

Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰ for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. ¹² I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

¹⁴ Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. ¹⁵ You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:9-18)

What Impact does the Gospel have on Us?

Some events in our lives have a permanent impact on who we are. Just to choose one from my own life, the years that I spent in the army when I was a young man – the experiences, the responsibility, the first opportunity to really function as an adult had a real effect on my life. And most veterans would probably say the same thing. It's just that kind of experience. But there are other things in life that are just as powerful. All those things leave a permanent stamp on us. Of course, we wouldn't be here today if we didn't recognize that one of the most important "stamps" on our lives is the gospel, the message about Jesus Christ. Here at Peace, we operate a school and a preschool and we support a high school because we want that gospel to stamp our children from as early an age as possible. We recognize that we are not the people we would have been without that gospel. But what kinds of changes does the gospel make? **What impact does the gospel have on us?**

I.

Obviously, the greatest impact that the gospel has on our lives is our faith. We trust in Jesus as our Savior because we have heard the good news. Having that faith has practical impact on us. Some of that impact is unquestionably hard. Jesus himself teaches there is a cost to following him. **What impact does the gospel have on us? What cost does it have in our lives?**

We can see that cost in the life of St. Paul. The words we have before us this morning come from the very end of his life. Except for some personal greetings, these are the last words that we have from St. Paul before he was executed – perhaps even before Timothy was able to come to him. Paul wrote these words from prison in Rome. They are deeply personal comments to his closest friend in the world. But God inspired them to be a part of the Bible so that we could understand more clearly the real life cost of following Christ.

One thing that comes out very clearly is the loneliness Paul felt. A former brother, a man named Demas, had deserted him. He loved the world, Paul says. The cost of following Jesus was just too much. His leaving hurt Paul. Many other men he had worked with had also moved on to work in places like Galatia and Dalmatia and Ephesus. To Paul, that work was more important than keeping them close by to him. But their going meant that he was almost alone. Only Luke the doctor, the writer of the gospel of Luke, was still with him. Paul felt lonely. God designed our faith with a need to have fellowship with other Christians. No one practices their faith in isolation. We gather for worship. We spend time together in prayer and in Bible study and just in talking and laughing and crying together. Prison robbed Paul of those blessings.

He was in prison for preaching the gospel, and not for the first time. Several years before this, he had spent about four years in prison – two years in Caesarea and two in Rome. The first time he was held in Rome, he was allowed to live in a rented house with a soldier to guard him. He lived fairly comfortably and friends and visitors came and went freely. This time was different. There was no rented house. There was no free access to him. He was probably in a cell and he needed a cloak because he was probably cold. Early in the letter, he made it clear that he knew he was going to die soon. The Roman authorities were preparing to execute him.

All the things that Paul suffered, we too can experience. Think about how much it hurts when people we love abandon the faith. When I was vicar – a student pastor – twenty years ago, I first noticed the

phenomenon of grandparents who came faithfully to church, but their children and grandchildren never came. In some cases, those children had come to church every Sunday of their lives until they moved out of their parents' home. Many of them had even attended a grade school and a high school like ours. Still, some of the parents had to beg them to get their grandchildren baptized. They had to watch while the congregation sadly removed their children's names from membership. Don't you think that hurt? Those parents experienced a loss similar to the one Paul felt.

We live in a mobile society. My children have never lived near their grandparents. So for those grandparents to be a part of their confirmations, they have to travel. They missed the baptisms. Some of you may be in a similar situation. Sometimes, people we get very close to in our churches move away. They still are faithful to the Lord, but we don't get to see them any more. We come to church and notice the pew they always sat in. We feel a sense of loss.

Sadly, in this life, persecution is a reality. On university campuses and in the media, more and more Christianity is treated as a negative force in our society. Christians are regularly dismissed as hypocrites and reactionaries. A few weeks ago when a Baptist minister pointed out that Mormonism is not a Christian faith, the media went nuts. But what he said was true. Mormons do not believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They do not teach that Jesus died and rose to take our sins away and give us eternal life. But when someone said that about a presidential candidate, he was attacked. We can expect that sort of thing to continue. If anything, we can expect it to increase. If we are faithful in proclaiming the good news about Jesus, then we must experience persecution. Jesus himself told us that.

Are we prepared to face persecution? Are we prepared to experience the emotional losses that come from following Christ in a sinful world? I don't mean do we want to face those things. Nobody wants to face them. But are we willing to face them? Or does it all seem like it's too much trouble? In our generation, people are far less involved in their congregation than at any other time in Lutheran history. Is that because we don't value the fellowship of believers anymore? We have our work and our families and our kids' activities. Do we find nurturing relationships at church to be too hard? Or is the problem that we're afraid of putting in the time and effort only to have people move on? Or have we experienced the hurt of someone we love leaving their faith behind? Have we even experienced pastors or teachers leaving because they loved something else more than Christ and we now we feel burned? Or is the problem that we don't want to get the reputation for being too "churchy"? We don't want people outside church to treat us differently because we spend so much time at church and with church people? So we keep our distance to keep our comfortable lives safe?

It doesn't take much to see that those attitudes are sinful. To follow Christ means to be willing to suffer the consequences. But those consequences only apply to this world. We follow Christ for the blessings of the next world. We follow the Savior who died and paid for those sins. Jesus died because my faith is weak and I don't want to suffer persecution or loneliness or loss. He paid for that sin and God has forgiven me. That forgiveness is what makes it possible for us to endure the cost. Jesus was very open about what it costs to be faithful in this life. No one would ever be willing to pay that cost on their own. Our sinful hearts are much to interested in what's good for me! But the Holy Spirit comes to us in that gospel and he changes us. Knowing our Savior makes us willing to go suffer the consequences of confessing our faith in a sinful world.

II.

Paul knew the cost of being a disciple. He lived it, over and over again. But he always knew where to turn for real comfort: the gospel. **What impact does the gospel have on us? What purpose does it have in our lives?** It's purpose is to rescue us. St. Paul said, **"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom."** The devil hates the gospel. He will do anything in his power to attack it. The world we live in hates the gospel. It pressures us to compromise our faith, to strip out the things our society doesn't like and if we don't, we'll suffer ridicule and persecution. But the Lord will rescue us from every evil attack.

How? Right before he said these words, Paul pointed out that at his first hearing, everyone abandoned him. The other believers in Rome were afraid to come and offer moral support. Yet, he says, **"But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it."** One way that God rescues us is by strengthening us to face the evils of this life. He works through the word he has planted in our hearts and when the attack comes, we stand up for the truth – sometimes very much to our own surprise! Even God's enemies hear that truth through us. Who knows how

many of them will come to faith because God gave us the courage to stand? Notice that God does have a purpose in the attacks we suffer: to give us that opportunity to testify when the world would expect us to shut our mouths. You can bet that the message gets repeated even by those who didn't hear it. Sometimes God sends us to suffer loss so that he can use our hurt and our testimony to bring more people to heaven.

Then Paul says, "**And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.**" He didn't die after that first hearing. God rescued Paul. He didn't send an angel or an earthquake to break him out of prison. Paul had to stay in prison. In fact, eventually, he died there. But at that moment, God worked through the ordinary things around Paul and he saved his life. Not one of us will leave this life until God says it's time. Not one of us will suffer more hurt than God determines is necessary for the good of the gospel. Not one attack against us will truly succeed, because God carefully measures our hurts and sorrows so that they only strengthen our faith, never destroy it.

Then when the time comes, God will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. The worst that anyone can do to us here is take our lives. Then we win! Then we go home to heaven! Once we leave this life, we leave behind all the cost of following Jesus. Only the blessing remains: eternal life with Christ. That is the promise of the Gospel. That is what Christ has won for us. That is what keeps us going here. The promise of life is the power to face the devil and the attacks of unbelievers all around us. The promise of eternal life with Christ gives us the strength to overcome fear and doubt. It comforts us when we suffer the loss of people we love and the brutality of persecution. In heaven, God's love for us in Christ will wipe every tear from our eye and we will live with him in joy forever.

That promise gives a purpose to our lives here. Our purpose is to testify to Christ. That's not just something pastors and teachers do. Today we're celebrating the Reformation, the restoration of the gospel. God didn't give the gospel back to me and to the pastors conference. God didn't give it back to the seminary or the synod leadership. God gave the gospel back to you. He gave it back to his church, to his people. We all have a purpose: to spread that gospel. Spread it to your children. Keep bringing them to hear it. Keep talking with them about it yourselves. Make clear to them your willingness to suffer the cost of following Jesus here. Spread that gospel to the people in your life who don't know it yet. God will provide the strength and the opportunity. Keep supporting our congregation's efforts to share the gospel here and throughout the world. That makes you a part of the work we do. That gospel is your heritage in the Reformation. More important than that, it is the purpose why God has not brought you home yet.

Some things affect our lives so much that we don't even think about it anymore. The gospel is like that. What would you be like without your faith in Christ? What would your life be like without the gospel? Only God knows, because what we see when we look in the mirror is the believer he has made us to be. The gospel's impact on our lives is undeniable. That impact continues in both the cost and the purpose of our faith. Yes, we will suffer for our faith here. We live in a sinful world. But that gospel message is all about rescue from what we suffer here. It's all about where we are going. That changes how we face the hardships here. Face those sufferings with joy, trusting in your Savior. Make hearing and sharing his message the purpose of your life. Amen.