

A CALL TO ENDURANCE

Part I

II Timothy 2:1-13

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As you remember from last week, Paul is imprisoned in the infamous Mamertine dungeon in Rome, awaiting his second and last trial. He indicates in chapter one that he has had one encounter with what he calls "the lions" in Rome. It is difficult to know what he is referring to specifically, whether he is speaking metaphorically of Satan, or of Caesar, or whether he had actually had some occasion to meet the lions in the Colosseum. But in any case, his life had been spared and now he is writing to Timothy, writing in the face of wide-scaled defection from the truth, as he indicates in verse 15 of chapter 1, "All who are in Asia turned away from me." Early converts in Asia Minor who had responded to the call to come to Christ were turning away because of persecution by the Roman government, and Paul was experiencing personally the force of this rejection. He writes to Timothy who is in the city of Ephesus pastoring a church that the Apostle Paul established in Asia Minor. And, of course, since Timothy was in Asia, he also was observing this defection from the faith to which Paul alludes. Timothy was weak in spirit, frail in body, timid in disposition and, being a young man, he needed these words of encouragement from the Apostle Paul.

In view then of this almost universal declension Paul writes these words in chapter 2 that I have entitled "A Call to Endurance." There are *three commands* in the first paragraph that comprise the call to endurance. These commands are amplified by *three metaphors*, and then further explained by the means of *three illustrations*. The first command is found in the first verse,

"You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

Be strong in grace. You, Timothy, in contrast to those in Asia who are turning away from the faith, be strong. No matter what others may think of you, no matter what you may think of yourself, no matter how weak, how inept, how inadequate, how ill-equipped you may consider your self to be, you, Timothy, be strong. Now as we indicated last week, this is not a call to be strong in himself; it is a call to be *strengthened*. The verb is passive and in the present tense. "You Timothy, keep on being strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus." It would be absurd indeed to ask Timothy to be strong in himself, to clench his fist, to set his jaw, to marshal his own resources and be the man Paul wanted him to be in Ephesus. He simply did not have it within himself to be strong. You might as well ask Ray Stedman to sing grand opera, or Dave Roper to grow hair as to ask Timothy to be strong. One of my boys asked me the other day "Dad, why don't you let it grow out on top?" I said, "Son, there is no way." I don't have the means. I can't do it. To ask Timothy to be strong without this qualifying phrase "in the grace that is in Christ Jesus," would have been ridiculous indeed. He was to find his resource not in his own nature but in the nature of Jesus Christ.

This is not a call to be stoical: it is a call to be dependent upon an indwelling Spirit. I had an illustration of this principle recently when we took a group of young people to Lytton Plaza. If you have driven down University Avenue recently then you've noticed that is where the action is. Many hippies and radicals gather there in the Evening. We took a group of about twenty students into the Plaza to give witness to our relationship to Christ.

It was a terrifying experience. As we gathered, I noticed one young man from our group standing with a Bible in his hands. I had asked them not to bring their Bibles into the Plaza, so I walked over to talk to him about it. I noticed he was reading and he showed me the passage. It was a promise from Joshua 1:9, where the Lord says to Joshua, "Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." He said, "That's it, isn't it?" And I said, "That's it." He put his Bible down and as he walked away I distinctly heard one knee say to the other, "Let's shake!" But he moved into the crowd. He went in fear; emotionally, he was shaken. But he went in the Lord's strength. He did not have it within himself to be strong, but he went in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. What a wonderful statement. What a privilege it is to walk in that strength. No matter how timid, how lacking in resources, you can be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Someone has described grace about an acrostic based on the letters G-R-A-C-E -- God's Resources At Christ's Expense. All that God is, available to us, to give strength to our weakness.

The second command is found in verse 2.

"...and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

The command is to *entrust the truth to others*. He had been told earlier in this letter to "guard the deposit that had been entrusted to him. And now Paul says, "Timothy, pass that deposit on to other men." The process is described. Paul first entrusted the truth to Timothy. We know from the book of Acts that Timothy was the constant companion of Apostle Paul. He selected this young man to accompany him on his second missionary journey through Asia Minor. Thus Timothy had an opportunity to associate with the Apostle and to observe his life and teaching. In this way Paul passed the truth onto Timothy. Timothy then was to pass the truth onto other men, faithful men (teachable men), men who would respond to the truth and who in turn would instruct others. Four generations are envisaged here: Paul teaching Timothy, Timothy teaching faithful men, and these faithful men teaching others.

The process began in the Apostolic era and it is still going on today. It is still our responsibility to pass the truth on, like an Olympic torch, from one generation to the next.

This was the pattern that the Lord himself employed. At the outset of his ministry he chose twelve men. It was to this small band that Jesus committed the future of the church. As the Lord's ministry drew to a close he spent more and more of his time with this inner circle who constituted his group of "Timothys." The transfer of truth to the next generation was dependent on his face to face instruction of these men. You see it in the ministry of Paul to his associates. He did not look primarily to his ministry to the multitudes as the means of discipling men. He spent much of his time--perhaps his prime time--in individual, personalized ministry to men.

We also must teach others. We must discover those that are teachable, who will take the truth that we impart to them and share it with others. This is not just the responsibility of apostles or pastors, the professionals, but all members of the church have this opportunity.

May I make an observation in passing? Eugene Nida, in one of his books, indicates that there are basically four types of individuals. There are initiators--creative individuals who originate ideas. There are purveyors -- those who will channel information to others. There are people who are receptors -- who listen but do not respond. The fourth type he calls censors -- those who oppose the truth. I think all four classes of individuals are found in the church today. May God give us wisdom to discover those purveyors and innovators of truth, who will respond, and invest their lives in others, equipping them to do the work of the ministry.

I spoke to a young man this past week who has a ministry of discipling others. He was telling me of a young man that he led to Christ three years ago. They began to meet weekly to study the scriptures and pray together. Within a few weeks this young Christian led his wife to Christ, and then his sister. His sister led her husband to Christ. Now they are meeting together in a Bible study with two other couples who subsequently found Christ, and the process is still going on. This is a ministry of multiplication. And it is the most exciting ministry I know.

There is a third command found in verse 3.

"Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus..."

Literally, "endure suffering *with* me." Paul is suffering in Rome for the gospel. People are turning away from him. Paul implores Timothy to be identified with him in his suffering. He is to take his share of suffering as a good soldier. Soldiers expect to suffer. It is part and parcel of their calling. A soldier does not expect to live a life of ease. When he is on duty, any type of austerity is justified. It is a part of his life. Paul says you, Timothy, must endure as a *good soldier* of Jesus Christ. Then he uses three metaphors to expand on the need for endurance. He uses the example of a soldier, in verse 4; an athlete, in verse 5; and a farmer, in verse 6. In each case there is a *requirement* and a *reward*. In verse 4 Paul writes,

"No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him."

The requirement is that a soldier be unencumbered and single-minded. There is nothing wrong with civilian pursuits; it is just that a dutiful soldier must not become *entangled* in civilian pursuits *because* they drain his time and energy. He is to concentrate, Paul says, on pleasing his Commander-in-Chief. A good soldier pours out his life to please his Commander-in-Chief, and cuts himself off from anything that would encumber him. So a good soldier of Christ considers as first priority the requirement to please his commander. He is a good soldier because he is dedicated. And the reward is that he receives the approval of his commanding officer. Without dedication there can be no approval.

The second metaphor is that of an athlete, in verse 5.

"An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules."

The requirement is that he observe the rules. There must be no random display of skill. He is to be *disciplined*. He is to place himself under the rules of the game. Any game has rules, and in order to play the game correctly, the participants must comply with those rules. An athlete must be law-abiding. The freedom an athlete enjoys is the freedom to follow the rules. No rules, no wreath.

The third metaphor is that of a farmer, in verse 6.

"It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops."

The requirement here is that the farmer work hard. Toil is indispensable to a farmer. In an undeveloped country such as Palestine there is no such thing as a gentlemen farmer. Farmers work hard. No matter how inclement the weather, no matter how disinclined the farmer to toil in the field, he must work. And the reward is the harvest. The harvest does not appear if the farmer does not log the time in the field. The figure of farming is so appropriate to the Christian life. The farmer works the field. He sows the seed, and he labors to cultivate the crop. He labors, but the harvest ultimately is produced by God. The principle of life that is inherent in the seed,

the rain and the sunshine, the factors that cause the harvest to come to fruition come from God alone. This is the mystery of divine-human cooperation that makes possible the harvest. He gives the increase but we must plant and water and toil.

There are, of course, two types of harvest in Christian experience. There is the harvest of Christian character. Paul speaks of the *fruit* of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, faithfulness, meekness, self control. These are characteristics of a life that is sown to the Spirit. This harvest can be produced only if we are diligent in our pursuit of holiness. We must turn away from sin and from self, and yield to the life of Jesus Christ. It is the Lord that produces the fruit, but our wills must be engaged in the struggle. We cannot be lethargic. The second type of harvest is the harvest of individuals brought into relationship with Christ. And again, the requirement from our standpoint is that of toil. The fruit will not drop into our hands without effort on our part. It will involve our time and energy and our willingness to give yourself in sacrificial friendships. Ultimately it is God who will produce the harvest but it is our responsibility to be a hard-working farmer. There will be no harvest without toil.

Now the theme of all of these metaphors is that progress in our Christian life will cost us dearly. There is no gain without pain! We must expect to labor if we hope to achieve. We cannot live desultory lives and expect God to pour everything in.

In verse 7 Paul says,

"Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything."

There are a couple of comments I would like to make on this verse in passing. First, it is a pointed statement of the authority of the Apostle. He informs Timothy that he cannot fully understand these simple metaphors without God's help. He needs God to understand what the Apostle is saying. What arrogance -- unless he is indeed God's spokesman.

The second thing that occurs to me is that this is the biblical method of Bible study. We have to apply ourselves to the truth, we have to think, and then God will grant us understanding.

Now in the remaining verses (8 through 13), Paul gives us three illustrations to reinforce his argument. He refers to the *experience of Christ* in verse 8; to the *experience of the Apostle Paul* himself, verses 9 and 10; and to the *experience of all believers* in verses 11-13.

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel."

Why should he remember Christ? Perhaps because Jesus, risen from the dead, is the heart of the gospel. However, I believe he is pointing to Christ as one who demonstrated the principle that life can only come through death; glory can only come through suffering; achievement ultimately comes only through endurance. Jesus died in order to be raised to the right hand of the father. For him there was no crown apart from the cross. The book of Hebrews says of Jesus that "for the joy that was set before him (he) endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He could never have received the glory apart from the cross.

There is an encouraging note tucked away in this verse. Paul reminds Timothy that Jesus was "descended from David." He highlights his humanity. He is saying, Timothy, remember that it was in his humanity, not his deity, that Jesus suffered. It is no encouragement that God suffered. But to discover that Jesus, as a man dependent upon the Father, suffered and endured -- that puts starch in our spine! He held fast in the face of death, endured

the cross, and received the glory. Whenever then we are tempted to give way under pressure we must "remember Jesus Christ" who suffered as we suffer, who shared our experience totally as a man, who fully understands. This same Jesus is available to us today to supply the strength that we need. He is a risen Lord who strengthens in the time of need. "Timothy, when you are inclined to shrink from suffering, remember Jesus Christ." There is no crown without a cross.

Then in verses 9 and 10 he refers to his own experiences,

... the gospel for which I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. But the word of God is not fettered. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory.

Paul links his own suffering with glory. He says, "I am suffering, but the result of my suffering will be glory for those elect of God who have not yet responded to the gospel." He speaks of the humiliation of wearing chains, and yet he says, "The gospel is not fettered." I think he is doing more than merely setting up a contrast (I am fettered, the gospel is not) . He is saying, "Because I suffer, others will hear the gospel and be saved." Paul's suffering, of course, is in no way redemptive. Only the death of *Christ* can redeem men. This is Paul's conviction: there is only one thing that will ultimately gather the elect and that is the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore I must preach the gospel. But Paul knows that in preaching the gospel he will suffer. He is presently suffering for it, and he will continue to suffer for it. And so he says, "Therefore on behalf of God's elect, I must suffer. There is no other way. If they are to be saved, I must suffer." Does not this truth apply to us? In our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our offices, on our campuses, there are people who do not yet know Jesus Christ. Therefore we must expose them to the gospel. But if we proclaim the gospel we will suffer. It is an inherent part of the proclamation of the gospel. We will be ostracized, we will be misunderstood, we will be excluded from certain circles, we will be hated and opposed and ridiculed. But we have no alternative. If they are to be saved, we must declare the truth and suffer for it. There is no salvation, Paul says, apart from suffering. No crown without a cross, no wreath without rules, no glory apart from suffering. Then finally in verses 11 through 13 he refers to the experience of all believers.

**"The saying is sure:
If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful--
for he cannot deny himself."**

This appears to be a portion of an early Christian hymn. I'm sure this hymn must have been sung by the church in the catacombs during periods of persecution. There are four things Paul says in this hymn that are the common experience of all believers. First, if we have died with him, we shall also live with him. Life comes through death. There is no other way. The cross is the symbol of that cutting off of the old life, in order that Christ's life may appear in us. There can be no life apart from this death. We must act upon the principle of the cross in our life.

There is no real life without death. Second, if we endure we shall also reign with him. We cannot reign with Christ unless we endure. James says, "Blessed is the man who endures trials for when he is tried he will receive the crown of life" The crown of life is a symbol of the authority that we have to reign in life. Trials teach us the utter folly of self dependence, and the absolute necessity of confidence in Christ. We draw upon him and his strength and thus discover how to reign in life. We

receive a crown of life when *we* have discovered through suffering that Jesus Christ is our life. We cannot reign unless we endure suffering. Third, if we deny him Paul says he will also deny us. It is the witness of scripture and experience that some will deny him. They deny him because their commitment to him is superficial *and* self-centered, and ultimately they turn away. Therefore he will turn his back on them. And finally, if we are faithless, he remains faithful. This is a word of encouragement to those who are weak in faith. Though we flag in faith he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself in us. This hymn, then, summarizes Christian experience in two words, dying and enduring. But this is the route to living and reigning.

If there is one lesson in these verses I believe it is this: blessing comes through toil; life comes through death, glory comes through suffering. Christian life and service will never come easy. It will cost us in terms of time and toil and energy and in terms of sacrificial friendships. But the promise is that this is the path to glory. The cross will lead to a crown. Suffering will mean salvation for many. Toil will inevitably result in a harvest.

Our Father, we thank you for the promise of life that there is in Christ Jesus. We know that suffering is standard operating procedure. Teach us to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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