

The Minister's Sufferings

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[0 : 00] Well friends, we're continuing with our series of talks under the title, Who'd Be a Minister? And today our subject is the Minister's Sufferings. We've been in 1 Timothy for the last couple of Wednesdays, but now we're moving into the second letter to Timothy, both for today and for the next two Wednesdays as well.

And today we're in chapter 1. I'm sorry, we have a little typing error there. It's not 2 Timothy 2, it's 2 Timothy chapter 1, verses 1 to 14 that I'll read now.

And it's on page 995 in our big heavy blue Bibles if you have one of those. So 2 Timothy chapter 1, the first 14 verses. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child, grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience. As I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith. A faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I'm sure, dwells in you as well.

[1 : 25] For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God gave us a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.

Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do.

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. Now I think you'll be relieved to hear that I have no intention of moaning or groaning or complaining about the minister's lot in life, despite this title, the minister's sufferings.

You might have thought that with a title like that, you were going to get an earful today about long hours and small pay packets and traumas in the manse and vandalism at the church building. Well, the truth about all that kind of thing is, yes, there are real pressures involved in a minister's life in the Western world.

[3 : 15] There are, of course, very great joys and benefits too. It's a terrific life, there are great privileges, and it's a great adventure. A minister's life in other parts of the world, of course, does bring real persecution and horrible things do happen to church leaders in parts of Africa and Asia particularly.

But in the Western world, yes, despite pressures, there are plenty of other people who live with considerable pressures as well. I'm sure many of you do. I'm thinking particularly of people like doctors, teachers, soldiers, motorway engineers, mothers of six, and that sort of thing.

Plenty of pressure there. So that's not the kind of ground I want to cover today. I want instead to look at this second letter to Timothy, and I want to ask what Paul means in this letter by suffering. Now, just a word or two about this second letter. This is the last of Paul's New Testament letters to be written. It was written in prison shortly before Paul was executed, probably in the year 64 AD, while Nero was the Roman emperor.

Nero, of course, famously or infamously hated and persecuted the Christian church. And Paul the Apostle seems to know, as he writes this final letter, that he is about to die.

[4 : 31] Now, from reading the Acts of the Apostles and his other letters, we know that he had many escapes and many rescues in the past. He'd been miraculously set free, for example, from jail at Philippi.

The story is told in Acts chapter 16, when an earthquake from God came. But somehow he knew that that kind of escape was not going to happen this time. So he says in chapter 4, verse 6, the time for my departure has come.

And in this final letter to his most trusted fellow worker, do you remember how Paul describes Timothy in Philippians chapter 2, by saying, I have no one else like him.

He seems to have been Timothy's most trusted fellow worker. And in this letter, it's as though Paul is rather like a relay runner, who is passing on the baton to Timothy for the next generation, so that Timothy should carry on the work.

And in particular, Paul emphasizes two things in this letter. The first is that Timothy is to preserve the gospel, intact, unabridged, unadulterated.

[5 : 34] So he puts it in chapter 1, verse 14, guard the good deposit. And then in the verse before, chapter 1, verse 13, follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me.

So preserve the gospel, Timothy, from all the influences that would distort it or change it or undermine it. And then secondly, Timothy is to proclaim this gospel.

So Paul says in chapter 4, verse 2, preach the word. So when he speaks of preserving the gospel, it's not to be preserved in the same way that you and I might preserve a museum piece.

If, for example, you've got an Egyptian mummy or a stuffed dodo, you'll probably put it behind glass. And make sure that nobody sneezes over it. It's to be preserved in that kind of way.

But the gospel isn't like that. Yes, it's to be preserved, but it's also to be broadcast, proclaimed, in season and out of season. To go back to chapter 4, verse 2. In other words, Timothy, whether you're feeling spring-like or autumnal, you keep preaching it.

[6 : 35] It doesn't matter what you feel like, keep preaching it. So here's the context of this second letter. 64 AD, Emperor Nero, horrible man, prison, discomfort, persecution, and Paul's certainty about his approaching death.

And in that context, Paul is telling Timothy that he, Timothy, has got to be prepared to suffer. So he says, look with me at chapter 1, verse 8. He says, Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. He says in chapter 2, verse 3, share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. But Paul isn't asking Timothy to do something that he's not prepared to do himself.

And he refers to his own sufferings in the letter. So chapter 1, verse 12. He says, appointed a preacher and teacher, Which is why I suffer as I do, but I'm not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.

And again, chapter 2, verses 8 and 9. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I'm suffering, bound with chains as a criminal.

[7 : 47] Now I want us today, just to stay in chapter 1, and I want us to notice something about Paul's thought and language, which is really rather surprising. And it's to do with the way in which the apostle links shame and suffering.

Verse 8, Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel. And let me ask, does that way of linking shame and suffering strike you as being somehow odd?

Let's look at another example in verse 12 there, which is why I suffer as I do, but I'm not ashamed. It seems that in Paul's thinking, if you're not ashamed, you will suffer.

And by implication, if you are ashamed, you won't have to suffer. In other words, suffering and shame are like oil and water. They're incompatible with each other. If you have the one, you won't have the other, and if you have the other, you won't have the one.

Isn't that rather surprising? Don't we normally think of suffering and shame as somehow belonging together, being part and parcel of each other? We certainly have hymns, a number of hymns that we sing, which speak of the suffering and shame of the cross.

[9 : 04] And we've learnt to link the two things together as if they're part of the same package. But here Paul seems to be saying that they cannot belong together. The reason Paul is suffering is

because he's not ashamed.

And the command he's giving to Timothy is that Timothy must not be ashamed either. And by being unashamed, he must be prepared to suffer. Well, let's be like Hercule Poirot and we'll follow this trail and see if we can work out just what's going on.

I've got three points today which I hope will help us to understand this linking of suffering and shame. First, Paul highlights the temptation to be ashamed.

The temptation to be ashamed. Let's notice from verse 8 what Timothy might be tempted to be ashamed of. Therefore, do not be ashamed of two things.

The first is the testimony about our Lord and the second thing is me, his prisoner, Paul, the prisoner. Paul would not have had to tell Timothy not to be ashamed of these two things unless he knew perfectly well that Timothy would be tempted to be ashamed of them.

[10:11] Let me give a simple illustration of being ashamed. Many of us will have been in this kind of position. A 15-year-old girl is walking down the high street with her parents one busy shopping Saturday morning and suddenly she leaves her parents and she darts across the road and mingles with the crowd.

She disappears. And later on, a few minutes later, she meets up with her parents again at the butchers. But she's not very forthcoming about why she left them so suddenly. But eventually it comes out that she'd seen a school friend, a school friend that she admired and she simply couldn't bear for her friend to see what her parents looked like.

I mean, Dad, look at you, those horrible, ridiculous trousers that you will insist on wearing at the weekend. And Mum, your hair looks as if you've crawled through a hedge backwards.

And that hat with your ears sticking out looks like a tea cosy. So she deserts her parents at that critical moment because she's ashamed of them. She can't bear to be seen by her rather cool friend with such frumpy and eccentric mother and father.

Now, it's a similar thing here in verse 8. Paul knows that Timothy will be tempted to be ashamed of two things. So let's look at these two things.

[11:26] The first thing he'll be tempted to be ashamed of is the testimony about our Lord. That is, the truth about Jesus that Christians believe and preach. In the first century AD, the Roman Empire was very cosmopolitan and sophisticated and rather like today's world, it was full of competing religions.

It was a multi-faith empire. And Christianity, this new religion, as well as being persecuted, was widely held in contempt. Jesus of Nazareth, he was regarded by many people as a disgraced and discredited cult leader, some sort of maverick Jewish rabbi who'd ended up on a cross and thereby had got his just desserts as far as people could see.

So if you let it be known in your circle of friends that you believe that this Jesus was the Messiah of Old Testament expectation and more than that that he was God incarnate and more than that that he was returning to earth as the judge of the living and the dead, you were risking sneers and jeers and the ending of friendships and possibly even persecution.

Paul isn't just saying to Timothy don't be ashamed of Jesus, though of course he implies that. He's saying don't be ashamed of these great truths about him which Christians believe and teach.

Now don't we know something of that same kind of temptation sometimes. Maybe there are folk here who left work half an hour or so ago so as to come here to church and you're just leaving your office or your shop or whatever and somebody said to you, one of your colleagues, where are you off to, Billy?

[13:00] And you said, ah, I'm, well, I'm just popping out for a short time. I'll be back soon. I'm going to have my lunch and do something else. Isn't that the same sort of temptation?

You're hardly risking your neck in Glasgow in 2005 by going to church but you might be risking the good opinion of your workmates. Now look at the other temptation to be ashamed in verse 8.

It's the temptation to be ashamed of Paul himself nor of me, his prisoner. Now Paul was well known and in many circles he was notorious.

Paul, the despised leader of that nasty sect, the man who was propagating this pernicious Christianity all over the Mediterranean world. Timothy, are you telling us that you know Paul?

Are you associated with his nasty work and all those Christians? Of course, there is still a temptation to be ashamed of Paul today. A person might say, you're a Christian, are you?

[14:02] Well, my thought about Christianity is this, I can respect Jesus, fine man, fine teacher, without of course believing in him in the way that you do, but that fellow Paul, his writings, I mean honestly, they're a corruption of Christianity.

All he did was to intellectualize it and make it complicated and anyway, he's anti-women and anti-Semitic, isn't he? Have you heard people speak like that about Paul? Timothy, don't be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord and don't be ashamed of me either. You'll be tempted to be ashamed of both, especially when the police are knocking at your door at three o'clock in the morning. But don't be ashamed. Instead, share in suffering for the gospel because if you're not ashamed, you will suffer.

Where there's no shame, there will be suffering. And of course, we might suffer too. So Paul highlights this temptation to be ashamed. Then second, Paul shows the reason for his suffering. It's striking that he begins verse 12 by saying, which is why I suffer as I do. Well, why is it that he suffers? Let's pick up Paul's long sentence at the beginning of verse 9.

[15:14] God who saved us and called us to a holy calling not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our saviour, Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher which is why I suffer as I do.

Now this too is really very intriguing and surprising. Paul is telling us the good news here. It's a short summary of the good news. He speaks of God's purpose and grace given to us before time even began and now lately in the first century demonstrated by the appearing of Christ as our saviour.

Christ who, notice this phrase, abolished death. Abolished death and brought life and immortality to public view in the gospel. And Paul, verse 11, is a herald, a teacher of this good news.

So think of the preacher out in the marketplace or out in the Buchanan Street of the first century. Good news everybody! Gather round! Listen! I'm announcing to you the abolition of death and in its place life and immortality.

This is the best news in the world. The oldest and worst enemy, death itself is at last defeated. What's the reaction? Everybody jumps for joy, tosses their caps in the air, hugs the preacher, begs him to tell them more.

[16:42] No, they don't. They say, shut this fellow up, throw tomatoes at him, lock him away, make him suffer. And that's exactly what they did. And a few weeks later they cut his head off.

Isn't it strange that the best news in the world, in the cosmos, receives this venomous vilification? But the reason is not far to seek.

It's all there in verse 9 if we look for it. In verse 9, Paul speaks of God saving us not because of our works. Now it's that element in the gospel message that causes Paul to suffer and be hated.

If he announced the abolition of death to all people on earth, regardless of any other consideration, then of course Paul would be universally popular. He'd be like the lottery operator whose lottery shells out a jackpot to every participant.

But Paul's gospel and Jesus' gospel is not like that. The point is that before we can enjoy the abolition of death and the revealing of immortality, we have to accept the painful and humbling part of the gospel which is that we need to be saved, that we need a savior.

[17:55] And that involves admitting that we're in the wrong, that we're in a mess. The gospel's message is death's power broken and life and immortality only for those who are prepared to acknowledge that they've been in the wrong with God.

One of the first songs, popular songs, that I ever heard as a little tiny boy went like this and I've remembered it ever since. Two Lovely Black Eyes. Oh, what a surprise.

Only for telling a man he was wrong two lovely black eyes. Do you remember that song? Some of you do. It has a very simple message. Tell a man he's in the wrong and he'll give you a fourpenny one between the skylights.

When the gospel tells a man that he's in the wrong with God, he may well want to give the preacher a fourpenny one. Who are you to tell me I'm in the wrong? Who are you to tell me that I need to be rescued as though I'm some weakling?

And because a man responds like that, he denies himself a share in the abolition of death. Let me ask, if you're not yet a Christian, have you admitted to God that you're in the wrong with him?

[19 : 06] You need to if you're to have a place in eternal life. There's no other way. So this is why Paul suffers as he does. It's because he preaches the real gospel.

The real gospel is never going to sidestep the sinfulness of the non-Christian. The gospel will never flatter the non-Christian. Paul has often offended people and aroused their anger by insisting that they face the fact that they're sinners who have rejected God.

They perhaps want the preacher to preen them and pet them and tell them how good and nice they are and how they deserve to be admitted to heaven because they've been so nice and so pleasant and hard working. But Paul's gospel, verse 9, is not because of our works.

Only because of God's grace and kindness to the undeserving. It is so humbling. It's such a sock in the eye to our pride to become Christians. It's a bit like the humbling of the little boy who admits to his father that he did steal the ten pound note after all although in the last half hour he's five times denied it.

But it goes deeper than that for us. It involves admitting to God that we've got everything wrong up to now. That we've sidelined him entirely. So Paul is telling Timothy and the preacher of today and the would-be preacher of today that he has to stick to the gospel, this gospel, if he's to be true to Christ.

[20 : 32] But if he sticks to it he will suffer for it. He may get a lot more than two black eyes for his pains. It's possible, friends, for a minister today to start off early in life as a gospel preacher, to hold the line for a while to guard the gospel and proclaim the gospel courageously and then at some point in middle life that preacher mops his brow and he begins to say to himself this is so tough.

People keep telling me that I make them so uncomfortable by preaching about human sin and the day of judgment and the need to repent. They tell me that the church would be happier and more compatible with the modern world if I toned the message down a bit and made it less challenging. Now how does a minister respond when he begins to feel that kind of pressure? If he wants to be comfortable he will begin to trim off the hard parts of the gospel whereas if he sticks to the full gospel of grace to sinners he will suffer.

His choice will be a choice between shame and suffering. Either he'll be ashamed of the truth about Jesus or he will suffer for the truth about Jesus.

Paul says to Timothy don't be ashamed instead take your share of suffering as I have done. I can remember taking a Sunday morning service about ten years ago at Burton-on-Trent when we baptised two or three babies.

[22 : 00] When we had babies being baptised in the morning service we knew that we could prepare for an influx of visitors because it was nice to welcome folk who came to witness the wedding of little Ermintrude's head. Now on this occasion knowing that we'd have lots of visitors I decided to preach a simple message from Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

How the tax collector was the one who went home in the right with God because he'd humbled himself and admitted that he was a sinner whereas the proud Pharisee although he was religious was not right with God because he wouldn't humble himself.

And as people left the church I was standing at the back and shaking hands with people at the end of the service and as they filed past there was a great big fellow there who looked a bit like a retired heavyweight boxer he was about six foot something with long black hair and he stood over me and he looked at me and he said next time vicar get someone else to write your script for you I'm off. Now listening to that hardly caused me major suffering I must say I was painful for a few minutes but reactions of that kind if they come again and again to a minister they can build up a certain pressure on the minister to fillet his preaching of its tough elements.

So a minister who at the age of 30 is preaching the Bible's message fully may possibly at the age of 60 be no longer preaching about sin or judgment or biblical sexual ethics or that Christ is the only way to God and to salvation.

[23 : 31] He's found the going too tough he's been too often criticized for preaching the harder edges of the Bible's teaching and so in later years he becomes inoffensive and cuts no ice.

Friends, let's pray for our ministers that they will be prepared to suffer by being unashamed of the testimony about our Lord of the truth about him. Now just a very brief final third point by way of encouragement and that is that Paul here teaches the minister how to suffer.

It's there in verse 8 at the end of the verse it's the kind of phrase that can so easily be overlooked as your eye rushes on. But here it is Paul says to Timothy share in suffering for the gospel by the

power of God.

By the power of God. That's how to suffer by the power of God. Now if somebody were to ask you what do you need the power of God for wouldn't you reply I need the power of God for lots of things in my Christian life.

To keep on praying to keep on loving other people to keep on evangelizing to be a good husband and father or a good wife and mother to make wise choices to keep reading the Bible. But would it occur to you to say I need the power of God in order to endure suffering.

[24 : 49] That's what Paul is saying here. He's saying Timothy you must suffer for the gospel by the power of God. Doesn't that cut across our natural inclinations? Our natural inclination is to ask God to send his power so as to reduce our sufferings.

Please Lord I'm suffering send your power to take it away preferably to get rid of it altogether. But here the power of God is available to sustain Timothy in the midst of his ongoing sufferings.

If he is going to be able to suffer for the gospel and to keep preaching it without trimming it if he's going to be able to be unashamed of Jesus year in year out for the rest of his life and unashamed of the gospel and ready to face persecution rather than running away from it he is going to need a great deal of the power of God.

The gospel will often be met with hostility when it's preached unabridged and untrimmed but the power to go on being unashamed of it is available to ministers and indeed to all of us if we mean business about serving the Lord.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me his prisoner but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.

[26 : 19] Our prayer therefore dear heavenly father as we thank you so much that you have abolished death through what Jesus has done and have brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Our prayer is that you will give to all of us the grace never to be ashamed of the testimony about the Lord Jesus the Bible's true testimony about him.

Give us the grace to stick to it so that all of us right to the end of our days on earth should hold out these words of life and truth to others. We pray that where suffering is necessary you will give us the power to endure it but to do so with joy because we do it for the sake of our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

Amen. Lovely to see you all friends. Do come and join us again next week if you can and don't forget we have an interesting little book stall here at the back if you'd like to browse there.

Thank you.