

2 Timothy: Strong in Grace

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, we know that from the Scriptures we learn wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by you and useful for our teaching and training in righteousness. May it be so again this morning. Correct us where we're crooked. Equip us where we're lacking. Inspire us where we're discouraged, so we might be ready for every good work you've prepared for us to walk in. Amen.

Background

We find ourselves this morning in 2 Timothy. You could almost call the book "2 Timidity."

Timothy's twin brother in life was timidity: Timothy and Timidity. Wherever Timothy was, Timidity was close behind.

Paul is Timothy's yoda—his task was to train Timothy to overcome his fears and insecurities: God has not given you a spirit of timidity Timothy, but a spirit of love, a spirit of power, and a sound mind—a disciplined and self-controlled mind. So be strong in grace, for Christ is always with you—holding your hand, guiding you into truth, and leading you to glory.

Paul is not only a yoda to Timothy, he's a coach:

- NEVER FORGET, Timothy—remember the Lord Jesus Christ—risen from the dead.
- NEVER FORGET the promise of life found in Christ.
- You too will rise with Christ above every challenge that comes your way.
- Timothy, you've got a holy calling: guard the sacred treasure of the good news entrusted to your care. Don't bury it—share it boldly.
- Be strong in grace, for Christ is the strength of your heart.
- Take heart.

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Let's hear now from ...

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:1-10 (NRSV)

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules. It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – 2 Timothy: Strong in Grace

Leonard Sweet in his book *Strong in the Broken Places*, tells about Samuel Shoemaker, who gave his life to the poor and downtrodden in New York City a century ago.

A friend asked him, "Why don't you just run away from it all before you're broken by this inhuman burden that you've placed on yourself?" Although Shoemaker himself was in poor health and discouraged he responded,

"I would like to run away from it all, but a strange man on the cross won't let me."

The place of ministry Shoemaker refused to run from was Calvary Chapel. The very same church that Bill Wilson would come from—where he wrote the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and founded AA Meetings to help others like himself who struggled with addiction.

"I would like to run away from it all—the hurt, the challenges, the uncomfortable things, the need, the pressing issues of the day—

"But a strange man on the cross won't let me."

"Take up your cross," says Jesus, "and follow me."

Jesus beckons us to die to ourselves. Die to our selfishness. Die to our comfort. Die to our preconceived ideas. Die to our pride. Die to our status. Die to our career.

Before being exalted, Jesus had to walk in the way of the cross and taste death. Then and only then he was resurrected.

I like how Karl Barth described Christ's redemptive suffering:

The life of Jesus Christ is not a triumph, but a humiliation, not a success but a failure, not a joy but suffering. The mercy of God is that he made man's business, God's own business. Christ took on our humiliation, failure, and suffering so it would no longer be our business, but God's business.

The good news is that with Christ, we have hope in our suffering, because we know resurrection is always around the corner.

Paul's giving a bit of pep talk during a time out to his protégé Timothy. Trying to get him and us spiritually pumped up so we don't give up.

To get our head in the game:

- Press through your fears, your reservations, and minister in Christ's name.
- Roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.

But don't do it in your own strength. Don't go at it alone. Revisit the basics. Lean into the Spirit.

"Remember the theme of the gospel," says Paul:

- Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. Don't forget Jesus.
- Listen to the strange man with the nail scars on his hands and feet.
- Remember. Remember.
- Never, ever, ever forget Jesus Christ who rose from the dead.

Don't forget to remember...

As we follow the risen Christ—he takes us by the hand and leads us to and through difficult places and uncomfortable situations, and to people and places very different from ourselves.

Walking by faith is no cake walk.

There's an important message here:

If you identify with Christ, *you will suffer*—it comes with the territory.
You'll be misunderstood and maligned.

Jesus was labeled a blasphemer, a Sabbath breaker, a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners because of the company he kept and the message he preached.

Paul was labelled a criminal for Christ. If you're looking for a squeaky-clean reputation or a life of ease, steer clear of Christ. *But* Christ is where the action is. That's where the real life is. Where the growth is.

Be strong Timothy. Take strength in the strong grip of Christ's grace. Show your mettle. Be brave—suck it up. Be soft-hearted and thick-skinned. Tough AND tender. Face the challenges in front of you, don't avoid them. Rise to the occasion.

But draw from the strength of God's grace and DO IT.

Give to God your doubts and fears. Take a deep breath, then take the leap of faith. Entrust yourself to God's grace. If you missed it along the way—trust in the mercy and forgiveness of our loving God to cover your back. This is grace—where we really believe that Christ receives us in our struggles, stammerings, and stumblings. Steps of faith are often stumblings of faith. We "stumble into grace" as Emmylou Harris sang.

I like how Episcopal clergyman George Everett Ross put it:

Where we would put ourselves down,
Christ bends to lift us up.
Where we heap judgment and blame upon ourselves,
he tenderly forgives and accepts us.
Where we are filled with despair
or overwhelming sorrow,
Christ loves us with a love that recreates us.

Grace is God's strength meeting our places of weakness so that we can move beyond our brokenness and into a new place of transformation, maturity, and grace.

Paul then reminds Timothy to impart this to others—don't keep it to yourself. Entrust the gospel of Christ to faithful and reliable leaders—don't leave it to chance. Hand it to the next generation. Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.

As I've mentored you, carefully select others to mentor. Don't be lax in your faith or lazy in investing in new leaders or your children. Be proactive. Be focused. There's something interesting I've noticed about myself. Maybe you've experienced this too. I find that when there's something pressing for me to do, some deadline that I need meet, I have sudden urge to ... clean and re-organize.

I will re-organize my books. I will dust. I will pull out the couch and sweep behind it. I will clean out my e-mail inbox. Create new folders to organize my in-box. Attend to the emergency of pushing back my cuticles ...

I will diligently do everything EXCEPT what I most need to do in the moment. I never cease to amaze myself at my creative avoidance strategies.

This is the Art of Procrastination that we human beings are so adept at.

Paul knows human nature pretty well. So he provides three metaphors to help us overcome spiritual lethargy and distractedness to courageously do what we need to do.

First, learn devotion from the soldier.

Like a good soldier of Christ on active duty—don't get tied up in civilian affairs. Soldiers live frugal and simple lives. Pare your life down to the bare necessities. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Be ready to obey at a moment's notice. Be focused and faithful—our aim is to please our commanding officer.

- As Christians, we're not our own boss.
- Concentrate on carrying out your orders.
- Stay true to your mission.
- Keep focused on your priorities.
- Don't get sidetracked or distracted.
- Put God's desires before your own.
- Give God your undivided attention.

Minimize and cut out all that gets in the way of our total service to Christ.

Second, learn discipline from the athlete.

Abide by the rules and cultivate self-discipline for the race of faith. In the ancient Olympic Games in Greece all competitors had to swear an oath before a statue of Zeus that they had strictly trained for 10 months.

- In the same way, have integrity in your faith.
- Follow the rules of the game—don't cut corners.
- Don't be a spiritual dope.
- Don't cheat or look for loopholes or the easy way out.

Good old-fashioned blood, sweat, and tears will pay off in your faith training. Push yourself, even when you're tired or want to give up. Be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus.

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Third, learn diligence from the farmer.

Keep toiling and tilling in the field of faith and you'll be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

- Don't be lazy or idle.
- Don't be disengaged or aloof to God's call.
- Tend the garden of your life. Don't let it go to pot.

Don't expect a well-manicured rose garden, if you haven't weeded, watered, pruned, seeded, and aerated your garden.

- Like a good soldier, serve towards victory.
- Like a professional athlete, run for the gold.
- Like a seasoned farmer, sow good seed, so you might reap a harvest of righteousness.

Paul sums things up with a challenge to us:

Think over what I say—reflect on it. Generate discussion with others. The Lord will help you to increase your understanding—individually and in community. Take the needed time to ponder God's word and will for our lives.

Know that God honors our diligence in this process, and he'll shed light on the truth for us. This doesn't mean we'll always have everything figured out. Or, that it will be revealed overnight. Faith is a trial and error process. Remember that Paul also says we look through a dark glass this side of heaven. Faith has the courage to trust in the midst of unanswered questions.

So keep studying God's Word. Meditate on it, memorize it, mull it over. God's Word is living and active, ever anew, dwelling among us, speaking to us, and guiding us. The word of God is not chained and will not return void. God's word cannot be boxed in, controlled, or captured by any friend or foe of God's.

Paul may be in jail, but God's Word isn't incarcerated. God's Word is incarnated in Christ.

God's Word is living and active—ever making inroads into people's minds and imaginations and daily living. So with the dedication of a soldier, the discipline of an athlete, and the diligence of a farmer, let us faithfully serve the risen Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen.

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