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## EMBRACING HARDSHIP FOR THE GOSPEL

2 Timothy 2:3-7

By

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2 Timothy Lesson 10

Embracing Hardship for the Gospel  
2 Tim. 2:3-7

Why would anyone willingly embrace suffering? The current "Mountain Living Magazine" (Oct., 2006, pp. 26-28) features a cover story on Olympic-hopeful runner Paul Stoneham, who attends FCF. The article chronicles his many years of injuries as a result of his running career. It begins by quoting Paul's description of his drive and inner resolve with running: "My relationship with Christ has paralleled my running career and I don't know if next week I will be injured. There is a level of faith required in all these things.... God is sovereign over what happens to me—and I find peace in that." To reach his goal, Paul puts his body through twice-a-day workouts, racking up 120 miles a week. His commitment to the goal motivates him to endure the hardships.

In our text, the apostle Paul wants Timothy (and us) to join him in suffering hardship for the gospel. That's a tough sell in our comfort-oriented culture! We recently bought a car off of Ebay. I was talking with the salesman in Florida, who told me that he had visited Sedona, but he left after a few days because he was bored. I asked, "How could you be bored with all of those beautiful hiking trails to explore?" He roared back, "Hiking! I'm 5 foot 9, 285 pounds. The only place I hike is to the parking garage. My idea of a great vacation is an air-conditioned hotel with a big screen TV!" I thought to myself, "Then why leave home?"

But that's the mentality of the typical American couch potato: Park as close as you can to the store, so you don't have to walk more than a few yards. Drive a block rather than walk. Sit in your recliner with the remote in hand, watching all of those crazy guys on TV run all over the field. Your exercise for the day is to walk to the kitchen for more chips and drinks. And you want me to embrace hardship for the gospel?

I will warn you in advance, this is a convicting text! How many of us, myself included, willingly embrace hardship for the sake of the gospel? How many of us keep ourselves unentangled from the affairs of everyday life so that we may please our Com-

mander-in-Chief? How many of us discipline ourselves as athletes for the kingdom so that we may win the prize? How many of us toil in the unglamorous task of farming God's fields so that we may enjoy the crops? These are the illustrations that Paul uses to make the point:

To be a fruitful Christian, you must willingly suffer hardship for the gospel now in view of future rewards.

This text assumes that as a Christian, you desire to be fruitful for Jesus Christ. Is that a valid assumption in your case? If it is, you either are serving Christ in some capacity or are seeking Him about where He wants you to serve. In other words, underlying Paul's command to suffer hardship (it *is* a command, not a nice suggestion!) is Jesus' command (Matt. 6:33), "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." "All these things" refers to the things that unbelievers eagerly seek: food, clothing, a nice place to live, and other material possessions.

Jesus' command applies to every believer, not just to those in so-called "full time" Christian service. Likewise, Paul's command certainly applies to pastors and missionaries, but it also applies to every soldier in Christ's army, which is to say, to every believer.

The convicting word in Jesus' command is, *first*. If He had only said, "Seek the kingdom of God," we could have added that to our list of things to do. That would be somewhat manageable. But to seek it *first* means that we must bump it up to the top of the list. It has to control everything else! Many Christians view the kingdom of God as a nice slice of life. It makes them feel good to go to church on Sunday and to have a spiritual element in their lives. But God's kingdom is not at the center. It's not the driving force of their lives. So they dabble at the kingdom of God, but they don't seek it first.

This is even a trap for many pastors. It's easy after a few years to settle into the pastorate as a comfortable career. You put in your time, get a paycheck, and save up for retirement at 65 or sooner if you can afford it. In your off hours, you pursue your hobbies. But you've lost that consuming passion of seeking first the kingdom of God. You're not willingly embracing hardship for the gospel in view of eternity. The ministry is just how you earn a living.

To sell us on this difficult command, Paul uses three illustrations and then he urges us to consider what he says. First, he points us to the soldier, then to the athlete, and then to the farmer. The three analogies are similar in that there is a requirement to receive the reward or reach the goal. The soldier must be focused and avoid entanglement to please his commander. The athlete must be disciplined to compete according to the rules to win the prize. The farmer must work hard to enjoy the first fruits of the harvest. Each endures hardship for the sake of future rewards.

1. To be a fruitful Christian, willingly embrace the hardship of the good soldier: Unentangled commitment (2:3-4).

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an ad in a London newspaper read: "Men wanted for hazardous journey: small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, and constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success." It was signed by the famous Arctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton and thousands of men responded. Commenting on this, Warren Wiersbe (*Be Faithful* [Victor Books, 1981], p. 13) writes,

If Jesus Christ had advertised for workers, the announcement might have read something like this: "Men and women wanted for difficult task of helping to build My church. You will often be misunderstood, even by those working with you. You will face constant attack from an invisible enemy. You may not see the results of your labor, and your full reward will not come till after all your work is completed. It may cost you your home, your ambitions, even your life."

Paul was an honest recruiter. I've told you about the dishonest recruiter who told a young man that he could water ski and fish off the island where the Coast Guard boot camp was located. That was *technically* true, but manifestly false! Paul knew that if you decide to follow Christ under the false pretense of a life of ease, you will quickly go AWOL when the battle gets intense. And so he calls us to embrace hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. This requires four things:

- A. To be a good soldier of Christ Jesus, recognize that you have been conscripted into Christ's army to fight the evil forces of darkness.

The imagery of being a soldier shows that Christ is not inviting us to a Sunday School picnic! It's a battle zone. People are getting wounded and killed. In this case, it's not a volunteer army. Rather, you were drafted when Jesus Christ laid hold of you. The enemy is the unseen forces of darkness in heavenly places. To avoid being a casualty, you've got to put on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17).

In boot camp, they train you to endure hardship. They get you up in the middle of the night and make you run laps on the black-top or do pushups until your arms feel like Jell-O. They teach you to work as a team when you are tired and upset. They teach you to obey orders, even when those orders seem to make no sense. You have to trust that the superior officers know something that you don't know and that by obeying their crazy orders, you will help achieve the goal of victory in battle.

As a Christian, you must develop the mentality of a good soldier of Christ Jesus. You will not understand all of His orders or why He puts you into some very difficult circumstances. In the case of Job, God permitted Satan to take all of his earthly possession, kill his ten children and their mates, and afflict Job with boils all over his body, just so that God could win an argument! But as the Sovereign of the universe, He has the right to do that!

Pastor John Piper has pointed out that many believers use prayer as an intercom to have the maid bring more refreshments to the living room, when in fact prayer is our walkie-talkie to call in more support to the front lines of the battle. In other words, prayer isn't to make our lives more comfortable. It is to bring the forces of heaven against the forces of evil in the cosmic battle of which we are infantry soldiers. So as a believer, you've got to develop this wartime mentality. Don't be surprised when the bullets start flying!

- B. To be a good soldier of Christ Jesus, willingly embrace the hardship of unentangled commitment.

Just as the soldier in Iraq doesn't set up a souvenir stand or a fast food business to make a little extra money on the side, so the Christian must not get distracted from seeking first the kingdom of God. This is one of the most difficult commands for each of us to apply consistently.

To apply it does not mean that you must become a monk or a missionary. It doesn't require you to quit your regular job or to neglect the daily matters that go along with being a functioning member of society. Paul himself made tents to support his ministry. While it is legitimate for some to be fully supported in ministry (1 Timothy 5:17-18), you don't have to be a career Christian worker to obey this command.

The key here is the word, "entangle." It's easy for all of us, including those of us supported by ministry, to get entangled with things that are not wrong in themselves. They're wrong because they distract us from seeking first the kingdom of God. There is nothing wrong with a limited use of sports or computers or recreation or hobbies, if we use them to refresh us for the battle. But it's easy for these legitimate things to suck you into the quicksand and before you know it, you're not seeking first God's kingdom.

In his book, *Your Money Matters* ([Bethany Fellowship, 1977], pp. 22-23) Malcolm MacGregor tells of a man who had gone into business for himself, who came to him for counsel. A tremendous opportunity had come along. Once he got this business established, he was going to have a lot of time available to minister at the church and help others.

He had excitedly told his family that he had found an opportunity to be his own boss and have the freedom he wanted. They must understand that for a short period of time, he was going to have to pour a lot of work and time into getting the business started, but after that he would have a lot of extra time. He would be able to help out at church, perhaps coach Little League, and they would do things together as a family.

So, the first thing he did was to resign his position on the church council, because the council met on Saturday and that was the one day he *had* to be at work. But as soon as he got the business started, he would be back.

Business was going well, but he was not going to the mid-week service any more, because that was the night he had to catch up on paper work. Then he quit teaching Sunday School, because he didn't have time to prepare his lesson. Next, he stopped coming Sunday evenings. Then a crisis set in and he was not in church on

Sunday morning for six, eight, ten weeks. Now, sitting across the desk from MacGregor, his business was destroyed and he was facing bankruptcy. He asked, "Why would God put me into this business just to see it fail?"

Before we sit in judgment on that man, let's admit that it's very easy to drift into that kind of situation. But if anything—even your family—comes before seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, it is wrongful entanglement.

C. To be a good soldier of Christ Jesus, live daily to please the Lord who enlisted you.

"The one who enlisted him as a soldier" does not refer to a lowly recruiter, but to the general who raised an army by rallying men to his cause. Jesus Christ is our general, who calls us to His person and His cause.

A good soldier must be loyal to his commander. Commanders are pleased by obedient, dependable soldiers. To please our Commander is the great desire of every blood-bought soldier of the cross (2 Cor. 5:9), so that one day we will hear, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Keep in mind who it is that we are trying to please: Jesus Christ. Otherwise, we will try to please people or get upset because people criticize what we're doing. While we must be sensitive to people, our aim is to please our Commander, Jesus Christ, beginning on the heart (thought) level.

D. To be a good soldier of Christ Jesus, remember that you are enduring hardship together with all of His soldiers.

The Greek word used (2:3) is a compound word meaning, "to suffer hardship with" someone, in this case, with Paul. It shows us that we are never alone in the battle. The enemy tries to make us feel that we're the only ones going through our trials. Like Elijah when he was running from Jezebel, we think, "I alone am left and they seek my life!" But the Lord always has His 7,000 that have not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:10, 18). Read the lives of the saints who have suffered in the past and be aware of the persecuted church around the world today. It helps put your trials into perspective to realize that you are enduring hardship with all of the Lord's good soldiers.

2. To be a fruitful Christian, willingly embrace the hardship of the athlete: Discipline within limits (2:5).

Observe three things:

- A. You do not become godly by accident.

We're all suckers for quick and easy remedies for difficult problems. Almost daily I get emails trying to sell me a pill that will take off pounds without the discipline of dieting or exercise. Spiritually, we fall for the same easy-remedy approach: "Get baptized in the Spirit and speak in tongues and you'll instantly be transported to a higher level where you'll never struggle with temptation again." But it doesn't work.

The athlete metaphor shows that it is only by discipline that the athlete may compete and win. Every athlete knows that occasional jogging won't prepare you to compete in the Olympics. To compete on a winning level, you must daily discipline your body through exercise, diet, and proper rest.

Paul writes (1 Tim. 4:7), "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." You can wish for godliness, you can try magic remedies for godliness, but you won't become godly apart from the daily discipline of making the time to spend in the Word and in prayer. There are no shortcuts.

- B. You must compete according to the rules of God's Word.

If an athlete disobeys the rules of his sport, he is instantly disqualified. Yet many Christians, even Christian leaders, think that they have a special exemption that allows them to disobey God's Word and yet expect His blessing. But it doesn't work that way! To put it bluntly, men, you can't engage in mental lust or look at pornography and then pray, "Lord, keep my children morally pure." You can't cheat in your business and ask God to bless it.

- C. Your aim in competing is to win the prize.

Paul tells us (1 Cor. 9:24) to run in such a way that we might win. In the Christian race, we're not competing against each other. And, there will be multiple winners. We all can win. But Paul wants us to adopt a mindset that says, "I'm not going to dink around in my Christian life. I'm running to win!"

Charles Simeon, a godly Anglican pastor in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw many young men under his influence go out into the cause of world missions. One such young man was Henry Martyn, who went to India and Persia, where he died at age 31 of tuberculosis. This was before photography, but someone had painted a portrait of Martyn just before he died and sent it to Simeon. He was shocked when he saw it, at the obvious toll that the hardship of missionary life had taken on his young disciple. Simeon hung the portrait over the mantle in his study, where he looked at it often. He said that it reminded him, "Don't trifle! Don't trifle!"

Thus to be a fruitful Christian, willingly embrace the hardship of the soldier and the athlete.

3. To be a fruitful Christian, willingly embrace the hardship of the farmer: Hard, unexciting work with no immediate payback (2:6).

Note three things:

A. Much Christian work is unexciting.

Compared to the lives of the soldier and the athlete, the life of a farmer is rather boring. The soldier lives on the edge of life and death on the battlefield. The athlete has the thrill of the cheering crowd as he runs toward the goal. But the farmer works long and hard, plowing and planting, and goes home tired. About the most exciting thing he can see is, "The corn grew two inches last week!" Whoopee! Why does he do it? He is looking for the harvest.

Spiritually, there are a few who have "exciting" ministries. They're invited to speak all over the world. They have thousands flocking to hear them or buying their books. Then there are the rest of us, out in the fields waiting for the corn to grow. Every week, I try to sow the seed of God's Word into hearts, but people don't usually change over night. Sometimes bad storms or pests destroy the plants before they bear fruit. But you keep sowing, trusting God to bring the increase of the harvest.

B. Christian work is tiring.

The Greek word that Paul uses for "hardworking" means to toil or strive so as to become weary and tired. He uses it to describe pastors who "work hard in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

He commends those in Rome who “worked hard” in the Lord (Rom. 16:6, 12). He often mentions his own labor or toil in the Lord’s work (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:4; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29-2:1; 1 Tim. 4:10). Much Christian work is mentally and emotionally draining. Even Jesus was so tired that He could fall asleep in a small boat in a fierce storm! Expect to be tired as part of the hardship of serving the Lord.

- C. The reward comes at the end of the age, not at the end of the meeting.

The harvest is at the end of the age. Often we will not know what God accomplished through our labors or our prayers or our gifts until we stand before Him. Then we will meet people who are in heaven because we sowed the seed through our words or our gifts or our good deeds. We will enjoy a harvest of eternal joy!

### Conclusion

After giving these three illustrations, Paul tells Timothy (2:7), “Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” Timothy had to engage his brain to think about the implications of Paul’s words, but if he gained any insight, it came from the Lord, who gives understanding in spiritual matters.

Perhaps we could add this as a fourth illustration—the hardship of the Christian scholar. To gain insight from God’s Word, you must apply yourself by carefully observing and thinking about what the text says. All the while that you’re laboring, you must ask God to give you understanding.

That is especially true in this difficult-to-apply text that we’ve been considering. None of us naturally is inclined to embrace hardship. But Paul directs us to look to the rewards in eternity. Jesus Christ will smile and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” That will make all the toil and hardship worth it! He will reward you eternally for your labors. You will enjoy the harvest of righteousness in the presence of the Lord and all His saints. But you must now set aside all distractions and the sin that so easily entangles you. Seek first His kingdom and righteousness as a good soldier, a disciplined athlete, and a hardworking farmer, even though it is difficult!

## Application Questions

1. Since it is so easy to drift into an easy, comfortable Christian life, how can we avoid it? What warning signs are there?
2. What other practical ramifications do the metaphors of soldier, athlete, and farmer bring to mind?
3. Some equate discipline with legalism. Is it? Can it become legalistic? How can we avoid this?
4. Since we often can't see visible results in ministry, how can we evaluate whether or not we're being effective?

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