

The Minor Festival of St. Luke, Evangelist

October 18, 2020

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2 Timothy 4:5-11

**USEFUL FOR
MINISTRY**



Paul was in prison awaiting his execution. 2 Timothy was Paul's last known letter. Some have called it Paul's "farewell letter" (note Luther, AE 35:389). Paul had run his race through life faithfully. Of course we all know about Paul's shortcomings early in life, when he persecuted the

church. No one knew those details better than Paul did. Yet here at the end of his earthly life, Paul could confidently say, *"I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith"* (7). Paul was brought to faith, and then dedicated his life to sharing the good news, the gospel, of Jesus Christ. He had dedicated his life, years of traveling (and not easy traveling), to sharing Jesus with others. Now, Paul was at the end.

"You see, I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.... From now on, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness. The Lord, the righteous Judge, will give it to me on that day..." (6,8a). All of Paul's labors, all of his travels, all of his faithful work had led him to this point—a martyr's death. But someone needed to carry on. Someone needed to keep on preaching that good news, that gospel of Jesus. That's what Paul was writing to Timothy about. *"As for you, [Timothy,] keep a clear head in every situation. Bear hardship. Do the work of an evangelist. Fulfill your ministry"* (5). What a blow to the kingdom, wasn't it? Paul, the greatest missionary who ever lived was on his deathbed, at the doorstep of heaven, about to be taken out of this world. What

would happen next? What about all those congregations that Paul had started? Would they survive? Or would they be rocked by controversy and torn apart by discord? What about all those letters that Paul had written, the teaching which God did through Paul? Would they be preserved? Or would they be lost, destroyed, and buried? Talk about pressure on poor Timothy!

But Timothy wasn't left without help. Listen to all the people Paul lists along with Timothy as those who are of benefit to him: *"Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is useful to me for ministry"* (10b-11). There were many people who helped Paul along his missionary journeys, not least of which was Luke, the Evangelist. Luke wasn't an apostle, personally trained and sent out by Jesus. Luke wasn't one of the 12 disciples, hand-picked for ministry by the pre-exalted Savior. Luke wasn't even a pastor of a congregation, at least not as far as we know from Scripture. In fact, Luke is only mentioned three times in the Bible, all of them in Paul's letters. Once here, once in Philemon as a fellow-worker of Paul, and once in Colossians as a good doctor. Luke wasn't anything special when it came to public ministry, and yet this was one of the men on whom Paul relied and to whom Paul left his life's work. Simple Luke, nothing special.

Was he up to the challenge? Could he do enough? Would he and a few others be able to fill the massive void left in the church by Paul exiting the picture? Though we're not told specifically about Luke or Timothy's mindset, I would imagine that Timothy and Luke felt overwhelmed with the prospect of Paul's death.

Do you ever feel that way when it comes to such important tasks in the church? I'm not talking about the cleaning list or ushering or being on the altar guild. I'm talking about those tasks that we encourage in sermons or in Bible Class. Someone has to proclaim the gospel. Could that someone possibly be you? When we put it in those terms, our minds start to swim a little bit. We start to ask questions like this: can I go to Africa and preach a sermon to the thousands who are longing to hear it? Can I live the long winters in Russia and tell those people about their Savior whom they so desperately need to hear about? Am I willing to drop everything and go to China, risking being caught by a government hostile to Christianity, just so that I can share Jesus? Can God really work through me? Well, maybe those tasks aren't very realistic for us. Maybe the work that God has for us is much closer to home. Could God use you in a conversation with a neighbor, co-worker, friend, family member...or maybe just someone you meet at the grocery store? Perhaps overseas missionary work isn't for you, but can't you share the gospel with those around you? Or do your palms get sweaty and your mouth get dry even when you think about telling a neighbor about Jesus? Do you start to have doubts just at the thought of God using you for ministry? Can God really use you? Can he possibly work through you?

Sometimes it's easy to feel as though the task is way too big for us. Sometimes we're afraid of being that person whom the Lord could use to spread his gospel. Maybe you feel like Luke, just a lowly doctor, not someone who could hold his own in a theological debate or give a proper defense or witness for the gospel. Could God really work through you?

In those moments when we're having doubts about God using us for ministry, it's important for us to remember this fact: it's not about us, it's about

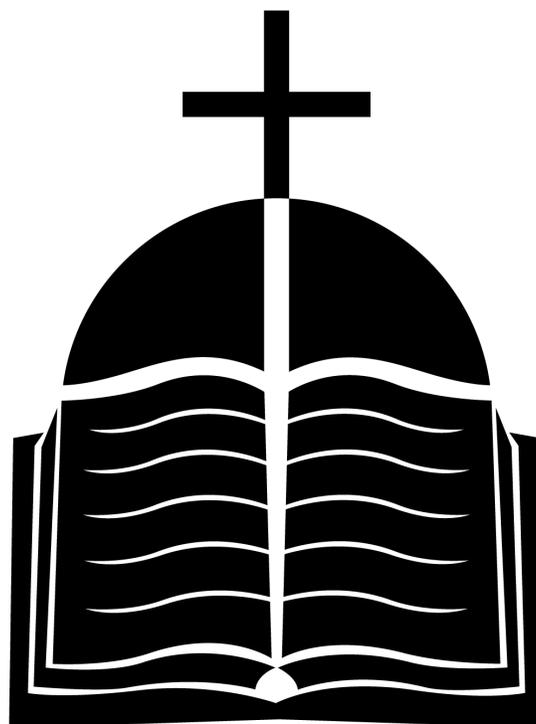
God. Can God work through us? He absolutely can. And it's not because we're so well-trained, or because we're such compelling speakers. It's not because God would be so lucky to have someone as gifted as you are me. God can and does use us for ministry because he's God. It is his wonderful message of sins forgiven in Jesus that makes us capable of whatever ministry situation God has placed us in.

Why can and does God use us for ministry? Because the greatest work he has accomplished was through Jesus for us. God's greatest work for you was accomplished by sending his Son, Jesus, to die for your sins, to purify you for service in God's

kingdom by making you perfectly holy by his blood. God's greatest work was earning for you a crown of righteousness which he will award to you in that Day of his reappearing. On that day you will stand with Paul holy and blameless, without sin, because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is God's greatest work of all. Because he has taken away our sins, because he has reconciled us to God the Father and restored that broken relationship, God has made us worthy to be members of his kingdom. And that makes us worthy to share

this wonderful message of reconciliation with others. Yes, even you are fit for this ministry.

If you don't believe me, just look at these men in our text. Paul could make that beautiful confession in verse 6 only because of God's grace. *"You see, I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith"* (6,7). Paul could confess to his faithfully finishing the race of life only because of God's grace. Paul was a persecutor of Christians, but God through his power and the power of his message changed Paul into the greatest missionary who ever lived. Or how about Timothy? Were they



big shoes to fill for Timothy after Paul would be martyred? No, because all along it was God filling those shoes and equipping whomever he placed in those situations to proclaim the gospel. Or, how about that meager physician Luke? Was he a trained apostle? No. Was he a trained pastor? No. He was a mouthpiece whom God used to proclaim the history of Jesus' saving work. He was a pen whom the Holy Spirit used to preserve the history of the early New Testament Church. He was a supporter whom God used to accompany Paul on parts of his missionary journeys. He was an encourager whom God used to comfort Paul when he was on his deathbed. How could Luke do so much for proclaiming the gospel? It's not because Luke was so great, it's because God is so great.

And how about you? How can God work through you? Perhaps someday God will open a door for you to be able to share the good news of Jesus in faraway places like Africa, Russia, China, or any of a thousand other countries. Or, maybe the way in which you can proclaim the gospel is by supporting those missionaries who are in faraway places. By supporting our Synod, the WELS, even if you never have a chance to meet a single soul in another country, you are supporting the work of those who are making an eternal difference for those souls in many other countries. How can so much

work be done for the gospel? Only by God's grace.

And it's not just work done in faraway places that God is doing through you. He has placed you in a situation right here where you can share your faith with others. He has placed you in moments where you can invite a friend to church, or comfort a neighbor with Jesus through a difficult time, or rekindle a family member's relationship with God with a Bible passage. There are many ways in which God has and will work through you to share the message of Christ with others.

How can God work through someone like you? He has given you the greatest tool in sharing that wonderful gospel message with others. He has given you his Word. He has preserved his Word through faithful men like Paul, and Timothy, and like the Evangelist Luke. And now, God proclaims that preserved Word through you.

As Paul was in prison facing the prospect of his death as a martyr, perhaps he thought about what would become of his churches and his writings. But if Paul ever asked that question, all he needed to do was remind himself again of his own writings where he makes abundantly clear that it never rested or depended on Paul or on any other human. That work of proclaiming the Gospel rested on God. To him be all glory as we faithfully proclaim his Word to others. Amen.

