

Strong in Grace

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of January 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Strong in Grace and is from 2 Timothy 2.1-13.

Please keep that passage open and I'll pray for us, that God will help us to understand and live out his word. God, we thank you for speaking to us so clearly in the words of scripture.

We pray that you may speak to us now and apply this word to our heart, that we may be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. When I was about 12, I was beaten up by the kid down the street.

Not quite sure why, really. I just happened to be walking down the street and he came over the road and he laid into me. Well, after a couple of punches, I picked up my glasses and I went home.

[1 : 1 1] And I told my parents and my father sort of told me off. I remember him telling me, come on, you can be strong, fight back. Well, to be honest, I think I chose the wiser course of action that day.

He was older and bigger than me and there was no way I was going to fight back. The point was I wasn't strong. Didn't matter how many sort of physical resources I could draw upon, he would beat me any day, hands down.

Probably still would. And all the strength that I could muster would be insufficient to fight back and prevail against him. So I went home. The wise action.

In a different sort of way, Timothy, to whom this letter was written, was under attack. Probably not at this point physical, although one suspects that later on when he was in jail there may have been physical attack as part of the opposition.

It's more than a physical dust-up that he faces. It's a spiritual one. For him, the opposition and the attack is perhaps emotional abuse as much as anything. Maybe his being, his ministry, his church, the gospel that he preaches, all aspects of that would be under attack from false teachers and people within his church and people from outside the church in Ephesus perhaps heaping abuse upon him.

[2 : 3 1] We know there were false teachers at Ephesus where he was at this time, spouting forth various heresies. We know there were people who were belittling St Paul who was languishing in prison in Rome and with whom Timothy was very strongly identified.

So no doubt there were all sorts of undercurrents and overcurrents for that matter attacking Timothy in his ministry at Ephesus. And I guess that for him there would be every temptation to beat a retreat and hurry off home and shut the door.

Pick up his glasses and go. There'd be every temptation to be like two of those people we heard about last week, Phygelus and Homogenes who Paul has reminded Timothy have given up the Christian faith, they've abandoned the gospel, they've abandoned Paul and headed away from Rome maybe to go back to Ephesus or wherever they were from.

Timothy could easily be like that. Every temptation would be there to pack it in. He's the minister of a church which is under attack. And people are saying, look, your gospel's nothing, Paul's in prison, he's going to die.

I mean, what's the point? Hear what we have to say. This is a better message, a better gospel. Follow us. Leave Timothy behind and so on. There'd be every temptation for Timothy to give up in that sort of situation.

[3 : 51] And Paul at first initially sounds a bit like my father. He says at the beginning of chapter 2, you then, my child, be strong. But Paul's exhortation to Timothy differs from my father's to me.

It's not about self-reliance. It's not about mustering up all the strength that you can get for your own physical or spiritual resources within you. But rather, Paul goes on to say, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

That is, be strong not in something in yourself, but be strong in God, in effect. In the grace of Christ, in effect. That's where strength lies.

That's where strength to sustain suffering and opposition and even persecution lies. Not in our own personal resources that we somehow summon up. It's not that we are self-sufficient for these things, but that God is sufficient for us.

Now this idea has already been expressed in this letter in different ways. Back in chapter 1, verse 7, we saw a fortnight ago, Paul reminds Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power.

[5 : 05] That is, you're not powerful in your own right, but God has given you his spirit of power. Same thing in the next verse, verse 8 of chapter 1. Don't be ashamed of the gospel, in effect, or of me, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.

Not relying on your own strength and resources, but on God's power. And similarly, in verse 14, Paul exhorts Timothy to guard the good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit that is living in us.

that is, even the strength to guard the deposit of the gospel that's been entrusted to Timothy, he doesn't have strength for that, but he has to rely on the Holy Spirit which is living in him.

Now, Paul says, same idea in effect, different words, be strong in the grace that is in the Lord Jesus Christ or of the Lord Jesus Christ. literally, it actually says, keep on being strong.

It's a continuous sort of action that's required. Not a one-off thing, but something to keep on practicing day by day, hour by hour when he's facing opposition and attack.

[6 : 18] And literally, it's not only keep on, but it's keep on being strengthened. That is, it's not you be strong, but it's be strengthened and by implication it is from God.

So there's a double sense in which this expression has got God as the source of power. Now, Paul's understanding of God is very straightforward and very clear, really.

It is God who gives sufficient resources to withstand opposition and attack on Christians. God supplies us adequately. So we've got to draw on his resources and not seek for them from ourselves.

God has given us his Holy Spirit a spirit of power where to rely on and draw power from that spirit to withstand opposition and to stand against it and be bold in the gospel.

This doesn't mean that God will take us out of pain and suffering. It doesn't mean that he'll take us away from opposition and persecution. It isn't that he's going to somehow stamp out hostility and opposition to the Christian gospel.

[7 : 23] God's promise is not to do that, but God's promise is to give us spiritual resources to draw on to withstand the opposition which we face. Indeed, God is, as the psalmist says, a sure defence, a mighty stronghold for us in such times.

Now, for us in Australia in 2001, the opposition we face is probably not going to be physical abuse. Maybe occasionally that might happen.

Maybe it'll happen more in years to come. But certainly the opposition we should expect and be ready for is the sort of emotional pressure of friends, family, work, acquaintances and so on.

People who will chip away and mock or ridicule or laugh at our Christian commitment, our faith, our church attendance, our moral stance because we're Christians.

People who might ostracise Christians at school or bully them in the school ground perhaps. People who will parade a rather hurtful caricature of what they think Christians are about, sort of old-fashioned wowzers and so on.

[8 : 30] In such situations which we must be expected to face, we must rely on God's power given to us, his grace and his Holy Spirit within us.

That's sufficient for the day. Now, in practice, what does that mean? What does it mean when we face such opposition? How do we actually draw on such resources that God has given us?

Well, there are a few clues, I think, already in 2 Timothy. Paul began the letter by talking about being an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God for the sake of the promise of life.

And then a bit later on in verse 10, he made it clear that Jesus' death and resurrection has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And then in verse 12, Paul expresses his confidence as we saw last week that God is able to guard until that day what he has entrusted to God, that is, his own life indeed.

You see, to draw on the resources that God gives us goes hand in hand with the trust of the promise of life to be sure that through Jesus' death and resurrection he has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light for us.

[9 : 48] So when we withstand or stand against opposition and attack or abuse or whatever, ridicule for being Christian, we ought to know and hold fast to the promise that life is for us regardless of what happens to us now.

Even facing death for Paul, he is holding fast to the promise of life. So God will strengthen us as we keep on claiming his promises of life that come to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, knowing and having confidence and trusting that God is able to guard what we entrust to him for that final day.

Now in a sense that's the sort of issue that Paul now elaborates on in the first half of chapter 2 that we're looking at today verses 1 to 13. One of the highlights of the Olympics is the final day athletics when they have the relays.

I guess the one reason why I particularly enjoy the relays is because so much can go wrong and there's so much unexpected that can happen in a relay. But when you watch a relay, in a sense you're not really watching the runners.

What you're watching, because what actually happens in a relay is that the baton goes from beginning to end. No runner goes beginning to end. It's the baton that in effect wins. They never have the baton up on the podium.

[11 : 06] It's always the runners. But it seems to me the baton's done more work because it's gone further than the relay runners, usually four times as far. So the key thing in a relay is to follow the baton.

Now two things it seems to me are crucial for a runner in a relay. They've got to hold the baton, if they drop it they're out, and they've got to pass it on reliably to the next person.

And both those things come here in 2 Timothy in a sense. Paul said at the end of chapter 1 that we saw last week to Timothy in verse 13, hold fast to the standard of teaching.

And now in verse 2 of chapter 2 he says, what you've heard from me, the pattern of sound teaching, same thing as what he said last week, what you've heard from me through many witnesses, now you entrust to faithful people.

The idea is of a baton in effect. Firstly, Timothy is to hold fast what Paul has entrusted to him. It's as though Timothy's the second runner in the relay. Paul's the first, the original apostle sort of, and he's now passed the baton to Timothy.

[12 : 11] So firstly, he says to Timothy, hold fast to what I've entrusted to you, to what I've passed on to you, the pattern of sound teaching the gospel. That's what we saw last week, the end of chapter 1.

But now, Paul says in verse 2, you now have to pass it on to faithful people who in turn will pass it on through the teaching of others. So in a sense, we've got a four-person relay here.

Paul, he's passed it to Timothy who is now holding it fast and exhorted to pass it on to the next person who in turn, Paul's looking well down the track, will pass it on to faithful people who will teach others and keep the baton going, so to speak.

Now, it's talking about gospel ministry, it's a sort of an analogy of a relay, but in a sense that's what Paul is on about here. That the baton must be passed faithfully from runner to runner, generation to generation, place to place for the sake of keeping the gospel going throughout the world.

Now, one reason why Paul is now saying to Timothy, pass it on, is because later on in this letter he'll ask Timothy to come and see him in Rome. He's already said in the first few verses, I long to see you and later on he'll say, come and see me before winter.

[13 : 26] So Timothy, before he can leave Ephesus, must make sure that the gospel ministry that he's exercising continues. He can't just go to Rome at Paul's whim and leave Ephesus bereft of gospel ministry.

So it's on him to make sure that there are appropriate, faithful, reliable, skilled people who will teach others there in Ephesus so that Timothy can go on and that they in turn will pass the baton on to the next generation of people to teach in Ephesus.

One of the jobs of any minister, I guess, is to train others to do Christian ministry. Whether lay people or ordained people, they must be faithful according to verse 2 and able to teach others.

That is, appropriately gifted, qualified sorts of people to keep on teaching Christian gospel faith. There's a sense in which at Holy Trinity I'm part of a relay.

I don't know how many vicars there have been before me, too many to count, but I'm one of the relay legs in one sense so that the baton has been passed down for nearly 150 years, the time I'm here, my job is to hold fast to it, not to drop the baton, not to preach any other gospel, but to keep on to the same Christian gospel and to do what I can, although the church government situation is different in Holy Trinity Doncaster than it was in first century Ephesus, but to do what I can to make sure that my succession is also going to be faithfully holding the same baton of the Christian gospel and not to deviate or drop the baton or to go elsewhere.

[14 : 56] The Melbourne Diocese is liberally sprinkled with churches that have dropped the baton and never bothered to pick it up again and they've ended up with a different gospel in effect and by and large those churches are dying or dead.

We must make sure, it's not just my responsibility, that that baton is kept alive and kept being passed on and this is not just the job of an ordained minister either.

Each of us as Christians has responsibility to keep on in the gospel and to keep on passing it on to others, whether through conversion, through our family, through our social networks, through passing it on to another generation and so on.

There's also a sense, I guess, in which we at Holy Trinity are responsible too for equipping people for the gospel in other places. We've sent people out as missionaries to other places and next week we'll be sending Phil and Barb and their family to Furniture Gully. Now our responsibility, mine in particular, but ours generally, has been to make sure that Phil is a faithful and qualified person able to teach others so that he can in a sense take the baton on to another place but for the next stage of their ministry as well and we will have failed if we haven't done that job of preparing him to take on that baton for the next generation there as well.

So that's Paul's injunctions in verses 1 and 2. to Timothy be strong in the grace and then secondly to entrust to faithful people the same gospel that Paul has entrusted to Timothy.

[16 : 33] Now he goes on to talk more about suffering. Join with me in suffering. Share in suffering is the next imperative command exhortation of this part of 2 Timothy.

When I was at school I only lasted three weeks in the school cadets. Endless parade drill for three weeks was enough for me I thought this is no fun so I joined the pipe band instead.

Then I had to learn the bagpipes. Likewise at school I was never much of an athlete. I dreamed of winning an Olympic gold that would be great fun I wouldn't mind doing that but jogging around tracks and ovals at dawn in Melbourne winter is no fun.

There's no way I was going to take part in any of that sort of stuff. And likewise many of you will know I'm not a gardener. I don't mind good gardens I'd be quite happy to sort of see gardens that are all flourishing and flowering and doing all the things they're meant to do but to be honest in any Melbourne weather today or any other day I just couldn't be bothered weeding, mowing or pruning rain, heat or even on a nice day that's not for me.

Now they say that there's no gain without paying ironically most people try to live their lives as though there is gain without any pain but basically it's a truism for various parts of life.

[17 : 49] It is true in the Christian life as well. There's little gain without paying and in one sense that could be how we summarise what Paul is on about in these verses. He uses three analogies the three that I've just mentioned about myself to say in effect Timothy join in suffering in order to reap the gains at the end.

He uses a military analogy not school cadets but joining the Roman army says in verse three and four share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs.

The soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. Now the issue here is join with me in suffering and the promise of reward at the end. So in a sense the military analogy is saying here there will be no battle victory if you do not fight and suffer.

If you get entangled in everyday affairs it's a bit different from just being involved in life generally but you know imagine being just before the dawn of a battle and saying to your commanding officer look I've just forgotten I've got to go home and mow the lawn.

Well that's getting entangled I think in daily affairs. You're not single-minded and focused and seeking to please the field commander whoever it is. the idea is you've got to fight the battle you've got to be prepared to be deprived and suffer if you're going to have any victory.

[19 : 12] Now that's the context that Paul is on about with Timothy. You must be prepared to suffer for the gospel if you are going to reap the rewards and the benefits at the end the promise of life so to speak that Paul talked about in the very first verse of the letter.

So with Christian ministry you must have an undivided loyalty to the field commander Jesus and you must be prepared to suffer before enjoying the victory of resurrection. The athletic imagery is next and in the case of an athlete he says in verse 5 no one is crowned without competing according to the rules.

Now one of the rules of athletics competitions in Paul's day in the Greco-Roman world and this may be what he's alluding to was that any athlete had to in the major games swear an oath to Zeus that they had trained for 10 months.

You couldn't just get out of bed on the morning of the Olympics sprint final and think I might run the sprint final today and off you go and win. No you had to train for 10 months.

Now possibly that's what Paul has in mind here. you've got to follow the rules in order to gain the victor's wreath laurel wreath that would be given to a winner of an athletic competition. That is you've got to put in the effort the training the hard work at dawn so to speak in a Melbourne winter and all that sort of stuff harder to imagine that it is today.

[20 : 33] So Paul is saying in effect that one of the Christian life rules is that there must be suffering for the Christian minister and servant of Christ in order to gain the rewards of resurrection life.

The third analogy is verse 6 the agricultural gardening farmer one. It's the farmer who does the work and literally it's hard work. It's the work of sweat and toil.

It's not just somebody who goes out neatly pulling out one or two weeds. This is hard work. It's a farmer who does this work who ought to have the first share of the crops. Now the issue there is not on having the first share.

The issue is you've got to put in the hard work to enjoy the harvest of the crops. It's the same point that he's been making in a sense in each of these three analogies. You've got to fight to get the victory.

You've got to train to win the wreath. You've got to work the soil to gain the harvest. And for the Christian life you've got to be prepared to suffer for the gospel's sake if you are going to expect to enjoy the blessings of resurrection life or the promise of life that is through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 39] In all three points, the same point is being made. Timothy, suffer with me, is what Paul is in effect saying to Timothy. There's something in our society that is quite dangerous I think in that we are on about all the time, instant gratification.

salvation. We want to have the ability to get what we want now. And that societal value is very much something that is dangerous and can undermine our Christian faith because the benefits of Christian life are not instant, usually.

Holiness is not an instant packet mix that you can buy at a religious bookshop, stir with water, and suddenly become holy. Holiness is an ongoing, lasting, enduring process.

Same with the fruits of conversion. You can't just sort of throw a tract at somebody and expect all of a sudden, you know, twinkle, twinkle, they've changed at the press of a computer button into a Christian. There's hard work involved in leading people to Christian faith.

Same sort of thing with just our own strength of Christian faith and commitment. You can't get that home delivered, pick it up on your doorstep one day and all of a sudden your Christian faith is strong with deep roots and maturity.

[22 : 59] These are all things that take effort and work, hard work. Too often, I think, the sort of instant gratification of our society spills over into the way we view God and what we expect of him.

Instant answers to our prayers, instant holiness, instant maturity, no pain but lots of gain. Similarly, our society is very preoccupied with comfort and being comfortable but that desire can also be rather pernicious with respect to Christian faith.

Our society, you see, is wanting to be pain-free. It's a paracetamol, pain-dulling world that we live in and it's easy to flee pain or to dull it and to escape it.

So you don't hear many sermons, I guess, about the need for Christians to be prepared and expect to suffer and endure pain for the sake of the gospel because all the time we're on about and the messages we like to hear are pain-free Christian living, pain-free living generally.

And therefore, as a result, I think, all too often the Western Christian church is unwilling to endure suffering, unwilling to make a stand, unwilling to resist and keep on resisting attacks to the gospel.

[24 : 17] Too often, I think, Western Christianity is rather wimpish and has little gospel backbone and just bends at every fad and whim of our society. Paul here is exhorting Timothy to stand, to suffer, to endure suffering, deprivation, maybe even death for the sake of holding on to the gospel.

He says to him in verse 7, think over what I say. Use your mind about this. Don't leave your mind at home when you come and worship God. Christian faith is about thinking as well.

Think over what I say for the Lord will give you understanding in all things. And Paul goes on with two more examples. He's used three secular examples or analogies to suffer for the sake of future glory.

He uses now two personal and probably more important examples, firstly Jesus and then Paul himself. In verse 8 he says, remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David.

That is my gospel. That's a fairly pithy summary of the Christian gospel. Slightly an unusual one as well. Why does Paul single out those two things to summarise Jesus?

[25 : 30] Risen from the dead, descendant of David. I mean he could have said other things. Born of Mary or virgin birth, died on the cross for our sins, exalted and ascended to heaven.

Why does he say those two things? I suspect because those things allude to the point that he's been making. If Jesus is risen from the dead, by implication he's saying he's died for what he stood for but the promise of life is now his.

So the pattern of death to life is the pattern for Christians. Timothy, be prepared to suffer, maybe even to death, but remember Jesus risen from the dead.

By implication, those who suffer for the gospel's sake will rise with him. Indeed he'll say something like that later. And then he says descended from David.

I think the point there is that David was an Old Testament king and maybe two things are being alluded to. One is that in David or to David God had made various promises that in Jesus were fulfilled.

[26 : 34] So the promise of life, the promise of resurrection, the promise of glory that is now made to Timothy and to any Christian, if God has kept past promises to David, you can be sure that he'll keep the promise of life and glory and resurrection for Christians now.

God is faithful. That's the first thing I think he's alluding to. But also David was a king and to David God promised a line of kings forever and Jesus is the fulfilment of that.

So I think he's saying in summary about Jesus, not only is God faithful by alluding to David, but that Jesus is king and reigning. And he's already implied for Christians that those who, like an athlete, do the training and will receive the crown or wreath at the end.

So to the promise is not just a promise of resurrection life, but a promise of a crown at the end to cap it all off, so to speak. The next example he uses is Paul himself in verses 9 to 10.

Paul is suffering hardship, he says, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. Seems that things have deteriorated for Paul since he first arrived in Rome and was under house arrest there, now he's chained as a criminal.

[27 : 47] Paul says then to Timothy, but the word of God is not chained. I just better check someone's okay here. I'll pray and then we'll sing a hymn.

Heavenly Father, we pray that we may heed the exhortation of Paul to be strong in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that we may hold fast to the gospel. Those you call to ministry will pass it on faithfully to people who in turn will teach it and pass it on.

We pray that you may give us a willingness to endure whatever suffering comes our way for the sake of Jesus Christ, that we may trust in the promise of life and one day be in your heavenly place, crowned with glory at Jesus' feet.

We pray this for his sake. Amen. Thank you.

[29 : 03] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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