



A procession of merrymakers and bearers of gifts in the mosaic of Dionysus at Sepphoris.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ (10/6/18)

Lower right: Mosaic of Dionysus, god of wine, from a Roman villa.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ/THE ANCIENT CORINTH MUSEUM (11/8/14)



STAYING SOBER

BY M. DEAN REGISTER

AT FIRST PAUSE, the expression “be sober” sounds like a clear and forthright prohibition against drunkenness. Indeed the New Testament warns believers to avoid intoxication. Paul specifically denounced inebriety in the Roman (13:13), Corinthian (1 Cor. 5:11), Galatian (5:21), and Ephesian congregations (5:18). The reference to staying “sober” (2 Tim. 4:5, NASB) contains, however, a much broader application than temperance. It includes, but is not limited to, the command to refrain from strong drink.

As we explore the linguistic background and grammatical usage of the term and investigate its biblical context, we will develop a

deeper understanding of its meaning.

Seven times in the *New American Standard Bible* the word “sober” appears in a New Testament epistle (1 Cor. 15:34; 1 Thess. 5:6,8; 2 Tim 4:5; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8). Every occurrence involves a translation of the Greek verb *nephe* [NAY phe].

In the Hellenistic era preceding the New Testament era, the word *nephe* and its derivatives referred to a state of abstinence from wine.¹ Since drinking wine often impaired mental function and physical dexterity, the proper recourse

involved abstinence. The associated idea assumed that sobriety in contrast to drunkenness provided the opportunity for sound judgment and clear thinking.

The term also took on a figurative application. By the time of the New

Lesson Reference:

FBSC: 2 Timothy 1:3-7;
3:10—4:5

Testament era *nephe* was commonly used to imply mental alertness. Philo often used it in association with a person's approach toward a parent or toward God.²

Within the New Testament proper the figurative sense predominates, and the word is always couched in the form of an exhortation.³

Before we examine 2 Timothy 4:5, in which *nephe* appears, we should discover how it occurs in other New Testament passages.

Peter employed the term three times (1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8). In the first instance he used *nephe* as a call to be watchful and in control of one's mental and physical faculties particularly as persecution mounted. Similarly in the next instance, Peter used it as an imperative for holy living because of God's impending judgment. The third instance turned the focus toward spiritual warfare. Peter warned believers to be vigilant and guarded about Satan's attacks. The metaphor of Satan prowling like a lion raised the level of intensity and reinforced the need to avoid the intoxicants of passivity and negligence.

In addition, Paul used *nephe* on two other occasions (1 Thess. 5:6; 5:8). By way of contrast he challenged believers in Thessalonica to avoid spiritual slumber. Instead of conduct characterized by darkness, they needed to maintain sober behavior characterized by the light. The underlying concept called for self-control instead of unrestrained and undisciplined living.

Second Timothy 4:5 (in concert with the larger passages of Acts 16:1-5; 2 Tim. 1:5-6; 3:14—4:5) relates to a specific situation at a crucial moment in the lives of Paul and Timothy. Paul first met Timothy in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy's mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, were believers who demonstrated a sincere faith (2 Tim. 1:5). His father was a Greek (Acts 16:1). The spiritual status of Timothy's father is not mentioned. Paul took Timothy as a missionary partner and regarded him as a "son" in the ministry. Timothy

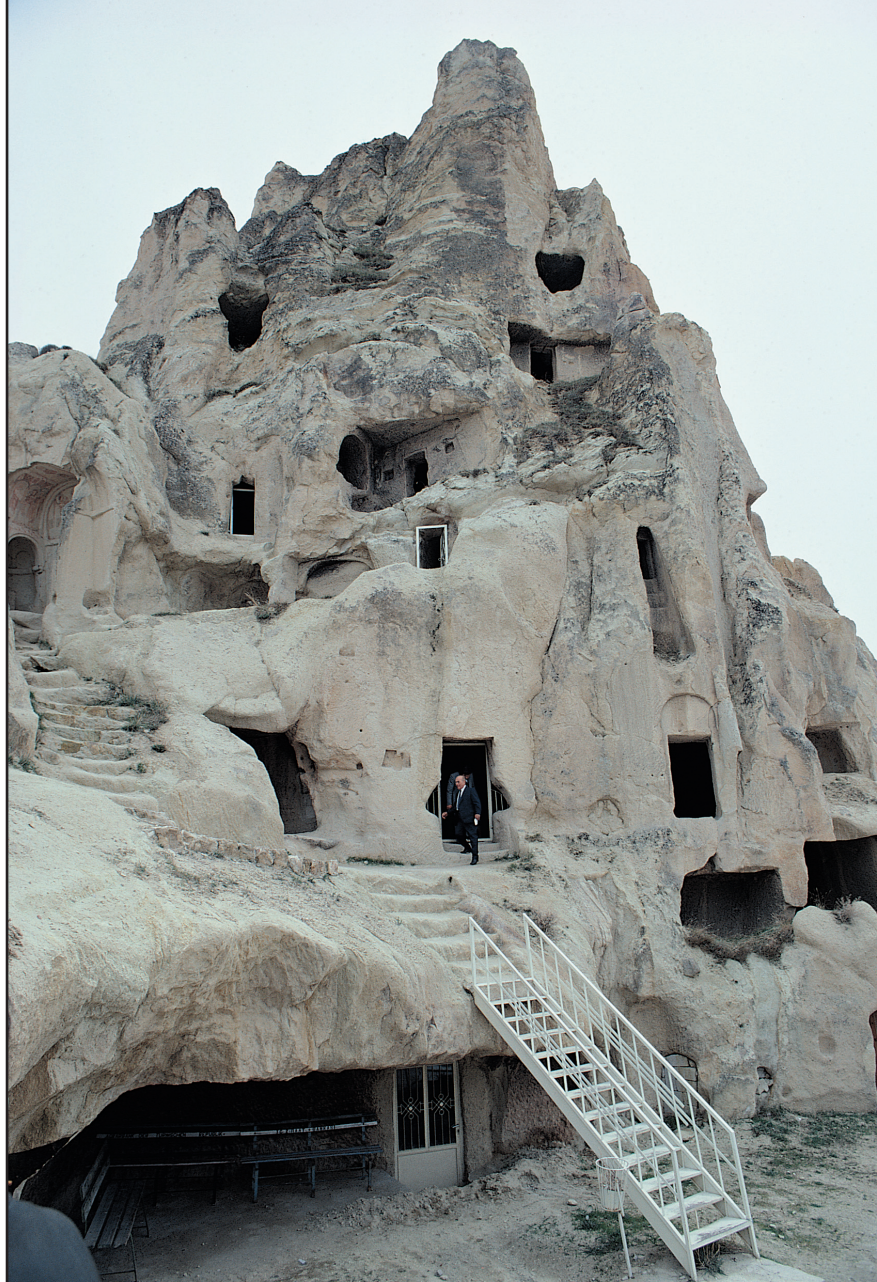
became one of Paul's most reliable companions throughout the missionary travels. When Paul penned his second letter to Timothy, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The future looked bleak regarding Paul's release, and he urged Timothy to arrive before winter. Whether Timothy reached Rome before Paul's death is uncertain. Paul's final letter contained a solemn challenge for Timothy to faithfully fulfill his responsibility to the gospel and especially in terms of spiritual sobriety.

Consequently in 2 Timothy 4:5 Paul presented four commands to Timothy. The commands were prefaced by the Greek phrase *su de*, "but you," to draw a distinction between Timothy and the

previously mentioned false disciples. The first command and the one that rivets our attention is a present imperative form of the verb *nephe*. The other three commands occur in the aorist tense. The call to "stay sober," however, occurs in the present tense to express continual action. Paul exhorted Timothy to be continually alert and clearheaded.

Scholars have suggested several reasons for Paul's emphasis on Timothy's sobriety, two of which deserve attention. One, Paul wanted Timothy to remain calm in the midst of impending turmoil. Quinn and Wacker claim that *nephe* was a technical term for a speaker in complete control of himself and his subject in contrast to the emotional eruptions of

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Above: St. Paul's outside the wall of Rome where tradition says that Paul was buried.

Left: The Monastery of the Nuns, one of the cave-churches in the ancient Roman province of Cappadocia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The soft volcanic tufts provided a haven for early Christians fleeing the persecutions following the Apostolic age.

his opponents.⁴ If so, Paul was exhorting Timothy to stay cool under fire and to verbally communicate the word of God in a rational manner.

A second reason for Paul's emphasis involved his passion for truth. He challenged Timothy to remain mentally lucid and spiritually ready to resist the sparkling intoxicants of heresies.⁵ With the threat of execution pending, Paul urged Timothy to reject the heady wine of false doctrines and guard the deposit of truth entrusted to him. Interestingly, the command to "stay sober" was followed by the prepositional phrase "in all things." Paul's exhortation to Timothy covered all conceivable situations and

circumstances that required a cool head; a calm, controlled disposition; a wide-awake spirit; and a vigilant mind.

Now that we have examined the linguistic background, grammatical usage, and biblical contexts of the charge to be "sober," what application does Paul's command hold for believers today?

One obvious application we can draw concerns the need to be keenly alert to the dangers of theological trends that distort or disparage the gospel. If Paul cautioned Timothy about the peril of heresies hundreds of years ago, shouldn't we be vigilant in guarding against moral and spiritual aberrations today? False teachers and their followers often blur the issues of sin and salvation.

They prefer pleasantries that minimize the consequences of sin and that tickle their ears (2 Tim. 4:3). They shun bold declarations about the exclusive claims of Christ and opt instead for a benign Jesus who muddled through life and accidentally ended up on a cross. Theological sobriety requires that we think clearly and conscientiously so as not to imbibe from the cup of spurious religious philosophy. Any intoxicating teaching that dulls our conviction that Jesus is the One and only mediator between God and humanity should be avoided at all times.

A second application involves the necessity of a sober, well-balanced presentation of the Word of God. As Paul urged Timothy to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2, NASB) and to be prepared to faithfully discharge his duties in all seasons, so also we are responsible to communicate clearly the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Sunday School teachers, pastors, and staff ministers have an obligation to remain sober in view of the opportunity to bear witness of God's mighty acts as revealed in Scripture.

A third application focuses on the need to stay controlled and calm under pressure. Daily stress takes a toll on our faith. Irritabilities arise. Frustrations erupt. Just as Timothy was exhorted to stay sober and self-controlled, we too are required to exercise discipline and restraint. Like a veteran pilot in stormy weather or a skilled surgeon during an emergency, the need of the moment calls for a steady and sober mind poised to respond to trials and threats.

¹"Drunken, Sober" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, Colin Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 514.

²See *n_ph_* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, Gerhard Kittel, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 937.

³See *n_ph_* in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 467.

⁴Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 781.

⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 112.

Dean Register is pastor of Temple Baptist Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.