



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

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GOD-GIVEN ENDURANCE

2 Timothy 2:1-7

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The best news you'll ever hear is that Jesus is risen from the dead. That's because his resurrection changed *everything*. It shows us that God's love will triumph in the end. It means that in Christ, God has broken evil's tight grip on our world. The resurrection also means that our sin need not weigh us down any longer. We can be free of it! The resurrection means that God really does have the power to bring us back from the dead. Death will not be the end of the story for Jesus' followers. Ultimately, the resurrection means that everything that is broken in our world is coming untrue.

All of this is wonderful news, isn't it? And wouldn't it be great if Christians experienced all of it right now? But God moves in mysterious ways. Some of the wonderful benefits of becoming a Christian do come immediately—like the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who comforts and guides and gifts every believer. There's also the peace that passes all understanding that accompanies God's love and forgiveness. And there's the tremendous privilege of inclusion and participation within the church. But as great as these benefits are, they're only a downpayment of what is yet to come. Christians await a much greater inheritance, the fulfillment of all God's redemptive promises, to be received at the consummation of all things, when Jesus comes again.

So while there are many present benefits to being a Christian, the Christian life is not without its hardships. Christians have the indwelling Holy Spirit but don't yet see Jesus face to face. Christians have the forgiveness of sins but still struggle against sin. Christians are included in the church, yet the church is an imperfect community. ***Because many of God's promises are yet to come, living the Christian life in the present is a tremendous privilege, but it also requires endurance.***

It's like getting an admission letter from your dream school, your top choice. You're in, and you can now legitimately wear the school T-shirt. You now have access to the faculty and the library and cheap tickets to the games and so on. All good things, all benefits. But what you don't have is the diploma. That's the big thing, the end goal. The diploma is yet to come, and there will be a lot of blood, sweat and tears between now and then. It may even get so hard that you'll think of dropping out. But if you'll hang in there through the hard parts, graduation day will come, and the promise of that admission letter will be realized in full. In the same way, living the Christian life is a tremendous privilege, but it also requires endurance.

When Paul wrote the letter that we now call 2 Timothy, he wrote from a prison in Rome (1:16-17), where he was chained like a criminal (2:9) and awaiting execution. This was Paul's farewell letter to Timothy, his protege and friend. The theme of the entire letter is the theme of this message: God-given endurance. By God's grace, Paul persevered as a Christian. He enjoyed the benefits and privileges of faith while also enduring the challenges. Now in Paul's last instructions to Timothy—and to all Christians—he's sharing how he persevered to the end.

In 2 Timothy 2:1-7, Paul offers a lot more than platitudes. He's a master at endurance, a black belt in Christian faithfulness. It would be hard to find a better teacher. So Paul's instructions here are precious gold, mature wisdom accumulated over a lifetime. If you want to persevere at school and someday graduate with that degree, then you'd do well to listen to the wise counsel of someone who made it through before you. Likewise, if you want to persevere as a Christian, then you'll definitely want to hear what Paul has to say.

Be Strengthened in the Grace of the Gospel (2:1)

Paul begins with what is most important when he says:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2:1)

Paul's starting point is Jesus—not himself or Timothy, not you or me. Jesus is the foundation for Christian endurance, and that's very good news. If you're like me, as soon as you get that admission letter from your dream school, there's a lot of anxiety mixed in with all the celebrations. I wouldn't get to the end of the letter before starting to wonder whether I have what it takes to graduate. Am I smart enough for this program? Will I make it through? Thankfully Christian endurance is different. When you become a Christian, there is 100% certainty that you do have what it takes to go the distance because *Jesus* himself is the basis for Christian endurance. You certainly couldn't do it without him. But you certainly can do it with him, and that's very good news.

What do you think Paul means by *grace* when he says to be "strengthened by the *grace* that is in Jesus?" He's referring back to his opening chapter, when he summarized the grace of the Gospel this way:

...share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (1:8-10).

In these verses, Paul is talking about the Gospel, but let's make sure that we understand what Paul means by the word, "Gospel." In v10, when Paul speaks of the "appearing" of Jesus, he uses the Greek word *epiphany*, which we typically associate with the birth of Jesus. But in this case Paul's talking about Easter rather than Christmas. Easter was when Jesus rose from the

dead and *appeared* to hundreds and hundreds of people. By his appearing Jesus demonstrated the truth of his entire message, the Gospel of his kingdom. Jesus had been saying all along, "Repent and believe in the Gospel," and even though he had a lot of followers, he didn't have many believers because it still wasn't clear whether Jesus would succeed. In all his teaching about the kingdom of God, Jesus was promising the moon. Would he be able to deliver on such grandiose promises? Especially on Good Friday, when Jesus was brutally tortured and crucified, it looked as if he had failed. But on Easter Jesus appeared as the triumphant king, alive and healthy again, and there was no longer any question about the Gospel Jesus had promised. Like Paul says in 1:10, Jesus' appearing proved that he indeed had "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." That's why the foundation for the Christian life is not "our works" (1:9) but Jesus himself. Are you smart enough and strong enough and holy enough to abolish death and redeem everything that is broken in our world? Of course not. But by the purpose and grace (1:9) of our Father, Jesus came to do what we could not do. When Jesus appeared as our triumphant, risen King, there was no longer any doubt about his ability to deliver everything that he had promised.

What then does Paul mean when he says "*Be strengthened* by the grace that is in Jesus" (2:1)? At first it may seem a little contradictory, like Paul is saying, "try harder by grace." But in fact what he's doing is *re-orienting us to a Gospel vision, the only vision that will hold our attention for a lifetime.*

I recently participated in a conference with other Anglican leaders sponsored by the Telos Collective. We gathered to talk about cooperating on the basis of our shared *telos*, which is the Greek word used in the Bible to describe the end, or goal, or outcome toward which a movement is being directed. We came from all the country to attend this conference, and we represented a diversity of thought and practices, but the idea was that we are united by a common *telos*, a common vision of the consummated kingdom of God.

When Paul says "be strengthened by the grace that is in Jesus," he's re-orienting us to the Bible's *telos*, the whole beautiful big picture of Jesus' kingdom in its fullness, when death is no more and every tear is wiped away. If you follow the trajectory of all of our desires, whether big or small, for achievement and love and pleasure and knowledge and peace and justice, they ultimately point towards the consummated kingdom of God. Becoming a Christian essentially means embracing the hope of this *telos*. It means saying, "Yes, the Kingdom of God is the treasure I really desire more than anything else. I will follow Jesus regardless of whatever hardship and persecution that may come, because I want to be with him forever in his consummated kingdom."

Recent generations in the church have lost sight of the *telos* of the consummated kingdom. The Gospel has been compressed down into something more personal and therapeutic, a Gospel of "accept Jesus into your heart and go to heaven when you die." For many years now, King Jesus and his coming kingdom haven't been at the center of the Christian imagination. What has been forgotten is what our world is longing for most of all: the renewal of culture-arts,

music, science, architecture, politics, agriculture, economics—all thriving in a world without sin, a world of love and peace under King Jesus. That's our *telos*! That's where we're heading! So why aren't Christians talking about it? Why aren't Christians preaching this gospel to one another all the time? This is the grace in Jesus that Paul says is foundational to Christian endurance. We're weak without it. What the church desperately needs today is a renewed vision of Jesus and his glorious kingdom.

Gospel Propagation (2:2)

Paul continues with further instructions:

what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men and women, who will be able to teach others also (2:2)

After beginning with this renewed vision of the Gospel *within*, the next logical step involves the propagation of the Gospel *with others*. When Jesus rose from the dead and appeared on Easter, he commissioned everyone that he met with this same responsibility. "Yes, it's me," he would say. "I really did rise from the dead, just as I said. Now go tell everyone the Gospel." Matthew's account of the resurrection concludes with Jesus' Great Commission:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded of you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

What did Jesus want his disciples to teach? Wouldn't it have been what Jesus talked about with his disciples all the time? Was it the message of "Accept Jesus into your heart and go to heaven when you die?" Is that what Jesus talked about?

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God all the time. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spelled out the ethics of the kingdom of God. It's that sermon, plus all his other teachings about the Kingdom, that Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and teach to others.

One of the main reasons why evangelism is so ineffective today is because Christians aren't talking with others about what Jesus talked about. People aren't that interested in a gospel message that lacks vision. But what if Christians were to recover this glorious vision of King Jesus and his kingdom come, and then to start talking about it?

Paul's expectation is that the Gospel will be contagious and will spread in such a way that generation after generation of believers will be able to learn the message and teach others also. Did you count the generations in 2:2? From Paul to Timothy to "faithful men and women" to those "who will be able to teach others also." That's four generations! Paul has already called Timothy "my child" a several times. Now he's talking not only about spiritual grandchildren, but also great-grands in the propagation of the Gospel.

People often think that Paul found evangelism to be really easy, as if he had a special eloquence or charisma that made him uniquely persuasive. Read his story carefully and you'll find that it was precisely the opposite. He wasn't an especially good public speaker. He wasn't particularly handsome; in fact, he must have been pretty disfigured after all the beatings and nearly being stoned to death. Most of the people who talked with him wherever he went didn't believe. He simply didn't have magic powers for evangelism. What he did have was God-given endurance. He was strengthened in the grace of the Gospel, and so he kept talking about King Jesus and the kingdom come, and because of his God-given endurance, some did believe, including Timothy.

As Paul saw others come to faith, he was strengthened all the more. That's the point that I believe he's trying to make in 2:2. He's not merely reiterating Jesus' Great Commission. Rather, Paul is talking about *the endurance effect* that comes from seeing others come to faith. It makes perfect sense, doesn't it? What could be more encouraging than to introduce another person to King Jesus, and then to see that person come to faith in him? I am so thankful for the new believers in our congregation. Their faith in King Jesus is deeply encouraging to me. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were many more? What could be more empowering for our own endurance than to see others coming to believe in King Jesus and his kingdom as well?

Every Vocation Requires Endurance (2:3-6)

Next Paul uses three illustrations to show that endurance isn't something that's peculiar to the Christian life, but is in fact normal and common to every legitimate vocation. Paul writes:

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. (2:3-4)

The soldier exemplifies endurance in setting aside civilian concerns and pleasures and offering single-minded service to the commander. In Paul's day, soldiers could expect a great reward at the end of a long campaign, when they returned home in triumph with the spoils of war. But during the campaign, they lived very simply in austerity, day after day, fight after fight, practicing delayed gratification in anticipation of the victory to come.

In the same way, to be a faithful Christian is to be a good soldier in the service of King Jesus. He's the commander, deploying his disciples on mission, directing what they do, where they live, and so on. At present, Jesus' call to simplicity and single-mindedness requires the practice of delayed gratification, day after day, come what may, in anticipation of the glorious inheritance that will come in Jesus' consummated kingdom.

An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. (2:5)

The athlete also exemplifies endurance in not slacking off or cutting corners, but in competing “lawfully,” which is a more wooden translation of the Greek here. If the marathon runner had a horse waiting in the bushes over the first hill, it would be easy to beat everyone else to the finish line, but he would be disqualified for cheating, and wouldn’t receive the crown. That’s why day after day, race after race, the athlete practices delayed gratification in anticipation of the prize.

In the same way, being a faithful Christian involves running the race “lawfully,” i.e. in accordance with God’s law. If your classmates or coworkers or neighbors persecute you for your morality, it’s not endurance if you buckle just to fit in. Keep your eyes focused on the prize, and don’t give in to cheating, or gossip, or sexual license, or whatever they may be pressuring you to do. Practice delayed gratification day after day, come what may, in anticipation of Jesus’ reward at the finish line.

It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. (2:6)

In those days, the “hard-working farmer” was likely a sharecropper who farmed the property of a more lethargic land-owner. The land-owner was due a share, but the sharecropper got the first share, the choice share of the produce. So day after day, season after season, the hard-working farmer toiled on the farm, practicing delayed gratification in anticipation of the harvest.

In the same way, to be a faithful Christian involves daily spiritual practices, like study and prayer and worship and solitude and sacrifice and service, all of which are often hard labor. In the 19th Century, Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle said:

I will never shrink from declaring my belief that there are no spiritual gains without pains. I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible-reading, his prayers, and the use of his Sundays. Our God is a God who works by means, and he will never bless the soul of that man who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without them.¹

In all three of these illustrations—the soldier, the athlete and the farmer—Paul’s point is the same: every legitimate vocation requires adjusting to a long-term vision while practicing delayed gratification in the short-term. In other words: no pain, no gain.

¹ Quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973. p 57.

Delayed gratification is the key to endurance in every vocation, and in all of life. We all need to be reminded of it from time to time, because waiting is so hard. And let's face it, we're often not at our best when we're waiting. Patience is not a temperament, but a skill that is cultivated by the hard work of waiting. You may well be learning this skill right now in some aspect of your life, e.g. doing mundane work in a job that is beneath your training. In any case, God is at work in your waiting. He is strengthening your endurance.

Paul's was a master of endurance. Later, at the end of the letter, he returns to these illustrations in a personal way:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (4:7-8)

By God's grace, Paul was a good soldier, a lawful athlete, a hard-working farmer. That's why he endured to the end. What about you? How's your vision of the kingdom come? Are you sharing it with others? Are you sharing it with yourself? How are you doing with waiting?

Think It Over (2:7)

After three illustrations, Paul pauses and invites his readers to ponder what he's saying:

Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. (2:7)

Go ahead and think about it. King Jesus is at work through his word. Like the psalmist says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." If you'll meditate on what he says to you through his word, he will bless you with growth in grace.

May the Lord in his grace grant you endurance to go the distance. Amen.