

Who were Hymenaeus and Alexander, and what does it mean that their faith was shipwrecked?

Hymenaeus and Alexander were men in the early church in Ephesus who had “suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith” and so were “handed over to Satan” by the apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:19-20). Hymenaeus and Alexander are thus examples of those who reject the true doctrine and follow the false. Later, Hymenaeus is mentioned with Philetus, another false teacher (2 Timothy 2:17). An opponent of Paul named Alexander the metalworker is mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:15-16, but whether or not this is the same Alexander mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:19 is unknown.

Paul writes to his apprentice, Timothy, for the express purpose of exhorting him to “fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience” (1 Timothy 1:18-19) while pastoring a church. Paul begins his epistle with a warning against false doctrine and myths (verses 3-4) and a charge to remain true to “sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel” (verses 10-11). Paul then provides the names of Hymenaeus and Alexander as examples of what can happen when someone does not fight the good fight and keep the faith and a clear conscience.

Here is the passage that mentions Hymenaeus and Alexander: “Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

Paul does not expound on the error of Hymenaeus and Alexander. Timothy obviously knew

who they were and knew their situation well. Second Timothy 2:18 gives a little more detail, saying that Hymanaeus and his new partner in sin, Philetus, “have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.” Paul likens their false doctrine to a gangrene that spreads corruption and destroys life (verse 17).

The idea of the “shipwrecked” faith of Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:19 is that they had veered off course, away from good teaching, and drifted into the dangerous rocks of false teaching. They had wrecked their faith. Paul clearly links faith with a good conscience (and the righteous behavior that comes with good conscience) in 1 Timothy 1:5 and 19. Interestingly, the word translated “rejected” in verse 19 is a nautical term meaning “thrown overboard.” Hymenaeus and Alexander had tossed out the good conscience that comes with proper belief—in other words, they loved sin. The “ship” of their faith, not having the ballast it needed, went out of control and wrecked. So those who accept false teachings and ignore their conscience will suffer spiritual damage, like a ship that hits the rocks and is broken up.

It seems that Hymenaeus and Alexander must have professed faith in Christ at one point, since it is their “faith” that was shipwrecked. But they refused to follow the dictates of their conscience. They walked according to the flesh and not the Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9), claiming the name of Christ while behaving like unbelievers. As commentator Albert Barnes wrote, “People become infidels because they wish to indulge in sin. No man can be a sensualist, and yet love that gospel which enjoins purity of life. If people would keep a good conscience, the way to a steady belief in the gospel would be easy. If people will not, they must expect sooner or later to be landed in infidelity” (Notes on the Bible, commentary on 1 Timothy 1:19). Hymenaeus and Alexander did not lose their

salvation; either they were pretenders exposed for what they were or they were straying believers disciplined by a loving God (see Hebrews 12:6).

Paul says that he had delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander “to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:19). There is one other time when Paul had delivered a person to Satan: a man who professed to believe in Jesus but simultaneously living an immoral lifestyle was delivered “over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5). Note that the reason Paul metes out such a harsh apostolic judgment is the benefit of all those involved. The church would be purified, and the erring individuals would be brought to repentance. The goal for the man in Corinth was that he would submit to God and be saved from spiritual ruin. The goal for Hymenaeus and Alexander was that they “be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:20).

Paul himself had been a blasphemer at one time (1 Timothy 1:13), but, praise God, he testified that “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (verse 14). Paul’s desire for the shipwrecked Hymenaeus and Alexander is that they would also learn not to blaspheme and come to know the grace and mercy of the Lord.