

FANNING THE FIRE

II Timothy 1:1-6

When Second Timothy was written Paul was a prisoner in Rome for the second time. Paul spent considerable time in jail -- at Philippi, Caesarea, Jerusalem and Rome. The Jews brought about his arrest, and the Romans imprisoned him, but he never described himself as a prisoner of the Jews or the Romans, but always as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus." He was imprisoned on account of his loyalty to Christ, so there was no shame about it. Rather, he gloried in it. At the order of Nero Rome was burned. To escape the blame for his terrible iniquity, Nero accused the Christians of burning the city and issued an order that all of them be put to death. During this persecution Paul was arrested and placed in the Mamertine dungeon. One can stand in that old dungeon today and look at those bare walls without a window in them, and gaze up at the ceiling in which there is a hole through which food and water were let down to Paul, and get a faint idea of the suffering which he must have endured. Just how long Paul remained in that dungeon we do not know, but during those months he wrote this farewell letter which has come down to us. There is always something tender about the last message from one whom we have loved, and this one is no exception.

When this letter was written Paul was approximately sixty-eight years of age, was tired and worn, with only Luke as a companion, and certain of a martyr's death, but living victoriously as always. Just before his martyrdom Paul wrote this letter to encourage and help Timothy, whom he was expecting to carry the torch passed on to him by the greatest of the apostles.

Paul ascribed his apostleship to the sovereign will of God. Apart from any merit, aspiration or work of his own, God chose Paul for this office. His apostleship was a responsibility which he exercised through the will of God, by which will he was led to the very end of his earthly career. Paul never had any misgiving about the will of God for his life. Just because suffering enters one's life, as in the case of Paul's imprisonment, it is no indication that the individual is living outside of the will of God. It is wonderful to walk so close to God that His will for our lives is crystal clear. When this is done the worst of human suffering can be borne with a cheerful spirit.

In this first verse the word "for," translated "according to," denotes the object or intention of Paul's appointment as an apostle, which was to make known, or to publish abroad, the promise of eternal life. The promise of eternal life made it necessary to have apostles to announce it. Therefore, Paul's apostleship is explained on the basis of God's promise of life.

Paul addressed Timothy, the minister of Christ Jesus in Ephesus, as "my beloved child." As, in a secondary sense, a child owes his natural life to his earthly father, so Timothy owed his spiritual life to Paul. Furthermore, as a child serves with his father, so Timothy served with Paul in the gospel ministry. It was only natural that this term of endearment should be on the lips of one who, facing death, reviews his entire past association with the precious young friend and helper whose life had been mingled with his own in so many ways.

Upon this "beloved child" Paul pronounced the blessing of grace, mercy and peace. By grace is meant the unmerited, pardoning and transforming favor of God. By mercy is meant a warm, tender and compassionate affection shown to one who is in a difficult situation. By peace is meant the consciousness of having been reconciled to God through the work of Christ. Just as a stream issues from a fountain, peace flows from grace and mercy. Both in times of persecution and in ordinary times Timothy would need grace for every service, mercy for every failure and peace for every circumstance. If God the Father and Christ the Lord bestowed the blessings of grace, mercy and peace upon Timothy, nothing more could be desired.

Sitting in that dark, damp and dirty dungeon and facing death, Paul, instead of complaining as most people would have done in similar circumstances, meditated on the blessings which he had received and sincerely desired to express his gratitude. Paul's gratitude was evoked especially by the blessed memories which he cherished of those whose lives had meant so much to him. Paul was indebted and thankful to God for his own godly ancestry and heritage. He considered himself fortunate in coming from a line of godly people who loved the Lord and His truth. Paul was also grateful to God for his memories of Timothy, which centered primarily on the tears which he shed at their last parting, on his genuine faith and on his godly ancestry. These precious memories caused him to pray unceasingly for his intimate and younger companion. These memories of his associate filled Paul's soul with longing for Timothy to come and visit him in the dungeon at Rome. If his son in the faith could only be with him in his trying experiences, it would fill his heart with joy. Therefore, he asked his son in the faith and his successor in the ministry to hurry to him.

Paul knew that he was leaving his timid and retiring successor in a hard place with many trials ahead. He challenged Timothy to remember the special gift which God had given to him. He wanted him to remember for a very definite purpose, namely, that he might stir up what God had given him. This gift was that endowment and endowment from God which Timothy had received at the time of his ordination to the ministry and which equipped him for his service. For his heavy responsibilities Timothy did not need a new gift but merely a rekindling of the one which he had already received. He simply needed an incentive to keep ablaze at full flame the holy zeal which he had. Paul was not urging Timothy to begin stirring up his gift, but to keep on fanning the fire as he had been doing. That which was already aglow needed to be fanned into a brighter flame.

Paul was greatly concerned because he realized that Timothy possessed latent abilities and undeveloped powers that he had never even suspected. Timothy did not know what he could do. That is not at all strange. It is often easier for someone else to see in us possibilities that we do not suspect. In Paul's exhortation here there is the implication, "If I can only wake that man up, what a power he will be. He needs to be aroused and shaken out of his complacency." The word which is translated "stir up" literally means "fan the fire into a flame." In other words Paul said, "Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou dost

kindle into the highest flame that you can make burn every power wherewith God hath endowed you."

Many are not able to appreciate the meaning of this verse because they never arose, as some of us country-bred mortals did, on cold winter mornings to shiver before an old fashioned fireplace while we uncovered the leftover coals of fire from the night before, applied kindling and then blew hard or fanned with a piece of cardboard until the flame appeared.

Such is the picture here. There come times in our experiences when the fires of God burn low and we must stir up or fan the heavenly flame within our hearts. Paul urged Timothy not to let the fire from God go out in his soul, but to fan it into a flame. Every true believer in Christ has a few coals at least in his heart, but it is not often that they are aflame. Wet blankets of various sorts have smothered the flame. Keep the flame aglow at any cost. No price is too great to pay to be a "burning and shining light" for Him.

There are so many things that can quench the fires of holy zeal in the soul. Willful sin will do it. Neglect will do it. If we neglect the means of grace -- prayer, Bible study and Christian exercise -- we shall soon need a stirring and fanning. It was never easier to grow complacent than today. The spirit of the times is against a person being on fire for God.

Our text mentions "the gift which is in thee." What is this gift? It is a gift of grace, a favor received without merit on the part of the recipient. Many-sided is the gift of God. It always starts in salvation -- God's initial gift of grace. But it is never limited to salvation. Timothy had not only been saved by the gift of grace, but he had been given a special talent for service, a gift of spiritual power. Salvation and service must not be separated. We are saved to serve.

By gift here is meant equipment for service. Every Christian has a gift. All are not equally gifted. Some have more talents than others. A compelling motive for the right use of our individual gifts is the recognition of the fact that they are not our own. If the gift were our own, acquired by our own effort or earned by our merit, we might reasonably claim the right to do with it as we pleased. But this personal gift of ours, whose rightful use brings blessings to others, is not our own, but God's. It is given to us in trust, and the condition of the entrustment is that it be used in the service of Christ. All possessors will be called upon for an account of the use they make of them. Privilege always carried with it a corresponding responsibility.

These gifts are not for mere display or adornment. Their object is employment. It is not the possession of these gifts, but it is their use that counts. The difference between people is not so much the resources at their command as it is the command of their resources. The man with meager equipment often outstrips his more largely endowed fellowman, simply because he knows how

to use what he has. There are latent abilities and possibilities in many people who are utterly unaware of their presence. All such need to be aroused and made acquainted with their resources. The unusual gifts of God's children are not accomplishing any more good than if they were not possessed.

We should examine ourselves to see what gifts we really have. We should then use our gifts and try to improve them. We should stir up the gift that is in us, because all we shall do when we have stirred ourselves to the utmost, and when the Spirit of God has strengthened us to the highest degree, will still fall far short of what our dear Lord and Master deserves at our hands. Let us serve Him with all our might.

What is this gift of God in each of us? There is a variety of gifts. No two people have the same gifts. Every person is given some gift and to each God says: "I want that gift enlivened, kindled, brought to the highest and used for Myself." Among these many gifts are the following:

1. The gift of speech.

This gift ought not to be perverted, prostituted, debauched or wasted. Our Lord would say to us, "I want every friend I have to be a talker, to be a witness, to be a champion or to be a pleader for Me." We should talk for Him wherever we go.

2. The gift of writing.

How few people make enough of the gift of writing! Everyone who can write things that will help others ought to write. Write simple, straight-forward Christian letters to those who should accept Christ. People will appreciate and treasure those things.

3. The gift of prayer.

God's Word says, "Ye have not because ye ask not." Oh, that the world might learn the marvelous meaning of stirring up the gift of prayer! Do you pray for people? Magnify the gift of secret prayer to the last degree.

4. The gift of influence.

No man ought ever to harm his influence. We have our influence. No one lives to himself, nor does anyone die to himself. We must bring all of our influence and put it on the side of Christ. Let us make our influence count for the maximum of good and helpfulness.

Why should we stir up these gifts? Because it is our plain duty. We owe it to God to do our best. We owe it to Christ. We owe it to others. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to our church to do our best at preparation, at training and at service. We should also stir up our gifts because of our incomparable opportunity now. Give your best in service for Christ now.

Paul earnestly exhorted Timothy to stir up the gift, to fan it into a flame. The expression fanning the fire suggests three things:

1. Let the clinkers out.

When the furnace is full of clinkers we cannot expect the fire to burn. When the heart is full of clinkers we cannot expect the fire to flame.

Many are the clinkers that get into our hearts and lives. We must shake them out. You and I know what some of these clinkers are -- sin, selfishness, disobedience, defiance, pride, stubbornness, envy, worldliness, ease and wickedness. We must shake them out. Let no malice mar. Let no habit hurt. Let no sin stay. Get that unfulfilled duty out of your life. Shake that hatred loose in your heart and get it out. Pray to God to help you get rid of that sin in your soul. Let the clinker out.

2. Let the draft in.

The Holy Spirit is God's heavenly draft. The word "Spirit" comes from the Greek word which means to breathe or blow. The primary conception is wind or breath. To fan the gift into flame we must open the heart to heavenly blowing and give the Holy Spirit right of way. Let the Holy Spirit take your memory of God's gift and fan it into real zeal for the Lord and His work. We cannot fan the gift with anything but the Spirit's draft.

3. Keep the fire going.

If we are to keep the fire going, we must give it something to feed on. We must be up and doing. A start and stop service is never a spiritual service. When we give ourselves to God and let Him fill us with His Spirit there is joy in it for us and blessing for others. Every Christian has some spiritual gift which can be used for God's glory, but some have let the fire go down. They need to fan into fire the gifts of God. Let us shake out the clinkers and let the Spirit of God warm our cold hearts until the fire is fanned into flame that we may use our gifts for His glory, the welfare of others and our joy. God help us to hear the exhortation of this text and to heed it.