

The unstoppable word

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, since at the moment we're not having a separate evening service, just the one service on the Sunday, I thought we'd pick up this morning on the series we've been going through in our evening services, where we're looking at Paul's second letter to Timothy that we read just then.

Do have that open in front of you if you can. Don't worry if you haven't heard the previous parts of this series. There are only three parts so far, so you can go catch up on the website if you like, or equally I'm sure that this will work just fine as a standalone to listen to.

Paul's general theme here in the first part of chapter 2, his general theme is that followers of Jesus should expect to suffer. And we looked a couple of weeks ago at the illustrations of that from the soldier and the athlete and the farmer that are there in verses 1 to 7.

Now in verses 8 to 13, that call to suffer, the call to endure hardship, that call is underwritten by looking at three different people or groups of people.

So first in verse 8, Paul calls us to look to Jesus. Then verses 9 and 10, Paul points to himself. And then at the end, he talks about what's generally true of all believers, and particularly in terms of suffering.

[1 : 15] That's the first line of verse 12. If we endure, we will also reign with Jesus. Now, I should be clear at the outset that the pandemic that dominates our thoughts at the moment, this is not really the kind of suffering that Paul is particularly talking about in these verses.

Because Paul is thinking about suffering that comes as a consequence of faith. He's talking about persecution as a result of going and proclaiming the gospel.

He's calling Timothy particularly to be willing to suffer for his faith, not just to bear up under the ordinary ups and downs of life. That's the context that Paul's writing in.

But as we consider these examples, I think we do still see ways in which the lessons that we learn can be applied to our present circumstances, different as this situation is to anything that Paul imagined back then.

We're going to actually save the closing verses of what we've just read for another time. Today, we'll consider what Paul writes about Jesus and what Paul writes about himself. So we're looking just at verses 8 to 10, really, this morning.

[2 : 26] So first heading, Paul calls Timothy to remember Jesus Christ. Heading one, remember Jesus Christ. Now, this might perhaps seem like a really strange exhortation, a really strange thing to call Timothy to do, because after all, Timothy is Paul's trusted lieutenant.

He's the global troubleshooter. He's been sent to Ephesus to deal with the false teachers. Timothy is a safe pair of hands. Paul depends upon him. So surely Timothy is in no danger of forgetting Jesus.

And yet Paul calls him to remember. And the reality is that for Christian teachers, then as now, there is no guarantee. There is no guarantee that we remember even this most crucial thing.

Not out of malice, not out of a desire necessarily to preach another gospel, but because we forget. Something else gradually shifts to become central in our thinking.

A peripheral matter becomes all-consuming, moves to be front and centre. And the pages of Scripture, too, are full of examples of those who forgot God, and who did so sometimes when we would least expect it.

[3 : 42] Psalm 106 points out just how very quickly after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, just how quickly afterwards the Israelites forgot what God had done, and put God to the test in the wilderness.

And as we look at the history of the church, we can see how often those who should have known better have forgotten Jesus Christ and have absorbed themselves in dry theological debate, or even in humanitarian activity disconnected from God and his power, or become consumed in petty internal business.

The church is perfectly capable of forgetting Jesus, even as we begin each of our meetings with his name on our lips. Yet we can then quickly move on from that into the business of the day.

Christian teachers forget. God's Old Testament people forgot. The church forgets. We, all of us, as individuals, are in danger of forgetting. Scientific studies will tell you that we don't remember things half as well as we think that we remember them.

That when we recall past events, we're filling in the blanks as we go along and fooling ourselves that we remember it accurately. We are a forgetful people. And so it's no surprise that we, all of us, need to hear this reminder to Timothy to remember Jesus Christ.

[5 : 06] This is particularly true, I think, when we are in difficult times. As we considered last week, we're tempted to focus on the problem in front of us.

But we need to hear the call that we considered last week from Psalm 11 to look up and to see God enthroned in heaven. And the week before, Psalm 10 reminded us that we can sometimes be practical atheists.

That we remember God when we're prompted and we pay lip service and we pause from time to time and think and remember him. And maybe at the start of each day, maybe we sit and we consider God and what he's done.

But then we forget him entirely for all practical purposes. We dismiss his impact on our lives. We need to hear this call to remember Jesus Christ, not only in an abstract, theoretical way, but in a way that drives our behavior day by day.

So, we need this call to remember. We should ask then what specifically it is that Timothy is being called to remember about Jesus. And maybe we'd think Paul would say, remember all that Jesus suffered.

[6 : 17] I mean, that's his big theme here, the suffering of Jesus. Nevertheless, that isn't actually where Paul focuses.

Now, we should remember that Jesus endured the agony of the cross on your behalf. Never mind the various struggles of his life leading up to that point. Jesus' own experience reminds us that death is the gateway to life.

And that suffering marks the path to glory. It may well be that Timothy should be reminded of that. As John Stott puts it, when you're tempted to avoid pain, humiliation, suffering or death in your ministry, remember Jesus Christ and think again.

All of that is true. And of course, we should remember that. But I don't think it's quite where Paul is focused just now. Because he says, remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

First, Paul wants Timothy to remember Jesus as the one who was raised from the dead. For Paul, Christ's resurrection is always central. To the Corinthians, he writes, If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins.

[7 : 30] To the Romans, he says, The gospel is about God's son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the spirit of holiness was appointed the son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees and authenticates every other aspect of Christ's work. Everything hinges on the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection shows he really is God's son. The resurrection shows that our sins really are dealt with. And as we'll come to when we turn to verse 11 on a future date, the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of our own resurrection as believers united to our saviour.

The resurrection for Paul is central to his understanding of the gospel. And for us, if we wish to have the resilience to face suffering for the sake of the gospel, then we need the confidence that comes from seeing Jesus risen from the dead, proving that our sins are dealt with, proving that we will one day live with him in the new creation.

In whatever circumstances we face, we look up and see him there, who made an end of all my sin, as we'll sing in a few minutes' time. We have hope for tomorrow.

[8 : 57] We have hope for today. Because of the historical reality of Jesus' death. So we remember Jesus raised from the dead. Secondly, Paul wants Timothy to remember that Jesus is descended

from David.

Now that implies two things. First, it implies that he really is the promised Messiah. He was and is the one who sits eternally on the throne of David by right as David's descendant.

And so God's covenant with David, the promises that God made to David so many years before, are fulfilled when Jesus comes. Secondly, if Jesus is the true son of David, that also implies his true humanity, that he really is an honest-to-goodness human being.

There might be an extent to which raised from the dead points to Jesus' divinity, and then descended from David points to his humanity. Both of these things are vital to our faith.

In his previous letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, In order to be a suitable mediator, in order to be a fitting sacrifice on our behalf, Jesus had to be truly one of us.

[10:17] And wonderfully, this reminds us that we have a saviour who lived a human life on this earth, with all of its pressures and struggles, who knows and understands our humanity, who knows the pressures that we're under as we seek to live a Christian life in today's world, who knows what it is to go through, the things that you and I go through each and every day.

Hebrews 4 reminds us, We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.

Friends, we believe in Jesus, who was born, who lived, who suffered, who died, and who was raised on the third day, who ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty, and who will come again to judge the living and the dead.

We must remember Jesus Christ. Now, having pointed to Jesus, secondly, Paul points to himself. And so if you like your second heading, remember Paul. The gospel summary in verse 8 is Paul's gospel. This is what he believes, and this is what he lives out.

[11:35] So Paul points to his own willingness to suffer. He says in verse 10, that he endures everything for the sake of the elect. And when he says that, the sense isn't that he's been forced into this, that he's been pushed into this situation where he's suffering, or been taken by surprise as events have unfolded.

Now, the idea isn't that he grudges his suffering, acute though it is, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. No, the point is that he counts his suffering as a small price to pay.

Why? For the sake of the elect. That they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. Now, Paul is not saying that his sufferings have a redemptive effect like Christ's suffering.

Paul cannot pay for anyone else's sins. Rather, the point is that the means by which God saves the elect, the process by which he brings people to faith, the method of God calling those whom he has chosen, that that method is preaching, is the proclamation of the word, is the declaration of the good news of the gospel.

That's how he principally draws people to faith. And Paul recognizes that, certainly in his environment, that one cannot expect to be about that work without courting suffering.

[13:03] So, Paul's suffering is a direct result of his preaching. And therefore, he counts it as a privilege to suffer because he desires that others may obtain the salvation that he himself has found.

He may be paying a significant price, but it is abundantly worthwhile given the pricelessness of the treasure that he has won for others.

In chapter 4, Paul's going to reassure Timothy that though no one came to support him at his trial, yet still the message of the gospel was fully proclaimed so that all the Gentiles might hear it.

Paul's sufferings are for the good of others. And therefore, whilst Paul is in chains, verse 9, God's word is not. Now, this to me, this is the greatest encouragement of these verses.

God's word is not chained. God's word is unstoppable. Nothing can prevent the good news from being proclaimed. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.

[14:12] Nothing can stand in God's way. The might of imperial Rome. It cannot prevent Paul from proclaiming the gospel.

Even as he stands on trial for preaching the gospel, in that very context, he preaches it again. And it may well have looked to Timothy and to other loyal supporters of Paul, it may well have looked like his imprisonment was a catastrophe.

How will the proclamation of God's word continue if the apostle to the Gentiles is in chains? But Paul says the reality is the exact opposite.

The word is not chained. The state authorities might silence Christ's messenger, but the word of God cannot be silenced because it is the living and abiding word of God.

And the same is true today. The same reality is true when the Chinese government imprisons church leaders. It is true when militant forces behead Christians.

[15 : 16] It's true when our own police force prevent preaching on the streets of London. And on another day, maybe we would focus our attention there on that kind of attempts to chain the word of God.

But that's not our primary situation right now, is it? The government, even as it urges churches to close, it is not doing so out of a desire to prevent the proclamation of the gospel, but rather in accordance with the government's duty to seek to preserve life.

But still there is a parallel here because we're in a situation where it looks at first instance like God's word is chained, doesn't it? It looks like preachers are muzzled, that we're not free to hold services. We can't go and run a quiz night and invite people to come and hear God's word. We can't invite people to come to a course and enjoy a meal with us and learn about the Christian faith.

We can't do many of the things that we as a church might normally wish to be doing. It looks like the gospel is hindered. It looks like God's word has been chained.

[16 : 23] But once again, the reality is anything but. God's word is unstoppable. It might be that right now people are listening to this on Facebook who would never have considered coming into the Morton Hall on a Sunday morning.

And if that's you, well, I'm thrilled that you have this opportunity to connect with us, to start to think just a little bit about these things. All of us.

Folks, the might of imperial Rome cannot prevent the spread of God's word, nor can latter-day persecuting states, and nor can a virus. Doug Milne says the work will continue because it depends on God, who is always at work through his word as the power of his salvation.

The gospel not only finds its way into prison cells, but also penetrates into the far deeper dungeon of the human heart, so as to throw it wide open and let God's light stream in.

Folks, we may not be able to do what we normally would as a church. But we are not without opportunities. We have new and different opportunities.

[17 : 35] And that isn't just in terms of what we do together. That's not just about me standing here recording videos in my study. It's not just the times when we come together, is it?

There's new opportunities for good news for each of us as individuals. There's different ways that we can both proclaim and demonstrate God's word, that we can show people the good news of the gospel.

Folks, we can and we should connect in with the coronavirus support groups on Facebook in both Darville and in emails and be offering whatever help we can, whether that's food shopping or being willing to pick up the phone and speak to the lonely and the troubles.

We can contact our neighbours and check whether they're in isolation and needing support and either give that support if we can or put them in touch with others if we aren't able to be that practical help ourselves.

And maybe you don't have phone numbers for your neighbours and depending on your situation, it may or may not be wise to be out popping cards through letterboxes.

[18 : 41] But at least some of your neighbours are probably in the phone book. Get in touch and see how they're doing. Maybe this is the time when you move from being people who smile at one another as you hand over a package that's been delivered to you for safekeeping or as you notice one another as you each get into your cars and drive in opposite directions.

Maybe this is the time when you move from that to being people who are friends with one another, who have dinner together once all this is over, people who have conversations about the big questions of life.

Friends, there are opportunities in these days. The Word of God is not chained. The Word of God is unstoppable.

So if the Word of God is active in your life, then please, please think about how you could proclaim and advance the Gospel in these days. Because I'm concerned that we need to be thinking not only about surviving, but about doing good.

About moving forwards and making progress even in these troubling days. Because, not at risk of being depressing, because I don't think this is going to be a short-lived thing.

[19 : 56] If we just survive until it's over, we'll be doing that for too long. We must be thinking about doing good, not just about treading water.

Now, folks, when we say let's be about doing good, let's be honest that suffering could come as a result of that. When you make the extra trip to the supermarket in order to take shopping to your neighbour, well, yeah, you will increase the risk to yourself.

But as Paul is making clear in this part of the letter, suffering is a normal, even inevitable part of the Christian life. So do not fear it, but approach it with the confidence that comes from remembering Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

because this is Paul's gospel, this is my gospel, and I pray that it is your gospel. Let's pray. Lord God, thank you that your word addresses every situation in which we find ourselves.

That as we consider what you have said, we see insights and applications for our own days. Lord, as we are perhaps tempted to hunker down and avoid the possibility of suffering at all costs, Lord, give us a greater desire to seek the good of our friends and our neighbours.

[21 : 38] Give us that willingness to step out, to reach out, to make connections even as we are physically distant because we have such confidence in the word that you have given us.

We have such confidence in this gospel that we proclaim, that we know Jesus, raised from the dead and descended from David. We know him.

And so, Lord, give us confidence to proclaim him in every situation, whatever may come. Amen.