

(Difference between the letters before Hebrews and those after? Before (Paul's) to Galatians etc, those after **from** James, Peter etc)

Let's read from Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> epistle to Timothy. There was a question on a GCSE Religious Studies examination which asked 'What are the epistles?' and one bright pupil wrote 'They're the wives of the apostles'! We're reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy. [Read]

A person's last words become very important, because they are just **that** – their last words. And we remember them, don't we? Someone's last words take on a significance which we wouldn't have given them if they'd said them in the middle of their lives, or at a time which wasn't the last time we saw them.

"Kiss me Hardy." [Nelson] wouldn't have been recorded, never mind remembered, if he'd said them after dinner down the local restaurant one evening.

"Et tu Brute?" [Julius Caesar – Shakespeare] wouldn't be remembered, if he'd said it while organising an evening out with his friends.

Here are some other famous last words:

Author HG Wells "Go away – I'm alright."

Someone said these were the final words of Sir Isaac Newton "Let me think – I wonder if an anvil will drop like an apple!" The man who discovered gravity of course.

Spike Milligan's epitaph reads "I told you I was ill."

Author Oscar Wilde on his deathbed "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do."

We remember a person's last words – we often hear people say 'his or her last words to me were such and such', and they're usually followed by 'so I'm going to do this or that.' A person's last words stick in our minds, and they often prompt us to some action, don't they?

Here in this letter to Timothy, we have the last written words of the great apostle Paul. These words and messages are important to Paul, important to Timothy and are important to us.

It is a **personal** letter to Timothy, but these are also his final words to the **church**. That's why God has preserved them. We do well to see them as being of ultimate importance and let them prompt us to action.

Let's look closer. The year is 66/67 AD, and **Paul** is writing this letter from prison in Rome. This is his second period of imprisonment. We read about the first at the end of Acts, living by himself in a rented house, but guarded by a soldier – house arrest, but still free to receive visitors and *'boldly and without hindrance ... preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ.'* Acts 28:31.

But **now** he is in a horrible, dark Roman prison, and sees very few friends. He is lonely and cold - verse 15 here tells us that everyone in Asia has deserted him. He's been convicted of being a follower of Jesus and chapter 4:6 shows that he **knows** he is facing death: we read there, *'For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.'* He is expecting to be executed. And that is exactly what is going to happen under the cruel and ruthless emperor Nero.

So he writes a final letter to **Timothy**, his dear son (verse 2). In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul speaks of him as *'Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord.'* This is an intimate letter from a spiritual father to his spiritual son. We read in Philippians 2:20, *'For I have **no-one else** like him,'* verse 22, *'But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.'*

Paul regards Timothy as a close friend, like a son. He was converted after Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> journey in a place called Lystra, and we read about this in Acts 16. By Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> visit, Timothy has become a respected disciple of Jesus and he is eager to join Paul on his journey. Since then, the two have been through a lot together, the ups and downs, the persecutions as well as the blessings. Paul saw great potential in Timothy, and he entrusted him with great responsibilities, and he left him in Ephesus as a leader of the young church there.

Verse 4 shows us the closeness of their relationship, *'Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.'* When they were parted, Timothy had cried, when they are reunited, this will fill Paul with joy. This is a very close relationship.

Paul is writing to encourage Timothy, because he sees that he (Timothy) will be one of the important people carrying on the work Paul has started. Timothy **needs** encouragement because humanly speaking he is not well-suited for the task: [2

He is still young. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:12, *'Let no-one look down on you because of your youth.'* 'Young' in those days was up to forty, after that you were old!

He is often ill – in 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul encourages him to use a little wine to help his stomach and frequent illnesses.

He is a naturally shy person, and Paul reminds him in 2 Timothy 1:7 that *'God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.'*

None of these things should stop Timothy being effective for God. Paul talks about a thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12, something which threatened to hinder **his** effectiveness – let's read of the lesson he learned through it – [read 2 Cor. 12:9,10] Isn't it great that the Lord takes the weak and makes them strong?

Are **you** naturally like that – are you naturally timid, an introvert? Or maybe do you think you're too young in the faith to be effective in ministry? Or are you naturally susceptible to illness? Or are you feeling like that just now? Take heart – God takes the weak and makes them **strong**. Be encouraged, God gives us a spirit of power, and of love and of self-discipline.

I've already said that this is a very personal letter, but it is a very important letter because it tells us what is important for a Christian, it contains the things that are important for the Christian church to remember as it reaches out to the world, and it encourages us in our service of God. What are these important things?

Have you noticed, that everybody has a certain way of talking that's peculiar or unique to them. Everybody has their pet phrases, or favourite words which they come out with all the time, don't they? My old Head used to use the word 'obviously' all the time, even when it didn't make sense in the sentence, but he didn't realise he was doing it. And if you listen to people who speak regularly, you'll notice that they use certain words or phrases a lot.

Preachers are no different, they have their words and phrases, ways of expressing things which they say repeatedly. You've probably realised that even I have set phrases – *I'm* not aware of them, but perhaps you've found that I have certain things that I keep saying, and at this **very** moment you're just waiting for me to say them.

And we **remember** people's set words, phrases or catchphrases, don't we? Like if I said 'Nice to see you,' you'd all reply ...? Or 'Hi de hi!' ... David Frost at the beginning of his programmes always used to say 'Hello, good evening and ...' Mastermind 'I've started, so ...'. The two Ronnies at the end of their shows 'So it's goodnight from me, and it's ...' We remember them, don't we? because they repeat them a lot.

Paul doesn't use **catch**phrases, but there are certain things he writes about in **all** his letters. He doesn't repeat them so that people will remember **him**, but so that they will see that they are the most important things that he has to say. And we find it here in verses 9 and 10. [Read]

**This** letter is no different to all his others, they are focussed on **the gospel**, on the Good News about Jesus Christ and salvation. They would have no content without the gospel. As in Galatians - his first letter – so here it is in his last letter, and every letter in-between. Salvation is by the grace of God – the undeserved love of God – through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This **grace of God** was given to us before the beginning of time, this was God's purpose. As it was worked out before the beginning of time, we have to realise that salvation has and has **never** had anything to do with who we are and what we do. We rely **totally** on God's purpose and grace, not on our good works. We can never be good enough to please God on our own merits.

This should humble us – God who created all things with a word – he said let it be, and it was – this God **loved** us and gave his **son** for us – this should humble us. But it should also give us a great sense of peace and assurance – God has wanted us and planned for us to be his children from before the beginning of time – from eternity – nothing can thwart God's purposes – He is almighty.

God's grace was put into **action in Christ**, living among us for a while, in his death on the Cross and in his resurrection. Here he destroyed death – the wages of our sin is death, but Jesus took those wages, that punishment upon himself – he died in our place and when he rose again he destroyed death and brought life and immortality. We live forever through him who loved us and died for us.

God has called us to a **holy life** – a life dedicated to knowing and serving him, being prepared for eternity with him. What a glorious prospect! Before time God called his people; in His grace and mercy Jesus came to save them from death – the punishment they deserved for their sins; he is now working in them by his Spirit, transforming them into his likeness, making them fit for heaven.

As Paul reminds us in Romans 14, *'If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.'* Romans 14:8. The great hope and assurance of the Christian.

This is the gospel, this is the Good News that Paul proclaims in every one of his letters. This is what is most important for Timothy to know, the most important thing for us as Christians to know, and the most important message that the **world around us** needs to know. Firstly, then, **we need to know the gospel.**

So what does Paul encourage Timothy and us to do in the light of this gospel?

Verses 1 and 11 tell us that Paul has been appointed by God to be an apostle, a herald, and a teacher.

So we're reminded secondly that this is **a gospel to be shared, to be passed on, to be talked about, to be preached and taught.** Man's first response is to **receive** the message of salvation and live by it, but what would happen if nobody **talked** about it? What if we just accept it for **ourselves**, but don't pass it on? What would have happened if those disciples who'd been with Jesus, and the apostles who'd witnessed Jesus hadn't preached the message to their generation? We wouldn't **be** here.

Paul says in Romans 1:16, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation for everyone who believes.'* There is only one gospel. But then in chapter 10 of Romans he goes on to say, *'"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?'* Romans 10:13,14.

This gospel is one to be passed on – good news is meant to be passed on, isn't it? This is the foundation of the church that is spoken about in Ephesians 2:20, *'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.'* The church stands on the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so it is important that we pass this on. We must never tire of repeating it – how could we? Such a wonderful gospel, such a wonderful salvation!

Coming back to our passage here, we find out in verse 5 that Timothy now shares the faith of his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. It is clear that they have shared their faith down the years with their family including Timothy. We must pass on the Good News to all, even to our family, and that's hard, isn't it? We find it so hard to witness to our family members, don't we? But we **must**. This is the [5

power of God to salvation – our families need to hear it too. We have perhaps a special job to bring the gospel to our families.

When God spoke to his people in the Old Testament, he said, *‘These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.’* Deuteronomy 6:6,7. No-one can give **faith** but God alone, but we can be good examples, we can talk about and teach the gospel. What we receive from God, we pass on – to family, friends, strangers, in fact anyone we’re brought into contact with as God gives us opportunity.

So; know the gospel, share the gospel; thirdly along with Timothy we must **guard the gospel**. Verses 13 and 14, *‘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 – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.’*

This is going to be a time of change for Timothy, he is going to take on more responsibility in the church after the death of Paul. President Obama came to power in America under the banner ‘It is time for change’, and I think David Cameron will also play along those same lines next year as **we** have a general election. We **need** change, we need to move on.

But the gospel of God, the message of salvation in and through Jesus has not, does not and will not **ever** change. We must never **allow** it to be changed – we must guard the gospel.

Verse 14 says that Timothy is to *‘Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.’* The NEB translates this as Guard the *‘treasure put in your charge.’* The gospel is **treasure** and has been entrusted to Paul, to Timothy and to us, if we are Christians.

**‘Guard the good deposit’** Guard here means to keep it intact, undamaged, unharmed. The same word is used in Luke’s gospel when Jesus is talking about a strong man guarding his house against thieves. [Luke 11:21]

If you have a family heirloom, perhaps a piece of furniture that’s been passed down through the family, it becomes valuable, doesn’t it, for sentimental reasons. You wouldn’t want to **alter** it – you wouldn’t want to paint it pink, or saw some of the legs off because it’s too tall for your room!

You'd want to pass it on in the condition you received it. Guard the gospel – don't alter, add to or remove from it.

It can't be like the game Chinese Whispers? Where someone at one end of the room whispers a message to the next person and they whisper it to the next until the message has gone right across the room. And it can sometimes be really hilarious to find the difference between the message at the beginning and the one at the end! Guard the gospel means that that kind of thing must **not** be allowed to happen.

How many times have we heard of churches, 'Christian leaders', supposed representatives of the church in this country and across the world who have corrupted the gospel, who have compromised the gospel, who have left out or altered bits of the Bible so that it **pleases** the listener. We're warned of this in this same letter, chapter 4:3, *'For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.'* We're not here just to please the crowds – we're here to be faithful to God's message. We must resist the temptation to alter the gospel just to appeal to the world. Guard the gospel.

We have a gospel that needs to be passed on **whole**. God has told us what we **need** to hear for salvation. There is no **point** watering it down, because then it won't be sufficient– it will not be the full gospel of God, and therefore **won't** bring salvation.

God knows all things – he **must** do, he **created** it all. So what **he** has to say is the only thing we can be totally certain about. What man has to say may be right, but it may be wrong – we can't be sure. But we certainly **can** be sure that what **God** has said is **absolutely** certain, and because he never lies it is certain and true. How can we presume to alter God's word? God's word contains what we need to know about God, about ourselves and for salvation – enough for us to understand with our finite minds.

We can't afford to add to or take away from God's word, we **can't** – otherwise we'd be robbing people of their opportunity of salvation, we'd be robbing them of the precious treasure of the gospel. We **can't**.

Verse 14 – *'guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit'*. At times it may be difficult, and it **will** lead to opposition to hold to the gospel, it may lead to persecution, even death. Paul is chained up like a criminal in prison, awaiting his execution. Hebrews 13:23 tells us that Timothy was also arrested.

But God has promised the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us if we are Christians, we **can** afford to guard the gospel even if we have to suffer for it.

Paul says in verse 12, *'I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.'* Interestingly, in the original language, Paul uses the same words here for 'guard what has been entrusted' as in verse 14, *'guard ...that was entrusted to you ...'* – what Paul is asking Timothy to do is what he **knows** God can do for us. We entrust everything about ourselves to God's safekeeping. Everything down to our very souls, to every breath is in his hands. He is in control. We trust in him, we're safe in him, no matter what may happen to us before he comes again. What assurance!

We must look at our attitude to the gospel of God. The Psalmist says in Psalm 119, *'...I delight in your law. ...The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.'* Psalm 119:70,72. This is a place **we** have to get to – where we **delight** in the Word of God. Is this gospel our passion? Do we see – like Paul in his last words to the church – that the gospel is the most important thing for man to know? If we do, then we will delight to know more; we'll delight to share it with others; and we'll do our utmost to make sure that people hear the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, with the help of God's Spirit, whatever the cost.