

Chapter Summary: 1 Timothy

Timothy was the young associate Paul had counted on for years. It was Timothy's visit and report that prompted Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica; and when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he sent Timothy to deliver the letter, affirming that Timothy was "doing the Lord's work, just as I am." Timothy had traveled with Paul, stayed with him during his imprisonment, and continued to fulfill assignments for the apostle like visiting the believers in Philippi.

He was such a close and trusted colleague that five of Paul's letters in our New Testament are written in Timothy's name as well. But now Paul was writing to Timothy himself with instructions and encouragement for his most difficult assignment yet.

As a missionary leader in the early church, Paul would travel, preach the Good News, start churches, and then move on to new places. Unfortunately, others often came in behind him, disrupting the churches he had started. While Paul was in prison, the church he had started in the strategic city of Ephesus was infiltrated by certain self-appointed "teachers." Like the false teachers in Corinth, they were discouraging believers from getting married and from eating certain foods. And like the false teachers in Colosse, they were encouraging speculation about myths and other so-called spiritual practices. Furthermore, these "teachers" were also causing disruption in a number of other areas, including leadership in the church.

Once Paul was released from prison, he investigated the situation in Ephesus. But he wasn't able to stay long because there were matters to attend to in other places as well. So he continued on into Macedonia but left Timothy in Ephesus with a clear and simple mandate: "Stop those whose teaching is contrary to the truth."

Shortly afterward, Paul sent Timothy a letter with more details, now known as 1 Timothy. This letter alternates between giving instructions on how to address specific situations in Ephesus and giving "charges" (words of personal challenge) to Timothy himself.

It's likely that Paul means for Timothy to read the instructions out loud to the church but intends the personal charges for Timothy's own private encouragement. Timothy was probably no older than his mid-thirties. Someone this young would not ordinarily be promoted to a position of leadership. But Paul tells him, "Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young." Paul clearly believes that Timothy can help restore peace and order to that troubled community.

As we prepare to read 1 Timothy, we should remind ourselves that the letters of the New Testament were written to specific churches and situations. They are meant first and foremost to address the needs of their original audiences. Our responsibility as good readers is to discover what these writings meant in their original context and then consider their enduring message for us today.

The church in Ephesus was troubled by disorder. In addition to the leadership challenges caused by the false teachers, they struggled with disruptive worship, how to care for widows, and divisions between wealthy and poor members. Paul refers to the church as "the household of God" and gives Timothy clear instructions on how to appoint and organize leaders in the community, which would have a positive impact on other issues as well.

All of Paul's instructions are closely tied to the nature of the Good News and its saving message. Paul is confident that the wayward believers can be restored. Indeed, as he summarizes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' - and I am the worst of them all." In closing, he reminds Timothy of his own responsibility as a teacher of the truth.

Paul urges Timothy to make sure the believers are constantly immersed in the Scriptures: "Until I get there, focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them." The more the believers find their lives taken up into the great story of God and the salvation found in Jesus, the better they will pursue their own roles in that narrative of restoration and life.