
THE METAPHORS OF PAUL'S WRITINGS

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DAY 3: BUSINESS AND TRAVEL

INTRODUCTION

While detailed accounts and records of the Roman Empire's economy are few, all indications are that it enjoyed a generally healthy situation. There was farming, of course, but also manufacturing, industry, trade, marketing, and, of course, politics and administration. In Rome, food and goods were imported from all over the empire—Egypt and northern Africa, Spain and France, Greece and Cyprus, even the Arabian Peninsula, India, and China. The city was full of warehouses, manufacturing facilities, shops, and workers to handle it all.

Facilitating all this business was the Pax Romano. More than at any other time in the history of world up to that time, the Roman Empire provided an opportunity for travel and commerce. People traveled for many reasons and all throughout the lands under the control of Rome in relative safety. Of course, travel was still a laborious and sometimes dangerous proposition, with weather problems, brigands, health challenges, lodging difficulties, and more. Paul was a man who traveled extensively both before and especially after his call as an apostle, journeying from the eastern to the western edges of the Mediterranean.

THE WORKMAN

2 Timothy 2 is a chapter full of metaphors. Two of them are relevant here (other will be discussed tomorrow). In **verse 6**, Paul evokes the image of a hard-working farmer (“husbandman”) who tends to his vines and soil. He calls this to Timothy’s remembrance to make the point that Timothy, as God’s husbandman, should be the first partaker of his own work—if he is not being blessed by his efforts to serve others, that is a concern of the apostle.

A few verses later, he calls upon another image of a hard worker (**verse 15**). The translation could use some help in being more clear. “Study” is not reading or something but ‘to hurry’ or ‘to exert oneself’; Paul is telling Timothy to work hard that he might present himself as a worthy construction worker, approved by God. He does not need to be ashamed of his work in any way when the master comes to check on his efforts, for he has been cutting the blocks perfectly straight—or, completing the metaphor, perfectly preaching the “word of truth” according to what he has received and what is true.

Paul knew about being a worker. He labored as a tent maker (which probably also meant an expert in leather working since tents were made of animal hides at that time; Acts 18:3) and worked hard to support himself all his life (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Though speaking of the ministry, he brings this image of the tent maker to mind when he said, “I labored more abundantly than they all” (**1 Corinthians 15:10**). This would be the tent maker examining his week’s efforts compared to fellow

workers—he simply had more output and probably of better quality. But Paul tempered this boast with a qualifying statement of humility: “yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Even though Paul worked hard to support himself, he did accept the support of some of the members as he traveled and preached. In some cases, he referred to this as a “wage” (Romans 6:23) and told the Romans proverbially that “A worker’s wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due” (Romans 4:4, *New American Bible*). Alluding to some generous material support he received from the Philippian Saints after laboring mightily with them, he said, “But I have all, and abound: I am full” (**Philippians 4:18**). This is common language in the business world of that time, acknowledging payment in full for goods or services rendered. In other words, Paul is saying that he has been fully paid for his labors, not only through their generous financial gift but by their open love for him.

THE MARKET

Roman, Greek, and Near Eastern cities were filled with markets, shops, and warehouses. Pompeii is an excellent example, with a relatively intact forum surrounded by porticoes that would have held shops and businesses of all kinds. There people could buy food of many varieties, fabrics, wines, and many other types of products. It would have been noisy and busy.

Paul drew on the image of a marketplace with people vying for products and prices in **Ephesians 3:19**, somewhat hidden in the KJV. *Hyperballō*, here translated “passeth,” has several meanings, including to throw or run beyond a mark, to overshoot or surpass—and to outbid at an auction. If Paul was using the latter meaning, we could see this phrase taking the meaning, ‘And the knowledge of the love of Christ outbids normal knowledge [for us, our souls].’ The reason for the bidding is captured in another metaphor in the same verse: “that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God,” where “fulness” refers to a ship being fully outfitted and ready to take a voyage. Said another way, the knowledge of the love of Christ outbids everyone else for us so that we might be fully prepared for our life’s journey.

Besides those in the shops and stalls, markets were full of people peddling their wares on foot, walking through the crowds. Sometimes these peddlers were not as favored as an established store owner—could you trust their quality, their scales, their honesty? Such peddlers were known to sell poorer product, watered-down wine, or otherwise items of lesser quality or value.

Paul uses this image in speaking of his own efforts—he is “not as many, which corrupt the word of God” (**2 Corinthians 2:17**). “Corrupt” here is to ‘peddle’ and ‘sell for gain.’ Paul reminds the Corinthian Saints that he did not come among them peddling the gospel for his own profit and their detriment; he gave them quality ‘product’ that has proved its value over time.

Likewise, Paul wants the Philippian converts to be both “blameless and harmless” (**Philippians 2:15**). “Harmless is better translated ‘unmixed’ or ‘pure,’ referring generally to wine or metal, telling them to be both free from defect and adulteration.

CONTRACTS

Corinth was a business town; it existed because it was in a strategic position to move goods from one side of Greece to the other. In Paul’s letter to the Saints in Corinth, he drew on some business metaphors in the opening chapter (**2 Corinthians 1:21-22**) to debunk the notion that they were

closely aligned to him or Peter or Apollos but instead wanted to assure them about their relationship to Christ and the Father.

“Stablisheth” means a ‘guarantee,’ a confirmation that something is going to take place. In this case, Paul taught that the Corinthians were guaranteed with him (“us with you”) in Christ. “In” is also part of the metaphor—it represents the idea that they were ‘entered into Christ’s account,’ credited to him, as it were (and not part of Paul’s or Peter’s or Apollos’ ‘accounts’). God is the one who guarantees this.

“Anointed” is not a business term per se but fits the context nicely. An anointing was part of a king or priest taking office. Thus Paul is saying that we are guaranteed to be in Christ’s ‘account’ and thus symbolically anointed for great things.

“Sealed” refers to the ancient practice of sealing a contract with hot wax and pressing a stamp into it, verifying the identity and authority of the contract owner. A contract with a broken seal was invalid. Likewise, a seal implied ownership, so if God has sealed us, he has placed his seal of ownership upon us.

“Earnest” was discussed on Tuesday with regards to marriage but as mentioned then, it also has a business context. Like earnest money paid on a house by an interested purchaser, it is a deposit or down payment of the full payment to come later. It anticipates that future event and is a promise that the contract will be fulfilled. Paul uses it here to show that the Holy Spirit confirms to our hearts that God will keep his promise of salvation and blessings.

DOCUMENTATION

Documentation was important for the traveler. Besides personal identification—especially helpful for Roman citizens—if you were going to a new place, you would carry a letter of recommendation to open doors and make alliances with the right people upon arrival. Paul refers to such a letter (**2 Corinthians 3:1-3**). Paul’s opponents who had come to Corinth with such letters, were charging him with promoting himself and coming to Corinth without the support of any sponsor. He asked if he needed “letters of commendation” either from or to the Corinthians. His answer was no: “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men.” Their lives, testimonies, and commitment acted as his ‘letter of commendation.’ They were, in fact, as letters from Christ himself, written not on a great stone monument set in the city square or something but in the humble hearts of the good converts in that city.

SEA TRAVEL

Hundreds of ships plied the Mediterranean Sea and the rivers of the area each year. From small to large (some big enough to hold grain for an entire city for a year), these ships not only hugged the coastlines but ventured out into the deep waters, crossing between the major ports, many bringing supplies to the great capital of Rome.

One subtle but interesting use of a nautical term is in **1 Corinthians 12:28**. Paul listed several leadership positions in the Church, including apostles, prophets, and teachers. Then he mentioned some gifts, including “healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” The word translated “governments” is *kubernēsis*, the term for the person piloting a ship (helmsman). Given its position in the list of gifts and the previous mention of general leadership, this seems to be a reference to local leadership, such as a stake president or bishop today.

When a ship left port, the sailors would cast off the ropes that held it in place and head out to sea. That familiar sight became an image for Paul (like the final scene in *Lord of the Rings*) of leaving this life. He used it both in **Philippians 1:23** and **2 Timothy 4:6**, where he had a desire to “depart” (‘cast off and head out to sea’) and recognized that the time for his ship to leave had come. Paul also described Christ’s role in bringing us to the Father in nautical terms—“access” being ‘a safe haven for ships’—in **Ephesians 2:18** (also 3:12 and Romans 5:2).

Safe havens were important because the seas could be dangerous. Paul had firsthand experience with that, being shipwrecked at least four times. He used that image in **1 Timothy 1:19** to describe how some, who had weakened their faith, had experienced disaster in their lives. Shipwreck usually starts with rough seas, and Paul’s counsel the Ephesians not to be like ships on the sea, “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (**Ephesians 4:14**) conveyed that lesson.

LAND TRAVEL

Most land travel was done by foot, though sometimes animals were involved. Either way, people took full advantage of the massive network of Roman roads constructed to speed the movement of the army but free to anyone else to use as well. But Roman roads were not without their risks and problems. For example, Paul speaks of wanting to come see the Thessalonians but “Satan hindered us” (**1 Thessalonians 2:18**), meaning he ‘blocked the road.’ Continuing that thought, he prayed that God and Christ would “direct our way unto you” (1 Thessalonians 3:11), or ‘clear the road,’ that Paul might fulfill his desire to be with them in person.

BANKING

Banking was typically done by the government, the temple, or certain wealthy individuals. In Ephesus, the temple of Artemis (Diana) was likely the major banking institution in the area, taking deposits and giving loans to business and individuals alike, with the city of Ephesus being its biggest customer. When Demetrius and the silversmiths caused a riot in Ephesus because of Paul and other Christian teachings, the charges against them, which were quickly squelched by the town leader, were: 1) stealing from the temple (called “churches”); and, 2) blaspheming the goddess (**Acts 19:37**).

Paul probably had all of this in mind when he used the word “riches” (*ploutos*) several times in his letter to the Ephesians. He wanted to turn their attention away from the riches of the world to the eternal ‘wealth’ that comes from Christ (**Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16**).

Likewise, Paul counseled Timothy how he should teach the subject to “them that are rich” (1 Timothy 6:17-19). They should not be egotistical in their wealth or trust in them but put their faith in God who “giveth us richly all things to enjoy.” All should “do good” and “be rich in good works,” always sharing and supporting each other. In that way, they are “laying up in store” [depositing in a bank] against a future judgment.

To the Philippians, he thanked them for their financial support, which helped him continue his work and travels. “Not because I desire a gift,” he assured them. His only desire was “fruit that may abound to your account” (**Philippians 4:17**). “Fruit” in this phrase is a double-metaphor; that is, Paul uses it to represent an increase—interest—and uses the concept of increase applying to a person’s account to represent the blessings he hoped accrued to them by virtue of their generous support of him.

Another very personal reference to banking comes in Paul's final letter as he is summarizing his own life and efforts. (**2 Timothy 1:12**). He explained that he has suffered as a result of his calling but he is not "ashamed" of any of it. He knows in whom he has trusted and is completely convinced that God is powerful and strong and thus can preserve the deposit that Paul has entrusted him (Paul's commitment and efforts) against the day of judgment.

DEBT

Paul spoke often of debt and frequently used the verb "to owe," with banking and borrowing in mind. When he applied it to Jews [Judaizers] who were teaching that Gentiles converts still needed to live the full Law of Moses, he said that such a person "is a debtor to do the whole law" (**Galatians 5:3**). By this he meant that seeking to earn salvation by living every law given by God was pointless—such a person would always be in debt to the law, always behind on payments.

The grace that Paul taught was the reason for our hope and salvation in Christ was a gift from God, but even gifts can bring upon the receiver certain obligations. In the case of a Christian, we owe God our obedience and our dedicated service. Applying it to himself, he said he was "debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians" (**Romans 1:14**), meaning he owed it to God and to them to preach the gospel to them. In terms of others, he invoked the image of being in debt and thus needing to do something for others several times, including:

- "Render therefore to all their dues [debts]...Owe no man any thing, but to love one another" (**Romans 13:7**).
- "We then that are strong ought [owe] to bear the infirmities of the weak" (**Romans 15:1**).
- "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies..." (**Ephesians 5:28**).
- "...for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children (**2 Corinthians 12:14**).

Debts were acknowledged by a document called a *cheirographon*, something written and signed by the debtor (an IOU) and given to the creditor as acknowledgment. Though these are found in many ancient documents, there is one in the New Testament—**Philemon 1:18-19**—where Paul promised to figuratively repay Philemon for any wrong he has caused him. He even wrote this part of the letter with his own hand to signify the seriousness of the IOU (most of the letter was written by his scribe).

The normal way of canceling a debt or acknowledging it being paid in full was to cross it out on the IOU (Greek *chiazō*, meaning 'make the letter chi'). There are numerous examples of ancient texts with such big Xs across the note of debt. But Paul intentionally evokes a different image in **Colossians 2:14**. The writing on the IOU is not crossed out but is blotted out—washed away, scrubbed off with a sponge. If the writing on the IOU was still visible after it was crossed out, the paid debt would still be known by anyone looking at the document. However, if it was obliterated, it is as if the debt had never been incurred—it is gone forever. That is what God does with our debt of sin to him—he forgives and forgets and it is never held to our account again—he "took it out of the way." How does this happen? Through the atonement of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Father symbolically nailed our debt to the cross, and it was paid in full and expunged forever through his sacrifice.