

“Continue in God’s Word”

What would you write in your letter? I’m guessing that fewer and fewer people in our congregation write letters anymore. Some of you probably prefer to email or text message or post your thoughts to Facebook instead.

But perhaps in this situation you might decide to sit down with pen and paper and write out your thoughts by hand. And here’s the situation: you are fairly certain that you aren’t going to live much longer. Perhaps this letter will be the last one you ever write. Who will get it? What will it say?

I don’t mean this as purely an exercise to get you thinking about your relationships or the things that you have to say. This situation gets you at least a little closer to understanding the letter we know as the Bible book of 2 Timothy. The author is the Apostle Paul, the great missionary and traveler. He makes it very clear that he expects his life is coming to an end. He writes from prison where he is in chains for preaching about Jesus. And he writes with the expectation of his own imminent execution. 2 Timothy is quite possibly the final letter St. Paul ever wrote.

His letter goes to Timothy, whom Paul calls “my dear son” (1:2). Timothy was a younger pastor, perhaps about 30 years old. He was a partner with Paul in his ministry, and a sort of apprentice who learned about the ministry from working with Paul. What did Paul want to leave to Timothy? What did Paul want his last letter to Timothy to say? Our text gives us a concise summary of the letter and of Paul’s Spirit-inspired advice: Continue in God’s Word.

Listen again to 2 Timothy 3:14-17: **“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

Timothy had known God’s Word for a long time. His wasn’t the ideal situation, as his father apparently was not interested in his religious training, but his mother and grandmother were faithful believers. They taught Timothy God’s Word from infancy. Probably before he could understand the words they were saying, they told him the stories and accounts and passages that they knew and loved from the Scriptures. Paul didn’t advise young to middle-aged adult Timothy to grow out of this Scripture-phase he was going through or to find a more mature resource to use. No, he encouraged him to continue with that same Word, that same message.

Paul encouraged Timothy to remain in the Word because he knew its source. It was a valuable gift and blessing that Timothy had a faithful mother and grandmother, but they were not the ultimate source of his education in Scripture. God is the source. Paul describes the Scriptures as God-breathed. We have come to refer to this quality of Scripture as verbal inspiration. God

breathed into his chosen writers the very words he wanted written. The apostle Peter also explains, “[P]rophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). And for us today God has faithfully preserved his inspired holy Word in the Bible.

As God’s own inspired Word, the Bible encourages us as a congregation and as individuals to continue in the Word. But we don’t always respond. “I know this already,” we whine, “It’s too boring to go over the same stuff, the same book, the same message week after week after week. I need someone to make it more exciting. I want someone to talk about the things that interest me the things that I enjoy.”

Could anything be more self-serving, more selfish, more sinful? For us to come to the house of God where we may be served his very own word, only to spit it back in his face. For us to let our minds wander and our imaginations race to anything other than what the pastor is saying.

This is God’s Word. From the pulpit, from the lectern, from the mouth of his spokesperson the pastor, it is his. He wants nothing more than for us to read and learn it and to take it to heart.

And he wants that because of his love for us. He wants it because he knows how valuable that Word is in our lives. He wants us to continue in his Word because he works through that word. He wants us to have salvation through that Word. That is its purpose and goal: to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Elsewhere, Paul testifies, “**I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes**” (Romans 1:16).

To the sinner ashamed of his sins, to the selfish and self-serving, God’s Word offers a substitute. While Jesus lived on earth, he explained that all of the Scriptures testify about him. When he was attacked and tempted by Satan, he used God’s Word to ward off the attacks. From the time he was a young boy until as a grown man he left our earthly life behind, he never once tired of hearing the voice of his heavenly Father in the Scriptures.

That same Jesus counts your selfish sins as his own. He treats your cavalier attitude toward the very Word of God as his fault, and he counts his humble service to God and his faithful use of God’s Word to your credit. He lived for you, he died for you, and now he shares that message through his Word.

No wonder that our worship services are arranged as they are. No wonder that everything is centered on God’s Word in the Bible. Every Sunday we read it from the lectern, we expound on it and explain from it in the pulpit. We often sing psalms as well as songs and hymns that are based on Scripture. Our canticles and prayers carry forward the message of God’s Word.

And why would we turn anywhere else? God’s Word is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correction, and for training and educating in righteousness. It is thoroughly useful for every day of our lives. It is useful for us to learn and to grow in our faith and lives as Christians. It has given us salvation and now shows us how we might best respond to such a gracious gift.

So use it. Continue in it. Listen to it and learn from it. Not only at church, but also at home. Not only in worship services, but also in Bible class and devotions and personal study. If today is an average Sunday at Grace, we might expect about 50-60 people to be in attendance in our early service. We'd see another 200 approximately in our late service- and what a blessing that is. But do you know how many would be in adult Bible class? Maybe 80. And the children in Sunday School? They might number 20 on a good day. Wouldn't it be wonderful to see many more take advantage of opportunities like these?

I can't keep attendance numbers on your home devotional life. I don't know how often you read and study God's Word on your own. I don't know what percentage of your children gather for a Bible story instead of or in addition to a bedtime story. But I do know this: God blesses every moment we spend in his Word. I know that by God's grace, we are committed to making God's Word the only source for our teaching and the only basis for our worship. I know that we have room to grow, and that the gospel motivates us to become more faithful Bible-users and readers and learners.

And I know that it is not always easy. Take a look sometime at the rest of 2 Timothy chapter 3. In it Paul writes about the ways that he had already suffered and the ways that Timothy and other faithful disciples would suffer. He talks about persecutions and hardships. And he doesn't make any exceptions for Christians in 2009. But no suffering is cause for abandoning God's Word or for looking elsewhere. No ridicule from the outside world can turn our worship services into anything other than a celebration of God's Word.

So what would you write in your final letter? Unfortunately, many of us, not knowing exactly how God will call us home, will not have the chance to spell out our final thoughts. But the way we live our lives can leave a lasting impression for those around us. Can you think of anything better to write than "Continue in God's Word"? Can you think of a better way to live? May God bless us with lives lived in his Word.