Focused

Believers can find strength for life’s hardships by focusing on God’s grace and the gospel.

As in every sport, golf has rules that govern how the game is played. Breaking the rules can result in penalties, including disqualification in some cases. Consider, for example, what happened in the men’s 1940 U.S. Open Championship tournament. Ed Oliver, one of the more popular golfers on the pro tour, finished his final round with a score that got him into a playoff with two other top golfers of the day, Lawson Little and Gene Sarazen. Before the playoff could begin, however, Oliver learned that he had been disqualified for breaking a rule governing players’ start times.

While several players were still awaiting their assigned start times, Oliver noticed storm clouds gathering on the horizon. He and five other golfers rushed to the first tee, hoping to start and complete their rounds before the storm hit. Unfortunately, the official starter was away from the first tee at the time, and by rule the six golfers were not to begin play before their start times or without an official starter. Because of the threatening weather, however, Oliver and five other players disregarded the rule and teed off. Oliver’s score for the round landed him in a tie with co-leaders Little and Sarazen, both of whom had completed their rounds earlier in the day. It appeared as though a three-person playoff would decide the champion.

As Oliver sat in the locker room waiting for the playoff to begin, he was informed of the disqualification for starting his round early. Both Little and Sarazen spoke in support of Oliver, arguing that he should be allowed to compete in the playoff in spite of the rules violation. Tournament officials stood by their decision, however; Oliver and the five other players who disregarded the rules were disqualified. The popular and skilled golfer could only watch as Little and Sarazen battled for the championship trophy.

In this session’s Bible passage, the apostle Paul used a similar illustration to motivate Timothy to “play by the rules” of faithful Christian service and not be cowed by threats of hostile opposition. Paul’s words can encourage us as well. Christian living, not to mention Christian ministry, demands that we maintain spiritual discipline, depending on the Lord for daily strength.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-13

Paul spent much of chapter one urging Timothy not to succumb to shame and fear over Paul’s situation but rather to share in suffering for the gospel (2 Tim. 1:8). At the conclusion of the chapter, Paul briefly described his concerns regarding several other gospel coworkers in the region of Ephesus, some of whom had abandoned working with the apostle. One coworker in particular, however, had come to Rome from Ephesus to care for Paul during the apostle’s imprisonment; for that assistance Paul was extremely grateful (1:15-18).

Second Timothy 2:1-2 is dominated by two imperatives that set the tone for the rest of the chapter. First, Paul commanded Timothy to “be strong” (2:1). He was referring in particular to spiritual strength, the strength that comes as a result of God’s grace in Christ Jesus and that empowers the believer to serve Christ boldly and faithfully. Second, Paul directed Timothy to “commit” (2:2) sound gospel instruction—the instruction Paul gave to Timothy—to other potential Christian leaders who, in turn, would also train future leaders. Essentially, the apostle commanded Timothy to establish an ongoing discipleship ministry in Ephesus: making disciples; then making disciplers of those disciples who also would grow to make disciples and disciplers.

Paul’s emphasis in 2:1-13 was on the recruitment and training of future church leaders. Thus, he began with an appeal for Timothy to view hardships as discipline—that is, as opportunities to develop spiritual strength. He encouraged Timothy to think like a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer, all of whom endure the hardships of discipline in order to succeed in their endeavors (2:3-7).

Next, Paul encouraged Timothy to consider two examples of endurance. First and foremost, Timothy needed to “remember Jesus Christ” (2:8). Jesus suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the world. Yet, the resurrection of Christ turned His suffering into healing and His death into victory over sin and the grave. Moreover, Paul’s endurance in suffering for the gospel was an example that God’s Word could never be stopped (2:9-10). Paul capped off the two examples with a trustworthy saying about endurance (2:11-13).

Several principles can be drawn from these verses. First, churches are to continually recruit and train future leaders and teachers. Second, Christian living and Christian ministry are not easy. Attention to discipline is required. Third, endurance must be developed so that believers are not easily discouraged by opposition and hostility. Paul urged Timothy (and us) to serve as a faithful witness to the power of the gospel.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

FUTURE FOCUSED (2 Tim. 2:1-2)

VERSE 1

You, therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

The word therefore connects Paul’s upcoming instructions about faithful service not only to the exhortation in 1:8 but also to the examples of trustworthy and untrustworthy coworkers in 1:15-18. Some of Paul’s helpers had deserted him, perhaps becoming discouraged by the apostle’s imprisonment and likelihood of execution. One helper, however, Onesiphorus [AHN if SIF oh ruhs], had proven faithful to Paul, going to great lengths to care for the apostle in a difficult time. Was Timothy, Paul’s beloved “son” in the ministry, also facing an inner struggle over the apostle’s dire situation? If so, Paul needed to intervene. He moved to reignite the young leader’s courage and commitment to Christ. Whatever might happen to Paul, Timothy needed to stay focused on his calling and the task of leading the church in Ephesus.

Paul urged Timothy to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

The Greek verb rendered be strong is in a tense that can also be understood as “be made strong” or “be strengthened” (see ESV). In either case, it is clear that God’s grace given to believers in Christ Jesus was the source of strength that Timothy needed.

God’s grace in Christ relates to the divine motive undergirding our salvation—we are saved by His grace through faith—as well as to the ongoing divine power by which we live and serve the Lord. Paul clearly connected both aspects of grace in Titus 2:11-12: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age.” Timothy needed to depend on God’s unfailing grace to complete the mission he had been given.

VERSE 2

What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Next, Paul directed Timothy to do what Paul had done with him. Perhaps the young church leader was feeling somewhat like the Old Testament prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10—that is, he felt that he was the only one left to carry on the Lord’s work and the enemies of the gospel now had a target on him!
What Timothy needed to do, however, was as basic as the Great Commission. He needed to make disciples that grew to become disciplers.

The phrase **what you have heard from me** refers to the sound gospel teaching Timothy had been hearing Paul proclaim for years. It was time for Timothy to **commit** (“entrust,” ESV; NIV) that gospel instruction to other **faithful men** in Ephesus. The Greek word translated *commit* was also used to describe a deposit of money or other goods left with a trusted friend for safekeeping. Timothy needed to identify some trustworthy believers in the Ephesian church and entrust them with the same gospel teaching he had received from Paul.

These men needed to display not only the characteristic of faithfulness (particularly in rejecting false teachings) but also the potential to lead and teach others. This is the effective discipleship-leadership approach that Jesus used in His earthly ministry and that continues to be used in growing churches to this day. Paul directed Timothy to entrust the gospel message to those believers **who will be able to teach others also**.

The situation for Timothy in Ephesus probably was made all the more urgent by two factors. First, many leaders in the Ephesian church evidently had defected to become proponents of the false teachers. Second, Paul wanted Timothy to leave Ephesus soon and come to Rome where the apostle was in prison and was likely to face execution (4:6,9). Recruiting and training teachers in Ephesus who would pass on the true gospel message was crucial for that church’s future.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Paul’s strategy for discipleship included the recruitment of people who could be trained to teach others what they had learned. How does your church carry out its discipleship strategy? In what ways could that strategy be strengthened?

**MISSION FOCUSED** *(2 Tim. 2:3-7)*

Paul chose three figures from first-century life (a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer) to illustrate the importance of disciplined living in achieving the goals of success in life. Timothy would have been familiar with these figures. Moreover, Paul had previously used the three illustrations in a letter to the church in Corinth, albeit to emphasize different truths (1 Cor. 9:7,24). The section ends with an appeal by Paul for Timothy to give attention to the truth he was emphasizing, applying it to his ministry task in Ephesus.
VERSE 3

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

The Greek word translated share in suffering (“endure hardness,” KJV; “join with me in suffering,” NIV) appears previously in 2 Timothy 1:8, where Paul challenged Timothy to “share in suffering for the gospel.” Here, he used the term to compare Christian life and ministry to being a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Paul used military language in other epistles as well, often in the context of the Christian’s engaging in spiritual warfare (see Rom. 7:23; 2 Cor. 10:3-4; Eph. 6:10-17). His emphasis in Timothy’s case was on a good soldier’s disciplined focus on the mission even in the face of hardships.

VERSE 4

No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in the concerns of civilian life; he seeks to please the commanding officer.

Paul extended his analogy of the “good soldier,” emphasizing two key disciplines of military life. First, no one serving as a soldier (“no man that warreth,” KJV) gets entangled in the concerns of civilian life (“the affairs of this life,” KJV; “in civilian pursuits,” ESV). Soldiers must give their full attention to the mission at hand. They cannot succeed in that mission if they are distracted and discouraged by outside concerns.

Second, the “good soldier” always seeks to please the commanding officer (“the one who enlisted him,” ESV). A basic tenet of the soldier’s creed—both ancient and modern—is to be loyal to the one under whom the soldier serves and do one’s best to carry out orders and instructions given to the soldier and his unit. Timothy’s ultimate commanding officer was “Christ Jesus” (2:3). Paul may also have had in mind that Timothy needed to stay focused on the assignment Paul had given him related to the church in Ephesus.

We must be careful not to misapply Paul’s analogy in terms of today’s Christian ministers. For example, the analogy of the “good soldier” does not mean that pastors must be single. Neither does the analogy forbid a church’s use of a bivocational pastor. Paul’s emphasis was on being disciplined as a church leader in regard to the church’s mission and the pastor’s crucial role in that mission. The gospel mission demands priority because Christ is Lord.

VERSE 5

Also, if anyone competes as an athlete, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

Next, Paul compared the Christian life and ministry to the discipline of an athlete (“strive for masteries,” KJV). Athletic imagery can be found in the
New Testament both in Paul’s writings (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27) and in the Book of Hebrews (see Heb. 12:1-2,12-13). Having spent considerable time in the region where the ancient Olympic games were held, Paul probably would have been familiar with the athlete’s life and the rigors of athletic competition. He knew, for example, that the athlete had one—and only one—goal in sight: win the competition and be crowned as the champion. To gain that crown, however, the athlete must compete according to the rules (“lawfully,” KJV). The Greek term rendered by the phrase according to the rules can also mean “lawfully,” “properly,” or “rightly.” In other words, the athlete who cheats, cuts corners, or disregards the established rules of the competition will be disqualified, not declared the champion.

Ancient Greek athletes were expected to abide by rules governing not only the competition itself but also their preparation for the contest. The application Paul wanted Timothy to learn was that victory in the Christian life and ministry required a disciplined focus on the goal of receiving the “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:8) from the Lord Jesus Christ at His return. Enduring hardships and suffering along the way was part of the training that prepares believers in general and Christian ministers in particular for the ultimate competition against Satan for the souls of men and women. The goal of Paul’s discipline and the focus of his ministry was that he might not be disqualified in the race (see 1 Cor. 9:26-27). Like Paul, Timothy was not to choose a less difficult path in ministry. Rather, he needed to abide by the rules of the gospel and not take shortcuts either in preparation or competition.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Games” on pages 613–614 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways does the imagery of athletic training motivate you to grow in your faith and Christian service? What are some “rules” that help keep you focused on succeeding in your church’s mission and ministry?

**VERSE 6**

The hardworking farmer ought to be the first to get a share of the crops.

Finally, Paul compared the Christian life and ministry to a farmer (“husbandman,” KJV). By using this familiar analogy, Paul emphasized two key points. First, he pointed to the farmer’s diligence and discipline. The farmer was a hardworking one. Successful farming in the ancient
world (as in today’s world) was not easy; it required hard work. The Book of Proverbs contains numerous sayings of condemnation for the lazy slacker who refused to do the hard work required to harvest a crop (see Prov. 20:4).

Second, Paul emphasized that the farmer who diligently puts in the required hard work **ought to be the first to get a share of the crops**. He made a similar point in writing to the Corinthians: “Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? Or who shepherds a flock and does not drink the milk from the flock?” (1 Cor. 9:7). Diligence and discipline may be difficult at the time, but they pay off in the end. Like the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer, believers who suffer hardship for the sake of the gospel and keep on faithfully serving can be confident that God will one day reward them.

**VERSE 7**

**Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.**

Paul concluded the analogies by urging Timothy to consider (“think over,” ESV; “reflect on” NIV) what he had said. Jesus similarly used parables in His teaching, often completing a parable with the words “Let anyone who has ears listen” (Matt. 13:43). Both Jesus’ words and Paul’s counsel to Timothy were calls to pay close attention to the deeper implications of what was said.

If Timothy took time to reflect on the purpose of Paul’s three analogies, the Lord could be counted on to give the young leader understanding in everything (“insight into all this,” NIV). The good soldier, the disciplined athlete, and the hardworking farmer provided insights of truth about the Christian life and successful Christian ministry.

**CHRIST FOCUSED** (2 Tim. 2:8-13)

These verses can be divided into two sections, the first section introduced by the command to remember (2:8) and the second by the introduction of a trustworthy saying (2:11). In the first section, Paul pointed Timothy to Jesus’ identity and then to Paul’s example of suffering. In the second section, Paul pointed Timothy to his need to endure and to avoid denying Christ. The section ends with a reminder of Christ’s faithfulness.

**VERSE 8**

**Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and descended from David, according to my gospel,**

Paul’s command that Timothy “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2:3) led to this command: **remember Jesus Christ.** Suffering
for the gospel was difficult, and Timothy needed to maintain his focus on Christ rather than on his circumstances. Paul highlighted two aspects that demanded Timothy’s careful attention. First, Timothy was to remember that Jesus had risen from the dead. Christ’s suffering and death were followed by His resurrection. Timothy could likewise be confident that his suffering on behalf of the gospel would end in vindication when Christ returned.

The second aspect Timothy needed to remember was that Jesus was descended from David. Jesus was (and is) the promised Messiah from the lineage of King David, destined to establish the everlasting rule of God in the creation (see 2 Sam. 7:12-16). These two aspects, Jesus’ resurrection and His everlasting messianic rule, were the heart of the gospel that Paul proclaimed.

The words according to my gospel do not mean that the gospel originated with Paul but rather that God had entrusted to Paul the ministry of declaring the gospel to the world—especially to the Gentile world.

VERSE 9

for which I suffer to the point of being bound like a criminal. But the word of God is not bound.

Paul asserted that his suffering imprisonment (to the point of being bound like a criminal) was nothing less than the result of his being obedient to Christ in proclaiming the gospel. Paul did not ask Timothy to do anything that the apostle was unwilling to do. The phrase rendered bound like a criminal probably indicates that Paul was enduring physical abuse while being locked in chains (see ESV; NIV). The Greek word translated criminal appears also in Luke’s Gospel in reference to the men crucified alongside Jesus (see Luke 23:32-33,39). The term typically described people accused of serious crimes; perhaps, therefore, it pointed to the seriousness of Paul’s situation.

While the authorities might keep the aged apostle in chains in a Roman prison, they could never stop the gospel. Paul reminded Timothy that the word of God is not bound (“God’s word is not chained,” NIV). This was not Paul’s first time to be imprisoned for the gospel. In fact, a number of his letters that are now included in the Holy Scriptures were written from prison. God’s enemies might lock up gospel ministers in chains for a time, but they could never restrain the gospel itself.

VERSE 10

This is why I endure all things for the elect: so that they also may obtain salvation, which is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

The phrase this is why (“therefore,” KJV; ESV; NIV) points to a conclusion based on what Paul stated in 2:8-9. That is, Paul’s suffering on account of the
gospel and the gospel’s unstoppable march were the reasons Paul endured all the hardships and dangers he had faced to that point. He did so for the elect.

In Paul’s writings, the term the elect most often refers to believers, the body of Christ. The question in this verse is whether Paul had in mind those who had already believed or those who would believe in the future. Perhaps he had in mind both groups. Paul had seen his gospel preaching bear much fruit throughout the Gentile world. He would keep on enduring to the end because the gospel could not be stopped and many more people would come to faith in Christ as Timothy and other evangelists took up the mantle of leadership.

Another question in this verse concerns the relationship between Paul’s endurance of suffering and the elect’s obtaining salvation. Paul did not mean that his suffering had any saving power. Rather, believers clearly obtain salvation … in Christ Jesus and in Him alone. Yet, it was to that end that Paul labored as a gospel minister and refused to forsake his calling even in the face of persecution, imprisonment, and the threat of death. Salvation in Christ—for Paul and for every believer past, present, and future—was far more than a promise of comfort and success in this life. In fact, believers might well face much suffering and distress in this life. But they are guaranteed to experience eternal glory with their God and Savior in the life to come.

VERSE 11
This saying is trustworthy: For if we died with him, we will also live with him;

Probably the words this saying is trustworthy point to what comes after them in 2:11b-13. (See also 1 Tim. 1:15; but contrast 1 Tim. 3:1 and 4:9 where the words point to what comes immediately before them.) The saying itself contains four parallel statements introduced in turn by the word if and concluded with a statement about the believer’s relation to Christ. The first two statements describe positive actions on the part of the believer and the final two statements depict negative actions.

The words for if we died with him are similar to Romans 6:8, where Paul used the language of dying to refer to the believer’s being baptized into Christ at conversion. Further, in Galatians 2:20 Paul wrote “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” It is possible that Paul expected Timothy to understand that the death to self at conversion might also foreshadow physical death as a martyr for the gospel.

Paul’s use of the future tense in the second half of the statement (we will also live with him) suggests that he was probably referring to life in heaven. However, some Bible scholars point out that Paul’s reference does not necessarily exclude an application in the believer’s present life with Christ.
To be sure, Jesus’ resurrection initiated the believer’s new life with Him in this life; it will be consummated in heaven in the life to come.

VERSE 12

if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us;

The second statement of Paul’s “trustworthy saying” emphasizes enduring suffering for the faith. The Greek word rendered endure means “to stand one’s ground in the face of opposition.” Those who endure suffering for the sake of Christ will also reign with him. Jesus promised that His apostles would sit on thrones and be given the responsibility of judging Israel (see Luke 22:22-30). In addressing the issue of lawsuits among Christians, Paul reminded the Corinthian believers “the saints will judge the world” (1 Cor. 6:2).

In the third statement of the saying, Paul shifted from a positive to a negative aspect—that of denying Christ. The Greek word rendered deny means “to disassociate oneself from a person or event.” Paul was addressing a situation in Ephesus in which people who once claimed to be Christians later deserted the Lord (see 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:17; 4:10). In Matthew 10:33, Jesus warned His disciples that “whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven.”

VERSE 13

if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.

The fourth and final statement in the “trustworthy saying” contrasts God’s faithfulness to the tendency of sinful humans to be faithless. It is the very nature of God to be faithful in His character. He cannot deny himself. That is, He cannot be anything other than who He is. In light of this, Paul was urging Timothy (and all believers) to live up to who he is in Christ. Difficulties, changing circumstances, and even the threat of death should not shake the believer off course from loving and serving Christ to the end.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why do you think Paul emphasized the need for believers to remember Christ and His resurrection? In what ways does staying focused on Jesus keep believers from falling into the problems mentioned in verses 12-13?