

SIGNS FOR OUR TIME 3: ENDURE HARDSHIP

II TIMOTHY 2:1-13 & 4:6-8

We come back to our series in II Timothy which Dayo has entitled “Signs for our Time”. Earlier this year, we were privileged to be able to travel to Australia for our third visit to see our daughter, Jo. While we were there, we travelled to this place. Does anyone know what it’s called? Uluru (or Ayer’s Rock as nobody calls it anymore – it never belonged to Ayer and he didn’t see it first. The Anangu people have been living there for, it is estimated, about 10,000 years!)

But can anyone tell me why it’s there, stuck in the middle of the central Australian desert? The Anangu will have a folk legend concerned with their ancestor spirits or something, but they’re wrong. The reason Uluru is where it is, is because it’s made of tougher, more enduring stuff than everything that was around it. Everything else has been eroded away into the low sand dune system all around – only the rock remains. Now the apostle, Paul, never went to Australia, so couldn’t use Uluru as an illustration, but in the passage we’re going to read, he talks to Timothy about endurance and gives him three examples of human activity to make his point. Let’s read on ...

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No-one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he doesn’t receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying and the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too, may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying:-

“If we died with him, we will also live with him;
If we endure, we will also reign with him;
If we disown him, he disowns us;
If we are faithless, he will remain faithful
For he cannot disown himself.”

II Timothy 2:1-13

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord,

the righteous judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

II Timothy 4:6-8

When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he (Paul) was in big trouble. He'd been in trouble before.

In II Corinthians 11, he tells his readers that he'd been frequently imprisoned, severely flogged and had his life threatened again and again. Five times he'd had 39 lashes, three times he'd been flogged with rods, once stoned and three times shipwrecked and so on.

He'd been constantly in danger, but now the trouble was bigger still – he was chained up like a common criminal in some horrible dungeon in Rome and would soon be on trial for his life. He strongly expected to lose and thus face execution.

Knowing all this, it was important for him to write and strengthen young Timothy and through Timothy (and others) the churches that he'd founded.

If you don't think this is a big deal, try to imagine how you'd feel if we reported to you that Dayo had been executed during the week for being our pastor. Now crank that up by a few degrees of magnitude to take account of Paul's standing and pivotal importance to these churches.

And Paul's advice to Timothy is to:-

“Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus ...”

II Timothy 2:1

The sense of this is an ongoing strengthening, not a once and for all being made strong. Instead of “be strong”, it would be better translated “be continually strengthened.” Because, you see, we have no strength or endurance of our own – and if you remember one thing today, remember this – WE RECEIVE STRENGTH AS A GRACE GIFT IN CHRIST JESUS.

If we begin to lose strength, seek and ask Him for more.

If we face a trial, seek and ask for strength to endure it.

If we have some work to do, draw strength from the grace that it is in the Son.

That's how Christians endure and do amazing things for God. Not always spectacular things in the way the world sees, but amazing things in kingdom terms. Like the southern African women I heard about a few years ago on the radio. They daily gathered up the children of parents afflicted with HIV/AIDS and gave them a square meal and something of an education with very little outside resource. Fleeting getting on to a radio report just the once – I have never heard of them before or since – when I heard about them I could perceive, even at this distance, they were spiritual giants. And to keep this work going, they would require loads of physical strength, emotional strength and spiritual determination.

Or the two Christian men who, before communism fell, decided that the political leader of their country needed to hear the gospel and reckoned they had about half a minute before being dragged off to imprisonment or worse. (This was the leader who was persecuting and imprisoning Christians.) And they summed up the strength for one effort

and were carted off, but much later, after he'd retired, that leader repented of his atheism and turned to the Lord before he died.

And Paul tells Timothy how important it is to find out those who will faithfully stick to the true gospel of Jesus that he'd brought and could them pass it on to others.

But such work would involve hardship such as that which Paul was now enduring, and Paul gives Timothy the three illustrations I alluded to earlier.

1. SOLDIER

Endure like a good soldier – Roman soldiers were phenomenally tough – a bit like our soldiers in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan. You only have to watch the TV news to get an idea of what they have to put up with. Day after day, they go out into that hostile land in awful conditions, not knowing what the enemy may have concocted for them. And whilst on their tour, they have no time to get entangled in civilian affairs – Paul's illustration is of the soldier's weapons getting entangled in his cloak. There is that disciplined, single-minded focus on obeying the commanding officer. Endure like a good soldier. (Six years previously, a Roman army of about 20,000 maximum had faced and defeated a horde of 250,000 in a tough frontier province as wild then, perhaps, as Afghanistan is now. The frontier province was Britannia and the enemy horde was led by a savage queen called Boudicca. (The soldiers Paul was talking about were tough too!!)

2. ATHLETE

To receive the victor's crown, the athletes had to accept the disciplined training required by his event. (These were no female athletes – sorry ladies!) To compete, you actually had to sign to say you'd trained for nine months. To run the Christian race, we have to keep to the rules of the event which involve tough training.

In Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul elaborates on this and in verse 27, talks about 'beating his body daily'. Now, I don't believe that he used to lash himself like some are reputed to in the far reaches of the Catholic church or like Shia Moslems do at one of their festivals, but Paul submitted his body to Christian discipline. And we will better endure if we do as well.

3. FARMER

Here, Paul cites the right of a hard working farmer to receive a reward of the first portion of the crop. And knowing this will strengthen us and motivate us. Don't take the metaphor too far or you'll end up performing Christian service just for the rewards you anticipate. Unless the reward we concentrate on is God's "well done!" when we finally enter his presence, then we can go wrong. Take these three pictures together and you won't go far wrong in gaining the endurance Paul is encouraging Timothy towards.

And for Paul, he could see these three things would soon be very real for him. He'd fought a good fight, run the race and kept the faith. What was before him was the crown of righteousness which would be granted and which Jesus would also give to all who love his appearing.

Like Timothy, let's consider and reflect on these things, but most of all (v8) remember the example of our Lord Jesus who, although descended from David (i.e. human like us with every weakness apart from sin) could endure right through to the resurrection.

This is the gospel to strive for.

Let's pray.