

# He Stood by Me and Strengthened Me for the Sake of the Gospel

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the importance of relying on Jesus as the rock-solid reliable friend in the midst of relational challenges in ministry. It highlights the need to cherish and forgive imperfect friendships while recognizing Jesus as the only flawless and all-satisfying friend who can bring believers safely into His heavenly kingdom. The sermon also underscores the significance of reading and spiritual nourishment, the value of Christian fellowship alongside the presence of Jesus, and the humility in not seeking great possessions despite influence and authority.*

**Scripture:** 2 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 4:17, James 4:4, 1 Corinthians 13:12, Matthew 6:19, Hebrews 13:5

**Topics:** "Reliance on Jesus", "Forgiveness in Friendships"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Let's pray together. Father in heaven there are so many terrible and wonderful things in this passage. I pray that you would break forth from this word and that you would speak from it into the needs represented by everybody listening to me.

And that salvation would come to the lost and that holiness would come to the worldly and that reconciliation would come to those who are embittered and estranged with others. And that your name now would be made great. I ask this through Christ, Amen.

So these last closing words of 2nd Timothy are sad and beautiful and heartbreakingly hope-filled. And if that cluster of words, sad, beautiful, heartbreaking, hope-filled, seems odd, like they don't really go together, then probably you have some hard and helpful experiences yet to go through in life. So I've prayed over this text, so many things flood to my mind that could be said.

It appears to me to be quite a choppy text. A collection of assorted concerns. Come to me before winter if you can.

Bring my cloak from Troas. Watch out for Alexander the coppersmith. Nobody stood by me in my last trial.

The Lord stood by me. Greet my friends Prisca and Aquila. Trophimus I left sick down at Miletus.

All the brothers greet you. The Lord be with you. What would you do with all that? So as I've tried to discern what I should say, it has seemed to me perhaps fitting that a choppy text should have a choppy sermon.

And so I have collected seven applications. And that they might just not fit together so well is okay. I hope.

Because this text I find difficult to fit together. I think the overall point or the overall impact that Paul wants these verses to have is this. No matter how hard ministry is, Jesus is rock-solid reliable.

I think that's the main thing he wants you to take away. Verses 17 and 18. When nobody stood by him at his defense, the Lord stood by me.

Strengthen me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed.

Bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Now I think that's the main thrust.

He wants us to take that away. The Lord will stand by you. But to feel the force of that, you need to you need to feel and see the assortment, cluster of burdens that surrounds that.

And then it'll get bigger. It'll feel more wonderful if you see all these things around Paul that are not so happy. So I've got seven observations here that I hope will be useful to you.

They were to me. Number one. Christian ministry is relationally hard.

I'm thinking first about Paul and Timothy and vocational ministers, but I'm thinking of you too because you are all you're Christian, you're all ministers called upon to love other people for their good according to your gifts. That's what ministry is and that's every believer. So I think this is for you when I say Christian ministry, that is Christian life, is relationally hard.

And Paul seems to want Timothy to feel that because of how many he dumps on him. Here's five and there are more. Verse 10.

Demas in love with the present world has deserted me. He's gone to Thessalonica. So I think Demas was once a faithful partner because over in Colossians chapter 4 he says, Luke the beloved physician greets you and so does Demas.

And now he's gone and he's forsaken Paul. That's number one. Number two, just being alone in the ministry.

Not just forsaken, but alone in the ministry can be a trial. So verses 10, middle of the verse, Crescens has gone to Galatia. I don't think that means he forsook me, I just think there's some ministry things that I wanted to do.

Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus over to Dalmatia, Luke alone is with me. So once upon a time there was quite a team here. Now it's just me and Luke and it gets worse.

Number three, Alexander the coppersmith, this is verse 14, Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. Verse 15, middle of the verse, he strongly opposed our message. So ministry is relationally hard, not just because there's loneliness and sometimes abandonment on the inside, but there's opposition, verbal, on the outside.

And nobody likes to be verbally attacked. It's hard to be verbally assaulted, even by people you expect it from. Every moment of unexpected silence from a friend and every verbal blow from an enemy wounds the spirit of the Christian and it happens a lot.

So ministry is relationally hard. Number four, verse 16, perhaps the saddest sentence in the paragraph or the book. At my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.

I'm gonna come back to this, but for now just feel the force of it. Luke, where were you? Number five, verses 20 to 21, Erastus remained at Corinth. I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus.

Do your best to come before winter. So sometimes strategic deployments take away friends. I left Trophimus.

Sometimes sickness interrupts a planned partnership. I left him sick. Sometimes seasonal changes make aloneness all the more difficult.

Please try to get here before winter. Paul mentions those things surely to cause Timothy to feel ministry is hard relationally. That's number one.

Number two, friends in the ministry can let you down and never return or care for you again. Verse 10, Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Now I admit, I do not know if he repented.

There's nothing in the Bible that says he did or didn't. There's no evidence that he did, but surely all of us, at least those who are older, know ministers who have forsaken their partners and left the ministry, left the faith, and as far as we know, never returned. We know people like that.

I think Paul wants Timothy here to feel not only a preparation for this sorrow in ministry. This happens, Timothy. I'm telling you it happened to me so that you'll be ready when it happens to you.

I think he also wants to hear the cause so that he can avoid that and doesn't ever do it. In other words, not ever is abandoned and doesn't ever abandon because he's seen the cause here. Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.

There is a love for the world that makes ministry impossible. There is a love for the world that produces either the abandonment of ministry or the making of ministry so worldly it's useless. It happens as often.

So if a minister starts to become worldly, he's got two choices. Leave the ministry or make the ministry worldly. Then you can survive.

Demas couldn't. Why? Paul! It wasn't going to happen on Paul's team. So here's a caution to young, and I say old, but I think especially young, culture-embracing evangelical Christians.

You need to ponder Demas a long time. In love with this present world, he found ministry with Paul impossible. And he left it.

There is a love for the world. There's a love for this present age, this God ignoring, God denying, God demeaning, Christ distorting products of culture that is mutually exclusive with real deep love for Jesus. There is a love for this world that is irreconcilable with ministry to the world.

The ministry of exposing the world. The ministry of witnessing to the world. The ministry of rescuing people from the world.

None of that's going to happen very well if you just love it, and they think you're just one of them. So, young Timothy and young Bethlehem, remember, more people leave Christ, and more people leave church, and more people leave ministry out of love for the world than anything else. I've wondered, what was in Thessalonica? In love with this world, this present world, Demas has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Was it a woman? Was it home? Maybe he grew up there, and he was just nostalgic, and was tired of this missionary life, and living with the Apostle Paul, and just wanted to go home. Was it a business offer? I got gifts for goodness sakes. I can make some money.

Or was it just a comfortably safe distance away from this maniac Paul? We don't know. Here's what we know. Demas didn't leave out of love for Jesus, but out of love for the world.

That's why everybody leaves. I've seen it happen. We've seen it happen.

Some missionaries. He didn't leave to follow Jesus. He left Jesus to embrace the world, the pleasures of the world, the entertainments of the world, the kickback of the world, the praise of the world, the friends of the world.

So some of your partners in ministry will do that. Number three, good friends in ministry can let you down and still be good friends in ministry. This is not Demas.

Verse 11, striking for a couple of reasons, Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me. First consider Luke, or first consider Mark.

Just sort of pass over Mark. You remember Mark. Mark abandoned the ministry on the first missionary journey.

He left Paul and Barnabas and he went home. And Paul would not have him on the second missionary journey, and Barnabas would, and so Paul and Barnabas split over this guy. And now get Mark, bring him with you.

He's very useful to me. Partners in ministry can let you down and be partners in ministry. Consider Luke.

Luke has been with Paul, it seems, ever since Troas on the second missionary journey. We know that because Luke wrote Acts, and you can tell when he's saying we, and he can tell when he's saying you, and where he is there, and where he's not there in the book of Acts. He was a very close friend of Paul.

He's called the beloved physician in Colossians 4.14. He was evidently his personal doctor for Paul's ailments, whatever they were. He was the biographer of Paul. This was a very close relationship, a

respected relationship.

Verse 16, shocking. At my first defense no one stood by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them.

And he had just said, in verse 11, Luke alone is with me. Now, I know maybe he was sick and dead-ridden. Maybe he was on a trip that week.

But what about the others? Verse 21, second half of the verse, Ubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens, and Linus, and Claudia, and all the brothers. Where were they? They all forsook me. Nobody showed up at my trial.

I was standing there all by myself. Ubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, all the brothers, none of them showed up. They didn't come through.

Now what's Paul's response to that? Verse 16, second half of the verse, may it not be charged against them. This means at least that Paul wasn't going to hold it against them. And I think he's praying to the Lord, don't you hold it against them either.

That's my desire. He is sending greetings to Timothy, in verse 21, from all the people who let him down at his point of huge need. They let me down.

They didn't come. And he didn't say, write your own letter of greeting. I'm not going to mention you in my letter.

It didn't. It appears to be okay. It appears to be fixed.

Paul's not making an issue out of it. Be careful. There are so many circumstances in life that might account for the people that didn't show up for you.

And you just are drawing the wrong conclusion. 32 years I've been at this church as a pastor. You know what one of my sorrows is? There are hundreds of you, hundreds of you, who could say, Pastor John never showed up at the hospital.

Pastor John didn't come to the funeral of my mother. Pastor Don didn't come to the wedding of my son. He didn't show up.

He let me down. Wives, you might say, if my husband loved me, he wouldn't have said what he said, and he wouldn't have forgotten that day. That's not true.

You might say of your teenage child, if he respected me, if he had any affection for me at all, he wouldn't act like that. He wouldn't treat me like a leper. He wouldn't forsake me.

And on the basis of what Paul is saying here, and what Christ has done for those who forsook Him, even Peter, and the 11, they all forsook Him, I want to plead with you, don't be simplistic and don't be unforgiving. Don't be simplistic. It is simplistic, that is excessively simple, to say, if they were real Christians, they would have stood by me in the hospital, at the wedding, at the funeral, in our anniversary, as a child.

If they were real Christians, they would... It's not true. Life isn't like that. Human souls and human circumstances aren't that simple.

It is possible to love someone deeply and let them down. So if you're among the black-and-white, rigid, overly simplistic people, who every time you are let down, you draw the worst possible conclusions from this professing Christian, you're wrong. That's a bad attitude.

That will kill you and all the relationships around you, ruin your church, ruin your small group, ruin your family, and spread out like gangrene from you if you live and feel that way. Paul did not respond like that. Nobody showed up.

Inconceivable that nobody would show up in Rome at Paul's hand when he's in a foreign city, on trial for his life, and he says, not gonna hold it against them. I'll name them in my letter and send their greetings to my friend Tim. Because he just knows life isn't that simple.

There are imperfections and failings and fallibilities and finiteness in human beings and human situations and human circumstances that just aren't that simple. There isn't a straight line between not showing up and being a non-christian or a lack of lover. It's just not like that.

And don't be unforgiving. Suppose they were lazy or unkind or neglectful or suppose they really have a fault in not showing up. Don't be unforgiving.

He said, may it not be charged against them. Not my heart against them, not God's heart against them. Here's the point.

Good friends in ministry will let you down and they can still be good friends in ministry. It's up to you. Luke and Ubulus and Putin's and Linus and Claudia didn't show up.

And Paul sends their greetings. That's number three. Number four, Jesus never intended that the enjoyment of his presence would replace the enjoyment of the presence of Christian friends.

Get that? Jesus never intended that our enjoyment of his presence would replace the enjoyment of the presence of Christian friends. Put it another way, when Christ died so that we could enjoy him supremely, he did not nullify the enjoyment of Christian fellowship. Friends.

He created it when he died. Christ always intends for your friendship with him to be the heartbeat of your friendship with others. His presence would be the central joy of Christian friendship.

And the joy of Christian friendship would magnify the worth of Christ because he's the common treasure between the friends. That's the way he aims it to be. Now where do I see that in this text? Look at verse 17.

You know everyone failed Paul. He says, nevertheless the Lord stood by me and strengthened me. I've got a friend.

Oh, I've got a friend. All you failures. This is not the way he talked at all.

The Lord stood by me and strengthened me. Now if that's all we had, you might say, see? Jesus comes through. Jesus always comes through.

And if Jesus comes through, let those fickle, failing, finite, fallible friends go. Who cares? I've got Jesus. What does Paul say? Verse 9. Do your best to come to me soon.

Verse 21. Do your best, in case you didn't hear me the first time, do your best to come before winter. I want Timothy's presence.

Jesus standing by Paul doesn't replace Paul's longing for Timothy. It informs it. It fills it.

It shapes it. It enriches it. It deepens it.

It doesn't replace it. Paul spoke this way so often. To the Romans, I long to see you.

I have longed for many years to come to you. To the Philippians, I love and long for you. My joy and my crown.

To the Thessalonians, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the Gospel, but our own selves because you had become very dear to us. So, even though mere human beings are fickle and fallen and finite and fallible and failing friends, and Jesus never fails, ever, ever, ever fails, Paul cherished those imperfect friendships, longed for them. Jesus never intended that the enjoyment of His presence would replace the enjoyment of friends, Christian friends.

Christ didn't die to create isolated worshipers. Here's one worshiping me and here's one worshiping me. Here's one worshiping me.

He died to create Christ-exalting friendships. That is, He died to create the church. That's number four.

Number five, nevertheless, Jesus is the only totally reliable friend for sinners. He is the only flawless friend and therefore He's the only all-satisfying friend and therefore He's the only one who can make all other friendships eternal. The sweetest words in this text, again, let's read them, verses 17 and 18.

The Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord, the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom.

To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen. So as much as you may love your earthly friends, they can't do that for you.

There is one friend who can bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom and that's Jesus. Only one can walk that path with you and see that you make it. Nobody else can rescue you like that.

So, Demas. What was wrong with Demas? Demas didn't compute. He didn't feel.

There was an insanity and a darkening and a blindness that came over Demas as he tasted the world. It was poison to his soul and he failed to feel what it means to walk away from Jesus, the one friend who can bring you safely to the heavenly kingdom. He just walked away into suicide.

Sin is insane. He's the one friend on the planet that can bring him to his heavenly kingdom instead of letting him go into hell and he abandons Paul and the ministry in love with the world that cannot do anything for you when you die and you will die. Crazy.

Tragic. You want to weep your eyes out when you see it happening. James said, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Demas, only Jesus can rescue you from every evil and bring you safely to the heavenly kingdom. Without him, you're not going to make it. So, by all means, plead for your Timothy to come.

By all means, seek Christian friendships. That's what the church is for. But when they fail, and they will fail, don't let the failure of the followers of Jesus make you crazy enough to reject the one friend who will always be there.

Isn't it amazing how many people do that? The church, the friends, fail them. And they say, oh, well, if that's what my friends who call themselves Christians are going to do, I'm throwing Jesus out. What? The one who'll never do that? That's crazy.

Don't do that. If you came in here tonight thinking, I'm gonna do that. I've had just up to here with Christians.

Okay, but don't throw him away. We're just a bunch of finite, fallible, failing sinners. We hate our sin.

We're sorry for the way we've let people down. I hope you are. But don't let our failures become an occasion for throwing away the one friend who never fails.

Paul did the opposite. Everybody left him, and he didn't say, well, I guess this Christianity thing is absolutely worthless. I'm the only one who's real.

He didn't even go there. He didn't even think about going there. Maybe he thought about it.

I don't know. But he didn't go there. I've got Jesus, and I can forgive them because Jesus forgave me.

So I'm putting them in the letter. That's number five. Number six.

Closeness to God at the end of your life does not remove the need or the desire to read and be spiritually nourished. I told you this was choppy. Oh, where did that come from? Verse 13.

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and also the books, and above all the parchments. I love that sentence. When you come, bring the books, the scrolls, and they have bound books, the scrolls, and the parchments.

Now, we don't know what was on those parchments or in those scrolls. The fact that they're both plural says to me you've got variety here. You've got more than one of these scrolls.

You've got more than one of these parchments, and so it could be the Bible, parts of the Bible. It could be books by others. It could be his own writings, notes that he took precious to him.

He wanted to think out another letter, and I have no idea what was on those scrolls. Nobody else knows either. So I'm not drawing any big conclusion about what he's reading.

I'm just saying this is amazing to me. This is the Apostle who is an inspired spokesman of the living God. God talks to Paul, tells him what to write.

He has just said, I enjoy right-hand intimacy with the living Christ. He stood by me, and he said, the hour of my departure is come. He's this close to death, and he wants something to read.

I think that's amazing. If I'm about to die, and I'm gonna see Jesus in a few hours or days or weeks, and I will know even as I am known, 1st Corinthians 13 12, why would I want to read anything now? A little more fallible human insight that I could get from reading the Bible or something else? I mean, I'm fallible, not that the Bible is. Would you do that? Why would you do that? Three reasons.

One, because reading and thinking over what you read is how God speaks now. Speaks now, not just in heaven, speaks to you now, both through his inspired Word and through illumined spiritual teachers, and reading them is a source of hearing God commune with you. Number two, reading and thinking over what you read is how God nourishes and strengthens the soul for dying.

How are you gonna get ready for death? Just wait. You won't. You want to read something.

You want to have some truth flowing into you here, because your mind is going and you need truth coming into your soul to help you die well. And third, reading and thinking over what you read is a way worship is ignited, and joy is increased, and peace is sustained for the journey and the river. So, form the habit of reading now, and don't ever think you will outgrow it as you approach the grave.

And if your eyes have gone, which they probably will, and you have outlived all your reading friends and you're over in Augustana, maybe on the fourth floor, take your lunch money and buy a reader. That is, pay somebody to read to you. It's more important than eating.

If your fingers are all gnarled up like this and you can't push the CD player, pay somebody to push it. And of course, we who are healthy should say nobody should have to pay anybody to do that, not as long as we have a church that shouldn't. Finally, number seven, people with great influence and great authority don't need great possessions, contrary to the American way.

Verse 13, when you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas. Seriously, you are the most famous and the most effective and the most authoritative Christian on the planet, Paul. Timothy is 1,000 miles away.

I googled it today. Rome to Ephesus. I don't know if he'd take a boat or walk.

No cars, no planes. This is going to be a hard, long journey, and Timothy has a job. He's the pastor in Ephesus, and you want him to bring you your coat.

Buy another coat. In Rome, they make coats. Ask Claudia to make you one.

What's going on here? Why is this in the Bible? And what is going on? Bring my coat. Well, I don't know, but it has the ring of unbelievable wartime simplicity to me. People that get power and influence start to feel like they are owed.

You owe me time, you owe me deference, you owe me a better seat on an airplane. You owe me! Don't you know who I am? There's nothing, nothing of that in the Christian ministry. Shouldn't be.

Nothing in Paul like that, as far as I can tell. I have a coat and winter is coming. Get the connection.

Oh, it's going to be cold, and you are writing this letter before the first winter of Rome hits. They told you what it's like. You left your coat, not knowing what the temperatures would be like in Rome.

Now you've been told what Minnesota is like, and you sin for your California coat, which won't work anyway. If God has given you the ability to make a lot of money, which he has for a lot of you, and that's okay, beware how much you keep. Don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, or moth and rust destroy, thieves break in and steal.

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. That is, invest in Christ's advancing mission. He will bring you safely to his heavenly kingdom.

You do not need a posh lifestyle here. If you make \$500,000, you do not need a \$500,000 lifestyle. I promise you, it will not do you good.

It will not be a good witness. So let me close with a story. This just struck me as amazing.

So my last point is, as influence increases, as power increases, as authority increases, and as income increases, don't buy the lie that you should be owed lots of coats. What's to do with only one coat anyway? Well, maybe because Jesus said if you've got two coats, give one to somebody. I'm gonna close with the story from William Tyndale.

William Tyndale was strangled to death and then burned at the stake October 6, 1536, and the reason he was killed was because he gave us the most beautiful English Bible that's ever been written. Tyndale's version, which became the King James Version, which was adapted to the Authorized Version, which has made its way into the ESV version. 90% of the ESV came from the pen of William Tyndale.

That's amazing, and he got killed for it. You hold this in your hand, it was paid for by blood. He wrote one letter that we have from that prison a few miles north of Brussels.

In 18 months he was in prison leading to his execution, and that letter included this. I beg your lordship that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me from the goods of mine, which he has, a warmer coat. Also, for this which I have is very thin, a piece of cloth to patch my leggings, but most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew grammar, and a Hebrew dictionary that I may pass the time in study.

Let's pray. Oh Father in heaven, this choppy assortment of things Paul said is very precious to us. We are thankful for these helpful windows into Paul's faith and into your faithfulness.

I'm thankful that you are a friend for sinners. I'm thankful that I'm surrounded by forgiving friends here. Nobody's ever beat me up for not showing up, even though I'm sure many have been disappointed.

I'm thankful for a forgiving people and forgiving staff, and I want to be a more forgiving husband and father and pastor and friend, and I'm sure in this room right now hundreds feel the same way. We just don't want to be overly simplistic and drawing conclusions about the people that have let us down when it's just probably not true. So help us to be relationship builders and preservers and reconcilers and healers rather than embittered, angry, unforgiving, simplistic relationship ruinners.

So come and magnify your friendliness to us and in us, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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