

Soldier On

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[0 : 00] This morning is taken from Nehemiah chapter 2, very short, verses 17 and 18. Nehemiah chapter 2, verses 17 and 18.

Now all of these readings, as you will know, are fitting within the context of becoming like Christ. The subject this morning is slightly different, but it's connected.

So Nehemiah chapter 2, verses 17 and 18. Now hear God's word. Chapter 2, verses 17 and 18.

Then I'll pray for the children, because I almost forgot there's Sunday school today. Just completely, I don't, you know, so I'll do this reading, then I'll pray for the children as you go out to Sunday school.

Then I said to them, you see the trouble we are in? How Jerusalem lies in ruins and with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.

[1 : 02] And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Well, let me pray for the children as they go out. Father God, we thank you for the hands that serve in Sunday school and serve these children so well.

We ask, Father God, that each one would come to Christ and know Christ, and that, Father God, you would bless and keep them this day in Sunday school. May you be with them all, and the teachers especially, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Timothy, chapter 2, verse 4. Now, I'm going to read this one verse, but I'm going to be relating to, I'm going to read a couple of verses from this.

I'm going to be relating to other passages within Scripture as well. But this is sort of the main focus for us this morning. So 2 Timothy 2, chapter 2, verse 4.

[2 : 13] No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules, it is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of crops.

Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. Well, let me pray for us. Father God, we would ask of you this morning that you would enlighten our mind, change our heart, set our vision higher, fill our imaginations with your word, so that we can imagine and we can taste and see that you are good.

And also, Father God, may those imaginations, and shaped by your word, shape our life for you down here. We ask you to help us now as we come to your word humbly and cause us to live the life that you have given to us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is part five, and there's only one more part, which is part six, which is the service after this.

In this part, it's almost a slight deviation from the main idea of sanctification, whereas the next part, we sort of go back into it to finish it off.

[3 : 42] But I want to begin by highlighting where we have been with the three tenses of salvation, what we saw in part four. The three tenses of salvation is that you have been saved, you are being saved, and you will be saved.

It's really important that as a Christian, you understand and appreciate these things because this is what it means to understand and appreciate the work of God in your life. God has saved you, God is saving you, and God will save you.

So firstly, you have been saved speaks to your justification. It means that you are now free from the penalty of sin. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, none whatsoever.

You've got to be definitively clear. You've got to be as definitive as the statement is definitive, that on the cross, Christ Jesus took the penalty for sin for you, the wages of sin is death, Jesus died, and he died for you to remove that penalty from you, to remove the judgment of God from you.

Secondly, and this is really important, but often overlooked, because we tend to go from the cross to the second coming, without the middle part of a Christian life, you are being saved.

[4 : 58] And this speaks to our sanctification. sanctification. You are definitively sanctified, which means that Christ has set you free from the power of sin. You no longer have to obey sin.

It's your master. You are now free to obey Christ, because you are no longer bound to obey sin. Therefore, we can get a little impatient with ourselves when we're sinning, because we know that we don't have to.

And we can also become impatient with Christian discipleship, because people who are continuing in sin, be careful, be careful, because you might just give your life enough evidence to demonstrate to yourself that you don't really belong to Christ.

This is how God causes us to measure our Christian life. That one of the ways we see the work of God in our lives is in the life of sanctification. That the power that we have to say no to sin.

Now, because of glorification being in the future, you will be saved. We are reminded that we'll never be free from the presence of sin. So the sin that causes you all the problems now is the presence.

[6 : 11] The presence of sin. It could be a thought. It could be words. It could be deeds. It could be in your flesh in terms of desires. You don't have to obey them anymore, because sanctification means that you have been set free from the power of sin.

But no Christian as yet has been set free from the presence of sin. We still live within a sinful world. We still live within the flesh. We still live with sinful thoughts, ideas, and what have you.

And that presence is still able to influence. And sometimes it gets the better of you. And sometimes it wins.

But it doesn't ultimately win, of course, because the victory belongs to Christ. So I want you to appreciate the three tenses of salvation, because by understanding them, excuses will disappear very, very quickly.

You'll be able to interpret your feelings much better than you did before. Well, you know, no longer will you say, well, it feels right.

[7 : 14] Well, of course it feels right, because your flesh wants to lead you away from God. Romans 12, chapter 1, verses 2, you are not allowed your bodies to dictate to you who you are or what you are to be.

You are to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. But too often, what we can often see is that bodies, desires, the flesh, can dictate who you are and what you do next.

So these are the three tenses of salvation. We have not yet entered into the glorification. We have not yet been glorified. We know that Christ had a body, and we have some idea of what that resurrection body looks like.

It's able to sit down on a beach. It's able to sit next to a fire. It's able to eat fish. It's able to do a lot of things. That's what a resurrected, glorified body looks like.

So if you're thinking about, what's it going to be like in the new heavens and the new earth? Well, you're going to have a body that looks very much like Jesus' resurrection body. It's going to be real, tangible.

[8 : 18] C.S. Lewis once said that you've got to understand that heaven is more real than earth. It's more tangible. It's not ethereal, floaty, and dreamy. It's real.

Everything's created by the word. This is the word of God. You may not understand it in those ways, but in Christ all things are held together. So when you get to build a picture of just exactly what God has done and is doing, suddenly your appreciation increases.

However, not everything in life is sinful that can lead us away from God. And this is what we read in 2 Timothy 2, verse 4, that no soldier gets engaged in civilian pursuits.

The pursuits themselves are not wrong, but they are wrong for a soldier. They're fine for a civilian, but they're not fine for a soldier. And so what Paul is explaining to Timothy is, look, there are legitimate pursuits within life that can keep you back from doing what God has called you to do because you have not yet identified who you are.

You're a soldier. You're no longer a civilian. Now, in Hebrews, it speaks about how we can become entangled in every weight and sin, holding us back from running the race.

[9 : 35] And we are to let it go. We are to give it over so that we are not to hold on to the sin that clings so closely. So there are certain things within the Christian life that can hold you back from following Christ.

Some of them are perfectly legitimate, but they're just not legitimate for you because you're not a civilian anymore. You're a soldier, to use the picture that Paul gives us. And secondly, there are sins that are really sins that can hold you back from following Christ in the way that you should.

So Paul makes it abundantly clear here, no soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits if his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. If my aim is to please God, then I'm not going to pursue something that God has not called me to pursue.

I'll give you it in a slightly different way. Imagine that a job has come up that you have wanted for a very long time. And the employer, the boss of the company, says, I want you to work for me.

And you get so excited that you have been drafted, that you have been brought in to work for this company. But the moment you start, you begin to realize that there are other things in the company that you enjoy doing, such as, for instance, they allow you to have flexi time.

[10 : 56] And the amount of flexi time you have as you go off and doing your own thing, and suddenly you've got your job, but all these other things are now taking you away from the job that you have been given.

I'm absolutely convinced the reason why the Lord called me to Scotland rather than Cornwall or anywhere else that was close by the sea is because I would spend too much time in the sea.

He knows my weaknesses. I know ministers who live very close to the sea, and the constant complaint of the congregation is they're forever surfing. Personally, I don't think that's a complaint.

I could, God forgives. I could put up with it for at least a few years. But you can imagine, so there are certain things that God, so I always pray, Lord, lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from the evil one.

I don't know what my temptations are, but it could be a certain job that I want but would be no good for me. Okay? It could be a certain job that, it could be living in a certain area that I would love to live, but it would be no good for me because though I'd love to live there and though I'd love to do that, it would lead me straight in the path of temptation.

[12:08] So if I'm praying, Lord, lead me not into temptation, I cannot then get angry with God for not giving me some of the things that I desire because it is counterproductive.

I'm praying for God to take them away from me and then I'm complaining at God for not giving them to me. You see the problem? This tends to describe much of the Christian's life.

We want things, but then we also want God not to lead us into temptation. And because we don't know what those things are, we wonder why certain things don't turn up in our lives when they should or when we expect them to.

Okay? I don't get it sometimes why some pastors just, you know, imagine some pastors literally having a beachside mission.

Can you imagine that? Now for some, that wouldn't be a temptation, but I know for me it would. I know for me it would. I'd be, let's sing psalms down on the beach. Let's have our service down here every week.

[13:09] And, you know, it would just, and this is the way life goes. None of that is sinful. But I start to engage myself in things that are no good.

This is why I struggle so much with holidays. I have a week's holiday. I'm still in the routine of ministry. I have two weeks holiday. It takes me two months to get back into a churchy routine.

And this is just, I know that way, I don't have hobbies. My only hobbies outside of the church is reading about the church. Right? Because if I start playing golf or if I start swimming or if I start something, I know it'll get the better of me.

I know it'll get the better of me. Does it mean that you always succeed in areas where you can eat so easily fail?

No. And this is what Paul is saying. Everything that takes you away from Christ is sinful. It could be perfectly legitimate. It's just no longer legitimate for you. Now, Paul is writing to Timothy, who's a young man in the ministry, but the same applies to believer and unbeliever.

[14:15] There are some things that unbelievers can pursue in life and get engaged in and do and enjoy that are just no longer available for you or they shouldn't be because they'll take you away from serving God.

You can't serve two masters. It's just not possible. That just the sheer amount of time being able to devote to the kingdom of God and devote to building your own kingdom, it's just not there.

So the desire to obey God is just another way of loving God. And this is simply put. Jesus describes loving him as obedience.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. So obedience is loving God, simply put. And when he's describing his obedience to the Father, he says, I do as the Father commanded me so that the world would know that I love him.

So even Jesus is describing his obedience as an act of love for the Father. So at no point are we to come up with some kind of twisted imagination where we are claiming to love God but are then disobedient.

[15 : 24] To obey your master is to love your master. To obey your Lord is to love your Lord. And those two just cannot be separated. You can be thankful for the cross.

You can demonstrate gratitude for the grace of God shown in your life every single day. But unless you're keeping the commandments, unless you're obeying, you're not loving God. You're being thankful.

You're grateful. But it's not love as Christ defined it. So love as Christ defined it is keeping his commandments. Remember how in the Sermon on the Mount that not one part of the law is going to pass away?

That Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it? And yet how many Christians think that God's law doesn't apply today because we're under grace? And it's this simple shift in misunderstanding that then shapes the church.

So you're constantly having to be retold God's law is still relevant today as it has always been. Why?

[16 : 27] Because it shapes who we are. So the simple summary, if I can put it in this way, of Paul speaking to Timothy is this. This is who you are.

You're no longer this. And because you're a soldier and not a civilian, you're not to get engaged into civilian pursuits. The pursuit of the soldier is not the same as the civilian.

But the ability for a civilian pursuit to entangle the soldier is there. And therefore, this is something that you must stay away from. Paul is saying that, look, you're unable to perform your duties as a soldier if you are engaged in things that have nothing to do with being a soldier.

So my son, my oldest son last night, found it a great surprise that I signed up for the parachute regiment at 18.

I didn't get in because I failed my medical. But he could never imagine me being the type of person who could run. Believe it or not.

[17 : 36] And not only could I run, I could run quite a long way for quite a long time. With weight on my back. And over this many years later, and I didn't get in because I didn't pass my medical.

I failed it. So I wasn't allowed in. But I understood that the moment I signed up for that, my life was then the property of the government. It was the property of the parachute regiment.

That no longer could I continue to do the things that I was doing as a civilian. I understood that. And so when you sign up, you sign so many rights away.

And what often happens when a person becomes saved is that for some reason, you try and cling on to so much of what you had before.

Rather than truly appreciating why you have been enlisted, how you have been enlisted, and now what this means. To put it another way, when Paul writes to the church at Galatians, which had multiple problems, one of them to do with the departure of the gospel, they also understood, or were about to understand with Paul teaching them, that there are plenty of hindrances that can stop us from obeying Christ.

[18 : 52] But the hindrances that stop us from obeying Christ often come in the form of persuasion. Read Galatians 5, verses 7 to 9. It's this act of persuasion that for some reason, someone has got the better of your mind.

And as I've said before, that whatever gets your mind gets you. If you've ever woken up with a thought that you just can't get, it has you for the rest of the day. It's just got you for the rest of the day.

In fact, some things can be so big, it can have you for weeks and months. You just cannot. And the only time you get a bit of reprieve from it is when you're so busy with something else that your mind is unable to focus on both equally.

And you get a bit of rest from it, but as soon as the other activity is over, it comes flushing back. So whatever gets your mind gets you. And Paul understands this in the Galatian church.

This church is able to be persuaded in such a way that they are no longer obeying their master. They're no longer obeying their Lord. And it doesn't take much to be persuaded, especially if your heart is inclined to pursue a certain role.

[20 : 02] You only need a few other people doing it, and it's what's called mimetic rivalry. Mimetic rivalry is simply a way of explaining why trends happen, why people copy other people.

It explains why no one's an original. No one comes up with an original idea. It's simply like Plato's bee. It takes its pollen from this flower and from that, but the honey it makes is entirely its own.

But none of it's original. It all comes from somewhere. And mimetic rivalry explains why you can have a child in a room with ten toys, and the child just so happens to be playing with one of those ten toys.

Then you introduce another child. Which toy do you think the other child wants to play with? See, you know, the reason it's funny is because you know that while the other child has nine other toys to choose from, it doesn't want the nine of those.

It doesn't want the nine that are not being played with. It wants the one that is being played with. Why? Because people don't know what they want, so they copy other people.

[21 : 10] People do not know what they want, and so they copy others. And this is why we are told to be imitators of Christ. We are told to imitate Paul. Follow me as I follow Christ, Paul says.

Why? Because people naturally do not know what they want. They have to imitate someone. They have to imitate someone. And so, you want to make sure that the leaders in the church, that the leaders in the home, that the leaders wherever, are people that you would want to become like.

Right? Because that's how life works. Every part of life is an act of imitation. Nobody knows what they want. That's why when they buy sunglasses, it just so happens to look like someone else's sunglasses.

Or they buy the clothes item, it looks similar to someone else's clothes item, or exactly the same, but of someone who lives several miles away. And this is why women can be absolutely devastated when they turn up to the same party with the same outfit on.

Because though they enjoy the same thing, they don't want to be the same at the same respect. All of it's explainable. Of course, you have to sit down. And this is what Paul is explaining in Galatians.

[22 : 26] This act of persuasion is based on that mimetic rivalry. That because people do not know what they want, they are told, not through being told, but they are told through imitating others.

Someone goes out, does something, and it's not long before everyone else is following. They don't know why they're following, they just are. That's how persuasion happens.

Therefore, this lesson is pretty straightforward, though as you can see, slightly more complicated and deep than you might first imagine, because we are more complicated and deep as people than you might first imagine.

So a legitimate concern, a legitimate pursuit for the civilian is not legitimate for the soldier. And therefore, you have to understand who you are.

And this is why we began with Romans chapter 12. Unless you appreciate who you are in Christ Jesus, unless you present your bodies as a living sacrifice so that your bodies don't dictate the terms of your Christian life, unless you're being renewed in your mind, able to discern what is good, acceptable, and perfect, unless you're growing up and becoming that type of person, you're going to be persuaded otherwise.

[23 : 46] You can't help but be persuaded otherwise because your decisions are imitations. Every decision you make is largely an imitation.

It's not a conscious, independent decision as you might think that it is. It is largely an imitation of someone else's decision.

And this is why it is so difficult when raising children and, you know, I wrote two posts, didn't I? It takes God to raise a child and then if you remember, it takes a church to raise a child because of just how difficult it is.

So God designed that it should happen in that context because of the difficulty. One of the difficulties is this, the moment a child sees another child in the home getting away with something, they then know that they have an automatic right to get away with the same thing.

Right? That then is automatically then transferred in the church. The moment you let one thing slide, everyone else in the church now who wants to do the same thing has an automatic right to, well, this happened before.

[24 : 58] Well, this happened, you let this happen before, so why can I do it again? Why can't I do it? You let them do it, why can't I do it? It's the same issue. You know, the reason why China is allowed to have an industrial revolution is because you did.

Why can't, like, the world's different, yeah, but you have, it's the same, and that's how it works. That if you got, if you got away with it, then I should be allowed to get away with it.

So the reason we clamp down on these tightly and seriously is because of their ability to persuade people away from Christ. They are powerful, they are strong, and Christians who, who follow civilian pursuits will often tell you that they're doing nothing wrong, and they're right.

But they're doing nothing wrong if you're a civilian, but if you're a soldier, then you shouldn't be doing it. So it really comes down to your identity, it really comes down to who you believe you are.

You're absolutely right, there's nothing wrong with many of these things. If you're a civilian. The question is, who are you? So now we have to deal, finally, with this idea of the myth of neutrality.

[26 : 16] We began, or not just began, we came through Romans 12 and of course Romans 6, and we should know by now that the myth of neutrality teaches us it's not whether but who.

It's not whether but which. It's not whether or not you will obey, but it's which you will obey. It's not whether or not you will obey, but who you will obey.

In Christ, you have been set free from the dominion of sin. No longer do you have to obey the sin as your slave. You can because the issue is not whether you will obey, you are bound to obey, but rather who you will obey.

Will it be Christ or will it be the old nature? And so all of life can be understood under these two basic headings of not whether but which, not whether but who.

And so the soldier that gets entangled in civilian pursuits is not whether or not he will obey, but who he is obeying. This is the basis of the argument that a little leaven in the wrong place leavens the whole lump as Paul puts it over in Galatians.

[27 : 35] So the myth of neutrality teaches this, that you can make any decision and it doesn't affect anything else. That's what most people are trying to argue that it teaches.

But what did Jesus mean when he said if you're not for me you're against me? There's nothing neutral. What did Jesus mean when he says if you don't gather you scatter?

Well he's saying there's nothing neutral. We want to believe in neutrality because we want the right to be able to do things without consequence. We want to be able to do things without being pulled up on them.

But Jesus makes it abundantly clear you're either for me or you're against me. No neutrality. You either gather or scatter. There's no neutrality. So it's not whether you will obey.

You will obey. The question is who? So it's not whether but who? Will you obey Christ who is your Lord and Savior? Or will you obey sin who you no longer have to obey?

[28 : 41] So it's not whether it's who. And this is one of the basic messages of sanctification. So we present our bodies as living sacrifice.

Why? Because it's not whether we will obey but it's who we're going to obey. I'm not going to be dictated by my body. I'm going to be commanded by my Lord. Because I have the power.

I have been set free from the power of sin. I now have the power to choose who I obey. And I can obey God because I am no longer bound to obey sin. That's the power that God has given us to the Christian life.

Why? Because the ultimate aim is that you are able to discern what is good acceptable and perfect. You need to be able to tell the difference between a civilian and a soldier.

You need to be able to tell the difference between whether or not you are a civilian or a soldier. You need to be able to tell the difference between civilian pursuits and the pursuits of a soldier.

[29 : 41] You need to be able to tell the difference so that you are able to please the one who enlisted you. And this is why we had Romans 12 right at the beginning.

So it's not whether but which. It's not whether but who. So Jesus leaves no room for neutrality at no point are we to think that we are in some kind of middle ground.

But it is entirely possible to sit here and say well I'm doing nothing wrong. But that's not the point. The distinct you want to affirm that you're doing nothing wrong but you're not wanting to affirm the distinction between a soldier and a civilian.

And that's what Paul is doing here. At no point does he say the civilian pursuit is wrong. What he is saying though is that it's not the pursuit of a soldier. and therefore who you are matters.

So when we've dealt with all these things when we've dealt with imagination now that we've dealt with imitation now that we've dealt with the myth of neutrality now that we're able to present our bodies to God because we know that they get in our way now that we're having our minds renewed so that we're able to discern what is good acceptable and perfect now we know that our obedience is not whether or not we will obey but who we will obey and what we will obey now we can affirm the truth that though there are many things in the world that I can do as a Christian there are many things that I should not do as a Christian.

[31 : 21] Sorry though there are many things in the world that I can do as a person there are many things that I shouldn't be tied up in as a Christian because of who I am. In other words you are so different from an ordinary person.

Let me put a slightly different way to finish with this. When we affirm that Jesus was fully God and fully man you recognize that in order for Jesus to become fully man he had to become fully man.

In order for the affirmation to be made he had to be fully man. When you look at the life of Jesus it's quite clear that he committed no sin and he had no sin.

Therefore we can affirm that the definition of a to be fully man to be fully human is a life without sin. Therefore we can also affirm if you can follow the reasoning that any life that is still in sin is not fully human.

It's not full. and therefore you understand when Christ has set us free from that thing that makes us less human.

[32 : 38] He's set us free from the power of sin and death. The thing that actually robs us of who we are that actually takes away from who God actually created man and woman to be in the first place.

If we want to know what a fully human person looks like we have to look at Jesus because we cannot look at each other. It is us who are not fully human.

We are less than what God created us to be because sin destroys everything which is good and Christ has come to remove that. And therefore when we present our bodies as a living sacrifice laying down our lives being renewed being transformed into the image of Christ we will one day be set free from the presence of sin and in glorification we will be exactly what God intends us to be.

So here's the exhortation as we close. It is absolutely possible for someone to affirm the sovereignty of God and in the same breath affirm it in such a way where they say well what I do then doesn't make any difference.

If God is in control what I do there is no difference because God is in control. That's not true. Because part of God's ordained control is to give you choice.

[34 : 00] God is able to be perfectly sovereign and for you to be perfectly free at the same time and I don't have time to explain that other than to state it. Therefore I want to affirm at this point that believers who want to constantly pursue the argument that I'm doing nothing wrong needs to wrestle with the idea whether or not they are actually serving the kingdom of God.

Not everything holding you back is sinful. And the reason some of us fail, the reason why there is no progress is because there is no obedience.

The reason why there is no success is because there is no obedience. There's plenty of gratitude, there's plenty of learning, there's plenty of believing but there's no obedience. And the reason why the church is not successful is not because it doesn't believe, it's not because it doesn't pray, it's not because it's not grateful, but rather because it's not always obedient.

Unless the athlete competes according to the rules, he doesn't win. This is what Paul goes on to say next. Unless the athlete competes according to the rules, he doesn't receive the crown.

There are certain rules to live by. So let me finish with this. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits. No athlete who runs not according to the rules gets to receive the crown.

[35 : 30] And no farmer or the farmer who does go ahead and seed should share the first of his own crop. And then Paul says, listen to what I've said for God will give you understanding and everything.

Which means that the reason he has to say it is because people don't understand. That though they understand what they're hearing, it's not yet sunk in at the level where it's making a tangible difference on earth.

And as I've said before, unbelief is exactly the same, functions exactly the same as not knowing.

When a person doesn't know what God requires of them, functionally it looks exactly the same as unbelief because an unbelieving person doesn't do it. And the believing person who doesn't know it doesn't do it.

So not knowing is functionally the same as unbelief. The motive is different because the person unbelieving is rejecting God, but the person who doesn't know isn't rejecting God, he just doesn't know.

[36 : 39] So not knowing is exactly the functions in exactly the same way as unbelief does because neither people are obeying. One because he doesn't want to, the other because he doesn't know what to obey.

And this is why Paul is saying to the church, God will give you understanding in everything. Amen. Amen. Well, before we come to our exhortation, let's listen to our final hymn.

Thank you. When the music fades and all is stripped away.

Thank you.