

# Paul's last letter

by EARL F. PALMER

NEAR THE END OF THE LETTER the imprisoned Paul wrote to a young friend named Timothy are these words: "Be sure to bring with you my books that I left at Troas with Carpus, and above all the parchments, also, don't forget to bring my coat. Luke is here with me now, our friend Trophimus is ill at Miletus. I hope Mark can travel with you, do your best to come before winter ...." (II Timothy 4)

There is something about these words that won me over to the man who wrote them, and to his friend Timothy. They are plain, not too religious, practical, and the kind I would expect a friend to write if he knows you well. They happen to be almost the final written words from a first century champion of the Christian faith, and they go to a young man he thought of as a son, a borrowed son. In this final chapter he will also write, "You then my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus ... I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

In reading the book they came from, I discover that Paul, who is the mentor to Timothy, becomes a mentor to people of every generation and time because St. Paul is a borrowable friend. All of his letters have this same knowable and personal atmosphere about them. I can see how a reader of Romans might even look at the long list of names in the last chapter for his or her own name. We feel included throughout Scripture not only because of what we learn about God's truth, but because we feel connected to the people of the texts, too. As we follow their stories with ups and downs, they themselves become a living part of the whole narrative of law, prophets, songs, Gospel records and NT letters.

These connecting points between biblical texts and the present-day reader are of real importance too for our understanding of what we read. This is why I don't accept for a moment the interpretive view of those scholars who have rejected the Pauline authorship of the II Timothy letter. This letter to Timothy, like other N.T. books such as Luke and John, was not written long after the events it describes by committee, even a devout committee, or by a loyal second or third century

believer who wanted to make use of an apostle's name to help readers accept his or her book.

The events of Jesus' life and his ministry do not now, nor did they ever, need a creative writing team to help make them understandable. Writer-created imaginary stories about crowd scenes and invented miracles are not needed to explain how Jesus would act if he did concretely care about people and if he actually knew the real people in the real places of the Gospel accounts. If Jesus really did concretely care about real people and walk in the real places of the Gospel accounts — even more, if he really is the son of God — then no writer needed to conjure imaginary crowds and invented miracles to explain a Jesus that *would have* acted a certain way. Jesus was able to speak and act for himself. *This* is what made him worth writing about.

Therefore, all that is necessary for the N.T. writers to do is tell the truth as they saw and heard of it themselves. This is why the Gospels

and letter writers like Paul, Luke and John are as amazed and startled by what Jesus said and what he did as we are. And this is why what they wrote for us to read has a ring of truth on every page.

**EARL F. PALMER** is pastor emeritus of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle.

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