A Study in 2 Timothy 1:3–7

I Am Thankful to God — Pure Conscience — Prayers Night and Day — April 9, 2008

We are reading 2 Timothy chapter 1, beginning at verse 3.

> *"I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day; greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy; when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also."*
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> *"Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God."*

The Setting — Energy in the Darkening State of the Church

2 Timothy is, to the best of our knowledge, the last epistle that Paul wrote. In the final chapter he says: the time of my departure is at hand. It is a sad epistle in many respects, because of the ruin that had come into the assemblies by the time it was written. Each chapter is in some ways worse than the one before. Chapter 1, verse 15 contains a very sorrowful statement: This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me. A wholesale departure from the Apostle Paul — and from his doctrine — had taken place in the province of Asia.

J. N. Darby, in a footnote to his translation of verse 5, states a principle that serves as the key to the entire epistle: the whole subject of this epistle is energy in the darkening state of the church. That sentence, tucked away in a translator's note, illuminates everything that follows. The thankfulness of verse 3, the pure conscience, the prayers night and day, the unfeigned faith, the stirring up of the gift — all of these are expressions of that energy. And all of them are needed, in exactly this proportion, precisely in a darkening time.

The comparison with Acts 23 is instructive. When Paul stood before the Sanhedrin and said, Men, brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day, the high priest had him smitten for it. That was opposition from without. In 2 Timothy, the opposition — if we can call it that — is by

neglect from within. The turning away of those in Asia was more painful than the slap of the high priest, in a different way. And yet Paul begins this epistle with the same quality of conscience. He did not learn to keep quiet about it from the earlier experience. It was still true. He said it again.

I Am Thankful to God — Five Words

The epistle opens in verse 3 with what Mr. Darby renders I am thankful to God. That is five words. It is worth pausing here, because in a day of trouble and ruin the very first thing — before any lament, before any exhortation, before any mention of what is going wrong — is gratitude. Not a vague, fleshly optimism that is thankful for nothing in particular. Not the kind of thankfulness that says, oh, I'm always thankful, but cannot name a single thing it is thankful for. But a specific thankfulness: I am thankful to God for Timothy, for his faith, for being able to pray for him night and day.

1 Corinthians 14:19 says: I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. In Darby's translation, I am thankful to God is five words. There is a lesson in that proportion. In the assembly, five words with understanding are worth more than ten thousand without it. And in the darkening state of the church, five words of genuine thankfulness — I am thankful to God — are worth more than a great deal of lamenting.

Hymn 297 in our hymn book has the words: ten thousand, thousand precious gifts my daily thanks employ; nor is the least a cheerful heart, to taste those gifts with joy. When recounting what one would want to encourage a brother in a day of trouble — hold the shield of faith, take up the sword of the Spirit, stand firm — it is easy to make a long list and leave out the thankful heart. But that is where Paul begins. He does not overlook it. The heart of thanksgiving comes first.

On the road to Rome, when the brethren came down to meet the apostle at the Appian Way, it says: when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. That is the order: thanked God, then took courage. The Lord had to say to Paul in a dream: be of good courage. He needed it. He had a heart the same as ours. And the thankful heart was the source of the courage.

A Pure Conscience — and What Makes It Pure

I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience. A pure conscience is not the same as a seared conscience. A seared conscience has been so hardened by repeated sin and indifference that it no longer registers. It has lost its sensitivity. A pure conscience is a tender conscience that has been exercised — kept clear before God and man, in that order.

But a pure conscience alone is not sufficient, and Paul's own history proves the point. When he was persecuting the believers, he did so with a pure conscience (Acts 23:1). Yet that conscience was not yet enlightened. A conscience needs not only to be clear but to be in the light — and light comes from God through His word. It is God's word that shows the difference between what is good and what is evil, beginning with my own heart and extending outward to all around me. The conscience's function is to register what the light reveals. An unenlightened conscience, however pure in the sense of unmolested, is not sufficient. The thankfulness here connects the two: I am thankful to God, whom I serve with pure conscience. There was no thankfulness in Paul's service before he was saved — there was zeal, but not gratitude. The thankful heart implies the enlightened conscience.

There is a connection too with what chapter 3:2 will describe among the characteristics of natural men in the last days: ungrateful and profane — the two words come together. Not profane in the sense of coarse language, but profane in the older sense of treating holy things as though they were common. The polar opposite of what Paul describes here: a thankful heart and a pure conscience, holding holy things with reverence.

Prayers Night and Day — and Timothy's Tears

Without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day. The word remembrance appears three times in close proximity: in verse 3 (I have remembrance of thee), in verse 5 (when I call to remembrance), and in verse 6 (I put thee in remembrance). It is Paul's good memory at work, and he wants Timothy to have the same. He is not content with having a good memory himself; he wants to pass that memory on.

Night and day, rather than day and night, is worth noticing. When you pray night and day, it begins in darkness. And while you are praying, the darkness gives way. And you keep praying as the light comes up, and there is reason to thank God for the light that has come. That is the right order. Genesis 1 gives us the same order: the evening and the morning were the first day. Job says: He giveth songs in the night. Isaiah speaks of treasures of darkness. Stars appear at night that are invisible in the day. Paul and Silas sang praises at midnight — their backs sore, their feet in the stocks — and prayed. Chains fell off. The jailer was converted. His household was baptized. All of that came from a midnight song of thanksgiving when nothing in the circumstances called for rejoicing. But the joy of the believer does not depend on circumstances. It depends on the state of the soul in them.

Being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy. Timothy's tears are not described explicitly, but given the general subject of the epistle and what Philippians 2:19–20 says about him — that he alone cared genuinely for the state of the saints, unlike others who sought their own things — it seems probable that his tears had to do with the departure and decline that Paul writes about in verse 15. They

were real tears, not crocodile tears. The man who with genuine feeling cared how the saints got on wept over the ruin. And it was those tears — along with the unfeigned faith and the prospect of seeing Timothy face to face — that filled Paul with joy. Not the prospect of comfortable circumstances, but the prospect of a brother whose tears were real and whose faith was real.

The Darkening — and God Still at Work

The great Darby footnote — the whole subject of this epistle is energy in the darkening state of the church — must never be read as suggesting that God has stopped working in a day of ruin. He has not. He does not. The Apostle Paul himself is our assurance: in prison, at the end of his life, with all they which are in Asia turned away from him, he begins his last epistle: I am thankful to God. He who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

The story of a grandniece who was long known for her rebellion and who, after forty years, wrote a letter of appreciation for having been borne with all those years — that kind of thing happens. God works. In a day of ruin, it is not right to think for one moment that God has stopped working. One may think that I have stopped working. One may think that you have stopped working. Never think that God has stopped working. He still does.

I am thankful to God — and in a day of ruin, that thankfulness is itself the energy that keeps the soul alight.