

**Bethel Christian Fellowship**  
**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of 2 Timothy (7): “The Demands of The Christian Life”**  
**2 Timothy 2:3-7**

**May 28, 2023**

Any follower of Christ should not expect life to be easy. If we are loyal to the gospel, we can and should expect to experience opposition from the world. That’s why the very first missionaries encouraged their young converts to continue in the faith, and then, based on their own experience, gave them a realistic warning: “*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22). They knew that the way to the Heavenly City is not an easy one.

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, that such a basic New Testament teaching surfaces early in the Pilgrim’s Progress. Shortly after Christian came to faith at the foot of the cross, he met Formality and Hypocrisy. They also professed to be pilgrims, but they soon parted company with Christian on the next leg of his journey. Here’s Bunyan’s description of what happened:

“They all traveled on until they came to the foot of a Hill, at the bottom of which was a spring. In that place could be found two other ways besides the one that came straight from the Gate. There at the bottom of the Hill, one way turned off to the left and the other to the right. The narrow Way, however, led straight up the side of the Hill, which was called Difficulty. Christian went to the spring and drank from it to refresh himself. Then he began to move up the Hill, saying, ‘*The Hill, though high, I desire to ascend; The difficulty will not me offend; for I perceive the way to life lies here: Come, be strong, heart, neither faint nor fear. Better, though difficult, the right way to go, than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.*’

The other two men also came to the foot of the Hill. However, when they saw that the Hill was steep and high and that there were two other ways to go, they supposed that the three ways might once again converge on the other side of the Hill; therefore, they resolved to go the two other ways. The name of one way was Danger, and the name of the other was Destruction. So one man took Danger and was led into a giant forest; the other went straight up the way to Destruction, and was led into a vast field full of dark mountains where he stumbled and fell to rise no more.”

In last week’s study, we saw how Paul encouraged Timothy to drink from the refreshing spring of God’s sustaining grace: “*Be strong in the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus*” (2:1). The reason was because of the task that he was called to do, namely, to *preserve* the truth of God’s Word and to *pass it on* intact to the next generation of faithful men (2:2). Paul also knew this would not be an easy path to follow. Timothy would surely come to the hill called Difficulty. His work would be strenuous, and it would involve hardship, pain, and suffering.

In the verses before us today, therefore, Paul reminds Timothy that suffering hardship is part of any Christian’s lot in life. To illustrate his point, he uses three analogies. First, he compares a follower of Christ to a dedicated soldier (vv. 3-4); then to a disciplined athlete (v. 5); and then to a hardworking farmer (v. 6). Each one provides important insights into the demands of the Christian life.

Then in verse 7, he concludes with a fundamental principle for understanding God's Word. If Timothy is to discover for himself the deeper implications of these three analogies, then two processes will be necessary. First, his responsibility is to meditate or "reflect on" on Paul's teaching (v. 7a); second, the Lord's responsibility is to grant him insight into all of this. Both are essential for *anyone* today who wants a greater understanding of the Word of God.

**A. The Dedicated Soldier (vv. 3-4):** "*Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.*" There are two things to note about this first analogy:

First, soldiers in active service do not expect a safe or easy time in combat. They are willing to take hardship, risk, sacrifice and suffering as a matter of course. In the same way, *any* Christian in combat for the cause of Christ should not expect an easy time. As F. F. Bruce has well said; "It is almost taken for granted in the NT that tribulation is the *normal* lot of Christians: it is those who suffer with Christ who are to share His royal glory (Cf. Rom. 8:17; 2 Thess. 1:4ff; 2 Tim. 2:12)." The call to "endure hardship" with our comrades-in-arms, therefore, should come as no surprise.

Second, soldiers in active service must also be willing to *concentrate* on the war effort, as well as to suffer. They free themselves from civilian affairs in order to be wholly at their commanding officer's disposal. In the same way, a good soldier of Jesus Christ does not "entangle himself in the affairs of everyday life" (NASB). "The Christian . . . cannot, of course, avoid ordinary duties at home, at work, or in the community," writes John Stott. "So what is forbidden the good soldier of Jesus Christ is not all 'secular' activities, but rather 'entanglements' which, though they be perfectly innocent in themselves, may hinder him from fighting Christ's battles." The point is that we should avoid *whatever* it is that may distract us from engaging in the battle. (There *is* a war going on, and we are all called to contribute to the war effort.)

**B. The Disciplined Athlete (v. 5):** "*Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.*" In Paul's day, as in ours, every sport had its rules for the competition itself, and sometimes for the preparation and training beforehand. No matter how skilled the athlete was, he was never awarded the victor's crown unless he competed according to those rules.

Warren Wiersbe explains: "In the Greek games in particular, the judges were more careful about enforcing the rules. Each competitor had to be a citizen of the nation, with a good reputation. In his preparation for the event, he had to follow specific standards. If an athlete was found defective in any matter, he was disqualified from competing. If, after he had competed and won, he was found to have broken some rule, he then lost his crown. Jim Thorpe, a great American athlete, lost his medals because he participated in sports in a way that broke an Olympic rule."

By way of contrast, Paul himself serves an example of the kind of discipline he desires for Timothy (and us). He had kept the rules laid down in the Word of God; he had fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith, and persevered to the end (4:6-7). Therefore, he knows that he will receive the "crown of righteousness" (4:8). The emperor Nero may declare him guilty of treason and condemn him to death; but Nero's verdict will soon be reversed, when "*the Lord, the righteous Judge,*" will award that crown of eternal, perfect righteousness to him "*on that day.*" This same crown also awaits all those who finish the race, keep the faith, and "*long for His appearing*" (4:8).

**C. The Hard-Working Farmer (v. 6):** “*The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.*” There are two practical truths that are found in this last analogy:

First, the farmer *has* to work. If he leaves a field to itself, all it will provide is weeds (which is why sluggards do not make good farmers; Proverbs 24:30-34). A farmer *knows* that successful farming “depends as much on sweat as on skill” (Stott). No matter how poor the soil, or how bad the weather, or how little the farmer *feels* about working on any given day, he must stay at his work. Hard work *is* indispensable to good farming.

Second, a farmer expects to receive the first share of his harvest. Paul’s point is that the hardworking farmer *deserves* it, because more than anything else his fruitful yield is the result of his toil and perseverance. But in this analogy, what’s the *spiritual* harvest to which Paul is referring? Numerous applications have been suggested by commentators, but the *context* ultimately governs the meaning of the apostle.

Here, Timothy is the one likened to God’s “farmer” (or minister). His task is to labor long and hard, in order to produce the fruits of faith and other virtues in the lives of those entrusted to his care (the harvest). As he faithfully performs this ministry, he himself directly benefits from the joy of a work well done, and from the gratitude of those whom he has served (the first share of the harvest). In the life to come, such faithful laboring will also be rewarded by Christ Himself. “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant*” (Matt. 25:21). Thus, this anticipated “first share” of the harvest is the motivation for *all* who serve others as God’s hardworking “farmers.” In the words of an old gospel hymn, “There is joy in serving Jesus.”

**D. The Way to Greater Understanding (v. 7):** “*Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*” There is an important balance between what Paul commands (v. 7a), and what he promises (v. 7b).

First, Paul exhorts Timothy to discover for himself the deeper implications of these analogies. He’s the one responsible “to reflect on” the apostle’s teaching, by listening to it carefully and thinking it over in his mind. At the very least, this would involve meditation and prayer (v. 7a). The promise then follows: “*For the Lord will give you insight into all this*” (Cf. vv. 3-6). This same process is applicable for anyone today who *wants to receive the promised gift of understanding from the Lord*. We do the contemplating, and the Lord gives the understanding. The more we read, study, and meditate on the Word of God, the more illumination we receive from the Lord. Our devoted study and His divine illumination work together.

In churches throughout this country, many have been led to believe that Christianity makes no unpleasant demands; that “the abundant life” that Jesus promised (John 10:10) is nothing more than an improved old life; and that the way to the Heavenly City is like Dorothy’s easy, leisurely stroll down the yellow brick road ([The Wizard of Oz](#)).

But Paul’s message to Timothy – and through Timothy to us – is precisely the opposite. Suffering hardship is the *normal* course of life for the true follower of Christ. *No* soldier, athlete, or farmer expects results without laboring or suffering. *Nothing* that is worthwhile is ever easy; and there are no *spiritual* gains without pains. That’s why Bunyan wrote [Pilgrim’s Progress](#), and why Paul wrote 2 Timothy, and why we need to reflect on this basic truth, so that the Lord gives us greater insight into the not-so-surprising demands of the Christian life – by His grace and for His glory.