

Hitherto – Underneath – Henceforth

2 Timothy 4:1-7

By **John Blanchard**

Let me encourage you to take your Bibles and turn with me to the second letter to Timothy, chapter 4. And when you have found it, let us pray together.

Our great and gracious God and Father, we thank You for the high privilege You give us of having before us the living and enduring Word of God. And as we come to it, we pray that You will graciously do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Open Your words to our hearts and open our hearts to Your Word, and give to each one of us the grace of understanding and the greater grace of obedience. And we ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

As most of you will know, this is the second of two letters that the apostle Paul wrote to a younger colleague, Timothy, in the position of leadership in a local church:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine, instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

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.

And this is the Word of God.

It's a great privilege to be back at First Presbyterian Church Jackson this morning. I've been coming here on and off for a great number of years. I

remember originally in Jim Baird's time and then of course throughout the whole of Ligon Duncan's time here and now just preempting the induction of David Strain. But it is a special pleasure to be here today and to be introduced in English, albeit with a somewhat Scottish accent which may be accelerated in a few months time if Scotland decides to disestablish itself with the United Kingdom, but I won't pursue that any further in the time available to me! It has been said all good things come to an end and it's a phrase with which we are familiar, and there are a number of things about which it is obviously true. Today is the last day of my present preaching tour in the United States. As it happens, dealing in a nice round figure, it is also the last day of my eightieth preaching tour here in your country. And it has been supposed from a little while before I left England that this would be my final tour in your country. If all of that is true, then this is the final sermon I will ever preach on this side of the Atlantic. And if that is the case, I can think of nowhere, I know of nowhere where I would sooner preach it than here in this church. It's this church that I have visited certainly more than any other, it is in this church that I have more very dear friends than in any other church, and this is one in which I and my late wife Joyce enjoyed such wonderful hospitality and so much kindness. And so naturally I've given a great deal of thought and prayer to the exact word that should be preached on this, if you'll allow me to call it such, very special occasion. And every preacher know that he should preach from the Word - but exactly what word? And it is critically important that if possible he gets the right one because it is possible to get the wrong one; and I've done it.

A Fitting Word for Today

I was leading a house party in Norway many years ago now and there was a fair-haired young lady in the group of about seventy as I recall, and in God's goodness during the course of the time there and in the preaching and the counseling, I was of some spiritual help to her. So when it was all over, I sent her a further letter of encouragement just to nudge her along the Christian way. And I ended the letter by giving a Biblical reference which I thought would be especially good for her. And the reference I had in mind was Proverbs 10:22 - "The blessing of the Lord makes rich and he adds no sorrow with it." Unfortunately, I wrote Proverbs 11:22, which is still part of God's Word and you might have thought could still have been greatly used in her life, however, she wrote to me a little while later and said, "Thank you for all you did in Norway, but I'm a little concerned as to the verse you gave me which reads, 'As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman without discretion.'" And I had to get out of that one in a hurry! Well I have to get out of here in something of a hurry today because I'm getting a plane to Atlanta and then flying overnight to England, but I dearly hope I haven't got the wrong word for this morning's service.

In fact, I've got three words and you will have seen them in the bulletin and their context will appear clearly as we go along. The first is from the story of Samuel -

the last of Israel's judges and the first of its prophets. And many of you will know about his call, his remarkable childhood, his great ministry. We are told at one point Samuel's word came to all Israel and then, as happens in the case of so many nations, great times are followed by exactly the reverse. Disaster befell Israel, they got into a dreadful conflict with the Philistines, thirty thousand foot soldiers were lost very quickly, and even worse the Ark of the Covenant - the visible sign of God's presence with them - was taken. And things went from bad to worse until Israel eventually came to its senses and Samuel called them to Mispah for a national day of prayer. When the Philistines heard about this they decided to attack and this absolutely terrified the Israelites, especially as the sight of the day of prayer was precisely the one where they'd been so horribly defeated earlier. But Samuel called on the Lord and God answered his prayer and routed the Philistines. Then we read Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mispah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer saying, "Hitherto has the Lord helped us."

I. "Hitherto"

And so our first word this morning is the word, "hitherto." And we, every one of us, regardless of who we are or what we are, should take this statement upon our lips and know it to be true in our hearts. "Hitherto the Lord has helped us."

Help to Survive

To begin with, He has helped us to survive; we're still here. And my first visit to the church has to be some twenty or so years ago. I recall, whenever I have the opportunity, it's very rare, of meeting a delightful, retired Methodist minister of mine, whenever we meet the greeting one to the other is very unusual. I've never heard it used anywhere else. We quote antiphonally part of a great Wesley hymn. One of us says to the other, "And are we yet alive to see each other's face?" and the other responds, "Glory and praise to Jesus give for His redeeming grace." I don't know what people think when they hear us greet each other in that way, but it's a delightful way to do it and I thank God for him and for every memory of him. But we're here and the Lord has helped us and without the Lord's help we would not be here. And we all know, and I speak especially of the circle of close friends that I have in the church, we have friends and church members and family members who have died since I first came here but we are still here, to quote Wesley again, "to see each other's face." Now we are older, we may have more aches and pains, and some at this very time may be battling sickness or health issues, some have reached what has been called "The Metallic Age" - they have gold in their hair and silver in their teeth and sometimes the other way around, and led in their boots, and as someone added the other day when I mentioned it to him, titanium in their hips!

But they're still here and we are here by the grace of God. It is literally, actually,

really true. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. We are here to enjoy each other's company, to join in public worship of God, to sense His blessing among us, to share our testimonies of God's goodness to us since last we met. And who knows the myriad of ways in which we have been preserved and delivered. Who knows how many angels have interfered to rescue us from situations that might otherwise have been disastrous. And it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. We are daily debtors to God's common grace by which we have life and breath and everything else. It is literally impossible for any of us to remember, to enumerate, to list all of God's common graces to us. If we had to declare such on our annual tax returns they would have to be listed under the item headed, "Unearned Income." We did not earn any of it, but by the grace of God we have received it. So the Lord has helped us to survive.

Help to Continue in the Faith

And He's helped us to continue in the faith. Among the saddest names mentioned in the whole of Scripture are the names Hymenaeus and Philetus, who apparently showed every evidence of truth faith. They had been received as these friends were this morning into church membership, and yet what we read about them is what I trust we will never read about our friends this morning is, they wandered away from the faith. And I think there's a terrible lesson in that. They wandered away from the faith. It wasn't a suddenly, here one minute and gone the next. There was a slow diminution of their interest perhaps in their attendance, perhaps in their listening to the Word or in their prayer life, and they just slowly ebbed away until they reached the point when they no longer fellowshiped with God's people. And we know some who have done that. You can think of them in your own minds. Once they would have been here or there or up there in the gallery and now they're not. They're somewhere else this morning. They would have been reading the Bible this morning; now they're reading the Sunday papers. They would have been listening to the preaching of God's Word; now they're watching television. And it's desperately, desperately sad. Once they were active and bright and showing signs of life and growth and now they've gone. And some, to make matters worse, have become antagonistic to the Christian faith - want nothing whatever to do with it. I can think of a preacher who is now in a situation where one tries to talk with him about Christian things says, "I don't want to hear a thing about it."

And we're here. And the Lord has helped us to continue in the faith. Oh, we've known difficult times - we've had times of doubt; there have been times when, in our own hearts, we know that we have taken backwards steps; we have been grieved by a sense of failure and sometimes in places where we swore we would never fail again, but we're here. How is that so? One line from John Newton's hymn will suffice to explain it to us, "Tis grace that brought us safe thus far" - we are debtors to mercy alone and to the grace of God.

Help to Serve with Faithfulness and Effectiveness

And then thirdly the Lord has helped us to serve Him with a measure of faithfulness and effectiveness. In a church of this size, it would be exciting, exhilarating, amazing even if we could scoop together - it would be impossible of course - if we could scoop together every way in which every member of this fellowship had been used in the ministry of the kingdom of God, ways in which God has graciously blessed the members of this church in Christian service. Where would we begin? And when, if ever, would we end? Work in the Sunday School and youth organizations, in men's ministries, in lady's ministries, in missionary support, in para-church Christian organizations, in literature evangelism, in mentoring and counseling and personal witnessing, and then in all the administrative side of a church this size. And how much more, when we had scooped all of that together, how much more would there be that we don't know or simply can't recall? And it's probably as well that we couldn't. We sowed the seed but God brought the harvest and we rejoice to give Him the glory because all of it is due to Him.

I've been in full-time Christian service now for over fifty years and I'm still humbled when I hear of someone who has come to faith in Christ or been significantly helped in their Christian lives through the preaching of the writing ministry. When I flew out to Albuquerque a couple of weeks ago in the course of this tour, the very first email that I opened was from someone who said, "Look, you won't remember my name, but you spoke at a barbeque in the south of England in 1962. There weren't very many people there but I want you to know that I came to faith in Christ on that day and have been walking with Him ever since." Now you simply cannot pay for that kind of encouragement. What an immense encouragement it was to me. But in none of this and in none of what you have seen the Lord graciously do through your work of ministry, is there any room for boasting, because all the sowing and the watering is done but it is only God who can give the increase. Or to change the metaphor, it's the Lord who builds the house. "Unless the Lord builds the house they labored in vain that build it."

I must remind you of 1 Corinthians 15 and Paul writing about the ministry of the apostles corporately now and on behalf of all of them. And he says, "I worked harder than any of them," and if that sounds like the beginning of a boast he immediately adds, "yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." So hitherto is my first word. "Hitherto the Lord has helped us." We're here and we're in the faith and the Lord has been graciously pleased to use us as we've sought to serve Him.

II. "Underneath"

Now the second word comes from Deuteronomy. Moses was coming to the end of an astonishing life and leadership, he was 120 years of age, and he knew he

wouldn't make it to the Promised Land. He gathered all of the people of Israel together and he reminds them of God's faithfulness, amazing faithfulness in spite of their repeated rebellion, and then he pronounced a final blessing on them. And almost his last sentence in Deuteronomy 33 was this, "The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms." So my first word is "Hitherto" and the second word is "Underneath." Now as a nation, Israel had had a very difficult and indeed checkered career - 400 years of slavery years in Egypt, 40 traumatic years wandering in the desert, and now they were on the brink of the Promised Land. But even then, when they entered the Promised Land their troubles were far from over. They were to be surrounded by aggressive enemies, tribal conflict broke out again and again, they were dragged down by a succession of ungodly kings, and although they had their good moments they also had their very bad ones. Problems faced them of one kind or another. I can't think of anything more up to date than that. A friend told me the other day, talking about the storms of life, and he said this. It may not have been original to him but it registered with me both then and I think when I had heard it on a previous occasion - we are either in a storm or we've just come through a storm or we're headed for one, which sounds so negative a way to approach life. But I suggest to you, and the older you are the more you will know this to be true, that it's frankly realistic.

"Just Fine"?

The first two American phrases I picked up - I first came to this country I think in 1969, two phrases that I use that everybody was using all the time. The first was "Coca-Cola" and the second was "Just fine." Ask anybody how they were, "I'm just fine." Go to a pastor's conference, a little local group perhaps, and Pastor A says to Pastor B, "How are things in the church?" "They're just fine." You know he's lying through his teeth! They can't all be just fine! I used to call those pastors gathering a feast of trumpets. Everybody was asked how they were doing and it was always, "Just fine!" I recall preaching at a Bible conference convention in Northern Ireland some years ago and I was there for a week. I was in the little gathering room before going into the sanctuary and the men who were members of the committee came in and one of them said to me, "How are you, John?" and I said, "I'm just fine." He said, "You're not. I've got an appointment for you at 10 o'clock in the hospital tomorrow morning." My host knew that I had a problem and he had told this doctor and this doctor wasn't having any of this "Just fine" stuff. He'd probably been to America a few times and knew how false it was and he said, "No, no, no. You're not just fine. You're due in hospital tomorrow morning." And I was, and grateful of course for what they were able to do for me there.

The Present and Constant Reality of God's Presence

Now I spoke earlier about a catalogue of fruitful service that we might have and many could add another list of mountaintop experiences in their lives - when things went or were going very well in terms of their personal health or the

progress of their children or other family members, their financial situation is doing very well, their business is progressing. There are even some here, and I see them all over the congregation, who brag about their golf game from time to time, and I don't only mean Tom Rice, but there are others who do. And young Mr. Kruger down there is not beyond it too! But we also have our valleys if we are absolutely honest - times of disappointment and doubt and insecurity and pain and sorrow, yes, and bereavement. And you may be in one of those valleys this morning. You may be identifying with Charlotte Elliott in her hymn, "Just As I Am" when she speaks of "fightings within and fears without." Well hear the Word carefully - "Underneath are the everlasting arms."

Notice that Moses didn't say "Underneath *were* the everlasting arms;" he's not saying, "Well there were times when things were going very badly and it was good to know that God was there and upholding me in all of that in that situation," although he certainly had testimony to that effect. Nor does he say, "Underneath *will be* the everlasting arms - Whatever happens in the future I know that I can trust the Lord to take care of me." He certainly would have been glad to give that testimony and to rest on that promise. What he says, however, is "Underneath *are* the everlasting arms." They are, if I can dare to use this phrase, a permanent fixture. God doesn't suddenly shoot out His everlasting, sustaining, strengthening, comforting arms when an emergency arises and then withdraw them as soon as the emergency passes. God never folds His arms. They are always outstretched and underneath His people and their circumstances, which means that they are underneath you and yours this morning. And notice too that Moses didn't say, "Well they're underneath this or that or something else in particular" because they're underneath everything. That surely is the reason why he simply says, "They're underneath." He doesn't pick out a particular pain, difficulty, sorrow, bereavement, heartache, doubt, insecurity. He just says they're underneath. It's impossible to go so far down that you are beneath the reach of God's grace and goodness and love. You are never in a situation where God says, "I can't reach you," because underneath are the everlasting arms.

Testimony of Sufficient Grace

Our minds have been occupied so much in recent weeks with the ongoing drama of the 777 airliner out there in the Far East, MH370. We've seen the pictures of the screaming, inconsolable relatives. But one night, very late one night, I was listening to a radio program in England and heard the brother of one of the passengers say this - "It's hard for all of us but my faith is in God who is sovereign over all things. I don't know the purpose behind this disaster but He is sustaining me through it all." I thought that was a great testimony. And then my heart was wrung by another interview with a girlfriend of the same passenger. Now listen to what she had to say, addressing as it were, the missing passenger - "Can you feel my love coming through to you? It is bottomless so it should be able to reach you no matter where you are." I could have wept. It was heartfelt, it was emotional, it was sentimental, but was it real? The victim concerned, for all

she knew, was lying dead and drowned at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. How different the testimony of the man who said, "I'm trusting in the Lord whatever the outcome might be."

The story is told of a man who bought a Rolls-Royce car in South Africa and when it was finally delivered he asked the dealer what the horsepower of the vehicle was and the dealer said, "Well I simply don't know." "Well look it up in the brochure." Well the brochure was bigger than your hymnbook! But he went through it and he said, "No, it's not there. They don't give the horsepower of the Rolls-Royce." And the man said, "Well I insist. I've paid a great deal of money for it and I insist on knowing. Send a cable or whatever to Rolls-Royce in England and ask them." So a long cable was sent with the precise details of the chassis number, the engine number. There was no question; it was this particular vehicle. And Rolls-Royce replied in one word - "Adequate." And what they were saying was this - "It doesn't matter how heavy the load, how steep the hill, how fast he wants to go; whatever he wants to do in that vehicle, all he has to do is to get on board, obey the instructions, and he will find the vehicle is adequate." And my dear friend, this morning, our God's grace is adequate for you. His grace is sufficient for you and it really does not matter where or who you are.

III. "Henceforth"

Hitherto the Lord has helped us. Underneath are the everlasting arms. And the third word comes from 2 Timothy. Written near the end of Paul's life, he gives counsel to Timothy for dealing with heresy. He warns him about the dangers of apostasy, he exhorts him to be earnest and courageous and faithfully to preach the Word, and then nearing the end of his own ministry he says this, "Henceforth, there is in store for me the crown of righteousness." So the third word is "Henceforth." So this is looking ahead. Another common saying would be that no one knows what the future holds. Well that's no more strictly true than the one with which I began which was, "All good things come to an end." But to say nobody knows what the future holds is simply not true as far as the Christian is concerned. There are specific things about the future that the Christian most certainly does know and we can flesh that out. And what Paul means by turning to the end, and you won't need to turn it up because you all know it so well, at the end of Psalm 23 where David says this - "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." So two statements - one about this life and one about the life to come.

Goodness and Mercy in This Life

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." That would be a wonderful testimony if you were speaking to a non-Christian who were to say to you in the course of a general conversation, "Well of course nobody knows what the future holds;" wouldn't it be great if you could say to them, "Actually, I do."

That would get their attention because they would wonder whether you were some kind of soothsayer! And you would say, "Well actually I do know what the future holds and what I know it holds is this - goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." This isn't meant to be a seminar on personal evangelism but I think that would be a good thing to do. So the next time somebody says to you, "Well who knows what the future holds," you could say, "Well I do, for a start." And I believe that would really get their attention. So for as long as the Lord allows us to remain on the earth we will have good days and we will have bad days. If we can borrow from Dickens, "We will have the best of times and the worst of times." And the trouble is, we never know when the worst of times are going to turn into the best of times or the other way around. One day we're on top of the world; the next day the world is on top of us. It can happen with bewildering speed. But we can be absolutely sure that goodness and mercy will follow us regardless of where the dial is pointing.

I had a friend in Florida who was born with spinal muscular atrophy, a dreadful disablement that meant he had no use of arms or legs. For fifty-seven years he endured dreadful pain and for several was simply unable ever to get out of bed. When I was put in touch with him he was a radiant Christian even though he was physically wasted. He was a keen sports fan, great sense of humor, ran his own website - please don't ask me how! - and was responsible in that way for reaching out to others with the Gospel around the world. When I was put in touch with him I asked if I could please quote part of his testimony. Would he write part of his testimony for me to include in a book that I was writing at the time. The book was called, *Is God Past His 'Sell By' Date*, and it had a chapter, I recall, I think in those days, "Where Was God On September 11?" And I wanted a testimony at the end of it that would say, "Well here is a bad situation and this is where God was." Let me read part of his testimony for you. "The psalmist says, 'Come and listen all you who fear God.' Let me tell you what He has done for me and I gladly do so. I bear witness that never servant had such a Master as I have, never brother such a Kinsman, never spouse such a Husband, no sinner ever had a better Savior, no mourner a better Comforter. I want none beside Him. In life He is my life and in death He shall be the death of death. In poverty He is my riches, in sickness my health, in darkness my sun. Jesus is to me all grace and no wrath, all truth and no falsehood, and of truth and grace He is full, infinitely full." And he was in dreadful pain when he wrote those words. He is not in pain now because he is with Christ, which is far better. So we do know what the future holds - goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

Goodness and Mercy in the Life to Come

And then the last phrase, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Well to give you another well-known phrase, "There's no place like home." And after fifty-two years on the road I can tell you that that's written in capital letters all over my heart and mind. There is no place like home. And I stayed many, many times in all of my visits to the States and all around the world, I've many times stayed in

homes and hotels that were way above my pay scale; I have also stayed in a motel where I had to make sure I had killed all the cockroaches before I got into bed, but I don't want to disturb your Sunday lunch so we won't pursue that! But wherever I have stayed, however luxurious the accommodations, I've always looked forward to getting back home. But with a house built in the early part of the last century, there were inevitably things that were always going wrong, and when I got back home there might be a leak in the roof or a broken gutter or a fence that had fallen or weeds that were invading my yard like triffets on steroids! There was always something that had been going wrong, and yet it was home. and there were times when I could hardly wait to unlock the front door before shouting, "Hallelujah!" Being in England, of course, I would wait until the door was firmly shut and nobody could hear me, but nevertheless that was my state of mind.

Yet all of those things are temporary, and for God's people, for those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus there is a permanent home and there's no place like it. It is the home of righteousness. It is a home in which there is no more sin or sorrow or sickness or suffering or struggles, and where every holy desire is satisfied. And my question, as I come toward an end, would be this - Do we think often or seriously enough or joyfully enough or rewardingly enough about our eternal home? If we're going on vacation somewhere for just a week we might take weeks here and there reading something about it, getting brochures about it, describing it, talking to our friends about it, talking about what we hope to see and do when we were there. How do we treat the glorious certainty of our eternal home in heaven? Especially as the Bible says to us, "Set your hearts on things above," and in the very next verse, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." I ask again, how long do we meditate on those things? Richard Baxter, said to be the most prolific theologian that England had ever produced, in his book, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, tells how ever since he was thirty years of age he spent thirty minutes a day meditating on heaven, thinking, rolling truths about heaven around in his mind until they caused him to rejoice in his heart. And he says he did that to increase his expectation of his future home and to increase his dedication to his present ministry.

Now of course there's no law that says this is how many minutes a day you should spend thinking about heaven. It's not even thirty or twenty or ten or five, but I ask myself how many minutes per day - if I got to the end of a week - how many minutes in that week would I have spent thinking, meditating, rolling the truth around in my heart and mind about the heavenly home and what awaits me there? Isaac Watts has some words in a hymn I've never, as far as I recall, sung them. And they read like this - "My thoughts surmount these lower skies and look within the veil; there springs of endless pleasure rise, the waters never fail. Light are the pains which nature brings; how short her sorrows are when, with eternal future things, the present we compare. I would not be a stranger still to that celestial place where I forever hope to dwell and see my Savior's face." The last words my darling wife, Joyce, heard from me before the Lord called her home

were the very words that we've been thinking of toward the end of this morning's sermon - "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Hitherto - what a testimony we have. Underneath - what security we have. Henceforth - what a future we have. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Amen.

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