

A week ago this last Thursday a gunman walked onto a community college in Oregon and killed nine people. As the news unfolded, differing reports of the number of injured and killed, sketchy details as to what happened and was happening, how did you react? In the days after, as mourning the lives lost began, families spoke out, and the all too familiar debates started up, how did you react? For me sadness started out small as the news broke. Steadily it grew. The news of each person killed made sadness grow into anger. Anger at how someone could do this. Then to find out he targeted Christians made the sadness and anger grow more. All of it like a flame being fanned to burn stronger.

Something happened that reminded the Apostle Paul of his friend and fellow pastor, Timothy. What, we don't know. Whatever it was brought a flood of memories. He began sad that his friend couldn't be with him. Sadness may have grown to depression because he was in prison and his life was almost over. What we might expect to bring a rising flame of anger and frustration, really brought peace. His memories brought happiness too. Paul remembered Timothy's faith, a faith that was in its third generation. In the second lesson, Paul wants Timothy to focus on what God does among his people and give him some encouragement. As we listen we get the same encouragement in the face of whatever extreme circumstances might be happening to us.

**Fan into flame your faith
You have God's power
You've been called by God's gospel**

In classroom number fifteen the gunman is said to have asked people one question. The first person was asked if they were a Christian. When they said yes, they were shot. I read somewhere that the most courage shown in that classroom was by all who said they were Christians after that. Paul was facing death too. He was in prison because of false accusations. Paul would soon be executed. Timothy, who Paul was writing to, may have had a confidence problem. He was young. His responsibility as pastor was high and his experience level was low. Dangers came at Timothy too. Because Christians were being blamed for many things, non-Christians were striking against and showing anger towards Christians. If ever there was a time for cowardice and fear, this was it. Like every student who stared down the gun while confessing they were Christian, these are moments that might bring timidity.

Sounds a lot like today. Truth is there's nothing new. It's all happened before. Christians today face similar threats and attacks as we always have, as Paul did, and as Timothy did. Even being killed for being Christian isn't new. Not being new doesn't mean they don't still hurt. It also doesn't mean we don't get afraid or doubtful. It wouldn't be surprising if we worried about the changing world around us. Threats against Christians happen each day, here and around the world. All of it might have us clamming up and not talking about Jesus. We don't know who we'll offend or who we'll make mad. We might be uneasy as to what to say. Danger in our lives because we're Christian could make us timid, cowardly.

But I know your faith isn't gone. **"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God...for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."** That gift is your faith. And it's a gift of God. He worked it in you through baptism or hearing the Word of God. The Holy Spirit broke through the sinful shell of your heart and brought about faith in Christ. You can claim God's love and Jesus as Savior. You recognize that Jesus came to seek and save what was lost, and you used to be lost. God's saving power flows through you. A power not from yourself but him. Saving power that flows from the work of Christ Jesus.

With God's power, fan into flame your faith. Give your faith some air as you settle into the reality of his promises. Blow your faith into a roaring flame as you partake of his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Fan that flame of faith by reading and studying the Word. When you face suffering, doubt, and depression, if you face the haunting choice of dying for being a Christian, faith in Christ will get you through. God's power flows through you. He's fanning the flame of your faith. It allows the same confession you make to your children when there's no pressure to come from the same place as those students confessed in that Oregon classroom. God's power works. Every trial and suffering leads to stronger faith. We're preserved in the hour of our worst fears by God. His good purpose for whatever's happening to you is for you to lean on his power, come back to the faith he gave, and return to Jesus as the only way.

I'm thinking not one of those students thought they'd die that day. When we go to work or school we probably don't think that we may not come home. We don't like to think about death. We know the reality of it happening any moment. We also know when our true life started. Paul takes Timothy back to when God's plan started. God's gospel was put into effect not by any human being. In the eternity before human beings, God established by grace his plan to save human beings. **"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus."**

For this Paul suffered. He preached the gospel and was rewarded with prison. **"Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."** Paul was called by the gospel of God and convinced the gospel saved him. That gospel was what God guarded. God made it so Paul could proclaim it, give it away, and others would hear and believe. And once Paul was dead, God would continue to guard that gospel. All would not be lost. Others would pick it up and proclaim it. The gospel would continue to bring people to faith and God's love in Jesus would continue to be known.

Could we understand if someone in that classroom froze, lied about being a Christian, maybe even denied? Fear and tension do crazy things. It wouldn't surprise me. Extreme suffering does that. Paul faced death by execution for the gospel. We face far less most days. The gospel doesn't bring attacks to you and me like it does in other parts of the world. But when suffering does happen what's our response? Do we fear sitting with a coworker sharing Jesus? Do we shift the message when someone at school asks how we feel about the recent changes in society for fear we'll have to tell what we know the Bible says? Do we lose our passion when others attack Christians? Do we even overhaul God's message of love so we can feel vengeance? Might we even shift the message to avoid suffering or protect ourselves or family? Who could blame us?

You've been called by God's gospel. Nothing but the death of one man was enough to save you from death. That's shocking enough. It runs opposite of culture. But it's the only message that does save you. **"Join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."** God's purpose was to rescue you from your sins. Nothing was needed from you, God provided it all. He had grace that was overflowing. Christ Jesus living among you by grace was part of God's purpose. Jesus proclaimed the gospel and by that gospel you believed. You were always part of God's purpose and grace, saving you was so important to God that he set the plan before you were born.

This particular teaching is most important. Paul encouraged Timothy, **"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus."** The message can't be changed. Jesus did it all and it's done. Jesus destroyed death. He was crucified for you and your sins. That needs no changing, no manipulation to make it easier. The gospel also proclaims how Christ **"brought life and immortality to light"**. Jesus rose from the dead to prove your sins were paid for. He proved everything was true. Life is yours. Immortality in Christ is yours. When facing suffering, keep to the pattern of the gospel. In temptation run to the truth of God's Word. In everything the world brings, you already have all that you need for life and immortality. In Christ you're saved. He will guard the gospel in you that has called you to faith till the end.

The mass shooting in Oregon was a tragedy. Because of sin we know it won't be the last. The flames of anger and sadness will once again be fanned higher. As persecution and suffering creep closer to us anger and fear might be fanned higher too. As senseless as tragedy, suffering, pain and persecution might seem God never operates senselessly. Paul faced suffering and so did Timothy. So will you. Yet, Paul's encouragement is for you. Fan into flame your faith. God's power will not fail to show God's love in your life. And you were called by the gospel to life and immortality in Christ.