

**“The Suffering Life”**  
**2 Timothy 2:1-13**  
**November 8, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We mentioned last week that the tone of Paul’s two letters to Timothy is very different, a difference that is due to the fact that Paul is addressing different problems in his two letters. First Timothy deals with a problem in the church in Ephesus, while 2 Timothy with a problem in Timothy’s life. The problem is Timothy’s failure to be prepared for a life of suffering. Paul is in prison, and he expects to die there. This outcome was very much contrary to Timothy’s expectations, with the result that Paul is concerned that Timothy might abandon the faith. So Paul writes to him about the suffering life, saying that such a life ought to be regarded as normal for the Christian.

My experience as a pastor tells me that we have the same need as Timothy. I have known Christians who have been so unprepared for suffering that the onset of a significant trial caused them to become angry at God to the point of walking away from the faith. Paul says, in agreement with Jesus and the other apostles, that we should expect suffering in this life. I think some of our problem is that the church has created a false expectation about life, an expectation that the job of God and his church is to help people enjoy life on their terms. I recently came across a mailer sent out by a new church to invite people to attend their services.

Hi Neighbor! At last! A new church for those who have given up on church services! Let’s face it. Many people aren’t active in church these days. Why? Too often the sermons are boring and don’t relate to daily living. Many churches seem more interested in your wallet than in you. Members are unfriendly to visitors. You wonder about the quality of the nursery care for your little ones. Do you think attending church should be enjoyable? WELL, WE’VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU! Valley Church is a new church designed to meet your needs... At Valley Church you... hear positive, practical messages which uplift you each week. How to feel good about yourself;... how to have a full and successful life;... how to overcome stress... Why not get a lift instead of a letdown this Sunday (found in *Christless Christianity*, by Michael Horton, p. 48).

Notice the change in the message of the good news, which is the literal meaning of the word gospel. This is another gospel, one that announces a church (and by implication a God) whose purpose is to meet your needs. The message of 2 Timothy takes a completely different trajectory. Paul portrays the Christian life as one which is characterized both by suffering and glory. Quite simply, if we aren’t prepared for suffering, then we aren’t prepared to live the Christian life. Let’s consider three truths Paul writes about the suffering life.

## I. The Strength to Live the Suffering Life – v. 1

The first order of business if Timothy is to be prepared for the suffering life is to clarify the source of power. **“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus”** (v. 1). Think with me for just a moment about this verb, “be strengthened.” It is a present passive imperative. It’s a command—that’s what imperative means. It’s a present tense verb, which has the sense of “keep on being strengthened,” indicating an ongoing need for power. Living the Christian life is more like a jet airplane than a glider. The glider can stay aloft for a long time with no power. But the jet will immediately begin to lose altitude if all the power from the jet engines is lost. The jet needs a continual source of power if it is stay aloft. We need the same as Christians.

This verb is in the passive voice, meaning that the action is accomplished by someone other than the subject. That’s why it’s translated **“be strengthened”** instead of “be strong”, which would be the active voice, or “strengthen yourself”, which would be the middle voice. The power is to come from outside Timothy. Specifically, it comes from **“the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”** So the command is to keep going to the grace of Jesus for power. The command is not, “Look to Jesus as your example in all things.” We don’t say, “Try really hard to pull yourself together and live like a Christian.” The command is this: “Make it your chief duty everyday to find your soul strengthened by the grace of God.” George Mueller speaks of it like this: “The first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day [is], to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about [is] not how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state.”

How is it exactly that we get strength from the grace that is in Jesus? It is not unlike the way we are strengthened physically by the nourishment that is in food. The eating of food happens through hunger, followed by receiving and internalizing of the food. We receive Jesus’ grace in the same way. First, we have to be hungry. You have to want outside help. And then you have to receive it as offered to us through Christ. The consistent message of the Bible is that God receives us on the basis of Jesus’ sacrifice, not on the basis of our performance. A few weeks ago, I heard a radio report on a Jewish practice called the Kaparot rite celebrated in preparation for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This rite consists of taking a chicken and waving it over one’s head three times while reciting these words. “This is my exchange, this is my substitute, this is my expiation. This chicken shall go to death and I shall proceed to a good, long life and peace.” The chicken is then slaughtered. The Old Testament was filled with such substitutionary sacrifices, but Christians believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those sacrifices. There is to be no more sacrifice because his achieved the end all of the others pointed to. By

Jesus' sacrifice, our sins really are paid for. That's the grace of God, and it is a gift that strengthens us. We simply receive it in faith and gratitude.

## **II. Acceptance of the Suffering Life – v. 2-7**

As Timothy fulfills God's calling to him to entrust the apostolic teaching to faithful men who will teach others, he is told to expect suffering. **“Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus”** (v. 3). One of the hymns that we commonly sing around Thanksgiving is the hymn “We Gather Together.” One line of this hymn reads, “Let Thy congregation endure through tribulation.” Steve Whitner told me several years ago that he found another version of that hymn that made a slight change in those words. It said, “Let Thy congregation escape tribulation.” I don't know which version is original, but I do know which one is biblical. Paul's command to us to share in suffering clearly means that we ought to expect suffering in this life. If you're not prepared for suffering, your entire walk with the Lord may crumble. The scenario that is often repeated goes like this. Suffering enters a Christian's life, and he is told that God wants to deliver him from that suffering. If he will pray with enough faith, then God will answer and work a miraculous deliverance. He prays with as much faith as he can muster, but the suffering is not removed. He then moves from blaming himself to blaming God. After a while, his anger with God grows to the point that he walks away from the church and from God.

Paul gives Timothy three illustrations to support his point to expect suffering, and then tells him, **“Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything”** (v. 7). Let's do that now. The three illustrations are of soldiers, athletes and farmers. Paul says that following Christ is like all three of these pursuits. Let me point out two similarities between following Christ and these three jobs of soldier, athlete and farmer.

The first similarity is that as these three metaphors all describe careers, so following Christ is more like a career than a hobby. Once you decide on a career to pursue, you are signing on to a set of commitments. The soldier is signing on to the military life instead of the civilian life, and the military life makes certain demands. The soldier must obey those in command over him. He must go where they tell him and when they tell him, whether he wants to or not. It's not like playing paintball, which is a hobby. If you get tired of paintball, you can just stay home and not play it any longer. The same is true of the athlete. Commentators have pointed out that to compete according to the rules defines the professional athlete over against the amateur. We have the same distinction. For example, one of the big differences between the golfer who pursues his sport as a hobby and the professional is that the professional must compete according to the rules. The occasional golfer can do things like improve his lie if his ball falls into a divot, and no one will really care. But the professional can't do that without sanction. To follow Christ is to acknowledge

him Lord over one's life. Among other things, that means that we are called to serve him as a career, not just a hobby. That doesn't mean that everyone needs to find a full-time job in Christian ministry. But it does mean that no matter what your job is, you are called to place your job and all the rest of your life under Jesus. It is possible that some of you might be troubled by a lack of any suffering in your life. Biblically speaking, I think this should trouble us. But what should you do if there is no suffering in your life? Don't seek suffering. Nowhere does the Bible tell us to do so. The problem might lie in the fact that you are pursuing Jesus as a hobby rather than a career. Ask him for a renewed purpose to pursue him, more as the soldier, athlete and farmer.

Second, all three of these careers, the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer, involve suffering. The soldier's life, with its long marches and hard struggles, is a life of suffering. The athlete has to train, and such training always includes some difficulties. The farmer has a different type of suffering. His is the combination of hard work, delayed results and sometimes bad results. All farmers work hard and no farmers ever see immediate results. Plants don't germinate and mature in a day. And sometimes, if the conditions are adverse, they don't grow to maturity at all. Paul's point is clear. To follow Christ is to pursue a life of suffering. Timothy should not allow his faith to be harmed by Paul's suffering in prison. Paul is not surprised by his suffering, and Timothy shouldn't be either. Jesus had taught the same thing, reminding the twelve that **"A servant is not greater than his master"** (John 15:20). Just as he lived a life of persecution and suffering, so they should expect the same. We know from other Scriptures that Timothy needed this preparation for suffering, because he too would later end up in prison, just like Paul. The author of Hebrews wrote, **"You should know that our brother Timothy has been released"** (13:23).

### **III. The Power Resulting from the Suffering Life – v. 8-13**

Why did God set things up so that to follow him leads to suffering? He could have done it otherwise, where believing in Christ would immediately remove all suffering. It will eventually, but why not in this life? Paul answers that question in verses 8-13. His answer is basically that we as Christ's followers are called to repeat the pattern of Jesus' life. Jesus suffered, died and was then raised again. We are joined into union with Christ and follow the same pattern. That's why Paul says, **"Remember Jesus Christ."**

This paragraph is full of hope. The Christian's life may be characterized by suffering, but his attitude toward this should not be the passive acceptance of the stoic, nor the self-pity of the self-centered. These are two unbelieving responses to suffering, and I confess that they are the ones I am usually guilty of. I tend to respond like the stoic, who quickly accepts whatever suffering comes his way as the new normal. This might look like a spiritual response,

but it is not. The faith-filled response to suffering is to be filled with hope, because we believe that our suffering is paired with glory just as certainly as exhaled breath always leads to inhaled breath. It is as certain as the resurrection of Jesus.

Part of this glory is in this life, and part of it in the next. The part that is in this life is found in the power of God's word to transform all of life. Paul says that he may be **"bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!"** (v. 9). Just as God spoke his word in Genesis 1 and the heavens and the earth were created, his word is still working powerful to transform all things. Christians are entrusted with this word.

This glory also extends to the next life. In what was probably an early Christian hymn that speaks of our union with Christ, we read, **"If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him"** (v. 11-12). As is the case in several places in the Bible, heaven is described as reigning with Jesus. Heaven will be a place of work and authority.

So Paul reminds Timothy that we respond to suffering with endurance that is filled with hope. He closes this hymn with a warning and an encouragement. The warning is in the line that says, **"If we deny him, he also will deny us."** But then there is encouragement in the final line. **"If we are faithless, he remains faithful."** There are times when our faith descends to such a low point that we could be described as faithless. This must be something less than an outright denial of Jesus, because in that case Jesus denies us. But this last line says that Jesus remains faithful even when our faith is low. We may not hang on to him, but thankfully, he hangs on to us.

## **CONCLUSION:**

What should you do if you are suffering right now? Let me summarize what we've learned here today like this. If you are suffering, the first thing you should do is try to change it. We are never told to seek suffering. On the contrary, the normal human response is to take steps that lie within our power to be delivered from suffering. If you're sick, go to the doctor. If you have a job that pays an inadequate salary, begin taking steps to seek another job. But if deliverance from suffering doesn't come after seeking it, then we ask God to strengthen us to endure it. We seek to find Jesus in the suffering. We do what Paul and Silas did when they found themselves in prison in Philippi. After being beaten and shackled, they sang hymns of praise to the Lord. They found Jesus in their sufferings. But that's not all. After the hymns of praise, God sent an earthquake that broke open that prison. His power was made evident through their weakness. God loves to work through our weakness to show his power. This is the pattern we see in Jesus' death and resurrection, and God tells us that it is the same pattern we will see in our own lives.