

***In Conclusion... STAY STRONG***  
**II Timothy 1:1-7 (AFBC 1/20/19)**

Allow me to begin with a bit of personal reflection. For the past 37 years, I've been a Pastor. Before that, I served three churches as Minister of Music, Children, Youth, and Young Adults. When I accepted the call to my first pastorate, I think I had preached a total of five sermons—including Youth Sunday at my home church.

In those early years, I mainly preached individual sermons. In more recent years, though, I have enjoyed putting together series of messages on a common theme or a particular book of the Bible. I want to devote our next six Sundays together to the theme "In Conclusion" while focusing on what we believe to be the final letter written by the Apostle Paul, the little book we know as II Timothy.

I trust that, after over 23 years of living and serving alongside you here, you know that I love this church and I cherish all of you. Pam feels the same way. We will always be concerned about the health and well-being of this congregation. We've invested a big portion of our lives in you—and you have done the same in us! What we've done, we've done together.

So during these six remaining Sundays—barring any inclement weather, of course--I have some final things I want to share with you. But they're not just random observations; they are all deeply rooted in Scripture.

Paul was back in prison when he wrote II Timothy, but he was no longer under house arrest. This time, because of his faithfulness to Christ, he was in Nero's dungeon... awaiting execution.

(By the way, I'm not trying to draw any parallels between Paul's situation and my own. I'm happily choosing retirement. As far as I know, an execution was never considered; but I didn't want to stay around so long that you might begin thinking about it!)

This is the letter, however, that contains those familiar words of the Apostle Paul that are often requested for memorial services: "...the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my race, I have kept the faith" (II Tim. 4:6b-7).

For Paul, his departure really did mean execution—so he crams some very important final remarks into this little letter of II Timothy. I'll try to do them justice as I share them with you.

Paul sounds strong and confident as he writes. He doesn't dwell on his own problems, but focuses instead on encouraging Timothy, along with the church, to stay true to their calling as followers of Jesus Christ and as witnesses to the power of His Gospel. So for today, "In Conclusion... STAY STRONG!"

**II Timothy 1:1-7--Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup>To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup>I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. <sup>4</sup>Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. <sup>5</sup>I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. <sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup>For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.**

Do those sound like concluding remarks? They are. Paul is talking about things that matter—things that we understand as Christians matter a lot—and always will! And he's saying all this in the context of being concerned about the future of the church and all those who are part of it.

For many of these early believers, this was a time of discouragement. And, friends, isn't the same true for us today?

For so many people in general, but also for many of us who love Jesus and His church, this is a discouraging time. But from what I hear and observe, this mood is certainly not limited to the future of the church.

It seems that most people today will tell you that they've experienced better days in the past than what they are going through now. Polls indicate that many of us don't feel hopeful about the future; and this has been true for a while.

People don't see things getting better for themselves or their children. The prevailing mood ranges from resignation to outright despair. We seem to be losing our way. As Paul begins this letter, he directs our attention to some of the blessings God gives us to keep us strong and moving in the right direction.

**I.** There are several of these, but Paul begins with **RELATIONSHIPS**. When times are challenging, good relationships can do wonders to keep us strong.

Back in September, we passed the 23-year mark that the Lord has allowed us to be in relationship together as pastor and people. I personally feel very blessed by this relationship!

Over the years, I've traveled with many of you on some very tough journeys—sadnesses, losses of various kinds. I can only hope that God has used me in some way as an instrument of His grace in your life.

And again, this hasn't been a one-way street. God has also used you as a source of love and encouragement for me.

Now, just a word about the unique relationship between pastors and the churches we serve. So many of the bonds between us are formed--and certainly strengthened--during significant events in the lives of those we serve.

I'm talking about illnesses and deaths (sad times, but also... ), weddings, childbirths, and anniversaries, and yes, retirements, too—all these along with many more are the events, the ministry opportunities, that cement the pastor-parishioner relationship.

This, friends, is why it's so important for the old pastor (yours truly) to give the new pastor (young Timothy, or Josh!) lots of room for this to happen. For this reason, I will be very intentional about making room!

In a few short weeks, if you call me about a ministry need, and I ask you if you've *called your Pastor*, please don't take that personally or feel that I don't care about you any longer. That question I ask you will grow directly out of my concern for you and this church and the very fine new Pastor you've called.

This relationship I'm talking about is precious; and that's exactly what God intends. He designed us to live together in families, churches and communities.

He formed us to love, support, and in so many ways, depend on one another. These relationships are gifts of God's grace.

God intends for our relationships to keep us strong in those times when we otherwise couldn't go on. First of all is our relationship with our Heavenly Father—a close, personal relationship made possible through God's greatest gift of all, His Son, Jesus Christ.

Then, growing out of this relationship is the one we enjoy here with one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ. It's the one we sing about: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

For many of us, this has been a twenty-three-year-plus relationship. For others, it's been a shorter time. For some of you, it's been a lifetime (at least, so far)! Again, blest' be these sacred ties that bind our hearts together in Christ's love!

Surely this is one of the reasons God gave us churches. Here we have the opportunity to develop relationships that God uses to fortify our lives as we celebrate the good times together, but also embrace and endure the sad times... together.

Hopefully we know that right here is where we can always find unconditional love. There's mutual support and encouragement here... and correction too, when that's what's needed—because this is what people who care for each other do.

Paul begins his letter to Timothy by speaking of us as being "in Christ Jesus." That's a phrase Paul uses 164 times in his letters. We're not just "in church," we're "in Christ Jesus together."

This was by far the most important relationship in the Apostle Paul's life—being "in Christ." But Paul also understood how much he needed to be in relationship with other people—people who shared this experience of being "in the body of Christ."

Paul wrote this letter to a young man whose friendship and companionship he had grown to cherish. You may recall there were times when Paul struggled a bit in his relationships with others. All of us do on occasion.

Paul actually had a parting of the ways with Barnabas and John Mark at one point—remember? This is when he first turned to young Timothy. Paul saw great promise in Timothy as a Christian leader, so Paul became his mentor.

Timothy accompanied Paul on his journeys. They became so close, Paul refers to him as “my dear son” (v. 2). Paul faced many difficulties; but he was never alone. The Lord was with Paul; and so were a few dear companions who got him through!

Here’s the point I’m trying to make: God intends for our relationships to be a source of strength in our lives. If they are not making us stronger people, or if we are not in turn doing this for others, we need to seriously question our relationships. They should always strengthen, and never weaken, our lives.

Paul bestows this blessing upon his friend Timothy: “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 2). Let’s ask ourselves this: how often do we bestow blessings on our loved ones? The Lord intends for us to bless one another.

I had someone tell me about their experience in AA-Alcoholics Anonymous. He said that people of various ages and from different backgrounds would get together, and each one would stand before the group and say, “I am an alcoholic and I cannot help myself.” They were then encouraged to rely on each other and their “Higher Power,” to find the strength needed to overcome their addictions.

Well, each of us should be able to stand before this congregation and say, “I am a sinner, a broken person, and I cannot help myself. I need God. I need what only the Savior can do for me.

I also need the fellowship and encouragement of others who realize how much they need God and one another. This is church, friends. These relationships help us to “Stay Strong.”

**II.** Here’s something else that helps: **MEMORIES.** Have you ever thought about how God uses our memories as a source of strength and encouragement in our lives?

God has endowed us with these wonderful cranium computers which have tremendous capacities to recall information stored away many years ago. It’s not a perfect system—or we’d never lose our keys, miss an appointment, or search for our glasses only to finally realize that we’re wearing them!

That’s irritating... Our brains aren’t perfect; but for the most part, they work remarkably well! Of course, our memories can work against us. We may recall things we would be better off forgetting.

Paul addresses this topic in another letter when he speaks of “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before... (Philippians 3:13). Some things from our past need to be left there—forgotten, forgiven, whatever—but left behind in order for us to move forward.

I’ve almost been here long enough now to forget how things were at the beginning of our time together—all the tensions, no one trusting each other, the terrible hurt, some questioning if the church could survive, and lots of folks jumping ship!

Later came concerns about new kinds of churches in our community and tensions over whether we should change; and, if so, by how much. There was something akin to a political fight right here in our midst.

People seemed willing to say or do anything to get their way—threatening to leave the church if they didn’t—and a significant number of them did when the vote didn’t go their way. I had never experienced anything like that in church!

Those were very painful days. But what I remember most about them is those of you who came to me and said, “Jim, we support you. This church supports you. We have your back. We need for you to stay with us and get us through this.”

I don’t know that I would’ve been able to remain strong enough to get through those days without these words of encouragement from people whom I valued and respected. To this day, I thank God for these relationships, and I find strength in these memories.

Now, I have lots of wonderful memories that did not emerge from times of crisis—hopefully I’ll get to share some of these as well—but our most poignant and cherished memories grow out of the soil of sadness and struggle. I think most of us who’ve lived long enough would agree with this assessment.

In our text, Paul tells Timothy that he longs to see him so they can renew this relationship that had brought them so much joy. He recalls Timothy’s sincere faith, along with that of his mother and grandmother. In difficult times, we draw upon these memories of people who’ve helped us, whose faith has been an inspiration to us, and whose prayers for us never ceased.

We all have these memory banks, friends. They contain a variety of powerful recollections which can bring strength to our lives... if we will only take the time and make the effort... to remember.

**III.** Now, let me share one other important message I hear coming out of this passage. Seems like we don't hear much about it anymore, but it still matters—perhaps even more so when a church is going through a change in leadership. What I'm talking about is **REVIVAL**.

Revival is about remembering the important commitments we've made in the past. From time to time, we need to renew these commitments. This will also help us to "Stay Strong."

In verse six, Paul says to Timothy, "...I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God..." This is important--don't let it die. Fan this life, this faith, this relationship with God into flame so that others can feel the warmth and see the light!

Why? Listen as Paul continues, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (v. 7). Giving up and dropping out will never do for God's people, no matter how big the challenge is that we face.

A boldness of faith is needed; and this may require a revival in our relationship with the Lord and with each other as His church. This is no time for timidity and fear, friends. It's time for revival and a recommitment to what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ!

Push aside the ashes. Add some kindling. Fan those embers of faith into flame once again; and you will find renewed strength and courage and sustenance to be all the Lord had in mind for this church when He birthed it nearly 200 years ago.

You already share together in some wonderful relationships here—but there needs to be more—more who join hearts and hand with you in this ministry. You have lots of memories to build upon as you pursue God's future for this church, but this will require revival—stoking the coals and fanning into flames the good gifts that God has already placed in the life of this church.

It's worth it. It's always a source of great joy and fulfillment when we let God do His work in this world... through us. Stay strong, First Baptist Church; and let God work through you! Amen.