

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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**Broadcast Date:** 29 October 2006

**No.** T0442

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## Passing on the Torch: Preach the Word - 2 Timothy 4:2

It is said that Charles Spurgeon, the well known 19th century Baptist preacher, was once asked how he would best defend the Bible. He replied, "In the same way as I would defend a lion – by setting it free"! A rampant lion needs no other protection! The apostle Paul would certainly endorse Spurgeon's words. Paul's burning desire was that through him the word of God might go out in all its power and do its unhindered work in the hearts and lives of all who heard it.

Today, we come to the third in our series of talks on "Passing on the torch". In 2 Timothy, written just before Paul's martyrdom, Paul hands on, as it were, the torch of Christian truth which he had so valiantly carried for some 30 years. In our first talk, "Hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13), we saw how Paul urged Timothy to have in his mind an outline of the whole scope of Christian truth as it was then being revealed by the Holy Spirit through Paul and others. That charge still holds good for us today. Only in that way will we be able, as Peter puts it, "to give an answer to every one who asks [us] a reason for the hope that is in [us]" (1 Peter 3:15).

Then, secondly, we saw how Paul charged Timothy, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:1). Taking up that torch of Christian truth and, in turn, handing it on to others would not be easy for Timothy. It had not been an easy ride for Paul! But Paul had proved that, in the Lord Jesus, there was every supply of grace and love to carry him through each difficulty. There had been a time of great personal distress, possibly through illness, when Paul had earnestly prayed three times that the difficulty might be removed from him. The difficulty was not removed but, instead, Paul received the special promise of the Lord Jesus, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). That lovely promise of Jesus still holds true for us today! Paul wanted Timothy to know that, too.

So now we come to our third talk, "Preach the word". It will be helpful, first of all, to read from 2 Timothy 4:1-4: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."

We should notice, first of all, from verse 1, the solemn way in which Paul lays this charge on his son in the faith, Timothy. This was no light matter which Timothy might choose to ignore. It had eternal consequences. So Paul writes of that day of judgment of the living and the dead. Let us be quite clear as to this. As to Timothy's personal salvation, Timothy, through the godly upbringing of his mother and grandmother, and through hearing the good news, brought by Paul, of salvation through faith in Christ, had come to trust Christ as his personal Saviour, the One who had died at Calvary so that Timothy's sins might be forgiven. Timothy could never again come into judgment for those sins. The Lord Jesus Himself had promised this. Listen to Jesus' own words, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

But there would come a time, after the Lord Jesus has come for His church, at the judgement seat of Christ, when Timothy, along with every other true believer in Christ, would have to answer for "the things done in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10). At that judgment seat, rewards for faithful service will be given out. Those rewards would be seen in display at the appearing of the Lord Jesus when He returns with His church to set up His kingdom. Timothy's whole life, and his response to this solemn charge of Paul, was to be lived in the light of that day. We, too, are to live in the light of that coming day!

So what is this charge which Paul wants to pass on to Timothy? It is summed up in three vital words, "Preach the word". There can scarcely be a more needed or more noble calling than this. Paul, after writing about the need for men to call on the name of the Lord and be saved, issues this challenge: "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). He continues, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (verse 15). That prophecy of Isaiah perfectly describes the Lord Jesus and His public preaching but the words are still an apt description of the preacher today.

Immediately, of course, we are driven to ask, "What is meant by 'the word'"? It is said that, when the celebrated Scottish author, Sir Walter Scott, lay dying in 1832, he whispered to his servant, "Bring me the Book". Now there were many books in Scott's library. Some of them, like *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, were written by Scott himself. But the servant knew instinctively what was wanted and brought Scott his Bible!

For Timothy, too, 'the word' could mean only one thing – the Holy Scriptures. It was those Holy Scriptures that Paul had in mind when he wrote to Timothy, "From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). Those Holy Scriptures had been a central part of that godly upbringing of Timothy by his mother, Lois, and grandmother, Eunice (see 2 Timothy 1:5). Mothers and grandmothers today, but fathers and grandfathers also, there are probably many books which your children, and your grandchildren, will want you to read with them when they are young and which, when they are older, they will go on to read for themselves. Let the Holy Scriptures be a central part of those!

At the coronation of our Queen in Westminster Abbey on 2 June 1953, surrounded by all the pomp and majesty of that special occasion, she was presented with a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, with the words, "the most precious thing that this world affords". More than 50 years have gone by since that occasion, years of tremendous technological change with an accompanying increase in wealth. Yet the fact still remains that there is no more precious commodity in this world than the Bible, God's living word to us. Down through the centuries, many have spent their lives, and given their lives in martyrdom, so that we might hold in our hand the Bible in our own language. Let us value it aright!

Of course, for Timothy, those Holy Scriptures would have been the Old Testament writings. When Timothy was a child, much, if not all, of the New Testament was still to be written. But now, as Paul writes to Timothy, a large part of the New Testament was already in existence. Much of it had been written by Paul himself, but God used others too. As Peter puts it, "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). It was this word that Timothy was being charged to preach.

We might wonder at Paul's insistence on this preaching of the word. Were there not other interesting themes which Timothy might speak about? Paul had himself seen the power of that word in his missionary journeys. That word had made many "wise unto salvation" as they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Not Timothy's own thoughts, but God's living word, would accomplish that same end in Ephesus where Paul had sent Timothy.

Little wonder, then, that Paul had just reminded Timothy, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (literally, is God breathed), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). The great cry of the Reformation was "Sola Scriptura – the Scriptures alone". Through Martin Luther and others, people turned away from the superstitions and idolatries that had crept into the church to a living faith in Christ alone, as revealed in the Scripture. That cry, "Sola Scriptura" would have been totally unnecessary had the church listened to this charge of Paul to Timothy, "Preach the word".

In the Greek New Testament, the two main words translated as 'preach' are 'euangelizo' and 'kerusso'. The former, from which we get our word 'evangelise' has to do with the preaching of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The latter means 'to proclaim, to be a herald' and is the word used in Paul's charge to Timothy here. Through Timothy, the word of God was to be sounded out loudly and clearly in Ephesus. Paul's description of the infant church in Thessalonica is striking and challenging: "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place, your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything". In lip and in life, these young Thessalonian Christians were telling out, like heralds, the word of God. Many of us may not have been called by God publicly to preach His word but all of us, as we live lives that are obedient to His word, can have part in this charge, "Preach the word".

But Paul continues, "Be ready in season, and out of season". There might be special times set apart for the preaching of the word. Timothy was to take every advantage of these. In his missionary journeys, Paul had consistently used opportunities presented to him in the synagogues to preach. But in the market place in Athens, and even when on trial for his life before Felix and Agrippa, Paul had gladly seized these 'out of season' opportunities, as it were, to preach the word.

In one of the 'Servant Songs' in Isaiah, we find the Lord Jesus prophetically speaking: "The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of the learned (or, instructed), that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned (or, instructed)" (Isaiah 50:4). Little wonder, then, that we read of Him in the Gospels, "The common people heard Him gladly" (Mark 12:37). May each one of us ask the Lord to help us pass on to others, perhaps in private conversation, "a word in season". "A word

spoken in due season, how good it is! ... A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Proverbs 15:23; 25:11).

Public preaching of the word was not the only way in which the Gospel was spread by 1st century Christians. Acts 11:19 tells us: "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word..." Here a different word again is used for preaching. The words might also be translated "gossiping the Gospel". Speaking to others about the Lord Jesus was a natural part of the day by day conversation of those first Christians. That's a preaching in which we can all have part!

Paul continues, "Correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction". That's the New International Version translation. God's word and God's word alone would be the yardstick by which the rightness or wrongness of every action would be judged. Today, more than ever, we need to get back to that sense of God's word as the yardstick of behaviour. Sadly today, matters of behaviour are more often judged in terms of personal satisfaction or political correctness. Any concept of sin seems to have been lost. Yet God's word plainly declares, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That same word that so clearly points out my sin also points me to the Saviour who died for my sins: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). As the hymn writer J Wilson Smith puts it,

*Thine the light that showed our sin,  
Showed how guilty we had been:  
Thine the love that us to save  
Thine own Son for sinners gave.*

But in preaching the word, Timothy was also to exhort, or encourage, his hearers. It is interesting that the word Paul uses here is closely related to the description by the Lord Jesus of the coming Holy Spirit as the Comforter. Life might well be challenging and difficult for Timothy as he sought to carry out Paul's charge to preach the word. That's why Paul encourages him to do it "with all longsuffering and teaching". It would also be difficult for those 1st century believers. But both Timothy and they would find in that same word of God the comfort and encouragement that they needed. Life was not easy for the first century Christians in Rome. So Paul writes to them, "...we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope". After Paul had written to the young Christians in Thessalonica about the return of the Lord Jesus for His church, Paul concludes, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). May you and I today find our comfort and encouragement in those same Scriptures!

In verses 3 and 4, Paul reminds Timothy that this kind of preaching would not be popular. People with itching ears would want only to hear what made them feel good rather than showing them where they had gone wrong, even if that meant they were listening to fables rather than the truth of God's word. People are just the same today. If anything, the tendency to want to hear only what suits them, to listen to fables rather than to the living truth of God's word, is more pronounced than ever. May we each one of us, in whatever opportunities are presented to us, in lip or in life, take up the torch that Paul would pass on to Timothy and "preach the word"!

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