

Will the gospel die with you?

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Date: 05 September 2021

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[0 : 0 0] You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra, which persecutions I endured, yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly held, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching, for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

We've come to our second and last talk in this mini-series on Christian success. Last week we were in Philippians to see what Christian success looks like in the broadest sense for every believer, and hopefully we saw that the goal of God, the goal of Paul, the goal of every believer, is the exaltation and crowning of Christ as King. That's where the whole of history is heading, and so the only ultimate category that matters for success in the Christian walk is whether Christ is King. This week we're going to be slightly more granular in focus and look at what success looks like in the local church. Exalting Christ, yes, but what does that actually look like in the nitty-gritty of church life? And the question I want us to think about this morning to help us answer that is this, will the gospel die with you? Will the gospel die with you? On a broad point, it's self-evident that with anything in life there's a need for regeneration. If all of my generation decided, as many radical climate activists are suggesting, to stop having children, then the human species would die out with us. It would be over as quickly as that. And it's the same for the gospel. The gospel is only one generation from extinction. If the gospel is not passed on, if we kept it to ourselves only, then the gospel message would die out in a generation. I understand that's a fundamental point, but it's one worth making nonetheless. Sadly, however, and more specifically than that, and I apologise in advance here to my brothers and sisters who don't identify as Anglican, but it's my denomination, rightly or wrongly, and therefore one I can speak on. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we in the Church of England have on our hands a gospel crisis. Just a few stats for you. Church attendance in Anglican churches since 1985 has more than halved. We've dropped from 1.3 million attending churches every week to under 620,000.

And it gets worse because in that same time, the number of young people attending churches, those between the ages of 11 to 17, has fallen by over a third. Yes, excitingly, there is church growth.

[4 : 36]

In fact, some 1,000 people a week are now attending C of E churches new every week. The only problem is there are over 2,500 leaving every week, mostly through the funeral parlour door. And your immediate response to that might be, well, this decline has been going on for over 30 years, Benji. Surely the Church of England's senior leadership team has put evangelistically minded, faithful men and women into positions to rectify this. No. However, in a recent survey by the Church Times, it found that 20% of C of E vicars do not believe in a personal God. Furthermore, it found that close to half of all C of E vicars do not believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. I could take any member of eagles and put them in half the pulpits in the country on a Sunday, and they would do a better and more faithful job. Alongside this, it found that the average age of starting curacy, which is the position I occupy here, is 48. They do not see a crisis. They see gospel ministry as a pension, retirement, and a free house. Furthermore, less than 100 of those curates are under the age of 30. So I had a bit of fun with this. You are effectively looking at right now a whole percentage point of curates under 30. So I come back to the same question. Will the gospel die with us? Will the gospel die with you? And sadly, it gets even worse than that, because it isn't just that our society is apathetic towards Christianity, but rather, and I think we all have our own examples of this, it's growing in its hostility. It's no longer quirky to hold biblical views on sexuality and marriage. It is no longer morally neutral to tell people they are a sinner that needs to repent. It is no longer acceptable to assert that truth is objective and the risen Lord Jesus is king of your life. These doctrines have become, in our society's eyes, evil, and the pressure cooker is being slowly turned up. We live in a society that hates the message of the gospel, and the

God-knowers, the church leaders in our denomination, many of them are wolves, and they do not and will not teach the gospel. And year by year, numbers continue to fall. That is the situation we're in. So it begs the question. What on earth does a successful church look like in a culture that hates the gospel, persecutes believers, and the church teachers, the God-knowers, teach a false gospel of a more acceptable and watered-down kind? Will the gospel die with you? Well, that is exactly the situation Timothy and Paul found themselves in in Ephesus when this letter was written, but perhaps even worse. I remember I said last week there's going to be some flicking, so get the thumbs ready. Just like our society, persecution was the absolute norm. Chapter 1, verse 4, as I remember your tears, I long to see you that I may be filled with joy. Or chapter 1, verse 15, you are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Homogenes. And just like our society, theirs does not want to hear the gospel preached, 4, verse 3 to 4. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from the truth, from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 2 Timothy is one of Paul's last letters. In fact, it's likely that it is his last before his execution. We know he's in prison, but in a far worse prison than when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. And Ephesus, where Timothy is based when Paul wrote this letter to him, we really need to get in the mindset of this because this is absolutely key. Ephesus was Paul's major hope for his mission to Europe. It was the evangelistic launch pad for reaching the Gentiles with the gospel. If Ephesus falls, the gospel to Europe falls with it.

But here, at the end of Paul's life and ministry, he takes stock of over close to 20 years of faithful gospel work. And what can he say for himself? Well, have a look with me again at 1, verse 15.

You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me. All Paul sees at the end of his ministry is desertion. His gospel plans to Europe seemingly in ruins. And the only person left, the only Christian left is Timothy. We know furthermore that in AD 64, Rome burnt to the ground. Nero blamed it on Christians. And in AD 65, when this letter was written, he came up with a really fun and cool way to illuminate his garden parties. He took Christians, covered them in tar, and set them on fire.

Timothy is left deserted. Ephesus, a place once full of Christians 10 years ago, in fact, where the letter of Ephesians was written to is now empty and hostile. So Paul, in prison, at the end of his life, looks at the fruit of his ministry, and all he sees is desertion and persecution. Timothy, Paul asks, will the gospel die with you? And friends, I think it is no small exaggeration to say that this letter and Timothy's decision of whether or not he would listen to it is one of the primary reasons you are a Christian today. Had Timothy given up, had he not planted and led successful churches, the gospel would not have come to Europe. What would you have said if you were Paul?

[11 : 05] The gospel looks like it might die out with Paul's generation. Paul, the chief missionary to the Gentiles, is in prison. The government is persecuting believers. False teachers abound. And you have one, only one letter to keep the gospel going. What do you say? I wonder if you were thinking, as we went through the context of 2 Timothy, what Paul's strategy would be for successful churches, given how daunting the challenge seemed. Surely you need a multi-pronged plan with emphasis on cultural engagement, powerful guest speakers, a panel on climate change, uplifting modern music, emphasis on the sacraments, or impressive church buildings. Perhaps you were thinking, Paul might need to rejig his message somewhat, given how catastrophically unsuccessful it seems to have been so far. Perhaps a little less judgment, Paul, and a little more grace. Or think hard, Paul, about the issues people care about at the moment, and show them how the gospel helps.

Maybe emphasize some doctrines, Paul, more than others. And don't mention the ones that people don't like. Or preach a therapeutic self-help gospel, Paul. People like help. But surely, given the outcome, something has to change. Well, 2 Timothy is, in essence, a book of two major unchanging commands. And we have in the first command, the method of a successful church. And in the second, the message of a successful church. So that brings me on to my first point, the unchanging method of a successful church, pass the gospel on. The unchanging method of a successful church, pass the gospel on.

Our first of these two commands comes in 2 Timothy, chapter 2, verses 1 to 2. I'm going to read those for us now. You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me, in the presence of many witnesses, in trust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

Generation 4. So here you have the method.

method, simple and straightforward. But I want us to see that this really is the method since the very beginning. Have a look with me at chapter 1, verses 3 to 5.

[13 : 54] I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers day and night. As I remember your tears, I long to see you that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure dwells in you as well.

Notice again with me the number of generations. Paul's ancestors, verse 3, which in this case is Old Testament prophets, generation 1. Then Paul, generation 2, who we know from Acts converted Eunice and Lois, generation 3, who then collectively in turn evangelised to Timothy. Again, four generations.

So do you see Paul's argument and method here? Just as his ancestors, the prophets of the Old Testament, passed the gospel down, so Paul passed it to Eunice and Lois, who passed it to Timothy, and Timothy now, you are to pass it on to others, who will in turn pass it on further still.

It's a simple, and despite a seemingly dire situation, the exact same method since the beginning. Pass the gospel on. It's like effectively a giant relay. The baton remains the same, the method remains the same, but it's passed from hand to hand, gospel generation to gospel generation.

But it is, in essence, shockingly ordinary. Paul is effectively saying, just has always been the case, keep doing the exact same thing. I wonder if that surprises you. I can certainly imagine how Timothy might have responded, Paul, what do you mean just keep passing the gospel on, man by man, woman by woman?

[15 : 46] That method clearly doesn't work. Everyone has left. If I keep going, I will just keep being persecuted, and false teachers have a more effective message. Give me something more.

And certainly, that is a temptation we all face. I think we can empathise. Surely we need to do more as a church. Set up a panel on social justice. Engage in mercy ministries. Elevate the communion and religiosity.

Invest in new tech and fit-for-purpose building projects. We need more. Impressive music. Impressive pastors. Cutting-edge academics. Academic critique. Christians in government.

Christians in business. Christians in the home. Reform the nuclear family. Hire a worship leader. The list goes on and on and on. But surely, we need more.

Well, Paul, from prison, surveys his life's ministry, a ministry with one unchanging method, pass the gospel on, man to man, woman to woman, and he sees only Timothy left.

[16 : 56] And he does not say, we need more. No, he commands Timothy, just as I taught you, so you teach others.

One unchanging method. And you might be thinking, but that method failed. It didn't work. But can I say, friends, that the very fact that you are in this room, listening to this message, to this gospel, is testimony to the ministry of Timothy and Paul.

In one sense, we are all products of this message. And that brings me on to my second and final point, the unchanging message of a successful church, the word of God.

The unchanging message of a successful church, the word of God. It begs the question, though, what exactly are we to be passing on?

What are we to entrust to the next generation? The gospel, yes, but is that it? And what exactly does that entail? Well, this brings me on to the second major command of the book.

[18 : 02] Have a look with me at chapter 2, sorry, 2 Timothy 4, verses 1 to 5. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word.

Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. It's a breathtaking, yet again, utterly simple command, isn't it?

Paul's answer to a gospel generation on the brink of extinction is preach the word. Preach the word. If you want to pass the gospel on, Timothy, preach God's word.

If you want to grow a successful church, Timothy, preach God's word. If you want to run the race faithfully, Timothy, until the end, preach God's word.

[19 : 26] And Paul sets up the reason for this in the preceding verses in 3, 14 to 17. Have a look with me. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you've been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

God's word is sufficient. It makes you wise for salvation. It is breathed out by God. It teaches. It rebukes. It reproves. It corrects. It trains in righteousness.

And arguably, and most significantly of all, it completes the man and woman of God for every good work. It is fully, completely, and unequivocally sufficient.

Now, Paul isn't naive. He isn't ignorant of the suffering that preaching a crucified Messiah will entail. If Christ was murdered for this gospel, then following him will make suffering inevitable.

[20 : 43] And Paul says as much in 3 verse 12. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Yet in no way whatsoever does this suffering change the method or the message of Paul's ministry.

4 verse 1. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing in his kingdom, preach the word. Note who is charging Timothy.

The judge of the whole world, Timothy, will hold you to this one command. You could not appeal to a higher authority. And that command is preach the word.

In season and out of season. Which simply means, whether those listening hate you or love you, revile you or praise you, worship God or try to kill you, you still have one and only one command to follow.

Preach the word. Preach the word. It is as breathtakingly simple as the first command. Timothy, pass the gospel on by preaching God's word.

[21 : 59] As mentioned, 2 Timothy is a letter written to stop the gospel going into extinction. The commands within it, therefore, must, must, must be the most core and fundamental to Christian ministry and church life.

If you want to see what a successful church looks like, it is the command to pass the gospel on by preaching God's word. And this remains the same no matter the context being preached into.

During Timothy's ministry, Christians are being burnt alive. Faithful brothers like Demas, the hero of Colossians ten years earlier, have deserted the gospel.

False teachers are bound in the church and people are listening. Paul, Timothy's mentor, is in prison about to be executed because of preaching that very same gospel.

And Timothy is tasked with keeping that gospel going. And how is he to do that? How does he stop the gospel dying with him? Well, just the same as always.

[23 : 02] A successful church passes the gospel on by preaching God's word. An unchanging method with an unchanging message. There are two implications I want us to think about together as we close.

First implication, that we, as we kick off a new year together, would be a church that prioritizes above everything else teaching the word of God. It isn't an accident that Grace Church sets itself up to have the preaching of God's word at the center of everything it does.

The command of 2 Timothy is to preach the word to the next generation. This is why we preach the word on a Sunday, hopefully, why teaching the word at youth and kids is the priority that Andrew organizes our young people's ministry by, why we read the Bible in our small groups and why we do one-to-ones.

And can I say, as one major application of this, I hope this changes how we view family Bible time. When you open the Bible with your kids, with your one-year-old or two-year-old right up to your teenagers, you are engaging in the most successful thing a Christian could be doing.

You are passing the gospel on to the next generation. The church's one goal to be successful is not to battle climate change, influence the culture, embed Christian norms, or lead the way in mercy ministries, although those are all good things.

[24 : 30] But it is first and foremost to preach God's word to a dying world. culture and context is irrelevant in terms of the priority of the church.

We preach the word in season and out of season. Second and finally, the priority of word-based time for every believer.

It follows, I hope, that ultimately the greatest need for every believer is to guard their time in God's word. It is the only thing that sufficiently equips every believer.

Everything you need for knowing God, receiving salvation, growing in godliness, running a successful church, passing the gospel on, is in the pages of scripture.

And if anyone tells you different that you need special music or special buildings or religious ceremonies to know, love, and grow in your relationship with God, they are lying to you and they deny the sufficiency of God's very words.

[25 : 37] So to close, the call is the same. The world needs the gospel and the unchanging, life-giving method and message is to pass the gospel on to the next generation by teaching the word of God.

I began this talk with a question, will the gospel die with you? Well, the answer and what defines a successful church is only if we pass the gospel on by teaching his word to the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Allow me to close us in prayer. Dear Lord, thank you so much for the ministry of Timothy and Paul. Thank you that they fought the good fight, they ran the race, they passed the gospel on.

Please would we be a church that is characterized by our love of the Lord Jesus and that we would be characterized by passing your gospel on faithfully generation to generation.

Amen.