

Paul, Timothy and Troubled Times Part 10

After a two week break for Palm Sunday and Easter we are back to our study of 2 Timothy. Paul is encouraging Timothy in the hard times he is facing and preparing him for even more troubling times ahead. Paul knows he won't be there to help Timothy as he tells him, **"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure."** 2 Timothy 4:6 He speaks of his impending death as a departure, as if he is simply leaving on another journey. We talked about this three weeks ago. Then, looking back over his life, Paul declares in the next verse, **"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."** I want to focus on that first phrase, "I have fought the good fight."

Paul's statement raises a question: Against what or whom was Paul fighting? Paul has already told Timothy to be a good soldier, enduring hardship and making every effort to please his commanding officer. But as a soldier, who was the enemy he was to engage? Who or what was he to fight against? Paul tells Timothy he will be opposed by others. Paul had experience having been attacked and falsely accused and beaten and jailed numerous times in a variety of places, but instead of giving Timothy instruction on how to crush the opposition, Paul says, **"And the Lord's servant must not quarrel, instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."** 2 Timothy 2:24-26 Paul directs Timothy to stay focused on sharing Jesus, on teaching and bringing people to repentance. We aren't fighting people. It isn't about winning arguments, it's about proclaiming Jesus, discharging all the duties of our ministry.

Our fight isn't against the people who oppose us. Paul writes, **"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."** Ephesians 6:12 The fight Paul has been engaged in was a spiritual battle. With whom are we fighting? In Ephesians Paul mentions three enemies of our soul: the world, the flesh and the devil.

We fight against the world. What do we mean? We aren't fighting against the planet, against God's creation. We aren't fighting a holy war against people. **When we talk about the world, we are talking about the ways, values, and perspectives of culture and society that are in opposition to God and His word.** Materialism, greed, pride, arrogance, violence, the

things Paul mentioned in 3:1-5, values that love pleasure more than loving God. The world, our society and culture values self over God's word, God's will, God's design. The world, our culture celebrates confusion and brokenness and can't even see the irony of it. I heard someone on tv last week saying she discovered her true self by performing in drag clubs. She found her true self by going to clubs where people dress up as something they are not. Does no one see the irony of that? The world wants to squeeze you into a broken mold. Claiming to celebrate individualism it actually fights to force and shame you into compliance, compliance with a distorted worldview. As followers of Jesus, we fight the good fight, rejecting the influence and the ways of the world and choosing instead to walk in obedience to God's word and God's ways. Here is the truth, God's saving grace brings wholeness and restoration. Receiving Jesus and his new life delivers us from the broken, marred, messed up version of ourselves and brings us to the whole person God intended us to be! Don't allow the world to force you into its' broken, distorted mold, instead, fight the good fight by trusting in Jesus and living according to his word. Keep choosing to follow Jesus and live according to his word. God has a better path.

We fight against the flesh. We aren't talking about our skin, but rather our own sinful nature. That nature, apart from Jesus's saving grace, wants to indulge itself in whatever we choose, regardless of what God or his word says, regardless of whether it's good for us or destructive. Paul speaks of this battle with our flesh when he says we all used to live this way, **"...gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, and following its desires and thoughts."** **Ephesians 2:3** We want what we want, when we want it, but living that way, ignoring God's word, gratifying our flesh in defiance of God's way, God's word, leads to death and hell. **"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."** **Proverbs 14:12** But there is a better way, a better choice. Through faith in Jesus Christ, **"God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ...it is by grace you have been saved."** **Ephesians 2:4-5** He has saved us so we no longer have to live according to that sinful nature and we no longer have to make choices that always end in brokenness and death.

The reality for us as believers: we are redeemed by God's mercy, saved and enabled to live for him, but we can still be tempted and drawn away from godly choices, so we have to keep fighting the good fight against sin and temptation. James writes, **"...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."** **James 1:14** There is a battle that

must be fought against that sinful nature that wants its' own way. We still have to make choices, choosing to flee temptation, to reject sin and sinful choices.

John Piper wrote, "I pray against sin. Lead me not into temptation. Deliver me from sin. Sin is the only enemy that will damn you at the judgment. Satan can't damn you, he can't condemn you and destroy you. Sin can." Paul is telling Timothy and us to embrace God's way, to live according to God's word and don't give in to sin. Fight against surrendering to the pressures of an ungodly culture and fight against surrendering to temptation coming from your own fleshly nature.

We fight against the devil and his schemes. The bible speaks of the devil as an adversary, a slanderer, tempter, deceiver, liar, murderer, accuser, evil one. Revelation 12 speaks of the devil or Satan as the one who leads the whole world astray. It gives us some idea of what he is up to and the fact that he directs those efforts and attacks against the church, against God's people collectively and individually. He is working to influence each of us to turn away from God and his word and to choose a course of action that will put us back into bondage and into the prison from which Christ has set us free! Paul tells us in Ephesians that we need to be aware of the schemes of the devil, the tricks he uses to trip us up, to distract us, to misdirect us, to take our eyes off of the prize and the calling of God. We are in a battle and we must fight the good fight. Don't be distracted or misled. The good news is, we aren't defenseless in the battle!

Paul said, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes...Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." Ephesians 6:10-18

There is spiritual armor and that comes with spiritual power. Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. We aren't going up against the devil, or the world, or our flesh, unarmed or in our own strength alone. The Lord promised to go with us. He is equipping us. We can stand against the schemes of the devil. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and with us and by his power, his anointing, his wisdom, we can recognize the plans of the devil before he even

attacks. We can stand firm in the truth of God's word with the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit and we can overcome the attacks of the devil. You are not defenseless!

We have the weapon of prayer. In every situation, every moment where we are tempted to sin, to compromise, pray and call on the Lord. Ask for his help. We have the weapon of God's word. By hiding God's word in our heart the Holy Spirit can bring it to our mind, direct our choices and keep us from yielding to temptation and engaging in sin. We aren't defenseless. The bible says we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Remember you can do all things through Christ who gives you strength and enables you. Remember the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you and that same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, quickens your mortal body so you can make godly choices and walk not according to the desires of the flesh but according to the will and word of God. Remember, "greater is he that is within you than he that is in the world." You don't have to live in defeat and sin. He has redeemed you so you can walk in victory. John wrote, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith!" God has destined you for victory. Keep fighting the good fight of faith.

James writes about the inner struggle that we battle, part of fighting the good fight. He reminds us that God will give us the grace we need. **"But he gives us more grace. That is why the Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." James 4:6-8**

Fight the fight. "But I've tried and I keep losing the battle." But here is the good news. There is more grace available. He gives us more grace; adequate, sufficient grace. So do this: submit yourself to God. Surrender to Him, to his word, to his will, to his design for you, his purpose, his God ordained plan for you and your life. Examine your heart. Have you submitted and surrendered yourself to him? It's part of fighting the good fight and winning the battle.

Resist the devil. Take your stand. Put on the armor of God we mentioned. Draw your sword, keep the shield of faith up. Stop making it easy for the devil. Stand your ground.

Come near to God. Get to know him. How does he reveal himself to us? By his Spirit and through his word. Read God's word. Let his word open your eyes to his character, his good plans for you and for your life. Come near to him. Move toward him, in prayer, in worship, in reflection, in meditation. Study and reflect on the word of God. The more you know him the closer you will want to come to him and James says as you move toward him he will move

toward you. He will come closer, his presence in your life becomes richer and deeper, you will become more aware of his presence. James adds, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.” Confess your need of Jesus, your need of his Holy Spirit, your need of his power, his grace, his help and he will lift you up. He will enable you to stand when the devil has taken his best shot at you.

It’s later than it’s ever been. We are closer to the coming of the Lord than we’ve ever been. Times are troubled and the pressure increases to compromise the faith or to abandon the faith entirely. Now more than ever we need to hear Paul’s words and be inspired and motivated to fight the good fight of faith. Fight and stand your ground against a culture of compromise and confusion, a culture that calls good evil and evil good. Fight against the weakness and compromise within your own heart and mind. Flee temptation, call on the Lord and rely on his grace, his empowering presence, put the word of God into practice in your life. Fight against the devil and his lies, his constant distortion of the truth, his misdirection. Put on the whole armor of God, bathe your life in prayer, resist the devil. There is a battle going on but we have a commander in chief who conquers every foe, including death and hell and the devil. Don’t hesitate to obey his commands because He is leading us in triumph!

Let’s do what James says to do. Let’s submit ourselves to God and come near to him. James continued in that passage that where necessary we are to wash our hands, purify our hearts so we won’t be doubleminded, grieve and mourn over our sins and humble ourselves before the Lord. That’s how we fight the good fight and win the battle. Do you need strength for the battle? “He gives us more grace.” Ask him.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.