

Finding Grace in Prison

II Timothy 1:8-11

By [Dr. Ligon Duncan](#)

Now turn with me, if you would, to II Timothy, chapter one. We continue in this series on the Pastoral Epistles that Dr. Duncan began some time ago, and just recently we've begun in II Timothy. We'll be reading from verse 8 through to verse 11. Before we do so, let's come before God in prayer. Let's pray.

Gracious God and ever-blessed Father, again we bow in Your presence. We would be still and know that You are God. We come to seek Your face. We come to read Your word and to gain; we are bereft of any native and inherent ability to understand the Scriptures apart from the illumination of Your Spirit, so guide us, we pray, into all truth. And grant this morning, as we read once again concerning the gospel, that our hearts might truly be ravished as we think of the beauty of that which You have done in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Second Timothy, chapter one, and at verse eight:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God; who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought to life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

Thus far, God's holy and inerrant and word.

Now, there is in certain liturgical traditions a very well-known hymn that is sung. It's usually sung by a choir rather than a congregation. It's called the *Te Deum Laudamus*—"We praise thee, O God"—and it's a text that comes from the middle to late third century, perhaps early fourth century, translated, at least from the Greek, by Ambrose, the famous Bishop of Milan. It's a text that includes the following lines:

"The glorious company of apostles praise Thee;
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise Thee;"

And then, in particular, this line:
“The noble army of martyrs praise Thee.”

One of the things that's illuminating about the *Te Deum Laudamus* is the fact that those lines are in the present tense. It's a reference to martyrs, those who have given their lives for the cause of the gospel, yet they still praise God. They have died in accord with this world, but they are very much alive. Their souls have ascended into the very presence of Jesus Christ, and they continue to praise God.

Paul is facing his martyrdom. This is his final epistle. As he writes, he's incarcerated in a prison in Rome, probably the Marmatine Prison. Some of you who've made a visit to Rome have done the tourist trails in the underground caverns of Rome—many, many dozens of miles of such caverns, I understand, in which you may be taken to a place purportedly where the Apostle Paul himself was kept chained for a good bit of time, in circumstances that may cause you and I to be ashamed. In the unsanitary conditions in which he was held, chained to soldiers on either side of him...and he's writing to Timothy. He's spent a winter in this prison. He's cold. He may even be suffering from more than one kind of physical malady at this point in time. The only person that he says is with him still is the beloved physician, Luke. How appropriate perhaps, in the providence of God, that a doctor was with him in his prison and in his final hours. Everyone else seems to have forsaken him.

We're not sure what the charges against the apostle were; more than likely he was caught up in the frenzy of accusations against Christians, given the ransacking and the burning of Rome. It wasn't a good time to be a Christian, and many of Paul's followers, many of the professing church, in fact, in this period of time had, to all intents and purposes, forsaken the apostle. The tradition is that he was taken out of this prison, and because of his position as a Roman citizen he was beheaded rather than crucified, on the Ostian Way, on the road leading away from the city of Rome.

For almost three hundred years Christianity grew in the soil that was wet with the blood of the martyrs. One such martyr was Polycarp, the Bishop of the beautiful city of Smyrna. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John. He died in the middle of the second century. He died at the age of 86 as a martyr. He had been arrested because of his testimony and preaching of the gospel. He'd been brought into the city; he'd been brought into the amphitheater; he'd been encouraged to deny the gospel, and his very famous words were, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any harm. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior who has saved me?”

They threatened to throw him to wild animals, and then they burned him at the stake when they brought someone in to nail him to the stake, he said to them, “Leave me as I am. He who gives me strength to bear the fire will hold me to the

pile.” And with only a rope tying his arms behind his back, the flames were lit. And he gave several words of exhortation to Christians who may have been there listening to him, to keep on enduring in the gospel, no matter what the cost.

Well, Paul is doing something of that here. “Don't be ashamed of the gospel,” he's saying, “...or of me, His prisoner.” It's one thing to think highly of the Apostle Paul when he's writing one of the ten best-sellers and he's been invited to CNN on Saturday evenings, and his name is being blazoned in all kinds of neon lights. It's one thing to be on the side of Paul in such circumstances: it's another thing to be on the side of one who tomorrow is going to be taken out and beheaded. ‘Don't be ashamed of the gospel, and don't be ashamed of me, His prisoner,’ Paul is saying to Timothy.

He's writing to Timothy. Timothy is his young son in the faith, his protégé. Timothy is a weak man; he's a timid man. He has problems with his stomach. Paul says to him to take a little wine for his stomach's sake, you remember. He's given to emotional outbursts. When at one point Paul was leaving, apparently Timothy fell on his neck in tears. And Paul is exhorting this young man, this young man who also will face persecution and imprisonment. We read at the end of the Book of Hebrews that he has been let out of prison. Evidently the words of the apostle here did indeed bear fruit in young Timothy's life, but at this moment, in the last moments of Paul's life, his swan-song, his dying words to Timothy are, ‘Be strong, Timothy, and don't be ashamed of the gospel...and don't be ashamed of me, His prisoner.’

Now, Paul isn't appealing to Timothy to pull himself up by his bootstraps. Paul isn't saying to Timothy, ‘Find that residue of strength that lies within you, that potentiality for greatness that lies within each one of us.’ Paul isn't saying any such thing. Paul, you remember, in the context in verse 7 has just reminded Timothy of where this power can be sought: “For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.” And although the word *spirit* is in a small “s” in our English versions, it could very well be a capital “S”. It is the Holy Spirit of power, the Holy Spirit who gives us power; and this strength, this ability, this courage, this resourcefulness that Paul is exhorting Timothy is that which can only be found by the strength of the Holy Spirit; and it comes, Paul says, from the gospel...from the gospel. ‘Share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God,’ and he goes on to describe the gospel.

Isn't it interesting that some of the very last words from the mouth of the Apostle Paul, or from the pen of the Apostle Paul, are about the gospel? He loves the gospel. He's never tired of talking about the gospel; he's never tired of exhorting and encouraging Christians to remember the gospel and to keep on repeating the notes of the gospel: “Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love...” we've just sung. Well, let's take a look here at what he says about the gospel in verses 9 and 10.

It's not a complete statement of the gospel. There are aspects of the gospel that Paul will refer to elsewhere that he doesn't refer to here. There's no specific mention here of the atonement. There's no specific mention of the cross here; there's no specific mention of the imputation of our sins to Christ, or the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to us. There's no mention here of substitution. Elsewhere, Paul will sound all of the notes that make up the melody of the gospel, but here his aim and purpose is singular. He wants to mention the gospel insofar as that gospel motivates us to living in this world without fear, come what may. And it's the resourcefulness that is derived from the gospel that is Paul's aim here.

Now, he says two things about the gospel in this passage: one is negative and the other is positive. There is a negative, and there is a positive. He begins with the negative. He tells us first of all what the gospel is not—like a good physician, like a good medical doctor going through the process of diagnosis, saying first of all what this is not. This symptom means that he does not suffer from A, or he does not suffer from B, or he does not suffer from C, and narrowing, therefore, the field. And that's what Paul is doing here. He's telling us first of all the negative: It is not because of works. It is not because of our works.

Now, I cannot emphasize too much this morning the importance of that negative: that the gospel is not anything to do with our works; that we are not saved because of our works; we're not brought into union with Christ because of our works. Our sins are not forgiven because of something that we do. It reminds us, doesn't it, of something that Paul has said on a different occasion to the church at Ephesus, in Ephesians, chapter two: that we are “saved by grace through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Paul, you see, is now asserting at the end of his life something that he had discovered at the very beginning of his Christian life: that we are Christians not because of anything within ourselves, not because of something that we do! Not because of human effort! Not because of promises that we make! Not because of goals that we set!

It's a fascinating insight into the conscience of the Apostle Paul. You remember, when he writes to the Philippian church in the third chapter, how he tells us that this wasn't always the way that he had thought. You remember how, at one point in Philippians 3, he begins to boast about his past? He says, this is what I once was, this is once how I thought of myself: that I was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee; and as touching the righteousness which is in the law, perfect!” Perfect! That is the assessment of Saul of Tarsus about himself, and now that he's a Christian, now that he has come to see Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, what does he think? Paul, what do you think now of all that past? And he says, ‘I think of it all as *scubala!*’ And our English versions politely translate it as *dung*, or *refuse*, or *rubbish*. And it's not a polite word, and it's the sort of thing that you would step on in the streets.

But that's Paul's assessment of human worth. That's Paul's assessment of his own personal attainments. Whatever he was in the sight of the world or in the sight of the church of his day, or in the sight of his own conscience as a native human being, it was all worthless in the sight of God—because we are not saved because of our works. We are not saved because of who we are.

“Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus’ feet,
And stand in Him, in Him alone, gloriously complete.”

It's the stuff of our hymnody, isn't it, this negative that we're thinking about this morning, that we're saved not because of our works? We sing that marvelous hymn of Augustus Toplady: “Not the labor of my hands...”—you know, *Rock of Ages*:

Not the labor of my hands
can fulfill Thy law's demands.
Could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.
“Nothing in my hands I bring,
simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
wash me, Savior, or I die.

It was the discovery that John Wesley would make in May of 1738. This fine, upstanding man, graduate of Oxford University, the world at his feet, decides he would become a missionary to do good to mankind; to set out on a boat, a ship, that would take him to the shores of America, and to work as a missionary for God in America, and to do all kinds of good things. And what does he discover? He discovered what the Apostle Paul says of the Jews of his time: that they were going about to establish their own righteousness—not the righteousness of God, but their own righteousness.

And Wesley discovered the all-important truth: that whilst he was engaged in missionary work in a foreign land, a foreign land to him, that is, he actually wasn't a Christian. He actually wasn't a Christian. He was trying to earn his way into the kingdom of heaven. Well, that's what Paul is reminding Timothy of here: that all of our righteousness is as filthy rags. This power that Timothy must have—it's not something native to him. It's not something that he can work up; it's not something of human effort. It's something supernatural. It must come from outside of himself. It must come from the outpouring of the powerful, sovereign God Himself!

My friend, let me ask you again this morning, a very, very simple question: what are you relying on for your salvation this morning? Are you relying on membership of First Presbyterian Church? Are you relying upon the fact that you are a good, upstanding Southern gentleman or gentlewoman? And you've been through Mrs. Manners' course, and you know all the rules of etiquette, and you're polite and you do good to your neighbor? And you never kick your dog, and you do all of those wonderful things, and you chart them up. And you tick all the boxes, and you hear what the Apostle Paul is saying? These are his dying words! That we are saved not because of our works; that human effort, human efforts, effort expended by our own inner strength and abilities will achieve absolutely nothing in the sight of our holy and righteous God; that if we are to be saved, it must come from something entirely from outside of ourselves.

Well, that's the negative. That's where he begins, and the negative is important, because if you fail here, if you stumble at this point, you stumble forever. You stumble here and you get it all wrong! Eternity hangs on this issue. Life and death hang on this issue. Whether you spend an eternity in the presence of Christ or an eternity in hell depends on your understanding of this simple statement: that we are saved not because of our works.

Now, what's the positive thing that he says? Well, he goes on to say that we are saved, that He has saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but—but because of His own purpose and grace. Because of His own purpose and grace—that's what Wesley discovered in May of 1738, in that famous meeting in Aldersgate Street in London, when he discovered the grace of God, when he discovered the free and sovereign grace of God, when he discovered that we are saved not by human effort, but by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone; that if we are to be saved, God must do it all from beginning to end.

Now, notice that Paul traces this gospel in a positive sense along four lines of thought. He doesn't expand on any one of them. You notice where it begins: before the ages began. It begins in eternity, this gospel, this purpose of God in rescuing our souls, in bringing us into union with Jesus Christ and forgiving us our sins, and granting to us the spirit of adoption. It begins in eternity! And Paul isn't just saying this because he's become a cragged old Calvinist in his latter years! He wants us to see that our salvation, the gospel, is not some Johnny-come-lately thing. It is the very definitive purpose of God, and we're caught up in it, you and I who trust in Jesus Christ!

And not only is it something that begins in eternity, but this is a gospel which he gives us in Christ Jesus, and now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus. It's connected with the incarnation of Jesus and the life of Jesus, and the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus, and the ascension of Jesus. It's all to do with Jesus Christ. Christ is at the center of this gospel, and what is it that Jesus has done? What is it that Jesus has done?

And elsewhere the apostle will answer that question in a different way than the way he answers it here. Elsewhere he might suggest to you that what Jesus Christ has done is that He has taken our sins, He's taken the guilt of our sins, and He's borne the wrath of God in all its fullness so that He cries out on the cross of Calvary, "My God! My God! What have You forsaken Me?" But that's not his purpose here. His purpose here is to say to Timothy, moments before his own execution, 'This gospel is something that prepares me for the world to come. I have no fear of death, and neither should you. I have no fear of what this world may have in store for me, and neither should you.' That's Paul's aim. And what he says is, 'This gospel of Jesus Christ that's connected with Christ's coming and death and resurrection and ascension, He has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' He's abolished death.

Paul *isn't* saying to Timothy that if we become Christians we don't have to die. That's not what he's saying. He's saying that if we become Christians, death has lost its sting. The grave has lost its victory! That this gospel, which is all of grace from beginning to end, is a gospel that prepares us and assures us of the life to come: of eternity in the presence of Jesus Christ, with the angels and archangels, and cherubim and seraphim, and holy apostles and prophets, and the martyrs who have died that horrible death.

"Paul, tell me some of the implications of this gospel." ...and you might hear Paul saying elsewhere that this gospel forgives you all of your sins, and it brings you into union and communion with Jesus Christ, and it justifies you, and it adopts you into the household and family of God, and it assures you of covenant love. But these are not the things that Paul is concerned with here. He wants young, fragile Timothy to understand that within the gospel is all the assurance that he needs to live this life to the praise of God, no matter what may come. No matter what may come, because grace saves and continues to save to the very end and then some, and beyond! And beyond!

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete.

His promise is "yea" and "amen," and never was forfeited yet.

Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above can make Him His purpose forego, or sever my soul from His love.

My name, from the palms of His hands, eternity will not erase;

Impressed on His heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace.

Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is given.

More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven.

"Not life, not death, not angels, not principalities, not things present nor things to come; nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all of creation can separate me from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ, our Lord."

In the very last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation...and in many ways, the Book of Revelation was written to answer one particular question...one particular question. You find it in Revelation 6:11, and it comes...it's a question that comes from the souls of those who have been martyred for Jesus Christ. And they're around the throne of glory, and they're crying out to God, "Lord, how long? How long?" And do you remember the answer?

"Rest," says the Lord, "until the number is completed who are to die as you have died."

Do you see the point? This gospel prepares us, even if we face martyrdom, for future glory in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Let me tell you about five students...seminary students. They're in their early twenties. They have studied at a seminary in Paris. They're touring Europe, partly to be out of the way of persecution that has come upon France. They're in Switzerland, where there's very little persecution. It's sixteenth century. They come to Geneva, the beautiful city of Geneva by the lake, and there they encounter John Calvin: preacher, commentator, lecturer. They only make a very brief acquaintance with John Calvin, and they return to France—and they're immediately arrested and imprisoned, and tried and found guilty of heresy. And there they languish in a prison in Lyon. They're taken to Paris for a short time, and then brought back again to Lyon. During this period—and they're in prison for something like fourteen months—and during this period they exchange letters back and forth with Calvin in Geneva. They're extraordinary letters. They're very, very moving letters. And when it becomes obvious to all, and especially to Calvin and especially to these five prisoners that they are going to die—they are going to be martyred, they are going to be executed, they're going to be burnt at the stake—this is what they write to Calvin, just weeks before they die:

We want you to know that although our body is so confined here between four walls, yet our spirit has never been so free and so confident. We are so far indeed from wishing to regard our affliction as a curse of God as the world and the flesh wish to regard it, that we regard it rather... [and listen to this] ...we regard it rather as the greatest blessing that has ever come upon us.

And a few weeks after they penned those words sent by letter to John Calvin in Geneva, these five young men in their twenties were taken out and burned alive at the stake, because they professed the gospel.

Now, my friends, this morning in places in this world—in Egypt, in Sudan, in Pakistan, in North Korea, in China—there are brothers and sisters who are in prison. Some of them have faced the most horrendous persecution and torture, and many of them are going to die. You won't [hear] about it on CNN, and you won't [hear] about it on Fox News, either, but that's the reality of it. And you see,

it's one thing to side with those who are glitzy: it's another thing to be on the side of those who are in prison and facing martyrdom. And do you hear what Paul is saying to you this morning? "Don't be ashamed of this gospel."

I wonder what it is you complained about this morning. What thing so turned your world upside down this morning? What was it? Because you couldn't find a pair of socks? That your wife had been driving the car and the seat had been changed? What was it that bent you all out of shape this morning? My friends, listen to yourself! And listen to Paul, as he says to you, 'Those things are trivial. What's important is the gospel, and don't be ashamed of the gospel.'

And I wonder this morning, in the ease and the luxury of the Western world in which we live, I wonder this morning what is the gospel actually costing us, because it should cost us something to profess the name of Jesus Christ. And Paul is saying to you this morning, as he's saying to me, "Don't be ashamed of the gospel, and don't be ashamed of me, His prisoner."

Let's sing together, shall we? *It is Well with My Soul*, No. 691 in our hymnbooks.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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