

On Enduring Ministerial Hardship 2 Timothy 2:8-10

(*Note: This sermon was preached to a gathering of local pastors on the morning of September 11, 2001 as the Two Towers in New York City were struck and the disastrous events of that day began to unfold. Unknown to both preacher and audience was the relevance of the theme preached for the many months to follow, as the disastrous events of that morning were unfolding during the delivery of the message.*)

Like black keys to a piano,
 like stones to a flowing stream,
like weeds to a flowery meadow,
 so are hardships to the pastoral ministry...They of necessity go together.

It's almost like a recipe:

1 desire for God's glory
1 gift for preaching
Love for 2 kinds of people: 1 sweetened, 1 unsweetened

Mix with 2 parts conflict; 3 parts criticism, 4 parts complaint, and 1 pinch of bitterness
Add 1 full stick of discipline

Pour into deep bowl of personal inadequacy
Mix all contents together for minimum 3 years
Whip, then beat thoroughly.
Pour contents out into open container.
Bake, on high, for 2-3 more years
Let sit until ready to serve

Recipe should make one man in the ministry.

That may be somewhat humorous, but it is not entirely unrealistic, as some of you can yourself prove.

The above is not a 'recipe for disaster.' It is a common recipe for the man in the pastoral ministry.

And although the above is a recipe for a man in the ministry, the ministry is not a 'piece of cake'. Nor is it a 'cakewalk.' It is hard, many times very hard.

If the pastoral ministry were easy:

- ◆ Why would Paul exhort to “Guard *through the Holy Spirit*, the treasure which has been entrusted” (1:14)?
- ◆ Why would Paul urge to “be *strong*” – and that, “in the *grace* that is in Christ Jesus (2:1)?”
- ◆ Why is there so much emphasis on conflict, opposition, labor, pain, and hardship?
- ◆ Why are there pictures such as an enlisted, warring soldier, an athlete who is at risk of being disqualified, and shipwrecked preachers?

A call to the ministry is a call to hardship, pure and simple.

Have you ever considered your ministry, and come to the conclusion that though you had once counted the cost, you’d better go back and “check your math” again?

Have you ever considered your ministry as an enlisted, warring soldier, and been tempted to go AWOL?

The Apostle Paul knew hardship. There was a time when he seemed to have had the easy life as a Pharisee of Pharisees. But the risen Christ changed that. When Paul was converted, Jesus said to Ananias concerning Paul, “I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16).

To the Ephesian elders, Paul himself testified that “bonds and afflictions await me in every city” (Acts 20:23). In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul commended himself as a servant of God “...in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger” (6:4-5).

Later, in 2 Corinthians 11, he rehearsed for that same church his litany of hardships to validate his ministry:

...labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (And then almost as an afterthought...) Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches (vv.23-28).

And now at the near close of his life, Paul is confined to a morbid Roman prison. He’s seen this kind of thing before, but he realizes that his end is near, the time for his departure, indeed, has come. And so, as his ministerial encore, he bids his young son in the faith, Timothy - and by implication, *all* gospel ministers - to “suffer hardship” (2:2-3).

Paul knew hardship.

I mention these not to minimize your own labor and hardship in the gospel (when's the last time you slept in the sea for the sake of the gospel?). I mention these to put them in context because they, in some sense, validate or confirm your ministry.

Suffering hardship is not only the apostolic call to the gospel ministry, but also a mark of the gospel ministry. You are called to suffer hardship in the ministry, and once in, you will suffer it.

As ministers, we are *called to* suffer hardship: 1:8...2:3...4:5... As ministers, we are *called to* suffer hardship.

Moreover, as ministers of the gospel, we are *marked by* suffering hardship: 1:10-12... As ministers of the gospel, we are *marked by* suffering hardship.

Suffering and hardships *are* our calling, and they *mark* us as ministers of Jesus Christ. As stripes characterize a zebra, and spots a leopard, so hardships characterize us as gospel preachers.

The word translated “suffer hardship” is *kakopatheo* (cf. 2:9; 4:5; also 1:8,12; 2:3). It literally means “to suffer evil.” In addition to its usage in the pastoral epistles, it is used also at James 5:13 for those that are “afflicted.”

It's basic idea is to undergo difficulty, or in the manner of the earlier Greeks, “to experience misfortune,” (and I suppose we could further popularize that and say it is “when bad things happen to God's people.” It may involve persecution. It may not. It does, however, involve evil done to you in exchange for your practice of truth.

Most generally, it speaks to *any adverse circumstance that is in response to the gospel*. It could be simple relational tension. It could be criticism. It could be slander. It could be ostracism. It could be persecution. It could be imprisonment. But it always is “hardship” which is “suffered.”

And always it is a byproduct of the gospel being proclaimed or lived. Paul said at 1:8, “join with me in suffering *for the gospel*.” Again, concerning his gospel, he said at 2:9, “*for which* I suffer hardship even to the point of imprisonment.” You notice by these, then, that the hardships suffered are a result of the gospel, and, that there are degrees of hardship suffered. Paul's was “to the point of imprisonment” (v.9), “chains” (1:9).

What is yours?

It seems Timothy's was just to keep his spiritual and ministerial composure amidst the hardship; to stay in the ministry. Though very gifted, Timothy was weak, cowardly, unsure, and susceptible to the fear of man. His knees seem to have rattled around false teachers. His tendency seems to have been to withdraw when the coals of hardship grew brighter, when the heat of difficulty got hotter, and when the flame of adversity grew higher.

Like Timothy, the temptation (and tendency) for us is to allow, not the Word of God, but the hardship, to determine our course of action (as if *it* is able in the first place!).

For example, when we are faithful in what the Lord would have us do, and yet hardship comes, do we not tend to want to change things? For some undefined reason the hardship is not right to us.

So, we seek to “undo” the hardship. Maybe we’ll compromise the message. Maybe we’ll seek to befriend those who have in reality manifested themselves as enemies. Maybe we’ll be about only those things that bring minimal hardship – selective visitation, infrequent and only scandal-addressing discipline, casual conversation, non-confrontation of sin in others. Or maybe we’ll do things in retaliation to the hardship toward God or others. Or in exhaustion and defeat contemplate leaving the ministry. Many such things.

But if we loosen the knot of hardship that is truly the effect of the gospel, we not only run the risk of hanging our own ministry, we really only create a hardship elsewhere, somewhere.

Or even if we suffer hardship, and do it more as Stoics than saints; or more with complaint about others than compliance before God; or with dumb resignation than with dutiful resolve, we show ourselves as those interested in Christ for mere convenience and not by conviction. When “it all comes down to it,” we are guilty of the fear of man. We compromise. And practically, we devalue the cause of Christ to nothing; though He suffered for us, we will not suffer for Him.

Timothy seems to have teetered and waffled when it came to this very brink. And it appears that Paul saw it coming, too.

For this reason *Paul exhorted Timothy* - and really through this letter, all Christian pastors - *to suffer and endure hardship*. The whole epistle is geared toward buttressing a pastor’s confidence amidst the hardships that inevitably come as a result of faithful gospel ministry.

But what would Paul have us learn? What would *God* have us do while suffering ministerial hardship? (That’s the question!)

There are many things we might be *inclined* to do. There might be many things *suggested* we do.

But what *should* we do?

From his prison cell some 2,000 years ago, Paul addressed that basic question:

- 1) Remember the Right Person (v.8)
- 2) Endure with the Right Perspective (vv.9-10)

Let’s look at the text.

1. *Remember the Right Person* (v.8)

Note v.8... “Remember Jesus Christ.” In all of the difficulty, all of the hardships, there is one simple point to remember (rather, *person* to remember) – Jesus Christ.

But Paul does not commend Him in any abstract way. Nor is this command a simple truism. It is an urge to weighty reflection on the Lord – not “remember” in the sense of reversing forgetfulness (“oh yeah...”), but “remember” in the sense of “Remember the Sabbath,” “Remember Lot’s wife,” or “Remember from where you have fallen” (*Rev.* 2:5). It is a forceful call to deep, sober, significant thought - together with related consequences; in this case, Jesus Christ and his relation to the hardships of ministry.

Now some have understood that Paul was commending Jesus Christ to Timothy as the model soldier, the model athlete, and the model farmer, per vv.3-6. I can see in some sense that Jesus is the model soldier in defeating the archenemy of God. I can see that Jesus is the model athlete who ran the race set before Him. I am persuaded that Jesus is the model farmer in the sowing and reaping of the gospel.

But I’m not persuaded that that is Paul’s intent here at v.8. Not only does he draw a clear end to the 3 illustrations at v.7, but he also specifically points out to Timothy how he wants him to remember Jesus Christ – not as a soldier, athlete, or farmer, but “risen from the dead,” “of the seed of David,” “according to my gospel.”

Paul’s gospel, like that of the other apostles, consisted in preaching the resurrection of Christ and Him being the promised seed of David (cf. *Acts* 2:22-36; *Rom.* 1:1-4). Take away either and you gut the gospel. Without these truths, there is no gospel. If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Those who have fallen asleep – they’ve perished. You are of all men most to be pitied. If Christ is not the promised descendant of David, then we have no king. Bring Caesar back. Worse, we have not been subdued under God. We have not come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness, as Hosea says as a consequent to David’s return (*Hos.* 3:5). We are not ruled or defended. There is no one restraining and conquering our enemies. We have no imputed righteousness, nor the Holy Spirit. The last 2,000 years are one colossal error!

But since Jesus is risen from the dead, and since He is seated on God’s throne, we have all the promises of God fulfilled, just as the prophets spoke! So, the apostles preached the resurrection, and Paul himself was imprisoned for it.

But why did Paul want Timothy to remember *these things*? (He could have mentioned others aspects of Christ’s person or work).

First, Timothy was surrounded by heretics. And they openly discounted the resurrection. There were plenty of Sadducees denying the resurrection. There were plenty of those saying that there is no resurrection, even laughing at the very idea. There were plenty of the sorts of Hymenaeus and Philetus saying that “the resurrection has already taken place.”

At stake was the verification of the cross and the death of death in the death of Christ. Undoubtedly, the presence of Christ’s genealogy and the skirmishes over genealogies reveal that there was dissension over Jesus as the true son of David.

At stake was the doctrine of Jesus' humanity. And if He wasn't human, than He can't sympathize with us nor accomplish our redemption.

At stake also was the valid claim of Christ as King over all. If He is not the heir of David's throne, then what right does the Church have to call the nations into submission?

But since Jesus is risen and reigning, He and His work are both verifiable and relevant to men. Timothy had to remember his orthodoxy if he was to stand firm amidst doctrinal hardship. He had to remember these central truths of the gospel.

But though this is all true, I don't think it is the fullness of what Paul is getting at. Paul calls Timothy not to the bare doctrine – though he needs that (and the Majority Text translates it this way). He *furthermore* calls him to the One embodying these doctrines – “remember *Jesus Christ*.” Paul is not so much saying, “Timothy, get your history and theology straight – ‘Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David!’” He was calling Timothy to recognize the living, risen, and ruling person of Jesus Christ and the relevance of Him for the ministry. “Remember Him as a living being, not a mere biblical doctrine; the Head of theology, not a mere locus. Remember Jesus Christ - raised for your justification, raised to empower you over sin, raised in testimony of the future resurrection. And as you remember Him *this* way, you will ‘be strong in the grace that is in Him.’ You will defeat the heretics. You will have resurrection power in and through you to command others' submission to His rule, for not only the message, but the Man Himself will be in you through His Spirit. *This* is my gospel – not only in word, but also in power and truth.”

And what better illustration for this than Paul himself? Imprisoned with Barnabas. What does he do? Sings Psalms! Baptizes a converted jailer! Imprisoned again. What does he do? Write epistles - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon for the strengthening of the Church! This was a man that knew what remembering Jesus Christ amidst hardships was all about.

And so I ask you, in all of the difficulty and hardship that is involved in the ministry, where do your thoughts go? What do you keep in mind when entering “the valley of the shadow of ministerial death?” Is it the risen, reigning Christ? Or is it a difficult, debilitating hardship?

If your ‘memory is correct’, it will rest on Jesus Christ. It will rest on the resurrection victory He achieved through the hardship of the cross, your participation in that by faith, and the outworking of that in your ministry by the Spirit of God.

So, remember Jesus Christ, who endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. And by faith, walk out your union with Christ, taking up your cross and following Him. And as a result of this, be a means of instruction to others as you go, for they are in hardship as they too pick up their crosses and follow Him. Teach them to look heavenward *to* Him in remembrance *of* Him.

But there is a 2nd element in your handling hardship. You are not only to remember the right person (Jesus Christ). You are to:

2. Endure with the Right Perspective (vv.9-10)

Obviously, Paul's circumstances were that he was imprisoned. Everything he told Timothy to do, he already had been applying. He speaks from experience.

And what did he tell Timothy? Verses 9-10...He told him to endure.

Endure what? All things, i.e., even the hardships associated with imprisonment.

Why? The Word of God is not imprisoned.

For whom? The elect.

Why? So that they also may obtain salvation in Christ and eternal glory.

What a practical theology for viewing ministerial hardship!

Let's boil down some of the principles involved in Paul's perspective:

a. God does His good will amidst your hardship.

"The word of God is not imprisoned" (v.9). That's a great picture! If you could personify the gospel, you can just see it moving around talking from prisoner to prisoner. Guards unsuccessfully trying to cuff it.

Paul acknowledged in Php.1, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (vv.12-14).

As a result of Paul's earlier imprisonment, prisoners were converted, and those Christian prisoners that were already there were encouraged all the more, and they spoke all the more! Again, the Philippian jailer was converted most likely on account of Psalm singing in jail!

Though we be in the midst of hardship, God works within it for *others' good*, having designed things toward that end. Oftentimes our hardships are not only designed as means of blessing toward others, but in them *we too* see that God is greater than our hardships! His word is not imprisoned because God is not imprisoned. "He does whatever He pleases in heaven above and in the earth beneath."

Remember that sermon that you barely got together, and thought would never get beyond the pulpit, (and looking back on it, really didn't!)? But there was that one person who came up afterward and sincerely said, "That was just what I needed to hear. That was one of the best sermons you've preached. Thank you for your faithfulness."

God is greater than your hardships. And He will have success despite, and through, your hardships. There's such a beauty in that! It is not because of me. In reality, it is in spite of me, and because of Him.

And Paul knew that. There's no evidence that Paul ever thought that his imprisonments and hardships would adversely affect the Church. Nothing to the effect of "take me out of the picture and this ministry comes to grinding halt!" He realized that since the ministry did not *begin* with him, neither did it *end* with him. To quote Hendriksen, speaking for Paul, "Others will carry on when I leave this earthly scene."

Look again at Paul's perspective on hardship, v.10... "for this reason," i.e., knowing that God and His Word are not chained, I will endure whatever the Lord brings my way. He has it all worked out. Though He has factored in *hardship*, He has not factored in *failure*. But through the hardship will bring about His good, pleasing, and perfect will."

But it goes further, v.10... Our encouragement amidst ministerial hardship is not just in regard to what's behind us (God's sovereignty determining good via hardship). It's also in regard to what's ahead of us (God's sovereignty *in the salvation of His elect*).

I love the practicality of divine sovereignty!

Because God has determined to work through your hardship:

b. Therefore, you should endure all hardship for the sake of the elect.

Verse 10... Here is one of many clear affirmations of the doctrine of election – that God unconditionally chose certain individuals for salvation in Christ before time began without any foresight of faith.

"I'll continue preaching in this dank prison because God's word is unleashed, and since that is the case, others might come into the possession of salvation... I long to see others know the grace I have been shown – a grace so wonderful and irresistible I endure prison with singing..."

It was only because God had determined to save elect sinners, *and* obtain eternal glory, Paul "stayed in the game." What other reason would there be? He didn't quit. He believed God for fruit in His ministry. He knew that whatever good work God began – even if it involved hardship – He also finished. Knowing that God elected, He knew God would not only save, but bring those saved to glory. He knew that the God who elects is the God who saves, sanctifies, and glorifies. He had the mindset that knew what God had promised, believed what God had promised, and worked toward the realization of what God had promised. "Those whom He foreknew... He predestined, those He predestined He called, those He called, He justified, those He justified He glorified" (*Rom. 8:30*).

Now, do you see your endurance of hardship as a means to God's end? How about the laborious task of studying the Word, when you simply are uninterested? How about your hearing for the 19th time, "pastor, I committed that sin again." How about when the next wave of butterflies

oozes out of your stomach area? What keeps you going in those times? Do you really believe that if God elects a sinner, he will bless your feeble and pitiful labor to bring him along in sanctification? Do you see your ministerial hardships as a means God uses to bring your people closer to the likeness of Christ?

The right perspective is an endurance that is selflessly motivated. It comes out in Paul's words, "so that they *also* may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus" (v.10). It is for others' good through even the detriment of ourselves; my prison for their salvation.

The right perspective is, in part, an evangelistic perspective. It is fixed on the saving good of others in Christ as a stimulus for endurance. It is a perspective that at its core sees the glory and sovereignty of God in the election, salvation, and glorification of sinners, but yet one that sees also the rightful place of enduring hardships as God's means to His and others' eternal glory. Their eternal glory through the sacrifice of our temporal ministerial hardships.

It's almost like helping someone climb up a wall... using your cupped hands (and your face) as their steps to glory. This is the right perspective: believing that God is doing His good pleasure *amidst* your hardships, and that the salvation and glory of the elect will come about *by means of* your hardships.

This was Paul's application of loving neighbor as and above self. And He learned it from Jesus.

To sum up, we could liken the hardship-enduring pastor to the sea wall of George Boschke.

George W. Boschke was the engineer who built the gigantic sea wall to protect Galveston, Texas from the horrible floods which had previously brought disaster to the city. He built his wall with the best materials available and the sure confidence of a thoroughgoing engineer and workman. Having finished his work in Galveston, he then went to Oregon to build railroads in an undeveloped section of the state. When in a camp, some 40 miles away from the nearest railroad, an exhausted messenger thrust a telegram into his hand. The message stated that the wall had been washed away by a ferocious hurricane not long after its completion. The messenger waited in dread of what Boschke's response might be. Boschke calmly read the telegram, smiled, handed it back to the exhausted messenger and said, "This is a black lie. I built that wall to stand, and stood she has. I know it." Sure enough, it did stand. The message was based on suppositions that had begun by, interestingly, a former but unsuccessful engineer.

And so it is for the pastor in the path of even ministerial hurricanes. God has purposed that he stand insofar as he is equipped with a *remembrance of the right person* and an *endurance with the right perspective*.

May God make you each to remember, endure, and stand that you may be a blessing to those who forget and neglect, faint and fall, that they, too, may stand with you in Christ.

Amen.