

# The Sadness and Beauty of Paul's Final Words

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the challenges and joys of ministry, highlighting the importance of total confidence in faith and obedience to God. It explores the relational hardships in Christian ministry, the impact of friends letting you down, and the unwavering support of Jesus amidst difficulties. The message underscores the need for forgiveness, the eternal reliability of Jesus as a friend, the value of spiritual nourishment, and the simplicity and generosity in serving others over accumulating possessions.*

**Scripture:** 2 Timothy 4:9, 2 Timothy 4:17, Matthew 26:56, Luke 23:34, 1 Timothy 6:17, Hebrews 13:5, Philippians 4:13, Proverbs 18:24, Ecclesiastes 4:9

**Topics:** "Faith in Ministry", "The Reliability of Jesus"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Father, we follow and we worship one who one day looked over his shoulder somehow like an ordinary man and said, before Abraham was, I am. And therefore we have no reason to shirk but to be obedient. And so God grant, I pray that as I try to unfold some of the pain and some of the joy of ministry, you would call us to this kind of total confidence in the train of faith I am.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Would you open your Bible, if you have one, to 2 Timothy chapter 4? And I'll read verses 9 through 22.

And we'll look at some of the most beautiful and some of the saddest words in the Bible that are intended, I think, to establish you in your mission or your ministry. 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 9. Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful for me, to me, for ministry.

Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. Also the books and above all the parchments.

Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. The Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

At my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it, so I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Greet Prisca and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained at Corinth and I left Trophimus, who was ill at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter.

Eubulus sends greetings to you as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

So I think those are words that are sad and words that are beautiful. And I think the overall impact that Paul wants them to have for the Timothys in the room especially is to inform you that ministry will be hard and that in spite of all of its hardness, Jesus will stand by you. That's what he wants you to take away.

That's the message. And he really does show how hard it is. There's a lot of pain in these verses.

And the centerpiece, let's read it again, is verses 17 and 18. This is the sweet part of the text. But you can't really feel the sweetness of this until you see how horrible some of the rest of this text is relationally.

But the Lord stood by me, verse 17, the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. So I have about seven observations about ministry.

The ministry in the church or the ministry in missions. And they're true and if you live long enough you will find them all to be true in your life. But you will find them to be true not mainly because you experience them but because God said so.

So number one, Christian ministry is relationally hard. Christian ministry, whether you're in a team on the field or whether you're in a staff or just alone with a small congregation, is relationally hard. And I think Paul wants Timothy to see this because he says it so many times.

Notice five things. One, verse 10, Demas, in love with the present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. He had been evidently a faithful partner because over in Colossians 4, Luke, the beloved physician, greets you as does Demas.

And then he's gone, forsaken. Paul is forsaken by Demas. Number two, verse 10, middle of the verse, Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

Luke alone is with me. Once there had been this team. Now it's down to Paul and Luke.

There were these great old days with so many of us and now it's just the two of us. Three, verse 14, Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. He strongly opposed our message.

You not only have loneliness or smallness and abandonment, on the inside you've got this opposition and painful slander from the outside. Four, verse 16, maybe the saddest sentence in the letter. At my first defense, no one came to stand by me.

All deserted me. I'm going to come back to that, but you've got to feel the force of that. Nobody showed up.

Number five, verse 20, Erastus remained at Corinth and I left Trophimus who was ill at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Sometimes strategic deployments take away our friends.

Sometimes sickness interrupts partnership in ministry. Sometimes seasonal changes make the aloneness all the more difficult. How are you doing in February? I mean if you're from Minnesota, February is the lowest month of the year.

It's gotten really long, Lord. We're ready for March, although March is no better in Minnesota. So come before winter because it's getting long out here.

That's number one. Ministry is relationally hard, five illustrations of it. Number two, friends in ministry can let you down and never care for you again.

Verse 10, for Demas in love with the present world has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. I don't know if Demas ever repented. There's no evidence that he does.

And we certainly know ministers who have forsaken us, forsaken the church, and forsaken Christ and never come back. And I think Paul wants Timothy not only to feel the force of this, but to be warned himself about why Demas left the ministry. Why he forsook the team.

And he says, Demas in love with this present world has deserted me. There is a love for the world that is incompatible with Christian ministry. You either have to leave the Christian ministry, you love the world so much, or you have to change the ministry to be worldly enough to survive in it.

Because you love the world. So I'm going to give you a warning about the young culture-embracing Christians in the room. Because you've got to be culture-embracing to be relevant.

There is an embrace of culture, God-ignoring, God-denying, God-demeaning, Christ-distorting products of culture that is mutually exclusive with a deep love for Jesus. There is a love for the world that is irreconcilable with world-exposing ministry. Witnessing to world ministry.

Rescuing from world ministry. If your heart is in love with the world, you just love what unbelievers love, you'll either change your ministry to be compatible with that love, which happens all over the place, or you will leave the ministry like Demas did. More people leave Christ, more people leave the church, more people leave ministry, and more people leave the hope of heaven out of love for the world than anything else.

What was it in Thessalonica? That's where it was going. It says so. In love with this world, Demas has deserted me and he's gone to Thessalonica.

Was there a woman in Thessalonica that he had met along the way? Maybe it was just his home. He just wanted to go home. Tired of this traveling.

Maybe it was a business offer. You're really gifted, you know? What are you wasting your life in ministry for? To make a lot of money. Or maybe it was just comfortably distant from Paul.

Because Paul is so spiritual, I feel guilty all the time around him. Because I love the world. He left Jesus and he left Paul.

He was in love with the world and it will happen to you. People will leave you in love for the world. Get ready.

Number three. Good friends in ministry can let you down and still be good friends. Verse 11.

First of all. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you for he is very useful for me in ministry.

And we all know that Mark had let Paul down. And had left the ministry. And now he is useful.

Look at verse 16. At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them.

No one. Not even Luke. Luke alone is with me.

Now I don't want to be too hard on Luke here. I have no idea. He could have been sick.

Really. He could have been on a trip. Somewhere else in Italy.

But nobody showed up including Luke. What about the brothers and the sister in verse 21? Middle of the verse. Ubulus sends greetings to you as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and the other brothers.

So here you have Paul greeting Timothy from these folks as though they were his friends. And they hadn't shown up. But he doesn't say to them, I'm not going to greet Timothy from you.

You write your own letter. You didn't show up. But that's not the way Paul is relating to them.

Look at verse 16. Second half of the verse. May it not be charged against them.

That's amazing. So, fallen friends. Imperfect friends.

Sinful friends. Will let you down. And they can still be your friends.

I hope you're big enough for that. I hope you're Christ-like enough for that. Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they're doing. They all forsook him and fled. And what did he do? He built the church on them.

And one denied him three times at his point of greatest need. And he made him the rock. Failing friends can still be your friends.

And that will hang a great deal on you. And whether you say, heart, don't charge it against them. Here's another turn on that.

32 years now of ministry. I look back and one of my greatest sorrows is how many of my people will be able to say, he didn't show up. He wasn't at the hospital.

He didn't attend my child's wedding. He wasn't there in Christ. He never called when my dad died.

Hundreds of my people will be able to say that. And yours. Broaden that out a little more.

This is Valentine's Day. Some of you will say, if he loved me, he would never forget things like that. And he did forget.

He forgot my anniversary one time. He didn't show up. He didn't show up emotionally.

He can still be your lover. He can still be your best friend. He can.

Friends fail us. They do. And if you want to be bitter and angry all the rest of your life, kill yourself that way.

But that's not the way Jesus handled it. So on the basis of what Paul does here, let it not be held against them. On the basis of what Jesus does in dying for them and forgiving them and coming back to them, I would just urge you, don't be unforgiving and don't be simplistic.

If this teenager really respected me, then he wouldn't talk to me this way. This is the way an immature dad talks. If she loved me, she would touch me.

All the conditions laid out. Failing friends, failing kids, failing wives can be our friends. Sweet friends.

Luke and Eubulus and Putins and Linus and Claudia did not show up at his trial. And he embraces them. Don't hold it against them.

And he greets Timothy from them. Your friends who let you down can still be yours. Number four.

Jesus never intended the enjoyment of his presence would replace the enjoyment of the presence of other Christians. Another way to put it. When Christ died so that you would enjoy Him supremely, He did not nullify the enjoyment of other Christians.

Christ always intended for your friendship with Him to be the centerpiece of your friendship with others. The joy of Christ-centered friendship is meant to magnify the worth of Christ as the common treasure of the friendship. And thus deepen the sweetness of the friendship, not eliminate it.

Now, where am I getting that? Verse 17. The Lord stood by me and strengthened me when nobody else did. Now, if that's all we had, we'd say, see, Jesus is a faithful friend.

Humans, they let you down. But I've got my Jesus and I don't need anybody else. That's just not the way the text reads.

Verse 9. Do your best to come soon. Verse 21. Do your best to come before winter.

He wants Timothy there. Paul does this a lot, right? Romans. I have longed for many years to come to you.

Philippians. I love and long for you, my joy and crown. Thessalonians.

I am being affectionately desirous of you, ready to share with you not only the Gospel, but my own soul. So, human beings are fickle friends. That's true.

They are. And Paul cherished them. He longed for those imperfect friendships.

So, Jesus never intended that the enjoyment of His presence would replace the Christ-centered enjoyment of Christians' presence. He died to create Christ-exalting friendships. Which means He died to create the church.

That's number four. Don't feel you must choose between the supreme love and delight you have in Jesus and the pleasures of Christian friends. Number five.

Nevertheless, Jesus is the only totally reliable friend for sinners. He is the only flawless friend and therefore the only all-satisfying friend and therefore the only friend who can make other friendships eternal. So, now we're at the sweetest centerpiece of the text, verses 17 and 18.

The Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom.

To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen. As much as you may love your earthly friends or your earthly family, they can't do this for you.

They cannot do verse 18. They cannot rescue you from every evil deed and bring you safely to the heavenly kingdom. Only one friend can do that.

And Demas walked away from Him in love with this world. That was not a good deal. So, by all means, plead with your Timothy to come before winter.

Seek Christian friendships. But when they fail, when they don't show up at your trial, the funeral of your wife, your stay in the hospital, don't turn on your one friend who will be there. Let me just say this clearly.

Have you ever thought how insane and tragic it is how many people being let down by Christian friends use it as a reason to leave the one friend who will never let them down. Is that crazy? I mean, I can just name people close to me. I can name people far from me who are walking away from Jesus because of Christians.

That's crazy! The one being in the universe who will never ever let you down. You're going to let those who lay you down drive you away from the one who will never let you down. I hate the devil.

He's so deceitful. Such a liar. Such a confuser of people's minds.

Don't let that happen to you. When your friends fail you in the ministry, fly to Jesus. Get the resources and go back to them and forgive them.

Don't let them drive you away from Him. Number six. Closeness to God at the end of your life does not remove the need or the desire to read and be spiritually nourished.

Closeness to God at the end of your life does not remove the need or the desire to read and be spiritually nourished. So here's verse 13. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas and also the books and above all the parchments.

Now we do not know what these are. But, the scrolls and the parchments are both plural which suggests to me it's more than the Bible. It could be his own notes for all I know.

You know, he kept notes. And he wanted his notes so he could be working on messages. Or it could be Scripture or it could be books about the Scripture or things he'd written in his journal to help him understand the Scriptures.

We don't know. But what we know is here's a man who is enjoying sweet, close fellowship with Jesus. The Lord stood by me.

I've got the Lord standing by me. And my life is ready to be poured out as an offering. I'm not long for this world.

Now at that point I would be inclined to say so what's with theological education? I mean you're going to know even as you are known in about two weeks. Why would you want to read anything? You're going to see it face to face, I would ask. And then I back up and I think a minute.

That's what you're supposed to do with the Bible. Think over what I say to you, Timothy. The Lord will give you understanding.

What are you going to do in your last two days? The doctor says you've got a week, maybe. You're going to call up your wife and say would you bring my copy of Edwards? Yes! Yes! You think I'm joking? Nobody, nobody on the planet gets me more in touch with Jesus outside the Bible than Jonathan Edwards. Yes! I want to read a sermon from this man who's ministered to my soul like nobody's ministered to my soul as I get ready to meet my Jesus.

You pick your own favorite helper. My point is it doesn't follow to say okay, in a few days I'm going to see him face to face so I don't need the book anymore. You do need the book.

The book and books. You need them both because those are the means by which you die well. They're not superfluous.

Bring the books and bring the parchments. I have a few weeks yet to live and they help me die. You're all in school and that's a good place to be for a season and I hope you just stay in love with God centered, Bible saturated Christ exalting literature till you breathe your last.

Finally, number seven. People with great influence and great authority don't need great possessions. People with great influence and great authority don't need great possessions.

Verse 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. Seriously? Paul, you are the most influential, the most authoritative, the most widely read Christian on the planet. Get another coat.

They got coats in Rome. Ask a friend for a coat in Rome. What's with the coat? Paul handled a lot of money in his day and he kept very little for himself.

If God has given you the means to make a lot of money as a businessman or God has given you a church where they pay you well, don't keep all of it. Don't lay up treasures in heaven, I mean on earth. Thank you, Lord, for catching that.

Don't lay up treasures on earth. Lay up treasures in heaven. Keep it simple.

Really, you'll help your people so much. There'll be a few people in your church, just a little few, who know how much you give back to the church. They keep the records.

God will know. They will watch your life and what kind of car you drive and how many houses you have and what you feel like you need to buy. John Wesley, I'm told, had a silver spoon left.

He'd given it all away when the time of his departure came. He handled a lot of money for the poor in Jerusalem, and he was safe. He didn't pilfer it.

Let me close by reading you a quote from William Tyndale. This was written a year before he was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536. He was in prison just north of Brussels.

He had been arrested for, can you imagine, putting the Bible into English. He's going to die for helping people read the Bible in English. And as he's in prison, languishing, he writes this.

It's just a beautiful, powerful, to my mind anyway, in my heart, illustration of what we've just said. I beg you, Lordship, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me from the goods of mine, which he has, a warmer coat also. For this which I have is very thin, a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings, but most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew grammar, and a Hebrew dictionary that I may pass the time in that study.

Ministry is hard, brothers and sisters. It's relationally hard. Friends will forsake you and never come back, and other friends will let you down, and they will be there for you, and you don't have to write them off.

Whether you're in a missionary team, on a field somewhere that's relationally unbelievably stressful, or whether you're in a local church, or just a family, or a single person, it's going to be hard, and the Lord will stand by you. I testify after 32 years of experiencing all of these things, it's been worth it. I'd do it all over again.

I don't want to drive any of you, I don't want to drive any of you away from the ministry. I just want you to walk in with your eyes open, wide open, and know He'll be there for you. And the friendship is very, very sweet.

So, Jesus, thank you for standing by us. I will never leave you. I will never forsake you.

Therefore, we can confidently say the Lord is our helper. We will not fear what can man do to us. So, hope of the nations, be our God.

Hope of the nations, be our King. Hope of the nations, be our never failing friend.

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