LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE ONE

THE DIVINE PROVISIONS FOR THE INOCULATION AGAINST THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 1:1-14

Second Timothy, the last Epistle written by Paul, opens with the words, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, beloved child: Grace, mercy, peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." This book was written at a time when the churches established through the apostle's ministry in the Gentile world were in a trend of degradation, and the apostle himself was confined in a remote prison. Many had turned away from him and forsaken him (1:15; 4:16), including even some of his co-workers (4:10). It was a discouraging and disappointing scene, especially to his young fellow-worker and spiritual child, Timothy. Due to this, in the opening of this encouraging, strengthening, and establishing Epistle, he confirmed to Timothy that he was an apostle of Christ, not only through the will of God, but also according to the promise of life which is in Christ. This implies that the churches may become degraded, and many of the saints may backslide in unfaithfulness, but the eternal life, the divine life, the uncreated life of God, promised by God in His holy writings and given to the apostle and all the believers, remains forever the same. With and upon this unchanging life the firm foundation of God has been laid and stands unshaken through all the tide of degradation (2:19). By such a life those who seek the Lord out of a pure heart are able to stand the trial of the church's decline. This life, on which the apostle in his

first Epistle charged Timothy and others to lay hold (6:12, 19), should be an encouragement and strengthening to him in perilous times.

Only in the two Timothys did the apostle include God's mercy in the opening greeting of his Epistles. God's mercy reaches farther than His grace. In the degraded situation of the churches, God's mercy is needed.

I. THE SUBJECT OF THE BOOK: INOCULATION AGAINST THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH

When Paul was writing this Epistle, he was fully aware that the churches were declining. However, because he was one who laid hold on the promise of eternal life, he was not discouraged or disappointed. He had something within him which never changed--the eternal, uncreated, incorruptible life of God. No matter how the environment may change, this eternal life remains the same. Because he himself was encouraged in the life of God and not disappointed by the situation, Paul wrote the Second Epistle to Timothy not only as an encouragement and strengthening to a younger co-worker, but also as an inoculation for the entire Body of Christ against the decline of the church.

We should not regard 2 Timothy merely as a so-called pastoral book. If we have the proper insight, we shall realize that the divine thought within Paul was to inoculate the believers against the decline of the church. Paul foresaw this decline. However, deep within he was encouraged, not because he could understand matters according to logic, but because he laid hold of the eternal life promised by God in His holy writings. The very life promised by God in the Scriptures dwelt within Paul. Paul's burden in writing this Epistle was both to encourage and to strengthen Timothy and also to inject a divine substance into the church in order to inoculate the church against the germ of decline. We praise the Lord that this inoculation has been effective. Yes, the church throughout the centuries has been ruined to a certain extent, but it has not been exterminated. Paul had the foresight to inoculate

the church against decline. Even today we in the Lord's recovery are enjoying the benefit of this inoculation.

My burden in this message is to consider eight basic elements of this inoculation. These divine provisions for the inoculation include a pure conscience, unfeigned faith, the divine gift, a strong spirit, eternal grace, incorruptible life, healthy words, and the indwelling Spirit. These ingredients of the marvelous dose administered by Paul are found in 1:1-14.

II. INTRODUCTION

Verses 1 and 2 are an introductory word. In verse 1 Paul says that he was an apostle not only through the will of God, but also according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus. The expression "the promise of life" does not mean that we have only the promise and not the life. It means that we have received the promised life. A similar term, "the promise of the Spirit," is used in Galatians 3:14. This term does not mean that we have received only the promise and have not received the Spirit. It means that we have received the Spirit who has been promised. In the same principle, the words "the promise of life" denote the promised life. Paul was an apostle according to the life which God had promised, which Paul had received, and which dwelt within him. Paul became an apostle by this life.

The eternal life according to which Paul became an apostle is incorruptible and unchanging, for this life is actually the processed Triune God Himself. Because Paul was indwelt by this life, not even the whole Roman Empire was able to prevail over him in its dealings with him. Paul was strengthened by the processed Triune God as life.

Nowhere else but in the opening of this Epistle does Paul say that he was an apostle according to the promise of life. Elsewhere he tells us that he was an apostle through the will of God (Eph. 1:1). Not many Christian teachers emphasize the fact that Paul's apostleship was not only through the will of God, but also by the promise of eternal

life. The reason Christians emphasize the will of God but not the promise of life is that they themselves do not see this matter of life. Whatever we do and whatever we are in the Lord's recovery today must be according to eternal life and by this life. Praise the Lord that we are in His recovery by this life!

III. THE DIVINE PROVISIONS FOR THE INOCULATION

The life mentioned in verse 1 includes all the eight basic elements of the inoculation. This means that eternal life includes a pure conscience, unfeigned faith, the divine gift, a strong spirit, eternal grace, the element of incorruption, healthy words, and the indwelling Spirit. If we have this life, which is actually the processed Triune God, we have a pure conscience, unfeigned faith, and all the other provisions of the divine inoculation. Let us now consider these provisions one by one.

A. A Pure Conscience

In verse 3 Paul says, "I thank God, Whom I serve from my forefathers in a pure conscience, how unceasingly I have remembrance concerning you in my petitions night and day." To serve here is to serve God in His worship (Acts 24:14; Phil. 3:3). Paul followed in the footsteps of his forefathers to serve God in a pure conscience. In a time of degradation, a pure conscience, a conscience purified from any mixture, is needed if we are to serve God.

I have the assurance that all the saints who are so honest, truthful, and faithful to the Lord in His recovery have not only a good conscience, but also a pure conscience. In this matter we should not accept the lie of the enemy. The more we doubt that we have a pure conscience, the more we shall feel that our conscience is not pure. We need to declare, "Satan, get away from me! I have a pure conscience. Satan, don't you know that I am for the Lord and not for anything else? I am for the Lord, for His recovery, for His church, and for His interests." The more we testify in an honest way that we have a pure conscience,

the stronger will be our realization that our conscience is in fact pure. The way for us to have a pure conscience is to declare by faith, honestly, truthfully, and steadfastly, that we have a pure conscience toward the Lord. Do not listen to your doubts, and do not believe the lies of the enemy. The Lord's blood prevails against him. Do not believe the enemy when he says that you are weak, or when he accuses you of being impure and not having a good conscience. Do you not love the Lord? Are you not for the Lord and His church? Learn to tell the enemy, "Satan, you have been cheating me long enough. I will not believe you any longer, and I will not allow you to hold me back. I am for the Lord, and I have a pure conscience."

It is the eternal life which strengthens us to make such a declaration to the enemy. This is why I say that a conscience that is pure and good is included in eternal life. Because we have eternal life within us, we can be strengthened to declare that we have a pure conscience.

B. Unfeigned Faith

Verse 5 says, "Having been reminded of the unfeigned faith in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded dwells also in you." Here Paul reminds Timothy of the unfeigned faith which is in him. This faith first indwelt Timothy's grandmother and then his mother. Now it dwells in him. We today may praise the Lord that this faith is also in us. Because we have eternal life, we have unfeigned faith.

Faith refers to the organic union with the Triune God in which we receive God's infusion through His Word and in His Spirit. The more we touch the Word by exercising our spirit, the more we shall contact the Lord and be infused with Him. As a result, our faith will be strengthened. This faith is actually the reflection of the eternal life we have received. Therefore, to repeat, faith refers to the organic union between us and the Triune God in which we contact the living God through His Word and by His Spirit to receive His infusion.

C. The Divine Gift

In verse 6 Paul goes on to say, "For which cause I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands." This word was written to encourage and strengthen Timothy in his ministry for the Lord, that his ministry not be weakened by Paul's imprisonment and the degraded situation of the churches. Here Paul seems to be saying to Timothy, "Timothy, I charge you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you. Something in you is burning. However, it is not sufficient for it just to be burning--you need to fan this gift into flame. You have something in you which is a gift of God. Since you have unfeigned faith, I remind you to fan this gift into flame."

It is rather difficult to define what Paul means by the gift of God in verse 6. It may refer to a particular spiritual function or ability, something burning within Timothy that enabled him to function in a particular way.

All the saints in the Lord's recovery need to fan into flame the gift of God which is in them. However, in the meetings many saints seem to throw away the fan. Especially in the meetings of the church, we need to fan into flame the gift which is in us. Then the flame will grow higher and brighter, and the riches of Christ will be manifest. All the saints need to be encouraged with the fact that they have eternal life, a pure conscience, and unfeigned faith. For this cause, they should fan into flame the gift of God.

D. A Strong Spirit

In verse 7 Paul continues, "For God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but of power and of love and of a sober mind." The spirit here denotes our human spirit, regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-6; Rom. 8:16). Fanning into flame the gift of God is related to our regenerated spirit.

Paul says that we have a spirit of power, of love, and of a sober mind. Power refers to our will, love to our emotion,

and a sober mind to our mind. This indicates that a strong will, a loving emotion, and a sober mind have very much to do with a strong spirit for the exercise of the gift of God which is in us.

We need to believe that God has given us such a spirit, and we should praise Him for it. We should not say that we do not feel as if we have a spirit of love, power, and a sound mind. In our physical body we usually do not have any feeling with respect to our internal organs unless there is something wrong with them. Under normal circumstances, are you aware of the fact that you have a liver? I may not be conscious of my liver, but I know that I have this organ and that it is functioning. In like manner, we may not feel as if we have the kind of spirit described in verse 7. Nevertheless, we need to believe Paul's word and exercise our spirit.

In verse 8 Paul says, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner; but suffer evil with the gospel according to the power of God." Here we have the reason Paul charged Timothy in the two preceding verses to fan into flame the gift of God which was in him. We need to do this in order not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord. Not to be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord is to stand against its downward current in the declining churches. We should also be ready to suffer evil with the gospel. The gospel, which is personified here, was suffering persecution. Therefore, Timothy should expect to suffer evil along with the gospel. Our suffering of persecution along with the gospel must be to the extent of what the power of God can endure, not limited by the endurance of our natural strength.

E. Eternal Grace

In 1:9-10a Paul says, speaking of God, "Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before times eternal, but now has been manifested through the appearing of our

Savior Christ Jesus." God has not only saved us to enjoy His blessing, but also called us with a holy calling, a calling for a particular cause, to fulfill His purpose. The purpose here is God's plan according to His will to place us into Christ, making us one with Him to share His life and position that we may be His testimony. Grace is God's provision in life for us to live out His purpose.

The grace given to us in Christ was bestowed upon us before the world began. The phrase "before times eternal" means before the world began. This is a sure and unshakable foundation, standing firmly against the waves of the downward current and exposing the total powerlessness of the enemy's efforts to counter the eternal purpose of God. In order to strengthen Timothy, the apostle identifies their ministry with this eternal grace, the sure foundation.

In verse 9 Paul says that God's grace was given to us before times eternal; in verse 10 he says that this grace has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus. God's grace was given to us in eternity, but was manifested and applied to us through our Lord's first coming to nullify death and bring life to us. Because this grace was manifested through the appearing of Christ, Old Testament saints like Abraham and David did not experience it. The grace destined to be given to us came with the appearing of the Lord Jesus. This grace is not merely a blessing; it is a Person, the Triune God Himself given to us to be our enjoyment. This grace came when the Lord Jesus appeared, and now it is with us today.

F. The Incorruptible Life

The last part of verse 10 says of Christ, "Who nullified death, and brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel." Christ nullified death, making it of none effect, through His Devil-destroying death (Heb. 2:14) and death-swallowing resurrection (1 Cor. 15:52-54).

The eternal life of God is given to all believers in Christ (1 Tim. 1:16) and is the main element of the divine grace given to us (Rom. 5:17, 21). This life has conquered death

(Acts 2:24) and will swallow up death (2 Cor. 5:4). It was according to the promise of such a life that Paul was an apostle (2 Tim. 1:1). This life and its consequent incorruption have been brought to light and made visible to men through the preaching of the gospel.

Life is the divine element, even God Himself, imparted into our spirit. Incorruption is the consequence of life saturating our body (Rom. 8:11). This life and incorruption are able to counter the death and corruption of the decline among the churches.

Second Timothy 1:11 says, "For which I was appointed a herald, and an apostle, and a teacher." The relative pronoun "which" refers to the gospel of divine grace and eternal life. This corresponds to the gospel presented in grace and life by the Apostle John (John 1:4, 15-17). For such a gospel Paul was appointed a herald, an apostle, and a teacher. A herald announces and proclaims the gospel, an apostle sets up and establishes the churches for God's administration, and a teacher gives instructions to the churches with all the saints.

In verse 12 Paul goes on to say, "For which cause also I suffer these things; but I am not ashamed, for I know Whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to guard my deposit unto that day." The apostle had a cause for his sufferings, a cause on the highest plane--to proclaim the glad tidings of the gospel of grace and life, to establish the churches, and to instruct the saints. Such a cause should also be an encouragement and strengthening to Timothy in facing the deterioration of the declining churches. Since Paul was not ashamed, Timothy should not be ashamed either.

In verse 12 Paul says, "I know Whom I have believed." What the apostle believed was not a thing or a matter, but a living Person, Christ, the Son of the living God, who is the embodiment of divine grace and eternal life. The eternal life in Him is powerful; it is more than able to sustain to the end the one who suffers for His sake and also to preserve him for the inheritance of the coming glory.

The grace in Him is more than sufficient to provide His sent one with all he needs for finishing the course of his ministry unto a reward in glory (4:7-8). Hence, He is able to guard that which the apostle has committed unto Him for the day of His return. Such an assurance should also be an encouragement and strengthening to the weakened and sorrowful Timothy.

The words "my deposit" refer to that which Paul had committed to the Lord. The apostle had committed his entire being with his glorious future unto the One who is able, through His life and grace, to guard his deposit unto "that day," the day of Christ's second appearing.

G. The Healthy Words

In verse 13 Paul continues, "Hold a pattern of healthy words which you heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." The preceding word in verse 12 is a pattern, an example, of healthy words. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ are words of life (John 6:63); hence, they are healthy words. The word healthy here refers to the health of life.

H. The Indwelling Spirit

In verse 14 Paul concludes, "Guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us." The Holy Spirit dwells in our spirit (Rom. 8:16). Hence, to guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit requires us to exercise our spirit.

We have pointed out that the Spirit is the ultimate consummation of the Triune God's contact with man. Praise the Lord that today this Spirit dwells in our spirit!

We thank the Lord for all the divine provisions for the inoculation against the decline of the church. The more we experience these provisions, the more we shall be inoculated against any kind of decline. Having such a marvelous inoculation; we should be able to declare that in the Lord's recovery there is no decline.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE TWO

THE BASIC FACTOR OF THE DECLINE– FORSAKING THE APOSTLE AND HIS MINISTRY

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 1:15-18

In this message we shall consider 1:15-18, verses which show that the basic factor of the decline consists in forsaking the apostle and his ministry. Although this portion of 2 Timothy is short, Paul must have had strong feelings when he wrote these words.

In 1:1-14 Paul covered many positive, encouraging, and strengthening matters. Based on his charge to Timothy in verses 1 through 7, Paul says in verse 8, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner; but suffer evil with the gospel according to the power of God." Here the gospel is personified; it is regarded as a living person that is suffering persecution. Paul encouraged Timothy to suffer evil with the gospel according to the power of God.

In verse 9 Paul goes on to speak of God who "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before times eternal." The purpose here refers to God's goal, and grace refers to the means of reaching this goal. The grace to reach God's goal was given to us in Christ Jesus "before times eternal," that is, before the world began. Grace "has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus" (v. 10). Hence, grace did not come until the Lord Jesus came. John 1:17 indicates this: "The law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ." The grace which came through Jesus Christ is nothing less than the Triune God dispensed into us for our enjoyment. This

grace carries out God's purpose and enables us to reach His goal.

Grace works in two ways. It works negatively to nullify death, and it works positively to bring in life and incorruption. This work of grace is still taking place within us. Today, in the church life grace is nullifying death and bringing life and incorruption to light through the gospel. Although we heard the gospel preached in the past, we probably did not hear that the gospel of grace nullifies death and brings in life and incorruption.

On behalf of such a gospel, Paul was "appointed a herald, and an apostle, and a teacher" (v. 11). Paul was a herald to proclaim the gospel, an apostle to establish churches, and a teacher to instruct the churches and the saints in the details of the gospel. For the sake of this gospel, Paul suffered "these things." However, he was not ashamed, for he knew the One whom he had believed and was persuaded that He was able to guard his deposit, to guard what he had committed unto Him (v. 12).

In verse 13 Paul charges Timothy, "Hold a pattern of healthy words which you heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." Paul's foregoing words to Timothy are a pattern of the healthy words which Timothy was to hold. We should hold such a pattern in faith, in the organic union with the Triune God, and in the divine love. Furthermore, according to verse 14, we should "guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us." The good deposit here is equal to the healthy words. We should guard this deposit through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The more we consider all the matters covered in verses 1 through 14, the more we realize what riches these verses contain.

I. THE APOSTASY

In 1:15 Paul says, "This you know, that all who are in Asia turned away from me, of whom are Phygelus and

Hermogenes." Asia here refers to the province of Asia. In this verse Paul indicates that believers in Asia who had formerly received the apostle's ministry now forsook him. In spite of such desertion, the apostle grew stronger in the grace that was in Christ, who was the same and would never change. Without being discouraged, he exhorted his son in faith to persevere steadily in the ministry in the midst of failure and ruin of the churches.

It is difficult to say to whom the words "all who are in Asia" refer. Does it mean that every believer in Asia turned away from Paul? Paul specifically names Phygelus and Hermogenes, two who must have taken the lead to desert the apostle because of his imprisonment. But what about all the other believers in Asia? We cannot say that every one deserted Paul, for Paul mentions Onesiphorus as one who often refreshed him and who sought him out diligently in Rome and found him (vv. 16-17).

A number of expositors say that these verses point to an apostasy, a departure from the truth. But what was the extent of the apostasy? I believe that "all who are in Asia" points to the general situation among the believers in Asia without including every particular believer. Generally speaking, there was apostasy in Asia.

II. THE FAITHFULNESS

Second Timothy 1:15-18 indicates that we cannot be neutral. We are either a Phygelus or Hermogenes, or we are an Onesiphorus. Onesiphorus was an overcomer who resisted the general trend and stood against the down current to refresh the Lord's ambassador in spirit, soul, and body, one who was not ashamed of Paul's imprisonment for the Lord's commission. Concerning him Paul says, "May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord in that day! And in how many things he served in Ephesus, you know very well." The words "that day" refer to the day of the Lord's victorious appearing to reward His overcomers (4:8; Rev. 22:12).

The principle here is nearly the same as that at the

time of Elijah. Elijah said to the Lord, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:14). The Lord replied, "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal" (v. 18). The principle here is that even during a period of decline, a downward trend when most of God's people are carried away, there are always a number who remain faithful. There will always be an Onesiphorus to stand against the downward trend. Yes, Phygelus, Hermogenes, and others in Asia turned away from Paul. But Onesiphorus, an overcomer, stood against the decline, against the down current.

I am certain that both Phygelus and Hermogenes were believers. Otherwise, Paul would not have said that they turned away from him. Phygelus and Hermogenes were with Paul at one time. Probably they were not ordinary believers; they must have been either co-workers or leading ones among the saints. To be sure, they took the lead to turn away from Paul.

Those who turned away from Paul turned away not only from his person, but also from his ministry. Actually, it is not the person himself who is important; it is the ministry carried on by a person which is of extreme importance. When Paul said that certain ones turned away from him, he did not mean that they merely turned away from him as a person, but that they turned away from his ministry. In perilous times, genuine believers, even leading ones and co-workers, may turn away.

In relation to this matter, I would like to relate certain aspects of the history of the Lord's recovery. During the years I was with Brother Nee in mainland China, I saw many who accepted Brother Nee's ministry for a time and later turned away. Although the number of saints was not large, it happened again and again that some, perhaps just two or three, turned away from Brother Nee's ministry.

We have also had many similar experiences from the time we were sent from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949. In the short period of six years, the number of saints in the Lord's recovery in Taiwan increased from approximately five hundred to more than twenty-five thousand. One year we invited a very spiritual and experienced brother from England to minister to us. His first visit was profitable, for he ministered to us without touching the practice of the church life. But when, at our invitation, he came the second time, he did so with the intention of correcting us with respect to the practice of the church life. Actually, he wanted to convince us to forsake the ground of the church. According to his concept, whenever two or three believers meet in the name of the Lord Jesus, there is the reality of the church. He taught that during the era of what he called organized Christianity there could be in any city a number of groups meeting in the Lord's name and that each would possess the reality of the church to a certain degree. Due to this brother's influence, a small number of young people turned from the practice of the church life, declaring that they had seen a vision of what they called "the full Christ. " It is not clear what they meant by this expression. The Bible speaks of the unsearchable riches of Christ and refers to the fullness of Christ, but there is no mention of a "full Christ."

Even though these young people began to undermine the work in Taiwan, I simply waited and prayed. Seven years went by before the issue was settled. At one point I told them frankly that I would follow the way of Christ and the church for eternity. I asked them to consider seriously what would happen if they would only take Christ, but neglect the church life. Furthermore, I told them that as children of light we should conduct ourselves in the light. I declared again that I would forever follow the way of Christ and the church as recovered through Brother Nee. Concerning this, I assured them that I would never change. I went on to tell them that if they preferred to leave the church life and follow their vision of "the full Christ," I

would not hinder them. On the contrary, they were certainly free to follow a way which they regarded as better. However, I told them that they should not remain with us pretending to be the same as we are when actually they were undermining the work. They claimed that they had no problem with the ground of the church, and they continued among us for seven years. All that time they were undermining the work in Taiwan.

In His sovereignty, the Lord brought me to this country and burdened me to start the ministry here. Certain of the leading ones in Taiwan wrote me regularly about the situation with the young brothers who were constantly undermining the work there. I answered them by referring to the words of the Lord Jesus in John 2:19: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," a reminder of a message I had given. In that message I said, "If this work on the island of Taiwan is something of man, it should be torn down. But if it is of the Lord, once it has been destroyed, the Lord will raise it up again in resurrection." I encouraged the leading ones to be at peace. Eventually, the dissenting ones left the church life and the work in Taiwan. Shortly thereafter they were divided among themselves. They did not succeed in their attempt to destroy the church life.

Let me now relate several experiences through which we have passed in the Lord's recovery in the United States. At one time a group of Christians who emphasize speaking in tongues wanted to join with us for the practice of the church life. On the one hand, we did not oppose tongues-speaking; on the other hand, we did not encourage it, and we were not willing for the meetings to be dominated by it. After a short period of time, this group left the church.

Others who were once among us recognized that the way of the church is true. However, their preference was for a native American apostle. When I learned of this, I said to myself, "Only the first group of apostles were native apostles, Jews who were apostles to Jews. But Paul became a foreign apostle, an apostle to the Gentiles." To reject a

foreigner and to accept only so-called native apostles violates the principle of the Body. The Body of Christ is universal. Nevertheless, we assured those who desired a native apostle that they were free to look for one and find one if they could. Hence, those who desired a native apostle also turned from the church life.

Another case involves a brother who was gifted in speaking. On one occasion he testified publicly that the Lord had told him to commit himself to the way of the recovery. After a certain time, he was distracted from the church life and came to believe that the church ground is too narrow. He had the concept that the recovery was merely something transplanted from China. Therefore, this brother also left the church life.

Yet another case concerns a certain brother who considered the denominations to be the field for our work. He claimed that if we offend those in the denominations, we shall lose the field of our work. This brother admitted that we were the church; however, he counselled us not to make such a statement. We replied that this can be compared to a woman not saying that she is the wife of a certain man. This brother's goal was to bring believers into a halfway shelter for Christians who had left the denominations, but who had not come into the church life. Actually, this is to compromise the truth, to share the teachings about the Christian life but, out of fear, to hold back the truth concerning the church. This brother promotes the books by Brother Nee that do not concern the church, but neglects those books which are related to the church life. He also has turned away.

One brother was in the church life for several years. Then he declared that he had seen a so-called third line. He claimed that Brother Nee had seen the line of Jerusalem and the line of Antioch, but that he had come to see the line of Ephesus. Thus, he turned from the church life to practice this "third line."

Another brother claimed that he knew the best way to practice the church life. According to him, the way to build

a local church is with the children both from families in the church and of families in the neighborhood. I visited a Lord's table meeting deliberately to see the situation in his locality. Even though very young children were allowed to partake of the bread, I did not say a critical word. However, I did tell the brother, "As the church, we are all-inclusive; we are not sectarian. Even if you wish to practice the church life according to your way, we do not oppose you. But please do not insist that you have found the best way or the unique way to build the church. Such insistence will be a cause of problems." Eventually, this brother also turned away.

In recent years certain ambitious ones looked upon the Lord's recovery as an opportunity for them to gain power. They realized that in the "field" of the recovery there were no "lions" or "tigers." On the contrary, all the saints were "doves" and "lambs." In other words, the saints in the Lord's recovery seemed to be naive. Although these ambitious ones tried to gain power for themselves, they failed. They came to realize that the naive "doves" and "lambs" had someone standing with them, that it is God Himself who guards His glory in His recovery. Unable to do what they desired, these also left the church life.

My point in relating these facts of history is to say that we should not think that everyone who comes into the Lord's recovery will remain. Because the church life is a test to all, a certain number eventually will turn away. However, we should not be disappointed by this. We should be encouraged just as Timothy was encouraged by Paul's word. Yes, the way of the Lord's recovery is a test and an exposure. But the recovery also proves that, although some turn away like Phygelus and Hermogenes, others like Onesiphorus stand firm. Today in His recovery the Lord has hundreds, even thousands, of such ones.

Paul's desire was that the Lord would grant mercy to Onesiphorus both in the present and on "that day." This indicates a double blessing: a blessing to the whole house of

Onesiphorus in this age and blessing to Onesiphorus himself on the day of the Lord's victorious appearing. Do you want to receive this double blessing of the Lord's mercy? If so, then do not be a Phygelus or Hermogenes, but an Onesiphorus. When others turn away, stay with the apostle and his ministry.

After we went to Taipei from mainland China, we built a meeting hall that could accommodate about five hundred people. The first Lord's Day after the building was completed, the new hall was filled, mainly with Christians who had fled the mainland. Realizing the situation of those in the audience, I spoke a frank word. I said, "In Christianity today there are different kinds of churches. Some of these churches will marry you; others will assist you with your medical problems; and still others will help you find employment. Some churches will give opportunities for those who are talented or wealthy. If you have certain abilities, they will give you a position. However, the church here does not afford you this kind of help. Furthermore, there are no positions to satisfy your ambition. If you want such things, you are in the wrong place. As the church here, we care only to preach the pure gospel, to teach the Bible, and to help people receive Christ, love Him, and grow in Him. We are not here for any earthly concern. We care for heavenly things. All those who are truly seeking these heavenly things please continue to meet with us. All the rest should go elsewhere to find the help you are seeking." The next Lord's Day more than half did not return. We realized that those who came back cared for the things of the Lord. Most of them have been gained for the Lord and are in the church life.

Once again I would say that in the Lord's recovery we care only for Christ and the church. This is our battle cry. Our goal is not to help people with earthly pursuits, much less to satisfy their ambition for position. We are here to minister Christ for the church according to God's eternal purpose. If you are seeking Christ and the church, then the church life is the place for you. Those who are seeking

something other than Christ and the church will eventually realize that the church life is not the place for what they are seeking, and they will turn away.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE THREE

THE INOCULATOR

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 2:1-15

We have pointed out that the subject of 2 Timothy is inoculation against the decline of the church. In this message we shall consider five specific titles given to the inoculator in 2:1-15. These titles are a teacher, a soldier, a contender (an athlete), a husbandman, and a workman. If we read these verses carefully, we shall see that Paul regarded Timothy and his other co-workers as those who should be teachers, soldiers, contenders, husbandmen, and workmen.

I. A TEACHER

In 2:1 Paul says, "You therefore, my child, be empowered in the grace which is in Christ Jesus." The word "therefore" refers to chapter one. Paul's exhortation in 2:1 is in view of what has been mentioned in the preceding chapter. Based upon what he has just written to Timothy, Paul now goes on to encourage him to be empowered in the grace which is in Christ Jesus. Paul did not charge Timothy here to be empowered in knowledge or in gifts. He charged him to be empowered in grace. The apostle himself had experienced the empowering of grace in life (1:9-12). Now he exhorts Timothy to be empowered in the same grace. This grace is God's provision in life for us to live out His purpose. Instead of being discouraged, Paul was empowered in grace, even though he was in prison. He realized that grace is nothing less than the processed Triune God--the Father embodied in the Son and the Son realized as the indwelling Spirit. Second Corinthians 13:14 indicates that grace is the very Triune

God Himself: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (lit.). Grace is not a thing; it is a unique Person, the living, divine Person of the Triune God processed to be the all-inclusive, life-giving, indwelling Spirit. This Spirit now dwells in us as our grace. We all can be empowered in this grace in the indwelling Triune God processed to be our enjoyment.

The more we are empowered in this grace, the more able we shall be to teach others. Thus, in verse 2 Paul goes on to say, "And the things which you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, who will be competent to teach others also." The things to which Paul refers here are the healthy words in 1:13. The healthy words, after being committed to faithful men, become the good deposit in them (1:14). This word indicates that if someone in a local church has a deposit of the Lord's healthy words, he should train the faithful ones, the trustworthy ones, that they also may have a good deposit from the Lord, thus making them competent to teach others.

Paul realized that Timothy had received a good deposit, that he had been taught and nourished with the riches of grace. Therefore, he charged Timothy to commit these things to others who would be faithful and competent to carry on the same ministry. This indicates that more than one person is needed to carry on the riches of God's New Testament economy. My hope is that through all these Life-study Messages thousands of saints in the Lord's recovery will receive a good deposit of the riches of grace concerning God's New Testament economy. Then those who have received these riches will be able to commit these things to others. Imagine what the situation would be if the Lord had ten thousand saints filled with His good deposit, spreading the riches of His economy throughout the earth. No doubt, this would hasten the time of His glorious appearing.

There is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, and one church. Because God is one, His way must also be one. Is

this way to be found in Catholicism or in the denominations or in the charismatic movement? Certainly not! Neither is God's unique way found among the independent Christian groups. God's way is in His recovery. Actually, the recovery is the recovery of the unique way. Many saints can testify with a pure conscience from the depths of their being that if they do not take the way of the recovery today, they have no other way. The Lord's recovery is the way. I say this, not because I have been used of the Lord in His recovery, but simply because it is a fact. Some who became dissenting and left discovered that they had no way to go back to the denominations. In certain cases the denominations might not even be willing to accept them. This shows that if we touch the recovery and then leave it, we commit spiritual suicide, for we turn away from God's unique way.

In 2:1 and 2 Paul is burdened to charge Timothy, one who had received such a good deposit, to pass on the riches of grace to others. Then there would be many teachers, many ministers of Christ, to spread the riches of God's New Testament economy.

II. A SOLDIER

In verse 3 Paul continues, "Take your share in suffering evil as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." The apostles considered their ministry a warfare for Christ, just as the priestly service was considered a military service, a warfare, in Numbers 4:23, 30, 35 (lit.). Whenever we minister Christ to others, we find ourselves in a battle. Hence, we should not only be teachers committing the deposit to others, but we should also be soldiers fighting for God's interests.

Verse 4 says, "No one serving as a soldier entangles himself with the affairs of life, that he may please the one who enlisted him." The word for life here in Greek is bios, indicating the physical life in this age. To fight a good fight (4:7) for the Lord's interests on this earth we must be cleared of any earthly entanglement. The matters of our

material, physical life should not entangle us as we are endeavoring to minister Christ to others. This ministry is a fighting, and the fighting requires that we be free from entanglement. On the one hand, the priestly service is a ministry to God; on the other hand, it is a warfare against God's enemies. As the priests were bearing the ark of testimony, they had to be prepared to fight against those who might attack this testimony.

III. A CONTENDER

In verse 5 Paul likens Timothy to an athlete contending in the games: "And if also anyone contends in the games, he is not crowned unless he contends lawfully." At the same time Timothy was to be a teacher and a soldier, he was also to be an athlete. A soldier must fight to win the victory, whereas an athlete must contend lawfully to receive the crown.

It is important for a runner in a race to run fast. That is not the time for him to exercise patience. In a foregoing message I encouraged you to wait and pray. But when it comes to running the race to win the crown, we should not wait. On the contrary, we should run to reach the goal.

IV. A HUSBANDMAN

Verse 6 continues, "The laboring husbandman must be the first to partake of the fruits." Here Paul likens Timothy to a husbandman, a farmer. Just as a soldier must win the victory and an athlete must receive the crown, so a husbandman must partake of the fruits, the food. This requires patience. As athletes we should be quick, but as farmers we need to be patient. If out of impatience a farmer would pluck up the tiny sprouts, his crop would be ruined. Likewise, if he drives his cattle too much, he may hurt them. With both crops and livestock, farmers must learn to have patience.

Verses 7 through 14 are related to Paul's charge to Timothy that he be a husbandman. After telling Timothy to consider what he says and that the Lord will give him

understanding in all things (v. 7), Paul goes on to say, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from among the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel." The word "raised" in verse 8 indicates Christ's victory over death by His divine life with its resurrection power. The expression "seed of David" indicates Christ's dignified human nature exalted and glorified along with His divine nature. The words "my gospel" indicate that Paul's gospel was the glad tidings of the living Person of Christ, who possesses both the divine and human nature, who was incarnated to be the Son of Man and resurrected to be the Son of God, as indicated in the parallel portion, Romans 1:1-4.

Paul says that he suffered evil "unto bonds as a criminal," but that "the word of God is not bound" (v. 9). In spite of all the opposition by human efforts that were instigated by the enemy, Satan, the bonds of the apostle released the word of God, giving it free course and making it more prevailing.

In verse 10 Paul continues, "Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the chosen ones, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." The "chosen ones" denotes the believers in Christ, who were chosen by God the Father before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and selected from mankind for salvation. The apostle endured all sufferings for our sake that we also may obtain salvation as he did.

In verse 10 Paul does not speak of salvation and eternal glory, but of salvation with eternal glory. Eternal glory is the ultimate goal of God's salvation (Rom. 8:21). God's salvation leads us into His glory (Heb. 2:10). This encourages us to endure sufferings for the gospel (Rom. 8:17).

Immediately after charging Timothy to be a husbandman, Paul speaks of suffering. This indicates that a husbandman must be one who is able to suffer and endure. As a farmer, he must learn not only to suffer, but also to die.

In these verses Paul not only speaks of his own sufferings, but he also presents the Lord Jesus as a pattern

of one who suffered, died, and was resurrected. Verses 11 through 13 may have been a hymn. This passage corresponds to Romans 6:8 and 8:17. Verse 11 says, "Faithful is the word: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him." The expression "died with Him" is related to Christ's crucifixion, as symbolized by baptism (Rom. 6:3-8). Likewise, the words "live with Him" mean to live Christ in His resurrection (Rom. 6:5, 8; John 14:19).

Verse 12 says, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us." Enduring is related to life in this age, and reigning with Christ, to the coming age. If we deny Him, He will deny us; that is, He will not acknowledge us (Matt. 10:33; Luke 9:26).

Verse 13 continues, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." The word faithful in this verse refers to the Lord's faithfulness to His own word. If we are faithless, the Lord will remain faithful, for He is not able to deny Himself. If we become faithless to Him, although He remains faithful, He cannot accept us as faithful by making Himself unfaithful, that is, by denying Himself, by denying His nature and His being.

In verse 14 Paul says, "Remind them of these things, solemnly charging them before the Lord not to have contentions of words, which are profitable for nothing, to the ruin of those who hear." By "these things" Paul refers to the charge that faithful, competent men, to whom the good deposit has been committed, should be not only teachers, but also soldiers, athletes, and husbandmen. Like the Lord Jesus during His life on earth, they need to be patient and have endurance. The Lord suffered with patience, and He endured. After He was put to death, He was resurrected. Based on this, Paul says that if we die with Him, we shall live and that if we suffer with Him, we shall reign with Him.

V. A WORKMAN

In verse 15 Paul says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman, cutting

straight the word of the truth." Here Paul indicates that the inoculator is to be a workman. As a carpenter, this workman must cut straight the word of the truth. This means to unfold the word of God in its various parts rightly and straightly without distortion. Just as a carpenter has the skill to cut wood in a straight way, so the Lord's workman needs the skill to cut straight the word of truth. This is necessary because in the decline of the church so many truths are twisted and presented in a warped, biased form.

"Contentions of words" (2:14), "profane babblings" (v. 16), the eating word of gangrene (v. 17), and "foolish and ignorant questionings" (v. 23) are often very much used by the Devil (v. 26) in the down current among the churches to produce contentions (v. 23), to ruin the hearers (v. 14), to promote ungodliness (v. 16), and to overthrow people's faith (v. 18). Hence, there is the need of the word of the truth rightly unfolded to enlighten the darkened ones, inoculate against the poison, swallow up the death, and bring the distracted back to the right track.

Among Christians today, only the superficial aspects of the truth are not twisted. Virtually all the deeper things of the truth have been distorted. Concerning these things, many have not cut the word of truth straightly, but cut it in a way that is curved and biased. Therefore, we should be not only teachers, soldiers, contenders, and farmers, but also workmen, carpenters, cutting straight the word of the truth. The truth here does not merely denote biblical doctrine; it refers to the contents and the reality of God's New Testament economy. The main elements of this truth are Christ as the mystery of God and the embodiment of God and the church as the mystery of Christ and the Body of Christ. We all need to learn to cut straight the word of truth with respect to Christ and the church.

Certain of the Brethren teachers interpret Paul's word about cutting straight the word of truth to mean dividing the Bible into various dispensations: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and kingdom. The Bible can be understood according to these dispensations.

However, arranging the Word into dispensations is not what Paul means in 2:15 about cutting straight the word of the truth. As used in the three books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the word truth has a specific significance: it denotes the contents of God's New Testament economy. Not realizing this, many readers of the Bible think that in 2:15 Paul is speaking of truth in a general way. But we need to understand the word truth in this verse according to its usage in the three books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. First Timothy 3:15 says that the church is "the pillar and base of the truth." This truth is the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh. The church should bear, uphold, this truth, this reality. Numerous times in these three Epistles Paul speaks of the truth. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:4 he says that God "desires all men to be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth." The word of the truth in 2 Timothy 2:15 refers to the healthy words of God's New Testament economy. As workmen, we should learn not merely to divide the Bible into dispensations. This is too superficial. We must learn to unfold the word of the truth concerning God's economy. If we would do this, we need to consider carefully Paul's use of the word truth in these three Epistles. If we consider these books carefully, we shall see that truth here denotes the reality of the contents of the New Testament economy of God. Therefore, to cut straight the word of the truth is to unfold without bias or distortion the reality of God's economy revealed in the New Testament.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE FOUR

THE SPREAD OF THE DECLINE

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 2:16-26

Second Timothy 2:16 is a contrast to Paul's word in verse 15, where he says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman, cutting straight the word of the truth." The good workman is one who cuts straight not the word of knowledge or doctrine, but the word of truth. Many Christians think that truth in such verses as 2:15 means doctrine or teaching. However, in the New Testament truth does not denote mere doctrine. Concerning Christ in His incarnation, John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us...full of grace and truth." It certainly would be nonsensical to interpret truth here as doctrine. How could we say that the Word became flesh and was full of doctrine? In New Testament usage truth refers to the reality of God's New Testament economy. When Christ came through incarnation, grace and reality also came. Both grace and reality are God Himself. Grace is God in the Son as our enjoyment; reality is God realized by us in the Son. Therefore, grace and reality both refer to God incarnate. When we receive grace, we also receive reality. Then we have God as our reality. This reality is the truth in 2 Timothy 2:15. As we have pointed out, this truth is the reality of the contents of God's New Testament economy. These contents include Christ as the Head and the church as the Body. To cut straight the word of the truth is not simply to divide the Bible into various sections. Rather, it is to cut the healthy word of the reality of the contents of God's economy.

I. AVOIDING PROFANE, VAIN BABBLINGS

A. Advancing to More Ungodliness

As a contrast to verse 15, Paul goes on to say in verse 16, "But avoid profane, vain babblings, for they will advance to more ungodliness." The word profane denotes that which touches worldliness and is touched by it; it refers to what is contrary to being holy. The profane, vain babblings Paul charged Timothy to avoid advance to more ungodliness, to a situation which is contrary to godliness, contrary to the manifestation of God in our daily life and in the church life.

B. Spreading as Gangrene

In verse 17 Paul goes on to say, "And their word will spread as gangrene, of whom are Hymenaeus and Philetus." The Greek word rendered spread may also be rendered feed or eat. Literally it means "will find pasture," as in John 10:9. The word for pasture in Greek is the medical term for the consuming progress of a mortifying disease (Alford). Hence, its meaning in this verse is to spread.

The word gangrene denotes an eating sore, a cancer. Paul uses such a strong word to describe those who teach differently. He tells us that their word not only advances unto more ungodliness, but that it spreads as gangrene which consumes the flesh and causes part of one's body to die. According to our observation, this has been the situation among certain dissenting ones.

C. Hymenaeus and Philetus

1. Having Misaimed concerning the Truth

Speaking of Hymenaeus and Philetus, Paul says in verse 18 that concerning the truth they "have misaimed, saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and overthrow the faith of some." The word misaimed means to miss the mark, swerve, deviate. Paul does not say that Hymenaeus and Philetus misaimed concerning doctrine or teaching; he says that they misaimed concerning the truth,

concerning the reality of the New Testament economy. They swerved from the truth by saying that the resurrection had already taken place. This is to claim that there will be no resurrection. This is a serious heresy, for it denies the divine power in life (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16; Rev. 20:4,6).

2. Overthrowing the Faith of Some

In verse 18 Paul also says that by having misaimed concerning the truth Hymenaeus and Philetus overthrew the faith of some. Faith here is subjective and refers to the act of believing. This subjective faith, our believing act, is very much related to the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 10:9). As we have pointed out, this subjective faith involves an organic union between us and the Triune God. For one's faith to be overthrown is to have this inward organic union damaged in some way. Some among us can testify of having had this organic union temporarily cut off by hearing the words of those who taught differently. Inwardly these ones realized that the organic union within them had ceased. That was the overthrowing of their faith.

II. THE FIRM FOUNDATION OF GOD AND ITS SEAL

In verse 19 Paul declares, "However, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, The Lord knows those who are His, and, Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness." Many Christian teachers claim that the foundation here refers to Christ. It is true that in 1 Corinthians 3:11 Paul says that Christ is the unique foundation. Apart from Him, we do not have any other foundation. Nevertheless, if we consider verse 19 according to the context of the chapter, we shall see that the foundation here does not refer to Christ as the foundation of the church, but refers to the church as the foundation, or base, of the truth. Verses 14 through 18 give instruction concerning how to deal with heresies on the negative side and how to handle the truth on the positive side. According to the context of verses 15, 18, and 25, the

foundation here does not refer to Christ as the foundation of the church, but to the church as the foundation of the truth. This corresponds to "the base of the truth," which holds the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), especially the truth of the resurrection of Christ (Acts 4:33).

The church is built with the divine life in Christ, a life which is indestructible, unconquerable (Heb. 7:16; Acts 2:24), and able to withstand decline into death from any source. Hence, the church is the firm foundation of God that stands forever against any heresy. No matter what kind of heresies may come in or how extensively the gangrene may spread, this firm foundation stands.

Certain of those who left the Lord's recovery expected that soon afterwards the recovery would collapse. However, because it is built upon a firm foundation, the recovery did not collapse and it will never collapse. Had the Lord's recovery been founded on something other than the divine life, the eternal life, it would have collapsed long ago. But because the recovery has the firm foundation of the truth, it is not hurt by attack. On the contrary, those who seek to damage the recovery actually damage themselves, and at the same time they strengthen the recovery and expose the firmness of its foundation. The recovery is built on something eternal and divine--God's life with His nature. For this reason, not even the gates of Hades can conquer it. Because it is built on the indestructible and unconquerable eternal life, the firm foundation of the truth stands. In recent years, it has not been necessary for us to protect the Lord's recovery. It has been protected by the unconquerable divine life. Hence, the church is the firm foundation of God standing in the eternal life.

Paul says that this firm foundation has "this seal." The seal has two sides. On the Lord's side it is: "The Lord knows those who are His." This is based on the Lord's divine life, which He has given to all His believers and which has brought them into an organic union with Him, making them one with Him and causing them to become His. On our side it is: "Let everyone who names the name

of the Lord depart from unrighteousness." This is the issue of the divine life: it enables us to depart from unrighteousness and keeps us blameless in His holy name. The church as the firm foundation in the divine life bears such a two-sided seal, testifying that the Lord's divine life has made us His and has kept us from things which are contrary to His righteous way.

III. A GREAT HOUSE

Verse 19 indicates definitely that the ones exposed in verses 16 through 18 are not the Lord's. Their evil doings are a strong proof of this.

In verse 20 Paul continues, "But in a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen, and some unto honor, and some unto dishonor." The word "but" at the beginning of this verse indicates that it stands in contrast to the definition in the preceding verse concerning genuine believers.

What does Paul mean by the expression "a great house"? In this great house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen ones, and some unto honor and others unto dishonor. I have spent a great deal of time considering this matter before the Lord. The house of God defined in 1 Timothy 3:15 and 16 is the genuine church in its divine nature and essential character as the foundation of the truth, whereas the great house here refers to the deteriorated church in its mixed character, as illustrated by the abnormally big tree in Matthew 13:31 and 32. In this great house there are not only precious vessels, but also base ones. Thus, we cannot believe that the great house in this verse refers to the church as the house of the living God in 1 Timothy 3:15. The great house is certainly not the house of the living God. The house of the living God is the great mystery of godliness and also God manifest in the flesh. How could such a house contain vessels unto dishonor? Therefore, the great house no doubt refers to Christendom, to Christianity. Furthermore, this great house is equal to the

big tree in Matthew 13. The genuine church today is the house of the living God, whereas abnormal Christianity is the great house. How great today is this abnormal house! Just as many unclean birds lodge in the big tree, so in the great house there are vessels unto dishonor, wooden and earthen vessels. In the genuine church, however, there are only gold and silver vessels.

A. Vessels unto Honor and unto Dishonor

Honorable vessels are of both the divine nature (gold) and the redeemed and regenerated human nature (silver). These, like Timothy and other genuine believers, constitute the sure foundation to hold the truth. Dishonorable vessels are of the fallen human nature (wood and earth). Hymenaeus, Philetus, and other false believers are of these.

B. Cleansed from the Dishonorable Vessels

In verse 21 Paul goes on to say, "If therefore anyone cleanses himself from these, he will be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, useful to the master, prepared unto every good work." To cleanse ourselves is to "depart from unrighteousness" (v. 19), as an outward evidence of the inward divine nature. The word "these" in verse 21 denotes the vessels unto dishonor, including those mentioned in verses 16 through 18. We should not only cleanse ourselves from anything unrighteous, but also from the dishonorable vessels. This means that we must stay away from them. Hence, we must cleanse ourselves from the unrighteous things and from the dishonorable vessels of wood and earth. If we cleanse ourselves from these negative things and negative persons, we shall be vessels unto honor, sanctified, useful to the master, and prepared unto every good work. Unto honor is a matter of nature, sanctified is a matter of position, useful is a matter of practice, and prepared is a matter of training.

IV. PAUL'S CHARGE TO TIMOTHY

A. Fleeing and Pursuing

Verse 22 continues, "But flee youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." Timothy should beware not only of outward corruption among the churches, but also of inward lusts within himself. He must avoid the outward corruption and flee the inward lusts. Furthermore, he should pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Righteousness is toward self, faith is toward God, and love is toward others. Peace is the consequence of these three virtues.

B. Calling on the Lord

To call on the Lord out of a pure heart is to "name the name of the Lord" in our prayer and praise to Him. The Lord's seekers must be those who call on His name. Today those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart are found in His recovery. Thank the Lord that we are with those who call on Him out of a pure heart. With such believers we may pursue the virtues of righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

C. Refusing Foolish and Ignorant Questionings

In verse 23 Paul says, "But foolish and ignorant questionings refuse, knowing that they produce contentions." The Greek word rendered foolish may also be rendered stupid. The word ignorant denotes that which is uninstructed, undisciplined, untrained, that is, not subject to God, but following one's own mind and will (Darby). The word produce means to engender, to beget. We must refuse such foolish questionings, for they have their source in Satan, the serpent. Many years ago I read that someone suggested that the serpent may have stood up in the form of a question mark when he talked with Eve. He questioned her with the words, "Hath God said?" (Gen. 3:1). All foolish questionings originate with the serpent.

Thus, we should refuse foolish and ignorant questionings, questionings which beget contentions. These questionings always arise from an evil, serpentine source.

D. Not Contending

In verse 24 Paul goes on, "And a slave of the Lord must not contend, but be gentle toward all; apt to teach, bearing with wrong." When people wrong you, you should not be troubled. Instead, as a slave of the Lord, you should be gentle and bear with the wrong.

E. Correcting Those Who Oppose

In verse 25 Paul continues, "In meekness correcting those who oppose, if perhaps God may give them repentance unto the full knowledge of the truth." Paul's use of the word repentance indicates that with the opposers of the truth it is the heart and conscience which are in question. The truth is the revelation of the living God and His economy--His heart's desire. To receive the divine revelation, the heart and conscience need to be rightly exercised toward God. The heart should be turned to Him, directed solely to Him, and the conscience must be pure and void of offense before Him. Otherwise, one might be carried away as a captive by the Devil and fall into his snare (v. 26).

In verse 25 Paul again refers to the full knowledge of the truth. Paul does not speak here of the full knowledge of the Bible or the full knowledge of doctrine and teaching. He emphasizes repentance unto the full knowledge of the truth. The inoculator must bear the burden to correct with meekness those who oppose in the hope that they may be enlightened, repent, and return to the full knowledge of the truth.

It is possible that those who repent "may return to soberness out of the snare of the Devil, having been caught by him, unto His will" (v. 26). According to Vincent, to return to soberness means to become sober again, to awake out of a drunken stupor. Paul's use of the expression "the snare of the Devil" indicates that the opposers of the truth,

being short of the adequate knowledge of the divine revelation, have been captured and kept in a snare by the Devil. The enemy of God occupies their reprobate mind with error and shuts God out, just as he did with the Pharisees (John 8:42-45). They need to return to God in their heart and have a thorough dealing in their conscience.

The pronoun "him" in the phrase "having been caught by him" refers to the Devil. However, "unto His will," literally translated "unto the will of that One," refers to God, mentioned in verse 25. Hence, it means toward God's will, for God's will, to do God's will.

Suppose some approach you with the intention of arguing about a certain doctrine or practice. Instead of entering into an argument with them, present God's dispensation to them. In order to do this, you need to be familiar with the contents of God's New Testament economy. All the saints should be trained, perhaps by the leading ones in their locality, to present the full knowledge of the truth, to share with others the reality of the contents of God's New Testament economy.

Often we are asked why we say that we are the church. The first time I heard this question in the United States was in 1963. During a time of fellowship, a brother asked me, "Why does your group call itself the church in Los Angeles?" In answer to this very good question I pointed out that in the Bible the saints in a particular locality, such as Jerusalem or Antioch, were regarded simply as the church in that locality. Acts 8:1 speaks of the church in Jerusalem, and 13:1, of the church in Antioch. I went on to point out that in Jerusalem there was just one church. Peter, James, and John were all for the building up of the one church in Jerusalem. However, today's Christians have gone astray and meet in many different denominations. For this reason, in the city of Los Angeles there are different kinds of so-called churches. There are even groups which say they are a Chinese church or a Korean church. Then I asked which of these different kinds of churches we should join. The one who raised the question about the

church in Los Angeles admitted that we should not join any of those so-called churches. Then I proceeded to say that if we in Los Angeles do not call ourselves the church in Los Angeles, we shall be another sect. If we are not the church in Los Angeles, then what are we? We have no choice but to call ourselves the church in Los Angeles.

Realizing that some may say that the church in Los Angeles should include all the saints in that city, I went on to say, "It is true that the church in Los Angeles includes all the believers in Los Angeles. However, most of them are not willing to meet simply as the church. This is their responsibility, not ours. For example, the Jones family may have many members. Suppose the majority of the members move away from home and only three remain. Are these three not the Jones family? Are they wrong to put a sign on their house saying 'The Jones Family'? Certainly not. If they are not called Jones, then what should they be called? It certainly would be wrong for them to take the name of Smith or any other name. It is right for them to say that they are the Jones family, even though many of the members of the family have gone away and live elsewhere. Likewise, many of those who are truly members of the church in Los Angeles do not meet as the church. Nevertheless, those who do stand as the church have the right to describe themselves as the church in Los Angeles."

On this occasion I asked, "Why don't those in the denominations call themselves the church? They are bothered by the fact that we claim to be the church in Los Angeles. They need to ask themselves why they take such names as Presbyterian and Lutheran. I hope that they would be willing to drop these names and simply be the local church in their city. To those who are willing to do this in this city I would say, 'Since we are all the same church, the church in Los Angeles, why don't we simply come together and be the church? Let us all meet together for the church life.' " This is one illustration of how we need to learn the full knowledge of the truth and then learn how to present the truth to others, especially to opposers. It

is our hope that others may be enlightened and also come to the full knowledge of the truth.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE FIVE

THE WORSENING OF THE DECLINE

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 3:1-13

The subject of 2 Timothy is inoculation against the decline of the church. After a word of introduction (1:1-2), Paul speaks of the divine provisions for the inoculation: a pure conscience, unfeigned faith, the divine gift, a strong spirit, eternal grace, incorruptible life, the healthy word, and the indwelling Spirit (1:3-14). Then he goes on to point out that the basic factor of the decline is the forsaking of the apostle and his ministry (1:15-18). In 2:1-15 Paul speaks of the inoculator, indicating that he must be a teacher, soldier, contender, husbandman, and workman. In the second half of chapter two he tells us of the spread of the decline, a spreading likened to that of gangrene (2:16-26). In chapter three Paul first speaks of the worsening of the decline, showing that it will become grievous times of deceiving (3:1-13), and then speaks of the antidote of the inoculation--the divine word (3:14-17). In chapter four there are three sections: the incentive to the inoculator--the coming reward (4:1-8); the issue of the decline--loving the present age and doing many evil things (4:9-18); and the conclusion (4:19-22). If we consider the outline of 2 Timothy, we shall see that it is not merely a pastoral book, a book for so-called pastors. On the contrary, it is a book written for inoculators, those who would inoculate others against the decline of the church.

I. THE DIFFICULT TIMES

A. Coming in the Last Days

Chapter three opens with the words, "But know this,

that in the last days difficult times shall come." Once again Paul uses the word "but" to point out a contrast. The contrast here is with the hope just expressed at the end of the preceding chapter. Toward the end of chapter two Paul declared that "the firm foundation of God stands" (v. 19), and that we should "flee youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (v. 22). Furthermore, if in meekness we correct those who oppose, "God may give them repentance unto the full knowledge of the truth, and they may return to soberness out of the snare of the Devil" (vv. 25-26). Paul realized that even though the decline would spread, the firm foundation of God still stands unshakable, bearing a seal which says, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness." At least God would have a remnant of those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Furthermore, such ones may even dispense the inoculation against the church's decline. Yes, the decline is spreading, but we have a firm standing, we can enjoy the riches of the Lord, and we can do the work of inoculation, even convincing those who oppose to come back to the full knowledge of the truth. This is to bring back those who have been caught by the Devil, and snared by him, to God's will. All this indicates that Paul was not discouraged. Even though the decline is spreading, we can do something positively to inoculate others against it.

Then in contrast to all this Paul says in 3:1, "But know this, that in the last days difficult times shall come." Paul had the foresight and the insight to realize that difficult times would come in the last days. The expression "the last days" denotes the closing period of the present age (2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). It began from the end of the so-called apostolic age, in the latter part of the first century, and will last until Christ's second appearing. The long duration of this period was not revealed to the apostles (Matt. 24:36); they expected the Lord to return in their generation.

Many Christians identify "the last days" in 3:1 with the "later times" in 1 Timothy 4:1. This is a mistake. In the Bible there is a dividing line between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The ancient Jews regarded the times of the Old Testament as the early times or early days. With the coming of Christ the period of the Mosaic law was over. Christ's coming began a new period, regarded as the last days, which will continue until Christ's second coming. Concerning Christ's second coming, there is a secret period of time, which was not known by the apostles. They were eager to know the time of the Lord's second coming. But in Mark 13:32 the Lord Jesus said, "But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." Later, after the Lord's resurrection, the disciples asked Him, "Dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). To this the Lord replied, "It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority" (v. 7). It is not easy to explain how the Lord could say that only the Father, not the Son, knows the time of the end. Perhaps in refusing to answer the question about the time of His coming, the Lord Jesus was maintaining the proper position under the headship of the Father. Therefore, He told them that this was something which "the Father hath set within his own authority."

The early disciples thought that the Lord Jesus would come back in their generation. This was Paul's concept when he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. This shows that the length of the last days was a secret unknown by the apostles. We simply do not know the duration of time the Father has set in His administration between the Lord's ascension and His second coming.

In 3:1 Paul says that in the last days "difficult times shall come." The Greek for "difficult times" also means hard times, grievous times, perilous times. This means that these times will be extremely difficult for Christians. In verse 12 Paul says, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." For those who pursue

righteousness, faith, love, and peace and who call on the name of the Lord out of a pure heart, this time will indeed be difficult, grievous, perilous. Here Paul seems to be saying, "Timothy, I am encouraged by the fact that the firm foundation of God stands and that, with others, you can pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace and call on the Lord out of a pure heart. You can stand together and dispense the inoculation against the decline of the church. Some may even be recovered to the full knowledge of the truth and to the will of God. Nevertheless, I want you to know that the time which is coming will be very difficult for you. This time will be grievous, perilous, for all those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart and who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus."

B. What Men Shall Be

In verse 2 Paul goes on to say, "For men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy." The prophetic picture presented in verses 2 through 5 portrays not the evil condition of non-Christian society, but the corrupted situation of the "great house" mentioned in 2:20, degraded Christianity. This is proved by the phrase, "having a form of godliness" (v. 5). Unbelievers do not have even the form of godliness. Those who have such a form are those who are called Christians. Thus, the men in verse 2 are Christians.

The first thing Paul says about these men is that they will be "lovers of self." Many Christians today are self-lovers. Not only those who indulge in worldly entertainments are selfish; even those who attend the chapels and cathedrals may be selfish.

In the three Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus seven kinds of lovers are mentioned: lovers of self, lovers of money (2 Tim. 3:2; 1 Tim. 6:10), lovers of pleasure, lovers of God (2 Tim 3:4), lovers of good (Titus 1:8), lovers of husbands, and lovers of children (Titus 2:4). There are also two kinds of nonlovers: nonlovers of good and nonlovers of God (2 Tim. 3:3-4). Of whatever one is a lover, that is

what his whole heart, even his entire being, is set on, occupied, and possessed by. This is crucial! Whether there could be a day of glory in the church's victory or grievous days of the church's decline depends altogether upon what we set our heart upon, what it is we love. History tells us that the root of the church's decline was the loss of her first love toward the Lord (Rev. 2:4). To maintain the victorious standard of the church, we must be lovers of God and lovers of the good which pertains to God's economy.

In verse 2 Paul speaks of those who are boasters, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, and unholy. The Greek word for arrogant also means haughty, and the word rendered revilers is literally blasphemers, as in 1 Timothy 1:13. Here, however, it does not refer to blasphemers of God, but to revilers or railers, those who speak evilly and injuriously of men. How much we have been reviled by those who call themselves Christians!

In a foregoing message I mentioned that some brothers in Taiwan who had been under my training for years became dissenting. Some even reviled God's government. They were not only rebellious, but they were also unthankful, ungrateful. It is significant that in verse 2 Paul puts together unthankfulness with disobedience to parents. This may indicate that here unthankful mainly refers to being unthankful to one's parents. We should be thankful to those who have raised us both physically and spiritually, thankful both to our natural parents and to our spiritual parents.

In the 1940s Brother Nee suffered intense opposition and was forced to be out of function for six years. Some of those who were dissenting with him still felt positive toward me because they had received help from me. One day one of them asked me, "Do you believe that Brother Nee has never been wrong?" I answered, "Whether or not Brother Nee has ever been wrong is not my business. I only know that I am indebted to him just as a child to his parents. If it were not for this servant of the Lord, I could not have the life I now have as a Christian. I have learned

the lesson of Ham, the son of Noah, and I dare not say anything negative about him. In a real sense, he has been a spiritual father to me. He has raised me up in the Lord. Therefore, I do not dare say anything negative concerning him." I can testify that throughout the years I have seen the blessing which has come from maintaining such an attitude toward my spiritual father. Both to our parents in the flesh and in the spirit we must learn to be thankful. It is a very serious matter to be ungrateful toward our parents. One aspect of today's trend is unthankfulness. This trend, this current, has even swept into Christianity.

In verses 3 and 4 Paul continues, "Without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, nonlovers of good, traitors, reckless, blinded with pride, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." To be implacable is to be irreconcilable, to be a traitor is to be a betrayer, and to be reckless is to be headstrong. In the picture presented here there are three kinds of lovers--lovers of self, lovers of money, and lovers of pleasure--and two kinds of nonlovers--nonlovers of good and nonlovers of God.

Verse 5 says, "Having a form of godliness, but having denied its power; from these also turn away." A form of godliness is a mere outward semblance without the essential reality. The power of godliness is the real and practical virtue of a living influence to express God.

In these verses we have a dreadful picture of today's degraded Christianity. By the Lord's mercy and grace, we in His recovery must reject the situation portrayed here and be the very opposite of it.

Verses 6 and 7 speak of those who are "always learning and never able to come to the full knowledge of the truth." This word has been fulfilled among many Christians today. They hear sermon after sermon and study the Bible, but they do not know the reality of the contents of God's New Testament economy. They do not know Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God or the church as the mystery of Christ.

Verse 8 says, "And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind, disapproved concerning the faith." According to Jewish tradition, Jannes and Jambres were the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses, as mentioned in Exodus 7:11 and 22.

In the decline among the churches, truth is the target of the enemy's attack. Hence, truth is also the remedy and rescue from the diseased and ruined situation. In verse 8 disapproved means reprobate, and the faith denotes the contents of our belief.

In verse 9 Paul goes on to say, "They shall not advance farther, for their folly shall be completely manifest to all, as also the folly of those became." The word folly refers to the lack of intelligence and the senselessness of their doing. The "folly of those" refers to the folly of Jannes and Jambres, who were defeated and brought to nothing (Exo. 8:18; 9:11).

II. THE INOCULATOR STANDING AGAINST THE TIDE OF THE DECLINE

In verse 10 Paul reminds Timothy, "But you have closely followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, endurance." Conduct refers to manner of life, and the Greek word for purpose is used in Paul's Epistles in relation to the purpose of God.

In verse 11 Paul speaks of the persecution and sufferings which he endured in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. Lystra was the city where Timothy lived (Acts 16:1-2), near Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia.

Verse 12 says, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The Greek word rendered desire can also mean determine. To live godly is to live a life of godliness. All those who desire, determine, to live a life of godliness in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. For this reason we should not expect good treatment from today's Christianity. Instead, we should expect persecution for living a godly life in an ungodly situation. As long as we

stand for the Lord's recovery, we shall be condemned, opposed, and attacked. Rumors will be spread concerning us, and our names will be smeared and defiled. Such persecution comes not from the worldly people, but from so-called Christians. In John 16:2 the Lord Jesus said that the time is coming when those who kill the disciples will think they are serving God. Out of their zeal for God, they will kill the followers of the Lord, simply because these do not follow the traditional way.

III. THE WORSENING OF THE DECLINE

In verse 13 Paul concludes, "But evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." The word imposters means juggling imposters. This verse indicates that the decline of the church will become worse. Evil men and imposters, those who deceive others by their skill in juggling, will become worse and worse. Being deceived themselves, they will also deceive others.

We thank the Lord that, in His mercy, He has brought us into the recovery where we can hear honest and healthy words.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE SIX

THE ANTIDOTE OF THE INOCULATION

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 3:14-17

We have seen that the subject of 2 Timothy is the inoculation against the decline of the church. In this message we shall consider the antidote of the inoculation, which is the divine Word. In 2:16-26 we have the spread of the decline and in 3:1-13, the worsening of the decline. We praise the Lord that in 3:14-17 we have a wonderful, heavenly, divine, spiritual, and rich antidote. As we shall see, this antidote is the divine word of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the God-breathed Scripture which is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness and which completes the man of God and fully equips him for every good work.

I. THE DIVINE WORD

A. Of the New Testament

Second Timothy 3:14 says, "But you, continue in the things which you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned." The things which Timothy learned of the apostle and was assured of were the vital portion of the content of the New Testament, which completed the divine revelation (Col. 1:25). Hence, he had the practical understanding of a great part of the New Testament. These were the things he had learned from Paul and which he had been assured of by him.

The word ministered by Paul was the completing word of God's revelation, the main part of the New Testament. Verse 14 indicates that from Paul Timothy received the proper knowledge of the New Testament and became

assured of it, even though at that time the New Testament was not complete as a written volume. Timothy was granted the central revelation of the New Testament.

B. Of the Old Testament

In verse 15 Paul goes on to say, "And that from a babe you have known the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." In addition to the knowledge of the New Testament, Timothy also had, from his childhood, a good foundation in the knowledge of the Old Testament. He was one who was fully perfected and equipped to minister the word of God, not only in caring for a local church, but also in confronting the increasing decline of the church.

Together verses 14 and 15 refer to both the Old Testament and the New Testament. By knowing the sacred writings from childhood, Timothy was familiar with the Old Testament, and from Paul he gained a proper knowledge of the central part of the New Testament. Therefore, Timothy had a proper understanding of the Bible as a whole. Today all the saints in the Lord's recovery, especially the young people, need the understanding of the Word of God, an understanding of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

II. THE SCRIPTURE

A. All God-breathed

Verse 16 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." The Greek words rendered, "All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable," may also be translated "Every Scripture God-breathed is also profitable."

To confront the death, corruption, and confusion in the church's decline, the eternal life upon which chapter one is based (vv. 1, 10), the divine truth emphasized in chapter two (vv. 15, 18, 25), and the holy Scripture highly

regarded in chapter three (vv. 14-17) are all needed. The eternal life not only swallows up death, but also renders the life supply: the divine truth replaces the vanity of corruption with the reality of all the divine riches; and the holy Scripture not only dispels confusion, but also furnishes divine light and revelation. Hence, in this book the apostle stresses these three things.

The expression "God-breathed" indicates that the Scripture, the Word of God, is the breath of God. God's speaking is God's breathing. Hence, His word is spirit (John 6:63), pneuma, or breath. Thus, the Scripture is the embodiment of God as the Spirit. The Spirit is therefore the very essence, the substance, of the Scripture, just as phosphorus is the essential substance in matches. We must "strike" the Spirit of the Scripture with our spirit to kindle the divine fire.

As the embodiment of God the Spirit, the Scripture is also the embodiment of Christ. Christ is God's living Word (Rev. 19:13), and the Scripture is God's written word (Matt. 4:4).

B. Profitable

According to verse 16, all Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. Reproof here means conviction or confutation. Correction denotes setting right what is wrong, turning someone to the right way, or restoring a person to an upright state. Instruction refers to discipline or chastisement in righteousness. This means to discipline or chastise in the element and condition of righteousness.

C. To Complete the Man of God

In verse 17 Paul says, "That the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work." We have seen that a man of God is one who partakes of God's life and nature (John 1:13; 2 Pet. 1:4) and thus becomes one

with Him in His life and nature (1 Cor. 6:17) and thereby expresses Him. This corresponds to the mystery of godliness, which is God manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). Through the God-breathed Scripture, the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work. Complete here means complete and perfect in qualifications, and equipped denotes being fitted out, furnished, made ready.

We need to know the Bible not merely according to letters in black and white, but also according to the divine revelation and heavenly wisdom. Do not think that having an advanced degree qualifies anyone to understand a book such as Ephesians. If we study this Epistle only in letters, we shall not be able to understand it. For a proper understanding of this book, and for the Bible as a whole, we need a spirit of wisdom and revelation. This was the reason Paul prayed, "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him, the eyes of your heart having been enlightened" (Eph. 1:17-18). We thank the Lord that for more than fifty years we have been receiving such a spirit of wisdom and revelation. As a result, the messages put out in the Lord's recovery always contain something fresh and new. These messages are given not merely according to the black and white letters of the Scripture, but according to the spirit of wisdom and revelation.

We in the Lord's recovery do not treasure theology, tradition, or the councils. We honor, respect, and treasure the holy Word under the shining of the heavenly light which comes by a spirit of wisdom and revelation. Because we depend on God's enlightenment, His Word is opened to us.

Many Christians misuse 3:16 and 17. They point out that the holy Scripture is for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness and that it enables the man of God to be equipped, completed, and perfected. Although all this is true, it neglects the element of life in the Word. Those who regard the Bible as a book of

teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction often ignore the life essence of the Word. As human beings we have a physical body outwardly, but inwardly we have a spirit and a soul. Our person is composed not mainly of the outward part, the body, but of the inward parts, the spirit and the soul. The principle is the same with the Bible. The Bible has not only a "body" of letters in black and white; it also has a spirit, because it is God-breathed. If in reading the Bible we exercise only our mind to study it, we shall not receive the life supply.

Most Christians neglect the spirit and take the Bible as a book of letters. The Lord Jesus once said, "The words which I have spoken unto you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). Furthermore, we have pointed out that every word of the Bible is part of God's breath. Thus, we should not only study the Word, but also breathe in the divine breath embodied in the Word. If we do not breathe the divine breath by exercising our spirit, we shall not receive life from our study of the Bible. But when we breathe in God's breath, we are enlivened by a divine, heavenly, and spiritual element.

I wish to emphasize the fact that to study the Bible in order to follow its instructions is not sufficient. Often during a wedding ceremony a minister will instruct the bride and groom according to Paul's word in Ephesians 5. The minister will then remind the wife to submit to the husband and the husband to love his wife. Although they may promise to fulfill these requirements, they will not be able to do so unless they receive the divine breath in the Word. The instructions in righteousness given according to the Bible do not work if we do not receive the breath of God, for then, in practice, we shall make these instructions the same as the ethical teachings of Confucius.

We thank the Lord for showing us that in reading the Word we need to exercise our eyes, our mind, and our spirit. We may say that with the eyes we contact the body of the Word, that with our mind we contact the soul of the Word, and through the exercise of our spirit to pray the

Word, we contact the spirit of the Word. Then we not only understand the meaning of a certain portion of Scripture; we also inhale the divine breath to receive the life supply.

Many of us can testify that a certain verse of the Bible may be very precious to us as we read it. However, disciples of Confucius may also regard certain statements made by him as precious. But with the teachings of Confucius there is no divine breath. God's Word contains His breath. Within the letters of the Bible there is the Spirit who gives life. This is the reason that in reading the Word we must exercise our spirit in addition to our mind. Then the verses we read will be not only precious to us, but they will nourish, refresh, and water us.

Actually, the function of the Word in teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction is all related to transformation. The Bible corrects us not primarily outwardly, but inwardly in the way of transformation. This means that the word of Scripture works within us in a metabolic way. Just as the food we eat and digest nourishes us from within, metabolically changing and transforming us, so the Word of God transforms us by inwardly teaching, reproving, correcting, and instructing us.

If we would be nourished by the Word, we should not only pray it, but also psalm it and sing it. In Colossians 3:16 Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to God." By praying, psalming, and singing the Word we shall fan our spirit into flame. Furthermore, when we pray, psalm, and sing the Word, we inhale the divine breath and receive more of the element of God. In this way God dispenses Himself into us and infuses us with His element.

We cannot deny the fact that the Lord has shown us much light from His Word. For example, much light has been shed on the Gospel of John. If you read the outline of the Gospel of John printed in the Recovery Version, you will realize that the Lord indeed has opened the Word to

us. Many may know the Bible in black and white letters, but, by the Lord's mercy and grace, we know the Bible in life, light, and spirit.

Allow me to testify concerning the light we have received on John 16:8-11. One day in my reading of these verses I saw that sin, righteousness, and judgment are related to the three persons of Adam, Christ, and Satan. Sometime later I was asked to give the message for a gospel meeting in the church in Shanghai. I spoke on these verses and told the people, "As human beings, you were born in Adam. In Adam you have sinned and you have been condemned. But there is another person--Christ--and there is a way for you to get out of Adam and into Christ that you may be justified by God. If you believe in Christ, you will be transferred into Him. But if you do not believe into Christ, you will remain in Adam, the first person, and eventually your destiny will be that of Satan, the third person. Judgment has been prepared for Satan. Do you intend to help Satan suffer judgment for eternity? Will you remain in Adam with sin and eventually share the judgment with Satan, or will you believe in Christ and be transferred into Him in order to receive the gift of righteousness?" That message was very good, full of light. After delivering that message, I was fully nourished. Brother Nee spoke to me sometime later concerning that message and said, "Witness, hardly anyone has seen that in John 16:8-11 sin is related to Adam, righteousness to Christ, and judgment to Satan. I encourage you to continue to teach the Bible in this way." I could never forget Brother Nee's word to me. Today I am still being encouraged, strengthened, and confirmed by that word.

We thank the Lord that over the years the light has been shining upon us, even pouring out upon us. Apart from the Lord's enlightening, we may read 2 Timothy a dozen times without seeing anything related to the inoculation. To see this we need a light. Under the light we can realize that the divine word, the Scripture, is the antidote of the inoculation.

We should not read the Bible in the way the religionists did at the time of the Lord Jesus and Paul. They did not realize that the title of God--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob--implied resurrection. Probably Gamaliel instructed Paul according to Genesis 12 and 15, but it was not until Paul was enlightened of the Lord and received revelation that he realized that Abraham's wife and his concubine typified two covenants. This shows that it is one thing to be a Bible scholar; it is quite another thing to have the light of God's revelation.

We should not merely study the Word in letter. We need to pray that the Lord would give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation. If we do not have such a spirit but read only the black and white letters of the Bible, we shall not experience life, light, or spirit. There is a great difference between the way the Bible is used among most Christians today and the way it is used among us in the Lord's recovery. The majority of believers use the Word in the way of letters, but we use it in the way of life, light, and spirit. This is the reason we constantly humble ourselves before the Lord, open to Him, and look to Him for light, vision, wisdom, and revelation. May we all learn to come to the Word of God in this way.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE SEVEN

THE INCENTIVE TO THE INOCULATOR

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 4:1-8

In this message we shall consider the incentive to the inoculator (4:1-8). As we shall see, this incentive is the coming reward.

I. THE APOSTLE'S CHARGE

In 4:1 Paul says to Timothy, "I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, Who is about to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom." God has given all judgment to Christ because He is a man (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16). As the righteous Judge (2 Tim. 4:8), He will judge the living from His throne of glory at His second appearing (Matt. 25:31-46), and He will judge the dead at the great white throne after the millennium (Rev. 20:11-15).

In 4:1 Paul speaks of Christ's appearing and His kingdom. Christ's appearing will be for judgment, to reward each one of us (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12), and His kingdom will be for His reigning with His overcomers (Rev. 20:4, 6). By these two events the apostle charges Timothy to fulfill his ministry of the word faithfully. Here it seems that Paul is saying, "Timothy, you must realize that your life and work today have much to do with the Lord's appearing and His kingdom. At His appearing will you be praised by the Lord, or will you receive a rebuke from Him? Will you receive a reward or chastisement? Will you be considered qualified to participate in the divine kingship and reign with Christ for a thousand years, or will you be disqualified from reigning with Him? Timothy, you

need to think seriously about these things. Thus, I charge you by the Lord's appearing and kingdom."

It is a matter of great significance to be charged by the Lord's appearing and kingdom. As genuine Christians we are saved for eternity, but how are we living our Christian life, and how well are we fulfilling our Christian duty? Are we taking care of God's New Testament economy? Do we practice the proper church life, the Body life, to express God in Christ through the Spirit? These questions deserve our attention, for the way we answer them may determine our future as far as the Lord's appearing and coming kingdom are concerned. Do not listen to the superstitious and superficial teachings which tell you that as long as you are saved you cannot have any problems with the Lord at His coming. You may have great problems when you meet Him at the judgment seat. Every believer in Christ, every genuinely saved person, must stand before the judgment seat of Christ and be judged by Him not concerning salvation or perdition, but concerning reward or punishment. Because this is a solemn matter, Paul charged Timothy before God and Christ Jesus and by the Lord's appearing and kingdom.

In verse 2 Paul continues his charge: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. " The word Timothy was to preach included what he had learned both of Paul and of the Old Testament (3:14-15). This proves that verses 1 and 2 are a continuation of 3:14-17. In caring for a local church, especially in a time of the church's decline, the preaching of the Word is vital.

Timothy was not merely to preach a word about salvation from hell to heaven. He was to speak a completing word regarding God's revelation concerning Christ and the church. Such a healthy word is the truth, the reality of the contents of God's New Testament economy. Timothy was charged to be ready to preach this word in season and out of season. To preach in season and out of season means to preach whether the situation is

opportune or inopportune, whether it is convenient or inconvenient, whether you are welcome or unwelcome. Furthermore, Timothy was to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and teaching. Reprove here means to convict. The adjective all modifies both longsuffering and teaching. It speaks of teaching in many aspects and directions. The carrying out of such teaching requires longsuffering.

II. THE TIME OF APOSTASY

Verses 3 and 4 say, "For the time will come when they will not tolerate healthy teaching, but according to their own lusts they will heap up to themselves teachers tickling the ear, and they will turn away their ear from the truth, and will be turned aside to fables." The time mentioned in verse 3 refers to the time when the decline of the church becomes worse. At that time many will not tolerate healthy teaching, teaching which is healthy in life and which ministers the supply of life. Instead, they will prefer teachers who tickle the ear. This indicates that those who do not tolerate healthy teaching have an itching ear, an ear which seeks pleasing speaking for its own pleasure. Furthermore, such persons will turn away their ear from the truth and will be turned aside to fables. The itching ear that is turned away is the main factor of the worsening decline in the churches.

Many Christians today do not tolerate the healthy teachings related to God's economy. When we teach that Christ is the God-man, the One who is the embodiment of God as His expression, some accuse us of blasphemy or heresy. Some have even gone so far as to twist our words concerning Christ as the God-man and, in print, to falsely accuse us of teaching that Christ was neither quite God nor quite man. In The Four Major Steps of Christ I say, "We know that Christ is God incarnated as a man. Christ is the God-man. He is not only a man of God, He is also a God-man. Therefore, the incarnation of Christ simply means the mingling of God with humanity" (p. 6). Twisting our

words and grossly misrepresenting us, certain of our opposers have written, "This incarnate deity was neither quite God nor quite man; He was a third thing, a mingled God-man." We believe that because Christ is true God and true man, He is the God-man. He is the perfect God and a complete man as well. Both His divine nature and His human nature, each being complete, concur in His one Person--without separation, without confusion, and without being changed into a third nature. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, one Person with two natures, is worthy to receive our worship and praise forever.

Because many Christians today will not tolerate healthy teaching, they heap up teachers to tickle their itching ears. The teachings in the Lord's recovery are altogether different. Our teachings do not tickle the ear. Instead, they may operate on the ears of those who hear. Unable to bear such an operation, some turn their ears away from the truth.

We have pointed out again and again that in 1 and 2 Timothy truth refers to the reality of the contents of God's New Testament economy. This reality consists primarily of Christ as the embodiment of God and of the church as the Body of Christ. Instead of listening to proper teachings concerning Christ and the church, many Christians have turned aside to other things.

III. TIMOTHY, THE INOCULATOR

In verse 5 Paul says to Timothy, "But you, be sober in all things, suffer evil, do the work of an evangelist, fully accomplish your ministry." For Timothy to fully accomplish his ministry was for him to fill up the full measure of his ministry. This ministry denotes the ministry of the Word to minister Christ in all His riches (Eph. 3:8) to both sinners and believers for the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). Such a ministry is desperately needed to counter the declining trend, as prophesied in verses 3 and 4.

IV. PAUL, THE PATTERN

In verses 6 and 7 Paul testifies concerning himself: "For I am already being poured out, and the time of my

departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." In verse 6 Paul indicates that he was already being poured out as a drink offering. The drink offering was additional to the basic offerings revealed in Leviticus 1 through 7 (Num. 15:1-10; 28:7-10). The basic offerings were types of various aspects of Christ. The drink offering was a type of Christ as enjoyed by His offerer, an enjoyment that filled him with Christ as the heavenly wine and even made him wine to God. The Apostle Paul became such a drink offering by so enjoying Christ that he could be poured out by the actual shedding of his blood. To be poured out here means to shed one's blood. "Already being poured out" indicates that the process of being offered as a drink offering had begun. Paul could say that the time of his departure was at hand. This refers to his departure from the world to be with the Lord (Phil. 1:23) through martyrdom. Paul was imprisoned in Rome twice. The first imprisonment, about A.D. 62-64, was due to the Jews' accusation (Acts 28:17-20). During that time he wrote the Epistles to Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. After his release (which he expected in Philippians 1:25; 2:24; and Philemon 22) from the first imprisonment, he must have visited Ephesus and Macedonia (1 Tim. 1:3), where he probably wrote the first Epistle to Timothy. Then he visited Crete (Titus 1:5); Nicopolis (Titus 3:12), where he wrote the Epistle to Titus; Troas; and Miletus (2 Tim. 4:13, 20), where he probably wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. Due to Caesar Nero's sudden persecution, Paul was imprisoned a second time, about A.D. 65. At that time he wrote the second Epistle to Timothy while expecting his imminent martyrdom for his Master.

In verse 7 Paul mentions three items: fighting the good fight, finishing the course, and keeping the faith. A proper Christian life is threefold. It involves fighting the good

fight against Satan and his kingdom of darkness for the interests of God's kingdom (1 Tim. 6:12), running the course for the carrying out of God's economy according to His eternal purpose (Heb. 12:1), and keeping the faith for participation in the divine riches in God's dispensation (Gal. 3:22). In this Paul set up an adequate pattern for us.

Paul began to run the course of the heavenly race after he was taken possession of by the Lord, and he continually ran (1 Cor. 9:24-26; Phil. 3:12-14) that he might finish it (Acts 20:24). Now at the end he triumphantly proclaimed, "I have finished the course." For this he will receive from the Lord a reward--the crown of righteousness (v 8).

Paul could testify that he had kept the faith. This means that he kept God's New Testament economy. To keep the faith is to keep the entire New Testament economy of God--the faith concerning Christ as the embodiment of God and the mystery of God and the church as the Body of Christ and the mystery of Christ.

V. THE REWARD--THE INCENTIVE

Verse 8 says, "Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me in that day; and not only to me, but also to all those who have loved His appearing." The crown is a symbol of glory given as a prize, in addition to the Lord's salvation, to the triumphant runner of the race (1 Cor. 9:25). This prize is neither of grace nor by faith as salvation is (Eph. 2:5, 8-9), but of righteousness through works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12; 2 Cor. 5:10). Such a reward will be awarded the believers not according to the grace of the Lord, but according to His righteousness. Hence, it is the crown of righteousness. The One who awards it is the Lord as the righteous Judge, not as the merciful God or the gracious Redeemer. Paul was assured that such a prize was reserved, laid up, for him and would be awarded to him at the day of the Lord's second appearing.

Paul says that such an award will be given to all who love the Lord's appearing. The Lord's appearing, His

coming back, is a warning, an encouragement, and an incentive to us. We should love it and look forward to it with earnest expectation and joy. By it, the apostle charged Timothy to fulfill his ministry (vv. 1-2, 5).

The crown of righteousness of which Paul was assured is the incentive to the inoculator. If we are faithful to the healthy word of the truth and if we are faithful inoculators to dispense the ingredients of the divine inoculation into Christians today that they may return to the full knowledge of the truth, this reward will be given to us at the time of the Lord's appearing. This means that if we are faithful to the Lord's ministry, we shall receive the crown of righteousness as our reward.

There is a great deal of talk among Christians today concerning the Lord's second coming. But not many believers realize that when the Lord Jesus comes back, He will not come as the merciful God or as the gracious Savior, but as the righteous Judge. Christians should be warned and encouraged to prepare themselves to stand before this Judge. I hope that many among us will take up the burden in this dark age to bring such a solemn charge to the Lord's people. We all need to receive this charge before God and before the Lord Jesus, the One who will judge the living and the dead. We must declare the fact that when the Lord comes back, He will be the Judge of all, both believers and unbelievers. According to Matthew 25, all of the Lord's servants will have to give an account to Him. The Lord will either say, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (v. 21), or, "Evil and slothful slave" (v. 26). In His righteousness the Lord will decide whether or not we receive a reward.

Because the Lord's coming and His kingdom are solemn matters, Paul gave a serious charge to Timothy in 4:1-8. We should not think that the Lord's appearing will merely be a time of rapture and excitement. It will also be a time of great solemnity for every believer in Christ. This was the reason Paul charged Timothy by the Lord's appearing and His kingdom. May we all give heed to this solemn warning.

LIFE-STUDY OF SECOND TIMOTHY

MESSAGE EIGHT

THE ISSUE OF THE DECLINE

Scripture Reading: 2 Tim. 4:9-22

In this message we shall consider from 4:9-22 the issue of the decline of the church.

I. LOVING THE PRESENT AGE

In 4:9 Paul says to Timothy, "Be diligent to come to me quickly." This is a loving and intimate word. Paul could write such a word only to one who was very close to him. Timothy was close to Paul and intimate with him.

In verse 10 we find the reason Paul charged Timothy to come to him quickly: "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved the present age, and has gone to Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia." Loving the present age, the world now before our eyes, is in contrast to loving the Lord's appearing, mentioned in verse 8. The world, the cosmos, is composed of many ages. It seems that every decade is a different age. The present age is the world which surrounds us, attracts us, and tempts us. Demas was one who loved the present age.

Some believe that Demas came from Thessalonica and that this was the reason he went to Thessalonica after forsaking Paul. But whether or not he was a native of that city, it is certain that he went there because he loved the world and forsook the apostle.

Verse 10 is difficult to understand because the predicate "has gone" governs not only Demas, but also Crescens and Titus. This means that Demas had gone to Thessalonica, Crescens had gone to Galatia, and Titus had gone to Dalmatia. Does this indicate that Titus, like

Demas, left Paul in a negative way? If it were not for the fact that the name of Titus is presented positively in the New Testament, I would understand this verse to say that Demas, Crescens, and Titus all left Paul in a negative way. At least, I would take it to mean that Crescens and Titus took their own way. However, I find it difficult to believe that Titus would leave Paul in a negative way, especially after he had received from Paul an epistle addressed to him. After Paul had been arrested and imprisoned the second time, Titus visited him. Although I find it hard to believe that he forsook Paul, it is nonetheless a fact that he is categorized with Demas in verse 10. Did Paul send Crescens to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia? We do not know for sure if they were sent by Paul or if they went on their own initiative.

In verse 11 Paul says, "Luke alone is with me. Take Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for the ministry." The fact that Paul says that Luke alone is with him may indicate that Titus left either in a negative way or in a neutral way. Demas forsook Paul because he loved the present age; Titus may have left him for some other reason. Because Paul was suffering as a prisoner in Rome, none of his co-workers should have left him for any reason unless they were sent by Paul. They should have remained there with Paul to strengthen him. Paul's word about bringing Mark also indicates that he needed helpers to strengthen him. Ultimately we must leave to the Lord the question of whether Titus was sent by Paul to Dalmatia or went there on his own.

Verse 12 says, "Now Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus." It is difficult to decide how to translate the first word in this sentence. We could use now, but, yet, or and. I prefer to use either but or yet. It seems that Paul is saying, "Although I need helpers and although I need you to come quickly and bring Mark with you, yet I have still sent Tychicus to Ephesus." Although we may have difficulty deciding how to render the Greek word at the beginning of this sentence, we can still praise the Lord that there was a

church in Ephesus, that Paul could send a brother there, and that there was a brother willing to be sent. Thank the Lord for such a sending!

I treasure verses 9 through 12 because they reveal that the relationship among Paul and his co-workers was divinely arranged; it was not based on human organization. Paul's co-workers had the freedom to act on their own. Paul did not say, "Titus, don't go to Dalmatia. I need you to stay here with me. If you leave, I shall fire you from the work." But although there was no human organization, there was a divine arrangement in which the leading apostle was the authority. Therefore, Paul could charge Timothy to come to him quickly.

During the years I was with Brother Nee, many co-workers came to him for advice, wanting him to tell them what to do regarding certain matters. Very rarely, if ever, would Brother Nee say anything. However, along with others who knew the situation, I can testify that whenever I asked Brother Nee about something, he always gave me a direct answer. Sometimes when I was in a distant city, he would send me a cable telling me either to come to him or to go to a certain place.

If we compare the books of 2 Timothy and Titus, we shall see that there was greater intimacy between Paul and Timothy than between Paul and Titus. Yes, Paul wrote an epistle to Titus. But he could not say as much to Titus as he could to Timothy. To such an intimate co-worker as Timothy, Paul could issue a command for him to come quickly.

Paul and his co-workers were not related to one another in the way of organization. This means that Paul did not regard himself as a boss who could hire or fire co-workers at his discretion. Likewise, because there is no organization in the Lord's recovery today, there is no hiring or firing.

We have seen that, due to the attraction of the present age, Demas forsook the apostle. In verses 8 and 10 we have a contrast between loving the Lord's appearing and loving the present age. If we love the Lord's appearing, we shall

take sides with Him and fight with Him for His interests. But if we love the present age, we shall take sides with the world. Even though Demas loved the present age and forsook Paul, Paul does not say that he dismissed him from the work. Furthermore, Crescens and Titus may have left Paul without having been sent by him. Perhaps, deep within, Paul wanted Titus to stay with him to help and support him. Whatever the situation may have been, these verses make it clear that Paul did not use his authority according to the way of human organization.

Many of those who have been co-workers for more than thirty years can testify that in the Lord's recovery we do not have a human organization with a boss who exercises authority to hire or fire co-workers. Instead of organization, we have God's coordination with His deputy authority. Because there was also such coordination and authority among Paul and his co-workers, he could tell Timothy to come to him quickly, and he could send Tychicus to Ephesus.

According to Philippians 2, Timothy was one with Paul in a very intimate way. He was one soul with him and was even willing to risk his soul for the work of Christ. Because of this oneness, this intimacy, Paul could command Timothy to come to him. He could also send Tychicus to Ephesus. This, however, is not organization. On the contrary, it is according to the spiritual situation among those in God's coordination. How much the leading ones in God's coordination can say to you depends on the extent to which you are one with the ministry. This is not a matter of organization, but of the degree of oneness.

In verse 13 Paul goes on to say, "The cloak which I left in Troas with Carpus, bring when you come, and the scrolls, especially the parchments." This word also reveals the intimacy between Paul and Timothy. Troas was a seaport in northwest Asia Minor, where Paul received the Macedonian call (Acts 16:8-11). The scrolls and the parchments were materials used for writing in ancient times. The cloak was probably a traveling cloak or traveling case.

II. DOING MANY EVILS

Verse 14 says, "Alexander the coppersmith did many evil things to me; the Lord will repay him according to his works." Paul did not curse Alexander, but he did utter a word of righteousness, saying that the Lord would repay him according to his works.

In verses 10 and 14 we see two aspects of the issue of the decline. On the one hand, certain of those affected by the decline loved the present age; on the other hand, certain ones did evil things against the apostle. In times of degradation these things occur again and again.

In 1 Timothy 1:20 Paul speaks of Hymenaeus and Alexander. In 2 Timothy 2:17 he again refers to Hymenaeus, and in 4:14, to Alexander. Were Hymenaeus and Alexander genuine believers, or were they imposters? This raises the question concerning the boundary line between the great house (2 Tim. 2:20) and the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15). Only the Lord is able to draw the line with finality. Only He has the full knowledge concerning who is genuine and who is false.

Those who have conducted a scientific study of the difference between the wheat and tares in Matthew 13 point out that in every respect of their appearance, in size, color, and shape, the tares and the wheat are the same until the fruit is brought forth. At that time, the wheat brings forth golden ears and the tares bring forth black ears. Prior to that time, no one can differentiate between the wheat and the tares. This does not mean, however, that we should make no distinction between true believers and false ones. As long as we know that a certain person is not wheat, we should not receive him or accept him as wheat. But if in a particular situation we are not certain, we should receive the person. Such an action is not contrary to our conscience. It is possible that some of those whom we receive may not be genuine believers. It may have been that Hymenaeus was a true believer who became ship-wrecked concerning the faith. Some may think that Hymenaeus was not a genuine believer, whereas others

may think that he was a genuine believer who later became heretical. Because only the Lord knows for sure, we should not devote too much attention to the case of Hymenaeus.

Concerning ourselves as believers, there should not be any gray areas. This means that it should be easy for others to discern whether we are "black" or "white." Certainly no one doubts that Timothy was a genuine believer. Timothy was not only white, but was white in a bright, shining way. It should also be clearly evident that we are true believers in the Lord.

We have pointed out that it is difficult for us to draw the boundary line between the great house and the house of God. (In the eyes of the world, we are considered part of organized Christianity.) Certain things in the great house may be used by God. However, we should not be used by God in this way. In the great house there are vessels not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and earth. Do you want to be used by God as a wooden or earthen vessel, or as a golden or silver vessel? I want to be used by Him as a golden and silver vessel in the house of God.

Do not spend too much time trying to discern whether or not Alexander was a true believer. Instead, concentrate on those matters which are positive, clear, and nourishing. Whether Alexander was genuine or false, a wheat or a tare, will be decided by the Lord. One thing, however is certain: we should not follow his example. We should be a Timothy, not an Alexander.

Concerning Alexander the coppersmith, Paul advised Timothy, "You also guard against him, for he greatly opposed our words" (v. 15). No doubt, the words opposed by Alexander were the healthy words of God's economy. Today we are facing similar opposition from those who oppose the words of God's economy.

Verse 16 continues, "At my first defense no one came with me, but all forsook me; may it not be counted against them." We do not know whether Demas left Paul before the time of his first defense or after. We know only that all forsook him, that no one came with him.

In verse 17 Paul testifies, "But the Lord stood with me and empowered me, that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and all the nations might hear; and I was delivered out of the lion's mouth." The expression "the lion's mouth" is a figure of speech referring to an evil matter (v. 18) or an evil person (1 Cor. 15:32). Perhaps at the time of Paul's trial a certain person dealt with him in an extremely cruel manner. Paul may have such a person in mind when he speaks of "the lion's mouth."

In verse 18 Paul says, "The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom, to Whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." The heavenly kingdom is the kingdom of our Father (Matt. 13:43), the kingdom of the Father (Matt. 26:29), the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph. 5:5), and the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:11), which will be a reward to the overcoming saints. It equals the crown of righteousness in verse 8, and it is an incentive to the believers to run the heavenly course. Paul had the assurance to make the triumphant declaration that he would be saved into this heavenly kingdom.

III. THE CONCLUSION

After greeting Prisca and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus (v. 19), Paul says, "Erastus remained in Corinth, but Trophimus I left at Miletus sick." Miletus is a city in Asia Minor near Ephesus (Act 20:15, 17). Why did the apostle leave such an intimate one in sickness without exercising healing prayer for him? Why did he not also execute his healing gift (Acts 19:11-12) to cure Timothy of his stomach illness rather than instruct him to take the natural way for healing (1 Tim. 5:23)? The answer to both questions is that both Paul and his co-workers were under the discipline of the inner life in this time of suffering rather than under the power of the outward gift. The former is of grace in life; the latter of gift in power--miraculous power. In the decline of the church and in

suffering for the church, the gift of power is not as much needed as the grace in life.

According to the New Testament, miraculous gifts may have a place when the church is first raised up. But for the church to withstand decline or persecution, miraculous gifts or powers are not very helpful. Only the eternal life on which we are to lay hold is prevailing. By this life we can withstand decline and persecution.

It may appear to some that in caring for Timothy's ailment and Trophimus' sickness in a human way Paul acted as if he were an unbeliever. There is no record that he prayed for healing, and he certainly did not exercise the gift of healing. Instead, he encouraged Timothy to take a little wine, and he left Trophimus at Miletus. Paul cared for his co-workers in a very human way. He did not do anything spectacular to make a display. In like manner, in the Lord's recovery we should not seek to make a show. Our emphasis must be on the eternal life by which we can withstand tests, trials, persecution, attack, and opposition. The firm foundation stands. This standing depends not on miracles, but on the eternal life which is the grace within us.

After charging Timothy to be diligent to come before winter and after sending him the greetings of all the brothers with him, Paul concludes, "The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you" (v. 22). Here we see that Paul concludes with two of the main elements of his composition of 2 Timothy: a strong spirit and the grace of God. The book of 2 Timothy, which gives instructions concerning how to confront the degradation of the church, strongly stresses our spirit. In the beginning it emphasizes that a strong, loving, and sound spirit has been given to us by which we can fan the gift of God into flame and suffer evil with the gospel according to the power of God and the Lord's life-imparting grace (1:6-10). In the conclusion this book blesses us with the emphasis on the Lord's being with our spirit that we may enjoy Him as grace to stand against the down current of the church's decline and carry out

God's economy through His indwelling Spirit (1:14) and equipping word (3:16-17).

In the grievous days during the worsening degradation of the church, what is needed is the eternal grace of God, which was given to us in eternity (1:9) and is appropriated by us in this age. This grace, which is in the indestructible life, is nothing less than Christ the Son of God, who is the embodiment of the divine life, dwelling and living in our spirit. We need to exercise this spirit to enjoy the riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8) as the sufficient grace (2 Cor. 12:9). Thus, we may live Him as our godliness (1 Tim. 4:7-8) for the building up of the church as a testimony of Christ, bearing all the divine realities according to God's economy.

As the saints in the Lord's recovery, we all must know how to contact the Lord in our spirit, realizing that the grace with us is nothing less than the Triune God processed to be the all-inclusive, life-giving, compound, indwelling Spirit. Now our human spirit is one with the Spirit, one with the ultimate consummation of the processed Triune God. Day by day, we may enjoy such a Spirit in our spirit. As long as we know that the Lord is with our spirit and that the processed Triune God is our grace, and as long as we exercise our spirit to enjoy this grace, we shall have the reality of God's New Testament economy. Then in the midst of the degradation of today's Christianity, there will be the testimony of the reality of God's economy.

According to John 1:14, the Word, which is God Himself, became flesh, full of grace and reality. This indicates that as long as we have grace, we shall also have reality. If we exercise our spirit and enjoy this grace, we shall have reality. Then we shall carry out God's New Testament economy.