

1 Timothy 1:18-20 - Part One

"Nobody told me being a Christian was going to be so hard." That's what he said to me - a college friend, whom we'll call "Greg". "Nobody told me it was going to be like this." On his face was a look of complete bewilderment. And as I watched him struggle, I shrunk a little bit inside. I should have warned him. It's not like I hadn't experienced the same things myself and, indeed, was still experiencing those things, although in different ways.

You see, "Greg" and I had gone to Slidell High School and, while we were not great buddies there, we knew each other and were at least casual friends. We both entered LSU in the fall of 1979 and, for the first couple years, had gone our separate ways, never really running into each other very much. And during that time when we didn't see each other much, I became a Christian and, to my great surprise, so did a number of other people I had known from high school.

Well, it was a couple years after I had realized my need of God's grace and mercy that my path intersected once again with "Greg's" path. Unbeknownst to each other, we both moved into the "Pentagon" dormitories which - at the time, were not great but were certainly a step up from Hodges Hall which, as far as I could tell, was a form of institutionalized torture.

We had both been living in Pentagon for a few weeks before we actually ran into each other and, to make a long story short, that was the beginning of a re-newed friendship and God was pleased, over a few months time, to use me and several others to lead "Greg" to Christ.

And then "Greg" went home for a weekend.

And it was *there* that he first experienced something of the struggle that goes along with becoming and being a Christian. While the struggle takes all sorts of shapes and forms, for "Greg", the initial form it took was the surprise, fear, and even anger expressed by his family upon the discovery that he had become "a born-again Christian" which, at least at that point in time, was not a welcome discovery for them.

And so after a weekend of grilling and questioning and in general just being given a really hard time, he returned to LSU and, with great puzzlement on his face, began to describe his weekend and the hurt and surprise at being rejected for his faith. And there was a real war, an internal and external struggle going on which had already manifested itself in one way, and which would continue to do so for the rest of "Greg's" life.

"Greg" hadn't realized that becoming a Christian was such a costly exercise. He didn't know that trusting Christ would place him "in harm's way" so to speak - would move him into the "line of fire" as a combatant in a multi-front war we call *life*.

He didn't know because no one had told him. I mean, we DID tell him a lot of things - about sin, about forgiveness, about the cross, about the love and holiness of God - we told him a lot of things. And we had talked about faith and what it involved and what it meant. We told him that faith meant "trust". We told him that faith meant "believing God". And that was fine.

But alongside all of that, we should have told him something else. We should have told him that *faith doesn't just mean "trust" - it means WAR*.

We should have told him that there is a struggle that begins when one becomes a Christian, indeed, *because* one has become a Christian. And that struggle gets played out in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons - all of which have the same effect - tension, turmoil, *war*.

In the verses before us this morning, Paul talks a little bit about this war in 1 Timothy

1:18-20. And it is that narrow aspect of this passage that I want to expand on this morning. Along the way we will come across a number of other issues which, Lord willing, we will pick up and address in 2 weeks time, when we come back to this same passage for another look. So we will not be dealing with everything in these verses this morning but will be confining ourselves to understanding something about what it means to *finish the fight that faith started...* Before we look at that, let's pray. (Pray and read passage)

As we look at this brief passage we will be concentrating on two main things. Firstly, we need to look at *why faith is a fight*. How does becoming a Christian bring about this kind of adversarial situation? Secondly, we're going to look at what this passage has to say about *how the fight of faith is fought*.

Now that is, of course, a very big subject and we will not be looking at everything the Bible says about the fight for faith but only and especially at what *this* passage has to contribute to our understanding of this important subject.

WHY FAITH IS A FIGHT

First up, then, we need to think for a moment about why it is that faith is a fight. Why does Paul, in 1:18 tell Timothy to "fight the good fight"? Why does he use very similar language in chapter 6, verse 12 of this same letter? Why does he continue with this same kind of battle imagery in his *next* letter, especially in chapter 2 where he talks to Timothy about being a "good soldier" in the faith?

Well, to help us understand this, it is helpful to hear what Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-10 (read this)..... These verses provide a kind of "before and after" picture of our spiritual situation before and after we were saved through Christ's work on the Cross. They talk about how once we were "dead in our trespasses and sins" and how we once walked "following the course of this world" and how we were "following the prince of the power of the air" - a reference to Satan - and how we once were "sons of disobedience" and "children of wrath". In short, these verses describe how we were once subjects of *another kingdom*, under the rule of *a different kind of king*.

And then God saved us in Jesus and our citizenship has been transferred. We now swear allegiance to a new king. As Colossians 1:13 says, "*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins...*"

So, we have undergone a change of kingdoms and a change of masters, as Romans 6 makes clear. But here's the problem. Our former master, the leader of the kingdom to which we *used* to belong - he's not happy about all of this.

Do you remember what happened with God's people in the Old Testament around the time of Moses? There they were, the people of God, living as slaves of the Egyptians. Pharaoh was their ruler, or so he thought. And then God marvelously delivered them from their slavery and from the rule and authority of Pharaoh. Well, as I'm sure you know, Pharaoh, after God gets through with him, goes along with their departure *at first* but then he later decides he's not going to take this lying down and so a chase ensues and God must step in to fight and defend his people from an enemy who would have easily destroyed them.

That model or "paradigm" of the Exodus is instructive for us today. Just as Pharaoh was not happy, **the former ruler of our hearts** is not happy about our changed citizenship and is described in the NT as our "... enemy who prowls about like a roaring lion, looking for

someone to devour..."

So, one reason the fight for faith is such a struggle is because we have an adversary who, although he has already been decisively defeated at the Cross, still manages to wound and oppress us - like a defeated and retreating army which, although it has been beaten, manages to lob a few grenades, and fire a shot here and there over its shoulder as it runs away.

That's one reason there's a fight. Another reason for the "fight of faith" is an internal one - the reality of remaining sin and the struggle that commences within every Christian when the Spirit of God takes up residence in a human heart, creating life where there was once death and a desire to know, love and honor God where there was once only a desire to promote and honor self.

And so, just as surely as the Kingdom of God has been *inaugurated* by Christ's coming but will not be *consummated* until his return, so too has the establishment of the Kingdom in the hearts of men and women been *inaugurated*, but is yet to be consummated in the life of the believer. This is the struggle that Paul so vividly describes in Romans 7 and which every true believer understands only too well. In short, when we become Christians, we are not only drafted into the war as soldiers of Christ's kingdom, we actually become *the battlefield* - the place where the war is waged on a daily basis.

This struggle manifests itself in many ways - but at its core lies a common culprit - *our unbelief* - *i.e.*, thinking that we know better than God, doubting his good purposes for us or the wisdom of his ways over against ways that we imagine to be better. Our fundamental unbelief leads us astray into unfaithfulness - which is why Paul talks to Timothy about holding onto faith and a good conscience - faith so that he does not continue to doubt God and, as a result, maintains the "good conscience" that comes from the knowledge that you are responding faithfully to the Lord.

So, faith is a fight because of an enemy OUT THERE - the objective work of Satan and his demons - and because of an enemy IN HERE - the fact of remaining sin and the slow but certain "turf" war that takes place on the battlefield of the human heart as God works from an established beach-head to bring to completion that which has been made certain by Christ.

Now one important pastoral lesson in all of this is to remember that the fight of faith is just that - *a fight*. In other words, we ought not to be surprised to discover that living Christianly is a struggle. And we ought not to be disillusioned or concerned if it *feels* like a struggle. That fact that it IS often difficult and it often FEELS like a struggle is becausesurprise, surprise, it IS. The struggle is not a sign that you are getting it wrong. It is a sign that you are His, that Romans 7 is not just some abstract theory, it is not just Paul's story - it is *your story* too. It feels like a struggle because it IS a struggle, and it could not be otherwise.

HOW THE FIGHT IS TO BE FOUGHT

The second thing I want you to see this morning is that, once you have acknowledged that the fight is real and the fight is here to stay, what does this passage add to our understanding of how this "good fight", as Paul terms it, is to be fought? As was noted in the introduction, the Bible has a lot to say on this subject. Some of the more prominent passages include - Romans 6-8, and Ephesians 6 and Galatians 5 and Colossians 2. All of these have some important things

to say on this subject. But for our purposes here this morning, I want to focus our attention on what appears before us in THIS text. And so the questions we are seeking to answer here is, "What is the *particular* point that Paul is making here about "fighting the good fight", why is he making this point to Timothy, and what does that have to do with us?"

In order to think about those things, we need to look at Paul's language for a moment. For one thing, we need to think about what Paul means when he says, in vs 18, "I give you *this* instruction". What instruction is Paul talking about? Does he mean, perhaps, his words in verses 4-11, before he goes into his big digression? Or is he referring to what he is *about to say* in chapter 2? Or is he, as some commentators contend, referring to the whole of the letter?

On balance, it seems to me that he is likely referring to the whole letter. He says in this same sentence that the instruction he is giving is in keeping with the *prophecies* made about him. Well, what is that about? What were these prophecies"? Well, again, we do not have a lot to go on, but we have *something*. Flip over, if you will, a couple pages to 1 Timothy 4:14. There it reads, "*Do not neglect your gift which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you...*"

Judging from those words, it would seem that, at the time Timothy was set apart by the elders for Gospel ministry, a prophetic message was given and received, indeed, 1:18 seems to indicate that more than one was received.

And while we do not have the specific content of these "prophecies" about Timothy, it seems reasonable that they must have been related to the whole matter of his being set apart as a preacher of the Gospel and a pastor of God's people. If that is right, then it makes more sense to understand the word "instruction", in verse 18, to refer to the whole of Paul's teaching to Timothy regarding his fulfilling this pastor/teacher role, rather than referring only to one isolated aspect of it.

A second thing to say here is that, when you hear Paul saying to Timothy, in essence, "Follow these instructions" - when you hear that sort of language about following instructions and observing commands, etc., you need to hear it in the *context* of what Paul has already said, particularly what he has *just* said about the purpose of the law. Paul has just finished reminding Timothy that the primary purpose of the law was/is to reveal sin and lead people to embrace the mercy of God in Jesus. So while Paul wants Timothy to take the things he says to heart - and act upon them - he doesn't want him to do it in a legalistic way. He doesn't want Timothy to see these things AS the basis of his right standing before God but rather ON the basis of his right standing before God.

Why does Paul emphasize *this particular aspect* of what is involved in the fight for faith? Why is he going on about "holding on" to things and following what he has said, and all of that? Well, Paul emphasizes the aspect of FAITHFULNESS here - receiving and sticking to the things that they have received from Paul - because it is the lack of this that has caused so much trouble in Ephesus of late. Whatever else the false teachers were doing wrong, included in that "package" was the fact that they had wandered from Paul's instruction - both in its content and in its application. And now here they were, perilously on the edge, close to being cast out of from the people of God. So, Paul knows, from firsthand experience, the deceitfulness of the heart -

and he has personally seen what can happen when people start to lose the plot and wander away.

Given those circumstances, it is understandable that out of all that is involved in "fighting the good fight" - the one aspect of that which Paul chooses to emphasize here is the importance of being faithful to what he has been received - faithful in both content and in application.

If Timothy will be faithful to make use of what God has so graciously provided for him through Paul, then he can avoid the fate of Hymenaeus and Alexander, who have "shipwrecked their faith".

Now surely this is a message for the church in our own day. Paul's urging Timothy to "fight the good fight" by being faithful to what he has received is just as applicable and necessary for us, as it was for him. We too, like Timothy and indeed, *through Timothy*, are the recipients of these same "instructions" - as Paul refers to them - God's gracious provision given first to Timothy but then faithfully preserved for us.

And the parties mentioned here - Timothy on one side and H and A on the other - stand out before us like warning beacons of what may or may not happen as a result of how we respond to that which *we* have received. Because the same opportunity is before us - as individuals, as congregations, even as whole denominations to either respond faithfully to what we have received - or not.

For example - in this letter there are all sorts of instructions - about prayer, about worship, about leadership, about roles and relationships between men and women, about family relationships, about money, etc. And much, if not most of what Paul has to say on these things is *counter-intuitive*, it goes against the grain of what the majority of our culture has to say, and indeed what we ourselves would choose to believe, in our own strength.

And because of this reality of the Christian struggle - through the direct and indirect work of our enemy and because of our own deceitful hearts - because of those realities we are constantly being tempted to believe that we know better than God in all of these areas. And as we continue to work our way through this letter and address various issues, the pressure, the momentum from within us, and from all around us, will be to NOT hold on to what we have received from God regarding these matters.

The temptation and pressure will be either to modify what Paul has said, or to upgrade it, or to launch into wild speculation about it, or to create a smokescreen of questions that we feel, wrongly, justifies our simply throwing our hands up, and saying, "oh well, NEXT...." The temptation will be that whenever what we have received rebukes us personally, or threatens to place us at odds with those around us - the temptation will be to walk on and look the other way.

But friends, that's not "fighting the good fight". That's *abandoning* the fight. And the result of that sort of thing is "a shipwrecked faith" - and it can happen to individuals, to congregations, to whole denominations. Now as for what that "shipwreck" is all about, we'll look at that in a couple weeks.

But can you see that what's behind all of this is a *heart attitude* - a recognition that every time God confronts us by and through his gracious Word, there is a battle and a struggle to submit, again and again, to the authority inherent IN that Word. We have to bow the knee, and keep bowing the knee as we learn, once again, to humbly receive *this* means of God's grace. And what is receiving all about? Is it about just nodding the head and saying, "Ah, yes, I see what

you're saying" No. What does Paul say, "I give you this instruction so that *by following them you* may fight the good fight...."

It's not just about nodding your head. It's about following.

When I ask my children to clean their rooms it is because their rooms need cleaning and *they* need to clean them. I don't ask them to clean their rooms because I want them to have philosophical discussions with me about the nature of cleanliness, or whether my desire for some semblance of orderliness is an expression of some psychological dysfunction on my part. No, I want them to clean their rooms. And I don't ask them to do this to earn my love and so gain entrance into our family. I ask them to do this because I know what they need better than they do, and because they are already in the family, and I already love them, and I want what IS best for them, not what FEELS best for them, not what they would always perceive as the best thing for them.

This is the problem in Ephesus. They have received God's gracious truths and promises through Paul's ministry. And now the Ephesians have all around them leaders who have discussed and speculated upon and otherwise misused what they had received. But all of that was useless. Paul doesn't want them to speculate on what he is saying. He wants them to follow what he is saying.

All too often the things that God has said to us become the subject of great debate and speculation but are not applied or acted upon - in faith. But that is not the way forward Paul says. You don't fight the good fight by merely knowing what God has said but by following what God has said.

What's Paul saying? He's saying that faith is a WAR that will be WON. But not without a FIGHT.....