

We are going to be reading the conclusion to Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy. We have been reading through the letter over the past few weeks and have discovered that it is a very personal letter.

As mentioned before, this is a letter written at the end of Paul's life. He is writing it to tell Timothy what he wants Timothy to know after Paul departs from this life. As we read these final words we clearly see this sense of completion of his life.

Read 2 Timothy 4:6-22

A woman named Denise routinely went to the grocery store but one afternoon she had an experience that was anything but routine. As Denise got out of her car in the parking lot, she noticed something unusual. In the car parked next to her, a woman was seated in the driver's seat, her arms were draped over the steering wheel, her head was resting on her arms, her eyes were closed tightly. She was not moving. She was perfectly still.

Denise thought to herself, "That's odd. Is the woman OK? Is she in trouble? Is she sick? Has she had a heart attack? Has she had a stroke? Has she fainted? Or maybe she's just resting or sleeping or praying?"

Denise wondered if she should say anything but finally decided to go on into the grocery store and do her shopping, then check back later to see if the situation had changed. Forty-five minutes later Denise had finished her shopping and came back to her car.

Immediately, she noticed that the woman in the next car was in exactly the same position as she'd been in earlier and was still absolutely motionless-arms draped over the steering wheel, her head resting on her arms, her eyes closed, not moving at all.

Denise then became really concerned. She went around and knocked on the window. No response. Now, at this point, Denise probably should have gone to find a security officer, but wanting so much to help and feeling guilty that she hadn't helped earlier, she opened the door and said to the woman, "Are you all right?" The woman replied weakly, "I've been shot!" "I've been shot in the neck," the woman said.

Denise was initially confused because there were no signs of foul play, no blood anywhere, no bullet holes in the car windows. Denise then examined the left side of the woman's neck-nothing. She examined the front of her neck-nothing. Denise then went around to the passenger's side, got in the car, looked at the right side of the woman's neck-nothing there either.

Then Denise got on her knees, leaned back over the seat and examined the back of the woman's neck, and there she found not a bullet or gunshot wound, but rather she discovered an uncooked Pillsbury biscuit stuck to the back of the woman's neck.

Denise looked at the back seat and saw a sack of groceries. At the top of the sack was a can of Pillsbury biscuits that had exploded and obviously had propelled the uncooked biscuit forward, hitting the back of the woman's neck.

When Denise told the woman that she had not been shot at all but rather had been hit by a flying biscuit, the woman didn't believe her at first. So, Denise peeled the biscuit off the back of the woman's neck, showed it to her, whereupon the woman straightened up, smiled weakly, said, "Thank you" and drove off.

I share this story to illustrate a point which I think Paul's letter illustrates. When events happen in our life, how do we interpret them? When events happen in our life, how do we interpret them? In other words, when you are faced with challenges or something that seems to be really bad happens to you or maybe you come to the conclusion of life or a period in your life, do you interpret events always looking for the worse or do you interpret life looking for the ways God guided you through them?

Let's look back at what Paul said to Timothy. He says to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." But Paul then recognizes that there were times when life got tough and people he depended upon were not always there.

He says that at his first defense no one was there. No one came to his support. His friends deserted him. But then Paul says to not count that against these friends. He says God was there. God was there to give him strength. God was there to carry him through the tough times when no one else was there.

Paul then expresses confidence that God will continue to be there for him in whatever lies ahead.

Jesus told a story, a parable, that we read earlier in the service. It is a parable about two men who go to the church to pray. The Pharisee, the man who was well off, had all of the advantages in life. He had been born into the best class of people and had not wasted his privilege. So this well off Pharisee goes to the church to pray.

He thanks God for all of his privileges. He thanks God that he was blessed by being born into the right family. He thanks God for never having to work too hard in his life to obtain what he has obtained. He thanks God for all of the financial resources that he has.

He thanks God that he is not like that tax collector who also came to the church to pray that day. The Pharisee thanks God that he was not born into his kind of family. The Pharisee thanks God that he did not have the kind of life that these other kind of people have had. People who were thieves and adulterers and tax collectors.

The Pharisee then reflects back over his life and notes that he fasts twice a week. He gives a tithe to the church. But the tax collector did not even feel worthy to approach God. He was far off beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

But then Jesus says this. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled. And all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Life sometimes gives us some really bad breaks. All of us know something about that. Some of us have faced tougher breaks than others. We can look over the life we have and wish it away. If you are a young student, you can look at the other students that are in class with you and you look at their life and you can covet what they have. You can say, "I wish I had her looks or I wish I had his athletic ability." Or maybe you say, "I wish I had his looks and her athletic ability."

We can look at the life that others seem to be living and we can think to ourselves, "I wish I had their life."

But I think the two stories we encounter today tell us to live life very differently than wishing it away and wishing that our lives were like someone else's. If we have a lot compared to what others have, we don't look down upon others. Instead we follow the advice of Jesus and live in humility.

We use the resources we have to help others. We use the resources we have to serve others. We don't hoard and we don't make a show of what we may have. Pray like the tax collector and not like the Pharisee.

When life brings difficulty to us, we don't have to assume the worse. In my opening example, the woman heard what sounded like a gunshot and she assumed the worse. She assumed that she had been shot and making this assumption caused her to stop functioning. She laid down her head and prepared to die.

But she was not shot and she was not about to die. It took an outside voice to redefine her situation. She was not dying. Her perspective on her life was wrong. She was not shot. She had simply had a freakish event happen. A freakish event which was quite funny.

As Paul says, "fight the good fight. Keep the faith." Don't let challenges or bad events or anything get you down. God created you to be better than that. Be humble and be brave. AMEN.

-Moore, James, "Never Give Up", http://day1.org/599-never_give_up

-Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-18, Luke 18:9-14

-Given: Oct. 27, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Unison Prayer of Confession

Watching God, like the Pharisee, we think we can stick our thumbs into life, pull out a prayer, and congratulate ourselves for being such good Christians. Then, we remember the harsh words we have spoken this week, the hurt we have inflicted on someone we loved, the lack of compassion we failed to offer to someone who needed our help.

Forgive us, God of Grace, and deal gently with us. May we become more like the tax collector - humble, penitent, acknowledging our faulty lives to you. Then, may we receive the mercy promised to us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Prayers of the People

Your heart opened, Amazing God, and abundant rain flowed forth
on that early morning of creation. Caring and loving beyond all hope,
the earth's floors were filled with grain and the plenty of every good thing;
valleys overflowed with oil and wine.

Ever ready to crown us with your blessings,
your heart broke as we allowed sin to cut out your hopes for us,
as we welcomed death, who came destroying your intended life for us.

You sent the prophets into our midst, to bring us back to live in your courts,
but we preferred the hollow promises of temptation and seduction.

So you sent Jesus into our lives, pouring your Spirit on his flesh,
so we might see you face to face. So, with those who have finished the race,
with those who are only at the starting line, we sing our praises to you: