

'Guard the Gospel'

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[0 : 0 0] Maybe you can think of a book like that, or even more precious, a letter that you treasure, because it's the last words that you have from someone. Think of my friend Kate, who died some years ago, seven years ago, on Christmas Day, and she'd written a book that was a bestseller that year called Late Fragments.

But Kate had twin boys, Oscar and Isaac, and as she was battling with cancer, she wrote this book so they would have a memoir from her. And the book became a number one bestseller, but of course the people to whom it will have meant far more than anyone else were Oscar and Isaac, as they've grown up as boys with that memory, those last words from their mum.

Now Paul, the one thing that would warm his heart while he endured a cold Roman prison was thinking of Timothy, and he thinks of him like a child.

So we just go back into chapter one and look at the warmth of what he says in verse two. To Timothy, my dear son, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord, I thank God whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day, I constantly remember you in my prayers.

Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. There is more going on as well to the setting of this letter than Paul's departure.

[1 : 2 5] He's probably writing around 66 AD, just over 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. And what we'll learn as we look at the letter is that the church, as Paul prepares to die, is in grave danger.

And the dangers described sound alarming, but I take it that the reason the letter is preserved for us in the New Testament is because these are dangers for the church in every generation between Jesus' ascension and the apostles passing on into death and Jesus' return.

So Paul here, as a dying man, is giving his co-worker and the whole church clarity about what our mission is. And it shapes the whole chapter, so we're going to just jump to it first.

It's in verse 14, and it's to be guardians. Just if you're following the outline in the notice sheet, I've abandoned it, okay? So it's no use. Okay, so we're going to look at the challenge first, the call, and the challenge is to be guardians.

In verse 14, just have a look at that with me. He says, guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you. Guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

[2 : 3 8] To be in ministry is to be a guardian. And you guard this good deposit that the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy. You guard it, not by hiding it away in a safe, but by making it known, passing it on to others, and making sure that it doesn't get distorted as other people in turn pass it on.

So we see that in the verse before, verse 13. He says, what you heard from me keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

In other words, the New Testament, the apostolic teaching, gives us this pattern for the Christian message for every generation until Christ's return.

It doesn't change. And we as the church in 2022, we are entrusted with that message. So we could picture the purpose of 2 Timothy a bit like a passing move in rugby, in a rugby match.

So if you're familiar with football, in football, you know, if you're out of ideas, you just hoik the ball forward. You go route one. Of course, in rugby, you can't do that. You pass the ball backwards. And if you imagine, someone's got the ball on the rugby pitch, and they're running forward with the ball, and they're about to get taken out.

[3 : 51] They're about to get tackled. Someone's going to crash into them. What do they do? They pass the ball out back behind them to someone else who becomes the ball carrier with the aim that that person will run forward with the ball until they get tackled, and they'll get over.

They'll gain yards. They'll get over the gain line from where the last person was before they in turn have to pass the ball out. Paul knows he's about to crash, that his time is gone.

And so what he's doing is in 2 Timothy, he's passing on the good deposit of the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ died for sins and rose to rule.

He's passing it to his best co-worker, his loyal co-worker Timothy. And he's saying, now you're the ball carrier. You're interested with that good deposit.

Receive it from me. Guard it by faithfully proclaiming it. And get beyond where I got to. And in our generation, we're the ball carriers. The ball's been played out to us to guard it, to get over the gain line in our time, and pass it on to the next generation.

[4 : 59] And there's all sorts of pressure not to do that with the gospel. There's the pressure of just complacency, of thinking to ourselves, were it not for 2 Timothy, we've got nothing to worry about.

We all get the gospel. We're all on the same page and taking it for granted. Or there's the pressure of boredom with the gospel. Of thinking, you know, I just want something new.

And being excited always by the new thing that we're reading about or hearing about. And forgetting to guard the main thing. But we're going to hear in 2 Timothy as well about acute pressures that Timothy was under.

And pressures we might face today that could stop us from guarding the good deposit. So let me ask, could you pray? I've been praying that this idea of the Christian life as having a great purpose, a role that you've been entrusted with, that you're the ball carrier now, you're the guardian, that that idea would take hold of you in your Christian life.

It's great to have a purpose in our lives, isn't it? And I think that sometimes we can lose our way in the Christian life because we stop thinking there's anything challenging about being a Christian.

[6 : 16] And we feel that there's great challenge somewhere else that really excites us. So maybe you're in a workplace where you can see a kind of career progression in front of you. Or you work in a partnership where there's kind of great challenges to meet together.

Or maybe you're part of a community project to help people. And you really feel that that's really exciting and that's where your energy should go. Maybe just seeing your children succeed is what's really spurring you on.

And you see that as a challenge. And then we start to think church is kind of unexciting, isn't it? We go because we think we should. But it's not really where the action is.

Well, could we feel stirred up by this great passing on from Paul of the task that God has entrusted to his people? The task of being a guardian.

Because he's basically saying to Timothy, this is your job now and we're not messing about here. If you're anything like me, it will cost you everything. Everything you have, this is going to cost you.

[7 : 19] And it's so easy for a church to forget about this task and lose its way. So that you can have a church that's getting so much right where it's full of people who are Christians. And there's loads of good stuff going on.

People love each other. People are engaging with the community. People are prayerful. But we're in the midst of it. Somewhere along the line, they stop guarding the gospel.

Maybe because they think, you know, we're all friends so it won't go wrong. But we find out in 2 Timothy that it's Paul and Timothy's friends who've lost the gospel.

Or we think, no, we've got nothing to worry about because we train our people really well. But we find out in 2 Timothy that the people Paul trained have abandoned the gospel. It can happen anywhere.

Sometimes it's said that when you have a church where the gospel is heard week in, week out, in the first generation the gospel gets proclaimed. In the second generation the gospel gets assumed.

[8 : 18] In the third generation it gets not believed, disbelieved. And in the fourth generation it gets denied. That's the kind of natural drift of a church.

And Paul says, verse 13, what you heard from me keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.

That's the great task. And it helps us grasp this first chapter. We're going to think about the power to be a guardian, the challenge of being a guardian, and the motivation to be a guardian.

So, first we're going to think the power to be a guardian. Paul reassures Timothy, he reminds him he's a genuine Christian. Have a look at verse 5.

He says, I'm reminded of your sincere faith which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice. And I'm persuaded now lives in you also. Maybe Timothy's discouraged, he's disheartened.

[9 : 20] And Paul's saying, remember your conversion. You are the real deal as a Christian. You've got this spiritual heritage. And then he says, verse 6, for this reason, for the reason that your faith is real, for this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Now, Paul will have laid hands on Timothy perhaps as he kind of commissioned him to be a church leader or as he ordained him for that task. But the gift that he's telling him to fan into flame is the gift of the Holy Spirit that every believer has, every believer in Christ, has the Holy Spirit.

And we see in verse 7 that it's the Holy Spirit that Timothy is to fan into flame in his life. That's the gift. If we feel ill-equipped for what God's called us to, if we feel weak, if we feel inadequate, then God can use us if we depend on his Spirit.

And it leaves us not feeling defeatist but expectant of what the Holy Spirit might do. Fan into flame the gift. It's a great picture.

I was reading Bob Mortimer's autobiography. He tells of a story of when he was a boy in Middlesbrough. I'm from Middlesbrough. And he was at home on his own.

[10 : 41] This didn't happen to me. And his mum went out and said he must stay at home. He must stay in the house, Bob Mortimer. And there was some fireworks. And he opened the box of fireworks and there was some sparklers that said not suitable for indoor use.

And Bob Mortimer thought to himself if it says that it must be because some people use them indoors. So he lit a sparkler and before he knew it the sparks had fallen into the box of fireworks and set fire to the fireworks.

So not knowing what to do and knowing that he was told not to leave the house he picked up the box and ran into the kitchen and threw them into the kitchen. And then he watched as the fireworks started going off in his kitchen.

And then he turned around and realised he'd dropped the sparkler on the living room floor. By this time he realised that the instruction not to leave the house had probably been overtaken by events.

So he ran out of the house next door and said to the next door neighbour my house is on fire. And she said to him you know what I thought it might be and called the fire brigade.

[11 : 47] And the house burnt down and his mum arrived at home and saw Bob safe and well and gave him a massive hug and Bob Mortimer reflected on how he felt that if only the kitchen had been destroyed he'd have been grounded for life.

But because the whole house went down he was actually given a hug of relief and joy. Fan into flame the gift of God.

What would it look like? What does a minister look like when he gets the Holy Spirit's fire ablaze in his life? What would that look like in Timothy's life? What would it look like to be able to if you could say to a friend how's your church going?

You know what the minister the fireworks of the Holy Spirit are going off with the minister. Well Paul tells us verse 7 for the spirit God gave us does not make us timid but gives us power love and self-discipline.

we find out why Timothy needs those things those qualities of the Holy Spirit from the letter. Paul himself is probably in the Mamertine prison in Rome a dismal underground chamber with just a hole in the ceiling for light and air.

[13 : 02] If you look at his life it looks as though the gospel that Paul preaches is very weak and Paul's ministry is very unsuccessful. and what happens when the world starts really persecuting the church like that is that the rest of us face an enormous temptation to distance ourselves from the Christians who are getting the flack so that within the church that Timothy's trying to pastor in Ephesus he's got detractors and deserters.

The detractors are criticizing him they know he's Paul's man they're criticizing Paul if only Paul was a real apostle God would be with him and he wouldn't have got himself into so much trouble.

Timothy maybe we need to distance ourselves as a church from Paul so that the authorities in Ephesus realize we're a bit different to Paul he's not very diplomatic so he's got detractors he's also got deserters people staying in the church not leaving the church but leaving Paul's gospel behind so they're still at church but actually they've followed this new stream of false teaching that we hear about in chapter 2 but Timothy shouldn't be afraid instead he has to remember his conversion verse 5 remember his calling verse 6 and remember he's got the Holy Spirit verse 7 finding to flame the gift of the Holy Spirit in you for in him you can find the strength the power to persevere in teaching the truth you can find the love to keep being kind to everyone longing to see people won back to the gospel you can find the self-control to gently instruct the people who stand against you not to get angry with them but to be gentle and godly there's the fireworks of the Holy Spirit it's quite a thought isn't it that the Holy Spirit's fire burning in a Christian minister would make them stick to the Bible's teaching and be godly and the reason we need supernatural power from God to guard the gospel is because it's so difficult to do so that's our next point the challenge of being a guardian the challenge so there's a command in verse 8 if you have a look at that he says so do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner rather join with me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God now obviously the world hates Paul he's in a dungeon but the thing that would have felt much harder

I think would have been that people in the church had moved away from Paul and in the same way today when a minister is under fire for defending the New Testament gospel if you yourself become a detractor or a deserter you get out of the way of suffering I take it you could even carry on being a Christian in some way and avoid suffering by just distancing yourself from the minister who is getting flack and we might be thinking well we wouldn't find ourselves doing that I would never do that but have a look at verse 15 Paul says you know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me including Phygelus and Homogenes now when Paul says Asia there he doesn't mean the continent that some of you are from that we think of he's talking about modern day western Turkey which is where

Ephesus is and it's where Paul brought the gospel he travelled town to town bringing the gospel to Asia to western Turkey he planted churches he trained workers and yet now he says everyone deserted him in chapter 4 he tells us of Demas who loved the world and ran away he warns that Alexander the metal worker did him a great deal of harm and he's already had a first hearing in Rome and he says at my first defence no one came to support but everyone deserted me isn't that extraordinary Paul paints a picture here of faithful healthy ministry and it's a picture of loneliness disappointment and apparent failure but his dying words to Timothy are join me don't be ashamed join me in suffering for the gospel some of us might feel this wasn't in the brochure when we became a Christian

[17 : 56] I don't remember this in an alpha course session when I became a Christian but for Paul his suffering comes from the particular role that God's given him in verse 11 he says and of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher that is why I'm suffering as I am so I take it that by being a messenger of the gospel he's in the firing line because he's a spokesperson of the gospel and at the same time aren't these words familiar for us of Jesus' words that when he calls us come and die for me if anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me he says if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation then the son of man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his father's glory with his holy angels so we're not to be ashamed of him and his words lest he be ashamed of us when he comes in glory and we live in a culture don't we where it's very easy to feel ashamed we live in a shaming culture social media has done that to our culture much more than before we're in a culture where there are very narrow parameters for what it's acceptable to believe what views it's acceptable to hold and express and if you fall out of line people will shame you people will shame you very publicly for what you say and so we feel this pressure to conform and we have a message from Jesus that is very confronting because it says to a world where the world says my inner being what I think rules the message of the gospel is you're so flawed that the only way for God to accept you was for his own son to die for you and yet you're so loved that he was glad to die for you and Jesus calls us not to be ashamed not to be ashamed that his teaching is repentance for the forgiveness of sins that we have to turn back to God not to be ashamed even when his message is hated not just by the world but by the church people in the church hating his message don't be ashamed and you can show you're not ashamed by lining yourself up with the gospel man so just after Paul tells us in verse 15 that everyone deserted him he tells us about one man who gives us a model of what it would look like not to be ashamed and it's this man

Onesiphorus so have a look at verse 16 may the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains on the contrary when he was in Rome he searched hard for me until he found me may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day you know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus I don't think many of us can be like Paul he seems to be a man who just shouldered the world for his whole life until they killed him he was shipwrecked four times he arrived in cities full of pagan priests and temples and Roman soldiers and he stood in the marketplace and told them about Jesus but maybe we could think well I can't be like Paul but I could be like Onesiphorus that I might be someone who would seek out the people who were standing up for Jesus and getting a hard time for it and look to refresh them and encourage them when I was in London

I went to a church where the church minister had his license to be a minister revoked by a bishop the bishop was a false teacher and our minister had stood up against that and spoken against that and his license was revoked and we were left as a church with a minister without a license what do you do?

and one Sunday night after we'd sort of heard the news of what had happened a friend of mine Tim who was a quiet guy came up to me and another guy and said let's go to the pub now and let's write two letters each we'll write a letter to the bishop in support of the minister we'll write a letter to our minister seeing how thankful to God we are for him and Tim himself wasn't like an apostle Paul he's a quiet guy but he was a man who wasn't ashamed he was like Onesiphorus this is a moment to stand alongside a minister who's getting grief even writing to the bishop and saying I'm thankful for his ministry and he called us to do that so why would we take on a task that's going to be painful why would we take on a task that might make us feel shame well that's our final point this morning we thought about the power to be a guardian the spirit's power to fan into flame the challenge of being a guardian not to be ashamed of the gospel and thirdly let's think about the motivation to be a guardian so have a look with me at verse 9 and just look at how the grace of God just explodes in this verse

Paul says he God has saved us and called us to a holy life not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace this grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our saviour Christ Jesus who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel Paul can bear the brutal treatment of the world and the scorn of the church from detractors and deserters because he knows that before the very foundation of the world God devised the plan to save him and to save us and that grace came to us when Christ Jesus appeared as God became a man to seek us because we were lost and to save us and verse 10 that saviour Christ Jesus has brought life and immortality to light by destroying death through his death isn't that an extraordinary thing that he can call every one of us because he died a death that destroys death he can grant us life life knowing God now life that lasts immortality through the gospel so that Paul knows that death is not the end that the Roman Empire cannot take from him what he's entrusted to God so he says in verse 12 that is why

[24 : 49] I'm suffering as I am yet this is no cause for shame because I know whom I've believed and I'm convinced that he is able to guard what I've entrusted to him until that day it's reasonable to suffer to guard the gospel for God when you know that he will guard your life forever and it's reasonable to stand up and be counted for the gospel because in the gospel we see God's amazing kindness to us and we see our only hope to take away the sting of death what a privilege to be the ball carriers of that good deposit in our age just recently Jeremy Clarkson was interviewed about his life a rich man a famous man a man with great bravado and he said he's terrified of dying he pictures how he'll be begging the doctors for a cure when it comes to him facing death then I think of a friend Amanda compared to someone like Jeremy Clarkson a relatively unknown person a lady who was in our church in Preston where I worked before I came here she died just at Christmas time last year it was a terrible thing but when I was the assistant at this church in Preston Amanda was brought by a friend to a Christianity Explored course that I was running I say it was a Christianity Explored course so that you realise in this story I did nothing special Christianity Explored I was putting on a DVD every week I was asking questions from a book and I was praying that God would do something and Amanda became a Christian and as we moved away from Preston she came to see me and she said thank you for showing me Christ thank you for showing me Christ and now she's died and she's gone to be with him forever because his death destroyed her death and she has immortality forever isn't it extraordinary that we're the ball carriers of that message what a privilege even if it means we bear shame to stand for the gospel we do that with the spirit's help fanning into flame his work in us so that we're not ashamed and we can follow the pattern of sound teaching in our times Amen we're going to respond to God's word together there'll be prayer ministry over at the back to my right if any of you'd like pray for you