PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY

The King's Finish Line

2 Timothy, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Finish Line: Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Paul would probably have smiled at it. He spent his last days writing to a younger friend he believed in.

Imagine getting a letter from someone you love, and realizing as you read it that it's probably the last one they'll ever write. That's what 2 Timothy is. Paul is in prison in Rome. He's been abandoned by most of his friends. He's cold, he's lonely, and he knows he's about to be executed. And from that cell, he writes to Timothy.

You might expect a letter like that to be full of fear or bitterness. It isn't. It's full of courage, love, and hope. Paul tells Timothy not to be timid. He tells him to hold on to the Scriptures he learned from his mother and grandmother. He tells him to keep going when things get hard. And he says that he himself has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.

This letter is short, just four chapters. But it might be the most personal thing Paul ever wrote. It's a mentor's final words to the young man he called his dear son. And it's written for anyone who has ever wondered whether faith is worth it when following Jesus costs something.

It's also written for anyone who has ever felt afraid. If you've ever felt too shy, too nervous, or too young to stand up for what you believe, Paul has something to say to you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all four chapters of 2 Timothy, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about Rome, prisons, the early church, and the people Paul mentions.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains where Paul was when he wrote, what was happening to Christians in Rome, who Timothy was, and the debate over who wrote this letter. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 2 Timothy sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 1 Timothy, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 2 Timothy chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

2 Timothy contains one of the Bible's most important statements about Scripture itself (3:16–17). Christians hold a range of views about what it means for Scripture to be inspired, and about related ideas such as inerrancy. I've described the main views fairly and briefly, without arguing for one. You may want to share your own church's understanding with your teen.

I've also presented the debate over the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles fairly, as in the 1 Timothy volume. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout. Paul's

warning about the last days (3:1–5) is explained in context, without predicting dates.

Several themes are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: courage instead of fear (1:7), the faith passed down from Timothy's grandmother and mother (1:5), friends who stay and friends who leave (4:9–16), and finishing well (4:6–8). Some readers may be dealing with anxiety; the chapter on 1:7 encourages them to talk to a trusted adult and makes clear that anxiety is not a sign of weak faith.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find the courage to follow Jesus all the way to the finish line.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Paul in Chains Again

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was a prisoner in Rome. He mentions his chains (1:16) and says he's suffering like a criminal (2:9). He'd been in Roman custody before. At the end of Acts, he spends two years under house arrest in Rome, living in a rented place and welcoming visitors (Acts 28:30–31). But this imprisonment sounds very different. Friends have trouble finding him (1:17). Most people have abandoned him. He's had a first hearing where nobody stood up for him (4:16). And he doesn't expect to get out alive (4:6).

Many Christians believe Paul was released after the imprisonment described in Acts, traveled for a few more years, and was arrested again. 2 Timothy, in that view, comes from this second, harsher imprisonment, shortly before his death.

Rome under Nero

In AD 64, a huge fire swept through Rome and destroyed much of the city. Rumors spread that the emperor Nero had started it himself to clear space for a new palace. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero blamed the Christians instead. Many were arrested and executed in horrible ways. Some were thrown to wild animals, and some were burned as torches to light Nero's gardens at night.

Suddenly, being a Christian in Rome was dangerous. That may explain why so many people were afraid to be associated with Paul,

and why Paul keeps telling Timothy not to be ashamed of him or of the gospel.

A Roman Prison

Roman prisons weren't designed for long sentences. They were usually places where people waited for trial or execution. They could be dark, cold, crowded, and filthy. Prisoners often depended on friends and family to bring them food, clothing, and other necessities. That's why Paul asks Timothy to bring his cloak before winter (4:13, 21), and why he's so grateful for Onesiphorus, who found him and wasn't embarrassed to visit (1:16–17).

A later tradition says Paul was held in the Mamertine Prison, an underground cell near the Roman Forum that you can still visit today. We can't be sure that tradition is accurate, but it gives a sense of the kind of place Paul may have written from.

Paul's Death

2 Timothy doesn't tell us how Paul died, but early Christian writers do. Around AD 95, a letter called 1 Clement says Paul gave his testimony before rulers and was taken from the world. Later writers, including Eusebius in the fourth century, say Paul was beheaded in Rome under Nero, which fits the tradition that he was a Roman citizen, since citizens were usually spared crucifixion. The same traditions say Peter was crucified in Rome around the same time. Most historians place Paul's death sometime between about AD 64 and 67, though the exact date is uncertain.

Timothy and His Family

If you've read the 1 Timothy volume, you've already met Timothy. He grew up in Lystra, in what is now central Turkey. His father was

Greek, and his mother, Eunice, was Jewish (Acts 16:1). In this letter, we learn that his grandmother's name was Lois, and that both women had a sincere faith that Timothy inherited (1:5). They taught him the Scriptures from the time he was a baby (3:15).

Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey and became his closest partner. By the time of this letter, he was probably in his thirties and was most likely still leading the church in Ephesus. He seems to have been a sensitive person who sometimes struggled with fear. Paul remembers his tears (1:4) and tells him not to be timid (1:7).

A Farewell Letter

2 Timothy reads like a farewell. The Bible contains several final speeches from leaders who knew they were about to die: Jacob blessing his sons (Genesis 49), Moses' final words to Israel (Deuteronomy 31–33), Joshua's charge to the people (Joshua 23–24), David's instructions to Solomon (1 Kings 2), and Jesus' words to His disciples on the night before He died (John 13–17). Paul himself gave a farewell speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–38). These speeches look back on a life, warn about dangers ahead, and pass on the work to the next generation. 2 Timothy does all three.

Who Wrote It? The Debate

2 Timothy is one of the three Pastoral Epistles, along with 1 Timothy and Titus. As explained in the 1 Timothy volume, many modern scholars think these letters were written by a follower of Paul after his death, while many others believe Paul wrote them. The arguments against Paul writing them include differences in vocabulary and style from his other letters, a church structure that

some see as more developed, and travel details that are hard to fit into Acts.

Why 2 Timothy Is Different

Among the three Pastoral Epistles, 2 Timothy is the one that many scholars find most likely to come from Paul himself. It's full of personal details that seem unlikely to be invented: Timothy's tears, his grandmother's name, a cloak left in Troas, scrolls and parchments, friends who left, a metalworker who caused harm, a coworker left sick in Miletus. It also has much less about church organization than 1 Timothy or Titus. Some scholars who think a follower wrote 1 Timothy and Titus suggest that 2 Timothy may include genuine fragments of Paul's last letters. Those who believe Paul wrote it point to these details, to the early church's acceptance of the letter as his, and to the possibility that Luke, who was with him (4:11), helped him write. Christians on all sides agree that the letter belongs in the Bible. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul remembers Timothy's faith and family, urges him not to be afraid or ashamed, and names friends who left and a friend who stayed.

Chapter 2: Pictures of a faithful life (soldier, athlete, farmer), a trustworthy saying, and how to handle God's word and difficult people.

Chapter 3: A warning about terrible times, and why Scripture matters.

Chapter 4: Paul's final charge, his reflections as he faces death, and his last personal messages.

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CHAPTER 1

Not Timid

2 Timothy 1

Paul opens the way he usually does. He introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus, sent by God's will to share the promise of life found in Christ. That's an interesting way to begin a letter written from death row. Paul is about to lose his life, and the first thing he talks about is life.

Then he greets Timothy as his dear son and wishes him grace, mercy, and peace. Paul tells Timothy that he thanks God for him constantly and prays for him day and night. He remembers Timothy's tears, probably from the last time they said goodbye, and he can't wait to see him again.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Tears**
>
> Paul doesn't say why Timothy was crying. Maybe it was when Paul was arrested, or when they parted ways for the last time. But notice that Paul doesn't tell him that real men don't cry, or that strong Christians don't get sad. He remembers Timothy's tears with tenderness. Jesus wept too (John 11:35). Crying isn't a sign of weak faith. It's a sign that you love people.

Paul remembers something else about Timothy: his genuine faith. And he points out where it came from. It first lived in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and Paul is sure it now lives in Timothy too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lois and Eunice**

These two women are only mentioned here, but their influence shaped the history of the church. Timothy's father was Greek and may not have shared their faith (Acts 16:1). So it was his mother and grandmother who taught him the Scriptures, prayed for him, and showed him what faith looked like in everyday life. They probably had no idea that the little boy they were raising would become one of the most important leaders in the early church, or that their names would be read by millions of people two thousand years later.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith Passed Down**

Maybe you have a parent or grandparent whose faith has shaped you. If so, thank them. Ask them how they came to believe, and what they've learned. But notice that Paul says the faith that lived in Lois and Eunice now lives in Timothy. At some point, it became his own. You can't live on your family's faith forever. And if no one in your family follows Jesus, that's okay too. You could be the first. You could be the Lois of your family, the one whose faith gets passed down for generations.

Then Paul tells Timothy to stir up the gift God gave him, the one he received when Paul laid his hands on him. The picture is of a fire that has died down to glowing coals. It hasn't gone out, but it needs air to blaze up again.

Why does Timothy need that reminder? Paul explains in the next verse, which is one of the best-known verses in the letter. God's Spirit doesn't make us timid. Instead, the Spirit gives power, love, and self-discipline.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Power, Love, and Self-Discipline**

Look at those three gifts. Power means the strength to do what God asks, even when it's hard. Love means that power is used to help people, not to push them around. Self-discipline, which some translations call a sound mind, means clear thinking and self-control, not being ruled by panic or

impulse. All three come from God's Spirit. None of them depends on whether you're naturally brave, outgoing, or confident.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What about Anxiety?**

Some people read this verse and feel worse, because they struggle with fear or anxiety and think it means they don't have enough faith. That's not what Paul means. Paul himself admitted to feeling afraid and overwhelmed (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 1:8). Paul is talking about being too timid to stand up for Jesus, not about the normal feelings of fear everyone has, or about anxiety disorders, which are real health conditions. If you deal with anxiety, God isn't disappointed in you. Talk to a parent, a counselor, or a doctor. Getting help is a wise and brave thing to do. And keep bringing your fears to God. He's with you in them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shy Is Not the Same as Timid**

Some people are quiet by nature. That's not a problem. Introverts and shy people make great friends, leaders, and witnesses for Jesus. Paul isn't telling Timothy to change his personality. He's telling him not to let fear stop him from doing what God has called him to do. Courage doesn't mean feeling no fear. It means doing the right thing anyway.

So, Paul says, don't be ashamed to tell people about Jesus, and don't be ashamed of me, even though I'm a prisoner. Instead, be willing to suffer alongside me for the good news, relying on God's power.

Then Paul describes what God has done. He rescued us and invited us to live holy lives, not because we earned it, but because of His own plan and His grace. That grace was given to us in Jesus before time even began, and now it's been revealed through Jesus' coming. Jesus has destroyed death and has shown us the way to life that never ends.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Death Destroyed**

Paul is writing this while waiting to be executed. For him, the claim that Jesus has destroyed death isn't a nice idea. It's the only thing that matters. Death is still real, and it still hurts. But because Jesus rose from the dead, it doesn't have the last word. That's why Paul can face his own death without despair.

Paul says God appointed him to preach this message. That's why he's suffering. But he isn't ashamed. And then he says one of the most confident things he ever wrote: "I know whom I have believed." He's convinced that God can guard what he's entrusted to Him until the day Jesus returns.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Know Whom, Not Just What**

Notice that Paul doesn't say, I know what I have believed, though he did know that too. He says he knows whom. Faith isn't just agreeing with a set of ideas. It's trusting a person. When everything else was falling apart, Paul's confidence wasn't in his own strength or his ministry. It was in Jesus, whom he knew personally.

Paul tells Timothy to hold on to the sound teaching he heard from him, with faith and love. He calls it a good deposit, a treasure entrusted to Timothy for safekeeping. Timothy must guard it, relying on the Spirit living inside him.

Then Paul gets personal again. Just about everyone in Asia, the Roman province around Ephesus, has turned their backs on him, including two men named Phygelus and Hermogenes. We don't know anything else about them. Their only legacy is that they left.

But one man was different. Onesiphorus often encouraged Paul and wasn't embarrassed by his chains. When he came to Rome, he searched hard for Paul until he found him. Paul prays that God will show mercy to Onesiphorus and his household, and reminds Timothy how much Onesiphorus helped back in Ephesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Friend Who Searched**

Imagine Onesiphorus arriving in Rome, a huge city of perhaps a million people, during a time when Christians were being hunted. He goes from prison to prison asking about Paul, knowing that being connected to a Christian prisoner could get him arrested too. And he keeps going until he finds him. Some interpreters think Onesiphorus may have died by the time Paul wrote, since Paul greets his household rather than him (4:19), but we don't know for sure. Either way, his courage is remembered forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Shows Up?**

When you're going through something hard, you find out who your real friends are. Some people disappear. Others show up. Which kind of friend are you? Do you stick with people when they're unpopular, in trouble, or going through a hard time? Sometimes the most Christlike thing you can do is simply show up, sit with someone, and not be ashamed to be seen with them.

KEY VERSE

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who has passed faith down to you? What did you learn from them?
2. When are you most tempted to be timid about your faith? What would courage look like in that situation?
3. Paul says he knows whom he has believed. What's the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus?
4. Think of a time someone showed up for you when you needed it. What did that mean to you?

TRY THIS *Write a thank-you note to someone who has helped you grow in faith, whether a parent, grandparent, teacher, or friend. If there's someone going through a hard time right now, be their Onesiphorus this week: find them, and show up.*

CHAPTER 2

Soldier, Athlete, Farmer

2 Timothy 2

Paul calls Timothy his son again and tells him to be strong. But not in his own strength. He means strong in the grace that comes from Jesus.

Then Paul gives Timothy a plan for the future. The things Timothy heard Paul teach, in front of many witnesses, he should pass on to trustworthy people who will be able to teach others too.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Four Generations**
>
> Count the generations in verse 2: Paul taught Timothy. Timothy will teach reliable people. Those people will teach others. That's four generations of believers in one sentence. That's how the Christian faith has spread for two thousand years: not mainly through famous preachers, but through ordinary people teaching others what they've learned. Somewhere along that chain, someone taught the person who taught you. Now it's your turn to pass it on.

Then Paul gives Timothy three pictures of what faithful living looks like.

First, a soldier. Timothy should be willing to suffer hardship like a good soldier of Jesus. A soldier on duty doesn't get distracted by ordinary civilian business. He focuses on pleasing his commander.

Second, an athlete. An athlete doesn't win the prize unless he follows the rules. In the ancient games, athletes had to swear that

they had trained properly for months, and anyone caught cheating was disqualified, no matter how talented they were.

Third, a farmer. The farmer who works hard deserves to be the first to enjoy the harvest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Pictures**

Each picture teaches something different. The soldier is about focus and loyalty: don't get so tangled up in other things that you forget whom you serve. The athlete is about integrity: how you play matters, not just whether you win. The farmer is about patience and hard work: you plant now and harvest later. All three require discipline, endurance, and sacrifice. None of them is easy. But all three lead to a reward.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Distracted**

What tangles you up? For a soldier in Paul's day, it might have been a side business. For you, it might be your phone, an endless stream of videos, a relationship that's pulling you away from God, or just a schedule so packed that there's no room for Him. Not all of those things are bad. But Paul asks whether they're keeping you from what matters most.

Paul tells Timothy to think about what he's saying, because God will help him understand. Then he writes, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David." That's Paul's gospel, the message he's suffering for, so much that he's in chains as if he were a criminal.

But then Paul adds a wonderful line: "But God's word is not chained." Paul could be locked up. The message couldn't. In fact, Paul's letters from prison have traveled farther than he ever did.

So Paul puts up with anything for the people God has chosen, so that they too can be saved and share in eternal glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Can't Be Stopped**

Throughout history, people have tried to stop the gospel by banning Bibles, closing churches, and imprisoning believers. It has never worked. Today, in some countries where Christians face severe persecution, the church is growing fast. God's word still isn't chained. You can pray for believers who are persecuted today, and learn about them through organizations that support them.

Then comes another trustworthy saying. Many scholars think it may have been part of an early Christian hymn. It's worth reading in your Bible. If we've died with Jesus, we'll share His life. If we keep going, we'll share His rule. If we deny Him, He'll deny us. If we're faithless, He stays faithful, because He can't deny who He is.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Remains Faithful**

The first three lines of the saying make sense. They're about what we do and what happens as a result. But the last line breaks the pattern. You'd expect it to say that if we're unfaithful, He'll be unfaithful to us. Instead, it says that even when we're faithless, He stays faithful. Christians have discussed how the third and fourth lines fit together. Many see a difference between permanently rejecting Jesus and the failures and doubts every believer goes through. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus restored him (John 21). Your faithfulness matters. But God's faithfulness to you doesn't depend on how strong you feel today.

Paul tells Timothy to remind people of these things and to warn them not to fight about words. It's useless and destroys the people listening.

Instead, Timothy should do his best to present himself to God as a worker with nothing to be ashamed of, someone who handles God's word correctly. This is the Key Verse for this chapter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Handling the Word**

The phrase translated correctly handles literally means to cut straight. People have pictured a stonemason cutting a straight stone, a farmer plowing a straight row, or a road builder cutting a straight path. The idea is that God's word should be handled carefully and accurately, not twisted to say what we want it to say. That means reading the Bible in context, asking what it meant to the first readers, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and being humble about what we don't understand. It's a skill you can learn.

Paul warns Timothy to stay away from godless chatter, because people who get into it keep sliding further from God, and their teaching spreads like gangrene. He names two of them: Hymenaeus, whom we met in 1 Timothy 1:20, and Philetus. They were teaching that the resurrection had already happened, and it was upsetting some people's faith.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Already Happened?**

What did they mean by saying the resurrection had already taken place? We don't know for sure. Maybe they taught that the resurrection was only spiritual, something that happened when you became a believer, and that there would be no future bodily resurrection. Some people in the ancient world thought the body didn't matter. Paul strongly disagreed. Christian hope includes the resurrection of the body, just as Jesus rose bodily (1 Corinthians 15).

But Paul is confident that God's foundation stands firm, and it carries two inscriptions. One says God knows the people who belong to Him. The other says everyone who calls on His name must turn away from evil.

Then Paul uses a picture from everyday life. A big house has some dishes made of gold and silver and others made of wood and clay. Certain ones are used for special occasions and others for ordinary things, including, probably, garbage. If people clean themselves

from the wrong things, they'll be like the special dishes, set apart and useful to God for every good purpose.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Useful to God**
>
> You don't have to be famous, talented, or popular to be useful to God. You just have to be available and clean. Think of it this way: if you were thirsty, you wouldn't care whether a cup was gold or plastic. You'd care whether it was clean. God wants to use you. The question is whether you're ready.

Paul tells Timothy to run from the wrong cravings that tend to come with being young, and to chase after righteousness, faith, love, and peace, together with others who call on God with pure hearts.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Run Away**
>
> Paul doesn't tell Timothy to stand and fight temptation. He tells him to run. Joseph did that when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Genesis 39:12). Sometimes the smartest thing to do is get out. Leave the party. Close the app. End the conversation. And notice that Paul says to chase good things together with others. You weren't meant to fight temptation alone. Find friends who'll help you.

The chapter ends with advice about dealing with difficult people. Avoid stupid, pointless arguments, because they just lead to fights. The Lord's servant shouldn't be someone who picks fights, but should be kind to all people, a good teacher, and patient with people who wrong them. Opponents should be corrected gently, hoping God will lead them to repent and know the truth, and that they'll escape the devil's trap.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Kindness Online**
>
> Paul's words in verses 23 to 26 are perfect for the internet. Don't get sucked into pointless arguments. Be kind to everyone, even the people who disagree with you. If you need to correct someone, do it gently. Remember that the person you're arguing with isn't your enemy. They're someone God loves and

wants to rescue. Before you post a reply, ask whether it sounds like the Lord's servant described here.

KEY VERSE

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Who could you pass on what you've learned about Jesus to? A younger sibling, a friend, a kid in your church?
2. Of the three pictures (soldier, athlete, farmer), which one speaks to you most right now? Why?
3. What distractions tangle you up and keep you from focusing on God?
4. How can you disagree with people, online or in person, without being quarrelsome?

TRY THIS *Pick one passage of the Bible you'd like to understand better. This week, read it slowly, read the verses around it, look up what you can about its background, and then explain it to someone else in your own words.*

CHAPTER 3

God-Breathed

2 Timothy 3

Paul begins chapter 3 with a warning. Terrible times are coming in the last days. Then he gives a long, grim description of what people will be like.

They'll love themselves and love money. They'll brag, be arrogant, and insult others. They'll disobey their parents and be ungrateful. They'll have no respect for anything holy, and no love. They'll refuse to forgive, spread lies about people, and have no self-control. They'll be cruel, and they'll hate what is good. They'll betray their friends, act recklessly, and be full of pride. They'll love pleasure more than they love God. And here's the part that hits hardest: they'll look religious on the outside, but deny the power that real faith has.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Last Days**
>
> When people hear the phrase the last days, they often think of the end of the world. Christians hold different views about the timing of the end and the events leading up to it. But in the New Testament, the last days usually means the whole period between Jesus' first coming and His return (Acts 2:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2). Paul clearly thinks these things are already starting, because he tells Timothy to stay away from such people. Every generation of Christians has seen people like the ones Paul describes. So rather than trying to use this list to predict dates, it's more useful to use it as a mirror.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Look in the Mirror**

Read Paul's list again slowly. Which of these do you see in the world around you? Now the harder question: which ones do you see in yourself? Lovers of themselves comes first on the list, and it's probably the root of the rest. We live in a culture that tells us constantly to put ourselves first, follow our hearts, and build our personal brand. Paul says loving yourself above everything else leads somewhere dark. The opposite is loving God first, and others as yourself (Mark 12:30–31).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Looking Religious**

Paul's description of people who have a form of godliness while denying its power is a warning for church people. It's possible to go to church, know the right words, wear the right T-shirt, and post Bible verses, without letting God actually change you. Real faith isn't a costume. It transforms how you treat people, how you spend your money, and what you love.

Paul says some of these people sneak into homes and take advantage of vulnerable women who are weighed down by sin and pulled around by their desires. These women keep learning but never manage to grasp the truth. In a world where women were often denied education, false teachers may have targeted them because they were eager to learn and had few chances to study Scripture carefully. That might help explain why Paul wanted women in Ephesus to learn (1 Timothy 2:11).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Always Learning, Never Knowing**

It's possible to watch endless videos, read endless posts, and listen to endless podcasts about God without ever actually coming to know Him or changing how you live. Information isn't the same as transformation. Learning is great, but the goal of learning about God is knowing God and following Him.

Paul compares these false teachers to Jannes and Jambres, who opposed Moses. Those names aren't in the Old Testament, but

Jewish tradition said they were the Egyptian magicians who tried to copy Moses' miracles in Pharaoh's court (Exodus 7:11). Just as those magicians were eventually exposed, Paul says, these teachers won't get far. Their foolishness will become obvious to everyone.

Then Paul turns to Timothy. You're different, he says. You know my teaching, how I live, what I'm aiming for, my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. You know about the persecutions and suffering I went through in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. And you know that God got me through every bit of it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra**
>
> These were the cities on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13–14). In Pisidian Antioch, he was driven out of town. In Iconium, people plotted to stone him. In Lystra, Timothy's hometown, he was stoned and left for dead. Timothy may have been a teenager at the time. He may have watched it happen, or heard about it from his mother and grandmother. When Paul came back to Lystra a couple of years later, Timothy joined him anyway. He knew what following Jesus could cost, and he chose it.

Paul then makes a statement that isn't very popular: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Meanwhile, evil people and frauds will keep getting worse, fooling others and being fooled themselves.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Will I Be Persecuted?**
>
> Persecution looks different in different places. In some countries today, Christians are imprisoned, attacked, or killed for their faith. For most teenagers reading this book, it's more likely to look like being mocked, left out, called names, or treated as weird or judgmental. Paul doesn't say this to scare Timothy, but to prepare him. If following Jesus costs you something, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It might mean you're doing something right. Jesus said those who are persecuted for His sake are blessed

(Matthew 5:10–12). And remember: being persecuted for your faith is different from being disliked for being rude or self-righteous.

But Timothy should keep going in what he's learned and become convinced of. He knows the people he learned it from, and he's known the Holy Scriptures since he was a baby. Those Scriptures can give him the wisdom that leads to salvation, by trusting Jesus.

Then come two of the most important verses in the Bible about the Bible: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

BACKGROUND CHECK **God-Breathed**

The Greek word is theopneustos, made up of theos, God, and pneo, to breathe. It appears nowhere else in the Bible, and Paul may have coined it. The picture is of Scripture coming from God's own breath, the way God breathed life into Adam (Genesis 2:7). Older translations often say inspired by God, from a Latin word meaning to breathe in. Paul doesn't say that God dictated the words or that the human authors were passive. Elsewhere the Bible describes people speaking from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). The writers kept their own personalities, vocabulary, and styles. But Paul says the result is God's word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Which Scripture?**

When Paul wrote this, the Scriptures Timothy had known since childhood were what Christians now call the Old Testament. The New Testament was still being written. But very early on, Christians began treating the writings of the apostles as Scripture too. In 1 Timothy 5:18, a saying of Jesus is quoted alongside the Old Testament as Scripture, and 2 Peter 3:16 puts Paul's letters alongside the other Scriptures. Most Christians believe Paul's words apply to the whole Bible. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians also differ somewhat about which books belong in the Old Testament, as you may have noticed if you've seen a Catholic Bible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Views on Inspiration**

Christians agree that Scripture is inspired, but they understand what that means in different ways. Many evangelical Christians hold to inerrancy: the belief that the Bible, as originally written, is without error in everything it affirms, including history and science, when properly interpreted. Some prefer the word infallibility, meaning that Scripture never fails in what it intends to teach about faith and life, while allowing that it may reflect the scientific understanding or historical methods of its time. The Catholic Church teaches that Scripture is inspired and teaches without error the truth God wanted recorded for the sake of our salvation, and that it is interpreted within the church's living tradition; Orthodox Christians similarly read Scripture within the tradition of the church. Many mainline Protestants see Scripture as an inspired human witness to God's revelation, through which God speaks, though written by people in their own times. And Christians in all these traditions argue about the details. What they share is the belief that, through Scripture, God speaks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Translation Question**

The Greek sentence in verse 16 doesn't contain a verb, so translators have to supply one. Most translations, including the NIV, read it as All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful. A few older translations read it as Every Scripture that is God-breathed is also useful. Most scholars prefer the first reading, but the second is grammatically possible. Either way, Paul's main point is the same: Scripture comes from God, and it's useful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Scripture Is For**

Notice the four uses Paul lists. Teaching shows us what's true. Rebuking shows us where we've gone wrong. Correcting shows us how to get back on track. Training in righteousness shows us how to stay on track. Someone has compared it to directions on a road trip: this is the road, you're off the road, here's how to get back, here's how to stay on it. And the goal isn't just knowing more. It's being equipped to do good. The NIV footnote says verse 17 could also be translated that you, a man of God, may be fully equipped, a reminder that Paul is writing to Timothy personally.

KEY VERSE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which items on Paul's list in 3:2–5 do you see most in the world around you? Which do you struggle with yourself?
2. What's the difference between having a form of godliness and having the real thing?
3. Has following Jesus ever cost you something? What happened?
4. What do you think it means that Scripture is God-breathed? What questions do you have about it?

TRY THIS *Make a Bible reading plan for the next month. Start with something manageable, like one chapter a day, maybe beginning with the Gospel of Mark. Each day, write down one thing it teaches you, one way it challenges you, or one thing it asks you to do.*

CHAPTER 4

Finishing the Race

2 Timothy 4

Paul gives Timothy a solemn charge. He makes it with God and Jesus as his witnesses, Jesus who will judge everyone, living and dead, when He appears and establishes His kingdom. That's how seriously Paul means it.

Here's the charge: Preach the word. Be ready whether the timing seems good or bad. Correct people, warn them, and encourage them, with great patience and careful teaching.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Whatever the Season**
>
> Paul tells Timothy to be ready whatever the season. That means when it's convenient and when it isn't, when people want to hear it and when they don't, when you feel like it and when you don't. Following Jesus isn't just for Sunday mornings or youth group. It's for the cafeteria, the locker room, the group chat, and the moments when it would be easier to stay quiet.

Why is this so urgent? Because a time is coming when people won't want sound teaching. Instead, Paul says, they'll collect teachers who tell them what they want to hear. Paul uses a vivid phrase: their ears will itch. They'll turn away from the truth and toward myths.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Itching Ears**
>
> Itching ears is a great picture. It's people who are only interested in hearing what scratches their itch, what makes them feel good, confirms what they

already think, and doesn't ask them to change. Today, algorithms are designed to feed us more and more of what we already like. It's easy to only follow people who agree with us, and to only listen to teachers who never challenge us. Paul's warning is a good question to ask yourself: am I looking for the truth, or just for someone who'll tell me what I want to hear?

But Timothy is to keep a clear head in every situation, put up with hardship, keep sharing the good news, and fulfill his ministry completely.

Then Paul explains why he's passing the baton. In some of the most moving words he ever wrote, he says: "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near."

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Drink Offering**

In the Old Testament, a drink offering was wine poured out on the altar along with a sacrifice (Numbers 15:1–10). Pagan worshipers in the Roman world also poured out wine to their gods. Paul pictures his life as an offering being poured out to God, drop by drop, until it's gone. He'd used a similar image years earlier (Philippians 2:17). Now he knows the last drops are being poured.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Departure**

The word Paul uses for departure was used for a ship pulling up its anchor and setting sail, for soldiers taking down their tents and breaking camp, and for a prisoner being set free. For Paul, death wasn't the end. It was leaving for home. He once said that he'd rather leave the body and be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), and that for him to die was gain (Philippians 1:21).

Then Paul looks back on his life with three short statements. He has fought the good fight. He has finished the race. He has kept the faith. This is the Key Verse for this chapter.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Pictures of a Life**

The first is a soldier or a wrestler: Paul has fought hard, and he's still standing. The second is a runner: he has crossed the finish line. The third may be a guard or a steward: he has kept the treasure safe that was entrusted to him. Paul isn't bragging. He's grateful. Remember, this is the same man who called himself the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). His life had been full of beatings, shipwrecks, prison, and betrayal (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). But he didn't quit.

Now, Paul says, there's a crown of righteousness waiting for him, which Jesus, the Judge who is always fair, will give him on that day. And not just him, but everyone who has longed for Jesus to return.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crown**

In ancient athletic contests, winners received a crown, usually a wreath of leaves, that would wilt in a few days. Paul says the crown waiting for him won't fade (1 Corinthians 9:25). Notice too that Paul expected to be condemned by a Roman court. But he knew there was a higher court, with a Judge who is truly just. Human judges might call him a criminal. Jesus would call him faithful.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Finish Well**

Lots of people start strong. Not as many finish well. Some people are excited about Jesus at camp or at a big event, and drift away a few months later. Some leaders start well and fall away later in life. Paul's goal wasn't just to start the race but to finish it. You're near the beginning of your race. What would it take to still be following Jesus at fifty, or eighty? Probably a lot of the things in this letter: good mentors, faithful friends, time in Scripture, courage, and dependence on God's grace.

Then Paul's letter gets very personal. He asks Timothy to come quickly. Demas has left him because he loved this world, and has gone off to Thessalonica. Crescens is in Galatia, and Titus is in Dalmatia, which is on the coast of modern Croatia. Paul doesn't criticize Crescens and Titus, who were probably sent on ministry

assignments. But Demas left for the wrong reasons. Only Luke is still with him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Demas**

Demas had once been one of Paul's coworkers. Paul mentions him in Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 24, right alongside Luke. But at some point, Demas walked away, because he loved this present world. We don't know exactly what that means. Maybe he was afraid of being arrested. Maybe he wanted a comfortable life. Maybe he just got tired. It's a sad reminder that being close to great Christians doesn't make you faithful. Each person has to choose for themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Luke**

Luke, the doctor, the author of the Gospel of Luke and Acts, stayed. He had traveled with Paul for years, through storms and shipwrecks (Acts 27). Now, when almost everyone else was gone, he was still there. Some scholars think Luke may even have helped Paul write this letter. There's something beautiful about the fact that the man who wrote down the story of Jesus and the early church chose to stay with his friend to the end.

Paul asks Timothy to get Mark and bring him along, because Mark is helpful to him in ministry. That's a remarkable sentence.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mark Gets a Second Chance**

Years earlier, a young man named John Mark had abandoned Paul and Barnabas partway through their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). When Barnabas wanted to give him another chance, Paul refused, and the argument was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas split up (Acts 15:36–40). But now, at the end of his life, Paul asks for Mark by name and says he's useful. Somewhere along the way, Mark grew, and Paul's heart softened. Tradition says this same Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. If you've failed, your story isn't over. And if someone has failed you, maybe they deserve a second chance too.

Paul says he has sent Tychicus to Ephesus, perhaps to deliver this letter and take Timothy's place while he travels. Then he asks Timothy to bring the cloak he left with Carpus in Troas, along with his scrolls, especially the parchments.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Cloak and Some Books**
>
> This is one of the most human moments in the Bible. The great apostle is cold, and winter is coming, so he asks for his coat. And he wants something to read. We don't know what the scrolls and parchments were. They may have been copies of the Old Testament, his own notes, or legal documents for his trial. But even facing death, Paul wanted to keep learning. Faith doesn't make us less human. Paul needed warmth, books, and friends, just like everyone else.

Paul warns Timothy about Alexander the metalworker, who did him a lot of harm and strongly opposed the message. Paul leaves it to God to pay him back. This may be the same Alexander mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20, though the name was common.

Then Paul describes his first hearing in court. Nobody came to support him. Everyone deserted him. But Paul prays that God won't hold it against them. He sounds like Jesus on the cross, and like Stephen, praying for the people who stoned him while Paul looked on (Acts 7:60).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When Everyone Leaves**
>
> Have you ever been let down by the people you counted on? Paul knew that feeling. But he didn't let bitterness win. He forgave, and he focused on the One who didn't leave. Paul says that the Lord stood by him and gave him strength, so that the message could be fully preached and all the Gentiles could hear it. He was rescued from the lion's mouth, which might mean literal lions, or might be a picture of death or great danger. Even when people abandon you, Jesus never will (Hebrews 13:5).

Paul is confident that the Lord will rescue him from every evil attack and bring him safely into His heavenly kingdom. That doesn't mean Paul expects to escape execution. He's just said his departure is near. He means that nothing can keep him from reaching God's kingdom. And then he breaks into praise.

Paul ends with greetings. He sends his love to Priscilla and Aquila, the couple who had worked with him in Corinth and Ephesus, and to the household of Onesiphorus. The NIV footnote says the Greek has Prisca, a variant of Priscilla. He mentions that Erastus stayed in Corinth and that he left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Even Paul couldn't heal everyone.

One more time, Paul urges Timothy to come before winter. Ships stopped sailing the Mediterranean in winter because it was too dangerous, so if Timothy waited too long, he might not make it in time. Paul passes on greetings from several believers in Rome: Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and the rest of the believers there. A later tradition identifies Linus as an early leader of the church in Rome, after Peter.

And then the last words Paul ever wrote, as far as we know: a blessing that the Lord would be with Timothy's spirit, and that grace would be with them all.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Timothy Make It?**
>
> We don't know whether Timothy reached Rome before Paul died. Hebrews 13:23 mentions that Timothy was released from prison, which suggests that at some point he was arrested too, maybe because he came to be with Paul. Later tradition says Timothy continued to lead the church in Ephesus and eventually died as a martyr there. But whether he arrived in time or not, Timothy carried Paul's faith forward, and passed it on, just as Paul asked.

KEY VERSE

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Where do you see people with itching ears today? How can you make sure you're listening for the truth, not just what you want to hear?
2. What do you think it would take for you to finish your race well?
3. Demas left, Luke stayed, and Mark came back. Which of their stories speaks to you most? Why?
4. Has anyone ever let you down when you needed them? How might Paul's example help you respond?

TRY THIS *Write your own finish line statement: a few sentences about what you hope people will be able to say about your faith at the end of your life. Then write down one thing you can do this week to move toward it. Keep it in your Bible.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read Paul's last letter. Facing execution, he wasn't afraid, because he knew whom he had believed. He was convinced that Jesus had destroyed the power of death. And he wanted Timothy, and everyone who would ever read his letter, to know that too.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He wants you to know Him. His grace was planned before time began.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus defeated death.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. He broke the power of death and opened the way to eternal life.

> *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.* **2 Timothy 1:9 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then run your race with Him all the way to the finish line.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus died for me and broke the power of death. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow*

Him as my King. Give me courage instead of fear, and help me finish the race. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a grandparent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 2 Timothy straight through. Then read Titus, the next letter in the New Testament, another of Paul's letters to a young leader.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Find an older believer who can mentor you, the way Paul mentored Timothy. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Be honest with Him, even about your fears. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, Jesus has defeated death itself, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Timothy 4:18 (NIV)