

## ***Be Prepared in Season and Out***

### **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**

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In the second letter Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy we find that Paul is highly recommending a certain book that Timothy not only read, but hold tightly, indeed to hold on to this book for dear life. That is a pretty strong recommendation for a book.

A friend of ours, a young woman we watched grow through elementary and middle school and high school and college...now that she is graduated, she had some time to do some reading for pleasure, for fun, for personal enjoyment. Recently she posted all the books she read since January, and it was an impressive list. For whatever reason, one of the titles caught my eye. She highly recommended David Copperfield...no, not the magician...David Copperfield, written by Charles Dickens. Years ago I bought a set of books by Dickens that included David Copperfield, so after her strong recommendation I sat down and started reading. This book, written over 150 years ago, has climbed right into my heart and claimed a special place. There is so much I could, and probably over time will tell you about, but one little part of the story impacted me in a powerful way.

David meets a man named Mr. Peggotty, who lives in a simple fisherman's house. Mr. Peggotty is truly a salt of the earth type person. Mr. Peggotty has a young niece whom he has adopted and cared for since she was left alone at a young age. This niece, Emily, is the apple of his eye. Now Emily is just about to be married, to a simple fellow that has worked side by side with Mr. Peggotty for many years. On the eve of their marriage, Mr. Peggotty is waiting for Emily to come home and have a final goodbye before she enters into this happy marriage. As he waits for this final visit before she leaves his house to make her own home, Mr. Peggotty gets sentimental. He picks up different household items and each one holds a memory of Emily. Finally he comes to a lamp. Emily has worked a few miles from the house for many years, and Mr. Peggotty remembers that each night he would light the lamp, so that as she came home in the dark, she would know he was there, waiting to welcome her. And Mr. Peggotty says that even after she is married and moves away, he'll keep the lamp burning, he'll leave the light on, in case she ever needs to return home.

And then something terrible happens. It turns out a villain has appeared and he wooed Emily, and turned her from the man to whom she was engaged, and on that very night they left and went across the sea. Mr. Peggotty hears this news that his precious young niece has turned her back on all the family held dear, has run away, and that news breaks Mr. Peggotty's heart. At this point I'm literally holding my breath to see how Mr. Peggotty will handle this devastating disappointment. The way he handles it, is every bit as meaningful as that beautiful image of leaving the lamp on. Mr. Peggotty leaves the comfort of his little home, and he sets off on a quest to find Emily, the niece

who caused such deep pain to all. But his going to find her isn't all he does. He also instructs that a widow who lives with him stay in his house, even though he is leaving. And his instructions are simple and clear. Keep the lamp burning. Keep the lamp burning. Oh, if she ever comes back, if she ever comes back, keep the lamp burning. We will welcome her home. I wrote my friend Natalie, who recommended David Copperfield, and I told her thanks, thank you so much for directing me to this story of love, of hope, of disappointment, and despair, to this story that points to a future where there might be a time of reconciliation and restoration.

When I was much younger, two well respected women, friends of our family, recommended another book to me. As much as I am loving David Cooperfield, this book they recommended has not only meant more, has not only touched my life in deeper ways, has not only been a message of hope and healing and goodness and grace, this book they recommended, back when I was in third grade, has literally transformed my life. It just happens to be the same book Paul recommended to Timothy. I stood on the steps of our chancel back in my home church, in a ceremony I didn't really attach much significance to, when Mrs. Frances Nicholas and Mrs. Rosemary Knudson handed me a bible. It was a gift from my church. Mrs. Nicholas and Mrs. Knudson were my Sunday school teachers. But it was more than a gift. It was given to me, and to every child in our church, with the belief that all scripture is God-breathed, inspired by God, the word of God, and that through these scriptures we encounter the living God. As Paul writes, these Holy Scriptures make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

It turns out in third grade I hadn't quite developed a burning interest in reading God's word. Apparently Mrs. Nicholas was convinced I might never develop that interest. Years later I returned to my home church, the one that gave me the bible. I was a pastor by this time. Mrs. Nicholas greeted me and the first thing she said was, "I never thought you would be a pastor." Anyway, this beautiful little bible sat somewhere in my room, hidden and out of the way. And then sometime in high school I started to have an interest in the bible. Not the whole bible. I wasn't ready for the whole bible, but this man named Jesus held out an attraction to me that I wanted to pursue. So I started reading the bible. Not the bible my church gave me. Instead, someone gave me a paraphrase, the bible in words a bit easier for a young person to understand. For several years I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And then I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I was on a journey, and though it was a limited one, it felt good to read God's word.

As much as I love the stories of Jesus, and I believe they are the heart and soul of God's word, they are not all of God's word. The Apostle Paul told Timothy all scripture is God breathed. All scripture includes that strange story known as the Old Testament. In fact, when Paul wrote to Timothy that was the only scripture he was referring to. The New Testament had yet to be written and compiled. The scripture Paul was referring to was what we know as the Old Testament. So I finally came to the point where I girded my loins and began reading the Old Testament.

It turns out once you dive into the scriptures they have a way of coming to life. Because the word of God is inspired, God breathed, the scriptures do indeed have a living quality to them. The more we grab hold of God's word, the more God's word grabs hold of us. It is not a history book, although it contains history. It is not a book designed to make us wise, although it does contain wisdom. Will Willimon writes, "Scripture wants to change you, transform your world, and commandeer your life. As Paul told Timothy, scripture's goal is to make you a different person than you were before you listened to these ancient texts. Scripture wants to say something to you that you cannot hear anywhere else, and, in saying that special word to you, scripture wants to transform you, even more to enlist you to follow Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, I hope we take Paul's words about scripture seriously. They are inspired by God, and by them we encounter God in ways that transform our lives. They are inspired from first to last, from beginning to end. There is no part of scripture that is not inspired by God, even the parts we struggle with or wrestle with or stumble through. From that image early in the book of Genesis that tells us there is a tree of life growing by a river in the Garden of Eden until that last chapter in the bible, Revelation 22 that tells us when God has completely restored and recreated this world, there will be a river and a tree of life, and the people of God will dwell with their God in safety and security, from beginning to end, these scriptures are God breathed, they are inspired.

No matter where you begin with scripture, we have to recognize it is a foreign book. It is unlike any other book we will read. It takes time to begin to grasp the full scope of God's actions and interactions with humanity. The first time you meet Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they will be strangers to you. But someday they will be family. If you are just beginning your journey with God's word, Willimon encourages you to "Think of church as lifetime training in how to listen to scripture read and preached and then how to interpret and live scripture in your daily life." Lifetime learning. You start as a novice, as a beginner. We all do. But we don't stay there. It is a lifetime journey of lifetime learning.

As we grow in our understanding of the scope of God's work, there will be moments where the light goes on and you realize you have stepped deeper into your experience of faith. You discover the Last Supper of Jesus is intimately linked to the Passover meal of the Exodus, so much so that at one point the New Testament calls Jesus, "Our Passover Lamb." There is a Day of Atonement in Leviticus and a goat who symbolically carries away the sin of the people. Again, the New Testament speaks about Jesus, atonement, and him being an atoning sacrifice. There were some powerful prophets in the Old Testament, guys named Elijah and Elisha, and one of the ways Jesus demonstrated his power and authority was in doing some of the very same miracles those prophets of old did. Jesus quotes the Old Testament when he resists the temptation of the devil, when he preaches the Sermon on the Mount, and when he stands up in his hometown synagogue. When Jesus prays on the cross the words on his lips come right from Psalm 22, "My

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Volume 44, No. 4, Year C, p. 10.

God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” As we find ourselves turning from the cross to the psalm written years before by another who was suffering, we wrestle with whether this is a prayer of abandonment, or the prayer of one who has abandoned himself to God, who has placed himself utterly and completely in the hands of God, one who has abandoned himself utterly and completely to the will of God. In the *Art of Reading Scripture*, the authors note: “Faithful interpretation of scripture requires us to consider the narrative as a whole and to engage both the Old Testament in our interpretation of the New Testament and the New Testament in our interpretation of the Old.”<sup>2</sup>

When we follow the journey of Israel we move from the slavery of Egypt to the hopes and dreams of the Promised Land to the glory days of King David to the despair of exile, when the temple was destroyed and God’s people were carried off by the Babylonians, where they sang a song of lament, “By the rivers of Babylon we set down and wept.” But the suffering the people endured in the exile opens the way for a daring act on God’s behalf. God demonstrates that suffering can be redemptive. It is in the deep and devastating darkness of exile that we are introduced to a servant who will come to redeem the people by enduring suffering. In Isaiah 53 we discover, “By his wounds we will be healed.” When Jesus came his suffering brought redemption. The cross paid a price and won a victory and demonstrated a sacrificial and self-emptying love that does exactly what the gospel promises. The cross and the resurrection bring transformation, life from death, victory from defeat, joy from sorrow.

When my friend recommended *David Copperfield*, I had no idea what an impact the story would make. When Mr. Peggotty says he will leave the light on, so that if there should ever come a day when his wayward niece would return home, it wasn’t simply that beautiful act of unconditional love that grabbed my heart. Mr. Peggotty’s act of unconditional love drove me back into the arms of Jesus, who told a story about a wayward child who ran far from home, turning his back on his father’s love. But that father left the light on. If ever the child shall turn toward home, home will be open, and home will be waiting. When the Prodigal Son of Luke 15 comes to his senses and drags himself home, fully expecting to be welcomed back as no more than a slave, Jesus wants us to know God’s love is greater than we could ever imagine. The hugs and kisses and rings and fatted calf all go to say that our God has no greater joy than that one of his beloved children would come home. Indeed, the angels in heaven rejoice when one lost child comes home.

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen F. David and Richard B Hays, eds., *the Art of Reading Scripture*, referenced in Willimon, p. 11.

But Mr. Peggotty did more than leave the light on. He went in search of his niece. And Jesus does more, so much more than wait at home with the light on. Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus not only knows his sheep by name, he will do whatever is necessary to bring his sheep home...even laying down his own life. All scripture is God-breathed and it brings us the word of salvation. As Paul told Timothy, scripture's goal is to make us different people than we were before we listened to these ancient texts. He wants to change us, transform our world, and commandeer our lives.

Scripture has done that for me. I know scripture has done that for many of you. We are not the first ones whose lives have been changed by scripture. We are part of a long legacy, faithful ones who have embraced scripture as God's inspired word. That word has changed us. That word has transformed our world. And that word has commandeered our lives. Along with that, there are also those incredibly sweet and tender moments when God uses scripture just to bless us, just to let us know he is with us.

On a trip we led to Greece and Turkey we traced the Footsteps of Paul, this same Paul who wrote these letters to Timothy. One day we stopped in Berea, a town Paul came to 2,000 years ago, a town where he proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. We are told the Bereans were of a noble character, for when they heard Paul's preaching, they examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. On the steps of a small memorial in Berea I asked the members of our group to stand up and share a bible passage that was dear to their hearts. My mom and dad were on that trip. It was 1999, and the fact that we were able to share this wonderful experience with them was such a gift. My mom stood up and said the verse that was dear to her heart was Genesis 28:15. Genesis 28:15 is the story of Jacob, at a time when he is running from his brother Esau, in fear of his life. Late at night, all alone and on the run, he lay his head down on a stone and had a dream. That dream was about a ladder, and Jacob's ladder is well-known to many. So it is that in Genesis 28:15, to a man all alone, on the run, the Lord says, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..."

I have thought about that verse and my mom so many times. As a little girl her mother died and her father had a stroke, so she and her siblings were all farmed out to families from their church, who took them in, raised them, and loved them. I can just see her as a young girl, alone, afraid, reading the words God said to Jacob. "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..." That is a promise my mom believed in, a promise my mom claimed, and a promise my mom trusted.

In April of 2012 we were living in Texas and my mom was in California. My sister Anne called and told me mom had a stroke, a serious stroke. By that night I was with my brothers and sisters and we gathered at her bedside. I was able to stay that whole weekend, and we made the decision to move her into hospice with the hope of keeping her comfortable until she died. With that decision made, the time came for me to head back to Houston. When I said goodbye to my mom before I returned home, I knew it would be our final goodbye.

I have a pattern of reading God's word, and it is pretty basic. I start in Genesis and read until the end of the book, Revelation. Then I go back and start again at Genesis. When my mom had her stroke I had just started back in Genesis. As I sat by her side, with a heart that was weary and heavy laden, I decided I would have my daily bible reading. I was in Genesis, and so I opened my bible and started reading out loud to my mom. I was a few minutes into this when I realized where I was in Genesis. I was in Genesis chapter 28. Jacob was taking a stone and laying his head on it. Then he started to have his dream with the ladder. And right then, in a hospital room with a woman who had trusted God every step of the way, who had endured sorrow and loss and sadness, but who had never endured those things alone, I came to Genesis 28:15. I had the privilege of reading to my mom the verse she held most dear. God said to my mom that day, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..." Turns out God was not just speaking to my mom. I felt his hand on my shoulder. I heard him speaking to me.

My dear friends here at the Dunn's Corners Church, I hold up this precious book and tell you what Paul told Timothy so long ago. All scripture is God breathed. All scripture is inspired by God. Through these scripture God wants to change us, transform our world, and commandeer our lives. Through these scriptures God wants to save us. And as I found out in the quiet of a hospital room reading these words to a mother I loved so much, through these scriptures God wants to bless us. He wants to say to us, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go."