

2 TIMOTHY 4:19-22

COME BEFORE WINTER

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. 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.”¹

Paul pleads with the younger minister, “Do your best to come to me soon” [2 TIMOTHY 4:9]. In the text before us, he iterates this plea, expressing his unspoken concern that Timothy might never see him again in this life. Winter was coming, sea travel would become dangerous and overland journeys would be hindered by the onset of cold and snow. Timothy would lose precious time in travel if he failed to come immediately. The old man knew that he had but few days left before the sentence of death was carried out.

Though the Apostle had provided instruction concerning how one should conduct himself in the House of the Lord, there remained matters of a more personal nature that he no doubt felt compelled to deliver to his colleague. Additionally, the old man longed for the personal comfort of a true friend that would make his final days somewhat more tolerable. The presence of the young theologian would be an encouragement, a source of comfort if only in the knowledge that Paul’s work of advancing the cause of Christ would continue through Timothy. Any individual can stand against injustice and the unrighteous opposition that many must face if only one somebody stands with him. Paul is facing death, and he longs for someone to come alongside to encourage him and lend him strength for the hard task he now faces.

Our lives, our very thoughts, are attuned to the annual seasons; and just as there are seasons to each year, so our lives are played out in a seasonal environment. You know that the normal life span is often compared to seasons. Birth and infancy are oft-times compared to spring, with the promise of a full life ahead. Youth and young adulthood are seen as summer, when the vigour of youth and the vibrancy of life is in full bloom. Middle age is often thought of as the fall of life, when we are reaping, gathering, preparing for the dark future days. And our aged, final years are frequently spoken of as the winter of our lives. Winter is the signal that the cycle of life is nearly complete. Anything that will be accomplished for a given year must be shortly completed with the onset of winter. Likewise, anything that will be accomplished in a given life must soon be completed with the advent of our personal winter. As the grey hairs accumulate, as the bodily systems begin to weaken and fail, as we near our long home, our preparation for the inevitable assumes a new urgency. Anything that we would do must be accomplished very soon, and anything that others would do for us must be done quickly.

Reviewing this final letter to Timothy, I note an urgency that was previously unrecognised in the Apostle’s letters. It is not that Paul has been casual about the need for service, but he was confident that his work was not finished. Now, however, it is as though God has informed him that his service is nearly complete. In earlier missives his sentences are complex—they reflect the brilliance of his great mind as he moves rapidly from one subject to the next. Now, sentences have become terse, sharp, pointed, urgent; they reveal a solemnity not previously noted and they assume greater poignancy in light of his sense of finality.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Alone, facing the daunting prospect of his execution alone and isolated from beloved friends, the condemned prisoner carefully analyzed his untenable and unenviable situation. Winter was rapidly approaching, and winter meant the cessation of all travel on the tempestuous Aegean Sea. The war galleys, the great triremes, to say nothing of smaller merchant barques which plied the seas to earn their masters' income, were kept within safe harbours during the winter months. You will recall the danger to sailing encountered by the ship and crew on which Paul was being transported to Rome. They knew they were sailing in the dangerous season, but they felt compelled to sail that they might reach "Phoenix," a harbour in Crete which faced both southwest and northwest, "and spend the winter there." The choice was necessitated because the harbour of Fair Havens, located near the town of Lasea, "was not suitable to spend the winter in" [see **ACTS 27:9-12**]. At any time, but especially in winter, travel by land was dangerous. In winter banditry increased; the brigands preyed on hapless travelers and caravans forced to travel by land by the winter conditions which halted sea traffic. For Timothy, it was truly winter, or never, if he would fulfill the hopes and expectations of the plea of loneliness.

THE URGENCY OF THE MOMENT — The Apostle has already spelled out the reasons for the urgency of his request. Recall that he wrote only a short time prior to the text, "Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments" [**2 TIMOTHY 4:9-13**]. He speaks of his loneliness, of physical discomfort he was experiencing in prison, of his undiminished desire to advance the cause of Christ and of his need for consolation from the Word. Think of the necessity imposed upon the Apostle.

The Apostle was lonely—he confessed his need for friends who would share his final days before execution. No rational individual seeks isolation, whether physical isolation or psychological isolation. Of the forms of isolation, psychological isolation is by far the worst. Feeling alone and cut off from encouragement of friends, any of us will feel acutely the pain of isolation. We are created for fellowship, we long for fellowship. Those rare individuals who choose to live as hermits are exceptions. Most of us consider such individuals somewhat strange; their choice to eschew human relations is odd at best. However noble such individuals may attempt to represent their choice, their actions are seen as aberrant.

One of the great benefits of the Faith is the fellowship we enjoy. There is a camaraderie that can be found in the world, but it really doesn't qualify as fellowship. The fellowship of the Faith is revealed in part in the instruction provided in **ROMANS 12:15, 16**: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." Fellowship means that we are prepared to share both hardship and joy. This is the deep yearning of each heart.

Christian fellowship is so much more than merely sharing human experience; Christian fellowship implies sharing at the deepest level of our existence. Man is a tripartite being; by that, I mean he has a body, he is a living soul and he has a spirit. I often use this to explain God's ideal for marriage. I explain, as this generation knows only too well, that marriage does share at the level of the body; but shared bodily activities can never make a strong marriage. A stronger marriage will share at the level of the soul—sharing similar interests, communicating, enjoying shared activities. However, the strongest marriages share at the spiritual level, sharing worship of the Living God, sharing times of prayer and times of communion with God.

Something similar is true of human interactions beyond marriage. Camaraderie almost always speaks of sharing life at the physical level, sharing life's experiences. Camaraderie is transformed into friendship whenever we begin to share at the level of the soul. Then, we are sharing common interests and mutually instructing one another in various facets of life. However, Christian fellowship always speaks of sharing at the spiritual level. Paul appeals for Christian fellowship when he writes, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any *fellowship in the Spirit*, any affection or mercy, complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose" [PHILIPPIANS 2:1, 2 NET BIBLE]. We Christians gather in our various Faith communities, not because we like one another, but because of the *fellowship in the Spirit*.

We Christians share in the fellowship of Christ the Lord; we are imbued with an ever deeper desire for this fellowship as we come to know Him. Paul writes of this deeper desire, "I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth, so that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. My goal is to know Him and the power of His resurrection and *the fellowship of His sufferings*, being conformed to His death" [PHILIPPIANS 3:8-10 HCSB]. Think of that! As we walk with the Master, we enter into fellowship with Him, ultimately entering even into *the fellowship of His sufferings*.

We fellowship on the basis of the Faith. Let me emphasise that by pointing to something the Apostle wrote to an individual named Philemon. "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that *the fellowship of your faith* may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake" [PHILEMON 4-6 NASB]. Isn't that an arresting phrase, *the fellowship of your faith*? We fellowship on the basis of the Faith. We may enjoy friendships on some other basis, but we fellowship on the basis of the Faith. This is an essential truth: *If we do not share this common Faith, there is no fellowship*. This is the reason I am leery of community services, world day of prayer services, participation in various community religious exercises. I ask, "What is the basis for this action? What are the grounds for the proposed sharing?"

Not only was he lonely, but *Paul was suffering*. Neither you nor I would be eager to embrace hardship. Likewise, Paul was not eager to subject himself to personal discomfort. The Apostle makes an entirely reasonable request of his beloved protégé in pleading, "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas" [2 TIMOTHY 4:13]. Incarcerated in the underground cells of the dark, dank, foreboding Tullianum, known to us as the Mamertine Prison, the aged saint must certainly have suffered acutely from the dampness which seeped through his clothing, penetrating his frame and sucking the scant warmth provided in this cell. Paul was caught as the vicious Neronian persecution of Christians was running its fiery course.

Though accustomed to hardship,² the Apostle was not so foolish as to voluntarily reject comfort when such was available. The cloak, would have been a large, sleeveless garment made from a single piece of heavy material such as wool. It would have a hole in the centre through which the head passed, somewhat like a serape. The cloak was especially useful for travelers, providing them protection from the elements as they journeyed. Held in custody in the Tullianum, it would provide a measure of warmth to the accoucheur of the Gentile Church during his last days of enforced idleness.

² See 2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-10; 11:24-29; PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13; 2 TIMOTHY 1:8; 2:3-9; 4:5, 6

Paul was driven to preach the Gospel of Christ. In **2 TIMOTHY 4:17**, the aged saint testifies, “The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.” Despite isolation resulting from desertion of erstwhile friends, Paul asserts that Christ stood with him, becoming more real than ever in order to lend divine strength, ensuring that the message of salvation was proclaimed, even in Nero’s court. Think of that! Even Nero, the mad emperor, heard the message of life because God was at work in the Apostle. Here is a truth that we need to grasp: in our darkest hour, God is at work to promote His glory. Our trial will be transformed into a powerful means of advancing the message of life as Christ works through us. This is encouragement we each require. In the day of deepest distress, God’s power is displayed in unprecedented measure!

Recall that after Saul had been struck down by the brilliance of the Risen Saviour, Jesus commissioned Ananias, saying, “Go, for [Saul] is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My Name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My Name” [**ACTS 9:15, 16**]. Saul, whose name was changed to Paul, embraced the divine appointment; and throughout the remainder of his allotted days he endeavoured to fulfil Christ’s commission. Now, standing in the heart and the capital of the Gentile world and awaiting the final stage of his trial, Paul realised that the final phase of fulfilling that commission was almost complete.

In an earlier letter to Roman Christians, the Apostle had averred, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written,

‘Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.’”

[**ROMANS 15:18-21**]

Paul had used every spiritual means to advance the message of life. He speaks of word and deed, of the power of signs and wonders and especially by the power of the Spirit of God as the means of advancing the message of life in the Risen Saviour.

He was not at all reticent in reminding saints who had begun to stray from the righteous path that he had brought them the Gospel. When the Corinthians had begun to turn to an errant path, Paul wrote them, “We are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another’s area of influence. ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” [**2 CORINTHIANS 10:14-18**].

Moreover, he was always alert to unexpected opportunities to declare the message of life. In the Letter to the Churches of Galatia, the Apostle has written, “You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” [**GALATIANS 4:13, 14**].

Then, *Paul needed the comfort of the Word*. Therefore, the aged saint pleads, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” [2 TIMOTHY 4:13]. Paul longed for the books, literally “the Bibles” (*tà biblía*), or the scrolls. He had a further request of Timothy, that he would be certain to bring the parchments (*tàs membránas*). The parchments were copies of the Scripture considered to be precious—so precious that they were more permanently preserved on vellum, animal skins, rather than paper. These were commonly referred to as parchments. “Above all [bring] the parchments.”

It should be humbling for us in this day to see Paul’s yearning for the Scriptures. A copy of the Bible can be found in almost every home in our nation. It is not often read, if the manner in which we live is any evidence. However, the Word was the greatest imaginable comfort for the condemned man.

“Scant comfort!” we may say, “A cloak and reading material!” We have today convinced ourselves that we must be entertained in order to be happy. Yet, for that one who has God, little else is absolutely necessary. In an earlier letter, the apostle had cautioned this same Timothy, “Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” [1 TIMOTHY 6:6-8]. How out of step with our world!

The apostle’s meagre request anticipated the plea of another of God’s choice martyrs. William Tyndale, translator of the first New Testament to be printed in the English tongue, was imprisoned in Vilvorde Castle near Brussels prior to his execution in 1536. His crime was that he had dared to translate the Word of God into the vernacular, thus taking power from the Pope and Cardinals and placing it in the hands of the people. In the year preceding his death he wrote to the governor, begging for warmer clothing—a woolen shirt and a cap, and above all his Hebrew Bible, grammar and dictionary. Proximity to death clears the vision like nothing else can, sharpening our focus and paring our desires to true necessities.

The most urgent and repeated plea of the valiant defender of the True Faith, the venerable old saint, is for Timothy’s presence, one whom he dearly loved, that he might share the final moments prior to his exodus. The Apostle thus pleads, “Do your best to come to me soon.” Confident that his appeal will be received by the young pastor, Paul writes, “When you come...” At last, he urges Timothy, “Do your best to come before winter.” Feeling deserted and alone, both because erstwhile companions who had once stood with him longing for an easier situation had fled and also because others who had once been a comfort to him were required to promote the expansion of the work of Christ, the apostle felt keenly his lonely isolation.

THE CONFIDENCE OF VICTORY — Propagation of the message of life, the Good News of Jesus Christ, as the Faith penetrated Gentile darkness, had been the prisoner’s consuming passion since he had first encountered the Risen Saviour. Saul of Tarsus was arrested by Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord of Glory, one unforgettable day as he travelled toward Damascus. He had intended to incarcerate Christians in order to stop the spread of the Faith. Instead, he was himself taken captive in order to do the will of the Master. Now, he who had previously persecuted the Way was pointing all to find the Way. How often Paul spoke of that undeniable desire that impelled him to tell everyone of life in the Son of God! How great was the need driving him to ensure that the knowledge of the Living Saviour was spread throughout the Empire! How powerful was his presentation of man’s responsibility to know the One Whom God had sent as he called on all people to believe the Gospel of peace.

One powerful thought indelibly impressed on the heart and conscience of virtually every evangelical shortly after conversion is a singular burning statement drafted during the Apostle's first imprisonment. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"

[PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14].

We admire dedication such as this from a distance, but proximity to such self-denial as here displayed makes us terribly uncomfortable and ill at ease with ourselves. I will not say that the desertion of some he had previously counted as friends was not painful—it was! I suspect that each of us knows something of such desertions at various times in our pilgrimage. Each of us has no doubt experienced a sufficient number of such desertions over the years to appreciate the pain such defection generates.

We were constrained to take an unpopular stand for the cause of Christ, or perhaps it was some point of doctrine that we found necessary either to promote or to emphasise, whatever the cause, it became the catalyst that served as an excuse for someone to drop out of sharing in the life of the Body. Their leaving left a scar on the Body of Christ; and our hearts were broken by their action. There has not been an individual who left this congregation but that I, as is true for you, have experienced deep grief and intense sorrow. The sorrow was somewhat mitigated when a change of vocation required a move or a change of venue necessitated by social changes in their personal situations. In such instances we knew that they were not rejecting that which was preached nor were they leaving because of some stand we were compelled to take; they rejected neither us nor the teaching we delivered. However, others that departed in anger because they didn't get their way, expressing their hostility either toward us or toward the doctrine we espoused, have taken a toll of my heart, as their leaving has injured each of us.

For my own part, the great and lasting toll to my heart is the sorrow experienced whenever I have witnessed a desertion of the Faith and the grave harm which such deserters seem prone to perpetrate. In their anger, those who quit often seek to justify their decision through speaking ill of those from whom they are departing.

So, the apostle cautioned against those who had left him for various reasons, not only because they had deserted the Faith, but because they were engaged in a form of spiritual guerrilla warfare from their known position of previous affiliations with the Faith. Thus, we read, "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm... At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me" **[2 TIMOTHY 14, 16a]**. Hymenaeus and Philetus **[see 2 TIMOTHY 2:16-19]** were so very dangerous simply because they gave every appearance of orthodoxy to the casual observer. Phygelus and Hermogenes **[see 2 TIMOTHY 1:15]** were more than a disappointment—they were a menace to the continued health of other believers since they taught that fear and disloyalty were acceptable within the entire Christian community.

If all you see is an old man's pique or pettiness as you read the apostle's words found in this intensely personal letter, especially his warnings in which he names names, you have failed to grasp the heart of this elder statesman of the Faith. Moreover, you will have failed to understand the divine reasoning which prompted his stern expressions of concern. Each desertion from the Faith was assuredly painful. The pain the Apostle felt was no doubt intense; moreover, that pain would only be intensified by his deep concern over the injury to the Body furthered by these desertions.

It is no mere speculation to imagine that some of these very individuals named in this final missive from the heart of the apostle were themselves a fulfillment of that dark prophecy Paul had delivered to the Ephesian elders gathered on the beach at Miletus. The deserters were proving themselves to be “fierce wolves [coming] in among [the saints].” They were revealed to be individuals guilty of “not sparing the flock.” These individuals had likely been numbered at one time among the very saints they now harmed. At one time they had likely professed love for the very congregation they now sought to destroy. Whether out of ignorance or whether motivated by deliberate malice, they were guilty of speaking twisted things in order to draw away the disciples after them [see **ACTS 20:25-31**].

Truth is a precious commodity, although on earth it is extremely fragile; being fragile, truth is altogether too easily destroyed in the eyes of earth dwellers. If advancing the truth is your priority, you will demonstrate that even in your response to disappointment experienced when watching deserters flee or when witnessing such deserters seek to injure the work of Christ. When some quit the church, returning as it were to the wallows of the world, truth is tarnished in the eyes of casual observers. In their blinded eyes, truth seems not to have stood the test.

But it is those who deserted that were tested, and not that which they once professed. That this is the case becomes evident from a statement Paul penned to the Christians of Corinth. “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:18, 19**]. God is at work among His people to ensure that those who stand with the truth will be recognised for their stance. Though the world may openly question the commitment of the faithful to the truth, in their heart they know because God Himself will have given His seal of approval.

Nevertheless, those deserting the truth frequently retain an aura of reliability for the unthinking or for those seeking cause against the truth. Therefore, when they distort the truth, speaking evil against it, their statements are accepted as reliable in condemning the righteous. When they disparage good people, demeaning their position and castigating them as evil, the words of the deserters are often used by the wicked for their own devious purposes. Because this is the situation, we lovers of the truth cannot help but grieve for the damage to defenders of the Faith that is caused by the desertion of evil men. However, we need not fret. We are confident that though it is necessary to be proven as valiant defenders of truth in this life, at the last the truth shall stand though all hell seems arrayed against it.

The Apostle faces death; his life shall shortly be extinguished and wicked men will rejoice that he is no longer able to torment them. There is another chapter that has yet to be written. Ridding themselves of their nemesis does not bring comfort to the wicked of this earth. The truth must prevail. Though truth is trampled to the ground at one point, it rises up confronting the conscience of those who acted wickedly, accusing them and driving them to either harden their hearts even more or receive the truth of God. It was so with another man who now stands accused of treason, though he has only spoken the truth.

That man confessed, “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women” [ACTS 22:4]. On another occasion he admitted, “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” [ACTS 26:9-11].

However, when he met the Risen Saviour, his life was transformed. After this, he was committed to serving Jesus, the Risen Lord of Glory. He testified, “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” [ACTS 26:22, 23].

Just so, the hearts of those who oppose the Way in this day will either grow ever more hardened, or they will be compelled to receive this Risen Christ as Master of life. In this same confidence, the Apostle writes, not in despair, but assured that the message he has delivered and for which he now suffers shall prevail. He chose wisely, and the One whom the Apostle has served shall be victorious.

WINTER, OR NEVER FOR SOMEONE — I have often contended that knowledge divorced from application is worse than worthless. It is the height of futility to hold some particular piece of information if there is neither intent nor ability to employ that knowledge in a constructive manner. Therefore, I search for ways to apply the knowledge derived from various passages of the Word. How may we employ information obtained from this particular pericope? What practical application can we make of the truths we have witnessed?

It is interesting to note Paul's heart that he has exposed in these closing words. Few other passages reveal the intensity of the Apostle's emotion as does this final plea to a beloved friend and colleague. It is instructive to learn that the apostle was not some sort of super man, immune to the cares and concerns of the remainder of mankind. Such knowledge should serve to encourage you and me in our own struggles, especially as we wonder how we can continue in the face of extreme opposition or while we undergo the pressure of some debilitating trial. But surely there is more that we could—and should, learn from this brief excursus into the apostle's response to trial.

It is easy to imagine that a particular ministry is dependent upon a dynamic individual. Such a thought does a disservice to the faithful. Paul names several individuals who appear to have been a blessing in his labours. He speaks of Prisca and Aquila, a couple who had shared the Faith for many years. We first met them in Corinth [ACTS 18:2], when they had come from Italy because Claudius had commanded that all Jews must leave Rome. Later, we learn that the couple travelled as far as Ephesus with Paul as he was returning to Antioch [see ACTS 18:18, 19]. Their long and loyal service is noted repeatedly in the Word.³

Paul's greeting to “the household of Onesiphorus” is a beautiful echo of his earlier greetings in **2 TIMOTHY 1:16-18**. Onesiphorus boldly sought out Paul when he was first brought to Rome; then, he repeatedly served the Apostle to refresh his spirit. It is quite possible that Paul is conveying his sympathy to the family because Onesiphorus is dead. If Onesiphorus was still alive, then it is odd that Paul doesn't address him directly.

³ E.g., ROMANS 16:3; 1 CORINTHIANS 16:19; ACTS 18:26

Erastus may have been “the city treasurer” for Corinth [see **ROMANS 16:23**]. A man named Erastus is mentioned together with Timothy in **ACTS 19:22**; and the fact that there is no explanation provided in **2 TIMOTHY 4:20** other than the notation that he remained at Corinth indicates that he was known to Timothy and required no introduction.

Trophimus is mentioned in company with Timothy in **ACTS 20:4**. In **ACTS 21:29** he is identified as “Trophimus the Ephesian,” indicating that it was not unusual that he would remain at Miletus in his illness. Miletus was near to Ephesus.

The Apostle finally names several otherwise unknown people—Eubulus, Pudens, Linus and Claudia. In these few, final verses, we have more than a mere list of names; before us is an honour roll of those who advanced the Faith in that day. These names remind us that the churches of the Lord are so much more than a pastor, more than some prominent speaker, more than a gifted teacher. Always and ever there are multiple people who comprise a congregation and who ensure that the work of the ministry is fulfilled. Church history focuses on a few prominent individuals in order to tell the story of the advance of the Faith. However, it is those who serve in the shadows, extending hospitality, encouraging the servants of the Lord, praying for God’s glory, speaking to the lost to call them to faith in the Son of God, giving comfort to the sick and injured, always encouraging the saints to keep on keeping on, giving sacrificially to ensure that the work is not hindered—these are the ones who are listed in the annals of Heaven.

I know that even among us are some who are overlooked when recognition of service is given. Let me assure you that you are not overlooked before the Eternal God. I have often encouraged myself with the words Malachi penned. “Those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ‘They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him’” [**MALACHI 3:16-18**]. I need that encouragement; and so do you.

Just as recognition is sometimes overlooked, churches and pastors sometimes give recognition when it is undeserved. Prominent people may be singled out who are undeserving; their position in society is the basis for the recognition received. Sometimes election to church office is little more than payback to an influential person. The names of such individuals may appear in church office year after year while those who are spiritual and who actually work behind the scenes go unrecognised. God makes no such mistake.

In every life there is a winter. After winter has come, it will be too late to do the things that must be done; the crisis will have passed or that individual will have passed into eternity. Each of us have family members in the winter of life; if we fail to go now, our opportunity will have passed. Friends are approaching the winter of life, and the comfort you can afford is needed now. What you would do to comfort or to console must be done quickly; shortly there will be no further opportunity to do good to those beloved individuals.

Let me be even more specific. For some of us, a friend or family member is a believer. Yet, that one is approaching a time of enforced confinement by reason of advanced age or perhaps because of a medical condition. They are, or soon will be, isolated and segregated from comfort and consolation. You are an encouragement simply by being available to share the dark, soul-draining experience they must endure. Perhaps illness constricts their world, or they suffer an imprisonment arising from financial reversal, from emotional trauma, from overwhelming fear. There are many reasons why one’s world might grow narrow and restrictive.

In one sense, the cause for their restriction is of no great moment; the immediate need is someone who loves the one restricted, someone who grieves with them at the pressure they are experiencing, someone who willingly inhabits their dark dungeon and by that presence brings hope and the warmth of love to dispel the dampness. You know some such someone, and if you permitted yourself to do so, even now you can see the face of that someone rising up before you, pleading for you to come before it is too late. Now is when they need you. Now is the time for you to perform the needed ministry of being present. For this person it is truly *winter, or never*.

It is far too easy to hesitate, distressingly easy to become so consumed by the demands of our own lives that we neglect doing what we could do and what we should do. Winter comes, and all traffic ceases, and we will be unable to tend to their needs any longer for they are removed from the cares of this life. There is no further urgency when death has at last prevailed. Who of us has not felt the guilt brought on by delay because we tended to our own cares first. We must be reminded that as Christians we are in the first place ministers—servants to others. Only after we have served others are we responsible for our own desires. This divine philosophy flies in the face of virtually all contemporary religious rhetoric. Who do you know that even now is suffering and the more so with the knowledge that winter shall shortly be fully present?

Robert Zimmerman is correct, “The Times They Are a-Changin’”; and the change isn’t always for the best. Morality is trampled to the earth in this modern day. The consequences of social change are great and lives are being crushed. Women are constantly left wounded and broken; they were taught that they could be immoral and there would be no consequences and because they are told the lie that the child in their womb is a mere blob of tissue that they can jettisoned without concern. Millions have learned too late, that it was *their* child—their own flesh, and that aborting that child cost them a part of their soul, consigning them to unending grief and pain. Do we not have an obligation to warn these young women that there is a cost to adopting these societal changes? Do we not have an obligation to warn young men that they cannot act like beasts without damaging their own souls? Christians must learn that for our youth, it is *winter or never*!

I would be remiss if I did not remind you that each of us know men and women who are in the winter of life; they are totally unaware of their peril. They are lost, under condemnation, without Christ and without hope in the world. We shrink from truthful words, but these are lost. They are bound by chains of darkness. They are condemned to a loveless eternity because they have not believed. You and I have the message of life that can transport them from death into life. The lost will pass forever beyond our reach when winter at last comes, and no further opportunity shall be presented for them to be delivered. We must not be content to care for our own creature comforts, ignoring their plight. As Christians, we must see their peril and make every effort to deliver the message with which we are entrusted? The answer lies in our hands. The moment for action is passing, for the lost it is *winter, or never*!

Let me speak to that one who listens even as cold winds sweep over your soul. Christ the Lord died because of your sin. He conquered death, rising from the dead and ascending into Heaven itself. Now, the Living God calls you, saying, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is my Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free.” The promise of God is that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved.” That promise is yours, and we echo that call by insisting that you must believe this message. We urge you to receive this Jesus whom we preach as Master over life. Do it now, before the chill winds of death come. Amen.