

Keep Your Head

By Dr. G.H. Visscher

Ps 119:1, 4

H 81: 1 – 7

Read: 2 Timothy 4:1 - 8

2 Timothy 4:5

NIV84: "... But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

One afternoon Alistair Begg was meeting with a number of pastors and he quoted verse 5 of our text: *"keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry"* and he said "I increasingly find that verse to be the anchor point for all of my days. I wake up on a Monday, and say, 'well, what will I do now?' Then I say, 'Well, I think I'll try to *keep my head, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all the duties of my ministry.*'" Thereafter, he said, "And when the waves beat on me and I feel just like running away to the hills somewhere, what should I do? 'Well, Alistair, just *keep your head, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all the duties of your ministry.*'"

I suspect that most pastors can relate to that. There are days and weeks when things seem to be coming at you from all sides, and you have two choices: either go under, or allow what really matters to rise to the top. Perhaps those who have been off on an internship for the summer have got a taste of what I mean. Perhaps seminary education is not entirely unlike that either as it prepares you for ministry. So this morning, I'd just like to pay attention to what John Stott has called these four "staccato commands" of verse 5: *"keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."*

"Keep your head in all situations..." – What this about?

Well, you can determine that from the pastoral letters themselves. Elsewhere, he spoke about those who get into stupid controversies about genealogies, myths, and what not else. In our reading, he talked about times when people will be lovers of

themselves, disobedient, unforgiving, slanderous – and, did you catch this one in 3:7 *"always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth"*? And in chapter 4:3,4, he talks about those who have "itchy ear disease" – they just want to hear what they want to hear and have little regard for the truth of the Word of God. It's a simple transition from "itchy ear" disease to turning one's ears away from the truth. When you're surrounded by all of this, it's obviously a challenge to "keep your own head about you."

Also in our day, pastors can have so many pressures on them, can be assaulted from so many sides, that it becomes difficult to focus, and difficult to keep our heads. There are not only ideas that conflict with the truth, there are ethical issues that arise, there are those who are ill and need the comfort of the Word of God, there are those whose marriages or families are in trouble and they so need direction. It was a prophetic word of Paul to all pastors: *keep your head in all situations....*

But surely, since context is always decisive, this too is an aspect of what Paul has in mind: How then does one manage to "keep one's head...?" Well, to a large extent it's a matter of keeping that focus of 1 Timothy 4:1,2, of "preaching the word." There's the focus. Paul here is reaching back into Timothy's childhood, and how he learned the OT Scriptures from Lois, his grandmother, and Eunice, his mother, and says: *don't underestimate the power of that Word...useful to teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness.* This is how *the man of God is thoroughly equipped for every good work.* Keep your head, Timothy. Keep it by staying in tune with the Word of God. There is no other way.

"Preaching" could also be called "heralding". In the days of the apostle Paul, a herald was a messenger who, vested with public authority, conveyed the official messages of kings, magistrates, princes, or military commanders. The word "preach" called to mind the royal herald who went as spokesman for the King from town to town, proclaiming in an authoritative manner the message which the King gave him to announce. He speaks with dignity, with sincerity and with authority. This is then the pattern

for every preacher throughout the ages. He is God's herald. He is under divine authority to proclaim God's message. When the herald proclaims his message, the voice of the king is heard. Like the king's herald, God's herald does not dare to withhold, nor revise, nor delay, nor neglect the message of his Master. So Paul tells Timothy to "herald the Word". The Word about Jesus Christ. The good news about what God has done in Jesus Christ. That, of course, rises above "stupid controversies," and "itchy ear disease" and whatever else – because this preaching has some royal, something urgent, some magisterial about it. Because notice what this herald proclaims. Only "*the Word*." There are some things, says Paul again and again that preachers should stay away from. Chapter 2, verse 23: "*Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels...*" This too is a word for our day. There will be those who will want to drag you into arguments and senseless debates that go nowhere; but the Lord's servant who is wise will know what is minor and what is major, what the Word of God speaks about and what it does not. The task of the minister of the Word is not to settle every controversy with his opinion, but it is: to minister with the Word of God. What the Word of God insists on, we must insist on. Where the Word of God leaves people free, we must leave people free. It's a reminder that we do need. How often are men not inclined to climb the pulpits with their own ideas, the latest philosophies, fanciful stories, and wonderful dreams? Well, Paul says: a herald of God the King is going to come only with the Word of His King. Preaching exists, not for the propagating of the preferred views, opinions and ideals of the preacher or of his audience, but for the proclamation of the mighty acts of God.

There remains those four staccato commands of verse 5.

"*Keep your head in all situations.*" I don't really know what to make of the ESV translation: "be sober-minded." But I think I know what Paul means. To come back to it a minute, it has to do with having a sense of vision, direction, and purpose. If the pastor does not know where he is going, how will the sheep? When everything else threatens to close in, you just keep going. Perhaps it also means this: *take care of yourself*. It's often said that a pastor has to be

sure to take care of his marriage and his family. Paul said it: "*he must manage his own family well*" (1 Tim 3:4). And that's so true. But this too: he must manage *himself* well. Ministry can be a lonely business in which you find yourself assaulted from every side. There can even be times in which, because of all kinds of factors round about you, that you actually feel far from God and like you are a robot who has to bring a message which you are not really in. Precisely then, we preachers need to beware, and be on guard for one's own head, and one's own soul. Our service of the King will surely suffer if our families fall apart. The same will happen if we fall apart. Read through the pastorals. So often Paul is saying things like: "*Timothy, train yourself...devote yourself...don't let anyone look down on you...manage your own family...*" (1 Tim 4:7,13,15,16). Effective ministry always begins with the one who is doing the ministering. They are apt words also for seminary, no doubt. Also here, we need to learn how to look after ourselves, develop our character in connection with the "fruits of the Spirit."

"*Endure hardship...*" It is a fact and Paul prepares Timothy for that as well. Bold and effective ministry will result in opposition, and sometimes even animosity. Also here, ministry can be a lonely business. "*Woe to you when all men speak well of you,*" our Lord said. Being determined to serve Christ above all, sometimes means others are quite disappointed with us when they perceive the will of our Lord differently. And then it's difficult to soldier on for our Lord. But be not surprised. Paul faced so much of this. And so did our Lord Himself. His fiercest opposition came from within his own church, his own people.

"*Do the work of an evangelist...*" What does Paul mean here? I read an interesting article on "Mission in the Pastoral Epistles,"¹ which pointed out that even though much of the pastorals is talking about a settled church situation, we should not be mistaken: it still has a very missional emphasis and goal. So too here. We are probably not supposed to think that Paul is saying to Timothy that alongside of being a minister he also has sort of a part-time job of being

¹ By Chiao Ek Ho, *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul's Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, edited by A.J. Kostenberger, B&H, 2010.

an evangelist. Instead, I believe he is saying that “even when he is rightly involved in preaching, teaching, instructing, correcting, even when he is known for keeping his head in all situations and learning to endure hardship, he most not forget to do the work of evangelist.”² If the word for preacher makes us think of a herald because that’s what the word means, the word for evangelist makes us think of the evangel, which is the gospel. Do we remember what the gospel is for Paul? It is the glorious but insulting message that Christ died for us. That we are beset by sin that it took nothing less than this. And this message has to be brought again and again in the church and outside the church, to believers and unbelievers, in so many conversations, in the catechism class, in pastoral work – it must again and again come down to this. Because this is the underlying basis of all other Christian conversations. The man on the street thinks he’s more righteous than he is, but so does the person in the pew. That’s the default delusion we are all afflicted with. But the gospel says: “even if you could obey God for a thousand years, you’re no more accepted than when you first believed.” (My wife and I read it this week in our devotions; Paul Tripp says, “If you gave yourself to an unbroken, moment-by-moment life of ministry, you could never minister enough to achieve God’s favor.”³ It’s all grace. It’s all Christ. That’s the gospel. For the pastor. For the parishioner. For the member, and the non-member. No, that does not have to be the topic of every conversation, but it has to be the underlying foundation of all conversations, the basic premise. And if and when it isn’t, you have to do again the work of an evangelist and remind them. This is what Christ does. This is who He is. And it defines everything about us.

So, brothers, if you get to the end of the road and enter ministry, here’s a motto for you. Perhaps it’s a motto for seminary life even, “I’ll just try to *keep my head, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all the duties of my ministry.*”



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² D. A. Carson, “Do the work of an evangelist,” *Themelios* 39.1 (2014) 1-4.

³ January 5 devotional in *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*.