

# Share in Suffering (2 Timothy 2:3-7)

**Big Idea:** Share in suffering by shifting your loyalties like a soldier, disciplining yourself like an athlete, and working hard like a farmer.

This is not my favorite subject, and it comes up a lot in 2 Timothy.

The subject is suffering. And it's no surprise that it comes up a lot in a book written by someone who had experienced a ton of suffering in his ministry, was in prison as he wrote the letter, and was about to die.

I want you to hear some of what Paul says about suffering in the book of 2 Timothy.

*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... (2 Timothy 1:8)*

*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:3)*

*As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:5)*

*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12)*

Just as movies have musical themes that weave through the films and repeat themselves, this theme of suffering weaves through this entire letter, and indeed throughout the whole New Testament.

It makes sense that Paul would talk about suffering. Suffering for the sake of Jesus was a reality in Paul's day. Many in New Testament world suffered and even died for preaching Jesus.

But what does this have to do with us?

I remember reading passages like this and scratching my head. It really doesn't seem like we need to suffer that much. We might get the odd perplexed look when someone finds out we follow Jesus, but I don't know if that's suffering. And frankly, a lot of us aren't really prepared to suffer much for Jesus. It's not that we're unwilling. It's just something we've never even thought about at all.

Some preachers even preach that we won't suffer. You can find preachers who say that if we believe God and try to please him and live according to his Word, that we will avoid suffering.

And so when suffering comes, as it always does, in the form of an illness, a divorce, a death in the family, emotional struggles, or persecution, we're not prepared. Some of us begin to question God's goodness – or even his very existence.

So it's important that we take a moment and consider what the Bible teaches about suffering. Jesus said, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul even said that suffering is beneficial for our souls:

*Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)*

Since we're going to suffer, we'd better be prepared for it. And if we're going to prepare for it, the passage that we just read is a pretty good place to start.

This is going to be a pretty simple message. In this passage, Paul gives two commands and three illustrations. We're going to look at the first command, and then the three illustrations, and then his final command. Simple, right?

## The First Command: Share in Suffering

Here's the first command: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2:3). This is very similar to what Paul said earlier in 1:8: "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..."

I find this command both comforting and troubling. Here's the comforting part: we're not alone. Paul says we're supposed to *share* in suffering. One of the most important things we can do and must do in order to suffer well is to remember that we're not suffering alone. Jesus went ahead of us and suffered. When we suffer, we enter the fellowship of his suffering (Philippians 3:10). We are not just beneficiaries of Jesus' death. We actually get to share in his sufferings. So when we suffer as Christians, we don't suffer alone. We suffer with Jesus. Suffering becomes a privilege because it's something we get to share with Jesus. It leads us into greater intimacy with him.

But we don't only suffer with Jesus. We suffer with other Christians too. Paul asked Timothy to share in his suffering. Whenever we suffer, we join with thousands of other believers who are suffering as well. A teenager and his younger brother were kicked out of their home recently in Laos in Southeast Asia for attending church.

*Chan and Huang were in a church service on May 24 when their father burst in and began swearing at them. He told them to stop worshiping and go home.*

*Members of the congregation prevented the boys' father from hitting them, but he later cursed at them some more and threw them out of the house. After the boys took refuge at the home of their pastor, their father continued to threaten them, even painting threats on the family home, saying, "I do not want to see you at all; heed this if you do not want to die!" ([Voice of the Martyrs](#))*

That's just one recent story of many. We get to share in suffering. When we suffer for Jesus, we enter the company of fellow sufferers that includes Jesus, Paul, Timothy, Chan and Huang, and more. Share in suffering.

## **Three Illustrations**

That's the first command. Here are the three illustrations of what he means by suffering. These are going to be helpful, because some of us are wondering, "What in the world would it look like for me to follow this command? How exactly am I going to share in suffering?" Paul answers by giving us three images: soldier, athlete, and farmer.

### **Shift your loyalties like a soldier**

"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him." (2:3-4)

Soldiers suffer. It's part of the job. They often sleep on the ground. They endure heat and cold, hunger and thirst. Soldiering required total commitment. Soldiers didn't get involved in anything that distracted them from being soldiers. When Paul

wrote this, you couldn't marry during your term of service. People would serve for up to twenty years; about half survived long enough to retire.

Paul highlights one part of soldiering that's relevant to our walk with Jesus: soldiers shift their priorities from civilian pursuits to pleasing their commanding officer. You're in active service right now. You're not on reserve or back at the base. You're on the front lines. When you follow Jesus, your priorities shift from the normal things that people worry about – living a comfortable life and getting ahead, for instance – to pleasing Jesus no matter what it costs. There's a cost to that. You don't get to choose how you live anymore! If your life doesn't reflect different priorities from people who don't follow Jesus, you're doing it wrong! We don't get to decide how we live anymore. Jesus decides.

That's just part of what it means to follow Jesus. Of course, we're going to continue doing a lot of the same things. We're still going to go to work and buy groceries and pay our bills. But our loyalties and priorities have changed. Your life is no longer your own. You live to please him, not yourself. This will stretch you and cost you your comfort.

## **Discipline yourself like an athlete**

"An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." (2:5)

Athletes live according to a couple of sets of rules.

One set of rules has to do with training: listening to your coach, showing up at practice, doing the drills, conditioning your body. Some athletes back then would have to swear that they'd trained the required number of months before they were allowed to compete. You can't be an athlete if you don't do the work that nobody sees.

But then there's the work that everyone does see. You have to play by the rules of the game. Sprinters have to stay in their lanes. Hurlers must toss javelins with fixed dimensions. Pitchers must use a regulation baseball. Soccer players must not kick opposing players. If you don't follow the rules, you can't play the game.

What kind of suffering is he talking about? We have to follow the rules of Christ. Obedience matters. We need to train ourselves in the habits of grace like taking in Scripture, praying, and staying involved in church. Again, discipline to train and follow the rules involves a certain kind of suffering and self-denial. That's part of what it means to follow Jesus.

## **Work hard like a farmer**

"It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops." (2:6)

How does a farmer suffer? A farmer suffers from hard work. Sacrificial labor. Hustle. But the hard work pays off. The hardworking farmer gets rewards that the lazy farmer doesn't. But it involves suffering: months of hard work, even when the farmer's tired, even when the results are a long way off.

A church like ours got a whiteboard out so they could describe what was involved in church planting in their context, a rabidly liberal, post-Christian context. Here's what they wrote on that whiteboard: "Really hard work. For a really long time. In a really hard place." ([What Church Can Be](#))

That doesn't sound very sexy, but that's what it looks like to follow Jesus.

To summarize: Share in suffering by shifting your loyalties like a soldier, disciplining yourself like an athlete, and working hard like a farmer.

# The Final Command: Think About It

Verse 7 says, "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything."

Hmm. What an interesting way for Paul to conclude this section. It's like he's saying, "I don't want to just give you a content dump here. I want you to really think about this. Work out what this will look like in your life."

And then the promise: the Lord will give you understanding in everything. He will pinpoint the areas of your life that need to change so that you are sharing in suffering.

We don't know what type of suffering we will experience in our lives. Maybe like Paul we'll be put in prison for our obedience to Jesus. Maybe like Timothy, we'll be challenged to not be ashamed for those who suffer for Jesus' sake. Or maybe like a soldier, an athlete, or a farmer, our suffering will be more like the everyday kind: staying loyal to Jesus, disciplining ourselves, and working hard over a long period of time. Whatever form our suffering takes, we're called to share in suffering.

Friends, what a privilege we have to share in suffering. We get to join Jesus and thousands of other believers in living not for ourselves but for him. Malcolm Muggeridge, a Christian journalist from the early 1900s, said, "I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die." When you choose to suffer this way, there's a payoff!

But think over what this will look like.

- Where do you need to shift your priorities and loyalties like a soldier, with a goal to pleasing Jesus instead of living for yourself?

- Where do you need to discipline yourself like an athlete, engaging in habits of grace like absorbing Scripture, praying, getting involved in church, and obeying him, even when it's costly?
- Where do you need to work hard like a farmer – really hard work, in a really hard place, for a really long time?

Think about this, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Lord, we don't want to suffer, but you repeatedly call us to share in suffering. Reveal to us what kind of suffering you're calling us to pursue: the suffering of shifting our priorities, of disciplining ourselves, or of working hard for you. And give us your grace to do so. Thank you for Jesus, who suffered this way for us, and thank you that living this way is the path to life. Lead us there by your Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.