

Series: Last Words for the Next Generation

Next Generation Fire

2 Timothy 2:1–7

The Apostle Paul frequently drew from the world of sports to describe the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9 he writes, “*So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control...*” (1 Corinthians 9:26–27). Paul is saying that he lived with the same purpose, focus, and self-discipline as an elite athlete—so that after preaching to others he himself would not be disqualified.

There is something shared between a championship boxer and a long-distance runner. In both, the key is not mere speed or flash. The key is endurance—resilience under pressure, the ability to keep going when the body and mind want to quit. That is why many have said the Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint. Endurance matters.

But Paul gives us an even fuller picture. The Christian life is not only a long race we run alone. It is more like a relay race. You can have speed. You can have endurance. But if you do not successfully pass the baton, you will not finish well. And the work of the gospel will not go forward.

Yet even the baton image, as helpful as it is, can still fall a little short. What we are called to pass on is not a cold object. It is a living faith—a torch that must keep burning.

The question is not only whether we hand something off, but whether the fire keeps burning hot when it reaches the next generation.

Main idea: The gospel does not advance by maintaining the status quo, but by a living faith that is received and passed on with holy fire.

As we unfold the text, we will consider three truths Paul presses upon Timothy—truths that call him not only to guard the gospel entrusted to him, but to pass it on with fire to the next generation.

1. Be Strengthened by Grace

Paul starts with this charge: **Be strengthened by grace.**

Specifically, he writes: *“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”*

Notice that Paul begins with relationship: “my child.” He is not simply issuing a cold command to a subordinate. He is speaking as a spiritual father to a beloved son. The call to be strong is rooted in affection and shared life.

Then comes the command: “be strengthened.” The verb here is passive. Timothy is not told to strengthen himself. He is told to receive strength. And the source of that strength is clear: “by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

This is the same grace we saw in the opening of the letter. In the first message we learned that grace is not only what we need when we fail. It is also the strength God gives so we can keep going.

John Piper said it this way: “Grace is not simply leniency when we have sinned. Grace is the enabling gift of God not to sin. Grace is power, not just pardon...It is not just pardon for the past, but power for the present.”

Moreover, we saw that this grace is not only delivered through the means of the Word and prayer, but especially through devoted relationships. In chapter one we learned that Paul prayed for Timothy night and day. He remembered his tears. And he longed to see him. Grace flowed through that father-son bond.

This is why Paul could say, “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). The same grace that saved us is the grace that sustains us. It is grace already given at the cross, and grace still arriving for the next hard step.

So when the pressure comes, the call is not simply “try harder.” The call is to receive again the strengthening grace that is already ours in Christ Jesus—and to keep going in the power He supplies.

Remember, ministry is first received, not achieved. This means that **our first priority is not to work for the kingdom but to be with the King.** Our first calling is not to greater effort, but deeper nearness.

Before fulfilling any assignment from God comes the enjoyment of being in the presence of God.

Before the labor comes rest.

Before we pour out, we must first be filled by Him.

Brothers and sisters, **everything we do for His kingdom must spring from the quiet place of being with Him.**

Being with Him is the greatest means of grace for all we do for Him.

But now grace received is never meant to stay with us alone.

2. Pass On What You Have Received

So Paul gives the next charge: **Pass on what you have received.**

He continues: *“And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”*

Here Paul gives the clear picture of the relay race. He describes four generations: Paul teaches Timothy; Timothy entrusts the truth to faithful people; those faithful people teach others also. If each generation is faithful, the work of the Lord continues. If any generation drops the baton, the local church is only one generation from extinction.

Let me pause and clarify that phrase, because it can be misunderstood. When I say a church is “one generation from extinction,” I am not suggesting that the success of God’s purposes ultimately rests on our faithfulness, or that the Church Jesus is

building could somehow fail. Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:18). God always preserves a remnant. The universal Church will endure until Jesus returns.

But any particular local church—including Midwest Bible Church—truly is one generation away from withering if we fail to pass on a living knowledge of the Lord and His works to the next generation.

We have seen faithful congregations close their doors, not because God abandoned His people, but because the baton was not passed. That is the practical and pastoral urgency Paul is pressing on Timothy, and on us.

Paul is writing his final letter. He knows the end is near. Chains, desertion, and the shadow of death surround him. Yet his concern is not primarily for himself. His heart is fixed on the next generations of Christians—on those who will carry forward everything he has poured out his life for, and more importantly, everything Jesus died to secure.

The gospel was not a private treasure to be guarded and then buried with him. The torch must be passed while it is still burning.

Ron Hutchcraft has helpfully illustrated the danger. He points to a common pattern in family businesses known as the “third-generation” phenomenon. The first generation starts with nothing but a dream. They work long hours, they sacrifice, and they keep the vision alive. The second generation tends to just **maintain** what the founders built. They may improve it a little or expand it a little, but they largely protect the original vision.

Then the third generation arrives. They never had to sacrifice for the cause. They didn’t see their parents sacrifice much. For them the business is often just an income source, not a vehicle for a vision they are passionate to carry forward.

Management experts know that if a family business can survive that third generation, it may make it. But often, every time the torch is passed, the flame burns a little lower—and sometimes it burns out.

Something similar can happen in the local church. And we do not have to look far to see the pattern. Midwest Bible Church was born in 1933 out of small prayer gatherings in homes. A group of believers gathered with faith and action, asking God for a positive gospel ministry in this neighborhood. The first public service was held on May 7, 1933, in a house. By September of that same year they were meeting in a building on Cicero Avenue. That founding generation sacrificed, prayed, and carried a clear vision.

Over the decades the Lord has been faithful. Pastors and church members have labored. Ministries have been raised up. Midwestern Christian Academy and Phantom Ranch came into existence. Many have come to faith and have grown in Christ through this church. We stand on the shoulders of those who ran before us.

Yet we must be honest. Although we have in recent times graciously seen new believers come to Christ, over the years attendance has declined. There may be other reasons, but part of that decline can be explained by the very phenomenon Hutchcraft describes—the challenge of the third (and now fourth) generation.

It is possible for a church to move from pioneering vision, to faithful maintenance, to a quieter settling where the flame begins to flicker. Busyness, weariness, comfort, or simply the assumption that the next generation will “just get it” can leave a tragic gap. A great big God can become small in the eyes of His people.

Paul refuses to leave that gap. He tells Timothy to guard the good deposit, and then entrust it to faithful people who will be able to teach others also. He is saying, in effect, “Don’t drop the torch.”

What God greatly desires among us is not merely the maintenance of what previous generations built. He desires a new generation of spiritual pioneers—people who become, in a sense, a new first generation. Risk-takers. People who pray for miracles again. People who will not settle for spiritual minimums. People who will resist the seduction of comfort and security and carry the flame with fresh fire.

Has the torch started to flicker in your hands—a torch passed by people who sacrificed to make a difference in 1933 and in every decade since? Then commit yourself to a holy, new fire so that the flame fueled by those who ran before us can burn more brightly than ever in your hands.

By God's grace, we must not drop the baton.

Now receiving grace and passing on the faith will not be easy.

3. Endure Hardship with Focused Discipline

So Paul shows us what this life requires, namely **Enduring hardship with focused discipline.**

After calling Timothy to be strengthened by grace and to pass the baton, Paul gives three vivid pictures of the kind of life required to do both well.

First we are to pass the torch **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.” (vv. 3–4)

A soldier accepts hardship as part of the calling. He does not demand ease. And he refuses to become entangled in things that distract him from the mission. The good soldier keeps his eyes on the One who enlisted him.

Secondly we are to pass the gospel torch **like an athlete:** *“An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.” (v. 5)*

The athlete trains with discipline. He does not cut corners. He submits to the rules of the contest. There is no crown for those who run however they please. Faithfulness requires self-control and a willingness to compete according to God's design.

Lastly we are to pass the torch **like a hardworking farmer:** *“It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.” (v. 6)*

The farmer labors with patience. He sows. He waits. He endures the long seasons before the harvest. Ministry is often slow work. Much of it is unseen.

But the farmer who does the hard, often unseen work, will share in the fruit.

These three images all require a willingness to embrace difficulty rather than avoid it. That is not the natural instinct of every generation.

In a recent *Christianity Today* article, Ashley Hales observes that Gen Z is markedly more risk-averse than previous generations. They are less likely to take ordinary steps into adulthood, like getting a driver's license or holding a part-time job, at the ages earlier generations did. The issue is not primarily greater moral caution; it is a broader pattern of avoiding discomfort and vulnerability.

When obstacles are continually removed, whether by parents, culture, or even the church, the capacity to endure hardship can remain underdeveloped.

The same pattern appears in how many approach money. Recent financial research notes that Gen Z often carries the lowest savings-to-spending ratio of any generation. There is a strong cultural pull toward experiences, comfort, and immediate gratification. The coffee, the trip, the concert, the small treat—these things often feel more pressing than disciplined saving or strategic generosity. In that atmosphere, planned, sacrificial giving that supports the long-term advance of the gospel requires something counter cultural: the willingness to live with less now so that the work of Christ can go further.

The Christian life cannot be lived in permanent safety. A soldier does not stay in the barracks. An athlete does not avoid the pain of training. A farmer does not refuse the uncertainty of the seasons. And Jesus Himself did not choose the risk-free path. He left the safety of heaven, faced rejection, and went to the cross. Following Him will always involve some measure of risk and cost.

Again, Paul's three images all involve delayed reward. The soldier does not demand comfort in the middle of the campaign. The athlete does not eat whatever he wants during training. The farmer does not store the seed. He plants it so that it can multiply. In the same way, gospel faithfulness—and gospel generosity—often means choosing restraint and risk today for the sake of fruit tomorrow.

And the good news is that the same grace that strengthens us in verse 1 is the grace that enables us to live verses 3–7. We do not dig deeper into our own reserves. We receive again the strengthening grace that is in Christ Jesus—and we keep going.

Now Paul then adds this word: *“Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything”* (v. 7).

These are not quick slogans. They are pictures to be pondered. We need more than a hurried reading of Scripture. We need to meditate on the Word until it reads us.

Hearts will not stay on fire to know Christ and make Him known if our minds are shaped more by the world, social media, and the culture than by God's Word.

The Word is the primary fuel. As we think deeply and prayerfully over it, the Lord makes its truths come alive—not only for our sake, but so that we can pass them on white-hot.

Again, we must take the Word in deeply and let it read us. That is essential. But if it never moves through us to the next generation, something is already cooling. The gospel stays white-hot in us not only when we receive it, but when we refuse to keep it.

The **strength** of a soldier, the **discipline** of an athlete, and the **patience** of a farmer are all required if we are to run our leg of the race and pass the baton well. But those pictures will just remain inspirational sayings unless we linger over them in the presence of God and ask Him to write them into our lives.

Conclusion

Paul's final charge to Timothy is clear. Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Entrust the gospel to faithful people who will teach others. Endure with the focused discipline of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer.

The Christian life is a relay. Speed matters. Endurance matters. But the baton must be passed—and the fire must still be burning when it reaches the next generation.

So I ask you this morning:

- Are you being strengthened by grace, or are you still relying on your own reserves?
- Who is the next-generation person to whom you are intentionally passing the baton?
- And are you running with the focused discipline these pictures require—or have distractions, comfort, or weariness caused the fire to grow cold?

May the Lord make us a people who receive grace, who endure with purpose, and who hand off a living faith still on fire—so that the next generation may know the Lord and carry His torch to the glory of His name.