

“Complaining with Paul but Holding on to Hope Too”

2 Timothy 2:8–15

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Professor Olive Elaine Hinnant suggests that in our reading from 2 Timothy the Apostle Paul sounds a bit like Jimmy Stewart’s character Charlie Anderson in the 1965 film *Shenandoah* (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 158). Anderson is a pacifist farmer trying to raise seven children during the American Civil War without his wife’s presence but with her instructions to help them become good Christians. He is exhausted, he feels alone and abandoned, and so he offers this blessing over a meal.

Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here; we wouldn't be eating it, if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same, Lord, for this food we're about to eat. Amen.

The prayer may seem irreverent, but it is honest, and Paul does sound a bit like this, not only here in 2 Timothy, but in numerous other places. I am in prison because of the gospel, he says here, I suffer hardship, I’m chained like a criminal. In 2 Corinthians 6:4f, he talks about afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger... Like Charlie Anderson, he ultimately gives thanks to God, but this laundry list of endurance sounds a lot like complaint. “God, I’m doing all this for you!” he seems to say, “It feels like I’m on my own, but thank-you anyway, amen.”

But the truth is it’s not just Paul who feels this way. We do too at times, at least I do, I’ll speak for myself here.

Sometimes we are fresh off an experience of grace and thus feel grateful and communicate this to God. We’re like the Samaritan Jesus

heals of a skin disease, along with nine other people, who turns back and praises God with a loud voice. He prostrates himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him, whereupon Jesus wonders where the other nine are. Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?

We often focus on this part of the story, these nine ungrateful people, and Jesus seems to see them this way, but we don't hear anything else about them. When all ten cry out for mercy, Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, and they are made well *as they go*. Perhaps they are just doing what Jesus tells them to do.

My college roommate and I had an experience like this in the summer of 1981. We had won the prize for "best band" at the Kentucky State Fair and were performing for 6,000 people at Broadbent Arena in Louisville with a live television broadcast. At the dress rehearsal, we were told we could take a bow after we played but then we needed to walk off the back of the stage without hesitation because the show would run on a tight schedule. We did exactly as we were told. We played, took a bow, and then walked off the stage.

Only later did we learn from friends who had watched on TV that since the crowd was still applauding as we reached the back of the stage, the MC said, "Take another bow, boys!" The lights and cameras turned to us, as we appeared to ignore the MC and just walked offstage. "Why did you do that?" our friends asked. Well, we couldn't hear her voice where we were, and we had been told not to linger. So, we appeared rude and ungrateful, but we were only doing what we were told to do.

I have often wondered about the "ungrateful nine," whether they are just doing what Jesus tells them to do. Who knows? Surely they know that they are well and that Jesus has had something to do with this, and now they are headed to the priests to be made ritually clean. Perhaps they are grateful, the Samaritan is, and so are we at times.

When we experience healing of the body, mind, heart, or spirit; when we experience reconciliation and peace in a significant relationship; when we see light on our path where before there was only darkness; whenever we experience something beyond our highest hopes and know that God is somehow behind the experience, we feel grateful and thus have a longing to express gratitude to God.

But there are also times when we don't feel so grateful, times when rather than singing, "Thank You, Lord" or Earth, Wind & Fire's song "Gratitude," we'd rather sing with Janet Jackson, "What have you do for me lately?" We have memories of grace, times when God clearly guided or healed us, comforted or encouraged us, beginning with the moment we embraced God's gift of love in baptism. But those memories are of times long ago. What has God done for us lately? Recent experience has brought mostly suffering and pain, hardship and loss - in our personal lives, in the church, in our nation and world.

We grieve the loss of loved ones, relationships, and abilities. We feel a heavy burden for the church in this time of declining interest in institutional religion, coupled with the distortion of faith proclaimed by many evangelicals. We work diligently at offering a faithful witness, but it often seems to fall on deaf ears and blind eyes. And in our culture and world, we vacillate between periods when we exhaust ourselves, seemingly for nothing, and times when we give in to discouragement.

Like Jimmy Stewart's character, and like the Apostle Paul, we have worked ourselves to exhaustion, seemingly on our own. We give thanks to God with our lips, but we're just going through the motions.

And yet, Paul does not end here, with frustration and fatigue. He ends with a word of hope and encouragement. All that Paul has experienced in the way of suffering and hardship is because of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that has changed him. So, it is worth it, every bit of it. And while Paul is chained like a criminal, the word of God is not chained. It is still free. It is able to comfort and encourage, challenge and provoke, transform people and the world.

Furthermore, while God may at times seem absent or at least passive, God is not. If we die with Christ, Paul says, perhaps quoting an early hymn, we also live with him; if we endure, we also reign with him; if we deny him, he will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful. All of this is to say God is still with us and working for good, even when we have questions and doubts. Paul offers more than a half-hearted prayer of thanks. He provides a full-throated affirmation of God's continuing work in the world.

Like Paul, we have reason to endure in faith. The gospel itself is reason enough, our experience of mercy and acceptance, being claimed as beloved children, creatures of value which nothing can diminish. But we also have the assurance that God is with us, working for good in all circumstances, whether we realize it or not. We may labor in the field of justice, seemingly to no avail, but we are not alone, and God will somehow bring about good, whether in our lifetime or not.

Consider the reading from Jeremiah. While the prophet Hananiah is preaching peace, predicting that the nation will be restored within two years, Jeremiah is not so hopeful. The exile will last seventy years, the people need to prepare for a long time in captivity. Yet even there, God will be with them, and they should invest in life — build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, settle down and start families, and all the while, seek the welfare of the city where they are in exile. Then, just past the end of our reading, Jeremiah adds this. “For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jer. 29:11).”

Even in the worst circumstances imaginable, all hope is not lost because God is still with the people, guiding their lives toward a better future. We can trust that the same is true for us, no matter how isolated and abandoned we may feel. No matter how profound our grief, how intense our discouragement, how entrenched our doubt, God still has plans for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope.

This alone is encouraging, but there is something else Paul says that might help us endure challenging times. While our voices may be bound, God’s voice is not, God’s word is not chained.

There are different ways in which our voices may be limited — by our experience and awareness which are finite, by our perception of what others want to hear and thus how they will react to what we say. The latter is true for those of us who stand behind a pulpit. There was a time, and I suppose there still is in some settings, when saying the wrong thing, as defined by what people do not want to hear, whether it is biblical or not, can lead to a preacher losing his/her job. More often the fear is damaging relationships or not being able to move the community forward, but no matter what the reason, a preacher’s voice is bound.

Paul would tell us that our voice can also be limited by authorities; his is. At least as of now in this nation, we still have the protections of the First Amendment and thus are free to express our opinions and beliefs, practice our faith, even organize in public places peacefully to share our views. But many of these freedoms are being threatened, we will have to fight for them if we are to keep them. One thinks of Benjamin Franklin's response in 1787 to the question of whether we have a republic or a monarchy. "A republic, if you can keep it," he said. If you can keep it... Freedom requires ongoing diligence.

Yet, no matter what happens with our voices, God's voice will not be silenced. Human speech may be limited by those who fear different ideas. And some may attempt to hijack the gospel, as White Christian Nationalists have done, but God's sovereignty will prevail. Paul is imprisoned and killed, but God is not silenced. Bonhoeffer is imprisoned and killed, but God is not silenced. King is killed and Mandela is imprisoned, but God is not silenced. Navalny is imprisoned and killed, but God is not silenced. As a familiar hymn says, "This is our Father's world: O let us not forget that though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet." God is the ruler yet.

It is a profound word of encouragement. Not only is God working for good; God's word is not chained. And so, we have hope, as well as a calling to listen to this word, as revealed in scripture and through Christ, listen to this Word before and above all others.

The Barmen Declaration, written by the German Confessing Church in 1934, articulated this calling in a powerful way at a time when the authorities in Nazi Germany were trying to use the church for political purposes. It asserted that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Christ would not bow down to any other authority, they said, nor would Christ's church.

So it remains to this day, no matter how powerful or compelling other voices are. There is one Word of God we trust and obey.

And so, we complain with Paul, but we also hold on to hope. God is working with us and speaking to us and for us. We just need to listen.