Series: Last Words for the Next Generation

The Human Side of Ministry
2 Timothy 4:9–15

After almost three decades in ministry, I've learned a vital lesson: there is only one man of steel—Superman—and he is not a real person. The greatest of leaders are all human, which means they all have limitations. And the quicker we learn that and admit it to ourselves and to one another, the better off we will be.

Second Timothy is Paul's final letter, written during a second, harsher Roman imprisonment. The time of his departure is at hand. He has just declared that he's being poured out as a drink offering, that he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. He has spoken of the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to him—and to all who have loved His appearing.

And then, almost immediately, the tone shifts. The same apostle who has just spoken of finishing well now shows us his humanity. He asks for people, for a cloak, for books and parchments, and he warns about someone who has done him great harm. These are not the words of a superhuman figure. They are the words of a man who knows his limits and is willing to name them.

I've walked through this myself. There was a season in ministry when the weight became heavier than I could carry alone. I was pouring out, trying to stay faithful, but the reserves were low. Fatigue, the pressure of decisions, the quiet sense that I was not praying enough or reading enough or doing enough—all of it accumulated. I reached a point where I needed the elders to step in and to give me space to recover. It was not a failure of calling. It was a reminder that calling does not make a man self-sufficient.

God used that season to teach me that faithful ministry is sustained by grace, by the Word, and by real people who will come near when you need them.

Research confirms this is not an isolated experience. Barna studies have found that a majority of pastors report having few close friends, and more recent data shows that roughly two-thirds of pastors regularly feel lonely and isolated. Only about one in three say they have a trusted friend outside their church context. The role carries high stress and heavy responsibility, yet it can be profoundly isolating. Many leaders learn to function with a constant sense of being needed while feeling largely unsupported. (www.barna.com)

Paul's words in these verses meet that reality head-on. He does not hide his need. He names it. And in doing so he shows us what it looks like for the strongest of leaders to remain dependent—on people, on practical care, and on a church willing to hold them up.

Main Idea: Even the strongest leaders are human and limited. They need people, practical care, and protection from harm. The church is called to hold them up so that the gospel continues to advance.

This morning we'll look at what Paul reveals about the real hurts and needs of faithful leaders near the end of his life. What he shows us is not only for leaders. It applies to all of us.

1. **Leaders Need People**

Paul's final words reveal a vulnerable side of his life. They show us that **leaders need people.**

In the closing words of this his last letter Paul makes this urgent appeal: "*Do your best to come to me soon"(v.9).* And he repeats this request in verse 21, adding before winter. This is not a casual "come see me some time."

Paul is asking Timothy to make every effort to reach him before conditions get even more difficult. And this is not just about bringing provision; it's about companionship as we learned in chapter one. At the beginning of this letter he tells Timothy:

“As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy.” 2 Timothy 1:4

Paul also reveals the reason for his urgent request in the following line of our text: “*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.* ***11*** *Luke alone is with me”* 2 Timothy 4:10-11a

Demas has brought pain to Paul’s heart. Earlier he had been a fellow worker. Now he has deserted Paul because he loved this present age, the comforts and securities of the world more than the cost of remaining with the apostle in chains. The others have gone to their assigned places of ministry. Their departure is different in kind, but the result is the same: Paul is largely alone, except for Luke.

Praise God for Luke. He stayed with Paul through thick and thin. He was present for much of the missionary work he later recorded in Acts, and now, at the end of Paul’s life, he is still there. In a season of desertion and isolation, Luke remains. What a gift a faithful friend is to a weary minister—someone who does not leave when the cost rises, someone who simply stays.

Then he adds, “*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry”* (v. 11b). Mark is the one who had once left the work and caused sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. But now years later, Paul is asking for him by name. Restoration has happened. Usefulness has been proven. And now Paul wants him near.

Even an apostle felt the weight of isolation and desertion. Ministry is not meant to be carried alone.

Kent Hughes, in his commentary on this passage, titles this section “Tough Friends for Tough Times.” He reminds us that Paul had learned the value of friends in hard seasons long before this final imprisonment. Years earlier in Macedonia, Paul had become so exhausted by external conflicts and inner fears that he was downcast.

In that moment it was not a change of circumstance that lifted him, but the arrival of a friend.

Paul wrote, *"But God comforted us by the coming of Titus"* (2 Corinthians 7:6).

Hughes observes that it was not things that brought him comfort. It was the touch of a trusted friend. Titus also relayed the encouragement of others, and Paul rejoiced still more. Luke remained one of those faithful friends. In the same spirit, Paul now summons Timothy and Mark to come and join him. He is still asking for the presence of trusted brothers.

This has direct implications for the church. Who is near your leaders? Are we making it easy for them to cultivate friendships and ask for help, or have we quietly trained them to pretend they don't need it?

The present and next generation of leaders will not sustain faithful ministry by learning to go at it alone. They will sustain it by having people who will come when they reach out, stay when others leave, and remain useful for the work.

2. **Leaders Need Practical Care**

Now as Paul continues to open his heart, we see that **leaders also need practical care.**

Paul continues, "*When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments"* (v.13).

These are not minor details. Paul is cold. The cloak is a practical necessity in a Roman prison as winter approaches. He also asks for the books and the parchments. Some commentators suggest the books may have included his own writings, notes, or early Christian literature, while the parchments were most likely copies of the Old Testament Scriptures. Even at the end of his life, he is not finished with the Word. He still needs it for himself—to feed his own soul in a dark and lonely place—and for the work that remains. The apostle

who has written so much of the New Testament is still a student of Scripture. He is still dependent on the ordinary means of grace.

Spiritual calling does not remove ordinary human needs. The same man who has been strengthened by grace, who has finished the race, and who trusts that Christ will guard what has been entrusted to him, still needs a coat and still needs the Scriptures brought to him. Limits are not a contradiction of faithfulness. They are simply part of being human.

Peter Scazzero in his book, Emotionally Healthy Leaders, has written that “limits are behind all loss. We cannot do or be anything we want. God has placed enormous limits around even the most gifted of us. Why? To keep us grounded, to keep us humble.” What he means is that much of the loss, disappointment, and fatigue we experience does not come only from our failures or poor choices. It comes from colliding with the reality that we are finite—limited in time, energy, capacity, and strength. When we live as if those limits do not exist, the losses mount.

Paul is living inside those limits and he’s asking the church to meet him there.

And there is a deeper reason God places those limits around us. Divine power doesn’t flow most freely through self-confidence. It flows through acknowledged weakness.

Alistair Begg has observed that the most dramatic displays of divine power in Scripture are found in those who are prepared to acknowledge that they are nothing very special. When God called, Moses asked, “Who am I?” Gideon insisted he was the least. Paul himself later wrote that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from becoming conceited.
The greater danger is not the weakness we feel or the limitations we must admit. The greater danger is the quiet conceit that says, “You picked the right man, Lord. You made the best choice.”

Pride and self-reliance negate, by definition, the very power we need. God uses jars of clay so that the surpassing power may be seen to belong to Him and not to us. Paul is not ashamed to name his need for a cloak, for books, and for people. In doing so he remains in the posture where God's strength is perfected.

Practical support—time, resources, rest, tangible help—is part of holding up those who labor in the Word. When a leader is carrying the weight of preaching, counseling, and leadership, the congregation's role is not only to receive. We are also called to notice ordinary needs and meet them willingly and graciously. The parchments matter. So does the cloak. And so does having people who are willing to bring them.

3. **Leaders Can Be Harmed**

Finally, this vulnerable text reveals that **leaders can be harmed.**

Paul writes, "*Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message."* 2 Timothy 4:14

Alexander is not a distant critic. He has done Paul great harm and has strongly opposed the message. Paul does not seek personal revenge. He turns the matter over to the Lord and warns Timothy so that he will not be caught off guard. Faithfulness does not make a leader immune to being wounded by people. Desertion hurts. Opposition wounds. The emotional and relational toll is real.

That toll is especially heavy when the wound comes from someone who was once close. Earlier in the letter Paul writes that Demas, "in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." He is not issuing a warning about Demas. He is simply naming to another pastor a desertion that has left him more alone.

Kent Hughes observes that Demas's departure devastated Paul: "Your deepest hurts can only come from people you love, your deepest disappointments from the destruction of your deepest hopes. What a bitter pill this was for Paul. I can testify that over years in ministry the

greatest heartaches have not come from enemies but from those who began so well, who raised my hopes high, only to become lovers of this world rather than lovers of Christ."

I have felt that weight too. The sharpest disappointments have not usually come from open opponents, but from people I loved, invested in, and had hoped would continue in the Lord. Paul is letting Timothy see both the practical need and the ache that comes with desertion. The church that holds up its leaders learns to recognize that kind of pain and to stand with them in it.

This means refusing to let leaders carry the weight of opposition in isolation. It means being willing to stand with them, to speak truth when necessary, and to help them recover when they have been wounded.

One of the most practical ways we do this is by refusing to let gossip and slander travel. So much division and hurt could be minimized if we nipped it in the bud rather than ignoring it or quietly passing it along. When someone speaks negatively about a leader who is not present, a simple question often changes the direction: "Have you spoken to this person about this?"

Jim Cymbala has said that when people join the church he pastors, he deputizes them. He tells them that when they hear someone talking about someone else, they are free to respond, "Who hurt you? Let's go to them right now and resolve this." That kind of response protects both the person being spoken about and the person who is speaking.

There is a wise word that says, "gossip ends when it reaches an anointed ear." In other words, it stops when it reaches someone who will not carry it further and who will gently redirect it toward truth and reconciliation.

Paul did not pretend that Alexander's harm did not happen. He named it, entrusted the outcome to the Lord, and warned Timothy so he would not be caught off guard. This was not gossip. Alexander's opposition was public, and the text suggests he had already been

confronted and remained unrepentant. Public sins, after biblical steps of confrontation have been taken (Matthew 18), sometimes require a public warning to protect others. In the same way, the church that holds up its leaders does not leave them to absorb opposition alone. Silence can function as additional harm. When we remain quiet while harmful words circulate, or when we stay neutral while a leader is being wounded, our silence can add to the weight they already carry.

What Paul is seeking is not only a first century need. It is still how the church is meant to care for one another.

Stephen Mansfield tells a true story of a man named Taylor who had led a strong men's ministry for years. During a difficult transition in the church, Taylor was deeply hurt by his own community. He left and withdrew completely. He stopped answering calls and shut everyone out. People assumed he would return on his own, but months passed and he remained isolated.
Finally, a group of men from the church decided they would not leave him alone. They set up a rotating camp in his front yard—about 150 men in total—and told him they would stay until he came out. They ran extension cords from neighboring houses, fired up grills, and posted signs that said, "Taylor, come out," "We love you," and "Taylor, we know you're in there." Taylor called the police. Officers came twice a day for nearly a week. Each time he opened the door, the men in the yard cheered until he went back inside. On the sixth day, when he opened the door again and the men cheered, he finally broke. He stepped outside in tears, apologized, and was restored to the brothers who had refused to leave.

That is what Paul is asking for when he summons Timothy and Mark. Not a program. Not a strategy. The persistent presence of brothers who refuse to let him finish alone. Most of us will never camp in someone's yard for six days. But all of us can show up. We can notice when a leader or a brother is withdrawing. We can refuse to leave them isolated. We can bring the ordinary presence and practical care that keeps someone from quitting.

Conclusion

Paul is not superhuman. He needed people. He needed practical help. He needed protection from harm. And he was willing to ask for all three.

The next generation will not sustain faithful ministry by trying to be self-sufficient. They will sustain it by receiving and giving the kind of care Paul both needed and modeled. This is not only a word for leaders. It's a word for all of us. It's not weakness to acknowledge need. Paul unashamedly asked. The church is called to answer that call—to come near, to meet practical needs, to stand with those who labor, to bear one another's burdens so that the gospel continues to advance.

May we be a people who do not leave our leaders, or one another, to carry the weight alone. May we come even before they ask, bring what is needed, and stand with one another especially when others desert, disappoint, or oppose. And may the same grace that strengthened Paul strengthen us to do it.