

A Valuable Prisoner

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[0 : 00] Well, it is very likely he was in prison, but it may well have been in the imprisonment that we have been reading about in Acts this evening. But I just want to take one or two sections from this chapter and apply them not just as Paul lived them so well and as he was wanting Timothy as a church leader to live, but also for all of us because there's great principles for Christian leaders, for teachers, for every Christian in the church.

And in many ways what I'm saying this evening dovetails quite nicely with what we were looking at this morning. There might well be some overlap between the two things.

And by way of introduction, I think sometimes we struggle with the idea of grace and also effort. We struggle with these two things coming together, grace and hard work. We've talked a lot, haven't we? We've preached a lot. I've preached a lot about grace, about the gift of life that Jesus gives us, that we don't earn, that we don't come before Him and try our very best and hope that that will be good enough on the day that we meet with our Maker.

But we recognise that we've been saved, we've been redeemed by grace, by the work of what Jesus has done and we've been made clean and we've been forgiven.

[1 : 32] There's a forensic aspect to that where God has declared us to be clean, to be innocent, to be forgiven by Him.

But we remember also that this judge who makes this declaration to us is the judge who brings us into His family, so that we're brought into a relationship with Him.

It's not a relationship of equals, we're not yet glorified, we're not yet perfected in a relationship with Him. There's work to be done. We have freedom in Jesus Christ but we've been set free to serve and the Holy Spirit gives us that ability to serve Him and follow Him.

So sometimes we finish the sentence too early. There's nothing we can do in order to earn our salvation.

That's right, isn't it? That's the sentence of itself. We can't do anything to make ourselves right before God. Jesus has done it for us on the cross. But sometimes we finish that sentence early and we just say there's nothing we can do.

[2 : 47] And we somehow get grace and hard work or effort mixed up. We forget that we are serving God out of gratitude and that we serve Him wholeheartedly with hard work, not to earn our favour with Him but in order to recognise and know, as we saw and we're speaking about a little bit this morning, that we are those who have been touched by grace.

Grace motivates hard work for us and takes us through the suffering, much of the suffering that Paul experienced and we've been reading about in Acts. And so he was writing here to Timothy and Timothy was a quiet, kind of lad, young man, a leader in the church, probably a quite intellectual, studious kind of boy, man, young man.

And Paul wants Timothy and the advice he gives him, he wants him to be spiritually reflective, to really think about what Paul's saying. And that's what I would like us to be as well.

And in the same way, kind of if we had a key verse this morning about God's glory, then we've got a key verse tonight as well. It's verse seven. It's kind of the fulcrum verse for this section.

And Paul says to Timothy, reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. So he's wanting Timothy to be someone who uses his mind, who uses his brain, who uses his intellect, who reflects on what is being told.

[4 : 18] He doesn't want Christians, he doesn't want Timothy to be kind of dumb and unthinking and unintellectual about these things, whether we're clever or not clever.

He wants us to put energy and effort into thinking about our spiritual lives, reflecting on what he's saying, but not just intellectually. He says, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

So there needs to be this balance between really thinking hard and working through our Christian lives and how we live, but doing so spiritually, asking for God's help, asking for the Holy Spirit to guide us, looking for the Lord to give us insight.

So we need insight, don't we? It's not just a matter of brain power or a matter of knowledge or orthodoxy or anything. We need God to help us. We struggle with the Bible. If you do struggle with the Bible, struggle to understand it.

I do. I'm sure you do as well at different points. And different points, we don't know how to apply it to our lives. So we often need to remember that it's not simply a reflection on God's word, but we're looking for the Lord to give us insight how it applies to our lives.

[5 : 23] So we're looking for that spiritual insight. And as he speaks about the Christian life and the kind of Christian he wants Timothy to be and wants Timothy's people to be and for us to be, because it's given to us by the Holy Spirit, he uses pictures.

That's good. I'm glad he uses pictures. I'm glad tonight he uses pictures because it's easy to understand and it's easier for us to take in in our own lives. He uses pictures for us.

Doesn't use philosophical concepts. He doesn't just use mere ideas. He uses pictures to help us understand a little bit more about the gospel and about the kind of people he wants us to be.

And he uses a picture of a good soldier, a good athlete, and a good farmer to get across what the different aspects of hard work as Christians living and recognizing that there's a need to be strong and to endure hardship and to keep on going as a Christian.

Because that's really the thrust of what he's saying in this passage. Couraging Timothy not to give up, to keep on going, to be strong and to be hard working because the temptation is to give up. So he gives these different pictures of living the Christian life.

[6 : 39] And the first is the good soldier in verse three where he says, endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs. He wants to please his commanding officer.

And it's a picture of a soldier on the front line, isn't it? Not a soldier back at the barracks, but a soldier who's on the front line who is sharp, who's mind and whose thoughts and whose actions and reactions are sharp because they're in enemy territory and they could be attacked at any point. They know it's important to do what their commanding officer says, even sometimes if they disagree with it. They know that they have to stand shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers they're working with.

And that there's a great sense of teamwork and a great sense of moving forward together. That they can't just not concentrate. And it's a recognition that when they're in this intense place, as it were, that they can't really be thinking about civilian affairs or thinking about life back at home for themselves.

In some ways, I think the illustrator had was maybe just now British soldiers in Afghanistan. And you see them sometimes just with the way it is today.

[7 : 55] You get a glimpse into the front line for various reasons. And you would get a glimpse of maybe soldiers in the Helmand district moving into a village or a town. And they have to maybe sweep through that town to make sure there's no insurgents there.

And so they're in a long line and they're, you know, it's not like Dad's army at all, but they're really, they've got everything ready. You can see how alert they are. They're standing shoulder to shoulder and moving forward.

But can you imagine one of them just was texting, you know, as they went forward and there could be all, you know, there could be mines around, there could be terrorists up in the, and he's just texting and he's not concentrating.

And how dangerous and how crazy that would be for him to do that. You know, you walk down the street, nothing more annoying, is there?

People coming towards you texting with their heads down. They don't know where they're going. They bump into you because they're not aware of their surroundings. The heads down are texting.

[9 : 00] Don't text walking down the street. You walk down the street to walk. You don't text. You go home and sit down and text. But don't do walking down the street. And same, a soldier would never be texting in that circumstance because he would be unaware of what was going on.

He would be letting his fellow soldiers down on either side of him. He would be a sitting duck. He would be a target for enemy fire. And that's really the picture that Paul is wanting to get across, that

we need to be those who recognize the urgency and the significance of being Christians, that we're aware, that we're still in enemy territory, that there is an enemy of our soul who wants to draw us away from himself and who wants us to take us away from our commanding officer, take us away from the Lord Jesus Christ, wants us to be unaware of the needs of our fellow Christians around us. Wants us to put our guard down so that all of the Christian community are affected. And it may be that spiritually or metaphorically speaking that we are living our lives going down the street, texting with our heads down, unaware of what is happening around about us, unaware of the needs and the realities of other Christians, not recognizing the urgency and the significance of being a soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But then he goes on to speak about the athlete in verse 5, no one serving. So similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.

And that's a very apt illustration just now with the Olympics coming to London in the summer and we've got all this different publicity about athletes and about their preparations and what's happening.

[11 : 02] And we know that we will look forward to and the great seat that is being sought among those who are interested in athletics is the seat for the 100 metre final to see if you say in bulk and do 9.4 and break the world record and everyone wants to see that and everyone wants to see the finals and everyone wants to be at these events.

And yet we recognize that there's four years of blood, sweat and tears have gone into this final push that these athletes make and that when they get to that place that they have to compete honestly and openly they can't use performance enhancing drugs, there's no shortcuts that they can take, they need to just act and run in the right way.

There's no shortcut for them and there's a tremendous amount of hard work that has gone into them competing as athletes. And Paul is trying to get across that same picture for ourselves as Christians when he's asking us to consider even the rewards and the blessings of being Christians that for us there's, we look at the Bible and sometimes we look at the promises of Scripture and we look at other Christians and maybe the blessings they've received and the success of their lives spiritual and we just want to be like that.

We want to be mature all of a sudden, we want to be blessed, we want to receive all the promises, we want quick spiritual fixes, we want spiritual performance in how we do enhancing experiences in our lives yet we have to recognise and know and see and appreciate that the Christian life is about hard work and training and preparation, ongoing, daily in our lives the spiritual disciplines, athletes talk about the disciplines of preparation and so as Christians we recognise that Grace and the blessings of Grace are free, that He wants us to live in a way that is spiritually disciplined, that we look to the words, a bit like what we were looking at this morning about the value and the cost of Grace, that we're willing to sacrifice, we're willing to suffer, we're willing to make God known in our lives by what we do.

So the picture of the athlete and similarly, thirdly the picture of the farmer that He gives us in this passage as well where we see and recognise in verse 6, the hard working farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.

[13 : 46] So you've got enduring hardship like a good soldier, you've got the athlete who competes according to the rules, you've got the hard working farmer, the same different illustrations, the same kind of point with maybe a different emphasis coming each and every time.

There's nothing better, nothing I like better than in the summer, the hot summer's day, picking rasps. Brilliant just taking the rasps straight from the raspberry tree bush thing and eating it and enjoying the fruits of that herb or digging potatoes out of the ground with a fork and getting just all these amazing potatoes that have grown there.

I don't know how they've grown there, just seeing something on top and then they grow and that's brilliant. It's tremendous to enjoy and to dig up these things and to get the harvest but you think of all the hard work that has gone into that, not by me if I'm picking them or digging them up by the farmer, the plowing of the fields and the planting and probably most significantly the waiting for the harvest to come and even the harvesting itself is hard work.

But again in our Christian lives we see blessings, we see promises of Scripture, we see fruit that we would look to have in our Christian lives but we need to remember and Paul is reminding Timothy as he had to remind himself and the whole of the Christian church that in order to know that

blessing and to know the fruit of grace in our lives there's ongoing spiritual work to be done. There's our hearts like in the parable of the sower, the ground needs to be prepared and there's sin that comes into our Christian lives and chokes the growth and chokes the fruitfulness of what we are and what we do, the selfishness and the lusts and the ambitions that we need to deal with and get rid of in our heart so that we can bear fruit, so that we can see God at work.

[15:52] And one of the hardest things I think that this passage reminds us of is the importance of waiting on the Lord. I have a lot of people that will question me about that in their Christian lives. Why doesn't God give me this answer to prayer?

Why doesn't He show me this promise? Why do I receive what He's promised to give me? Why do I have to wait? What is it all about? And yet this picture reminds us that the farmer can't do anything about the potatoes growing or the raspberries growing once everything is put in place that they need to wait for the harvest and so spiritually there are times in our suffering Christian lives that we don't know the end of the picture, we don't know what God is doing, we don't know why He's doing it but we are simply asked to trust in Him, to develop faith and to develop a commitment to Him and to develop an understanding and a patient waiting upon Him.

So in your lives that's the great challenge is to be those who endure hardship, who develop, who mature, who work hard, who go through sufferings because we recognise grace working through us in different ways that we're good soldiers that we're athletes and they're farmers.

And these are the pictures He gives us. He wants us to reflect on Jesus Christ. He gives Jesus Christ as the example in verse 8 who was the one who was descended from David and who was raised from the dead.

He gives us an example from his own life, Paul who was suffering for his chains but the Gospel was still moving forward and then he speaks about the church in that kind of poetic line from verse 11 to 14.

[17:47] We take example from the church from Paul, from Christ himself. But I just want to finish with a summary that he gives us in verse 15 about the good workman that is entitled that section, the workman approved by God.

In verse 15 he says, do your best to present yourself as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed but who correctly handles the word of truth.

And there's a summary here of what it is to be a Christian in an ongoing way that's significant for us as we think through our own Christian lives. And it really is that we are able to look Christ in the eye. Do yourself to be a workman approved by God who does not need to be ashamed, who correctly handles the word of truth. I think the older verses of the Bible sometimes have who correctly divides the word of truth.

And the whole picture there is of cutting a straight line. That we're able to cut a straight line into the truth of God's word and we're able to face God.

[18:57] It's kind of a picture of a railway line being built through a mountain pass.

It's all dynamite goes to blow up all the rocks so it can go straight through the mountain. It knows exactly the direction it's going and it's heading towards a fixed destination.

And as Christians he says, that's how he wants us to be. That we're allowed scripture to be a mirror into our soul and we're face to face with God through Jesus Christ. We know the direction we're going in.

We've set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts and we know exactly who's we are and who we serve and the direction of our lives because we're guided by the word of truth and we handle it correctly. So we're people who are reflecting on truth, who know the truth of Jesus Christ and who allow that to be our light, our guide, our beacon and we know the direction which we're going because we serve Jesus and He's our Lord.

[20:00] We're honest with Him. We're willing to learn from Him. We're willing to follow Him. We're accountable to Him. We're living in the way of grace. We're empowered by the Spirit and we are walking that path.

It's not necessarily an easy path but we know exactly who's we are and who we serve and we face up to our failings and we come to Him for forgiveness and we keep on walking on that road.

And that's really the picture that He gives us of a workman approved. He doesn't need to be ashamed but correctly divides or handles the word of truth who cuts it open in such a way that we are led by it and move by it and we are going in the right direction.

So in other words, we have an ongoing clear, deliberate walk with Jesus Christ and we follow Him clearly and we know the direction we're going in.

That's what He's saying. And the opposite is those who He gives the example of here like Haim and Aeus and Phylites and He gives us another word picture who have wandered away from the truth.

[21 : 14] And the danger is to be bod... and the picture that you can come out there has been a body swerving Christian. Instead of looking Christ in the eye, we can be those who are body swerving Christ.

We're avoiding Him. You know what that's like. It's the picture here. Those who've wandered away from the truth. The picture is of a narrow that's been fired but it goes nowhere near the target. It's not like the single-mindedness that we're speaking about before but it kind of just wanders away completely and it swerves away.

It's a hopeless error. It's not well-guided. It's not going the right direction. It just completely avoids the truth and the significance of the truth in our lives and He doesn't want us to be like that about Christians who are walking or wandering away from the truth.

He doesn't want us to be Christians who make excuses for the Bible and say, well that doesn't that can't really apply to me now. I don't want to live by this standard for Jesus Christ.

[22 : 22] I don't want Christ's gaze in my heart. I don't want to have to repent and turn from the lifestyle that I'm living. So you wonder and either say you avoid His gaze, you avoid the Spirit's work in your life, we can avoid His honest, truthful summary of what we need to do to get right with Him.

And instead of being honest and facing up to what it is to be a Christian, we become involved like the people that Timothy Paul is speaking about here, to Timothy who just focus on stupid arguments.

Oh, it sounds great. And we make arguments about whether bits of the Bible apply to us anymore or not. And we just spend our time focusing on words and things that are insignificant, godless chatter or flighty.

We don't like God to see what we really like in our hearts, so we avoid Him. We don't like the gaze of His pure word, so we avoid Him. We don't want to be accountable to Him or to any of His servants or to any of His children.

We avoid commitment. We just go our own way. And we maybe think that the cost of grace is too high.

[23 : 47] The cost of God working in our hearts and humbling us and changing us is too great. And so we are body swerving Christians, always on the make, always making excuses, always with reasons not to be accountable to God, always with reasons not to come fall on our knees and cry before Jesus Christ.

Because we recognise that as we fix our eyes on Him, His gaze is very pure and His grace is hugely loving but is weighty and gives great responsibility in our lives.

So Paul was someone who knew and lived as he taught and was humble, a humble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and didn't get distracted, didn't avoid the truth, didn't avoid His responsibility but recognised the value of grace and the worth-wildness of putting Himself in the shadow of Jesus Christ and the grace that He gives to us.

And the encouragement for Him through the Holy Spirit to us and to Timothy is the same this evening. Reflect on what I am saying, he says, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

And may that be true for us all this evening as we reflect on Scripture and on the importance of hard work, effort and energy in developing our relationship with Jesus, not to earn salvation but because we understand the value of the grace we have been given.

[25 : 28] Are we willing to put in the time? Put in the time for Jesus, put in the time for prayer, put in the time for repentance, put in the time for honestly being focused on who we are, who we serve and where we are going and not being flighty and avoiding the reality and being body-swerving Christians.

Amen. Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord God help us we ask to reflect on you, to reflect on your grace and your goodness, to reflect on your teaching, the challenges of your word, to reflect on the images and the pictures you give us, to remind us that for the short time that we live our lives, for the focus time that we are to be here in this world, just like the soldier would only have a short time to be on the front line or an athlete a short time in the race or a farmer a short time preparing the ground for harvest and sowing the seed.

So remind us that we also are only here a short time and the effort and the energy and sometimes the downright hard work of maintaining our Christian lives and being honest before you with Spirit's help is only for a short time and that one day that we will be faced with the Lord Jesus Christ who will wipe away every tear from our eyes and who will usher us into the wonderful marriage feast of the Lamb and we look forward to these days also even though we feel very grounded and rooted in this world and it's all we know, know we experience yet by faith we look forward to new heavens and a new earth within the well of righteousness and so we pray until that day that we would serve you with responsibility and with courage, with endurance and with hard work that we would suffer for being a Christian with grace and with humility and that you would bless us in that we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.