

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD
Arlington Presbyterian Church (PCA)

The Soldier, the Athlete, and the Farmer
2 Timothy 2:3-7 (588)
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Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself with the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops. Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Julia and I have not had a particularly hard life. We know little of tragedy or heartbreaking loss. Nonetheless, we have not escaped the common troubles shared by the rest of the sons of Adam. We have known our share of marital struggles. We have experienced financial stress. We've known illness. I know what it takes to grind it out at a job day after day, week after week, year after year. We know the unglamorous routine of family life – bills, babies, cooking, washing, shopping, chauffeuring kids around, lawn work, auto repairs, doctor appointments, and all the rest. We know the sting of disappointment, of frowning providences, of unmet expectations, and of unrealized dreams. But we have made it. We have come through those things. We are still solvent, still married, and reasonably sane.

But as our children complete their education, begin careers, take husbands and wives we wonder. We wonder ... will our own kids make it through all of this OK? Life is tough and unglamorous. Will our own kids bear up? Will they persevere? Will they face what we know to be real life with discipline, courage, integrity, and joy? Or will they buckle, faint, give up ... unable to face the realities of life; unwilling to fulfill their responsibilities?

Paul had been *appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher (1:11)*. In obedient pursuit of this calling he experienced and endured unbelievable deprivations, difficulties, and disappointments. He is convinced that such suffering is of the essence of a life lived in the path of obedience to the call of God (**3:12**). The great concern of his heart is for Timothy. What about Timothy? As a faithful and loving spiritual father he desires to do all he can to the end that Timothy might *fulfill his own ministry (4:5)*. The yearning of Paul's heart is that Timothy endure with integrity and courage all that lies before him. And so in this final poignant letter Paul pulls out all the stops. He instructs (**2:16,23-26**). He encourages Timothy (**1:7**). He exhorts (**2:1**). He even commands him (**I Tim. 6:13-16, II Tim. 4:1-2**). He prays (**1:3**). He reminds (**1:6, 2:8**). He inspires (**1:12**). He counsels (**3:14-17**). He warns (**4:14-15**). And here in **2:3-6** he *illustrates*. Citing the professions of a *soldier*, an *athlete*, and a *farmer*, Paul challenges Timothy to wholehearted, single-minded devotion in pursuit of his calling.

But these verses represent not just a bold challenge but also a blessed encouragement. You see, each example mentions a reward. The dutiful soldier pleases his commanding officer. The disciplined athlete wins the prize. The diligent farmer reaps a harvest. And here's the point: wholehearted, single-minded devotion in the service of Christ carries with it the promise of reward. Indeed, he will enjoy the prize who endures in the path of obedience. To come to grips with this will result in that kind of devotion "that will carry [Timothy] through times of suffering when the temptation to quit is very strong" (Towner, p.173). Paul had learned this. He had internalized it. Look over at **4:7-8**. *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.* Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight on glory far beyond all comparison (II Cor. 4:17).*

Pastor I can see how this applies to an ancient itinerant evangelist but what about me? Suffering differs from one particular ministry to another. I think this difference, for the most part, is in *degree* more than in *kind*. For example, Paul was the itinerant evangelist and church planter. Timothy, the settled pastor of a local church. And yet, Paul invited him to **join with me in suffering for the gospel (1:8)**. He broadened the idea even further in **3:12**, *Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* It seems inadequate to limit suffering to evangelists, missionaries, and other Christian workers. What about the stay-at-

home mom? What about the businessman? What about the widowed grandmother?

Listen to John Piper at this point: “When you stop to think about it, all of life, if it is lived earnestly by faith in the pursuit of God’s glory and the salvation of others, is like the Christian who goes to the disease-ridden village. The suffering that comes is part of the price of living where you are in obedience to the call of God. In choosing to follow Christ in the way he directs, we choose all that this path includes under his sovereign providence. Thus all suffering that comes in the path of obedience is suffering ‘with Christ’ and ‘for Christ’ – whether it is cancer or conflict. And it is “chosen” – that is, we willingly take the path of obedience where the suffering befalls us, and we do not murmur against God ... All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: they all threaten our faith in the goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience ... Therefore all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering ‘with Christ’ and ‘for Christ’ “ (Piper, *DG*, pp.215-216).

Suffering comes as you earnestly pursue your Christian calling and as you remain in the path of obedience. Do you see this? There is a real sense in which you stay-at-home moms can be courageous and valiant spiritual soldiers; you businessmen can be hard-working spiritual farmers; you widowed grandmothers can be great spiritual athletes. That’s right! You grandmothers

can run great spiritual races of faith. All of you do so as you stand resolute against the world, the flesh, and the devil; as you live the counter-culture life outlined by our Lord in the Beatitudes; as you wrestle to mortify sin; as you put yourself on the stretch to win others to Christ; as you assume your place in the church's ministry; as you give yourselves to others even when you are tired; as you pray even when you don't feel like it. Now, let's look at these verses.

2:3. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Paul urges Timothy, Suffer hardship as a good soldier suffers hardship. I have never served in the military. I have never experienced the rigors of basic training. I have never known the terror of combat. I am unfamiliar with the culture which is the military. In light of this deficiency, I requested six of our men to respond to this question: *What are some of the hardships which good soldiers suffer?* Their responses fall pretty well into four major categories. **First**, there is the hardship of **separation**. Five of the six men listed "separation from loved ones" as the first and greatest hardship. **Second**, there is the hardship of **deprivation** – the absence of "ease, comfort, and conveniences" (M. McMillan) which border on the "very primitive" (G. Doan). Two men mentioned "lack of rest" (G. Doan) and "mental and physical fatigue" (S. Smith). **Third**, there is the hardship of **uncertainty**. A good soldier says "Goodbye" to familiarity, stability, and predictability. Kent Walton put it this way: "I think there are some things that are universal among military types. Much of this can be put in one big bag called 'uncertainty'." **Fourth**, there is the hardship of **horror** – the raw gruesome terrors

of combat. One of our guys said, “In a combat zone not knowing if the next incoming round was destined for you and watching the casualties around you” (G. Doan). A friend of one of our men said, “55 years after the Battle of the Bulge [my] father still remembers and dreams about the horror of having to go out after battle and retrieve the American dead” (Carlynn Benedict to Gamblin).

Beloved, when Paul says, *Suffer hardship as a good soldier*, he’s not talking about accepting or putting up with minor inconveniences or irritants. He’s talking about (1) the sacrifice of that which is precious and (2) the endurance of that which is painful to the end that Christ might be honored, that the truth be upheld, and the kingdom of God advanced. Timothy, in the same way that a soldier endures the separation, deprivation, uncertainty, and horror inherent to the profession of arms, endure the suffering which comes to you in the path of obedience to the call of God. Now in verse 4 Paul selects one prerequisite to good soldiering.

2:4. *No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.* The soldier in this verse is on *active* duty. He’s not retired. He’s not a reservist. He has not been discharged. He’s not AWOL. He’s no ‘gold brick’ looking for an easy way to avoid his duty. Rather, he is on the field of battle or he is in training to go there.

Tertullian wrote, “No soldier comes to the war surrounded by luxuries ...” (Bentley, p.230). Indeed, this soldier does not ***entangle himself in the affairs of everyday life***. You can’t pursue God’s call as a good soldier if your life is gummed up like a dirty carburetor. You can’t pursue His call if your life is as complicated as differential calculus. Timothy, you can’t please God if your life is as busy as an ant farm. The good soldier lives to carry out that which he has been assigned to do. The Holy Spirit is telling us that “any worldly pursuit which gets in the way of our obedience to God must be pushed aside” (Bent., p.230).

What are some of the *entanglements* which hinder our devotion, service, and progress? I’ll list a few of the culprits. **Possessions** to pay for and maintain. **Projects** to accomplish. **Personal interests** such as hobbies, travel, computers, social functions, and so on. **Professional** pursuits. **People**. Now these are neither wrong nor unlawful in and of themselves are they? We’re talking about the degree to which you allow these things to occupy your *thoughts*, to drain your *energy*, to consume your *resources*, to take your *time*, and to win your *affections*.

Why is it important to disentangle ourselves from these things? ***So that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier***. Beloved, this should be the one grand aim in your life; the one great driving purpose. Jesus said in **John 8:29**, “*I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.*” **II Corinthians 5:9**, *Therefore we have as our ambition ... to be pleasing to Him.* In response to my question about soldiering one brother responded, “You don’t ask questions, you follow orders,

and all else has to take a back seat to what your commanders need you to do and where they need you to go” (KW). And so here in verse 4 Paul illustrates his point: wholehearted, single-minded devotion in obedience to Christ has its reward – the divine commendation, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”

2:5. *And if anyone competes as an athlete.* *Anyone* does not refer to any athletic man or woman who enjoys an occasional pick-up game of basketball. Barclay points out we probably ought to think in terms of “a *professional* as opposed to an *amateur* athlete” (p.161). And this athlete ***does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.*** “To qualify to run in the Olympiad or Isthmian games, a contestant first had to complete the required [ten month] period of training” (Towner, p.173). In view here is the person whose life is given to excellence in athletic competition. A second time Paul illustrates his point: wholehearted, single-minded devotion in the path of obedience to Christ has its reward – the crown of victory.

2:6. *The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.* I know as much about farming as I do about soldiering. Farmers are up early and work long plowing, planting, watering and then harvesting. In his calling patient, consistent, and systematic labor is required to receive any benefit. And that benefit - that reward - is the personal enjoyment of the crops he has worked so hard to raise. The point, once again, is the same – wholehearted, single-minded devotion in the service of Christ carries with it the promise of reward.

2:7. After he shares these observations, Paul writes, ***Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.*** This is very simple. There are all sorts of parallels he could draw concerning the Christian life. All sorts of observations Paul could make. He is saying to Timothy. Consider these three examples. Timothy, meditate on them. Make your own observations. As you do so, the Lord will open up to your understanding other dimensions of your life and ministry.

There are here today those who by grace are ordering your affairs under the one great driving purpose of obedience in the pursuit of God's call upon the totality of your life. These verses are given by the Holy Spirit to the encouragement and comfort of your souls. Barclay concludes his section on these verses like this : "One thing remains in all three pictures. The soldier is upheld by the thought of final victory. The athlete is upheld by the vision of the crown. The husbandman is upheld by the hope of the harvest. Each submits to the discipline and the toil for the sake of the glory which shall be. It is so with the Christian. The Christian struggle is not without a goal; it is always going somewhere. The Christian can be certain that after the effort of the Christian life, there comes the joy of heaven; and the greater the struggle, the greater the joy" (p.163).