

2 Timothy 2:8-17

Life in a Hole

The hole

This year, especially because of the pandemic, a sense of isolation, fear and mistrust has been growing throughout the country. We wear masks, the activities of churches and small businesses are restricted, education has gone online, more than 10 million people are still unemployed.

For nearly 50 years the Gallup poll has been asking Americans about their level of confidence in 18 categories of institutions including various aspects of government, business, medical service, media and organized religion. Whereas more than half of the American population had much confidence in nearly half of the categories when Gallup began asking people, only 3 categories enjoy much confidence today. They are small business, the military and medical systems. This year the Gallup survey reveals that less than 1 of every 5 people has confidence in the media, congress, and big business. Trust has declined in 13 of the 18 categories; only small businesses and the military enjoy increased confidence.

The pandemic has caused many of us to become isolated and afraid. As a nation we have become deeply divided. Suspicion and anger grow. These are the seeds of depression. In an emotional sense, many in our country have fallen into a hole. At times you may find yourself in that emotional hole as well.

If so, no less than the Apostle Paul would understand what you're feeling. In the last letter he would ever write, that second one to his young coworker Timothy, Paul says he is "suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal" (v. 9). In fact, in other places in that same letter it's clear he expects to be killed soon because he was telling people about Jesus Christ. Listen to a bit of what he says in that second letter to Timothy:

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying:

**If we died with him,
we will also live with him;**

**¹² if we endure,
we will also reign with him.**

**If we disown him,
he will also disown us;**

**¹³ if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.**

Many tourists in Rome will tell you that the Mamertine Prison is one of the most difficult sites to find. That's the traditional place where the apostle Paul was held before he was killed for talking about Jesus Christ. Over the years, countless tourists have walked right past it without recognizing what it was. This is understandable, because the Mamertine Prison does not look like a prison in our country. Rather, it is simply an ancient tank divided into two rooms, one on top of the other.

On the floor of the upper room is a hole. And through that hole is where prisoners were either lowered—or dropped—into the lower room.

According to an ancient historian, this lower room was 12 feet underground. In his words, it was "disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness and the stench." The room is a little larger than a two-car garage but only 6 and half feet high. This was where prisoners waited to die, either by execution or by simple starvation. An iron door at the end of the room opened into the city's main sewer, where dead bodies are said to have been dumped into the river.

It was in this lower room, where many believe Paul spent his final days. And if so, Paul wasn't in an emotional hole just because he was suffering and facing death. He was literally in a hole. (based on WELS devotion, 10/4/2016 "No Greater Honor")

Wherever Paul was held in chains while waiting to be killed, that was the place where the Lord moved him to write his final letter. In that letter, the Holy Spirit empowered Paul to look beyond the dank, foul walls of his dungeon and to speak to his friend, Timothy. He also speaks to you and me. He talks about **Life in a Hole**.

The Life

There in that part of the letter we just read, Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ."

Remember that he is the descendent of David, that he was born of the virgin Mary and became a human being like you and me. Remember that during his life on earth he suffered and died for us. He suffered and died for our sins. And remember that he lives! And because he lives, we shall live also. Paul was chained, likely in a prison, possibly in a prison that looked

like a hole in the ground. He could have felt like his life was worthless and that everything was hopeless. He could have given up. Instead, he remembers Jesus Christ. He looks forward to his death, because he knows that after death, he will be alive forever with Jesus in heaven.

Remember also that if Paul is chained, the gospel is not chained. That life-giving message is not stuck in a hole—a dark place where no one can see it. No. It shines like the sun, moon and stars. It's a brilliant light that shines in a world of people walking in darkness smothered under their guilt and sins.

That good news about Jesus—that gospel—creates faith. It spreads throughout the world as it was proclaimed by Paul and he knew that it was being preached still by Timothy and many others.

We don't know how Paul was killed and where he was buried. We have traditions written 30 years and more after the event that tell us he was beheaded and the Catholic Church claims to know the place where his bones are buried.

It doesn't matter, does it? What does matter is that gospel he preached is still being preached all over the world. Your fellow Christians preach it in Russia, Europe, Africa, Asia, North America and Latin America. What matters is that the gospel is being unchained in the very social media that often seems biased against the Christian faith. What matters is that while in-person worship has been restricted throughout much of our country, Christian churches are learning to use the Internet to proclaim the gospel. It appears that outreach both in the United States and abroad has increased as we proclaim the gospel through the Internet.

So, with Paul who sat chained in that hole waiting for execution, think about other people. As Paul says, remember God's elect. That person chosen by God for eternal life could be that spouse or child who betrayed you. It could be someone at work who wronged you. They have souls too for which Jesus died. God loves them and wants them to be saved too. They just might be among the ones God chose for eternal life. Witness to them, love them, even if it means suffering for them.

The Words to Hang Onto

That's a tall order! How do we suffer in a hole and see life even when we're in a hole? Think again of Paul. You know, he could have denied Jesus and maybe then he would have been unchained. Maybe the people who hated Christians and locked Paul up would have led Paul through the streets trumpeting his denial. Don't be fools! Don't follow Jesus. Deny him and live, they could have cried.

But Paul didn't deny Jesus. Instead he had a saying—a mantra. They were words he hung onto. They sound a little like a poem. Maybe a song. Picture him saying them over and over:

If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
¹²if we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
¹³if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

You and I did die with Jesus. That happened when we were buried with him in baptism. Our old sinful nature was crucified, and a new person arose. That's what Paul teaches in his letter to the Christians in Rome. When we were baptized with Jesus into his death, we received and have forgiveness. We belong to Jesus and we will live with him forever. This suffering, this hole we find ourselves in now, is not worthy of being compared to the joy and glory that awaits us in heaven.

- Endure, hang in there, as Paul did. He sang: "If we endure, we will also reign with him"—in heaven.
- Don't disown Jesus, Paul sings. No never. Because if we did, then, then he would disown us.

But what if in our hearts or in our words and actions we fall even for a moment? Are we then lost forever? God's still there. He hasn't stopped loving us! He remains faithful! He can't disown himself. Turn back to God, he will receive you as the loving father hugged his lost son who came back to him.

Do you know people in a hole? Do they think there's no way out? Do they think they're dug in too deep? Then tell them, God remains faithful. Turn to him, ask for forgiveness. He will give it. He cannot deny it.

Are you in a hole! You're not alone. All of us at some time or another have been there. Think of Paul, who was truly in a hole about to die. Think of him and remember what he remembered. Remember Jesus. Remember that he became a human to take your place and give himself as a sacrifice for your sins. Remember that Jesus conquered death. Because Jesus lives, you shall live also. Remember others who still don't know that gospel message. Be a life-giver when you're in a hole. Brothers and sisters, there is life even in a hole. Amen.