

Text: 2 Timothy 3:10-17
Theme: Claim God's Promises of Wisdom and Power!
Opening Worship: Arizona-California District Convention
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Phygelus...Hermogenes...Hymenaeus...Philetus...Demas. Those aren't household names for us. But those names deserve to be emblazoned as a warning on the hearts of each one of us who serves in a position of lay or called leadership within God's kingdom. Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and Demas, those are five who once walked side by side with Paul in the work of the gospel, but, as Paul wrote 2 Timothy, no longer did.

In such a short letter, why would Paul name so many who went from leading God's people home to heaven to stumbling badly themselves and leading others to stumble with them? Why, as Paul writes his final inspired letter to his beloved co-worker and son in the faith, would Paul want Timothy and us to hear this sad litany of unfaithfulness in the task of leading in God's kingdom?

And as if just hearing those names was not sobering enough, right before and after our text Paul speaks a long list of the kind of obstacles at work to make Timothy and us timid and afraid and finally faithless as we seek to minister in these "last days." Right before our text he writes:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

And then Paul bookends that warning with these words right after our section:

For the time will come when people 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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

From the names of those who were proving themselves unfaithful, to the description of the pressures that can lead to such unfaithfulness in kingdom leadership, Paul is clearly providing a sobering warning to Timothy and to you and me. Let the leader who thinks he is spiritually so wise and so strong that this could never happen to him or her recognize how empty are all such boastful thoughts. If any of us – lay or called leaders - would be so foolish as to think we need

no such warning, well then we might as well start penciling in our names to the list: Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas...Rich Gurgel!

But just when we begin to take to heart the real danger of how easily we can shift from being a blessing to God's church to a curse, then the opposite danger looms. Then the temptation comes our way to give in to fear and timidity, as if, facing how weak and foolish we can be by nature, it is almost inevitable that our names will be added to that list of those who prove unfaithful, otherwise Paul is wasting his words! His goal is to turn our attention away from ourselves. He wants to turn us away from boastful pride in our alleged strength and away from despairing timidity in our very real weakness. He wants us to join him in finding wisdom and power for faith and ministry that is renewable day by day so that we stand strong no matter what comes our way.

And as proof that it is possible to stand strong no matter what comes our way Paul holds before Timothy, and you and me, his own life. ***"You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things I suffered in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from them all. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."*** As Paul turns Timothy's attention – and ours – to his own life, Paul makes no false promises about what a serene experience it is to be to be a leader in the kingdom of God. It's no accident that he mentions in particular what happened to him in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. Antioch and Iconium were the last two towns Paul visited on his first missionary journey before arriving at Timothy's home town of Lystra. Paul was forced to flee from Antioch and Iconium by Jews who hated his message. And in Timothy's own home town those same Jewish agitators arrived and convinced the Gentile crowd to stone Paul, leaving him for dead.

And in case Timothy missed the implication, Paul spells it out: ***"In fact everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** "Timothy, unless you let cowardice and timidity get the better of you, this is coming your way as well!" And did you catch that word ***"everyone"***? Unless we let fear and timidity get the better of us, this is coming your way too. Will you have the wisdom and power to stand up under that for the sake of your own soul, not to mention the souls that follow you in family and congregation! Is it even possible to be ready for all that Satan will throw your way as he seeks to sift you like wheat?

Paul answers with a bold "Yes!" ***"Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them."*** And no, that is not just something that God specially promised to the Apostle Paul. Paul writes these words so that Timothy and you and I might realize that the same wisdom and strength is available to allow us to stand victorious, rescued in the midst of every attack.

Yes, with almost brutal brush strokes of warning Paul grabbed our attention, but now he redirects our attention to how God fulfills this promise of rescue. ***"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.” Isn’t it interesting that Paul doesn’t begin by directing Timothy back to any sermon and Bible class he heard at Paul’s feet? Paul points Timothy back to what he has known since the time he was being bounced on the knee of his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. Paul is pointing Timothy back to what has made him wise for salvation since infancy. What Timothy needs to stand strong is not some advanced PHD training available only to the few. He simply needs to grasp ever more firmly the very same truths he has known since childhood! He points him back to continue in pondering ever more deeply what he has known.

And why is it so important for Timothy to being back to what he had learned? You see, being wise for salvation is not like some commodity that you receive once and then place it in your pocket like a quarter. Saving faith – the wisdom that clings to God’s grace to us in Jesus – is a living and breathing thing that daily longs to be refreshed and renewed just as the opposition saving wisdom faces comes from new and dangerous angles every day. “Timothy, reclaim every day the promises of God who determined to claim you as his own in Jesus before the beginning of time! Timothy, saving wisdom comes from going back again and again to the truth that this Jesus has destroyed death for you and for you brought life and immortality to light. Timothy, ponder the truth of Christ’s love for you – including his forgiveness for unfaithfulness, and timidity and fear – and that saving truth will reveal its wisdom more and more as you ponder and meditate on it!”

Yes, like Timothy I had my Lydia who read me my Bible stories night after night. I had faithful teachers in grade school, high school, college, and seminary who shared with me the saving wisdom of Jesus. The key for me too is not to move on to some knowledge I do not have, but to go back to that which first made me wise for salvation already in my baptism. There was always so much more for me to grasp than I realized in what was shared with me from infancy on. There is always so much I need now, today, in the midst of the battle raging within and around me. “Richard, continue in what you have learned because God has also known you by name as his own in Jesus before the beginning of time. Richard, remember those who shared that Word with you and taught you that Jesus was crucified and risen and ascended for you! Richard there you find forgiveness for unfaithfulness and timidity and fear!”

Yes, also for many of you here today, the wisdom of salvation has been known since your own Lois and Eunice carried you to the water and Word of baptism. Continue in what you have learned and become convinced of! There the Spirit first taught you to know and become convinced that you are a loved, forgiven and holy child of God in Jesus. Now, in the midst of the battle raging within and around you, the Spirit longs to deepen you in the wisdom of a Savior crucified and gloriously risen and ascended for you. He longs to convince you that he knows how to rescue you from every evil attack. As you continue in what you have learned, in the midst of all the voices of those deceiving and being deceived clamoring and shouting around you, that Word that is like rain and snow (Isaiah 55:10-11) still knows how to work in your heart what your God delights to do. The Spirit longs to produce a rich crop of faith, hope, and love in you even though, as our gospel pointed out, we cannot explain how he does it!

And with that gift of wisdom, there comes yet another gift to claim as you return to that which you have known from infancy. ***“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.”*** As that word daily instructs you – as it rebukes you by revealing where sin is making its daily bold bid for your heart – as it stands you back upright in forgiveness – as it directs you in words and actions that reflect the righteousness that is already yours in Jesus – it is accomplishing through all of that another glorious thing! Allow me to provide a paraphrase of that last verse that retired Seminary President Dave Valleskey used to speak. As the Word does its teaching, rebuking, setting back upright, and training, the result is that you are a servant of God who is ***“completely, completely, complete.”*** This, dear brothers and sisters, is a glorious promise of power for every good work that God had in mind when he laid out your life before you ever lived. He knew the callings he was going to give you, from royal priestly callings such as husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, brother or sister, to those more representative ministry callings of lay leader, teacher, staff minister, pastor.

To live all those callings in a way that brings honor to God in the midst of an unbelieving world is far, far beyond you. In fact, we bring on ourselves the deepest and darkest days of faith and ministry when we forget that. But whoever said this depended on you? It is not Cabela’s that is the world’s foremost outfitter; it is your heavenly Father! In his Scriptures that renew your wisdom in Jesus day after day, there you find his daily power to live out who he has made you in Jesus. God always equips where he calls. God will never ask anything of you that he does not provide the power to accomplish. As you continue in what you have learned, with Paul and with Timothy, he is at work to make you completely, completely, complete. Paul is speaking the same promise here that he made in Philippians 2:13: ***“It is God who works in you to will and to do according to his good pleasure.”*** You are too precious to him not to empower you for everything he has called you to do. The souls who receive a glimpse of Jesus through you are too precious for him not to do that. The power to live out your callings is not something you must manufacture. It is his gift to you!

As many of you already know, this past school year marked the 150th year of the founding of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Do you know what the word “seminary” means? It is taken from the Latin word *seminarium*. That word means greenhouse. Picture a greenhouse that has been set up for perfect conditions to protect and nurture those seeds so that they sprout and grow up strong so that they can bear the fruit they were intended to bear. That is the beauty of what Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is all about. It is *seminarium* a greenhouse where those studying for the ministry – or already in the ministry – are filled full again and again with the wisdom and power of Jesus’ gospel.

My brothers and sisters, Paul is inviting you to make every day of life *seminarium*. No, you don’t need to go to a hill in Mequon to do that (though pastors you are always welcome to do so!). You are simply being invited to return to what you have known since infancy. As you go back to what you know, in his gospel greenhouse God supplies you with the wisdom of growing

day by day in what it means to enjoy salvation in Jesus. In his gospel greenhouse God supplies you with the power to live out all the callings he has or will give you to be glimpses of Jesus.

My friends, the wisdom and power not to be listed among the five - Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and Demas – does not reside naturally in you. Don't be offended by that. Don't be surprised when you find out how foolish and weak you can be when you put your hope in yourself! But such wisdom and power did not reside naturally in Paul or Timothy either. Wisdom and power reside in him who has called you to be his own and who has called you to serve as his own. They are his gifts to you beyond measure in his means of grace. His delight is offering you day after day a rich supply. His delight is to keep on giving you wisdom and power without counting the cost or skimping the measure. My brothers and sisters: ***Claim God's promises of wisdom and power!*** Amen.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the Sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.