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# Especially the Parchments

## Devotionals for the 2005 ACL Conference

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### Especially the Parchments

It was August of 1974. We had just moved to Miami Springs, Florida, where on July 1 I took up my duties as president of Miami Christian College, having left a most enviable position at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a bewildered band of faculty friends. The man I hired to build shelving around the room that would become my study had finished his work and I was in the process of sorting and shelving some 4,000 books. In the midst of the effort, my wife came into the room, watched for a while silently, and finally asked the question, "You really love your books, don't you?"

That total is now down to about 3,000, but the sentiment has not changed. We of the dinosaur age admit that computers have taken over the world but too many of us know a shining piece of hardware stuffed with miraculous software can never take the place of a library. When some people move to a new town, they search out the best restaurants, perhaps a health club, parks, pools, churches and malls. Not I. First, show me the library.

### Paul: The Role of Suffering

My title is taken from a most unusual passage written during Paul's last days at the Mamertine Prison in Rome. He was just about nine or ten verses short of the final Scripture he would ever write, and after reminding Timothy to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2), he offers his own marvelous testimony, which could well have been used as an eulogy at his funeral.

*For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing* (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

As death nears, priorities seem to clarify. Multi-tasking as a habit of life no longer seems essential and one finds oneself looking at the basics of

life. We must believe that Paul understood this would be his last contact with Timothy unless he lived long enough to receive the visit which our text requests. The NKJV attaches an interesting title to 2 Timothy 4:9-16 – "The Abandoned Apostle."

Paul tells Timothy "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas." The word *phelones* describes a traveling coat used for protection against stormy weather. In his word studies from *The Greek New Testament*, Kenneth Wuest tells us the word "is the name of a circular cape which fell down to the knees, with an opening for the head in the center. H.V. Morton, a student of Roman times and a traveler in the region of the Pauline journeys, speaks of this type of cloak in his excellent book, *In the Steps of Saint Paul*. He has seen these cloaks on shepherds in what the Bible calls *Cilicia*. "They are felt cloaks ... and are impervious to wind and water. They are so stiff that the wearer can step out of them and leave them in an upright position. They are made of the tough Cilician goat's hair with which Paul was familiar in the making of tents." Such a coat must have been a great comfort to Paul on his long journeys. Now he needed it to keep out the cold and damp of his Roman cell.

We have no idea who Carpus was, though in context, clearly another member of the apostle's entourage. His name means fruit and we can assume him a highly trusted friend since Paul gave him custody not only of the cloak but of the priceless "books and parchments."

Before we leave the suffering theme, let's notice that these friends were pulled together by simple things like clothing and books. No divine task can ever be beneath the dignity of any believer and no such task dutifully and faithfully performed will go unnoticed or unrewarded by our Lord. Not re-shelving books for uncountable times, not answering elementary freshman questions, and not working for a sub-standard wage.



## Timothy: The Role of Scholarship

Yes, it seems a strange designation to apply the term scholarship to Timothy rather than Paul, except that the apostle was in the very act of passing the torch of scholarship to his student. I find it so interesting that Paul wants just four things in these closing hours of his life: friends, warm clothes, books and parchments. Though the word “books” (*biblion*) occurs commonly in the New Testament, scholars are by no means agreed on what these “books” included. A note in the NKJV suggests that “The two words in this passage have been interpreted in three different ways: (1) The scrolls [parchments] were copies of Old Testament books; (2) the books were copies of Old Testament and New Testament books; (3) the two words signified the same thing.” This last suggestion seems quite unlikely in view of the word “especially” (*malista*). In other words, the parchments may very well have been part of the total book collection, but they were a specific and separate group of items which Timothy would have recognized immediately.

The word for “books” is fascinating since it comes from *bublos* which refers to the pulp of the papyrus plant as commonly found in ancient books. This tall aquatic reed was grown in the Nile Delta of Egypt and made into a writing material of the same name. In fact, papyrus was the main writing surface throughout the Mediterranean World from the 4th century B.C. to the 7th century A.D. The earliest New Testament Greek manuscripts were written on *papyrus* and, of course, the English word “paper” is derived from the Greek *papyros* and the Latin *papyrus*. Unger says, “To prepare the writing product, the outer covering of the stem of the plant was removed and the inner fibers were cut into thin strips. Some of these were placed vertically. Superimposed upon them were soaked fibers laid horizontally. These two layers were stuck together with an adhesive substance, pressure applied, and the strips dried. The result was a yellow piece of papyrus paper (*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1988).

We assume, of course, that Paul wanted this reading material for himself and quite possibly to finish some rough drafts he had already

begun. In other words, presumably Carpus was holding final portions of the New Testament along with that stiff Cilician coat.

But to take such a view leaves the spotlight of scholarship only on Paul. I picture him forcing that lamp around to shine on Timothy to whom he has already said, “Until I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophesy with the laying of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will have saved both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:13-16).

Let us turn our attention now to the parchments, the membrana, a hapax legomenon (word found only here in the New Testament). Zodhiates says, “The English ‘parchment’ is a form of *pergamene*, an adjective meaning from Pergamum, the city in Asia Minor mentioned in Revelation 2:12, where parchment was invented and named after the city. These parchments were prepared from the skin of a sheep or goat. They were first soaked in lime for the purpose of removing the hair, then they were shaved, washed, dried, stretched, and kneaded or smoothed with fine chalk or lime and pumice stone. The best kind was called vellum made from the skins of calves or kids” (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.)

Nazarene scholar Ralph Earle, with whom I once studied for a short time, adds a most interesting historical parallel to our passage. He claims, “William Tyndale, who translated the first New Testament printed in English, was imprisoned in Vilvorde Castle near Brussels before his execution in 1536. In the year preceding his death he wrote to the governor begging for warmer clothing, a woolen shirt, and above all his Hebrew Bible, grammar and dictionary.”

John Wesley once told the preachers in the Methodist movement to read or get out of the ministry. Alexander Whyte, that magnificently imaginative verbal portrait painter once said, “That elect, and honorable, and enviable class

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of men that we call students of New Testament exegesis are surely the happiest and the most enviable of all men who have been set apart to nothing else but to the understanding and the opening up of the hidden treasures of God's Word and God's Son" (*The Walk, Conversation and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*).

Spurgeon speculates that the "books" represented study works Paul utilized in his own intellectual efforts, obviously in scroll form. Parchments, however, according to Spurgeon were "oriental; and possibly they were the parchments of Holy Scripture; or as likely, they were his own parchments, on which were written the originals of his letters which stand in our Bible as the Epistles to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and so on." Spurgeon's point, made only after several more paragraphs of descriptive narrative, is that modern Christians should read all the good literature they can get their hands on, but especially the Bible.

C.S. Lewis once said, "If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better, but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful." To which I choose to add the words of Augustine Birrell, "An ordinary man can surround himself with 2,000 books and from thence forward have at least one place in the world in which it is possible to be happy."

Spurgeon waxes so eloquent on this verse I beg you to allow me another lengthy quote which should resonate like the pounding of kettledrums in the hearts of librarians.

*Even an apostle must read. Some of our very ultra-Calvinistic brethren think that a minister who reads books and studies his sermon, must be a very deplorable specimen of a preacher. A man who comes up into the pulpit, professes to take his text on the spot and talks an equinity of nonsense is the idol of many. If he will speak without premeditation, or pretend to do so, and never produce what they call a dish of dead men's brains — O! That's the preacher.*

*How rebuked are they by the apostle! He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching for at least thirty years and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into*

*the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own.* (Excerpted from C.H. Spurgeon's Sermon No. 542 "Paul — His Cloak and His Books" published in MTP Volume 9, 1863, pp. 668-669).

In 1823 Daniel Webster offered this paragraph for the consideration of his contemporaries. "If religious books are not widely circulated among the masses in this country, I do not know what is going to become of us as a nation. If truth be not defused, error will be; if God and His Word are not known and received, the devil and his works will gain the ascendancy; if the evangelical volume does not reach every hamlet, the pages of a corrupt and licentious literature will; if the power of the gospel is not felt throughout the length and breath of the land, anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corruption and darkness, will reign without mitigation or end."

### **Demas: The Role of Selfishness**

The first of many names to appear in our passage is Demas who succumbed to the danger of defection. Part of Paul's suffering was loneliness, and part of his loneliness was the failure of one of his staff members. In Colossians 4 we learn that Demas was called of God. To the church at Colosse Paul sends greetings from Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke and Demas. Of Epaphras Paul writes, "I vouch for him that he is working hard for you" (Col. 4:13). Though Demas gets no such recognition in that text, yet he is mentioned in the letter to Philemon as one of the members of the missionary team. There he is called "a fellow worker."

But Paul does not just tell us Demas bailed out on the ministry, he tells us why. Certainly Paul understood that one does not impute motives unless one knows what those motives are, so we assume that he and Demas had discussed this desertion centering in five words in the NKJV: "having loved this present world." He was, in a word, **selfish**. His ministry was a **sham**. Among Christians in Roman his behavior must have been **scandalous**. Had he possessed

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the qualities of the young man to whom this letter is being written, we might have a 1 and 2 Demas in the New Testament.

Paul even knew where he had gone – to Thessalonica. Why? Thessalonica was the second European city to be evangelized after Paul's Macedonian vision (Acts 16:9-10). It was a port city, a commercial center located in the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. It was literally on the road from Rome to Byzantium, the Egnatian Way, that great Roman freeway. A thriving port on the Aegean, Thessalonica radiated an abundance of wealth and popularity in the Roman Empire. It was the capital and largest city of Macedonia with a population of about 200,000.

It was also a city from which Paul and Silas had to run for their lives, pursued even to Berea by the angry Jews of Thessalonica. This was a safe place for a turncoat. A comfortable city in which to hide one's faith, one's testimony, one's relationship to God and His people. Demas was the walking, breathing, colorful incarnation of John's warning, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

As little as we know about Demas, it seems safe to surmise that he could handle neither suffering nor scholarship.

### Mark: The Role of Service

Here we have a choice of several names. We could have tagged this section with Luke, Crescens, Titus or Tychicus. But the line that shines the spotlight on Mark is the phrase "he is useful to me for ministry." The interesting thing, as you recall, is that Mark could very well have been another Demas. His spoiled brat behavior on the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13) ultimately brought a complete schism between Paul and Barnabas, surely something no first century Christian believed could happen. But at the end of Acts 15, when Paul suggests a second journey to visit the

Paul responds, "Forget it. I'll never take that kid on another missionary trip as long as I live." So Paul took Silas and headed off on what we now call the Second Missionary Journey and Barnabas took his cousin Mark back to Cyprus and began to disciple him all over again.

It is now ten years later and finally, while Paul has been preaching to thousands all across Asia Minor and Europe, Barnabas has succeeded in raising a spiritual son who is useful for the ministry.

Everyday Christian librarians deal with students who don't know what they need much less where to find it. I'm reminded of a story Hans Finzel included in his book *Change Is Like a Slinky*. Apparently during the first Gulf War three British soldiers got separated from their unit and were stumbling around the desert completely lost. The men were hungry and desperately searching for help when they literally bumped into a Four-star American general. Excitedly they blurted out, "Do you know where we are?" The general stiffened, upset by their lack of protocol. He looked at them and demanded, "Do you know who I am?" One of the British soldiers elbowed his buddy and mumbled, "Now we are in deep trouble. We don't know where we are, and this general doesn't know who he is!"

If we push that illustration to its outer edges, the students you serve are the British soldiers stumbling around the desert and you are the general. The difference is, you had better know who you are.

In the history of America, there have been many great educational leaders. Few, however, have been more influential than William Holmes McGuffey, author of the famous *McGuffey Reader* which was used over 100 years in public schools with over 125 million copies sold. Abraham Lincoln called McGuffey "the School-master of the nation." I leave you therefore with the words of the Schoolmaster: "From no other source has the author drawn more copiously, in his selections, than from the sacred Scriptures. For this he certainly apprehends no censure. In a Christian country, that man is to be pitied, who at this day, can honestly object to imbuing the minds of youth with the language and spirit of the Word of God."

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