

The Heart of a Leader

*Saint Paul as Mentor,
Model, and Encourager*

Edward S. Little

About the cover: The painting, *The Apostle Paul*, is by artist Dustin Parent. A New Orleans native, Parent lives and works in Frenchtown, New Jersey. This painting is a part of a series called “Re-Imagining the Bible.” Learn more at theartofdustin.com.

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PROLOGUE

Famous Last Words

“Et tu, Bruté? Then fall Caesar.” Painful last words, these. Shakespeare’s Caesar looks into the face of his killers, recognizes his beloved but unfaithful friend, gasps a word of accusation, and dies.

Charles Foster Kane, the towering figure in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, speaks a mysterious last word: “Rosebud.”

Thomas More, awaiting the ax, says, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first,” and then turns to his executioner: “Be not afraid to do thine office.”

Saint Stephen, protomartyr of the Christian faith, prays for himself and his killers. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59-60).

Aware that his death would provoke war among his successors, and asked who should inherit his conquests, Alexander the Great declares, “To the strongest!”

W. C. Fields, on the other hand, utters more prosaic final words. To a lynch mob in *My Little Chickadee*, he says, “I’d like to see Paris before I die...Philadelphia will do.”

For centuries, Christians have pondered the last words of Jesus. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in

Paradise” (Luke 23:43). “Woman, here is your son....Here is your mother” (John 19:26-27). “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). “It is finished” (John 19:30). “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). On Good Friday, we mine these words for meaning. What do they tell us about Jesus? About the Father’s plan to reconcile the world to himself through Jesus’ death on the cross? About the depth of his love and the suffering that he is willing to endure for our sake? These questions are answered throughout the biblical narrative, and yet there is something profoundly important about the words on Jesus’ lips as the nails pierce his hands and his feet. We listen to the last words of Jesus more intently. They touch our hearts as well as our minds. Last words demand our attention in a way that no others do.

Decades ago, while serving as assistant rector of St. Michael’s Church in Anaheim, California, I visited an elderly parishioner named Francine in the hospital. Francine was one of those pillars who hold a community together through prayer, love, and sheer determination. Over the years, I’d come to know and respect her. When I entered her hospital room, she was asleep. I spoke her name several times and touched her hand, but she didn’t respond. So I stood there for a few minutes in silence and finally said a prayer aloud. All the while, Francine slept; or so it seemed. As I turned to leave the room, she began to pray, though her eyes remained closed. Her words were clear: to this day, I can hear them in my memory. “Lord, watch over Father Ed, keep him safe, bless his ministry.” And with that, her breathing became steadier, her sleep deeper. I wrote a note to her family on a business card, left it on the bedside table, and departed. Francine died that night. Did she know I was there? Or had the Lord in some miraculous way spoken through her? I’ll never know. But this is certain: her last words were a blessing uttered on behalf of an inexperienced young priest. I have carried those words in my heart ever since.

We have no “famous last words” from the Apostle Paul. Ancient Christian tradition maintains that he was executed—beheaded—in 68 CE, during the persecution initiated by the Roman emperor Nero. No one, however, recorded his final words. We do not know if, like Thomas More, Paul had the opportunity to speak before the ax fell. He died off-screen, his death caught up in the social and political chaos of the era. Years earlier, long before his Christian conversion, Paul had participated in the judicial killing of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1). In that grim moment, he heard Stephen pray for his executioners. Did Paul, awaiting the ax, do the same and pray for Nero? Did he, like Stephen, commend himself into Jesus’ gracious care? Or did he follow the example of Isaiah’s suffering servant, who “did not open his mouth” in the face of death (Isaiah 53:7)? We will never know.

The New Testament document known as the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy does not contain the apostle’s last words in any literal sense. But it comes close. The letter is presented in the New Testament almost as a last will and testament—not his final spoken words, certainly, but the last piece of writing that bears his name. Paul is in prison, presumably in Rome, his execution a certainty. Few friends are with him. Alone in a prison cell, he writes to his young apprentice and traveling companion, Timothy. This, Paul tells him, is what I want you to remember. These are the essential elements of Christian ministry. Here are the tools you will need when you take on the mantle of apostolic leadership.

Most of Paul’s letters appear to have been dictated. At one point, a scribe surfaces to give his own greeting (Romans 16:22). At another, Paul inserts a sentence in his own oversized handwriting (Galatians 6:11). None of this is a surprise. His letters, after all, have a kind of breathless tone. Sentences tumble out and sometimes run together. He interrupts himself and changes direction. One can imagine Paul pacing and dictating, the words fast-paced and relentless. 2 Timothy and the other pastoral epistles (more about that phrase

below) seem more structured. There's nothing spur-of-the-moment about them. In these documents, Paul is carefully laying out a pastoral plan, preparing for the next season in the church's life, bringing a spontaneous community into a semblance of order.

At this point, an honest disclaimer is important. I am treating 2 Timothy as Paul's final written words, but not all biblical scholars agree that he wrote them. Three letters in the New Testament are often called the pastoral epistles because they all, in one way or another, address the need for the young church to organize itself and provide for a well-ordered Christian ministry. Two of these letters—1 Timothy and Titus—specifically name church officers: bishops (1 Timothy 3:1-7), deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13), and elders (or presbyters, Titus 1:5-9; note that elder and bishop seem to be used interchangeably). It is true that one of Paul's indisputably genuine letters, Philippians, also mentions bishops and deacons (1:1). But in the pastoral epistles, a more systematic administrative structure is clearly beginning to develop. That, in fact, is one of the reasons why some scholars believe that the pastoral epistles were written long after Paul's death. These letters address concerns, they argue, that would not arise for decades.

Scholars cite two other reasons for rejecting Paul's authorship of the pastoral epistles: content and style. The letters, to begin with, do not contain the great themes that we find in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, or Philippians. There is nothing about salvation by grace through faith; no reference to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit; no struggle over the relationship between faith and works. These letters deal with matters foreign to the concerns that Paul typically addresses. In addition, many scholars argue, the pastoral epistles simply do not sound like Paul. The tone is more formal, the sentences more carefully crafted. It is hard to imagine the emotional author of Galatians writing (not dictating!) these systematic treatises on church organization.

PART I

REMEMBER YOUR ROOTS

The TV miniseries *Roots* took the nation by storm in 1977. For eight consecutive nights, tens of millions watched the fictionalized account of Alex Haley's family. His distant ancestor, Kunta Kinte, had been stolen from his home in the Gambia, shipped inhumanely across the Atlantic Ocean in the notorious Middle Passage, and sold as a slave in Maryland. His identity taken away—his owners even re-named him Toby—Kunta Kinte struggles to remember his home, his culture, his language. In one powerful scene, Kunta carries his newborn daughter, Kizzy, into a clearing at night and lifts her high above his head, the stars shining above them: an ancient ritual of his people, a reminder of who he is and where he comes from, and an expression of hope. “Kizzy, behold the only thing greater than yourself!” Kunta Kinte cries.

When I watch this scene, I always think of Mary and Joseph in the temple, presenting their newborn son to the Lord. They meet the aged Simeon, who takes Jesus in his arms and declares, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.” (Luke 2:29-30a). Here too is an ancient ritual (see Leviticus 12:1-8), an expression of deep rootedness in the past and of hope for the future.

Something essential is at work here. The principle applies to Kunta Kinte and Kizzy, to the Holy Family and Jesus, and to us: We

can't understand who we are or what God wants from us without immersing ourselves in the past. Our hope for the future has its roots in forces often only dimly understood. It may be that the enormous success of *Roots* stemmed from an intuitive awareness that we need to come to grips with our DNA, literally and figuratively. Services like Ancestry.com point to the yearning of so many to discover where they came from. While researching one's family can become obsessive, it can also be strangely liberating. The more we learn about ourselves, the more we can present ourselves to Jesus.

At first glance, Paul's initial word to Timothy surprises us. Because 2 Timothy is, in effect, his last will and testament, one might expect Paul to plunge quickly into practical advice. Do this! Don't do that! Instead, Paul urges Timothy to take a deep breath and look backward. Remember your roots, he tells his young apprentice. Remember who you are and where you come from. Remember the people who have had an impact on your life and the experiences that have formed you as a disciple. And so, like Paul and Timothy, we will linger for a time on our roots. From what kind of family did I emerge? How did my parents' faith—or lack of it—shape my own? Who are the people whom God sent into my life as teachers, mentors, and encouragers? What events forever changed me? What were the steps that led me to Jesus, opened my heart and mind to his will and purpose, and empowered me to follow him in ways that I could never have predicted? Paul counsels Timothy to take a step back from his urgent duties and ponder his roots. We can most profitably do the same. Our apostolic calling, like Timothy's, begins with a backward glance.

CHAPTER ONE

Lois and Eunice

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

—2 Timothy 1:1-5



“X,” my great-grandfather wrote on the signature line of his Civil War enlistment papers. Someone else scrawled, “James Little, his mark.” My great-grandfather was illiterate, but this didn’t prevent him from serving in the Fifth New York Heavy Artillery regiment that, among other things, rode with General Philip Sheridan in the merciless Shenandoah Valley Campaign. The new recruit’s enlistment papers include a physical description of James Little: 5 feet, 9 inches tall; blue eyes; sandy brown hair; 160 pounds. While I have no photograph of my great-grandfather, my physical description is identical to his. James Little was the source, my

father told me, of our family's connection to the Episcopal Church. An immigrant from County Kerry, Ireland, his Roman Catholic commitment was sufficiently lax that a priest paid a call to his farm in Afton, New York. According to family lore, my great-grandfather threw the priest off the porch and then, to show his utter contempt, became an Anglican.

My gene pool is quintessentially American. My father's paternal line is Irish, but his mother was descended from the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts, staunch Congregationalists. Among my ancestors on that side of the family is Roger Conant, founder and first governor of Salem, whose statue stands in the center of town to this day. Happily, he died before the famous witch trials. Somewhere deep in that family line is Oliver Goldsmith, eighteenth-century author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. On the other side of the family, my mother's people were Lithuanian Jews who emigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century from the city then known as Kovno and now called Kaunas. My maternal grandfather, Harry Herman, sang on the Yiddish stage in New York City and occasionally, in synagogues. His wife and my grandmother, Rose, was active in the Workman's Circle, an organization that promoted progressive social and economic causes as well as Yiddish culture. Relatives who remained in Kovno died in the Holocaust. Twice I have stood at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, and wept as I looked at photographs from the infamous Kovno Ghetto, where tens of thousands died. These were my people.

All of us have a DNA trail, for good or for ill. Instinctively, when a baby is born, we look for family resemblances. Does she have grandma's ears or Aunt Harriet's chin? Is his nose like Cousin Fred's? Even superficial facial characteristics remind us of our roots, as do gifts, talents, strengths, and weaknesses. Why is it that temper seems to run in some families, or a tendency to addiction, or difficulty in forming stable relationships? And why do some people seem to inherit, say, gifts of writing or painting or athletic

dexterity? Some of this, of course, is learned behavior; some may be embedded in our genes. Whatever the origin, the more we learn about our families, the more we understand ourselves—even if, at times, the information can be painful.

And so it was with Timothy. Paul begins this letter in typical fashion. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise that is in Christ Jesus;” and then, naming his addressee, he mentions the deep bond that they share: “To Timothy, my beloved child.” This is startling indeed. Paul regularly calls fellow Christians as “brothers and sisters,” indicating a kind of filial parity. At one point, he refers to the Christians in Corinth as his spiritual children: “Indeed in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:15). But this is an exception, and it is Paul’s way of reminding the Corinthians that he was their founding pastor. His address to Timothy, on the other hand, has a more intimate feel. As we move through this letter, it will become increasingly clear that the bond between Paul and Timothy was as profound as that between father and son. Paul had invested himself in this young man in the way that a parent does in a child. The remainder of the greeting, while there are parallels in Paul’s other letters, feels uniquely personal in this context. “Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God...when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.”

And then Paul turns to Timothy’s family of origin. “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” While the reference is brief, we can draw some important inferences. Timothy’s grandmother and mother were early Pauline converts, probably turning to Christ during Paul’s first missionary journey, when he passed through Lystra (Acts 14:8). By the time that Paul returned to the region, Timothy was already a Christian