

Daily Devotions with the Dean

Including a Vicarious Faith

By [The Very Rev. Dr. Reggie Kidd](#)

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Welcome to Daily Office Devotions. I'm Reggie Kidd, and every Monday through Friday, I offer devotional observations on some portion of that day's readings for Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Thanks so much for joining me this Monday following the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. Because of my travel schedule, for the next two weeks we are taking a detour in our devotionals

These next ten devotionals will treat Paul's last three letters — those to his ministry proteges, Timothy and Titus. First, in three devotionals on the so-called Pastoral Epistles, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, we will see how God overcomes our lack of faith, hope, and love. Then, in the next four devotionals on the Pastorals, we will see how God implants in us basic ingredients of human flourishing: godliness, temperance, justice, and courage. Finally, in the last three devotionals of this special series on the Pastorals, we will see how Paul inspires us to faith, hope, and love.

Paul shows us in the letters to Timothy and Titus how Christ compensates for our lack of faith. Paul wants us to know that Jesus meets us in our lack of faith. That's what Jesus did for Paul. It's what he does for us. It puts Paul in awe of God's mercy. It puts me there too.

Here toward the end of his ministry, Paul has reason to look back on his life and marvel at the way God set aside Paul's flawed faith — his false or misguided faith — through Christ's faith or faithfulness. In fact, as we will see, Paul claims that his life prior to his encounter with Christ had been animated by "lack of faith," or in Greek *apistia*. In 1 Timothy 1:13, Paul says that it had been out of a lack of faith—or in unbelief—that he had persecuted Christ's church.

Flawed faith.

In that self-reflective mood Paul contemplates the horrible prospect of other people losing their faith or living out of unbelief like his own. In striking metaphors and figures of speech, he warns Timothy about people:

- shipwrecking their lives by rejecting the faith (1 Timothy 1:12);
- abandoning the faith (1 Timothy 5:12);
- contradicting the faith by their lives (1 Timothy 5:8);
- changing the teaching to something “other” than what it is out of conceit, showing themselves to be “pompous ignoramuses” (REB, *tetuphōtai mēden epistamenos*) who then promote envy, blasphemy, and base motives (1 Timothy 6:4);
- allowing greed to make them wander away from the faith and “spik[ing] themselves on many a painful thorn” (REB, 1 Timothy 6:10);
- reducing the truth of the faith to faux-knowledge and “empty and irreligious chatter” (REB), and thus straying from the faith (1 Timothy 6:21).

Paul is so attuned to those dangers because these are the terms in which he views his own life prior to that fateful trip to Damascus in which Jesus revealed himself to him. That previous life had been one of a passionate championing of the faith of his ancestors, of defending the cause of his people, of protecting the honor of Israel’s God. But Paul had come to see all of it as an exercise in “unfaith” (*apistia*).

“I used to blaspheme the name of Christ,” he asserts. “In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief (*apistia* — 1 Timothy 1:13 NLT).

In this verse, Paul names himself a blasphemer, because he mocked God’s name — by rejecting Jesus, he got God’s story entirely wrong. Paul labels himself a persecutor, because, in the name of God himself, he attacked the people God resided among, championed, and commissioned to represent him. Paul accuses himself of being excessively proud (*hubristēs*, a concept that weighs heavily in Greek tragedy).

In his old life, Paul had been doing his very best—but his very best was entirely wrong. That’s my biggest fear in life—mounting (metaphorically) a cool motorcycle, and racing off ... in the wrong direction ... right over a cliff. Paul found that his zealous, loyal service to God was its opposite: misguided, self-centered faithlessness.

Though less dramatically so, that was my experience too. Though raised by skeptical public educators, I was nonetheless raised in church. And I thought I had it figured out: if there was a God, that God was a projection of our best selves (à la Eric Fromm’s *Psychoanalysis and Religion*). If there was such a thing as justification, it was by virtue of attaining the best self-knowledge possible (à la James Michener’s autobiographical *The Fires of Spring*). If there was such a

thing as sanctification unto glorification (as Western theologians put it), or such a thing as “divinization” (as Eastern theologians put it), it was by molding ourselves into our best selves (à la Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*).

Not only that, after I became a Christian, I flirted with theological ideas and ethical practices as dangerous as Paul warned Timothy about.

Fixed faith.

But what rescued my wrong belief was exactly what rescued Paul. And, like Paul, I found it was a Who that rescued and redirected my faith. In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul says that the faith he could not find within himself, he found “in Christ.” He found that while he couldn’t believe rightly for himself, Another believed for him. “The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:14). Again, in 2 Timothy 1:13, Paul says that the faith and love he couldn’t find in himself, he found “in Christ Jesus.”

Christ’s vicarious life and death for sinners included a vicarious faith. When Paul couldn’t correctly confess the faith, Christ had confessed it for him: “... Christ Jesus ... in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession” (1 Timothy 6:13). It was that confession that enabled Paul and Timothy, and that enables the rest of us, to make a good confession (1 Timothy 6:12). Christ’s prayer for Peter got Peter through his dark night of doubt and denial (“I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” — Luke 22:31). In all of us, Christ’s same prayer imparts and sustains faith. Praise be.

Be blessed this day.

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