

## 2 Timothy 4:1-8

You've seen the battle movies. Before the army charges into the fray, their leader rallies the troops. "Be brave! We're fighting for a noble cause! Remember those who've fallen before you! We shall overcome the forces of evil today!

"Fight the good fight of faith!" Our general, the Lord Jesus Christ, sends us forth into battle. The enemies are supernatural forces of evil. Listen to your commanding officer. Believe in Him. Obey Him. So much is at stake. Our natural in-born pride and self-righteousness would so quickly give in to Satan and the ways of this wicked world. Our vain efforts to win the battle with our own strategy or strength would so quickly turn to the dark defeat of despair. So our Lord and Savior encourages, **"Fight the Good Fight of Faith!" Christian, 1) In this life keep the faith. 2) In the life to come, enjoy Christ's eternal victory.**

Paul had been a fanatic, self-righteous Pharisee. He was battling all right – on Satan's side against the Son of the living God. But God in His grace smashed his pride, and by the gospel lifted him up to faith in Jesus. God chose him to bring the Lord's Word to the world. With a burning, consecrated zeal, born of God's love and forgiveness for Jesus' sake, he preached Christ crucified wherever he traveled. He warned against falling away from grace by impenitent sinning and unbelief.

But now he was nearing the close of his earthly battle. By all appearances, he had lost! He was in prison at Rome. He would soon be executed for his fearless testimony that Jesus is the world's only Savior from sin. What would you be thinking if you were he? "If only I had kept my big mouth shut. If only I had gone along with the idea that all religions are OK, if only I'd compromised a little, I wouldn't have annoyed the emperor! Instead of this dark lonely prison, I'd be dining in luxury with the emperor!" But he looks back without regret as he speaks of the time of his departure from this life. He has been faithful, relying on the strength of God's grace in the ministry to which God had called him. He had kept the faith the Lord had implanted in his heart at conversion, the faith in Jesus Christ by which he was saved.

Now his young co-worker Timothy would have to carry on this precious gospel ministry. With an urgency that comes from knowing Christ will return soon, Paul urged, **"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing, I give you this charge: Preach the Word! Be prepared in season and out of season! Correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction."** The Gospel is the God-given means by which the Holy Spirit awakens hearts, dead in sin, to life by faith in Jesus. But since people would rather listen to the words their own sinful desires find attractive, keeping the faith also means correcting, rebuking, and encouraging others. Faithful preachers must use God's Word to convict the human heart of its true sinful condition before God, and then use the Gospel to show the way back to God through Jesus, who died for all sin. To rebuke means to scold, if

necessary, to make people aware of their sin. Then, the heart that is crushed by God's Law, will want to hear the gospel's sweet encouragement. "Here is your God, your forgiving saving God, in the person of Jesus, His Son!

Fellow Christians, today more than ever don't we need this same encouragement to fight the good fight of faith? Satan in these last days increases his attacks upon the true faith. How do you picture the devil? Is he the funny character in the red suit with the pitch fork and pointed tail? No, that's silly. Do you think of him in the other extreme – the dragon, belching sulfur and fire? Perhaps it's even better to think of him dressed in a nice suit, standing in front of a lecture hall. With missionary zeal spawned in hell the professor is trying to convince the Christian that evolution is a scientific fact. He knows if he can get the Christian to doubt Genesis One, it won't be long and he'll also doubt John 3:16. Do you picture him as the friend, inviting, "Just take this drug once. Go ahead, you need another drink!" Do you picture him as the boyfriend or girlfriend, or the co-worker offering compassion and understanding and the thrill of an illicit relationship? Do you picture him as the friend speaking to you on your death bed, "Don't worry. You've been a good person. You'll go to heaven." These are all lies, aren't they?

We live in an age where anything goes. People surround themselves with preachers who simply tell them what they want to hear. What they're hearing sounds a lot like this: "Jesus is just one of many ways to know God. The Bible is just a storybook, like Aesop's fables. God is love, so it doesn't matter how you live or what you believe. God will accept all good people, who are trying their hardest. After all, God is tolerant of our weaknesses." Oh? Then why are we still dying? Why does every human effort to reform the world by removing the constraints of God's just laws end up in greater immorality, corruption, sorrow, and despair? Why are the self-righteous pagan religions the most vicious in destroying their enemies?

Thank God He has rescued us from self-righteousness, from perfectionism, from false teachings and false gods, from sin's curse, and from hell's torment. The Holy Spirit has shown us the futility of trying to win God's approval and love by our own goodness. The Holy Spirit has led us to regret our sinful condition and to repent of our daily sins. By God's holy Law He convicts us. He rebukes us. He warns us. Then by the Gospel the Holy Spirit has given us the faith to believe Jesus God's Son has given us the victory over sin, death, and hell. Fight the good fight of faith! The gospel truth of God's divine plan to save us from sin, foretold by ancient prophets and carried out in time 2,000 years ago, consists of these certain, accomplished facts: Jesus came from heaven to earth, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He fulfilled the law in your place. He died to pay for your sin. He was buried, certifying his death. He is alive from the grave, certifying of life under God's grace here and in glory in heaven! God's grace has saved us. God's grace forms our moral character. God's grace compels us to serve the Lord Jesus.

And when you fight the good fight of faith, you get so tired! You will wonder, "What's the use of contending for God's truth? All I get is trouble for

it. My family members don't accept my gentle reminders from God's Word. People in other churches accuse me of being narrow-minded and ultra conservative because I don't approve of all the changes so popular in their churches. My co-workers or friends at school exclude me from their conversations and their parties. Is it worth my time and offerings to keep alive my congregation, my synod, and its gospel ministry?"

Did the Apostle Paul think fighting the good fight was a thankless and unrewarding battle? He was going to offer his life on the altar of martyrdom for the sake of Jesus' gospel. "**The time has come for my departure,**" he admits. But when all seemed so pointless, so useless, so empty, he was actually looking forward to a more glorious future! "**I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.**"

The winner of the ancient Greek Olympic race would receive a laurel wreath crown, a mark of human achievement and honor...that would soon wither and perish. We who run the race of faith in Christ, with all the spiritual stamina the Spirit of God supplies through the gospel, we who fight our spiritual foes, the devil, the unbelieving world, and our own sinful flesh with the weapons of God's Word and Sacrament, shall also receive a crown. Jesus, the righteous judge, will declare you righteous when you stand before Him at the end.

Oh, how we long for His appearing. Day in and day out our flesh is a constant source of grief, trying to trip up our new self and drag it into the gutter of sin and despair. If we were given an award for our own personal righteousness, we would receive God's just condemnation and death forever in hell's regret. But God gives us the crown of righteousness freely, by grace. We wear it even now by faith in Jesus. In heaven, we'll wear it in glory. Then God's image will be fully restored in us. We'll live before Him in true righteousness and purity. So we say with firm Christian confidence as we look beyond the brief span of this present life, beyond the confines of time and space, to the life that is eternal, "There is in store for me the crown of righteousness!" After the conflict come the victory and the glory!

Fight the Good Fight of Faith! Amen.