

2 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4

A GOOD SOLDIER OF CHRIST JESUS

“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.”¹

Suffering well is a ministry in itself! Note that I did not say that suffering is a ministry. Few of us tolerate suffering of any sort. Whenever we think of suffering, we may be focused on any of a variety of conditions. All suffering shares in common discomfort or distress arising from some particular condition that is out of the normal realm of life. Suffering likely will entail pain—physical, emotional and/or mental. Suffering may be the result of unjust accusation or it may arise from a broken relationship. Sorrow and grief arising from any of a variety of causes result when one suffers, and the pain may arise even from personal reversal.

While we know that suffering ultimately is the result of sin in our broken world, when our suffering has no immediately obvious reason we struggle against the burden of the challenge. We may complain when suffering results from our own wicked choices, but in that particular instance we know we are the cause of our own grief. However, pain, injury or loss of health that arises because we are part a fallen race often seems unjust; such seeming injustice often leads us to complain, much as Job complained when he was pummelled by the Adversary.

When hurting, we whinge and whine, grumble and complain, plead and wheedle, but the challenge of pain or the sense of deprivation continues nevertheless. Though friends tolerate some of our complaining, we know that eventually they will tire of our protests and grouching. And, yet, those who walk in the Faith must *know* they will suffer—often because of the Faith!

The Word of God is replete with warnings that following the Christ will bring suffering because you follow Him. As I have often pointed out, Jesus warned us who would follow Him, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me” [JOHN 15:18-21].

I am always humbled by the statements given by those who gave us the Word warning us as believers. As he opens his first missive, Peter has written, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” [1 PETER 1:3-9].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Opening the Second Letter to the Church of God in Corinth, Paul spoke of their suffering. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7].

In either letter to the Thessalonian Christians, Paul spoke of their suffering as something to be anticipated in this life. These saints had suffered because of their Faith. Paul notes their struggles when he writes, “You, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:14-16].

Paul was obviously concerned for them, especially since they were experiencing assault because of the Faith. Thus, he writes of his response to their trials. “We sent Timothy, our brother and God’s co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know” [1 THESSALONIANS 3:2-4].

When Paul writes of their affliction in verse three, he uses a Greek word that speaks of distress that comes from outside of a person. The word might also speak of mental or spiritual affliction.² Today, we might speak of anguish. When he speaks of affliction in the fourth verse, he uses a different form of the verb, emphasising oppression from outside.³ So, the Thessalonians experienced genuine anguish arising from outside opposition and assault. This is indicative that Christians can expect opposition because they are followers of the Christ, and the attacks from outside will be sufficiently severe to cause real anguish. This anticipates the pressure Christians in Syria, Libya and Iraq experience in this day!

In the Second Letter to these same Thessalonian saints, the Apostle again wrote, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.”

However, note what follows as the Apostle continues writing. “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-7].

² William Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer’s Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur** (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1979), 362

³ Arndt et. al., *ibid*

Consequently, these believers were experiencing anguish (the word used in the previous letter), but Paul also mentions that they were experiencing “persecutions.” The word used may speak of the infliction of harm; it may include threats or even chasing individuals from place to place.⁴ What is important is to note that his particular word is reserved for religious persecutions.⁵

I have invested more time than usual on introducing the message; however, I believe the information will prove beneficial for us. I do not want anyone to say they come into the Faith under the illusion that if only they will become a Christian, all their problems will be solved—they will not! In fact, on no less authority than that of Jesus Himself, I can assure you that if you become a Christian you will be targeted by the enemy of souls. He will work through people whom you love, whom you respect, people whom you count as friends, and you will be attacked. Still, together with the Apostle, I call on you to become a Christian, and more than that, to become “a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

ENLISTMENT — “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 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4]. Enlisting in the United States Marines was relatively easy. It was during a time of war, and the Corps needed warm bodies. During times of national crisis, enlisting in the armed forces is not particularly onerous. The recruiter is given a job of signing people up for the various forces. Something of the same concept applies in the Christian Faith.

We are at war. It is not a war as people might normally think of war—ours is a spiritual conflict. It began with a sneak attack against our first parents when they were in God’s Garden. Adam had been assigned responsibility. Moses writes, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it” [GENESIS 2:15]. The verbs chosen give insight into the responsibilities Adam had received. The word translated “to work” is most often translated “serve,” which provides some understanding of God’s intent.⁶ Depending on context, the word could speak of working the soil or worshipping. In a biblical sense, there need not be a difference in our work and our worship, since we are taught “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” [COLOSSIANS 3:17].

Not only was Adam to work the Garden, he was to “keep it.” This is another word that conceals as much as it conveys. In that Hebrew tongue, the word presents a specific concept. “The basic idea of the root is ‘to exercise great care over.’”⁷ We would not do violence to the meaning were we to say that Adam was to guard the Garden. Certainly, he was to exercise due care of the Garden. What was he to guard against? Well, there had been a rebellion among the angels of God, resulting in one-third of the angels being cast out of heaven [see REVELATION 12:4], An angel that had been the anointed guardian cherub [see EZEKIEL 28:12-19] was thrown down out of heaven [see REVELATION 12:9; see also LUKE 10:18]. This event appears to have occurred sometime prior to the man being placed in the Garden.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1996), 498

⁵ Arndt et. al., op. cit. 201

⁶ James Swanson, **Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)** (Logos Research Systems, Inc., Oak Harbor, WA 1997)

⁷ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., **Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament** (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1999), 939–940

You know the remainder of the story. Satan deceived our first mother, and Adam, our first father, chose to rebel against God [see **GENESIS 3:1-9**]. Since that time, war has continued on earth. The universe was plunged into ruin, and death has reigned over mankind since that time. The war is not a physical war, as mankind imagines war—it is a spiritual conflict, and most people remain unaware of the conflict. Paul writes of that unseen war and the participation of believers in the encyclical we have received and know as the Letter to the Ephesians.

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel” [**EPHESIANS 6:10-19**].

As a recruiter for the cause of Christ the Lord, I am unashamed in calling all who will heed the call to enlist in this great cause. I do not ask you to join a church, for if you do not wear the livery of the Faith your membership is of no value. I do not call you to receive baptism, for when a goat is immersed she remains a goat. I call all who will receive the challenge to believe the message of life—that Christ Jesus the Lord of Glory gave His life as a sacrifice because of sin. Attested as dead, He was buried. However, He broke the bonds of death and came out of the tomb. Now, this Risen Lord of Glory offers real life to all who will receive Him as Master over life. In **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2**, God’s gracious offer is presented. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’

“Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

To be certain, if I am offering only a fire insurance policy against eternal judgement because of your sin, that is a wonderful thing—and God’s salvation does deliver from judgement and death. However, I must caution any who hear my words that when you decide for Christ and for life, you will be marked for attack by the enemy. You will almost certainly experience assault immediately, for the enemy does not appreciate new recruits to the cause of Christ.

TRAINING — “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” [2 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4]. The one who enlists in service to King Jesus can anticipate opposition; that one will surely experience hardship; that one will know what it is to suffer. Opposition will begin immediately and it will not cease until the day that the warrior is called home or until the Master puts down all rebellion. Friends will not understand your decision. You will be challenged and doubted. Ridicule is one of the most effective weapons in the demonic arsenal; and you can expect that some will laugh at you and mock your choice to identify with the Master.

This was the Master’s word to His followers. As we saw earlier in the message, Jesus taught His disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours” [JOHN 15:19, 20].

The opposition you will experience is all part of your training. The wicked one means it for evil, but God is at work in your life transforming you into a mighty warrior for the cause of Christ. Drawing this missive to a close, Paul will counsel Timothy, thus counselling all who will serve the Master, “I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the message, be ready whether it is convenient or not, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and instruction. For there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead, following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have an insatiable curiosity to hear new things. And they will turn away from hearing the truth, but on the other hand they will turn aside to myths. You, however, be self-controlled in all things, endure hardship, do an evangelist’s work, fulfill your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5, NET BIBLE].

Many years ago when I was still a young man, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. My primary reason for enlisting was that if it was necessary to fight, I wanted to be part of a force that took the fight to the enemy. I believed then, and I believe now, that the surest hope of returning from a fight is to face the enemy, besting him on the field of battle. However, simply enlisting would not make an individual a Marine—training would be required. I was convinced that the finest training available for warriors was provided by the Marines.

It is not natural to run toward people who are shooting at you; Marines are trained to run toward the sound of gunfire. The natural response when shooting begins is to flee or to seek cover. However, Marines are trained to face the enemy, charging into the fire. Their mission is to defeat the enemy, always conducting themselves with honour, courage and commitment. This would be accomplished only by turning toward the fire and moving determinedly toward the source of firing. To prosecute this mission required constant training. Moreover, the training in which Marines engage is constant—it never ceases. The same is true for young men who join the Canadian Forces; they are charged with defending our nation and with providing whatever force the government deems necessary.

Plutarch tells that Spartan mothers would hand their sons their first shield as they went into battle, saying to the young men, “È τὰν ἐπὶ τᾶς,”—“With it or on it.” The Spartan Hoplite was renowned for courage in battle; their warriors were not to show cowardice. Should a Hoplite fall in battle, he would be borne home on his shield. Since the shield was so large, he could not easily run away from the enemy and carry his shield. Thus, the mothers’ admonition as they would hand their sons their shield, “With it, or on it.”

You will make errors as you prepare yourself for service; anticipate multiple failures. You are not an expert and you have not yet been tested. You are facing a determined enemy who once served next to the True and Living God. He is powerful, knowing your weakest points. Depend on it, he will attack you there. The more effective you become in service to the King, the more rigorous the opposition you will experience. Your comfort will lie in the knowledge that you were saved to serve and that your service, however flawed you may think it to be, will be successful. God Himself is at work in your life.

You will also be comforted by the knowledge that the salvation Christ provides is forever. Jesus our Saviour gives His people “eternal life”; He does not give “probationary life.” Listen to the Master’s teaching concerning this matter. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” [JOHN 10:27-30].

The Christian life is not an easy life—not if it is real. You will be disappointed in yourself at times; but you will never be disappointed in the One you serve. The Faith demands rigorous commitment to righteousness, holiness, godliness. Christ is looking for winners, not whiners; He seeks victors, not victims. Too many who profess Christ as Master are content to occupy a seat for a brief period on Sunday morning and then ignore the demands of the Master during the remainder of the week. It is easy to be a Christian when there are no demands on one’s life. However, no life is found that has no demands placed on it. Christians, fellow believers, are part of this fallen world, just as you are part of this fallen world. As broken people, we will disappoint and perhaps even hurt fellow believers. We must learn to forgive, loving with a radical love that esteems the individual as one who is a member of the Family.

Listen to the Word as we are urged to excel. “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” [ROMANS 15:30-32]. We are urged to excel in prayer for those who serve, just as Paul pleaded with the Romans to pray for him.

“Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:12]. Church is not an activity—it is our life! Church is who we are! As the redeemed people of God, we are to “strive to excel in building up” the Body.

Paul testified, “I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me” [PHILIPPIANS 3:12, NET BIBLE]. Christ saved us in order that He might be glorified in us. Writing the Thessalonian Christians in his second letter, Paul consoles them that though they were then suffering persecution, those who were assailing them would “Suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:9, 10]. Catch that concept and hold tightly to it—Christ is coming again “to be glorified in His saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed.” Therefore, we are to strive now “to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of” us. Therefore, we should push ourselves to ensure that He is honoured in our lives and through our choices. Again, this is not something that we do once and are finished with the responsibility; we are to be thinking constantly how we may glorify the Master and then doing what is necessary to ensure that He is honoured through us.

Let me point to yet another portion of the Word that speaks of the need to make every effort to excel. You will recall this passage from our earlier studies in First Timothy as the Apostle spoke of the need for constant training to be godly. “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” [1 TIMOTHY 4:7-10].

As we continue our studies through this Second Letter to Timothy, we will soon enough come to another well-known passage that speaks of the exertion that is expected of us who have believed. The Apostle will write, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” [2 TIMOTHY 2:15]. Divine approval comes only after testing. The proof that one is thoroughly prepared is that the individual has stood firm in the conflict. Here is the take home lesson: through all the challenges faced, you are being trained for service. The sure hand of the unseen God is guiding you through the challenging terrain. What He began, He shall bring to a successful conclusion.

At last, the aged Apostle did reach the end of his life’s journey. His summation is worthy of reading; and as we read we will want to pause in order to consider what he anticipated ahead as his life was ending. “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8].

One day, I shall fight the last battle. When that day comes, my prayer is that I can say with conviction, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” For if I can say this, I will also be able to say with great confidence, “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day.”

Reading the words of the Living Son of God to the Seven Churches of Asia, we see that some of those saints were commended, and some were censured. Among the churches that were commended, the Christians of Smyrna stand out. These saints were warned that they would be assaulted, but they were not to give in. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” [REVELATION 2:10]. You know, of course, that the Risen Son of God follows that encouragement with a word of caution to all who would read what was written: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” [REVELATION 2:11a]. We are now in training. Our training shall continue throughout the days allotted. For we are engaged in a great conflict—a conflict which is destined to be brought to a successful conclusion at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

GOAL — I understand that some will demur from applying the metaphor referring to warfare, stating that they don’t want to fight. However, I caution each individual who listens that regardless of your willingness to fight, you are engaged in a great war. I would only remind you that the Wise Man has said concerning war, “There is no discharge from war” [ECCLESIASTES 8:8]. If you are a Christian, you are at war.

In the Psalms, David has written:

“Who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God?—
the God who equipped me with strength
and made my way blameless.
He made my feet like the feet of a deer
and set me secure on the heights.
He trains my hands for war,
so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.
You have given me the shield of your salvation,
and your right hand supported me,
and your gentleness made me great.”

[PSALM 18:31-35]

God Himself is said to have trained David’s hands for war. Consider these verses from a contemporary translation.

“Is there any god like GOD?
Are we not at bedrock?
Is not this the God who armed me,
then aimed me in the right direction?
Now I run like a deer;
I’m king of the mountain.
He shows me how to fight;
I can bend a bronze bow!
You protect me with salvation-armor;
you hold me up with a firm hand,
caress me with your gentle ways.”

[PSALM 18:31-35, THE MESSAGE]

Though no one denies that David was a warrior, it should be apparent that these verses speak of more than a physical conflict. When I read of the LORD, “He trains my hands for war,” I understand that the Psalmist is stating that God does give strength. However, David is obviously speaking of something more than mere physical battle, for the warrior recognises that God has given strength and ensured that the warrior walks in a blameless path. God has given His shield of salvation to His warrior. God’s right hand supports the warrior. And God’s gentleness makes His warrior great.

We *are* training for war; but it is not war as the world thinks of war. You will no doubt recall that as he was writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul does speak of the conflict in which we are engaged. He writes, “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:4, 5]. I do not want anyone to imagine that they will find warrant in the Word to engage in physical battle against the world. We do not advance the Kingdom with the sword. Our weapons are spiritual, and the battles we fight are spiritual. We are engaged in preparing our minds through study of the Word and in winning souls through persuasion and prayer.

Because we are engaged in a great war, the Apostle continues with strong advice that is difficult to handle: “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” [2 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4]. The impact of the language is masked by our English tongue. The verb specifically speaks of “a soldier in active service.”⁸ The pronoun makes the concept absolute. In time of war, those in the military are not engaged in trading in the marketplace. Their job is to fulfil the will of the one who enlisted them. Therefore, a soldier does not get “entangled in civilian pursuits.”

The verb is used only one other time in the New Testament when Peter warns of the nefarious work of false teachers. Look at what he has written to capture a sense of what would have been understood by the first readers of our text. Peter warned, “[False teachers] speaking loud boasts of folly ... entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first” [2 PETER 2:18-20]. The verb translated “entangled” in our text describes a sheep or a rabbit being caught by the fur in thorns.⁹

“Civilian” in my translation is taken from the Greek term “bíos,” often translated “life.” This is not the usual form of the word “life”; this points specifically to the world. Jesus used this noun in the parable of the sower. Referring to that parable will clarify Paul’s intent using this particular metaphor of a soldier. “As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” [LUKE 8:14]. Thus, the intent of Paul’s words to Timothy is that he must make certain that “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” are not permitted to thrive and grow lest they choke out the will of God.

The good soldier of Christ Jesus is focused on serving Christ—he does not allow himself to be consumed by the affairs of this world. This point is vital to a proper understanding of what the Apostle has written. Paul is not advocating a cloistered life. Neither is he urging Timothy to a life of celibacy. He is warning that Timothy must not allow himself to be consumed by that which is passing away. This same teaching is emphasised by John in his First Epistle. “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” [1 JOHN 2:15-17]. The things of this world are not necessarily wrong, but they are a distraction from what is truly important.

I fear that by speaking as I have that some will take this as concession to continue living for this present, dying world. Do not mistake what is written in the Word for permission to become casual about righteousness. Timothy, and thus all who are Christians, is being urged to look back to that moment when he became a Christian, the moment when he was enlisted. There was a time when each Christian was called and responded to that call by putting faith in the Living Son of God. The Apostle would urge you to remember that you did not merely decide on a personal level to follow Christ—you had a commissioning service by God Himself as He enlisted you in His great cause. From that moment, the follower of Christ has new life, her pleasure is now secondary to the pleasure of Christ. Now, the Christian wants to please God.

⁸ Cf. NASB: 1995 Update

⁹ Arndt et. al., op. cit., 256

Pleasing God is a consistent theme of the Word of God. I close by pointing to several portions of the Word that emphasise our responsibility as those who follow the Saviour. Paul warns that “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” [**ROMANS 8:8**]. When he counsels the Corinthian Christians to have single-minded focus, it is so they will be able to “please the Lord” [see **1 CORINTHIANS 7:32**].

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that we seek to please God by pointing to the example that he and his missionary band had provided. He wrote, “You yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts” [**1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-4**]. Later, in the same chapter, he will point out that those opposed to the message of grace displease God [see **1 THESSALONIANS 2:15**].

As he brings the First Letter to Thessalonians Christians to a conclusion, Paul will remind them that the singular purpose of the Christian life is endeavouring to please God. “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification” [**1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-3a**].

Honestly ask yourself this one great question: Are you living to please God? If someone examines your daily life, is it evident that you are living for Christ’s pleasure? Or do your own desires take precedence over serving the Master. Life is passing quickly, it will be finished far sooner than any of us can imagine. All that will be left when we are removed from this world will be the memory of a life spent either for that which is passing away or a life spent living for the glory of God. We are bound to our Great Commander by duty; but even stronger is our bond of love for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Years ago, the saints would often repeat a verse that emphasised the point. “Just one life, ‘twill soon be passed; what’s done for Christ is all that lasts.” What are you leaving that will be permanent? Perhaps some who listen will heed the call to enlist in this great cause! Hear again the promise of God: If you agree with God that Jesus Christ is Master, believing with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. With the heart one believes, resulting in a right standing with the Father; and with the mouth one openly agrees with God and is set free.¹⁰ Paul concludes that promise by citing the prophet Joel, who has written, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved.” Assuredly, that is my prayer for you.

For all who are twice-born, all who are set free of the fear of judgement and set at liberty from the power of sin, my prayer is that they live to please God. Do this for Christ’s sake. Amen.

¹⁰ See **ROMANS 10:9-13**