

Foreword by

**DANE ORTLUND**

**THE  
UNWAVERING  
PASTOR**

Leading the Church with  
Grace in Divisive Times

**JONATHAN K. DODSON**

“A biblically driven, beautifully written book about being a pastor and a human. Dodson’s honesty and vulnerability demonstrate that the key to leading through divisive times is to learn to suffer, grieve, and look to Christ. Every pastor who reads this book will learn principles and lessons to lead through divisive times, but even more, they will be moved by the kind of man and pastor Christ calls us to be in these difficult days. I heartily commend this book.”

**BRIAN CROFT**, Executive Director, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization Center, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is an excellent book, offering much wisdom and insight to pastors who are facing unprecedented challenges. It is a masterful example of double listening: listening to the pastoral challenges of our time and listening to what the Spirit says to pastors in 2 Timothy. It arrives at just the right time, as I have increasingly engaged with leaders facing the same struggles that Jonathan Dodson skilfully addresses.”

**MICHAEL W. GOHEEN, PHD**, Director of Theological Education, Missional Training Center, Pheonix

“If there ever was a time when the calling of a pastor could be called difficult, so much so that many are leaving the ministry at unprecedented rates, now is that time. In a world wracked with negativity, outrage, caricature, and us-against-them partisan tactics, Christ’s undershepherds need a resource to help them navigate these realities with grace, truth, and integrity. This is that book!”

**SCOTT SAULS**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen*

“If you are wavering, if you are overwhelmed, if you have nothing left, read this book! *The Unwavering Pastor* will lift your head to see that we have an unwavering Father who is committed to you.”

**STEVE ROBINSON**, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Liverpool, UK; Director, The Cornerstone Collective

“As a weary pastor myself, who is constantly talking to others in a similar condition, I appreciate how this book comes at the right time. Whatever trial you are leading others through at the moment, this book is sure to provide helpful instruction and life-giving encouragement.”

**TONY MERIDA**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; Author, *Love Your Church*

“I sat down to read *The Unwavering Pastor* at the close of a particularly hard week in ministry. Jonathan’s stories and gospel-rich reminders were a salve to my soul. I appreciate the stories and relatability as much as I value the grace and truth on every page. Any pastor or ministry leader who feels weighed down will find fresh encouragement here.”

**JEN OSHMAN**, Author, *Cultural Counterfeits*

“Every pastor and Christian leader will relate to the poignant struggles so openly shared in this powerful book. Dodson has given all Christian leaders balm for our wounds and a compass through this storm.”

**TIMOTHY C. TENNENT, PHD**, President and Professor of World Christianity, Asbury Theological Seminary

“Here is an oasis for pressured pastors and weary leaders. This book reads like a conversation with a good friend, who wants to prepare you for inevitable pain as well as save you from unnecessary pain. Jonathan writes from experience, sharing practical wisdom grounded in biblical insight. A timely book for our difficult times!”

**ADAM RAMSEY**, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast, Australia; Network Director, Acts 29 Asia Pacific; Author, *Truth on Fire*

“A must-read for any and all who love, serve, and lead the local church. God has led the church through pandemics and divisions before, working through broken men and women just like us. *The Unwavering Pastor* is a reminder of God’s faithfulness, guiding us toward hope.”

**JAY Y. KIM**, Lead Pastor, WestGate Church, Silicon Valley; Author, *Analog Church*

“Gut-level honest, biblically rooted, beautifully written, and full of wise counsel. Pastor, read it to have your worries and wounds sympathetically understood, your weary soul encouraged, your calling clarified, and your love for Christ deepened. Again and again, I found fresh insights in these pages. For years, Jonathan Dodson has proven himself an important voice in matters of church and culture, and in this book, he shows himself to be a trustworthy pastor to pastors.”

**STEPHEN WITMER, Pastor, Pepperell Christian Fellowship, Massachusetts; Author, *A Big Gospel in Small Places***

“This book is timely because we are living in one of the most culturally challenging contexts of pastoral ministry in generations. This book is timeless because it flows from the inspired counsel Paul gives to Timothy as recorded in Scripture. Jonathan Dodson gives us help and hope by reminding us, as the apostle Paul did, the ‘aim of our charge is love’ (1 Timothy 1:5).”

**DAVE BRUSKAS, US Director, Acts 29**

“In my work as a counselor, I see pastors and ministry leaders facing anxiety, depression, weariness, panic attacks, and temptations to quit like never before. Jonathan honestly and vulnerably shares his own struggles, but he goes much further. He helps leaders endure controversy, division, criticism, and a whole host of cultural challenges alongside presenting a hopeful, practical, and encouraging vision forward. Every pastor would benefit from reading this gospel-rich encouragement.”

**JASON KOVACS, Executive Director, The Gospel Care Collective**

“*The Unwavering Pastor* does a fantastic job in providing insightful counsel for pastors to depend on both God and others in ministry. The guidance in this must-read book will enrich steadfast and godly leaders to fulfill God’s mission.”

**TOMMY LEE, Founder and President, Resource Global**

“This is going to be a tremendous help for leaders serving Jesus. I recognize my own story here. Jonathan captured the emotional exhaustion, paralyzing emptiness, and spiritual confusion I felt when I experienced pastoral burnout at 50. Thankfully, Jonathan also gives us gospel balm and grace ballast. This short book is long on wisdom, grace, and timely encouragement.”

**SCOTTY SMITH**, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher-in-Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“As exhausting, and often spiritually depressing, as normal ministry may be, the last few years press us to go to deeper wells. This book is a deeper well—a very refreshing one.”

**MICHAEL HORTON**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary, California

“Lyrical, subversive, tender, raw, grace-filled and profoundly counter-cultural, *The Unwavering Pastor* is a beautifully different book which speaks and embodies the gospel for this moment in a way in which we desperately need. Read it and drink deeply from its grace and truth.”

**GARY MILLAR**, Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia; Author, *Read This First*

“Pastors are facing discouragement and burnout at unprecedented rates, and the factors contributing to these challenges are complex. That’s why I’m grateful for Jonathan Dodson’s *The Unwavering Pastor*. This book brings a biblical wisdom and a surprising candor to helping pastors navigate the journey through the thicket of conflict, division, criticism, and even depression, always holding out the healing comfort of grace for the weary pastor’s soul. This is a really good book.”

**JARED C. WILSON**, Assistant Professor, Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Seminary; Author, *Gospel-Driven Ministry*

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UNWAVERING  
PASTOR**



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Grace in Divisive Times

**JONATHAN K. DODSON**

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*To my fellow elders and friends,  
Peter, Matt, and John*



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# FOREWORD

By Dane Ortlund

I needed this book. If you're a fellow weary pastor, you do too. And I didn't know how much I needed it until I read it.

Jonathan Dodson has already proven himself to be a wise and steady guide for the church today through his books and his ministry at City Life Church in Austin.

We don't need to be told what bizarre and perplexing times we live in. We know that. We need to be given guidance for how to negotiate these times as pastors. That's what Jonathan Dodson's *The Unwavering Pastor* gives us.

What kind of guide do I need and urgently welcome?

First, someone who is communing with God and commends that communion to us. To quote Francis Schaeffer, someone who knows the all-determining significance of "reality with God" for soul health—an actual moment-by-moment fellowship with the triune God. Sometimes books for ministry leaders have much incisive counsel but miss the nuclear core of communion with God. I was reminded time and again as I read of

the freeing truth that all the obstacles of ministry are navigable if I walk through them with God. Jonathan brings us back repeatedly to this non-negotiable of pastoral health.

Second, someone who is biblical. But by “biblical” I don’t mean someone who feeds Scripture into a family of other equally competing influences—cultural insights, common sense, personal experience, historical lessons, Barna surveys. I mean someone for whom the Bible is the all-determining treasure chest of truth and wisdom in how to lead fruitfully in these days. Jonathan is this.

Third, someone who is honest. Throughout the book Jonathan reflects on his own ministry experience with a refreshing transparency to which I can immediately relate. That candor builds trust as we read and serves us well.

Fourth, someone who is tested. It is obvious in these pages that Jonathan has been tried and found true. “Through many dangers, toils, and snares” he has already come. And we can learn from his experiences.

Fifth and finally, someone who writes well. Jonathan does.

The greatest temptation confronting every pastor right now is not one of resigning, though I know that many are contemplating that route (and if they do, Jesus won’t love them any less). The greatest temptation is more subtle. It is to continue collecting a paycheck from the church while shifting our hearts into neutral. It is to carry forward the ministry at the level of activity, while quitting ministry in terms of our hearts and longings. This is the fork in the road that the criticism and adversities that Jonathan writes so poignantly about, and

which we in the pastorate are facing more persistently than ever, presents us with.

Jonathan understands this greatest of temptations. He helped me understand it more acutely. And *The Unwavering Pastor* helps all of us, through these tumultuous times, fend off that ministry hypocrisy—smiling outside, quitting inside—as it is written by a man who is communing with God, biblical, honest, tested, and articulate.

I've only been a pastor for a few years. So I needed this book more than most. And already in that short time I have been tempted to waver: to withdraw—if not vocationally, in resignation, at least emotionally, in cynicism. God has kept me thus far, and this book is one means that will help me to keep going, dancing my way cheerfully through the Normandy Beach of pastoral ministry. If you read it with an open heart, unhurriedly and reflectively, then you will, like me, conclude your reading of this book deepened, freshly energized, and fortified with sage counsel as we all keep going.

Thank you for blessing us with this seasonable word, Jonathan.

*Pastor Dane Ortlund  
January, 2022*





# INTRODUCTION

**Y**ou may have picked up this book because you want wisdom for leading others through complex cultural issues. There is certainly some of that here. Perhaps you're hoping to find a sympathetic ear from a fellow struggling pastor. I can promise you that. Maybe you want to know how to stay grounded when the world seems to be spinning out of control. If I haven't shown that, then I have failed.

What you will not find here is an unwavering pastor. I waver plenty: from troughs of despair to crests of spiritual joy, habitual sinner to faith-filled saint, ready-to-throw-in-the-towel leader to tenderhearted shepherd, perplexed pastor to confident leader. Christ has held on to me when my emotions would have taken me elsewhere. He has kept me when my sins could have easily swept me away.

Then in what sense can we be unwavering pastors and ministry leaders? In the sense that Paul meant when he said, "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me" (2 Timothy 1:12). What was Paul's unwavering confidence in? His faith? His spirituality? God's

existence? No, his confidence was not in what he believed but who he believed in. He *knew* the God he trusted.

The more we know a person's character, the more we can discern their trustworthiness. And knowing the utter trustworthiness of God led Paul to tremendous confidence in God's commitment to the good news. Christ died, Christ rose, and Christ will come again to make all things new: even—especially—sinners. Paul's unwavering belief was in a God who forgives wavering people. It was the object of his trust that gave him confidence—the God of the gospel.

Therefore, his knowing, believing, and conviction are expressed as perfect verbs, meaning Paul's past knowledge, belief, and confidence continued on into his present. Why? Because he had encountered a God he could not “un-encounter.” He was redeemed by a gospel that could not “un-redeem.” He knew a messiah who is forever for and with him. Grace had left its mark.

An unwavering pastor's confidence doesn't come from their command of theology, his experience in counseling, or his faithful spiritual disciplines. Our confidence is derived from God's unwavering commitment to his own gospel, so that we can preserve, protect, and promote his grace in Christ through the Spirit for sinners. The triune God is unswervingly committed to that, and therefore, we can count on his steady presence, unrelenting forgiveness, unstoppable grace, and unmatched redemptive power. If you believe this, then you too can be an unwavering pastor.

How then do we lead his church with grace? I have taken two threads and tried to weave them together throughout

this book. The first is an eternal thread—the inspired wisdom of Paul in his second letter to pastor Timothy. The first and fourth chapters contain remarkable candor about the hardships of ministry. Here is mature Paul, broken but full of hope, weak yet strengthened by Christ himself. The second and third chapters are full of penetrating insight for leading a church through division. Here is the sage dispensing wisdom to a growing pastor. It is a personally rich, theologically robust, practical letter.

The second thread is comprised of my imperfect yet authentic pastoral reflections on how to lead the church—with grace—through divided times. It is virtually impossible to make it through division without sinning, and Christ is gladly present to remedy that. What is scary is that we can endure divisive times but emerge hardened and closed off. But when we allow God's grace to flow through us in these times, we soften and become more open-hearted toward fellow sinners. We draw near to God, and consequently, we love his people better and deeper. Though not easy, such a process is entirely worth it.

This book is, in a sense, a long prayer. A flaming arrow shot into the darkness of trial, with the hope that every leader who reads it, and every pastor who engages with it, will feel seen and known, not merely by me but by their Father in heaven and the compassionate Savior at his right hand. I hope you sense divine attentiveness, and even if you don't, that you will believe in it—and in a God who is always for you and not against you, especially when things are bleak.



# 1

## DIVIDED TIMES

**C**ovid is rampant. Hospitals are at capacity. The case count has skyrocketed and Stage 5 restrictions are clamping down—no leaving the house except for the essentials. Minneapolis is on fire, and injustice is in the streets.

I sit down at my writer's desk, wedged between the corner of our bedroom and a freshly made bed, and stare at the wall. Do I have to log on to another Zoom meeting? I'm reeling from meetings with people who think I'm not doing enough and those who think I'm doing too much. The topics of my failure seem to update as frequently as a Twitter timeline.

Overwhelmed, I open my laptop, and a notification pops up—another burning critique. It's a matter of time before this person leaves too. I try to remind myself that most people are grateful for our church, but the critics' voices grow louder and louder.

Division compounds the weight of ordinary leadership. It threatens the integrity of the thing you've given your life to. It's not a screw that needs to be tightened or a tire waiting to be aired up. It's a raging fire that, if not put out, burns the whole house down.

While there are always loose screws and slow leaks in life, people who divide are often so outwardly focused that they lose sight of their own issues. They ignore the telephone pole protruding from their own eye while obsessing over the speck in another's eye. When the telephone-poles take sides and attack, their logs collide violently with leaders. Caught between people on the left and the right, leaders suffer at the center of organizational ferment.

How do we lead through divisive times?

### **REFRESHING PEOPLE**

The apostle Paul was no stranger to division. His second letter to Timothy mentions divisive people on every page. In an underground chamber, with a single hole overhead for light and air, he sits convicted of treason against Rome, awaiting execution. Apparently, instead of testifying in court to support Paul, Demas abandoned him for the love of this world. Many in Asia turned away from him, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. The sting of Alexander's betrayal is still fresh (2 Timothy 1:15, 4:10, 14). Where does Paul look for help in divided times? The answer may surprise you.

Paul reaches out: "To Timothy, my beloved child ... I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy" (1:2, 4). In crushing isolation, betrayed and forgotten by his spiritual co-workers, Paul looks to *the church* for help. While his letter is written to encourage and guide Timothy, it also provides a candid, intimate glimpse into Paul, who yearns to see the outline of Timothy's face and take in his joyful presence.

I preached yet another sermon to a cold, dark camera that week. Not a face in sight. On Sunday, our family logged off the pre-recorded service to prepare for lunch. Although we'd heard the word and sung to the Lord, discouragement lingered. I heard a honk, walked out onto the balcony, and leaned over. A grey minivan was parked below. A smiling face emerged. Peter, my friend and fellow elder, said, "Hey, we thought we would come see you and encourage you." Family members spilled out of the van. Emotion surged as tears filled my eyes. I called my family out to the balcony to talk with our friends below.

If social distancing has taught us anything, it's that we are made for one another. In his isolation, Paul longed to see Timothy. Paul mentions people *by name* 36 times in his brief second letter to Timothy: the same number of names mentioned in Romans, an epistle five times the length. Paul's old age and suffering worked like prescription lenses to clarify how important people are: Timothy, Lois, Eunice, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and on. Men and women, leaders and members. Names, faces, stories, lives. People. Some brought him anguish; others brought him joy, but *all of them* mattered.

The apostle Paul "yearned" or "longed" for people. In addition to using this word to express his desire to see Timothy, he also longed for the Roman church (2 Timothy 1:11), the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 3:6), and the Philippians: "With God as my witness, I yearn for you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8). Paul was free with his affection, but *longing* is something deeper. The Greek word *epipotheo* conveys not just a strong desire but "desire with the implication of need."<sup>1</sup> Paul didn't



just plant each church; he needed the church. He wasn't merely supported by each church; he was *affectionately dependent* upon the church. He got close enough to people to receive joy from them: "Onesiphorus ... often refreshed me" (2 Timothy 1:16). It's interesting how people fill up their names with meaning. The root word of Onesiphorus means "to receive benefit from." He filled up his name, and the lives of others, with grace.

One way to thrive in ministry is to have an Onesiphorus or two. Peter is one of those people for me. We're quite different. He's a talented filmmaker, and I'm a pastor, but we both love movies. Good friends share good things in common, but great friends hold the greatest things in common. When two people delight in the same truth, it has a way of gluing them together. We frequently reflect on God's word together, marveling at who he is and what he is doing in our lives. But Peter also refreshes me by allowing me to be myself.

I'm not Pastor Jonathan. He knows that's a role I play: an important one but not the only one. He relates to me as a whole person, asking about my interests and family. I can speak freely with him about my struggles and know they will be held in confidence. And when we go to Alamo Drafthouse to see a movie, I don't have to be "on." If you don't have a Peter, ask God for one. They often refresh you.

My church is also a source of refreshment. During gathered worship some Sunday mornings, I am flooded with a sense of God's weighty presence and thrilling affection. This movement of the Spirit flows through the

instruments, voices, liturgy, and prayers of our people, lifting my spirits and increasing my joy. On these occasions I find myself saying to the Lord, “This is why I do this, Lord. Thank you. Give me more of you.”

But some weeks I don’t feel like gathering with the church at all. Excuses spring to mind like tennis balls launched from a ball machine, but often it’s in those very same weeks that I am most encouraged by the saints. In a particularly discouraging week, I considered canceling our City Group gathering but couldn’t come up with a valid reason! When everyone arrived, they fell into effortless conversation. During our time of reflection, a couple who had endured significant loss declared, “We are so excited. God is at work. We can see it all around us!” I was so focused on my discouragement that I had lost sight of what God was doing. Sometimes we need a refreshing community to open our eyes to God’s work.

Paul also found the church refreshing. He wrote to the Romans, “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf ... so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (Romans 15:30, 32). Appealing to their bond—loving Spirit and faithful Son—Paul sought refreshment from the church. Have you lost sight of this eternal bond, reducing the church to a vocational responsibility? Have you withheld your affection or need? Ask the church for prayer. Invite them to strive with you. Seek rejuvenating fellowship not only with your friends but also with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

## WHEN PEOPLE LEAVE

In seeking refreshment from the church, we need not be naïve or idealistic. The same community that helps us can also hurt us. Paul's intimacy with the church also led to personal pain. He describes a painful visit to the Corinthians—so painful that he decided not to visit them again. Instead, he wrote them a letter “so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice” (2 Corinthians 2:3). In a raw display, Paul shows us the cost of affectionate dependence—those who should bring us joy can also inflict pain. He writes, “For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears” (v 4). Just one phrase would have communicated his pain clearly, but he includes three to express just how much the church hurt him: much affliction, anguish of heart, many tears. Leading the church means living close enough to others to get hurt.

I opened my email and saw a note from a friend in the church and eagerly clicked on it. I was skewered by what I read. He and his family were leaving the church. Leaving churches is part of life in America. There are good and bad reasons to leave a church, but departures are inevitable, especially in a geographically mobile society. Early in my pastorate I resented this, but eventually God helped me accept the transience involved in pastoring an urban community. He even reframed it for me, helping me to see the turnover in terms of providence—God fixes the times and places where people live so that others can hear the gospel (Acts 17:26-27). I began to see goings as sendings. We pastor people as long as we have them and then send them off to take the gospel to the next place.

However, not all goings are sendings. Some are just *leavings*, and leavings like this one hurt. Leaving like what? Leaving like you're not friends when you are friends. At least that's what I thought. This person had pursued me and asked me to spend more time with him. I walked him through some sin struggles and watched him mature into a godly man who led others. My wife and I really clicked with him and his wife—a rare thing in a changing community, so we cultivated a friendship with them. We went to concerts, went out for dinner, hung out as guys and gals, and ministered to the church by their side. Then I got an email—an email—announcing their departure. Don't friends talk about this stuff? I scheduled a painful visit.

I met Tom and another elder at Merit Coffee Co., a clean, white, urban coffee shop with sprawling seating and great espresso.<sup>2</sup> After the awkward greetings, we sat down to talk through the reasons why they had chosen to leave. I empathized where I could and challenged him where I felt I should. It was a heartfelt discussion, but I walked away wincing. You see, this awkward leaving was one in a whole string of friends leaving the church. Some went through bitter attack and insult; others just disappeared. There was no conversation—not even an email. Just poof and they were gone. My heart was done.

For the first time in ministry, I was genuinely tempted to close up my heart. I told myself I would love the church, counsel the church, pray for the church, and preach the gospel to the church as best as I could, but I would no longer *befriend the church*. Friends would be found elsewhere. Until I read Psalm 62:1: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone

is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.”

I couldn't get past the first three words: for God *alone*. I knew “alone” all right, but not really with God. I had waited in silence; actually I cried out in silence but not with God as my salvation. Sometimes we want God plus. God plus a spouse. God plus a friend. God plus a job. I wanted God minus. God minus the pain. God minus the suffering. God minus the abandonment. God minus friends treating me like a spiritual commodity: sought after when I'm needed—disposed of when a better prospect comes along. But the Spirit was saying, *God alone*.

In God, alone, is our salvation. He is our rock and our fortress, not friendship. God was saying, *Friendship is not a fortress. People are not your protection. I am your safety; I am your refuge, and I will never leave*. Then I read, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him” (v 8). Don't board up your heart; pour it out to him. I knew I could trust the Lord, so I let it rip. I shared the pain, and he comforted me; I confessed my sin, and he not only forgave me but also loved me in my mess. You can trust *him* at all times. There is no better prospect. *Friendship isn't a fortress; God is a fortress*—a marvelous one at that. God's presence is so dependable that it enables us to give ourselves in serving those who disappoint us.

Paul's painful experience with the Corinthians wasn't a one-off. He describes his prosecution in Rome: “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me” (2 Timothy 4:16). Desertion is an intense word. Jesus used this word in the sixth hour of his crucifixion

to describe his feeling *forsaken* by God (Mark 15:34). It is important for leaders to verbalize these feelings to a friend, spouse, or counselor, and especially to God. Paul didn't keep his sense of abandonment a secret. His letter is littered with names of people who went poof: Demas, Phygelus and Hermogenes, Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Timothy 1:15, 20; 2:17; 4:10), and Alexander the coppersmith, who "did me great harm" (4:14). This is the last letter Paul wrote, and he was still writing lines like that. Betrayal stings, even years later.

But Paul didn't close off his heart to the church, no matter how much it hurt. He declares, "May it not be charged against them!" (4:16). That is not my first response when I am betrayed. I reach for the imprecatory justice-seeking psalms. I wonder if Paul did too, when the gavel came down and his sentence was announced. Yet he refused to hold the church's betrayal against them. He didn't stew in bitterness but soaked in grace. He sounds like our Lord, who from a blood-stained cross said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24).

How did Paul not hold their betrayal against them? It seems superhuman... because it is. Paul forgave his betrayers and willed no ill against them because there was one person who did not abandon *him*: "But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:17). The word "stood" is chosen carefully. No one stood up for Paul when he was on trial. But when everyone else left, the Lord Jesus remained. When false witnesses hurled accusations, Jesus stood by him as a witness of his faithfulness. Jesus also stands by you. He is not embarrassed

to do so. Rather, he proudly stands next to his faithful servants. Jesus remains when people leave.

When loving the church left Paul with wounds, Jesus stuck around to bandage him up. Jesus doesn't minister in word only. He serves Paul. He bends down to lift Paul up and imparts strength to his weary servant. This ministry is not only for Paul but also for us. Jesus bends down to minister to us. When we are low, he goes lower to lift us up. Jesus sympathizes with your struggle. Will you receive his strength and believe in his heart for you? Collapse into his arms if you have to and receive the ministry of Jesus!

Paul led through thick and thin because he knew the Lord was with his spirit (2 Timothy 4:22). Instead of boarding up his soul, he continued to long for the church with the affection of Christ Jesus. His longing wasn't self-manufactured; it sprang from the love of the Holy Spirit, who imparted Jesus' affection for him. Through this intimacy with Jesus—"For God, alone, my soul waits"—Paul not only received but recycled God's perfect love. He saw his betrayers' departure as an invitation into depths of intimacy with the Spirit and the Son. If we accept this invitation, *Jesus Christ* will love the church through us.

### **PRAISING GRATEFULLY**

How did Paul persevere in ministry to the very end? In the same way he begins and ends this pain-laced letter—with prayer. He does not begin by complaining about how he has been mistreated. He starts off with thanksgiving because he has developed a habit of thinking beyond himself. His prayers are filled with people and not with *Dear God, sort out so and so*. Instead, he begins by thanking God

for *specific* people. He expresses gratitude for *Timothy's* sincere faith, and in savoring his faith, Paul tips over into gratitude for the faith of Timothy's *mother* and *grandmother*—Eunice and Lois (1:3-5). Who can you thank God for right now? Which people have been a grace to you in this season of ministry?

“Faith” is shorthand for the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Paul praises God because the gospel has moved into the lives of these saints. It didn't stay on the outside—a mere doctrine to affirm or liturgy to rehearse. The gospel took up residence in them. This kind of faith is unlike the cold, combative Christianity often caricatured on our screens. It is regenerative, warm, and lively. Christ moved *noticeably* into the lives of Lois, Eunice, and Timothy. No wonder Paul's thanking God!

Have you ever looked at a photograph and marveled at what the photographer captured? Good photographers aren't in a hurry. They are observant. With eyes wide open, they take in their surroundings to capture what happens in the moment. To remember people in prayer, we must slow down to take in what God is doing in them. To pray gratefully for the church, we must see people, not just serve them.

Prayer is an opportunity for close-ups. Gratitude zooms in on what God is doing and praises him for it. When I'm praying with a small group of people, I am often moved when I hear someone praise God for a specific quality in another person's life. They pick up on the character of God in others and credit him for it. I see others through their lens, and it stirs the soul. Eugene Peterson says, “Giving thanks is one of the most attractive things that we can



do.” But it’s not *just* attractive; it attracts us to God. Praying gratefully for others leads us to appreciate them and the God they serve. As Peterson says, “Praise is our best work.”<sup>4</sup>

Praising God is easy when you’re praying for the righteous, but what about praying for the critical? Paul advises pastors to patiently endure evil and correct opponents with gentleness (2:24-25). I don’t know how to do this apart from through prayer. When I’m not praying for my critics, it’s much easier to find fault and demonize than be patient and gentle.

During an unusually tense time in our church, a small group of progressively minded people began critiquing my sermons. They often took words out of context, distorted my intended meaning, and took offense. I scheduled meetings to better understand where they were coming from. I fielded angry, irrational emails, but the criticism only kept coming. As a consequence, I developed a significant awareness of how my sermon vocabulary choices could affect this group. It was demoralizing to go into the pulpit knowing people were poised to misunderstand and misconstrue my words, instead of seeking to understand and cherish the word of God.

During that time, while I was brushing my teeth in the morning, the faces of my critics would pop into my mind, their jabs and critiques on replay in my thoughts. Each time I thought of a person, I had a choice: follow the criticism down the rabbit hole and mount a defense, or pray for each person. I quickly learned that rehearsing counter arguments didn’t endear me to them, so each time a face popped up I began to pray for them. I prayed they would

repent; I prayed they would not cause division, but I also prayed they would know the heart-melting love of Jesus.

I also learned it wasn't enough to pray for them once; I had to pray for them every time their faces popped up or I would grow defensive and bitter. But prayer for my critics made me gentler and more patient. It softened my heart toward them, and I know God heard every prayer. Of course, it wasn't my praying that changed me. It was Jesus, who stood by me, who sustained me, who taught me not to charge it to their account. It's hard to hate those whom we carry to the Lord of love in prayer.

### **PRAYING CONSTANTLY**

Paul also teaches us to pray constantly: "I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day" (1:3). He prayed all the time at any time. Now we might object: what else did Paul have to do in prison? But doesn't that make his constant prayer for others, not himself, more noteworthy? When I feel isolated and hurt, my thoughts don't naturally go toward others. They tend to be about me. But here is Paul, in a hole in the ground, *interceding for others*. One commentator notes, "His whole waking being was in a spirit of intercession."<sup>5</sup> I love that. I want to live like that—attuned to the Spirit in dependent prayer with every breath.

Praying constantly can be hard, especially in hectic seasons of division. One reason why we find it difficult was anticipated in *Wired* magazine nearly 20 years ago, when Michael Goldhaber, "the internet prophet you've never heard of," predicted that the internet would drown us in information, making attention so diffuse that an

“attention economy” would be formed.<sup>6</sup> He further predicted that when this economy matured, its “increasing demand for our limited attention would keep us from reflecting, or thinking deeply.”<sup>7</sup>

Prayer requires reflection; we often live by reaction. After you wake up, what is one of the first things you do? Reflect or absorb the news? When you stop at a light, do you reflect on the day or check your cradle-secured phone? While you’re driving, do you listen to a podcast or playlist, or pray for others? When you’re waiting in line, do you check Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook? When you go to bed, do you reflect, pray, or doomscroll? No wonder we find it hard to pray without ceasing. We’re too busy getting our attention stolen.

What could it look like to take our attention back? To be a waking, praying being? I find it helpful to turn off digital inputs to create space for spiritual input. Create space for memories and then *turn memories into prayers*. When Paul remembers Timothy, he turns his memory into a prayer. When you remember someone in the in-between spaces, pray for them. When you’re longing for community, pray for people in your community. When you think, “I sure miss so and so”, pause and pray for them. Don’t dead-end in nostalgia or fantasy. *Follow your memories into prayers*.

When I am prompted to pray for someone throughout the day, I occasionally send that person a text. Very often, they respond by saying it was just what they needed to hear. Cultivate the habit of turning memories into prayers and you’ll find yourself praying constantly.

## PASTORING IN POWER

A survey by the Barna Group reveals that, in 2021, 38 percent of Protestant pastors gave “real, serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry.”<sup>8</sup> Many resigned. All leaders struggled. Where do we get the power to lead through divided times?

### Ministry of Affirmation

To help Timothy lead through division, Paul affirms Timothy by expressing confidence in him: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, *I am sure, dwells in you* as well” (1:5, my italics). This isn’t a throwaway line. He praises the lively, indwelling faith of Timothy’s esteemed mother and grandmother and then adds Timothy to the group!

Over the years mentors I respect have said five simple, powerful words to me: “I am proud of you.” These words are meaningful not because they mean I’m awesome but because they convey approval from someone I respect. Affirmation is especially powerful when it comes from people we admire. Towering in our estimation, mentors pull us up with their words.

Their endorsement is even more significant when it’s tied to the work of God in our lives. After all, what we want most is not to be people’s favorite leader but to honor and please the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Paul nails this “gospel” affirmation when he says, “I am sure [that the faith] dwells in you.” In using the perfect tense of “convince” (“I am sure”), he is saying, *I was convinced, I am convinced, and I continue to be convinced that the gospel is alive in you!* It’s

so powerful to hear words like this when we are drowning in criticism. So, if you see someone honoring and pleasing the Lord, tell them you are proud of them. Highlight God's work in their ministry. If you don't have a mentor in your life, look for one and tell them you are looking for affirmation, as well as constructive feedback. If your team doesn't practice godly affirmation, you may need to start by setting an example of godly encouragement to them.

Can I give you a dose of affirmation? The crazy thing about Paul's affirmation is that Timothy wasn't killing it in leadership. He lacked some typical leadership qualities. He wasn't bold and courageous but fearful and timid. Yet, even though Timothy had some things to work on, Paul knew his struggle wasn't a reflection of his true self. He knew the true, life-from-death Tim was indwelt with the gospel, which tells us that *God*—the Creator of quarks and strings and atoms, and gravity and black holes and galaxies, and stunning sunsets—so loves you that he chose to die in your place *and* triumph over your greatest enemy. God is *your* defender, down to the death.

The gospel affirms us even more deeply. The good news is that you are God's dwelling place. Yep, you are where God chooses to kick back. Not just you, all the saints, but also you personally. The Holy—*holy*—Spirit chooses to reside in you (Ephesians 2:22). He occupies the most intimate place in our lives and does it without regret. Take a deep breath and inhale his heavenly affirmation.

### **Ministry of Exhortation**

When we're struggling, sometimes we need exhortation more than we need affirmation. With critics breathing

down his neck, Timothy could have easily dwelt on what they thought of him, even living in fear of their opinions. But Paul exhorts Timothy “to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:6-7). He reminds Timothy of a gift so powerful that it displaces fear and compels love.

What gift could he be talking about? Paul could be referring to a spiritual gift or Timothy’s ordination. However, he says the gift is “in you” not “with you,” and it’s a gift that came into Timothy through the laying on of hands. The gift people received when Paul laid hands on them in Acts was the Holy Spirit. So when Paul says, “fan into the flame the gift,” he is exhorting Timothy to be his true self—the Tim indwelt by the Spirit, who has “[S]pirit of fear but of power, love, and self-control.”<sup>9</sup>

The old Timothy is tempted by fear, timidity, and self-doubt, but the Spirit-Timothy is filled with power, love, and self-control to suffer for the gospel. Paul is essentially saying, *Your critics don’t define who you are. Your feelings of fear and apprehension don’t have the last word. What defines you is who lives in you! You’re a life-from-death, Spirit-indwelt child of God.* We have exactly what we need to lead through difficult times; we just need to fan the flame.

How do we fan the flame? The word for “fan into flame” combines two Greek words: one for “life” and the other for “fire”. The fire of the Spirit isn’t a destructive flame but a life-giving force that brings warmth and light into our souls. It means “to kindle afresh.” Have the embers of your soul grown dim? Take some time to stoke the fire of the Spirit.

When I kindle the fire in my fireplace, I look for space beneath the logs to blow on the embers. Perhaps you need to create space in your day to blow on the Spirit. This might entail going for a walk and talking to the Spirit about your challenges and heartaches. Alternatively, you may need to throw another log on the fire. This may mean placing Scripture on your heart and praying for it to ignite. But don't throw too much Scripture on or you will snuff out the fire. Let your soul breathe. Thomas Watson warns, "Too often we walk away from the Word of God coldhearted because we fail to warm our souls at the fires of meditation."<sup>10</sup> When we fan into flame the gift of the Spirit, we make a deliberate effort to receive from the Spirit who we are in Christ.

An unwavering pastor remains centered in adversity by developing friendships that bring refreshment, while also remembering that friendship is not a fortress. God is our refuge. Unwavering pastors pray constantly and gratefully, heeding valid critiques but zooming in on signs of God's goodness. They stay afloat in a deluge by clinging to gospel affirmation and heeding exhortation, giving God's words more weight than their critics' words, choosing to live by the power and presence of the Spirit.

## **THE UNWAVERING PASTOR**

An unwavering pastor navigates divided times by:

- developing refreshing friendships.
- remembering that friendship isn't a fortress but that God is our refuge.
- using prayer to zoom in on God's goodness and express gratitude.
- turning memories into prayers and mental images into intercession.
- giving and receiving gospel affirmation and exhortation.
- fanning the flame of the indwelling Spirit.