

The Secret for Enduring through Difficult Times (2 Timothy 3)

Introduction:

So far in 2 Timothy we have reflected on Paul's words to Timothy concerning his calling. In chapter 1 we saw how the fulfilling of one's calling will happen through difficulty, and in chapter 2 we saw that to continue well in one's calling will require grace, endurance, and faithfulness. Paul's main exhortations included for Timothy to Be Bold and to Be Strong.

As we turn to chapter three I suggest that the Big Idea Paul wanted Timothy to understand is:

The primary means of fulfilling one's calling is relying on the truth of Scripture

The exhortation I would suggest for your remembrance from chapter three it is this:

Be Wise!

In the first two chapters Paul brought up the obvious reality of suffering to Timothy and the need for endurance. In chapter three Paul brings these realities into sharper focus with an abrupt change involving persecution. Emperor Nero had been persecuting the Christians and after the great fire that burned Rome in AD 64 Nero blamed this devastation on the Christians. Many believers were abducted, persecuted and killed so some were denying their faith or fleeing.

Today, according to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world's population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions (and many of these people are Christians). Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ. While Christian persecution takes many forms, Open Doors, a ministry to serve persecuted Christians worldwide, defines it as any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Christians throughout the world continue to risk imprisonment, loss of their homes and possessions (including custody of their children), torture, beheadings, rape and even death as a result of their faith. Of the 50 countries on the Open Doors World Watch List, 30 saw an increase in persecution during the reporting period. New research indicates that throughout the world, approximately 215 million Christians experience high, very high or extreme persecution for following Jesus. Nearly one of every 12 Christians in the world lives in an area, or in a culture, in which Christianity is illegal, forbidden or punished. (Open Doors USA.org)

Singapore, as well as the US, has also experienced such kind of persecution but not as prominent or lasting. The fact is, persecution has been happening since Cain killed Abel and wise people should take heed. We live in a dangerous world where situations can change quickly. As Paul shared with Timothy, wise people need to know and be prepared for inevitable difficulty.

Remember, Paul was writing to his son in the faith. He was deeply concerned that Timothy live wisely and victoriously. We do well to take Paul's words as fatherly encouragement for us also. First, one must avoid godless people and teachers and second one must adhere to the truth.

Avoid and adhere, as simple as that. To live wisely we must understand these two simple yet powerful truths.

1. Avoid the godless. Paul begins this chapter with yet another command: know about the end times and especially know how to live victoriously through difficulties. He goes on to list 18 or so different characteristics of life in the 60s, AD that is. Time does not allow for comment on each of these characteristics but when you read and reflect upon them you will notice many similarities to our current time. Pastor Rick preached on this passage a few years ago so I will try to complement what he shared.

Verse 2 begins by saying *'men shall be'* and then comes the list the characteristics. In verse 9 Paul ends this section saying *'their folly shall be manifest to all.'* He puts book ends around his observations about how people were living and being influenced to live. He states clearly in verse 5, from such godless people doing ungodly things, avoid or turn away!

Now we know Paul is not saying to totally avoid such people since he also says in 1 Cor 5:10 that the only way to avoid evil people would be to go out of the world. He must be saying that we need wisdom not to associate with such people to the extent that we are negatively influenced by them. As Jesus prayed in Jn 17, we must remain in the world but need the Father's protection. So we should pray daily as is in the Lord's Prayer, "lead us not into temptation."

One of the 18 characteristics comes very close to home for me. You see, I love to learn. I seek to be a life long learner. My learning style is primarily from reading and secondarily from experiencing. My recent study to share these sermons was a great joy for me. Yet, Paul says in 3:7 that it is possible to be ever learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. As nice as learning can be, it is not a worthy end but only a means. The end is to gain skill for living or what we call wisdom. Learning is the means to gain wisdom. Solomon provides a warning in Eccl 12:12 saying, *"But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body."* Some of the students present might concur! Learning is good but our goal is the processing of learning so we have greater skill for living.

Transition: In verse 10 Paul changes direction from people we must avoid and what characterizes them to truth for which we must adhere. He first recounts his learning and then in verse 11 he states his secret for victorious living. This secret involves what we need to know and how we need to act. The word endure appears in four different forms in this letter, sometimes translated to suffer. (Endure: 2:10,12; 3:10,11; 4:2,3,5. Suffer: 1:8,12; 2:3,9; 3:11; 4:5.) Since endurance was such an important word and character quality in Paul's day and I suggest is also vital to understand today in order to live wisely, let us look at the word more deeply.

Word Study: A central verse around which we can look at endurance is verse 12 where Paul writes, *"And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* Wow, now that is not a promise one would normally want to claim! Paul says something similar in Phil 1:29, *"For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."* Jesus said something similar in Jn 16:33, *"In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*

Persecution for one's faith is normative. It happened to Jesus and it will happen to greater or lesser degrees for all Jesus followers. When life is stable and relatively easy our ability to endure is weakened. Frankly, I am concerned that if significant persecution was to come to many Christians today they would not have the ability to endure. We live in a day of much ease and blessing causing many to become weak.

So what did Paul want Timothy and all readers of this letter to understand about endurance? Synonyms include the ability to hold fast or have perseverance. It can mean to wait but with hope. In an active sense to endure is to continue to work through something difficult and not give up. In a passive sense it means to submit to difficulties knowing that God is ultimately in control. For most of us the kind of persecution we must endure does not involve bodily harm. Many do experience discrimination for actually believing such "ancient beliefs." Others who stand firm on their beliefs can be marginalized or laughed at. Endurance is very much needed.

Although we don't normally choose the patriarch Job as someone we want to be like because of the great difficulties he had to endure, we find him to be a great model by how he stayed faithful to God. Don't let people influence us to turn from God. The process of enduring produces a fruit that is so precious that it redeems the hardship. In Romans 5 and James 1 we see the unmistakable outcome that difficulty with endurance produces a character that is admired by all.

John Newton, the English slave trader who became a pastor and writer of the hymn *Amazing Grace* is credited as saying, "*Everything that is necessary God sends our way; nothing necessary He withholds from us.*" Do we believe this? Do we really believe that God is both sovereign (He can do anything) and good (His intentions are beneficial)? If yes, then we can prepare for the inevitable by living faithfully today, asking the Lord for strength, and assuming that with the help of friends we can weather any storm.

Timothy was being challenged in his sense of calling due to many difficulties from society as well as from within the church and he needed endurance. You might be at a place of challenge as well. What difficulty are you experiencing now? How are you doing with endurance? It is no shame to ask for help. Who can you share your burden with so you can endure?

Transition: We have seen that to be wise we must avoid godless people. Through life's difficulties we must learn to endure. Now Paul addresses our need to adhere to the truth if we are to continue well and fulfill our calling.

2. Adhere to the Truth: As mentioned in the first message, some writers have suggested that this letter written to Timothy is primarily applicable to people in church leadership. However, in 3:16 we read that every scripture is profitable and this must mean for everyone. The verse begins with a contrast, *but*. As opposed to evil people who 'go on from bad to worse', Timothy was to go on 'to advance, to progress, to proceed.'

So the main point of this text is that Timothy was (we are!) to hold onto, continue in, stay in, remain in, the truth that he had learned and believed (2 Timothy 3:14–17). The point is stated clearly in verse 14a: "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly*

believed.” The rest of this chapter gives several reasons for why he should hold fast to the truth he has learned and believed. These reasons are very valid for us today.

First we should remind ourselves of the character of the people who taught us the truth. The point is not that nice mothers and grandmothers or whoever taught you the Bible don’t make mistakes. The point is that there was something about these people that should make us very slow to forsake their teaching. Their motives and lifestyle speak truth.

Second, the term sacred or holy writings in verse 15 refers to the Old Testament and any NT books already written. The Scriptures are unique and have been divinely preserved to subdue folly, to impart wisdom, and of utmost importance, to influence one’s eternal destiny. We have access to knowledge that is unshakably true and infinitely valuable. How much do we treasure this book in accord with its infinite worth? When Paul says it can make us wise unto salvation he is not referring to regeneration but sanctification. Living by the Bible will change our life.

Third, God’s Word is the source of wisdom, the supreme and final source and standard of truth (John 17:17). It conveys to us God’s wisdom concerning the great questions of human existence: Is there a God? What is He like? How can we know Him? Who are we? Why are we on this planet? Why is there death and suffering? What lies beyond the grave? What does the future hold? How do I know right from wrong? These and many other questions are answered in the Bible from God’s all-knowing, authoritative perspective.

Furthermore, there are principles in the Bible concerning all the practical matters we grapple with daily: How do I relate to my spouse? How do I relate to others? How do I raise my children? How do I manage my money? How do I conduct my business? How do I make wise decisions? How should I think? How do I control my emotions, such as anger, depression, anxiety, and impulsiveness? How do I overcome temptation? The Bible speaks practically on these and many more matters.

There are also many matters for which the Bible does not directly speak. In our day there is much confusion on how to rectify the Bible and Science. I think what Jesus said to the Pharisees when asked if it was lawful or not to give taxes to Caesar is helpful for this issue. In looking at a coin and being told the inscription, Jesus said to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s (Mt 22:15-22). Would it not be equally accurate to say we should believe and live the truth of the Bible where it clearly speaks and render to science and philosophy the things to which the Bible does not clearly address? Maybe in time the Bible and science will be more clearly reconciled. Now, for the sake of humility and dialogue, we can take the high road and acknowledge that there are areas of science we hold as a legitimate option.

Fourth, a word on the rather famous verse 16. The word ‘inspired’ literally means God-breathed. In other words, part of God is embedded within the words of the Bible. We learn four things about the truth of the Bible here. Scripture is useful for 1) teaching God’s truth, 2) for confronting sin, 3) for correcting deviant thinking and behavior, and for 4) ongoing training in righteous living. Whatever we think about the Bible, it has proven over the centuries to be the most moral and reliable source for wise living. We will not go wrong adhering to it!

And fifth, the God-breathed Bible aims to make us godly—to make us doers of good in this world. The doctrines of the Bible are designed to produce good deeds as verse 17 tells us, “*that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*” A basic principle of biblical interpretation is that *the Bible is not primarily a source to increase our understanding but to change our lives.* We are to be doers of the Word as James says (1:22). Followers of Jesus should be the people most concerned about the poor and the oppressed, about injustice and corruption, and going about doing good everywhere possible.

Let me ask you a question. Are you giving as much care to the godliness of your life as you are to your physical health? Husbands, heads of households, are you taking as good care to feed your family with Scripture as you are to feed them with food? What percentage of your life is devoted to good works for others versus caring for your own needs and desires? To adhere to the truth will require both growing in wisdom through the Bible and doing good works.

Conclusion:

In summary, if we are to Be Wise and prepared for whatever difficulties we might have to endure we will need to avoid those who are godless and adhere to the truth. Simple as that!

Listen to this poem by Amy Carmichael. If you have not read of her life and ministry, she labored for 55 years as a missionary to India with her last 20 years bedridden after an injury. She primarily served destitute young women. She had a clear calling for her life. She surely understood endurance and being wise. Let this be our closing prayer:

From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakenings,
(Not thus are spirits fortified,
Not this way went the Crucified)
From all that dims Thy Calvary
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay
The hope no disappointments tire,
The passion that will burn like fire;
Let me not sink to be a clod;
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.