

2 Timothy 3

2 Timothy 2:1-13

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Text Comment

- v.1 Four times in 2 Timothy, five if you count 1 Timothy 6:11, we have a short phrase with the singular second person pronoun “you.” The Greek pronoun “*su*.” Three times we have “But you” (3:10, 14; 4:5), and here “You, therefore.” The point is that Timothy is not to be or do as those around him. Paul has just talked about the theological defections in the province of Asia, but Timothy is to stand fast. He is to resist the prevailing mood. [Stott, 49] But he needn’t find his strength in himself, as if this were a matter of gritting one’s teeth and summoning up one’s courage. The Lord is with him and will help him as he depends upon him.
- v.2 His task is not only to guard the faith -- to protect it from error (as in before in 1:13-14) -- but he is to pass it on to others as Paul passed it on to him. The “many witnesses” is a check on personal creativity. Lots of people knew what Paul’s doctrine was; many others had preached it besides Paul. [Mounce, 506] Timothy is to hew to *that* line and no other. Later Gnostics would advance teaching that they claimed had been revealed to them in secret revelations of truth handed down by the apostles, so it was apostolic teaching, but nobody else knew about it. They were delivering it for the first time. Always be wary of such claims, they come in many guises; in fact, forget “wary” and just run hard in the opposite direction!

Verse 2 gives us the Protestant doctrine of apostolic succession: not a direct line of descent by ordination from the apostles to the present generation of the church’s ministry, but a direct line of *faithful* descent, from men faithful to the gospel in one generation to men faithful to the gospel in the next. In the Protestant church a minister’s authority does not depend upon his having been ordained by a bishop who himself was ordained by a bishop and so on backward in time until we get to Peter himself. A Protestant minister’s authority depends rather upon his loyalty to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. “...the succession from the apostles is to be more in the message itself than in the men who teach it.” Think of the Olympic torch and how it is handed from hand to hand. Well it is to be something like that with the ministry as Paul is describing its succession here. [Stott, 52] And not only faithful, but able teachers. Ministers must always have both: pure doctrine and the gifts by which to communicate that doctrine to others.

- v.4 A soldier is, as it were, a wholly owned subsidiary of his commanding officer. He can't be involved in other things because he must be ready and willing to go wherever and do whatever his commander requires of him. Since, as we read in v. 3, the illustration has to do with suffering, the point seems to be that the soldier suffers by having to forego many other interests to concentrate on his duty. [Mounce, 507]

I told you that I've been reading a new biography of Abraham Kuyper. Something that I had not known before was that upon his involvement in politics, his being elected to the Dutch Parliament, Kuyper demitted the Christian ministry. He couldn't do the work of a minister if he were "entangled" in the concerns of a politician and so, though he had been a minister for years at that point and the ministry had been the central calling of his life, he surrendered his ordination and was never a minister again.

- v.5 The context suggests that "competing according to the rules" has to do with Christian service and, in particular, with faithfulness to the gospel. No runner will be judged to have won the race if instead of going round the track in his lane he cuts through the infield to get ahead of the leader! So the faithful gospel minister. He must not only prove himself true to the apostolic faith, but he must be willing to suffer for it, because that is what a faithful gospel ministry requires. That's one of its rules.

- v.6 The farmer's situation is different. His work is ordinary, repetitious, and unexciting. He expects no applause from a crowd of expectant onlookers. But if he works hard he reaps the greater benefit at the end of the day. As we read in Proverbs, the sluggard never makes a good farmer. Farmers are up early and work late, and no one would ever mistake what they do as *anything but work!* So a faithful minister. There is hard work to be done and those who devote themselves to it will reap the harvest. Elsewhere in his letters on several occasions Paul commends individuals who have "worked hard in the Lord" (e.g. Rom. 16:6, 12) and reminds his readers that "I worked harder than any of you" (2 Cor. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:10). The more you read ministerial biography, which I read a lot of, the more you will realize that one thing these great men had in common was indefatigable labor! Alexander Whyte once sternly remarked in an address to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland that he would have all lazy men drummed out of the ministry.

In the context it is not entirely clear what the "first share of the crops" refers to. But here, as often elsewhere in Paul and the rest of the New Testament, the concept of reward surfaces. The faithful worker, the hard worker will have his reward in due time.

In all three ways -- the single-minded way of the soldier, the lawful way of the athlete, and the zealous, hard-working way of the farmer -- Timothy is to be and remain a faithful gospel worker and he is to bring up a generation of such men behind him to do the same.

- v.7 We have here a fascinating and important statement. We must think carefully about what the apostles have written -- we are to be avid students of the Word of God -- but we are also to depend upon the illumination of the Word by the Spirit of God. Not one without the other, but always the two together: our study, the Spirit's illumination.

Paul has so far told Timothy, in effect, that nothing worth doing is easy to do. The life of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer is hard in some predictable ways. Now he's going to illustrate this principle further from the life of the Lord, from his own life, and from the life of Christians in general.

- v.8 The principle here seems to be that for Jesus too suffering and death were the path to glory. As it was for the master, so it will be for his servants. Christ is here described as "descended from David" and "risen from the dead," the earthly beginning and the heavenly and triumphant end of his ministry.

- v.9 And so it has been for Paul, now a prisoner in Rome and expecting execution for having served Christ as he has. He's being treated as a common criminal even though he has done nothing but render faithful service to the King of Kings.

His own circumstances are confining, but the gospel is far larger than any one preacher of it. The Lord has his servants everywhere -- Paul mentions some of them in 4:10-12 -- and, for that matter, even Paul, prisoner that he was, took every opportunity to speak of Christ to those with whom he came in contact. In 4:17 we read that he turned his first legal hearing into a gospel presentation! It is in the confidence that the elect will be saved that Paul lays down his own life. Crucial as Paul's ministry had been to the establishment of the church, the Lord was going to carry it on with others.

- v.12 Once again Paul cites a saying familiar to his readers. It applies to all Christians. The first couplet puts the point positively, the second negatively. "If we die with him," in this context likely refers to the Christian's baptism and the new life that follows it, as in Romans 6, a life in which the Christian must persevere in the teeth of opposition, difficulty, and loss.

- v.13 The Lord himself said a similar thing in Matt. 10:33: "if you deny me before men, I will deny you before my Father in heaven."

But what of the last line's final phrase "...he remains faithful"? It is tempting to take it -- as many reliable commentators have -- as an assurance to real believers that no matter our unfaithfulness, the Lord will forgive our sins and never forsake us. True enough. However, in the context, that seems to me unlikely to be the point. The last line should confirm the point of the line before it. The Lord will remain faithful to his threats as he remains faithful to his promises. [Stott, 64-65] We can be sure of that because God will never be untrue to his own nature. There are things God cannot do and one of them is to lie. If he promises to deny those who deny him, we can count on his doing so. *So far the Word of God.*

Listen to John Stott's summary of the paragraph we just read.

"Looking back over the first half of this chapter...the apostle Paul seems to have been hammering home a single lesson. From secular analogy (soldiers, athletes, farmers) and from spiritual experience (Christ's, his own, every Christian's) he has been insisting that blessing comes through pain, fruit through toil, life through death, and glory through suffering. It is an invariable law of Christian life and service.

"So why should we expect things to be easy for us or promise an easy time to others? ... The truth is the reverse, namely 'no pains no gains,' or 'no cross, no crown'.

"It is this principle which took Jesus Christ through a lowly birth and a shameful death to his glorious resurrection and heavenly reign. It is this principle which had brought Paul his chains and prison cell, in order that the elect might obtain salvation and glory." [65]

A good summary, I think, of what Paul has told us.

There is a great deal of woe in this world. People suffer; it is fact of human life. Nobody, no government has ever been able or ever will be able to eliminate human suffering. And most of this suffering is not specifically suffering for Christ. Much of the hardship and the heartbreak that Christians must endure in this cursed and dying world they share with unbelievers. Famine, war, and disease are "equal-opportunity" afflictions that draw believers and unbelievers alike into their maw. And, let's try if we can to escape our American provincialism and recognize, at least for the evening, that much of the world is not nearly as comfortable as we are.

I remember my first reading of Thomas Boston's immortal *Memoirs*, the 17th and 18th century Scottish divine, which is nothing if it is not an account of the great man's suffering. Six of his ten children predeceased him, most of them dying as infants or little children. His wife, a devout and gifted woman whom he loved deeply, suffered in her later years from what Boston's biographer merely calls a "mysterious and racking disorder of the intellect." Infant mortality and mental

illness have been through the ages and are still today in much of the world punishing miseries to vast numbers of people. But there is more. Boston records in the narrative of his life the loss of his teeth one by one. *That* is a problem we do not face as so many did in years gone by and as so many do today in other parts of the world. Throughout the ages daily life was and in many places still is far more painful than it is for us. They were and sometimes are complete strangers to the creature comforts we take for granted: no aspirin for their headaches, no pain-killers to assuage the sometimes unbearable pain of the illnesses that eventually carried their lives away. They lived in constant fear of plagues that would sweep away whole sections of the population, and so on.

But, for all our comfort, how much woe remains. If we have less pain from headache or aching teeth, we have more from ruined marriages and broken homes. We are consuming tranquilizers by the boatload not to assuage the pain of the body but of the soul. And then there are traffic accidents that darken a family's life by leaving loved ones dead or paralyzed; there is the aftermath of the sins of others that often leave a life blighted before it has well and truly begun, and then the often horrific consequences of our own sins. We tend as a people to be mesmerized by natural disasters and the carnage they bring – tornados, earthquakes and tsunamis – , but most human woe is caused by sin, by evil in the human heart, either the sin of others or our own. C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* estimated that 80% of human suffering was in effect or penalty the direct result of human sin. Others have thought it still a greater percentage; one scholar I read thought it more like 95% of human woe was the direct result of human sin! In any case believers and unbelievers alike can suffer all of this and for all of these reasons find this world a vale of tears.

One of the most wonderful things about the Bible, one of the things that gives it is unmistakable authority when it is read with an honest heart is its relentless honesty and realism about life. Think of how much suffering is reported in the Bible! Think of Joseph's captivity; or Judah's in Babylon. With respect to physical afflictions we can go from Eli's blindness to Mephibosheth's broken feet; from Hezekiah's terminal illness to Uzziah's leprosy. Think of David's loss of his best friend Jonathan; of Mary and Martha's devastation over the loss of their brother Lazarus. Think of Job's blighted life. Think of childlessness such as was suffered long by Hannah and Elizabeth, widowhood for long years by Anna, Ezekiel and the death of his wife, Jeremiah's enforced singleness, Paul's thorn in the flesh. Think of Elijah's loneliness or Jeremiah's discouragement. The Bible is painfully honest about the ravages of old age, which are set before us famously in Ecclesiastes 12 and illustrated in many biblical lives. Think of Jacob or David. And the list goes on and on and there is nothing on it that does not have its counterpart in human life today. In fact, there is not an affliction in human life that I am aware of that is not addressed in one way or another in Holy Scripture.

You are, of course, well aware that it is precisely the existence of such suffering -- so much of it, so terrible, so heart-breaking -- that has become the principle argument against the Christian faith in our time. our Christian faith. Alvin Plantinga, the evangelical philosopher, goes so far as to say that the argument from evil in the world, by which is meant the terrible suffering caused by man or by nature, is the only argument of any consequence against the Christian faith. And you are aware of the arguments that Christians have long deployed in response to the charge that if God were truly good and truly powerful, he wouldn't allow so much misery to exist in the world he made and controls. The Bible has so much to say -- and so much that is important *and* beautiful to say -- in answer to that charge. There is so much essential *truth* about human life that is never seen except in sorrow and in great sorrow. Sorrow and loss are divine instruments of sanctification. They educate us in the ways we *need* to be educated, not necessarily the ways we *want* to be educated. They break our pride, the chief problem of human life. Comfort, peace, and luxury almost invariably corrupt the human heart. Affliction has brought life to so many, has punished so many who deserve punishment, has opened so many hearts to love and sympathy, and, supremely, for so many has broken the grip of this world and opened the eyes to the world to come. If there is a world to come, if there is a hell and a heaven, one cannot look at the sufferings of this life in the same way. And there is so much more to say.

But Paul is not talking about suffering in general here in 2 Timothy 2. He's talking about a particular kind of suffering and it is important that we note the distinction because we tend to mix it all up in our minds. There is, to be sure, a Christian way of enduring suffering in life. No matter what the origin of our suffering, no matter whether it is the sort of suffering unbelievers must also endure, there is a distinctly Christian approach to suffering, a way for Christians to consecrate it to God, to make it, what P.T. Forsyth brilliantly called a "sacrament of pain." There are convictions, attitudes, and practices that ought dramatically to distinguish a Christian in the midst of his trials from the unbeliever suffering similar trials. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. The suffering he has in view is a very specific kind of suffering, and *one that Christians and only Christians ever experience. can know.*

Paul is encouraging Timothy -- who certainly knew the reality of suffering from illness (he was apparently a somewhat sickly man as we learned in 1 Timothy) -- to be ready to suffer in this other way. He is not talking about illness or famine or war; he's not talking about the loss of loved ones to disease or accident or even the consequences of injustice in general. Paul is talking about the opposition, the persecution, the attacks, even the deadly risk that befalls a Christian *because he is a Christian and because he is serving the Lord Jesus Christ.* Paul is speaking about the suffering he himself was experiencing at the moment he wrote the letter. He was in jail and not in jail in the sense of being under house arrest as had been the case in his previous imprisonment in Rome, described for us in Acts 28. Now he's in a real jail; whether every day all day or only from time to time, he was actually in chains. He expects to be convicted of a crime and to be executed for it.

In verse 9 Paul referred to himself as someone charged with being a criminal. The commentators advise us that when the adjective Paul employs is used as a noun, it can be translated not just “criminal” but “serious criminal.” It is an interesting historical detail. The great William Ramsay -- who did so much in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to restore the historical reputation of the New Testament after the attacks made against its historical reliability by German scholars in the 19th century argued that the term used here indicated that this was, in fact, the exact charge against Paul, viz. that he was a *serious criminal*. He then argued that such a charge would have made sense during the persecution under Nero in the mid-60s of the first century, but not later, in the next century, when simply being a Christian was a sufficient charge. [Mounce, 514] His point was that the term used in 2 Tim. 2:9 suggested that 2 Timothy was written in the era of Nero, not a century later as the German scholars were alleging. [By the way, no one nowadays takes that 19th century German skepticism seriously. It is a great illustration of how cultural and philosophical tendencies can make even ridiculous ideas seem eminently plausible!]

Paul’s point is simple and easy to follow. No soldier enlists expecting an easy life. Suffering goes with the territory. You are in the army to follow orders and the army exists to fight wars. With war and the preparation for war goes all manner of hardship and loss. Soldiers know that. It is the life they chose for themselves. My father was an army reservist when the Korean War began and was busy in a pastorate in Wheaton, Illinois. He had remained in the army upon the recommendation of some of his commanders, but never supposed he would be asked again to go to war. He had a growing family -- I had just been born -- and a busy life. Then, out of the blue, came the army’s summons. He was a soldier so he had no choice but to resign his pastorate, leave his family, and report for duty. Within weeks he was on a troop ship to Korea and a few days after arriving he was jumping out of an airplane behind enemy lines. Such is a soldier’s life. No army could function were it not. Well, we Christians are in an army and we are fighting a war. Of course we have opposition. You can’t have a war without an enemy! The devil and the world are arrayed against us and, while the victory is already guaranteed, there is a lot of hard fighting to be done before it is all over.

No soldier imagines that the enemy is shooting at him for personal reasons. He doesn’t stick his head out of the foxhole and whine, “Was it something I said?” **“I’m happy to apologize.”** He knows very well that his life is in danger because the war that is being fought and because of the side he is on. During the great wars, it was common to hear people remind one another that “there’s a war on;” that’s the phrase they used to explain why they had to do without this, or suffer the want of that, or endure something else. “There’s a war on.” Well that is Paul’s point here.

And he makes a similar point by appeal to the example of the athlete and the farmer. Christians are running a race and any athlete knows the pain that one must endure to compete in a race

according to the rules, the pain one suffers in training and the pain one suffers in a race. I've told some of you before that my one year of experience in track and field has stuck with me as an illustration of this point. I was a quarter-miler who had some speed but not much endurance and a high jumper who had an endearing relationship with gravity. My real opportunity for success was in the quarter mile, but I much preferred to practice the high jump rather than the quarter mile. The former was fun, the latter was just painful. The result was that I never amounted to much at either. I didn't submit myself to the laws of athletics, the inevitable necessity of embracing pain, and the result was a foregone conclusion. Had I done what I should have done and run twenty or thirty quarter miles every afternoon, I would never have been a particularly great quarter miler, but I would have been much better than I was.

Do you remember, some of you, that excruciating footage of thirty-nine year old, Gabriela Andersen-Schiess, a Swiss marathoner at the 1984 Olympics, entering the stadium and the final several hundred yards of the more than twenty-six mile road race so utterly exhausted that she couldn't even walk in a straight line. The crowd gasped in horror as she staggered onto the track, her torso twisted, her left arm limp, her right leg mostly seized. She waved away medical personnel who rushed to help her, knowing that, if they touched her, she would be disqualified. The L.A. Coliseum crowd applauded and cheered as she limped around the track in the race's final 400 meters, occasionally stopping and holding her head.

While the effects of her heat exhaustion were plainly evident, trackside medics saw that she was perspiring, which meant that her body still had some disposable fluids, and let her continue her march to the finish line. At the completion of this final lap—which took Andersen-Schiess five minutes and 44 seconds—she fell across the finish line into the arms of medical personnel who had followed her around the track. She finished 37th, ahead of seven other runners. Medical personnel tended to her immediately and, miraculously, she was released two hours later. Though she finished twenty minutes behind the winner, her time of 2:48:45 would have won the gold medal in the first five Olympic marathons.

She was determined to finish the race and if she were to do so no one could help her. But the rules required her to run the same course the other runners followed and to receive no help, and pain and suffering were the price of finishing the race. And so with the life of a farmer, even more in those days when farming was so much manual labor. The suffering of hard work, of early mornings and late nights was the price of a large harvest.

Paul's point is straightforward and unmistakable. If a person is loyal to the gospel, he or she may expect opposition and ridicule, suffering and loss. Not always, to be sure, but sooner or later and again and again. The Lord himself prepared us for this. He reminded his disciples that if the world hated him -- and they put him to death in their hatred -- they would hate his followers also.

The servant is not above the master! Indeed, he once told them, “the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”

And later in this same letter (3:12) Paul will lay it down as a general rule:

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”

It is the nature of this world to hate God and it is inevitable that those who stand with God and who are known to be serving God in the world will suffer the same animosity and opposition. So Paul’s counsel to Timothy *and to us* is to expect this, and expecting it, face it with aplomb. It is the mark of a Christian man or woman’s faithfulness to be opposed because he or she is a Christian.

Now, to be sure, Christians can sometimes bring opprobrium upon themselves unnecessarily and what they take to be persecution is simply dislike or disapproval for other reasons. The Florida pastor who has been ridiculed for burning the Koran is not for that reason suffering for righteousness sake. But the long line of martyrs is proof of the point Paul is making here and, of course, there have been many other Christians whose suffering has been much less but who have nevertheless suffered for Christ’s sake.

You may be aware of a controversy that has erupted in evangelical Christian circles over the past few years and has set friend against friend and mission agency against mission agency concerning what has come to be called the *insider movement*. Insider movements can be found particularly in Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism and refer to Muslims, Jews, and Hindus who convert to Christianity, become followers of Jesus, but who do not disassociate with their former religious community, and often do not even announce their belief in Jesus to their families or their former religious communities. They continue to attend the temple or the mosque, continue to participate in the rites of their former faith, but with a different understanding and attitude. The God they worship is the Triune God, the Savior is Jesus, and so on. One of the justifications for such insider movements in modern missiology is that it is far easier for people to become Christians if they don’t have to suffer estrangement from their families or culture in order to do so. Furthermore, by remaining in place, these Christians are not required to associate with a Christendom that has often in the past mistreated the people of their religion or ethnicity. Messianic Jews are something of an insider movement, though they do typically meet apart from the local Jewish synagogues and are a distinct movement that official Judaism doesn’t recognize as Jewish. Insider movements in Islam and Hinduism are typically more secretive and unidentified by the officers of the official religion.

Opponents naturally point out that it seems very unlikely that a gospel believer, no matter his or her sincerity, could really practice a biblical faith and worship in a mosque or a synagogue or a

Hindu temple. At point after point, one would have to confess something one did not believe to be true or practice in a way forbidden in Holy Scripture. No Christian Muslim, for example, could declare as Muslims do in worship that Mohammed is God's prophet, when the man said so many things that contradict the teaching of the Bible.

To be sure, in my opinion, some of the criticism we have heard of these movements, even in PCA circles, has been uninformed and unhelpful. And there is something unseemly about comfortable, secure, relatively wealthy American Christians telling Muslim converts to identify themselves as Christians though such identification may very well lead to their ostracism and even their death.

However, we cannot read the Bible and not realize that from the very beginning to follow Jesus Christ was to risk all manner of loss, of suffering, and of opposition. It is not a historical detail that so many early Christians lost their lives precisely because they were Christians and fearlessly identified themselves with Jesus' name and cause. Our Savior suffered death for us; it is a fundamental piece of our loyalty to him that we should be willing to do the same for him. This world is a spiritual battlefield. Wounds and death are inevitable in war.

But then we can't ask Muslims and Hindus to face this fact if we are not willing to face it ourselves! What a text like the one we read this evening amounts to is a personal challenge and summons. Have we suffered for Christ's sake? Have we suffered for the gospel's sake? And if we have not or rarely, is that because we have not sufficiently identified with the Lord Jesus for others to attach their opposition to Christ to us? We will never have the delicious privilege of being counted worthy of suffering for the Name -- as did the Lord's earliest disciples -- if we are not known as his followers and if we are not actively serving the gospel in the world. Too many Christians are like the soldier who cowers from the fight, the runner who relaxes instead of trains, and the farmer who sleeps in and quits early. We may live more comfortably, but what wounds will we have to show to prove that we have done our part for Christ and the gospel? There is a reason why the representative Christian in the book of Revelation is the martyr and why the rewards are given to them precisely because they came out of the great tribulation (7:14). In Revelation's account of the long sweep of history, suffering for Christ and his kingdom is the critical mark, the distinguishing, identifying mark of a man or woman in Christ's faithfulness.

Love desires its demonstration and nothing more powerfully or beautifully demonstrates true love than the willingness to suffer on its behalf. I'm sure you have thought as I have from time to time: what would you like to be doing at the very moment when the Lord Christ appeared in the sky, or rather, what would you hope to be doing at the very moment your heart stopped and you dropped dead? Many of us I'm sure would say, we would love at that very moment to be sharing the gospel with someone else or to be serving the Lord in some other way. But I think taking the

Bible as a whole the best possible thing that could happen to us at that moment would be that somebody was taking it out on us because we were a follower and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. A call to arms brothers and sisters: to diligent training as spiritual athletes, and to the hard work of gospel cultivation! And if we suffer some reproach, if others ridicule, if we should suffer some material loss as a consequence; what is that to us? Our Savior suffered far more and he said, "If we endure, we will also reign with him."