

Second Timothy

Imagine Paul sitting in prison chained up like a criminal. Many of his friends have abandoned him, and the great king of the Roman empire, Caesar Nero, is persecuting Christians. This is the situation from which Paul writes his second letter to Timothy. Paul believes he will die soon (4:6) and is writing Timothy to encourage him, provide further instructions, and ask Timothy to join him in Rome.

Writer: The Apostle Paul
Date of writing: Between 64-66 AD
Original Audience: Timothy, a coworker of Paul

The Reason for the Letter: Sometime between 64-66 AD, the great king of the Roman empire, Caesar Nero, turned against the church and attacked and killed followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul had been arrested and was in a Roman prison at the time of writing.



Only Luke was with him. Paul had suffered a lot and knew he was going to die soon. However, he writes this letter filled with encouragement and joy to his disciple Timothy, who is like his son.

The Main Message of the Letter: The letter opens with a greeting, “To Timothy, my dear son” (1:1–2). Paul gives thanks for the faith of Timothy (1:3–5) and offers words of encouragement for his continued zeal (1:6–7). Timothy is told not to be ashamed of the gospel or of the suffering that it brings (1:8–14). Paul’s status as a prisoner has caused many to turn away, but Timothy should follow the positive examples of Paul and a man named Onesiphorus (1:15–18). Indeed, Paul charges Timothy to continue passing on sound teaching to “reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2:1–2). Paul urges Timothy to faithfulness with examples from daily life: a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. Then Paul quotes lines from a Christian confession or hymn (2:3–13). Paul tells him to avoid those things that have been the downfall of false teachers (2:14–26). He is warned about difficult times to come and of false teachers who will take advantage of others during those times (3:1–9). As things go from bad to worse, he must remember Paul’s own life and ministry and commit himself wholeheartedly to learning and teaching the Scriptures (3:10–17). The need for Timothy’s diligence and persistence in such faithful ministry is made more urgent by the certainty of God’s judgment (4:1–5) and by the fact that Paul’s days on earth are coming to an end (4:6–8). Paul concludes the letter with some personal instructions (4:9–18) and final greetings to and from others (4:19–22).

Outline of Second Timothy:

1. Introduction and charge to stay faithful to the Gospel (1:1–18)
 2. Encouragement to be strong (2:1–13)
 3. Dealing with false teachers (2:14–26)
 4. Paul’s example of dealing with ungodliness (3:1–4:8)
 5. Instructions for Timothy and closing greetings (4:9–22)
-

Suffering and Shame

Paul’s final words from prison are an encouragement for Timothy to be strong in the face of suffering and shame. For many people in Roman society, the humiliation of “being chained like a criminal” (2:9) would be an almost unbearable disgrace. Paul says his friends deserted him in the face of such hardship (4:10, 16). Similarly, Jesus’ closest followers deserted him in his hour of trial (Mark 14:27, 50). Still, Paul is not ashamed (1:12; 3:10–11), and the letter also names Onesiphorus as a positive example of one who was not ashamed of Paul’s chains (1:16). Paul even says that “all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (3:12). Paul invites Timothy to join in “suffering for the gospel” (1:8). In the middle of this suffering and shame, Paul focuses on the Good News. First, the word of God is not chained (2:9), and those who harm God’s messengers will not stop God’s purposes. Second, suffering for the sake of the gospel can help accomplish God’s purposes and bring salvation to others (2 Tim. 2:10). Third, a glorious reward awaits those who suffer for Christ (2:12; 4:18).

Passing On to the Next Generation

In this letter, Paul reminds Timothy to stay faithful to God’s work. However, that message isn’t only for Timothy. Paul says to Timothy, “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2:2) Timothy was one of Paul’s many disciples, and Paul tells him to share all he learned with other reliable people. Those reliable people should also be able to teach it still others. This is how it works in the Kingdom of God. We should all be learning from our mentors and teaching others all we have learned. At the same time, we are like Timothy learning from Paul and also like Paul training another Timothy. Who is like Paul to you? And, who is your “Timothy” that you are teaching?

Like all letters, it is best to read or listen to the whole letter from beginning to end. Then go back and reread each section from the outline above and discuss these questions:

1. What do you learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
2. What do you learn about Paul and Timothy?
3. What do we need to do to obey this Scripture?
4. Who can I share this letter with?