

Body Building

In the name of Jesus who is risen from the dead, dear friends in Christ: The Apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy is sometimes thought of as the great evangelist's last will and testament. He writes the letter from Rome where he is undergoing his second imprisonment there. The first time he was being held, several years earlier, it was under what we might call "house arrest conditions". There was a guard stationed with him at all times; but he was still relatively free to move about, and he was able to receive any number of visitors and so continue his teaching ministry. Strangely enough, his captivity then served to his advantage because it allowed him to work steadily in the cause of Christ's Gospel undistracted by his many enemies and their threats of violence. When his case was finally heard – he had been accused of inciting a riot in Jerusalem – we know that he was acquitted and released. But the Roman attitude toward Christians had changed in the years since then. Enemies of the Church had so slandered it that now the authorities believed that Christianity was a dangerous cult that needed to be eradicated. So, Paul knew that this time the outcome of his trial would not be so favorable. Nor were the conditions of his imprisonment. Now he was being held literally in chains in a dark dungeon, almost completely cut off from outside world. And this time he was not accused of fomenting rebellion as before – a rap he could of easily beaten; but merely of confessing the name of Jesus – a crime of which Paul would enthusiastically confess himself to be most guilty.

Unfortunately for Paul, this also meant that many of his formerly faithful friends and co-workers chose to abandon him. Some fell away entirely from the faith during the persecution. They chose to renounce Jesus in order to save their skins. Others fled to safer regions of the empire. And still others who remained in Rome continued to confess the Lord Jesus in their hearts, perhaps; but they were not willing to do so publicly or with their mouths. They certainly didn't want to be seen visiting Paul in prison or bringing him much needed food and clothing for fear that their association with him would lead to their own arrests as well. Only through his still devoted friend and longtime colleague, Luke, who continued to visit him when he was able, did Paul have any contact with the world outside his cell.

Doubtless it is through Luke that the Apostle got this letter out. In fact, Luke probably wrote it while Paul dictated. But however, it was written, the content of the letter is veritable treasure for the Church for it contains the final advice, encouragements, and warnings of the Church's most experienced old warhorse, Paul, to Timothy, his much younger former student and aide. Paul knows that it is to him that he is now passing the mantle of leadership and responsibility. And Paul writes this letter from a unique perspective, for he has seen it all. He was on hand to witness the birth of the Christian Church—though at that time (now more than thirty years ago) he had been its most active and bitter opponent. He had set out to destroy faith in Jesus by mercilessly persecuting those who believed in him. He was a self-described Pharisee among the Pharisees, an über-legalist, full of pride and self-importance. He was firmly convinced that he was God's handpicked agent to defend the sacred faith of his fathers by crushing the heretical cult of the crucified Nazarene. He was in the process of doing just that when the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road. Then he realized that everything he so firmly believed was wrong. He also understood, to his terror, that the Judge he now stood before was the very Jesus whom he had until recently so delighted in cursing and blaspheming.

But instead of damning him to the deepest pit of hell as he knew he richly deserved, Christ showed Paul his all surpassing grace and forgiveness. And Paul's eyes were opened to the truth: that mercy is greater than sacrifice; that the Gospel of Jesus Christ supersedes the Law; and that God's love for sinners who trust in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross triumphs over his judgment against them for their sins. He learned that everything he thought was good and righteous about himself, all his works of glory, his proudest achievements, his struggle to perfect himself through his own efforts – these were all an affront to Almighty God. They stank to high heaven. He learned that the only true merits before God were the ones won by his Son. And he learned that the greatest power in the universe was the grace of God in Jesus Christ who was crucified for the sins of the world and raised to life again. It was in this grace that Paul was now being raised to

a new and holy life of his own; for it turned out that he was indeed God's chosen agent, not to destroy the Church of Christ, but to build it up and spread its saving message across the Roman Empire.

And empowered by that grace he had done just that. He, a relatively slight and weak man, with a stammering tongue and a number of obvious physical defects, had spread the Gospel like no one else. Though outwardly he looked more like Peewee Herman than Arnold Schwarzenegger, in a spiritual sense he was a dynamo of strength and activity: a cross between the mighty Samson and the Energizer Bunny. He planted dozens of churches on two continents as well as on several islands of the Mediterranean. He was a one-man traveling seminary who trained an entire generation of pastors – Timothy was just one of them. And while doing all that, Paul also found time to write more than half of the New Testament. He witnessed Christ before kings and paupers, he confounded religious scholars and secular skeptics with his arguments, and on one occasion he even rebuked St. Peter because his actions were inconsistent with the Gospel he claimed to teach. And in the process Paul faced more hostile crowds than he could count. He survived beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, and assassination attempts – and now he was facing his death, firmly convinced that the grace of Christ that sustained and strengthened him through all these other trials would carry him through the last one.

And so as he prepares to meet the end of his earthly life, he commends to Timothy the same all powerful grace of Jesus that made him the champion of Gospel that he was. He does this with the hope and prayer that his young charge will carry on the good fight taking full advantage of the wellspring of divine strength that is available to him. And before I go on, I should probably mention that Paul writes here as a senior pastor to another pastor with less experience. For that reason, what he says applies primarily to those who hold the pastoral office. However, we needn't limit it to pastors alone, for we are all members of the body of Christ, and each one of us has a part to play in it and any number of functions to perform. And just as a body builder, when he goes to the gym to work out, concentrates on developing all of his muscles through a wide variety of exercises, so too every member of the body of Christ needs to be exercised for the Church as a whole to be strengthened.

For that is the goal: for all of us to be strengthened by the grace of Christ. That's what Paul says he wanted for Timothy – and by extension, it's what Jesus wants for all of us. And that pretty much begs the question: how? How are we to be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus? The answer is quite simple. In this whole wide world the Lord Jesus has bound his grace to just two things: his Word and his Sacraments. That's where he says his grace is to be found and that's where we should expect to find it – there and not in any other place. This is why Paul tells Timothy, "Keep on teaching exactly what you've heard me teaching; and train up other trustworthy men to do the same thing." Paul wants the Word of Christ to be taught because it's through the Word that Jesus gives us the power of his Spirit to believe in him and be saved. It's through the Word that the Spirit convicts us of sin and turns our hearts to trust in Jesus. And it's through the faith that his grace works in us that we are equipped to step out boldly in the face of adversity, to share the Gospel with those who have not heard, and to give ourselves sacrificially to attend the needs of others.

And here's the point: if we attempt to do any of these things (or anything else, for that matter) apart from the grace which we receive through hearing the Word, we'll be operating in our own failing strength and not in his – and the pathetic results of our efforts will show it. What applies to body builders applies also to us: use it or lose it. If you are not actively receiving the strength of his grace that comes through his Word and Sacraments, you're losing it. It's like walking up a down escalator at the mall. If you stand still, you will go backwards. If you want to stay at the same level, it takes steady work; but if you want to get ahead, then you have to redouble your effort. The only way to grow stronger in Christ's grace is to exercise your spirit more thoroughly in his Word.

To drive the point home and to expand upon it some, Paul then uses three different illustrations that relate very physical pursuits to the spiritual development he wanted Timothy to strive for. The first picture is that of a soldier. "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus", he says. Who can doubt that Paul had in mind the many so-called Christians who were hiding their faith to avoid persecution? He's telling Timothy (and us) not to be like them. A soldier's job is to face the enemy and fight, not to run from conflict, and certainly not to blend in with the enemy to avoid detection. Of course, facing the enemy means taking the brunt of their attack – and that means suffering. But even this suffering serves a good purpose. Paul said that

when he was most afraid, when he felt weak and unsure of himself in the face of adversity, those times required him to rely more on Jesus and to place his trust in his promises. That, he said, made him far stronger than he could ever be by himself. So suffering for the faith makes the Christian stronger in Christ's grace.

Another aspect of the soldier illustration, Paul says, is not becoming entangled or unnecessarily encumbered in civilian pursuits. And I think what he has in mind here is how sometimes undisciplined soldiers took advantage of their circumstances to loot the homes and property of their enemies. They would weigh themselves down with heavy items of brass, silver, and gold – any valuables they could find; but of course, the additional burden made the going a lot more difficult for them. It made them far less effective as soldiers. A good soldier, Paul says, doesn't saddle himself with that kind excess weight. And in the context of what he's talking about, he's referring to all those worldly things that distract us away from receiving the grace of Christ through his Word. When you say to yourself, "I don't have time to spend with Jesus and receive his strength for my life today because ..." it's time to reorder your priorities.

The second illustration Paul gives us is that of an athlete. He says, "An athlete only wins a trophy if he competes according to the rules." Just this last week we heard about an Olympic medalist who admitted that she used anabolic steroids. She was stripped of her medals. And it seems to me that a few weeks ago, I read about a marathon runner who got caught taking an eighteen-mile shortcut. He slipped out of the race, cut over to where he knew they'd be returning, and then waited in the crowd for the front runners to go by. Then he rejoined the race, easily kicking past the leaders because they were exhausted, and he was relatively fresh. Trouble is that he got caught.

Paul's point here is that there are no shortcuts to receiving the soul strengthening grace of God in Christ. You can only get it in his Word; and in particular only by actually engaging it fully with meditation and prayer. Paul did not become the giant of faith he was by magic. It's not like the Lord just filled his brain with deep theological insights one night while he slept. No, he came to them the hard way: by grappling with the difficult texts and mysteries of the Scriptures, and step by necessary step the Holy Spirit revealed a little more of the truth. The same is true of us. There is no shortcut or steroid we can take to artificially strengthen ourselves with the grace of Christ. Just for example, it would be a lot easier for me to hunt around on the internet each week to find a clever sermon to preach to you on Sundays. There are thousands of them available. Some of you might appreciate it because I'm sure that I could find ones that are shorter and more entertaining than what you usually get. The trouble is that I'd be robbing myself of the time I spend engaging Christ in his Word – the time the Holy Spirit is at work building me up in the faith. And so, in the end I'd be robbing you too: robbing you of a spiritually strengthened pastor who is able to serve you as he should. How can I feed you if I'm starving myself?

Paul's last illustration is a farmer. He writes, "It's the hard-working farmer who earns the right to his share of the first fruits." What's telling here is the word he uses for hard-working. It literally means to work to the point of exhaustion. This, incidentally, is how body builders work. They exercise their muscles until the point of failure – until they can't lift the weight their working with anymore. And what's going on internally is that muscle cells are being destroyed; but what happens is that the cells around one that's been destroyed try to fill the gap by generating new cells – and since its maybe two or three or more cells that are neighbors, they all try to fill the gap; so you end up with several cells where one used to be. This is what causes you to bulk up when you work out – and what gives you more strength in the end: you've got more muscle tissue. That, according to Paul, is how we should be pursuing the strength we receive by the grace of Christ. And that should make us all ask the question, "What am I doing personally to deepen my faith in Jesus and grow in the strength of his grace?" That's important, because a strong body needs every part in top condition. It doesn't make any difference how much you can lift with your arms if your back won't support the weight, nor how fast you can run if your ankles are weak. In the same way, the body of Christ in any given place is only as strong as its weakest members. And for that reason, we have an obligation, both to ourselves and to each other, to be as strong as we can be in the grace of Christ.

Paul concludes this morning's text with some strong words of encouragement for Timothy. First, he rejoices that even though he is in chains, the Word of God is still unbound and at work in the world calling people to faith and life in Jesus. For that reason, he's unconcerned about whatever may happen to him. He is certain that Timothy and the many others God will raise up after him will continue the work he's soon to leave

behind. And this should be an encouragement for all of us: if the church could get by just fine without Paul, then surely none of us is indispensable. The Lord will see to it that his Church in all ages is strengthened by his grace in Christ. Paul's final words are apparently part of an early Christian hymn: "If we have died with him, we will also live with him"; that's the promise Jesus makes to us at Baptism. "If we endure, we will also reign with him"; that's the promise for all who remain in their Baptismal grace and faith till the end. "If we deny him, he also will deny us"; a grave warning against falling away into apostasy. And finally, words of comfort that remind us that even when we as the members of his body are weak and failing, he is always strong to forgive and to save: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."

May Christ our Lord who is faithful to us strengthen each of us with his grace and preserve us in the saving faith until the end. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!