

## Active Service

*2 Timothy*

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**Bible Text:** 2 Timothy 2

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Please take your Bibles and turn with me to 2 Timothy and to those verses we read earlier in the service.

It was May 13, 1940, the newly elected British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, went to speak to the House of Commons in London. He said this, "I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined this government, I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat." He was preparing the House and he was preparing his nation for many long years of total war.

We are reading the last known letter of the Apostle Paul, writing to an individual, Timothy, a friend that he regards as his child in the faith, one he's seen grown up in his relationship with God and he's conscious as he writes this letter that he is writing against the background of a mounting crisis. Total war. The key words are in verse 3, really. They capture what this whole paragraph is about,

"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

He's preparing Timothy and us for the future as the church looks out from its comfort zone here as we're gathered or in Africa gathered in the open air around the word of God, wherever we might find ourselves in the world. We look out at a task and an opposition and enormous challenges. We find ourselves a bit like Gideon. You remember in the Hebrew Scriptures where he found himself outnumbered by the enemy, 32,000 against 135,000. The odds didn't look good. Then God comes to Gideon and says, "I want you to go and speak to the people. I want you to say to the people, Everybody who is fearful and trembling, go back home." 22,000 leave and go back home and then God goes further, as if that wasn't enough, God orders a screening test. It was how you drank your water, whether you were a lapper or a cupper; whether you got down on your hands and knees and you lapped the water like a dog laps the water or whether you were a cupper using your hands to bring the water to your mouth. God separates and Gideon is left with 300 people against 135,000 people.

The lesson of that story is this: the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not particular about being in the minority in a world of

opposition. He isn't phased by it. And the Apostle Paul now is giving his charge to his colleague Timothy. He's giving him instructions as to how to live and serve in a fallen world against overwhelming odds with an imperfect church. There were faithful souls, of course, who were standing but there were many others who had defected to false teachers. And as they were then, so we are now, faced as a church, not with armies but with ideas, and the battles we face today are not new battles. They are the same old same old. You know, some Christian people talk as if there was once a golden age. A golden age when people who weren't Christians loved the gospel and loved Christians and loved Jesus and the reality is that no such golden age has ever existed. Even when there were more Christians than there are now, we were still in the minority. Even though church attendance once was better than it is today, we were still the minority. It's the reality in a fallen world.

The first time Jesus talked about church growth he said he was going "to plant his church at the gates of hell." By the way, he said, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against a militant, aggressive, outgoing church." He built his church and we break down the gates of hell in order to get the gospel out to the world. Paul has spoken in similar terms to the church at Ephesus where Timothy was the pastor. He said to that church, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic forces of this present darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly realms."

You cannot read the New Testament without realizing that conflict and struggle leading to suffering is one of the basic fundamental marks of the church of Jesus Christ. When those who were putting together our creeds and our confessions were doing so, they didn't include this as one of the marks of the church because the reality is that suffering has been the constant. It's almost like they didn't have to mention it, it was the assumed, it was the observable, it was the reality. Suffering goes with the church. The church suffers when it's persecuted. The church suffers when people defect. When false teaching insinuates itself into the life of the church. Paul wants Timothy and through Timothy he wants us, to be ready, to be prepared.

So, he gives three exhortations here that we're going to look at this morning, to Timothy and to us: be strong, be focused and be ready. Let's look at them together. First of all, look at verse 1,

"You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

The "then," of course, points us back to what he's just said. He's been talking about suffering for the gospel, he's been talking about retaining and following and holding onto and clutching the standard of sound words or the shape of sound words that you'd heard when you were first converted, when you first believed, when you were being instructed in the faith. He's just said "guard the gospel, guard this good news message. Don't let anyone rob you of it, take it from you." Those tasks require strength, inner strength. All

of those tasks. Where is this strength going to come from? He's already said in chapter 1, I think it's verse 7 of chapter 1, "God has given us a spirit not of fear but of power."

Now he speaks directly to Timothy, he says to Timothy, "be strengthened." You notice, it's passive. "Be strengthened, let yourself be strengthened. Let the strength of God, the power of God, let it operate upon you. Let it strengthen you so that the product of that is that you are strong. Be strong by being strengthened." In other words, he needs to keep on being strengthened by his continual dependence on God.

Now, I want you to notice the way in which he puts that exhortation to be strengthened. He's to "be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Let's start with the last phrase first. How do we understand this idea of being in Christ? It's used right throughout Paul's letters. It's not always used the same way. It's often used to describe the doctrine that we call "union with Christ." We think of that being an experiential union with Christ so that we are with him, in him. Jesus dies, I die in him. Jesus rises, I rise with him. Jesus is exalted, I am exalted with him. My friends, Stewart Townsend who wrote that song along with Keith Getty, he tries to capture that in a couple of those verses where he's thinking of the objective work of Christ and our relationship because of what Jesus did. I was there, now nothing that Satan can throw at me can ultimately damage me or destroy me because I am in Christ.

But there's another sense in which that phrase "in Christ" is used. It's used covenantally or it has to do with your location. Are you "in Christ" in the sense of are you in the realm of Christ, the place where he rules? The place where he is present and rules the world, the church? And under the rule of Christ, in the dominion of Christ, in the kingdom of Christ to which if you are a believer you belong, in that kingdom there are all kinds of things that are available to you in Christ, in the realm of Christ, in the kingdom of Christ. Hope is one of them, "In Christ alone my hope is found." Understanding. Light. Strength. Joy. These are found in the realm of Christ, in the kingdom of Christ.

Here the apostle is teaching us that in Christ alone my grace is found and my strength is found. All in Christ alone. What does he say specifically? He talks about grace. Grace is the favor of God. Usually we think of the favor of God being shown to unworthy sinners. Salvation, we are Christians because God has saved us by his grace. But in the Bible, grace is a comprehensive work. It doesn't just apply to saving grace where we're put right with God but there is serving grace where you're given gifts and abilities, capacities to serve others, to serve the world, to serve one another within the body of Christ. There is sustaining grace. When you're going through that tough time, when you're struggling with yourself and your sin, when you're struggling with your circumstances, when you're struggling with what people are saying about you or doing to you. Sustaining grace will keep you going. There is suffering grace that enables us to put up with pain or loss or separation. Whatever kind of grace you need, it's found in Christ alone.

The Apostle John when he writes his gospel tells us this. In John 1:16, he says, "From his fullness," that is the fullness there is in Jesus, "we have all received grace upon grace." And he uses a word there, it's the substitutionary word. Grace instead of grace instead of

grace. Grace upon grace upon grace upon grace. You go to London and you go down into the subway, to the underground and you stand there at the platform and if you stand there for about ten minutes, the trains will come in and go, they'll come in and go, they'll come in and go. Train upon train upon train upon train. You stand at the ocean and the waves come crashing in. Wave after wave after wave after wave comes crashing against the shore. Says the Apostle John, "In Christ alone there is wave after wave after wave of grace upon grace upon grace. You name it, there's grace for you. You name your need, there is grace for you. You name what resource you need, there is grace for you in Christ alone." Grace to meet every need. Grace to match every emergency. Grace to maintain your weary spirit and your struggling soul throughout this, your brief, uncertain life and pilgrimage. And it's all in Christ alone. Infinite supplies of grace.

Paul says to Timothy, "be strengthened. Allow the grace of God to strengthen you in Christ alone." How do you do that? Why does he say that this strength is connected to grace? He's telling you how the strength comes to you. It comes to you as a gracious gift of God to you. You see, I can't make myself strong internally, to fortify my spirit against all the onslaughts of the world in the flesh and the devil. I can't do that. How do I get strong? I get strong when I let God strengthen me by coming to God and by specifically, clearly confessing and admitting my utter weakness to God, that I can't do this on my own, that I am utterly in need of God's gift of grace, his gracious strength for my life. It's as we confess our need, as we acknowledge our weakness, as I cast myself upon God, that that very action of giving up and giving in is the means by which God strengthens me, fortifies my soul, puts a rod in my backbone and enables me to live for him. Be strong.

He says to Timothy, "be focused." I mean, we are listening or reading a specific letter to a specific person and he's already been given two words, two commands: he's to follow the pattern of sound words and he's to guard the good deposit entrusted to him. Just like Adam in Eden, just like Israel in Canaan, the church today and Timothy as a minister, is to serve and guard the sanctuary and in the sanctuary, of course, the record of the relationship between the great King and his people, the word of God. And guarding the sanctuary and the sacred deposit in the Ark of the Covenant in the sanctuary carries risks. Life is uncertain. Gospel ministers are an expendable species. The gospel itself is at risk.

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul has warned Timothy by reminding him that Eve, this magnificent woman made in the image of God, perfect teeth, perfect genes, this magnificent woman was deceived by the serpent. He goes on to say that there are deceitful teachers who are trying to do the same thing to you. They are trying to deceive you. They are trying to deceive the church of God.

The church is at risk so how do we guard against that? Here's what the apostle says in verse 2, the apostolic gospel has to be handled rightly, communicated faithfully and transmitted accurately to the next generation,

"What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

You know, they let me do something at the early service that's really a big risk. They let me go down and talk to the children. This morning I went down to talk to the children and I found a ball and I just threw it at them. Now, these children are very well behaved, they're Tenth children. After all, they've been trained and schooled from their earliest days to behave and to sit well. There was total chaos as I suspected there might be. Total chaos as this ball was being thrown among them downstairs. And it went on and I could see the panic in the teachers' faces. Oh, this was shameful. I want to confess right now it was my fault. It wasn't their fault, although they were part of the chaos but nonetheless, it was my fault in precipitating and drawing out their fallen natures in the first place. It was good fun.

And then I went on to show them that, in fact, I was going to be talking to you later about the whole business of catching the ball and then throwing it to someone else who catches it and holds it and throws it to someone else who catches it and holds it. The ball of the gospel. That's really what Paul is speaking about here. Do you know as I was talking about that, I didn't say throwing the ball, I talked about what the passage says. One of the children put his hand up and said, "That's why you threw the ball." He worked it out. I thought that was really good.

Well, I want you to notice what Paul is talking about here is the apostolic succession. Interesting, isn't it, that we're looking at this passage today? In a week, last week, we had the election of a pope. That's all about apostolic succession. It's the apostolic succession of an office, from one pope to the next. At least, that's the very questionable historical assertion of the Roman church. But this is all about apostolic succession. It's about the apostolic succession, not of an office, but of a message and the sign of it is not a fabricated ring of Peter but a revealed gospel of God.

Look how Paul describes it, first of all we can put it like this: Paul gets the message from Jesus. Notice how he puts it here, "What you have heard from me." He's already introduced himself in verse 1 of this epistle. I mean, this is a personal letter but he still introduces himself with his full title. Did you notice that? "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus." He's an apostle. And if you said to the Apostle Paul, "Where did you get the gospel from?" He would answer you in the language that he uses in Galatians 1, "I would have you know my brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel for I did not receive it from any man nor was I taught it but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." He received the gospel by direct revelation.

When you go to John 17, you find the Lord Jesus praying that great high priestly prayer and in that high priestly prayer he prays for his disciples who are there with him, he prays for everybody who is ever going to be a Christian wherever they are in the world, he prays for you and for me. "All those," he says, "who will believe in me through their message." Their message. In other words, you can only be a Christian if you believe the apostolic gospel.

And in that upper room, Jesus said some things to them that he doesn't say to you and me. He said some things to them, he said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you. There are many things that I wanted to say to you but I haven't been able to say it but when the Spirit comes, he will remind you of things I said and did. When the Holy Spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth and he will tell you things to come." We only learn those things because we got it from them. We got it from them. That's why the earliest church, Acts 2, the birthday of the church, what do the people do? They devote themselves to the apostle's teaching. Why? Because they got it from Jesus and the people around when they saw them doing miracles like Jesus that nobody has done since. I mean, people make claims and so on but actually if you look at them, they do nothing like what the apostles did which were exactly like Jesus. Everybody, their opposition even, noticed that they had been with Jesus. The signs of an apostle were done among them.

Paul got the message from Jesus. Timothy got the message from Paul. Paul gives him a deposit, the deposit of truth by word, teaching and in writing. Timothy has preserved these writings for us and for the church because he is a strategic custodian of the apostolic tradition and now faithful men are to get the message from Timothy. Who are these faithful men? In general, I think we must say that they are elders or ministers of the gospel. Elders generally are charged to be the theological gate-keepers of the church. But I think he's especially thinking of teaching elders. Back in 1 Timothy 5:17, he distinguishes between elders who rule and elders who are paid to preach and teach. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor especially among them those who labor in preaching and teaching." These men, we are told, are to hold fast the faithful word that is in accordance with the teaching. They are to be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict. They are stewards to whom the gospel is committed. Stewards of God's mysteries. They are required to be faithful.

What we find in the New Testament is the ministry of Jesus is reflected in the offices of the church. He is a priest. Our diaconal ministry has a priestly ministry. He is a King. His rule is reflected in the session as it gathers together as a group of elders and together rules the church in Jesus' name. He is a prophet and he has appointed teaching elders in order to prophesy to the church, accurately handling the word of truth. I'm very conscious that the role of a preacher in the New Testament church is to do what the prophet did in the Old Testament church and that is to address the church, Israel, and the world, the nations in that order. In that order.

So, he's to hand the gospel on to these men. We need to appoint men as elders not for their managerial ability or their personal popularity or because they represent some special interest group in the congregation but because they are men who know their Bibles, who understand and grasp theology, who know the creedal and confessional commitments of the church. Paul says to the elders, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Care for the church of God." Why? "Because fierce wolves will come in from among you," i.e. the elders.

Let this passage of the Scripture be a warning and a cry to every nominations committee wherever it is, who is listening here today, that when you're appointed elders, you need to

analyze and scrutinize what they believe. You need to be asking the questions the church is confronting today in terms of assaults. You need to be asking them for example, do they believe in an historical Adam who was the first man and the head of the human race? You need to ask yourself, what do they believe about justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone which is being undermined even within our Presbyterian church today? You need to ask those questions. Never assume. Never assume because a person belongs to the church and is a member that they actually understand anything. You can't assume anything. You can't assume the minister understands or believes the gospel. You can't. Faithful men because we, we get the message from faithful men.

Anything I am today, I am by the grace of God through the men who preached the word of God to me. This church is what it is today because of the men who have preached the word of God to us. Do you know it is totally irrelevant whether they were good men, though they were, or godly men, though they were, or great men, though they were? That's immaterial. What really matters is what they taught you. What they taught you.

So, he's saying to this man, Timothy, "be focused." And then he says to Timothy, "be ready." Be ready. You see, he knows what's coming to Timothy. We know, by the way, what's coming to Timothy but Timothy doesn't. We know Timothy ended up in prison for the gospel. If you keep coming week after week, I'll tell you how we know that one day but not today. We'll leave that for another exciting episode.

Look at verse 3,

"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

That's his principle metaphor there. By the way, the others flesh out but that's his principle metaphor. He says we need to be ready and, therefore, we need the commitment of a soldier. The world is a spiritual battleground with two powers contending for the same territory. God's adversary, Satan, has invaded creation, attempts to hold it as occupied territory. These powers are not equal and opposite to one another. God is a supreme power. He has permitted this to happen and he has launched a counter-offensive with the death and resurrection of Jesus to reclaim that rightful dominion and we are God's soldiers in the ongoing battle. He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. And we fight. We are armed to fight, to extend the kingdom, to push back the forces of Satan and we never do it, we've never finished the task.

Until Jesus comes back again, we're still doing it. Still doing it. This pulpit has been an evangelical pulpit for a long time but we can't guarantee it will be in 100 years from now unless we keep fighting the same battles for the gospel. It's just the way it is. The level of attrition, the propensity to deterioration and degeneration is built in because we human beings are just the same. The same human nature.

Now, when I use this military language, some people will be offended. I'm sorry you're offended but this is Bible language. The Bible uses fighting talk but please understand that when the Bible uses fighting talk for extending the kingdom of God, it does not mean that the kingdom of God is extended by bombing tall buildings or underground trains or places of worship or burning Korans or anything else. That's not how the kingdom of God is fought for. Our weapons, says the Apostle Paul, are not earthly weapons. We don't fight with bullets and bombs and knives and guns. We don't fight with those weapons. Our weapon is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. The word of God. Martin Luther said, "We were sitting, me and Master Philips, drinking our beer and God was at work." His word was doing it. The word of God unleashed was building the church. Unfortunately, I can't go and sit and drink beer because I've got to come and do the preaching of the word. The word of God does the business.

The apostle is picking up this metaphor of a soldier because no life is more rigorous or uncertain in the sense of which if you sign up, you're prepared to die on active service. This takes strenuous activity. Christian, when you sign up, you're signing up potentially to suffer in one way or another. It's not all persecution. It's not all being taken outside and put against a wall and shot by a firing squad. It's a daily struggle with your own nature. It's a daily struggle with ideas that people have that you hear all the time in the world. The opposition of friends. The misunderstanding that goes with it. The disappointments of an imperfect church. All of that is just part of the battle. Part of the battle.

But notice what he says,

"No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits."

He's not giving a blanket advocacy here of withdrawing from everyday life. He's talking not in terms of absolutes but of priorities. He wants a single-minded devotion to duty. He's talking principally of ministers here, I have to say, but it applies to all of us. But let's just for a moment focus on the ministers: what is he saying about the ministers here? They are set apart for the proclamation and work of the word whether from a pulpit or one-to-one in counseling or to small groups. They labor, that is, they get paid for the ministry of word and doctrine and they are not to be distracted by other matters. There may be somebody listening to this or you may be here this morning and you're the minister of a small church and you say, "Well, it's all very well for you. You have an ordained intellectual congregation that you can spill all your guts to." They just don't know you, of course. I most certainly didn't always and I want you to know I gave them more than I give you because you can't take it. Seriously.

The danger is, you see, it's very easy to moonlight, to find something else to occupy your attention, to get caught up in other matters, to be diverted into counseling or promoting or events management or other little tasks or interests or hobbies that develop into little businesses that you run on the side. I want to encourage every minister of the gospel: that's what you are primarily. I know sometimes you have to do what Paul did when he was church planting and that is, moonlight as a tent maker, as a way to make contact in a



place where there's been no gospel before. I know that. I understand that but principally, get on with the work of the gospel.

Now, I'll tell you how you do it: you do it as one who knows who enlisted you. That's what he says, the aim is to please the one who has enlisted him. That's why armies operate with small units, to help build up trust and confidence in the officer who will lead them into battle. Just think of your relationship with the Lord Jesus. That's why we do this.

“O Christ, in Thee my soul hath found,  
And found in Thee alone,  
The peace, the joy I sought so long,  
The bliss till now unknown.

Now Christ alone can satisfy.”

Do you believe that? Is that where you are in your heart? Christ alone can satisfy. Is your goal in life to please him? I ask the minister but I also ask all of us: is your goal in life to please the Lord Jesus?

Well, you need the commitment of the soldier and you need the discipline of an athlete.

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

Break the rules then the disqualification. But the emphasis here is on reward. He promises a reward, a crown of life, the glory that God is preparing for those who love him.

Then the last emphasis, the commitment of the soldier, the discipline of the athlete, the persistence of the farmer. My mother had a saying, she had lost of sayings by the way, you'll hear them over the next 30 years. “No pain, no gain.” This was usually trotted out on those occasions when I'd been given tasks to do. I had some regular things that I had to do: I had to wash the dishes every night, every night, wash the dishes. You know, they invented dishwashers about 100 years before the British people ever permitted them into their homes because of a conspiracy among mothers, British mothers, to impose upon their children the task, the thankless task, of having to wash the dishes every night. Seriously. I don't know why we just put it off so long. The first time we got a dishwasher, heaven came down and glory filled my soul.

Washing the dishes every night, vacuuming the house every Saturday and washing the car. Those are the jobs. “No pain, no gain,” she said. I'm still waiting for the gain but anyway, you know, it's true spiritually. No cross, no crown. He uses the image of the hardworking farmer. Gardening, farming are back-breaking, painstaking activities. I know that because my wife has told me. Whenever she says, “Well, maybe you should be helping,” I say, “No pain, no gain.” If you're going to have the gain, dear, you can have the pain that goes in preparation for it.

That's the principle and in the Christian life, the big question then is: are we good soldiers of Jesus Christ? Are we serving and guarding the gospel? Forty years ago I was ordained to the Christian ministry, this year, and at my ordination service we sang a hymn that I also had at my induction in my first church, that's the same, I think, as you call instillation which seems a bit bizarre. Anyway, we sang this song,

“A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
A never-dying soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.

To serve my present age,  
My calling to fulfill,  
O may it all my powers engage,  
To do the Master's will.”

I want you to notice that for each of these metaphors, there is a goal. Beyond warfare, victory. Beyond athletic effort, the prize. Beyond agricultural labor, the harvest. So, how are we doing? George Hoffman was the founder of probably England's premier relief agency. He was a bit of a strange preacher and he would often finish his sermons in an awkward way leaving the congregation hanging in the air. Last time he preached to the Keswick Convention that I was involved in, he was preaching on the parable of the talents and that's the parable where the words of Jesus are spoken to the faithful people at the end of time when he comes back, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.” As he finished his sermon, he asked this question: if you were to meet the Lord today, if you were to stand in his presence today, would he say to you, Well done? Or would he say to you, Well? That's it. You answer it.

Let's pray.

Amy Carmichael, as we're bowing in prayer, has a poem in which she articulates the words of the Lord Jesus to us in relation to suffering for the gospel.

“Hast thou no scar?  
No hidden scar on foot or side or hand?  
I hear these sung as mighty in the land,  
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,  
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?  
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent.  
Leaned me against the tree to die, and rent  
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned,  
Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?  
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me,  
But thine are whole. Can he have followed far,  
Who has no wound nor scar?"

*Father, we pray that today you would take your word which often comes to us like ointment to our souls, sometimes comes as abrasiveness to our skin, as it were. However it's come to us today in the variety of its content this morning, will you please, Lord, strengthen us inside? Will you please keep us focused on the callings that you've given to each of us? whatever they are, and they are all important. Will you make us ready, Lord, ready for whatever comes? We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.*