

## **Sustaining Graces I II Timothy 1:1-7**

For several weeks now, we have been studying the letters of Paul at our two Wednesday Bible studies. We'll continue to look at these letters for a few weeks; but this morning I want to share with you the beginning of what is thought to be the very last letter the Apostle Paul ever wrote—the letter we know as II Timothy.

Paul was back in prison when he wrote this, but no longer just under house arrest. Conditions hadn't been so terrible for Paul then. Now, however, because of his faithfulness to the cause of Christ, he was in Nero's dungeon...awaiting execution.

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

But Paul in no way sounds defeated here. He seems strong and confident; and rather than focusing on his own problems, he's encouraging Timothy...to stay true to his calling as a follower of Christ and as a minister of the Gospel.

In the process, he assures this young pastor that he will be able, with God's help, to endure whatever difficulties he must face. With that, I want us to look at our text for today:

**II Timothy 1:1-7** <sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup>To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

<sup>3</sup>I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. <sup>4</sup>Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. <sup>5</sup>I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

<sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup>For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

Paul is sharing with this young pastor, Timothy, what I've chosen to call "Sustaining Graces." Often we hear of "sustaining grace" or "all-sufficient grace;" but I'm speaking here of graces—plural--in the sense of gifts—God's gifts that become instruments of His strength and encouragement in our lives—gifts that can get us through those moments when we're not sure anything can.

For so many people, this is one of those times right now. Most people today will tell you that they have experienced better days in the past than what they are going through now.

Many people, polls indicate, no longer feel hopeful about the future; and this has been true for quite awhile now. People don't believe things will get better for themselves or for their children. The prevailing mood ranges from resignation to outright despair.

**I.** We need some graces—some special gifts from God--to sustain us during these challenging times. I believe we can find several in our text today; and the first of these is **RELATIONSHIPS**.

Good relationships are surely one of God's sustaining graces in our lives. Last week, we celebrated the 15 years that the Lord has allowed us to be in relationship together as pastor and people. I feel very blessed by this relationship and by the way we observed the anniversary. Thank you again. It was a great day!

Over these 15 years, I've traveled with many of you on some very tough journeys—sadnesses, losses of various kinds. I can only hope that God has used me as a "sustaining grace" in your life. What I can say for sure is that He's used some of you as a sustaining grace in mine.

These relationships are precious to us; and listen: this is exactly what God intends. He designed us to live together in families, churches and communities. He formed us to love, support, and in so many ways, depend on one another. These relationships are priceless gifts of grace in each of our lives.

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

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

For many of us, it's been a fifteen-year relationship. For others, a shorter time. For some of you, though, it's been a lifetime! Blest be these sacred ties that bind our hearts together in Christ's love!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Timothy accompanied Paul on his journeys. Their relationship became so close, Paul refers to him as "my dear son" (v. 2).

If you know Paul's story, you realize how many difficult times he faced. But he was never alone. The Lord was with Paul; and so were a few dear companions. Together, they got him through!

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

In verse two, Paul bestows this blessing upon his friend Timothy: "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." Let's ask ourselves a question: how often do we bestow a blessing upon our loved ones? The Lord intends for us to be blessings to one another.

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

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

I need the fellowship and encouragement of others who also know how much they need God and each other. This is church, friends. These relationships are sustaining graces in our lives.

**II.** Here's another one: **MEMORIES.** Have you ever thought about how God uses our memories as a source of encouragement in our lives—as a gift to sustain us when we're in the valleys?

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

That's irritating, isn't it? So our brains aren't perfect; but for the most part, they work remarkably well!

Of course, when it comes to our memories, they can work against us. We may recall things we would be better off forgetting.

Paul actually addresses this topic in another letter: “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Some things from our past must be left there—forgotten, forgiven, whatever—but left in order for us to move forward.

But there are also those good memories—lots of them—that need to be recalled again and again. In verse 3, Paul assures Timothy that he is remembering him, and doing so in his prayers.

Isn't it encouraging when someone assures you that they are praying for you, and you know they mean it! In verses 4 and 5, Paul continues to share memories of their times together.

They're good memories. Paul says that he yearns to see Timothy so they can once again experience the things that had brought them both so much joy. He recalls Timothy's sincere faith, along with that of his mother and grandmother.

In the difficult moments of life, we can draw upon memories of people who have helped us in the past, those whose faith has been an inspiration to us, those who have been our encouragers and our prayer partners all along life's way.

Added now to my list of sustaining memories are some from last week's service. Looking back, so much of what happened that day was simply the sharing of memories.

They're sacred. They continue to strengthen and inspire us. I found myself remembering some precious people who have gone on to be with the Lord now, but I recall how they touched my life and the life of this church before He called them home.

So why are we so forgetful? Who are the people and what are the circumstances you need to be remembering right now? Why do we overlook these sustaining graces that God provides?

We all have these memory banks; and they contain a variety of powerful recollections which would bring strength to our lives...if we would only take the time and make the effort to remember.

**III.** And then there's one other sustaining grace I find in this passage. Relationships and memories are two very important ones, but there is also **RENEWAL.**

While we're remembering, we need to recall the important commitments we've made in the past; and from time to time, we must renew them. Renewing our commitments to Christ and to one another will empower us for the troubling times we'll face.

This is the time of year when lots of us attend homecoming games and festivities. Maybe it's a reunion year for you. If so, the Development Office is sending you reminders to come join the folks you finished school with...and see just how far down that proverbial hill they've traveled since your last reunion.

You know what I mean: "Susie sure has gone downhill, hasn't she?" "I guess so...but have you seen Bill?" I think they're trying to convince us that if we're ever going to give to the Alumni Fund, we probably should go ahead and do it now...just in case.

That's why they always have those pledge cards everywhere you turn. And listen, I'm okay with that. Pam even served as President of the Alumni Board. We support our alma mater.

But here's the point—and yes, there is one. When it comes to the Lord and His church, there are no alumni. Those are the folks who show back up on special occasions to see how the place is doing, and maybe to give some small token of their support.

But in the church of Jesus Christ, friends, matriculation is for all of life and eternity. It's amazing how many folks don't seem to understand this, but there is no such thing as alumni status around here.

But there is re-enrollment! There is revival and recommitment! One of the sustaining graces God makes available to us is the opportunity to find new strength through renewing our relationship with Him.

In verse six, Paul says to Timothy, "...I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God..." This is too important, he's saying. Don't let it die.

Don't let it just smolder and produce nothing more than a little puff of smoke. Fan this life, this faith, this relationship with God into flame so that others can feel the warmth and see the light!

Then Paul continues, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (v. 7). Does that sound like a bunch of drop-outs? No! Giving up won't do for God's people, no matter how big the challenge is that they face.

Boldness of faith is what's required; and sometimes a renewal of our relationship with the Lord becomes necessary. It could be that the time to do this—to recommit our lives to the Lord--is right now.

Push aside the ashes. Add some kindling. Fan those embers of faith into flame once again; and you will discover strength and courage and sustenance like you never dreamed were possible.

**Relationships** are precious. Let's make more of them as we reach out to others with a consistent and compassionate witness for Christ.

And **memories**—I look forward to the ones where we're rejoicing and celebrating how the Lord saw us through the hard times...and then blessed us with both spiritual and numerical growth.

And **renewal**--this may well be what God is looking for in our lives in order for Him to pour out His blessings once again. A recommitment of our lives, our gifts, our money, our time, our service to the Lord.

Listen: anybody can focus on how tough the times are...most people do. And most churches do too.

But what if, instead, you and I remember--and really take to heart--just how powerful, renewing, and sustaining God's grace is. I can't help but wonder what the Lord would do through us if this really became our focus! Don't you want to find out?