

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD
Arlington Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Deserters and the Loyalist

2 Timothy 1:15-18 (586)

November 11, 2001

Every war has its heroes. The occasion was WWI. The date was October 8, 1918. The place was the Argonne forest of France. An American battalion was ordered to take Hill 223 that morning and then drive across a narrow valley surrounded on three sides by hills bristling with German machine guns. Their mission was to destroy the machine gun nests and press on to the Decauville Railroad which was their objective. The attack bogged down under the withering fire from their front and both flanks. A hurried conference decided the only way to continue the advance was to knock out the machine gun nests on the hill to their left. A detachment of one non-commissioned officer and sixteen men was detailed to circle around the end of the hill and attack from the rear. One of the seventeen men detached was a 30-year old corporal from Fentress County, Tennessee, Alvin C. York. The officers of the 82nd Division made this official report to General Headquarters upon the successful completion of the mission: "The part which Corporal York individually played in the attack is difficult to estimate. Practically unassisted he captured 132 Germans (three of whom were officers), took out thirty-five machine guns, and killed no less than twenty-five of the enemy ... the story has been carefully checked in every possible detail from headquarters of this division and is entirely substantiated ..." On April 18, 1919, Alvin York was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Every war has its heroes.

Likewise, every war has its deserters - those who, without consent or legal justification, abandon their posts; who simply walk away from their duties and obligations. During the American Revolution as many as 2,000 soldiers may have deserted during the encampment at Valley Forge. The threat of desertion was high. It was virtually a daily occurrence (www.ushistory.org). In 1916 during the Battle of the Somme in WWI for every 1000 men under arms more than nine soldiers deserted. In 1944 on D-Day in WWII for every 1000 men under arms more than six soldiers deserted. Every war has its deserters.

Two deserters and one hero of the faith are portrayed in the brief paragraph before us this morning. Please turn to **II Timothy 1:15-18** and follow as I read these four verses. Paul writes to Timothy, **15** *You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.* **16** *The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chains;* **17** *but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me, and found me -* **18** *the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day – and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus.*

With the other sons of Adam, all of you share the common struggles of living in a fallen world – sickness, fractured relationships, disappointment, death and dying. Few here today, however, are acquainted with these things as a clear, direct, and immediate consequence of your Christian testimony. For example, few of you

have lost your jobs on the sole basis of your faith. Few have become familiar with the inside of a jail cell as a consequence of your verbal witness for Christ. Few of you have had your property and possessions confiscated on account of your public identification with the Christian community in Arlington.

The man who wrote the letter we are studying was not so insulated. Look at **1:11-12a**. [For the gospel] *I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher. For this reason I also suffer these things.* Now **2:8-9**. *Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal.* Paul had not dodged the bullet of persecution. Yes, he anticipated the future when he would rejoice with the company of *just men made perfect*; the church triumphant (**2:10, 4:8**). In the meantime, he knowingly and willingly paid the price for identification with and participation in the great calling of the church militant to extend the kingdom of God; to actively engage in the battle “against all the spiritual forces of darkness” (Berkhof, p.565). And he was determined that his beloved Timothy should understand the true character of such a militant ministry. Paul didn’t seek to glorify or exaggerate its hardships. In **3:10-11**, he just told it like it is. *But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured.* Paul’s great purpose in this letter is to encourage Timothy to remain *steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord (I Cor. 15:58)*.

To this end, he supplies an example of steadfastness – the life and ministry of a man named Onesiphorus, a believer with whom both Paul and Timothy are acquainted. And to add force to the example he contrasts Onesiphorus with two deserters; two who have slithered away in that crucial hour when there was a price to pay for the advance of the gospel. This paragraph is clearly about the desertion of Phygelus and Hermogenes and the loyalty of Onesiphorus. Paul is saying, Timothy, avoid the former but emulate the latter. But more generally the point of the paragraph is this: your faithfulness in the hour of trial is a strong inducement to others to remain loyal to the gospel.

Beloved, you yourselves are in a spiritual war (**II Cor. 10:3-6**). You are in a spiritual fight (**II Tim. 4:7a**). You are in a spiritual battle (**Eph. 6:11-13a**). You are men and women under arms. You are soldiers under orders (**I Tim. 6:12, II Tim. 2:3-4**). Those orders are to press the attack against all that is *raised up against the knowledge of God* (**II Cor. 10:5**) that the gospel might advance. How many times, when you have been sorely tempted to abandon the campaign, have you been encouraged to stay the course by the faithful words and witness of a fellow Christian? Paul is encouraging Timothy first to emulate the loyalty he sees in Onesiphorus and second to exhibit such bold loyalty himself so that those who come after him, as they observe his life and witness, will likewise be encouraged to stay the course of faithfulness to the gospel.

Verse 15. You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. We needn't spend a great deal of time in verse 15. The example of *Phygelus and Hermogenes* is cited in order to set up a contrast; to heighten the impact of the positive example of Onesiphorus. From Chapter 4, verses 10 and 12, we know that a few of Paul's loyal co-workers had been deliberately dispatched elsewhere - *Titus to Dalmatia and Tychicus ... to Ephesus*. Others, however, are absent because they abandoned the apostle. And I would suggest to you that the reason is found in **1:8**, where Paul urges Timothy, *join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God ... 12a, for this reason I also suffer these things*. They deserted when faced with the prospect of joining Paul in prison (*my chains*).

Obviously Paul does not mean to suggest that every man, woman, and child on the entire continent of Asia turned their backs on him. This is an example of a verse in which *all* is used but its scope is limited by the context. By the way, the same contextual limitation of the term *all* occurs in some of the verses which speak of the scope of Christ's atoning work. By *Asia* Paul has in mind the west coast of Asia Minor (western Turkey) where Ephesus was the capital. Now, what does he mean when he reminds Timothy that *all turned away*? I agree with those who suggest that a specific event is in view here. George Knight says there were men "who failed Paul in some way either (1) when he was arrested in their midst, (2) when they were requested to come to Rome, or (3) when they were [actually] in Rome. Timothy knows about the event, but unfortunately we

do not” (pp. 383-84). These men left Paul to fend for himself at some crucial moment. Their defection weakened and compromised what should have been a spiritual “band of brothers.” These men had let him down in his hour of trial. He points out that *Phygelus and Hermogenes* are *among* these deserters. It may be that these two are mentioned by name because their defection was particularly surprising and disappointing to Paul.

Paul is alone in prison. He is isolated from fellowship not only by prison walls but also on account of the abandonment of his comrades. I want to make three observations at this point about ministry in general. I trust that the Spirit of God will assist you in applying them to your own lives and ministry situations.

First, there are always casualties in war. It is estimated that in the Revolutionary War 6,284 men were killed in action. 10,000 died in camps of disease and other causes. 8,500 men died as prisoners of war. There will be casualties as we seek, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to advance the gospel. Some will actually die on the field. Others will be wounded. And yes, there will be those who simply defect or desert. And Paul is telling Timothy to expect this in his ministry.

Second, with all the other hardships which Paul was called upon to endure, he must now bear the pain of being abandoned. The fact is that folks will disappoint you. Some by the shallowness of their commitment. Some by sluggishness in the performance of their duties. But the greatest and most painful

disappointment will be the actual defections. When allies antagonize. When comrades criticize. When teammates turn on you the sense of abandonment can be agonizing. Paul wanted Timothy to realize and face these hard facts.

The **third** observation flows naturally from the second. There may come a time when it's just you and God. To *finish the course* there must be a vital reality to your faith personally. Do you, in your heart of hearts, possess abiding convictions regarding the priority of the gospel, God's call to personal holiness, obligation to love and encourage the brethren, your place of ministry in and to the body of Christ? There may come a time when the human support system which props you up today may not be there. With Paul, may you be able to say, "*But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me*" (4:17a).

While the prospect of pain and loss is the occasion for cowardly desertion, difficulty is also the occasion on which faithfulness and courage shine most brightly (1:16-18). We now consider the life and ministry of Onesiphorus. Timothy is one of the most well-known figures in the New Testament. Onesiphorus, one of the most obscure. All that is said of Onesiphorus is right here ... three verses. And yet, Onesiphorus is put forth as a model for Timothy to follow. Beloved, every one of you who names the name of Christ is called upon to model faithfulness to every other member of the fellowship. We are to be encouragers to one another.

As your pastor I am to be an encouragement to you. But you are to live in such a way as to encourage me in the way of righteousness. I think of one of the ladies being trained in Evangelism Explosion. With all the difficulties and frustrations she faces, this sister consistently spends three to four hours each week preparing, perfecting her presentation of the gospel. As I review her assignment sheet each week, I am encouraged by her quiet, faithful, and courageous engagement in the advance of the gospel.

There are three things here which mark the gospel loyalty of Onesiphorus. The **first** is found in **verse 16**, *he often refreshed me*. True gospel loyalty is a **delightful** thing. Onesiphorus certainly brought things such as food, medicines, and clothing to Paul. But surely Paul also has in mind the refreshment gained from the presence and fellowship of his friend. Simply put, Onesiphorus was a joy to Paul. Paul's spirit was refreshed in the company of this brother. Early yesterday morning I walked into the place I often go for coffee. As I approached the counter, the lady who usually waits on me, said jokingly, "Here comes trouble." Unfortunately some in the church are so given to criticism, contention, and complaining that we can say that about them ... but it's no joke. But other men and women refresh the soul. Indeed, the psalmist observes, *How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity (Ps. 133:1)*. As you give yourselves to edifying conversation, a contagious vitality of faith, genuine sympathy, affection for Christ and love for the gospel, and a sincere humility ... you yourselves will be a delight to others. *He often refreshed me*.

Second, true gospel loyalty is not only a delightful thing, it is a **courageous** thing. *He was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me, and found me.* It is at the point of association with the apostle in his imprisonment that the others abandoned ship. There is often a price to pay for identifying oneself with suffering saints. Onesiphorus was willing to pay that price. He was not ashamed of the message itself. To him the gospel was neither foolishness nor a stumbling block but *the power of God for salvation*. He was not ashamed of the one who proclaimed the message. *When he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for Paul until he found him.* He did not desert or ignore Paul in his trial. Indeed, risking his own well-being at every turn, he wandered from building to building, person to person in the great city of Rome asking, “Do you know where I might find a prisoner named Paul? A Jew, a preacher from Asia?” What a rebuke to us who, aware of the troubles of others, simply close our eyes to them. If it will stretch us, inconvenience us, or cost us often we, like a student who doesn’t want the teacher to call on him, lower our heads and remain silent.

Finally, true gospel loyalty is not only a delightful and courageous thing, it is a **consistent** thing. *You know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus.* Many will engage in occasional deeds of kindness as their schedule allows. Loyalists are consistent over the long haul. You examine their lives to find that day after day, week after week, year after year they have, without interruption or fail, gone about the business of advancing the gospel.

Like Onesiphorus, their faithfulness in the heat of battle, in the hour of trial, in the routine of life ... is a strong inducement to others to also remain loyal to the gospel.

I close with this thought. There are two phrases upon which I have not commented – *The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus (16a)* and *the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day (18a)*. While not conclusive, some take the language to suggest that Onesiphorus is dead at the time of this writing. **Verse 16** represents Paul's prayerful expectation that God will pour out His comforting and supplying mercies on the family of the faithful Onesiphorus. **Verse 18** represents the expectation that Onesiphorus will rejoice in the saving and preserving mercies of God in the day of judgment.

Whether he had died or not, the point is the same. When life comes to its end, will there be those who will testify of you, "God used his faithfulness in the hour of trial to renew my own resolve to remain loyal to the gospel?"