

Introduction to Timothy

Key Verse:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God (2 Timothy 1:7-8)

Key Truth:

In perilous times, we must be steadfast and determined to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith. *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* (2 Timothy 2:2)

The Book of Acts closes with Paul imprisoned in Rome around A.D. 63. The commonly held view is that he was acquitted and released, afterward traveling again through Greece and Asia Minor. Some years later, he was arrested a second time, brought back to Rome, and executed around A.D. 67 or 68. Second Timothy was written during this final imprisonment, as Paul awaited martyrdom.

Background of 2nd Timothy

In A.D. 64, a devastating fire swept through much of the city of Rome. Public suspicion quickly fell on Emperor Nero himself. Though notoriously cruel, Nero fancied himself a great builder, and many believed the fire was set deliberately to clear space for an ambitious program of urban renewal—a grander Rome built to his own glory. According to ancient tradition, while the city burned, Nero played music, indifferent to the suffering around him.

Historians have widely regarded Nero as the true instigator of the fire. To divert blame from himself, he needed a scapegoat. He found one in the Christians—a new, despised, and socially powerless group, largely drawn from the lower classes and including many slaves. Nero accused them of burning Rome and unleashed a brutal persecution.

Although the New Testament does not directly record Nero’s persecution, it occurred within New Testament times and forms the historical backdrop for at least two books of Scripture: First Peter and Second Timothy. This persecution ultimately led to Paul’s martyrdom and, according to early Christian tradition, to Peter’s as well.

Our primary historical source for these events is the Roman historian Tacitus. He makes clear that Christians were not responsible for the fire, yet they were punished to satisfy public outrage and shield the emperor. Across Rome, countless believers were arrested and executed in horrifying ways. Some were crucified. Others were sewn into animal skins and torn apart by dogs in public arenas. Still others were thrown to wild beasts. Many were bound to stakes in Nero’s gardens, coated with pitch, and set ablaze to serve as human torches, lighting the emperor’s nighttime festivities.

It was in the aftermath of this savage persecution that Paul was rearrested—likely in Greece or Asia Minor, possibly at Troas (2 Timothy 4:13)—and taken back to Rome. This time, he arrived not by appealing to Caesar, as he had before, but under Roman arrest. He was treated as a criminal (2 Timothy 2:9), not merely as someone accused of a technical violation of Jewish law. It is possible,

though unconfirmed, that his arrest was connected to the burning of Rome. After all, Paul was widely known as a leading figure among the Christians, and he had lived in Rome for two years shortly before the fire. Whether or not this charge was formally laid against him, Paul knew the outcome was inevitable. His trial had progressed far enough that he understood there would be no escape.

While confined in a Roman dungeon, waiting for the time of his departure, Paul wrote this final letter to Timothy—his beloved son in the faith and trusted coworker. He urged Timothy to remain faithful to his calling as a minister of Christ, regardless of the cost, and to come to Rome before winter if at all possible (2 Timothy 4:21).

Out of this dark and lonely hour emerged one of the most noble and moving testimonies in all of Scripture. Paul was about to be executed for a crime he did not commit. With the exception of Luke, his companions had left him. The cause to which he had devoted his life was under violent attack—by persecution in the West and by false teaching in the East. Yet there is no trace of regret in his words. No wavering doubt about the worth of serving Christ and His church. No fear that the gospel would fail, even though it seemed, for the moment, to be overwhelmed.

Paul was convinced that the church, though battered and opposed, would ultimately prevail. And he was equally certain that the moment his life ended, he would enter immediately into the presence of the One he had loved and served so faithfully. Second Timothy, then, is not the lament of a defeated man, but the triumphant cry of a conqueror—one who finished his race in faith and looked beyond death to eternal glory in Christ.