

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Start from the Finish

What a time to start.

It was a horrible world. A certain young man wasn't wondering *where* he was going to serve, but there was no doubt he was soon to be all on his own. Not Call Day, but not so different from Call Day.

Paul was going away.

Timothy, left behind in a horrible world.

And it is a horrible world.

All about "me." Money rules. Disrespecting authority. Refusal to see things from someone else's perspective. *That* person does something wrong? Put a target on their back, refuse to forgive, and even better, make it go viral. The eighth commandment, chiseled off the tablets of stone. Insist on assuming the best? At your peril. Weekends are for pleasure; the past is for God. Mindfulness, sending good vibes, finding your higher self – spirituality everywhere; divine power words, dismissed as foolishness.

It is a horrible world.

But maybe it will be different tomorrow.

If we ever imagined that there might be a day when the prince of this world and his partners would stop resisting the truth, no – an old Paul says to a young Timothy, "The wicked will go from bad to worse."

This was the world that was. This is the world that is.

Do you want to be here?

In a world like this, to a young man that Paul loved . . . to young men who are sitting with wives and children, with fiancés and fathers, with brothers and sisters and mothers—in the midst of all this darkness, Paul reminds Timothy of his birth day.

Moms, I know you haven't forgotten your son's birth day. You could probably tell the story, your birth story, as if it were yesterday. To realize that a helpless precious newborn once nestled in your arms has been brought by the Lord to this moment can cause the chest of a mother and father to quiver, with tears of perspective and gratitude welling up to the Lord. For Timothy, it was in those moments when an infant lay in the arms of the mother, a grandmother, that light entered into the darkness of his world. For all of the enemies that would take on a young pastor, the heart of Timothy's strength had been his already as a little child. The word had transformed his tiny heart. His mother and a grandmother shined gospel light on a soul, words which made him wise for salvation and then taught, admonished, trained, equipped a little boy for every good work.

You aren't little boys anymore.

This is a big day. But on such a big day, in the face of this great work of ministry, God simply says to your son, to your grandson, not to look for some new strength or secret. No. He is simply to keep on with what has been the light of his life since you had him on your knees. It's that simple.

Though the stakes are anything but simple.

Your parents did not bring you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord because they wanted you to be a good boy. Your parents brought you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord because they wanted you to be in heaven when you died.

As Paul was saying his goodbyes to Timothy, he spoke about the day of Christ's appearing . . . about a day when the heavens will disappear with a roar, the earth will be consumed with fire from the God who will judge the living and the dead. There will be sheep, there will be goats. The words "depart from me" or "come to me" will ring in ears forever, whether the echo thunders in a fiery prison or the chords resound in the presence of Christ.

That is what is at stake.

What do you do if all of this is true?

A young man ready to live listens to an old man about to die. A young man who never had the opportunity himself listens to an old man who had seen Jesus face-to-face. Young men who live millennia later hear now words dripped through the pen of Paul from the voice of a God unseen.

Hear God speak to you.

Preach the word. It isn't complicated; it isn't easy. Be prepared when you're ready, and be ready when you're not prepared. Love enough to point out sin; care enough to comfort the broken heart. With patience help the weak walk strong. Shape words not to gain an audience, but be the doctor who tells hard truth and brings true healing. Be a careful thinker, a gospel preacher, a do-your-duty servant.

There it is. Instructions for a lifetime. A horrible world it is. But there is work to do.

And that would seem enough. But it wasn't.

There was one more thing. One more thing that would give Timothy perspective for a beginning like the one you anticipate today.

For just a moment, become old. For just a moment, wear a head of hair that is gray or have a head that has no hair. Your grinders have ceased because they are few. Your ears hear birds, but faintly. Your eyes look through windows, but dimly. Your flesh is on the verge of dust. Hear the words of one who was almost done.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Today you start. One day, you will finish.

There is in store for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day. Today you start. One day you will finish.

And not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. Today you start, with so many eager to learn your name. One day, you and those you serve will finish.

That was the one more thing. Those were the last words of the heart of Paul's message.

Why? Why distract from the joy of a beginning with a reflection on the end? No. Why even make a beginning unless you know the end?

It is a horrible world. The prince of darkness lies in wait. We walk in danger all the way. It is only in knowing the end that, unafraid, we can begin. It is only in knowing the prize that we do not hesitate to take first steps. It is only in knowing what has been promised that we can journey at peace into the unknown.

Today you step. The world will not cheer you. But an apostle Paul, with words from long ago, will. Your brothers and sisters today, old and young, cheer you on. And the righteous judge, who has in store for you the victor's crown – from the finish line, cheering you on.

Why start if you don't know the finish. But when you know the finish, you can't wait for the start.

Amen.