

## Understanding 1 Timothy 1:18-20

***18This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, 19holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, 20among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*** 1 Timothy 1:18-20 [ESV]

Taking this passage in isolation it is easy to see why it is hard to understand. As with practically all Biblical teaching, it is critical to first understand the context of the scripture – its backstory if you will – before tackling the meaning of any scripture passage.

First, let's take a quick look at the relationship between the apostle Paul and his much younger protégé Timothy. The two first met early in Paul's second missionary journey in Timothy's home town of Lystra in what is now south-central Turkey. Timothy was the son of a Jewish Christian woman, and Paul asked Timothy to accompany him on his missionary journey during which churches were planted all around ancient Greece. The Bible is silent about Timothy's exact age when he took up with Paul, but he was certainly very young – possibly still a teenager. During this time, Paul was discipling Timothy to become a Gospel preacher and pastor. Timothy accompanied Paul through many hardships, and eventually became the pastor of the church at Ephesus in southwest Turkey, where church tradition holds that he was beaten to death at the age of 97 while trying to stop a pagan procession in the city.

The two letters from Paul to Timothy that we find in the New Testament are so-called “pastoral epistles” – letters from a senior pastor to a younger pastor giving advice and direction regarding the conduct of the ministry.

So with this knowledge under our belts, we have an approach to understanding verse 18 and the beginning of verse 19...

***18This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, 19holding faith and a good conscience.*** 1 Timothy 1:18-19a [ESV]

Having given Timothy his foundational discipleship in the Gospel, Paul often referred to Timothy as his spiritual child. Although Paul was never married, he considered Timothy as “the son he never had.” The Bible is silent about what specific prophecies had been made about Timothy, but we can certainly guess that they had to do with the sincerity of Timothy's faith, and the confirmation of God's calling Timothy into Gospel ministry.

But what about the charge that Paul speaks of here? To understand that, we need to go back to the beginning of the letter, and to determine the specific timing and purpose of the letter. The letter was sent by Paul from Rome some ten years after the two first met. Timothy had acted as Paul's intermediary to the churches in Greece and Turkey during Paul's first house arrest in Rome. This first letter was sent to Timothy in Ephesus. Apparently, news had reached Paul in Rome about false teaching that was being spread in Ephesus and elsewhere throughout the Mediterranean basin. This is what Paul speaks of at the beginning of the letter.

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***3As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. 1 Timothy 1:3-7 [ESV]***

We can only guess who these false teachers may have been, or what specific false teachings they were spreading. Possibly they were judaizers – who claimed that in order to be saved, a person had not only to profess faith in Jesus’ Gospel but also had to conform to the Old Testament law. The false teachers might also have been promoting Gnosticism – a religious system that emphasized personal and private mystic spiritualism over scriptural and doctrinal teaching. Regardless of that though, it is apparent from the letter that although we can only guess about who these false teachers were and what they were teaching, Timothy did know exactly who and what Paul was writing about. Perhaps Paul referred to them as “certain people” in order to protect Timothy or others in case the letter might be intercepted by them.

Paul goes on in verses 8-17 to talk about his own struggle against these false teachings and teachers. If we read between the lines, it seems apparent that Paul was already beginning to realize that his Roman imprisonment might not end well for him even though elsewhere in the letter he seems to be enthusiastic and hopeful that he will soon be freed. Regardless of that, Paul certainly realized that he was getting old, and wouldn’t have the needed physical strength and energy to continue the struggle for much longer. Thus, we see in verse 18 that he is entrusting God’s charge to continue the struggle against the false teachers with Timothy.

So now we have our handle for understanding the remainder of the passage.

***19...By rejecting this [faith and good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, 20among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. 1 Timothy 1:19b-20 [ESV]***

So, Paul is now done pulling his punches, and goes ahead to name some names. Paul mentions Hymenaeus here and again in his second letter to Timothy.

***15Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 16But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, 17and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. 2 Timothy 2:15-18 [ESV]***

Here in 2 Timothy 2 we get a clue about the false teaching that Hymenaeus had been spreading – that the resurrection had already happened. We also see the reason why Paul was so upset about it –

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because Hymenaeus' false teaching about the resurrection had already caused some people's faith in the (still) coming resurrection to falter.

Paul also mentions the name Alexander again, but we need to be cautious. The name Alexander (after Alexander the Great) was and still is a very popular name. In fact, my own nephew is named Alexander. So, the Alexander whom Paul warned Timothy about in 1 Timothy 1:20 may or may not be the same Alexander the coppersmith whose testimony at Paul's second trial in Rome did Paul much harm (2 Timothy 4:14).

Whether or not they are two different Alexanders, it is apparent that Paul has decided that he has exhausted all avenues of persuasion to convince Hymenaeus and Alexander to cease and desist with their false teaching and has left the matter in God's hands. This is what Paul means in saying that he has handed them over to Satan, knowing that in some cases people who have strayed from the straight and narrow path may return to uprightness after suffering a little while in the clutches of our great enemy.