

# **The Christian's Path In a Day of Ruin**

As seen in 2 Timothy ( Part I )

by George Cofresi

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The last words of a dying man often act as a window to the heart. They reveal what he sees as most important in light of eternity. Who can forget the story of godly F. W. Grant on his death bed, who with his last ounce of strength raised himself up and with the appearance and authority of a true patriarch declared, "Oh the book, the book, the book!". Perhaps he had in mind Paul's last recorded words found in this second letter to Timothy. Conscious of his impending "release" (ANALUSEOUS, 2 Tim 4:6) this epistle reveals what was uppermost on the mind of the Apostle Paul as he sought to prepare his beloved Timothy (and us) for the perilous days that lay ahead. My desire in this article is to trace out the path of departure and ruin into which Christendom has been drawn while highlighting God's path for the believer who would be true to Christ in day of widespread apostasy.

Paul teaches that understanding, stability, and spiritual progress are found in a proper response to revealed truth. That message is crystallized in the "second" epistles of the New Testament, which focus on the end of things and the activity of the enemy (2 Cor, 2 Thes, 2 Pet, 2 John, 2 Tim). When our Lord faced "the enemy of our souls" in the wilderness, He overcame him with the thrice repeated phrase "It is written" and those immortal words "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Behold, the True "standard of excellence"!

Let's start by comparing 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. Notice how they touch upon similar themes: faith/the Faith, doctrine, sound words (lit. health giving), knowledge and godliness. However, in 1 Timothy this teaching is connected with "the house of God" (3:15), the emphasis there is on the corporate testimony of God's people. In contrast, 2 Timothy focuses on the individual servant of Christ and how he is to order his life in days of confusion and departure from the faith. In 1 Timothy false teachers were creeping in with pernicious teaching (1:3, 4, 6, 7, 19, 20; 4:1-4; 5:15, 22, 24, 25; 6:3-5, 20, 21), here the instruction is designed to keep it out. When 2 Timothy was written, some 2-3 years later, it had already spread like gangrene. All was in disarray, the great house of Christian profession contained vessels both to honor and to dishonor. If the message of 1 Timothy is "keep out", the message of 2 Timothy is "get out"! (2:21). Yet, God will not leave His servant alone. In response to such faithful obedience He will lead him to the company of those that "call upon the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim 2:22b). A subtle illustration of

the degenerative environment that called forth this shift from the corporate to the individual can be seen by contrasting the word "some" found in 1 Tim 4:1 with the word "men" in 2 Tim 3:2. What was true of only a few in "latter times" becomes true of the majority in the last days"<sup>1</sup>. No wonder the word of God takes such a prominent place in this epistle (Jn 6:63, 68; Acts 20:32; Num 23:19, 20). Calvin's right when he writes that only in the Bible does God "open His own most hallowed lips". But in order to appreciate what those "lips " are saying to us it's important that we first take a brief look at these Ephesians among whom Timothy labored, and of whom Paul wrote of in his epistles to Timothy (1 Tim 1:3, 20; 2 Tim 1:15, 18; 2:17; 4:14, 15, 20; Acts 19:1, 10, 22; 21:19).

### **An Historical Snapshot:**

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia (the western part of present day Turkey). Archaeology and scripture join hands in giving us a threefold view of Ephesian greatness (humanly speaking) in ancient world.

(1) Commercial Greatness: Together with Smyrna, some 40 miles away they were called "the twin eyes of Asia". Just three miles from the Aegean Sea, it was one of the top three cities of the eastern Mediterranean world and a populous center for east/west trade.

(2) Cultic Greatness: The center of Ephesian pride, prestige and revenue was the cult of the so-called goddess Artemis (Diana is from the Latin translation). Her temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to tradition, her image fell from heaven (Acts 19:35). She was called "the mother of life and nourisher of all living things". In fact, some ancient inscriptions call her the "saviour goddess". Two natural by-products of this cult were a lucrative banking business conducted inside the temple and a powerful enslavement to Demonism. The Ephesians were obsessed with "magical arts", (see Acts 19:11FF). So widespread was their reputation for producing books or scrolls of magical practices that the term "Ephesia grammata", meaning "Ephesian writings (or letters)" became synonymous, in the Graeco-Roman world, for magical texts. They claimed to have a magical incantation or formula for every conceivable problem one could encounter. Eventually these formulas were written on little scrolls or leaflets, which were then worn on the body, ready for use at a moments notice. Clement of Alexandria and the Sands of Egypt have added additional historic and archaeological testimony to the influence of this practice.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek text does not contain the definite article. It is what is Characteristic and thus has a wider application, without taking away its future importance.

(3) Cognitive Greatness: "The school of Tyrannus" referred to in Acts 19:9 is an example of the Ephesian thirst for knowledge. His name implies that he was a Rhetorician and, as was the custom, lectured till eleven in the morning. In full agreement with this, the Western text tells us that Paul occupied the room "from the fifth to the tenth hour" (from 11AM to 4PM). Paul probably labored as a tent maker from dawn till 12 noon then taught the Word of God the remainder of the day. There was no rest for the Lord's servant as long as there remained one needy soul (Acts 20:31)!

### **A Chronological Overview:**

Paul past through Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his 2nd missionary journey, (Acts 18:19-21). Priscilla and Aquilla stayed on, resulting in the conversion of Apollos, (18:24). Paul's major work in Ephesus began during his 3rd missionary journey and continued for 3 years, Acts 18:23; 19:1-41 (note v 10). Some time later he gave his pastoral discourse to the Ephesian Elders, (Acts 20:18-35). Despite this extensive history of "light and love", as well as the clear warning of the dangers ahead, faithlessness and departure began to set in. Some six years later Paul had to write Timothy - "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes." (2 Tim 1:15)! Like a snowball rolling down the side of a mountain, which only gains speed and size the more it travels, the failure continued. Thirty years later our Lord had to rebuke 5 out of 7 Asian assemblies, beginning with Ephesus (Rev 2-3)! Could it be because they never heeded Paul's warning in Acts 20:28, 31?

We can better appreciate the message of 2 Timothy by looking closer at the chronology of events. Note the increasing degree of departure from "the faith" that eventually required Paul to write this little epistle.

We begin with the historical background to Paul's extended (Acts 20:31) ministry in Ephesus found in Acts 19; 20:16-38. In Acts 20:28-32, we find Paul's prophecy of this "departure". In clear unmistakable language he reveals the future character, cause and consequence of this movement away from the truth (vv29-30). Yet, not without setting before them the Divine Presence, Principles, and Prospect as encouragement to responsible action (vv31, 32). One could not be more enlightened nor better equipped to fend off "the wolves" than were these Ephesians. Several years later, Paul wrote that heavenly epistle which bears their name. It begins with the declaration of every Spiritual Blessing (Eph 1:3) and ends detailing the weapons of our Spiritual Battle (6:10-18). What makes the message of this epistle so striking is that, while being written, one could hear the clanging of the prisoner's chains (6:20)! His moral character under such conditions was a telling exposition of the truth he taught. These chains were neither a hindrance to the enjoyment of the

blessing nor a sign of defeat in the battle, but rather a badge of honor in the service of the one who has already gained the victory (1:15-23)!

Upon his release from prison, Paul visited the saints in Ephesus, only to discover, to his horror no doubt, that the "drawing away" process he alluded to (Acts 20:30) had already begun! Unfortunately, he was not able to stay, so with a sense of urgency he "besought" (PARAKALESA-urged, exhorted, begged, 1 Timothy 1:3) Timothy to remain (in Ephesus) as his representative and pass on his "command"<sup>2</sup> to stop teaching a "different kind of doctrine"<sup>3</sup> (v3). Apparently the problem centered around certain ones of the Ephesian company who, despite their profession, were false teachers. Their doctrine seemed to be a combination of Jewish/Old Testament "law-teaching" (1:7) mixed with "fables and endless genealogies" (1:4) which only generated questions "rather than (further) God's dispensation, which (is) in faith" (1:4; 6:4 Darby Translation). It was characterized by "vain discourse" (1:6), "profane and vain babblings, and opposition<sup>4</sup> (F4) of science (GNOSEOS-knowledge) falsely so called" (6:20). Do we see here something of the enemies strategy in praying upon the Ephesian Cultic and Cognitive greatness? Consider also 4:1-3 in this regard. Their supposed strength was in fact their weakness! Need I say more? Before we pursue this "departure" any further I suggest that perhaps 1:19 reveals the origin of this downward process(?). We will have occasion to look at this matter later on.

During his second imprisonment Paul wrote to Timothy again, but by then things had grown decidedly worse (2 Tim 1:15 etc). The Ephesian/Asian Party had abandoned Paul. The Epistle not only reveals the pattern and progress of departure, but sketches a solemn picture of "the last days" (2 Tim 3:1 FF) in its downward spiral. This epistle speaks so pointedly to our own day that we must linger, listen, and learn the answer to the question "How shall we then live?" Now is the time to take inventory of our lives, before the Lord, in light of the message in this epistle. Then ask ourselves, is the Lord glorified by what we see? Whether the answer is yes or no, I invite you to continue this study with us

For His name's sake!

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<sup>2</sup> From PARAGGELLO, a military term meaning "to give strict orders" emphasizing the authority with which it was to be done. Also, translates "to change", "to instruct".

<sup>3</sup> HETERODIDASKALEIN, "to teach something totally different" (Ellicott).

<sup>4</sup> "ANTITHESIS-contradictions, name for debates of a technical kind" - M. Zerwick, An Analysis of the Greek New Testament. (Although not the same word, consider the phrase "dispute of words", 6:4 Darby Tr.)

# **The Christian's Path In a Day of Ruin**

As seen in 2 Timothy ( Part II )

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Now you might be tempted to ask; if conditions were so bad why did God allow Paul to be executed shortly after writing this epistle? Why remove this champion of the Faith when he was most needed? I believe the Spirit of God used this situation to show faithful believers, then and now, that God is able to give them the victory, apart from human agency, no matter how bad conditions get or how severe the opposition. Our resources are in Him alone, though He often uses human instruments to communicate them. This is an important first principle to remember in a day of collective failure (note the strategic use of the expression "in Christ Jesus" in chapters 1 & 2).

## **A Prophetic Preview - The Dark Side**

If you have read this epistle then perhaps you were struck with its "devolutionary" character. As you moved from one chapter to the next the scenes got darker, the environment got colder, the twisting of truth more pronounced, and the opposition to the faithful more severe. In chapter 1 we see a scene of desertion (v15); in chapter 2 distortion (vs 14-18); in chapter 3 opposition (vs 5-8; 12); and finally in chapter 4 cold indifference (vs 3,4). With a prophet's eye, Paul looked down the corridor of time and saw that the current abandoning of the faith for the lies of some smooth sounding false teachers (ch 1&2) would eventually lead to "difficult times" (3:1) during which "a form of godliness but denying the power of it" would prevail (3:5) giving birth to a day when most "will not endure sound teaching" but will seek out teachers who will say what they want to hear (4:3, 4). That sounds an awful lot like today! It's enough to overwhelm even a proven "soldier of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 2:19-23; 2 Tim. 1:3-8; 2:1-3). But this "somber setting", so accurately predicted by the Apostle, only serves to bring into clearer focus the only road available for those who would stay clear of "By-Path Meadow, Doubting Castle and Giant Despair". We will call it,

## **The Pathway of Piety - The Bright side**

Piety is just an old fashioned word for godliness. Paul used it in 1 Tim. 3:16 when referring to "the mystery of piety (godliness)" revealed in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now those "who desire to live piously (godly) in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:12) must travel a pathway that has its origin in God (1:7-9), is characterized by a manifestation of the Divine life in vessels of clay 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6-11; Col. 3:1-4), moves against the grain of this world (2 Tim. 4:10; 1 Pet. 2:21); but ends in glory (2 Tim. 4:8, 18). The one who is found on this road is called "the

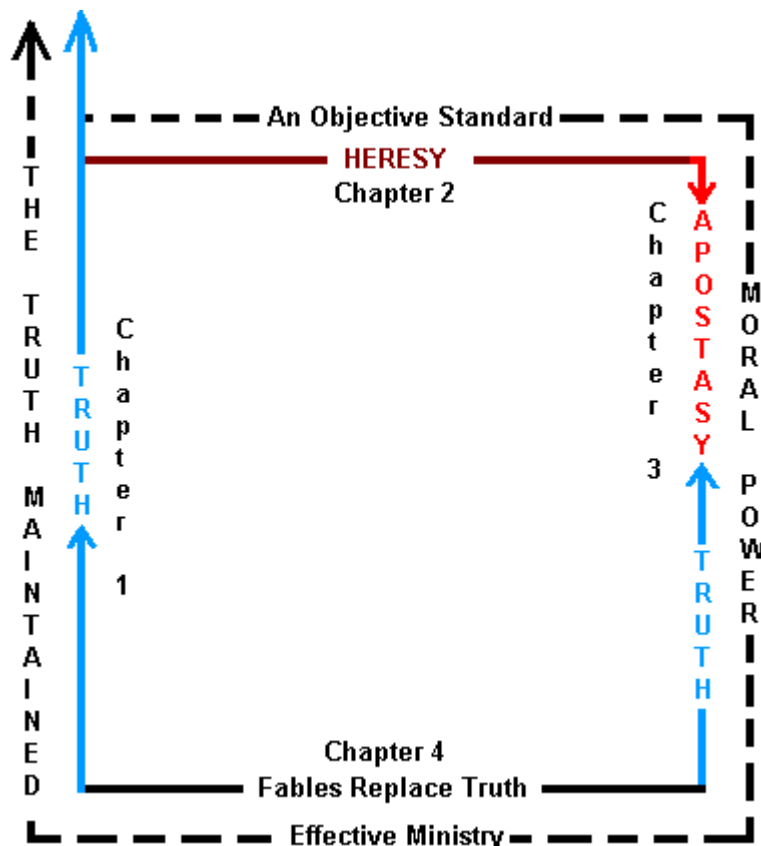
man of God" (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:17) and he alone can stand against that "form of godliness" (3:5) that has let to this day of self-serving doctrines (4:3,4). It's a perilous journey through enemy territory, but, thank God, He has provided us with all the necessary resources for success. These are found in chapter 1 and can be broadly categorized under the heading: (1) Purpose, (2) Principles, (3) Power. The remaining chapters will confront us with the responsible use of these resources under different "road conditions".

**A Suggestive Outline:**

Before we look at the details let's get an overview of where we are going. Remember, we are not going to exegete the entire book, but instead trace out the main thread running through the book as a key to understanding its relevance for today.

1. The Provisions -or- the need of reliable resources, 1:13,14
2. The Word vs. Heresy -or- the need of an objective standard, 2:14-18
3. The Word vs. Apostasy -or- the need of subjective Power, 3:5-17
4. The Word vs. Fables -or- the need of responsible teaching, 4:1-5

We can also illustrate it this way:



In this illustration the solid line veering off chapter one represents the path of departure while the dotted line represents God's remedy or the path of piety. The word TRUTH represents our responsibility to "hold fast an outline of sound words" (1:13). HERESY summarizes the activity of false teachers in chapter 2 as their "disputes of words" cause some of the saints to stray from the truth (2:14-18). In chapter 3 Heresy turns into APOSTASY as "a form of godliness but denying the power of it" begins to "withstand the truth" (3:5, 8). Finally, using the alchemy of apostasy, the majority "will turn away their ear from the truth and will have turned aside to FABLES" (4:4). Fables replace facts so that truth is unrecognizable to most yet remains their claimed possession!

The dotted line paralleling the solid one shows us how to use the resources of Ch. 1 to maintain the truth in the face of these varied stages of departure. In chapter 2 the answer to going off course is to have an objective standard against which everything can be tested. Thus we get "cutting in a straight line the word of truth" (2:15). However, in the face of apostasy, where there is form with out reality, what is needed is moral power. Something that can only be enjoyed by those who "abide in those things which thou hast learned" (3:14). Of course, these chapters are not to be treated in isolation but rather show progression so that now we have one who can be called "the man of God" (3:17) who alone is "thoroughly equipped" (3:17 Greek) to render an intelligent and effective ministry in maintaining the truth against fables (ch 4). Thus we can say with Paul: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" as we await "that day" with joyful expectation (4:7,8). God grant this to be the portion of both writer and reader, for His name's sake.

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