

# The soldier, the athlete and the farmer

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[ 0 : 00 ] I wonder for many of you what metaphor you would be inclined to use if you were asked to describe the Christian life. What metaphor, what simile would seem to you most apt?

Maybe it would be a nice relaxing holiday on the beach. Gentle, pleasant, albeit with the occasional gust of wind that blows sand in your ice cream. And maybe one or two occasional grey clouds, but generally glorious sunshine and happiness.

Or maybe you'd say it's like working on an allotment. You can pass the time quite pleasantly and maybe you'll get a few treats along the way, something delicious to eat. And maybe you'll enjoy the company that you keep.

But your health and your well-being doesn't depend on the effectiveness of your allotment, does it? We all know most of your food is coming from Tesco, not those few square yards of earth.

We all know it's God who does the work. He lets us join in, but like a parent lets the two-year-old help with the gardening. You go do some digging over there where you won't do any harm.

[ 1 : 01 ] Maybe that is your perspective of what the Christian life is like. I don't know what metaphor you would be inclined to pick and why. But there are three for us in tonight's passage chosen by Paul the Apostle.

Timothy is called to be like a soldier, like an athlete, and like a farmer. And overall, the big message of how Paul here characterizes what Timothy's life should be like as a Christian, and perhaps especially his life as an elder in the church, as a minister of the gospel, overall the message is summed up in one word of what his Christian life should be like.

Suffer. That's what Paul tells Timothy to do. Suffer. That's the call of verse 3. Join with me in suffering, says Paul.

And he returns to it explicitly in verse 9 and following. And we'll be looking at that section next week, God willing. But I think that this theme of suffering is also the foundation of the verses that lie in between, and indeed impacts upon verses 1 and 2.

So the verses 1 to 7 that we look at tonight is against this backdrop of the theme of suffering. This foundation for these verses is this called suffer. The soldier, the athlete, the farmer, they all of them kind of stand against a backdrop of suffering.

[ 2 : 22 ] But before we get to those three, let's spend a couple of minutes on the first two verses. Verse 1, Paul calls Timothy to be strong. The opening, you then.

This builds on what's gone before in the preceding paragraph, the end of chapter 1. The negative example of Phygelus and Homogenes who abandoned Paul, and the positive example of Anaciphorus who went and sought him out.

Timothy is called to be strong, to stand firm like Anaciphorus, not tempted to turn away like everyone else. How will Timothy be strong?

Four quick points on this one. Firstly, this is a present tense verb. The call to be strong, this is present tense, this is now. Which in this case, the fact that it's present tense, this points to the fact that this is an ongoing strengthening.

This isn't a case of go and get filled up at the point of conversion, and maybe a top-up when Timothy was ordained, and then that's your lot. No, in an ongoing fashion, day by day, be strengthened.

[ 3 : 25 ] That's what Timothy needed, and that is what you and I need. Not an occasional top-up, but God's daily grace. Secondly, this verb is in what's called the passive voice.

Don't worry if you're struggling to remember your grammar lessons. The point is that at least on some level, this isn't something that Timothy can do for himself. Rather, he is dependent upon external strength.

Be strengthened, not strengthen yourself. Nevertheless, this is, thirdly, an imperative. It's a command. Timothy is not expected to be wholly passive, but rather he is called to go and to seek out this strengthening from outside.

And fourthly, this is not an abstract strength. This is not just the strength of his arms or the strength of his character. No, this strength is to be in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

In the grace, that's the literal translation. That's what the NIV goes for. The ESV has by the grace, which makes for more natural English. And this, I think, is one of the cases where the sense is probably both of these things.

[ 4 : 37 ] In what sphere, in what sense does Timothy need to be strengthened? In the grace of Christ Jesus. That is where he needs to be strong. He doesn't need to look elsewhere. He doesn't need to go and find something different.

He doesn't need to move beyond the gospel of grace. No, he needs to be strong in the grace of Christ Jesus. But we could equally ask, how will this come about?

Well, again, it will be by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. We aren't saved by the gospel of grace and then sanctified and strengthened and brought on by some other means.

No, we are strengthened in God's grace. We are strengthened by God's grace. Verse 2, then, seems perhaps somewhat disconnected.

Verse 2 comes with a call to pass on the faith. But I think this is still linked to this theme of suffering. Because remember, Paul's writing this letter to Timothy in the expectation that Paul will soon be put to death.

[ 5 : 35 ] That he will be executed for preaching the gospel. Suffering doesn't get much more extreme than that, does it? And I think it's this expectation of imminent death that's sharpened Paul's focus on the future in terms of making provision for continuity.

Timothy needs to be willing to suffer in order to continue the proclamation of the gospel that has taken over Paul's life. Because the gospel needs to continue long after Paul's death, long after Timothy's death, indeed.

Whether Timothy's is by execution too or at a ripe old age, still the gospel must continue. And therefore Timothy too needs to invest in the next generation just like Paul did.

And for this next generation, two criteria are given. Firstly, they must be reliable men. You can go back to 1 Timothy chapter 3 for a fuller description of what Paul means by being reliable.

The character of an elder in the church. And then second criterion, they must be able to teach others. Why? Well, because the gospel must go on and on and on.

[ 6 : 44 ] And perhaps that was the need back then. But if we think that this is no longer a present concern for us, well, hear these words from Calvin's commentary on this verse. Paul saw that the gospel would quickly perish if it were not soon scattered by the ministry of many persons.

And indeed, we see what Satan did not long after the death of the apostles. Calvin writing in typical style there, writing in the Reformation era, Calvin was all too aware of the possibility that the gospel gets corrupted.

Calvin looks and says that's exactly what happened. Timothy needed to guard the gospel to arrange for it to continue because Satan wants to stop it continuing.

And Satan, for many centuries, seemed to have succeeded. And it seems to me that it is happening again. As we look at the state of what passes for the church in so much of the Western world today, we see the gospel being corrupted.

And what do we do in response to that? Well, our response should be the same as Timothy's. We spread the true gospel as wide as we possibly can.

[ 8 : 10 ] We stand firm on what the apostles said. We're no more free to change it than Timothy was. We recognize that the church needs those who are dedicated to spending their time thinking deeply about these things in order that they may be able to pass on the fullness of that which has been revealed in order that we may refute those who might proclaim another so-called gospel.

The need today is the same as it was in Timothy's day. We need reliable men who will be able to teach others to continue this line of proclamation. And that brings us on to these three characters. To the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. And of course, this isn't three different options. This isn't a case of, well, which one of these three would you like to be? Which role will you choose to adopt in the Christian life?

No, Timothy is expected to learn the lessons of each of these and apply them to his own Christian life. The three all contribute to the call to suffer with which verse 3 begins.

And by the way, Hebrews 13:23 refers to Timothy having been released from prison, which strongly suggests that Timothy did indeed suffer imprisonment sometime after receiving this letter.

[9:20] This call for Timothy to suffer, this is not a theoretical thing. This is a very real possibility. And so the call to suffer is fleshed out here in the image of the soldier.

Perhaps in that sense that soldiers on active service, well, they don't expect an easy time of things, do they? Hardship, risk, and suffering are par for the course.

Sleeping in a tent, not a comfortable bed, that's just the beginning of the suffering, the hardship of being a soldier in constant danger. Go read an account sometime of the conditions in the trenches of World War I.

But the suffering is a serious thing. The call to be a soldier is inherently a call to suffer. But especially here, Paul is drawing attention to one particular aspect of the suffering of the soldier, which is that of a sense of single-minded focus.

The soldier can't afford to be distracted. He can't focus on the task in front of him if he's involved in 400 other things. Now, this verse, this charge, has sometimes been misunderstood.

[10:29] It has, for instance, been used to argue that ministers of the gospel shouldn't be married because they're becoming involved in the affairs of this world. Or to argue that it would never be right for someone to be employed in another profession at the same time as being the minister of a church.

Now, that latter clearly cannot be Paul's intent. Otherwise, his own ministry falls by his own standard. Part of the confusion here as to why this verse has been misunderstood, part of this is a matter of translation.

If you read the older NIV, you'll find this rendered as no one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs. Rather, he wants to please his commanding officer. But the ESV, the new NIV that we use here at church as well, and most more recent translations, they use instead entangled. Not just involved, but entangled. The call is to avoid being entangled in civilian affairs, which is a much more helpful translation. Commentators are largely agreed. The issue here isn't that there's a problem with having anything else in your life.

The issue is with entanglements. And probably this is principally focused on things that are perfectly innocent in themselves, but which are yet a distraction from fighting in Christ's battles that make it more difficult to have the focus that a soldier requires.

[11:52] Now, given Paul's comments elsewhere on marriage and singleness, I'm sure he would say it is possible for a Christian to be distracted, to be entangled by a marriage.

But for every minister who's rendered less effective by his wife, there are, I suggest, many, many more whose ministry effectiveness is multiplied many times over by a wise and godly helper. So should the minister consider whether a prospective wife would be a distraction or an advantage? Absolutely. And depending on the order of events, one might also say that the married man considering ministry would do well to ask, has the wife that God has already given me, will she be a benefit to this or not?

And if the latter, then perhaps to have the humility to recognize that this strongly suggests he is not, in fact, called to ministry in that form that he might first have thought. Similarly, not an out-and-out rejection of other employment, but a desire to avoid, whenever possible, the need to do so, and certainly the wisdom of considering which other employment will avoid being entangling.

So I think the first application of this passage today is perhaps two pastors walking along in Timothy's footsteps. But I think there are clear implications for other believers as well.

[13:14] Firstly, church members might well do well to consider how they can guard their minister and other elders against entanglements. That just as the apostles in Acts 6 appointed deacons, so that they could devote themselves to the ministry of the word and to prayer, so too the church of today does well to guard its officers against entanglements.

But secondly, and probably more importantly, ministers and other ordained officers in the church are not the only people in the church who are called to ministry. As John Stott says, every Christian is to some degree a soldier of Christ.

Every Christian is called to this path of suffering that Timothy is called to. Every Christian is called to consider how it is that they might avoid unnecessary entanglements so as to maximize their

focus on Christ's work.

So the sporting endeavors that you're drawn towards, the amateur dramatics, whatever other hobby, or the demanding employer for that matter, will committing yourself to these things enable you to better serve Christ or not?

These things might open up profitable avenues of service. These might be places to speak winsomely of your Savior. We're not saying do not get involved.

[ 14 : 35 ] We've been thinking about some of this in our recent Connect Group series as well, thinking about how our front line is an opportunity, not necessarily a distraction. But we also recognize the possibility that these things can be distracting entanglements, that they can draw us away from a focus on Christ's service.

Why does this matter? Well, because just as a soldier's desire is to please his commanding officer, so too our desire is to serve our own commanding officer.

This love so amazing, this love so divine, it demands my soul, my life, my all.

A single-minded focus in the manner of the soldier. Secondly, verse 5, we come to the athlete.

Now, this metaphor of the Christian life as a race, it's not an unusual one.

It comes up several times in the course of the New Testament. It never comes up with the sense that Christians are competing against one another. The closest we get to that is Romans 12. Paul exhorts the Romans to outdo one another in showing honor.

[ 15 : 50 ] That's about the only way that we're meant to compete against one another. Who can be the most humble? Who can be the best at putting others before themselves? But more often, this racing metaphor is used to focus on things like the strenuous training that's required, that's 1 Corinthians 9, or the need to lay aside hindrances, Hebrews 12, and so on and so forth.

Here, the focus of this athletic metaphor is on keeping the rules. The athlete is not entitled to the prize if he doesn't follow the rules. Lance Armstrong, he fooled people for quite a while, perhaps, but he was stripped of his titles when his use of those performance-enhancing drugs came to light in 99, and he's since admitted that he was indeed guilty.

Investigation concluded he was the ringleader of the most sophisticated, professionalized, and successful doping program that sport has ever seen. He was not competing according to the rules, and so he lost those trophies.

He didn't compete by the rules, and so he lost the trophies. And when we're talking about a race that is run with God as the referee, then there's not the slightest possibility of pulling the wool over his eyes.

So then perhaps we should ask, what are the rules in question by which we are called to compete? John Stott is again very helpful here. He says, The Christian is under obligation to live lawfully, to keep the rules, to obey God's moral laws.

[ 17 : 21 ] True, we as believers are not under law as a way of salvation. This is not to commend us to God, but rather these things act as a guide to conduct.

In fact, far from abolishing his law, God first sent his son to die for us in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, and now he sends his spirit to live in us and to write his law in our hearts, not to ignore his law, but to have it written within us.

Romans chapter 8 verse 3 and Jeremiah 31. And furthermore, there is no crown otherwise. Not because our law abiding justifies us, but because without that law abiding, we give evidence that we never have been justified.

To compete lawfully, therefore, requires moral conduct, to show, to demonstrate our love of God, that we have indeed been washed and cleansed.

So it requires moral conduct, but competing according to the rules of the race is, I think, also broader than that, not just a question of morality. Consider the call of 1 Corinthians 3, a call for the Christian teacher to build with solid materials on the foundation of Christ in order that his work might endure and not be burned up.

[ 18 : 48 ] That is another of the rules. Or consider the context of this passage, which says to us that one of the rules of the Christian life is suffering, that this is part of what we expect in the normal course of things, that those who follow Christ will suffer.

Paul says in Romans 8, 17, we shall be glorified with Christ if we suffer with him. Glory is the goal, is the crown of life, but suffering is one of the rules of life in this age that is hostile to the gospel.

And so quickly, Paul moves on to the farmer. And here with the farmer, his focus seems to be on the farmer's hard work and the need for the sweat of one's brow, perhaps more obvious before the advent of mechanization and tractors and milking machines and so on.

But I think you would be hard-pressed to argue that farmers, even in this country, in this day and age, are anything other than very hard-working on the whole. The early start to the morning would be enough to put plenty of us off, I'm sure, never mind anything else.

So the metaphor, I think, is still valid. But what point is Paul making with it? Well, I think it's quite straightforward. He's saying the Christian life is hard work.

[ 20 : 12 ] It requires sweat, if not physically, then mentally and emotionally. And this applies first in the arena of our holiness. Holiness does not come about overnight.

Growth in godliness is never the result of laziness, but always requires that we be engaged, putting in some effort. The bumper crop of wheat doesn't come about because the farmer lay in bed wishing for it.

The cows do not milk themselves. J.C. Ryle, in his excellent book entitled Holiness, he says, I will never shrink from declaring my belief that there are no spiritual gains without pains.

I should as soon expect a farmer to prosper in business who contented himself with sowing his fields and never looking at them till harvest, as expect a believer to attain much holiness who was not diligent about his Bible reading, his prayers, and the use of his Sundays.

Our God is a God who works by means, and he will never bless the soul of that man who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without those means.

[ 21 : 23 ] I don't know whether Ryle was saying no gain without pain before it was cool or whether it was already in use as a concept for physical training by then, but he's certainly absolutely right that it applies in our spiritual lives just as much as our physical lives.

It may well require considerable effort to be able to spend time devoted to your increasing holiness, and it may require creativity to find that time as well.

But Ryle is right that God works by means and doesn't bless those who think that they can get by without such means. Therefore, the analogy of the hardworking farmer can be applied to our growth in personal holiness.

Given that Paul's writing to Timothy in his role as proclaimer of the gospel, I suggest that this image can also be profitably applied to the saving of souls because this too is a harvest, and this too requires effort.

Now, of course, for a moment, we don't for a moment wish to downplay the work of the Holy Spirit. We're not denying God's sovereign right to do as he pleases in drawing people to himself. But again, God works by means.

[ 22 : 40 ] And again, in most cases, those means involve his people in considerable effort. We shouldn't imagine that souls will be won by some kind of slick, automatic application of a formula, but rather it will most likely require the sweat of our brows.

This is true in our disciplined prayers for others. This is true in our sacrificial personal relationships. That if we want to see others won for Christ, we most likely need to be willing to be there for them when they need it most, even when that is inconvenient for us.

We most likely need to be willing to sacrifice our own comfort, even perhaps our own health, for the good of others. Now, Paul was ready to recognize the hard work of other people.

Several times in the closing greetings of his letters, he commends people for their efforts, for their hard work in the gospel. And he's not calling other people to something that he was unwilling to do himself.

He writes in 1 Corinthians 15, by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

[ 23 : 59 ] So Paul intertwines the idea of God's grace with his own efforts. He commended in his first letter to Timothy, commended those elders who labor in preaching and teaching.

Paul commends effort in the Christian life. And I hardly need to point out, I hope, that the harvest in this sense is no more the preserve of ministers and elders alone than is the harvest of holiness.

Folks, if you want to see your family and your friends coming to know your Lord and your Savior, then that will most likely require hard work and disciplined effort on your part.

the hard-working farmer does not get a crop without that hard work. Now, Paul is not done with the theme of suffering, and it continues into the rest of the chapter, indeed the rest of the letter.

But if Timothy is going to stand firm in the face of suffering, then Timothy needs to carefully consider these things. And so Paul pauses in verse 7 to exhort him to that end.

[ 25 : 05 ] A few brief things from this one simple sentence.

Firstly, it is what Paul is saying that is at issue. It is what Paul is writing to Timothy that he says should be reflected upon. Paul's conscious that as an apostle, which he reminded Timothy of at the start of the letter, as an apostle, Paul has the right to say what is true and what is not.

It doesn't do Timothy any good to reflect on the words of just anyone. No, Timothy needs to reflect on what Paul says, because Paul is the one who is conveying this apostolic gospel that Timothy is then called to pass on.

For you and for me, this means that the primary focus of our reflection needs to be on what God has said to us. What God has said as recorded in his word.

Because here we have the words of the prophets of old. Here we have the revelation of God's deeds throughout history. Here we have the gospel narratives of Jesus' life. Here we have God's truth as it was clarified and declared by the apostles.

[ 26 : 17 ] Here is where we need to reflect. The thoughts of others are useful only insofar as they equip and enable and encourage us to reflect on these things.

Secondly, this is a call to reflect. A call to consider. A call to think over. This doesn't mean kind of reflect in the sense of look back on. This isn't the, oh yes, that was fun.

This isn't that kind of reflection that you feel when your phone or when Facebook pops up and says here's what you were doing last year. This isn't just looking back and reminiscing. It's not that kind of reflecting. But rather, as my dictionary puts it, this is to grasp or comprehend something on the basis of careful thought to perceive, to apprehend, to understand or gain an insight into.

This is reflecting in the sense of carefully considering, of seeking insight and understanding. The call to live a holy life requires effort like that hard-working farmer.

And this call here to understand what God is saying requires effort, requires serious consideration and study. Devotional booklets, you know, like Every Day with Jesus and so on, these absolutely have their place.

[ 27 : 41 ] But what I want to invite you to consider, if that is the full extent of your engagement, what I invite you to consider is whether you are really being serious about reflecting on what God is saying.

Because this is a call to grapple with God's Word, not a call to expect to be spoon-fed by a booklet or spoon-fed by a preacher for that matter. So will you continue to ponder and to consider what God says to you in His Word day by day?

Will you continue to ponder and consider what you have heard from God's Word today over the coming days? And I know this is a danger for me.

I mean, there is an extent to which I kind of have to go and reflect on God's Word. I hope it's apparent to you that I have done so in order to come and preach this sermon and indeed this morning's.

But what I'm aware of is that it is all too common that my reflection on God's Word is limited to those passages that I'm considering for the benefit of other people. But I need to remember to reflect on God's Word when I am reading it for my own profit, not to let those times be a time when I skip lightly across the surface and fail to engage my mind and think about what God is saying to me.

[ 29 : 03 ] So verse 7 is a call to reflect on the words of the apostles and by extension the rest of God's Word. This is a significant charge. So it's a command but that's not all.

Verse 7 is also a promise. Verse 7 has a reassurance for us. Verse 7 shows us that God will give us insight. That's the third thing we need to notice here.

It's good. It's good to compare translations. It's good to go and read concordances and commentaries. It's good to listen to erudite sermons. It's good to grapple with the text and to churn it over in your mind.

This is exactly what this verse is inviting us to do. But let's be clear it is still the Lord who grants understanding and as a gift of his grace.

Now what that means is that the learned doctor ought not to despise the insight of the uneducated ploughman or the young child for that matter because the Spirit grants insight as he sees fit and he may choose to grant it through unlikely means perhaps not least to teach humility to those in danger of feeling pride in their exalted learning.

[ 30 : 17 ] Nevertheless the normal means of that insight is granted by the use of means. The insight comes through the process of careful reflection. Proverbs 2.6 The Lord gives wisdom from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

It's worth putting in the time and effort to consider carefully. Why? It's worth putting in the time because the Lord here promises to grant insight.

This is how you will be equipped to be ready to suffer. This is how you will be enabled to compete according to the rules because they're embedded so deep into your heart by this careful consideration of his word.

This is how you will be able to focus wholeheartedly on the cause of Christ even as you suffer as a soldier in his service. These verses call us to suffer and they equip us to be ready for it.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for your gracious word to us. Thank you for the encouragements for us this evening.

[ 31 : 29 ] Thank you for the reassurance that you give us. Thank you that it is you who grants us insight. Thank you that it is your grace in which we need to be strengthened.

Lord, help us to consider these things. Help us to trust these promises. But Lord, may we not trust them in a way that pulls us away from that sense of effort, that sense of commitment, that desire to serve you, to put in the hard work, to be found as useful laborers in your vineyard, profitable soldiers in your course.

Equip us, we pray. Amen.