

2 Timothy: Last Words of Paul Written from Mamertine Prison

By Steve Ray

[NOTE: In my articles on the *Pastoral Epistles*, I use each one to relay a theme: *1 Timothy* emphasizes Timothy; *Titus* emphasizes Paul's ecclesiology; *2 Timothy* emphasizes the end of Paul's life.]

It was dark and damp. The scurrying feet of nasty rats was constant in the everlasting darkness. He could feel the scratchy feet as the rodents scrambled over his body and their yellow teeth nipped at his flesh. It was hard enough to sleep on the wet dungeon floor and the rats only made it worse. The acrid stench was unbearable—the years of accumulated excrement and urine was revolting. Vile prisoners fought over scraps of food. Once a doomed man was lowered into this subterranean chamber through the hole in the roof, there was no escape and death was certain. Julius Caesar had dispensed with his enemies here and it was now in use by Emperor Nero who was using it to dispense with the Apostle Paul.

Welcome to the Mamertine Prison, located in Rome near the Roman forum at the base of the Capitoline Hill. It can still be visited today and it was here that many believe, with good reason, that St. Paul spent his last days.

Earlier, about AD 61–63, Paul had spent two years under house arrest in Rome awaiting his appeal to Caesar—much better conditions than he suffered now. The *Acts of the Apostles* abruptly ends with the earlier imprisonment during which Paul wrote letters to Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and to a man named Philemon. But Paul was eventually released and early writings indicate that he spent several more years (c. AD 63–67) preaching Christ and traveling as far as Spain (Rom 15:24, 28) (Endnote 1). But now Emperor Nero ascended the throne and the Christians took the brunt of his cruelty. Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom under his insanity.

While bound in shackles and awaiting execution (2 Tim 2:9; 3:6) Paul wrote his last existing letter to his most loyal friend and companion, Timothy. It is a very personal final letter. Prison could not dampen Paul's spirit or confidence in his eternal destiny. He spent those miserable days and nights praying for Church. His spirit soared far above the stench of the dungeon and while caged he exulted in his "Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10).

Timothy had loyally stuck with Paul through thick and thin, through prison and labors and Paul now writes his last will and testament—a letter to his young son in the faith pleading with him to visit before the end comes. This letter resembles other farewell letters in Scripture: Moses' final words to his people before he died, David, Tobit, and even Jesus in his final words personally given to his disciples before his crucifixion. These letters typically review the past, prophecy about the future, and provide comfort and challenges in the present, especially passing on the torch to the successors. Paul had been abandoned by many of his followers, and others were ashamed of his ignominious imprisonment—probably afraid for their own lives if they were to associate with a

condemned criminal. But Paul's life had come to an end and he needed to pass on his inheritance—the deposit of the faith—to a faithful steward. Timothy was that successor of Paul's tradition and teaching. He was to avoid sin and heresy and to preserve the faith unblemished, passing it on to the next generation.

As a nursemaid, Paul had brought many Gentiles to Christ and numerous churches into existence. And after expending his life and strength teaching and caring for them he now must trust them into the hands of God—and into the hands of the bishops appointed in the churches. It was the apostolic successors who were entrusted to pass the apostolic tradition on to the next generation. Paul entrusted Timothy with his gospel and Timothy was a crucial link in the chain of apostolic tradition. Paul had ordained Timothy by the laying on of hands and he now reminds him of the special gift (2 Tim 1:6; 1 Tim 4:14) and exhorts him to use it faithfully in passing on the tradition intact. Five “generations” of the faith can be seen in 2 Timothy 2:2: Paul received the tradition from others which he passed on to Timothy who was to teach others so they could pass it on to still others. The truth was not passed on simply in a book, but in the tradition (2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6) and through the ordained teaching office in the Church.

Paul had sacrificed everything to serve Jesus—including worldly possessions. We have a brief insight into Paul's personal possessions and what he loved when he asks Timothy to “bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Tim 4:13). It seems Paul was arrested before grabbing his few possessions and was whisked off to Rome without them. The cloak, no doubt, would be very useful in the cold dungeon, but the books and parchments were probably copies of Scripture which were held very dear by Paul who loved the Old Testament and felt deprived without them. St. Thomas Aquinas commented that the closer Paul came to death, the stronger he felt the need for Scripture.

We don't know if Timothy ever arrived in Rome before Paul was executed, but Paul's last exhortations and warnings certainly held Timothy in good stead throughout his life. Earlier Paul had written the letter of 1 Timothy to his protégé and now he writes to his spiritual son again. Timothy seems to have been easily intimidated and timid and discouraged, but Paul challenges him throughout to stand strong, suffer for Christ, and hold to what you've been taught (e.g., 2 Tim 1:8, 18; 2:2, 15; 3:14). One can be called and ordained by God and granted the grace to serve Christ, but it remains the responsibility of Timothy and others called by God to maintain morality, avoid false teaching, and flee from sin.

Paul's life was full of paradoxes. His heart is heavy but at the same time he exults; he is bound with chains yet rejoices in his freedom; he is at the end of his life yet revels in his future. He knew death was imminent. He informed Timothy “I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim 4:6–8).

Paul had finished his mission. As a wiry old man he had suffered every sort of pain, punishment and humiliation. He had suffered for Christ and in the midst of his tribulation he never ceased rejoicing. Paul never went around telling about the deplorable conditions of Roman jails—and he knew them well from the inside. Rather he told his readers about the joy of the Lord, and the hope of eternal life.

Rotting in the damp darkness, Paul knew the cold blade of the sword was already laid upon his neck. It was not a surprise that he was on “death row”. Persecution had raged against the Christians. The apostle Peter suffered crucifixion like his Lord since he was not a Roman citizen. It was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen like the apostle Paul, so he would forgo a death like his Lord, suffering the dungeon instead and knowing the sword would soon fall, severing his head from his body.

Tre Fontaines marks the place of Paul’s execution along the Ostian Way and his body is venerated under the altar in the Church of St. Paul outside the Walls in Rome. His earthly life had come to an end, but his legacy lives on far overshadowing all his opponents and executioners—and he won the crown given by his Lord who received him into glory with open arms. Timothy was challenged to imitate Paul, as Paul imitated Christ, and we should do the same (2 Tim 1:13; 2 Cor 11:1).

Endnotes:

1. Scripture is silent on Paul’s final days, though Paul indicated his intense desire to preach in Spain (Rom 16:24, 28). Clement of Rome (AD 97) wrote that Paul had traveled to the “extreme limit of the west” which geographically from Rome must have referred to Spain. Other early writers concur. The actual details of St. Paul’s final years are debated and here I present the most widely held view.