The Friend We All Need
2 Timothy 4:16–22

It's been wisely said that marriage is God's grand conspiracy to reveal our weaknesses. I think the same can be said of joining the church.

In both cases, we enter with hopes and expectations. We bring our ideals about what love, commitment, and community should look like. And then real life begins. We discover that the other person is not as consistent as we hoped. We discover that we are not as patient or as loving as we thought we were. The relationship that was meant to be a place of blessing becomes a place where our sin, our fears, and our self-protection are exposed.

But God is not only after our happiness. He is after our holiness. He uses the ordinary, and sometimes painful, friction of real relationships to reveal what is in us so that we might become more like Jesus.

The church is no different. We come looking for belonging, encouragement, and spiritual family. And then we are disappointed. Someone lets us down. A leader fails. A friend withdraws. Conflict arises. And we are faced with a choice: Will we use the disappointment as a reason to keep our distance, or will we let it drive us deeper into the only relationship that can sustain us when others fail.

Paul knew what it was like to need people and not have them show up. When he stood before the Roman authorities at his first defense, no one came to stand by him. All deserted him. He experienced the sting of abandonment. And yet he did not write the church off. He still prayed for those who failed him. He still asked Timothy to come before winter. He still sent greetings from imperfect believers in Rome. He still closed with grace.

He could do this because his first love was not the church. His first love was Jesus. He loved the church because Jesus loved the church.

Main Idea: Friendship with Christ enables us to keep loving imperfect people and proclaiming the gospel, even in hard places.

As we walk through these final verses, we'll discover what makes Jesus the Friend we all need—and how His friendship shapes the way we become friends to others.

1. Only Jesus Is the Perfect Friend

If we're going to become the kind of friends that others need, we must first recognize that only Jesus is the perfect Friend.

Paul writes:

“At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them.” 2 Timothy 4:16

Paul had expected the presence of friends, but instead he received their absence. The people who might have stood with him did not. This was not a minor disappointment. It was the sting of being left alone at the moment of greatest need.

The best of men and women will let us down. The body of Christ is made up of imperfect people. We’re all capable of the same desertion, the same fear, and the same self-protection. Paul knew this about himself. He never forgot that he was the chief of sinners.

James Bell has written, “One of the hardest lessons in life is learning to love people as they are, knowing they’ll sometimes disappoint us, frustrate us, and make decisions we don’t understand, and choosing to love them anyway. People are complicated. They’re inconsistent. They carry wounds, fears, insecurities, and habits that make them difficult to love. And so do we. One of the greatest obstacles to loving imperfect people is forgetting that we’re one of them.”

Now, after speaking of the hurt of desertion, Paul prayed, “*May it not be charged against them.”* He could pray this because he had never stopped being amazed by Christ’s love for him.

John Piper has observed that much of our bitterness toward others is rooted in our inability to remain profoundly amazed that Christ loves us in our sin.

Paul's prayer is the prayer of a man whose first love was still Jesus. It is the prayer of one who has been forgiven so deeply that he can release those who failed him. He can drop the charges. He could pray for God to give grace and to bless them.

Only Jesus is the perfect Friend. Everyone else will fail us at some point. The question isn't whether the church will disappoint us. The question is whether we will keep our eyes on the One who never will—and whether that friendship will produce in us the same Christlike forgiveness Paul demonstrated.

Now, I want to make an important distinction here. Church hurt is real. Some of it reaches the level of genuine abuse, spiritual manipulation, or unrepentant sin that harms others. In those cases, Scripture does not call us to minimize the harm or pretend everything is fine. We must name it, confront it, and take appropriate steps to protect those who are being harmed. Sometimes that means creating distance. That's exactly what Paul does with Alexander in the verses just before our text. He doesn't minimize the harm. He identifies it and warns Timothy.

But not all hurt is abuse.

Much of what is now described as "church hurt" is the ordinary, painful friction of life among imperfect people.

Research from Jim Davis and Michael Graham in their book *The Great Dechurching* helps us understand the distinction. They estimate that roughly forty million Americans have stopped attending church in recent decades. Of those, approximately thirty million fall into what they describe as the **casually dechurched**—people who have drifted away because of life transitions, moving, busyness, convenience, or a gradual loss of connection. Roughly ten million are what they call **church casualties**, those who left because of conflict, harm,

hypocrisy, or the church's failure to protect them. Those distinctions matter.

When the pain is genuine abuse, it must be named and addressed. But when the pain is the inevitable disappointment of imperfect people, it is not necessarily a reason to abandon the body of Christ.

Sometimes what we call church hurt is someone disagreeing with us, a church not meeting our expectations, a relationship becoming difficult, or the discomfort of having to work through conflict rather than walk away from it.

Now, I'm not suggesting that every person who leaves a church has the same story or that we should judge someone's reasons for leaving. People leave permanently or temporarily for many good reasons. But I do think we need to recognize that sometimes leaving feels easier than staying and doing the hard work of loving people through their flaws and failures.

Paul models a different way.

He names the desertion. He feels the sting. And yet he refuses to write the church off. He still prays for those who failed him. He still asks Timothy to do his best to come. He still receives and passes on the greetings of believers, despite their shortcomings.

Why?

Because he understood that the refining work of God often happens precisely in the ordinary, sometimes painful, reality of doing life together.

The church doesn't need people who only know how to love those who never disappoint them. It needs people who have been so deeply loved by Jesus that they are learning to love imperfect people.

2. Our Ultimate Strength Comes from the Lord's Presence

The next key to becoming the friend we all need is finding our ultimate strength in the Lord's presence.

The turn in the text is immediate and decisive:

“But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me…” (2 Timothy 4:17)

What a contrast!

When everyone else failed to stand with Paul, the Lord stood by him. People deserted him. But Jesus never did.

Paul is not just speaking of a general sense of divine approval. He is speaking of real presence and real power in a specific moment. The Lord stood by him. The Lord strengthened him. And the purpose was clear: “*so that through me,* Paul said*, the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.”* 2 Timothy 4:17b

This is not the first time the bible says the Lord stood by Paul. In Acts 23:11, after Paul had been arrested and faced intense hostility, Luke records that the Lord stood by him in the night and said, “*Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

The presence of Christ was not an occasional rescue. It was the ongoing reality of a life lived in close fellowship with Him.

When Paul needed someone to stand beside him, the Lord was there. When he needed strength, the Lord supplied it. When he needed courage to continue proclaiming the gospel, the Lord sustained him.

And the same Lord still draws near to His people today.

He does it through His Word, through the quiet witness of the Spirit who reminds us of what Christ has promised, and often through the timely encouragement of another believer who shows up when we feel alone.

The presence may not always be dramatic, but it's real.

The Lord still stands by His people. He is the Friend who sticks closer than a brother.

It's important to recognize here that Paul's confidence in the Lord's presence and power flowed from a life of seeking the face of God.

Friendship with Jesus is not a substitute for people. It is what enables us to stand when people fail. It is what gives us the strength to keep proclaiming the gospel even when we are left alone.

Knowing the Friend he has in Jesus, Paul continues:
"*So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."* 2 Timothy 4:17b–18

Because Paul knew the Lord stood with him, he could face desertion without being destroyed by it. He also testifies that at his first defense the Lord delivered him from the immediate threat of death—"rescued from the lion's mouth." This language reflects the biblical imagery of God's deliverance from deadly peril.

But notice something important. Paul is not claiming that the Lord will spare him from every hardship or that he will never suffer again. He knows his life is approaching its end. Yet he says, "*The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom."*

In other words, Paul understands that his ultimate deliverance is not necessarily deliverance from death. It is deliverance through death into the presence of Christ.
He knows that even if the Roman authorities take his life, they cannot take his Savior. Even if earthly friends abandon him, he will never be abandoned by the Lord.
His security is not in the reliability of his friends. It's in the faithfulness of his Savior.

And that changes everything.

The Lord may not rescue us from every difficult relationship, every disappointment, or every painful circumstance. He may not prevent the people we love from failing us. But He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us, and that He will bring His people safely into His eternal kingdom.

That is the kind of security we find in the presence of Christ.

Friendship with Jesus does not remove the pain of being forsaken. It gives us a deeper foundation than the pain.
And it's that security that enabled Paul to say, even in the moment of desertion, "May it not be charged against them."

3. Friendship with Jesus Deepens Our Love for Imperfect People

The final key to becoming the kind of friend we all need is understanding that friendship with Jesus doesn't make us independent of people. It deepens our love for them.

Paul does not end this letter in isolation. He ends with people on his heart.

Listen to the names and the personal details in these final verses:

"*Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of O-ne-siph-orus. Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you."* 2 Timothy 4:19–22

These are not merely closing pleasantries. Paul is remembering people. He is acknowledging people. He is asking for people. He is passing along greetings from people.

After being deserted by some, he is still connected to others. He still wants Timothy near. He still remembers Prisca and Aquila. He still

acknowledges the believers around him. He still desires grace for Timothy's spirit.

Paul has not allowed the failure of some people to destroy his love for people.

Intimacy with Christ did not make Paul self-sufficient. It made him more capable of loving people who sometimes let us down.

This is the fruit of abiding in Christ. When Jesus is our closest Friend, we are free to keep loving a flawed church. We don't demand that people be perfect before we invest in them. We don't withdraw every time they disappoint us. We keep showing up, keep extending grace, and keep investing in relationships because we have received grace ourselves.

My friends CD and Melody Fabien share a testimony in their marriage ministry about a painful discovery. After years of raising children and managing the demands of life together, Melody's husband spoke ten words that cut deep: "We're great parents. We're a great team. But I don't feel like you're my friend."

She was hurt.

Somewhere between schedules, responsibilities, and simply doing life, she had stopped being his friend. She still loved him, but the joy, openness, and enjoyment of simply being together had faded.

The turning point came one day when he asked her to go to the beach. Everything in her wanted to stay on the shore, but that day she decided to get in the water. They laughed, they played, they talked, and she realized he didn't just need a wife to do life with. He missed his friend.

That same gap can open in our relationship with Jesus.

In Revelation 2, Jesus speaks to the church in Ephesus. They were doing many good things. Jesus affirmed their works, their toil, and

their patient endurance. They had not abandoned sound doctrine. They had persevered.

Yet Jesus said: "*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."* Revelation 2:4

It's possible to be faithful in ministry, busy in service, and still slowly lose the closeness and affection that once marked our relationship with Christ.

Activity is not the same as intimacy. Being busy doing things for Jesus is not the same as enjoying fellowship with Jesus.

And friendship with Christ is not automatic. It must be cultivated.

Abraham was called the friend of God. Psalm 25:14 says, "The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him." And Jesus says to His disciples in John 15, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Then He says, "I have called you friends."

A friend who only agrees with you is not a friend. He is an audience.

Real friendship with God is a relationship with another Person. It's a relationship in which we listen, respond, trust, obey, and allow Him to shape us.

That is why in our friendship with Jesus we open the Scriptures and let Him speak first.

Prayer is not simply presenting our wish list to God. It is communion with the living God. We speak to Him, but we also allow His Word to shape what we say, what we desire, and how we live.

If we begin only with our own words, we can easily end up praying to a God who simply shares our opinions. But if we begin with His Word, He gets the first word. He can unsettle us. He can correct us. He can challenge us. And He can also say what we would never have dared to say over ourselves: You are my beloved child.

As Tim Keller has said, “Unless the Scripture is a word of law, it’ll never be a word of love to you.”

The God who will not be reduced to our imagination is willing to be known. Open the Book. Let Him contradict you. Then respond to His revelation.

Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Jesus didn’t merely teach us about friendship. He demonstrated it at the cross.

Paul could remain faithful to people who failed him because he had experienced the love of a Savior who gave His life for him.

And that’s the ultimate foundation of the Christian life. We don’t become the friend everyone needs by simply trying harder to be nice, more patient, or more forgiving. We become that kind of friend as we increasingly understand and experience the love of the Friend who gave His life for us. And the more deeply we experience His love, the more freely we can extend that love to others.

We stop demanding that people meet needs only Christ can meet. We stop expecting others to provide perfect friendship. We stop allowing every disappointment to become a reason to withdraw. Instead, we become the kind of people who show up, who forgive, who bear with one another, who speak truth in love, and who keep investing in the lives of others.

Paul ends his letter with these words:

“The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.” (2 Timothy 4:22)

What a fitting way for Paul to finish. His life and ministry were marked not by the absence of pain or the perfection of people, but by the presence of the Lord and the grace that sustained him.

And that is what the next generation needs to see: people whose lives are so shaped by the love of Jesus that they keep loving one another, even when it isn't easy.

Conclusion

Paul knew what it was to need people and not have them show up. He knew the pain of disappointment, the sting of abandonment, and the loneliness of standing alone.

But he wasn't alone. The Lord stood by him and strengthened him. And that made all the difference.

As Paul approaches the end of his life, he leaves Timothy with something more important than a ministry strategy or a leadership philosophy. He leaves him with a testimony:

People will fail you, but Jesus never will.

The next generation needs to know that. They need to know that the church is worth loving, even when those within it disappoint us. They need to know that following Jesus doesn't mean we will never be hurt, disappointed, or abandoned. But none of those experiences has to define us.

So don't let the failures of people cause you to walk away from the One who will never leave you. And don't just look for a good friend. Become the kind of friend someone else needs.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.