

Keep Focus



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➤ Opening

On 26 September 1983, a Russian air force officer, lieutenant commander **Stanislav Yevgrafovich Petrov** saved the world.

This happened during the **Cold War**. The Cold War was fought between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was not a war with battles like the Second World War or the Vietnam War. Rather, it was fought with spies, which is where we get the James Bond stories from. The war was also fought with the superpowers supporting other countries in their wars, and competitions like the Olympic Games and the Space Race. Each one trying to show who is better, smarter and stronger. It was called the “Cold War” exactly because it never “heated up” to become a full blown war. Both the United States and the Soviet Union knew that if they were to fight each other, it would be with nuclear bombs.

Lt. Comm. Petrov was assigned to monitor the Soviet early warning satellites. These satellites would alert the Soviets if the USA launched any nuclear missiles.

September 1983 was a particularly difficult time for the USA and the USSR and tempers were flaring high. It was a dangerous time. The Soviet leaders had told their people that at any time—without warning—the USA could attack them.

And then it happened: just after midnight on 26 September the screen showed a blip. The USA had launched a nuclear missile. And it was heading towards Russia. Later the computer showed four more blips: four more missiles were on their way.

Petrov's duty was to notify his superiors about the launches. They would then have only a few minutes in which to decide whether or not to launch their own missiles against the USA. And they likely would have. But Petrov did not sound the alarm. He kept quiet. He believed that the satellites were malfunctioning—and they were because of sunlight bouncing off of clouds. But he did not know this then and if he was wrong, millions of Russians would die. Even though he had been taught to hate the USA, perhaps he could not believe that they would actually start a war. If Petrov had said something, millions upon millions of people all over the world may have died.

It may seem surprising, but in this story Stanislav Petrov shows some traits which the apostle Paul tells Timothy in our passage that he should have.

1. Petrov used his reason to decide that the computer was not giving him accurate information.
2. He kept focus: he did not give into the mania and paranoia which had gripped so many of the Soviet people, including his superiors.
3. And he kept the faith: nuclear war would, to a certain extent, have destroyed the world. Even though the USA and the USSR hated each other, he could not believe that either would allow the world to end like that.

These three things allowed Stanislav Petrov to make a crucial life-or-death decision. What Paul writes in this part of his letter, is that Timothy should apply the same qualities in his own life:

1. Timothy had to remember what he had learnt from Paul and the reasons behind his faith.
2. He had to keep focus and stand firm even though other people had left the faith to follow lies which appealed to them more.
3. He had to keep faith and keep being faithful to God and the people whom he was serving, rather than grow complacent in the world.

We are going to look at each of these points as we go through this part of the letter. But first we need to take a brief step back and see what has already been said.

➤ Recap

The apostle Paul is writing to the young Timothy to encourage him and ask him to come visit the apostle. Paul knew that he was now near the end of his life. Even though he was old, he knew he would not die peacefully in his bed. Instead, the Romans had put Paul in prison in order to have him executed. This was not the first time Paul was in prison. Previously he had been under house arrest. Even though he could not go where he wanted, he still had some freedom and comfort. But now he was in a proper prison which was cold, dark and miserable. He was chained up next to criminals. And he did not have any comforts or luxuries with him. And not only that, but many of his friends had abandoned him. Paul was old, alone, and cold.

And so to encourage himself, Paul actually writes a letter of encouragement to Timothy. He had met the young Timothy years earlier and Timothy became a trusty friend and co-worker in Paul's mission trips. At some point they had separated. Paul continued on his mission trips and Timothy became the pastor of the church in the city of Ephesus. Now Paul is writing to ask Timothy to come visit him

in prison. But he also encourages him in the work that he does in Ephesus while he is still there.

➤ **A Reason to Believe**

Our passage begins with the words “Keep reminding God’s people of these things.” But what are “these things”? They are what Paul had written in the previous section and summarises the message which he had been preaching. So reading from 2 Timothy 2:8 onwards:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my good news for which I am suffering, even to the point of being chained like an animal. But God’s word is not chained.

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him,

we also live with him;

if we endure,

we will also reign with him.

If we disown him,

he will also disown us;

If we are faithless,

he remains faithful,

for he cannot disown himself.

Here Paul appeals to Timothy to use his *reason*:

1. he must remember that Jesus was a real person (a descendant of David);
2. the historical events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15);
3. and to remember that it was all foretold hundreds of years before by the prophets (Old Testament; Genesis 3 onwards).

Having established how God had revealed Himself through the person of Jesus Christ, Paul summarises from verses 11 to 13 what it means to be in a right relationship with God ("obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory").

1. He says that people who follow Jesus have died to—that is, given up—the life as they knew it before. Previously people only lived for themselves, trying to make the most of life as they wanted. Now they have a higher goal in mind: to honour the God who created them and made them free from their selfish selves.
2. But to have this restored relationship with God, people must respond to Him when He calls, verse 12, even if that means suffering here on earth (as Paul was doing). If we don't, we condemn ourselves.

3. But if we do respond, verse 13, and then we are weak and fail to obey God completely as we should, God will still be there to forgive, love and care for us.

➤ **Keeping Focus**

Because Timothy is a pastor, we would expect him to know these things, and that he would remain faithful to God. He clearly has dedicated his life to something which is much, much bigger than he himself is.

But coming back to tonight's passage, Paul wants to remind Timothy of these things again. He wants to do it not because Timothy had forgotten them, but because humans *can* easily forget. We forget because we get tangled up in the things of the world: its troubles and its pleasures.

We need to be reminded of these things regularly; much like a musician must regularly practise his or her instrument.

Paul knows this and he wants to remind Timothy to keep focus on his mission as someone preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. And Timothy must in turn, according to verse 14, remind other people, because they are the people *living* the good news of Jesus Christ. They are in the world, interacting with people who have not yet come into a right relationship with their God. This puts them in a

great position to witness—through their lives and words—about Jesus. They can do this by living lives as people who are not ashamed or enslaved, but are free and in a loving relationship with their Maker.

- **Non-believers**

Paul wants to make sure that Timothy knows *how* people are to be witnesses. They should not be quarrelsome or forceful. Rather, they need to be gentle and respectful. It is human nature to be proud of something which we have, especially if someone else does not have it.

For example, when I got **my first car**, I was very proud of it! Even though it was an old car, to me it looked like a silver blue bullet. I was proud of it, *especially* considering that not all my friends had cars yet.

And with the good news of Jesus—that is, the incredible story of what God did for us so that we can be in a right relationship with Him—is so fantastic that a certain degree of pride is appropriate. But where there is pride, it is easy to become arrogant. And arrogance is never a good thing.

We did not invent or discover God's grace. Rather, He revealed it to us. It was a gift from Him to us. We have no reason to be arrogant about it, because we do not deserve it. So when we speak to people

who do not know God, we cannot be arrogant. We cannot speak with hate or condemn them to hell, because we are just as deserving of condemnation as they are.

- **Believers**

Now when Christians speak amongst *themselves*, they must also be patient and forgiving. It is no secret that there are thousands of different churches which teach differently on many things. As long as they teach the gospel, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. But if we disagree with them about something which does not affect our salvation, then we must be gentle and understanding. We must neither bash nor condemn them. The reason for this is, verse 15, that one day we shall all be accountable before God. Whether we have salvation in Christ or not, God will call us to account. And if we were arrogant and bashful, even about the gospel, and only spend our time talking to each other and not people who do not know God, He will tell us that we were people whom He had to endure, and wishes we had not been so.

- **Heretics**

But next in verses 17—19 Paul gives a big warning. Even though we are to be tolerant about other people in the church and even of other churches, we must watch out for people who have left the faith. These are people who have left the *reason* which we spoke

about in the first point to follow invented stories which appealed to *their* view of how the world—and God—works. Throughout the church's history there have always been people like this.

In our passage Paul specifically mentions two people named **Hymenaeus and Philetus**. We do not know exactly what these two taught other people. But we can make an educated guess. According to Paul they believed that the resurrection from the dead had already happened. Of course, even today, only Jesus has been resurrected from the dead. Everyone else is still in their graves. The Bible teaches that we will be resurrected with physical bodies. So Hymenaeus and Philetus probably believed that the resurrection was only spiritual. This tends towards a Greek philosophical idea that whatever is physical or material is evil and corrupted, and only what is spiritual is good and pure. This goes against what the Bible teaches. But it was a teaching which was more in tune with what the world believed at that time. Back then it was less offensive and radical to teach that than what the gospel message of Paul was.

These days we still have people who teach very wrong things: things which the Bible says we must not allow to be taught in our churches. An example is the Watchtower Society (or, as they are more commonly known, the Jehovah's Witnesses). They teach that Jesus was not truly God and that people are not saved by God's grace. They have even gone as far as to make their own translation of the

Bible where they **deliberately and fraudulently** change the words which are used when describing Jesus.

Paul is clear that such people are dangerous. Their teaching “spreads like gangrene” (verse 17). This is because their teaching is more likeable to the world and does not represent the truth. Paul says in verse 18 that such false teaching destroys the faith of some because it “departs from the truth”. Everything that we do which requires faith we base on truth.

If I walk across a bridge, I have faith that it won't collapse while I am walking on it. I believe this because

- I intuitively know what a sturdy bridge looks like
- I know that am I not a heavy person
- I understand the mathematics and physics needed to hold a bridge up
- I believe that the people who built the bridge used that same knowledge

But if the bridge consists of rotten wood, then I don't necessarily know that the bridge won't collapse underneath me. I might not even know that the wood is rotten. But if someone does know that the wood is rotten but tells me that it is sturdy, then they are endangering me.

That is what is happening with these false teachers. They take their cue from the Bible and then twist it into something else which they like more.

Paul says that we must not allow such people to enter our churches and destroy the faith of others. We can listen to them and reason with them, because the truth of God will prevail. But we must not allow them to teach nor have other people believe that they truthfully represent Jesus.

Instead, we must strive to be “useful” and “valuable” to God, verses 20 and 21. Rather than be a hindrance or even just “ordinary”—that is, carrying out the tasks of the day without thinking about our part in God’s creation—we must seek and further the kingdom of God. That is a life which is precious to Him.

➤ Keeping Faith

In the last part of tonight's passage Paul gives some advice on what Timothy and his congregation can do to stay faithful to God. Verse 22:

Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Even though Timothy is much younger than Paul, Paul expects a certain level of maturity from Timothy. I think this is because Paul wants to drive home the point that, as Christians, we have a responsibility towards the truth and towards other people.

That is not something to be taken lightly.

It means we have less "room" for mistake making than other people might have. It means we need to be serious when other people are being silly. We see more of this in verses 23 and 24:

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

Note that Paul does not say we should not have arguments, but that we must not engage with *foolish and stupid* arguments. Where there is serious, respectful and honest discussion happening we must be

willing to engage. Paul did this throughout his life as a missionary when speaking to the Greeks and the Jews. We must also not *quarrel*, but rather debate. This is a much more respectful way of talking about serious matters.

It might seem as if God is laying a “burden” on us if He expects this kind of behaviour even from young people. But another way of thinking about this is that He considered us so important and trustworthy that He actually entrusted His truths to us. He called us into a right relationship with Him and wants us to get to know Him. And to share what we learn with others so that they too can be in a right relationship with Him. Because, like us, they are precious to Him. Verses 25 and 26:

Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their sense and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

➤ Call to Action

We don't know for a fact that Stanislav Petrov actually saved the world. No one knows for sure that if he did tell his superiors, that the Soviets would have launched their own missiles. He does not think of himself as a hero. In his own words: “I did nothing.”

If war had broken out, the world would have survived. It would certainly have been a very different place. Millions would have died. But there would still have been people. There would still be greed and envy and hate and murder. The world would not have been cleansed of those things.

The Bible tells the story of another Hero. One who did save the world. He did it by doing the single most important thing which needed to be done: restoring people's relationship with the God who created them. Sin still remains, but the effects of sin have been dealt with. Through His death, death was defeated, because death could not keep Him down.

- **Believers**

If you believe this, then I want to encourage you in the same way that Paul is encouraging Timothy. Don't argue just for the sake of it and don't be mean spirited.

Flee temptations. Where possible, don't allow yourself to be put in situations where you can easily be tempted. If you have a particularly tough struggle, perhaps find someone to whom you can speak about it. Perhaps one of the pastors here. Make yourself accountable and find someone who will hold you accountable to do the right thing.

Ask your Father in Heaven to help you to be righteous, faithful, loving and peaceful. These things need to shine when you are interacting with other people, because whether they know God or not, they are precious to Him. And you have to treat them in the way in which Jesus treated you.

Lastly, study the Bible. Make sure you understand the gospel so that you can explain it if someone asks you about it. Read books and equip yourself with the reason of your faith. Remember that if God leads you to speak to just one person who responds positively to the gospel, over that person, as Jesus said, the angels will rejoice. Verse 19:

The Lord knows those who are His. Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

- **Non-believers**

If you are here tonight and you have not yet made a commitment to Christ Jesus, then I also have a message for you. If you are looking for truth and meaning in this life, then I want to encourage you to keep searching and keep reading. Be faithful in that quest. The fact that you are here tonight, in my opinion, is a great start. Never let the world drown out your craving for meaning and truth with the comforts and concerns that it gives you.

I understand that much of what I said here tonight is scary. The idea of fleeing desires to pursue righteousness is uncomfortable. It is asking you to give up a comfortable life which you know for one which you don't. And the expectations which God may have of your life and how you interact with others might seem unappealing. But if you are honestly looking for truth and meaning, then you need to realise that it will look different from what you know. Otherwise you won't be looking for it.

Perhaps you are offended when you read something like verse 26 where Paul says that you are trapped by the devil. Perhaps you are a good and upright person, not a Satanist. But remember that the function of the devil is to *deceive* people and lead them away from the truth. Again, if you know what truth is, then why are you searching?

I want to urge you not to settle for lies or half-truths which have been packaged in something which appeals to the world. Something which does not offend. If it is clear that there is something wrong with the world, then the answer cannot come from it.

In my experience, no-one has offended and divided so much, yet at the same time caused so much love and selflessness, as Jesus of Nazareth. Something about Him repulses the world—the same world which we feel isn't right—yet inspires love which defies the world as well. No-one has had such a profound impact on the world

as this person. At the very least He is worthy of serious consideration. Verse 8:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my gospel.