

### The Baton from Paul to Timothy

It was a battle. There's no other way to describe it. From the moment the apostle Paul was brought to faith in his Savior until the day he died, it was a battle. He had fought, he had clawed, he had scraped his way through violent attacks from entire cities, plots against his life from total strangers, and torture tactics by local governments. He took some severe beatings. He experienced his fair share of abuse – physical and otherwise. And so by the end of his life, Paul's body was battered and worn down and probably grotesquely disfigured from the multiple clubbings and scourgings he experienced and the near-death stoning he survived. His life had been a battle. But what Paul left in his wake was nothing short of the greatest missionary endeavor this world has ever seen: multiple congregations in multiple cities in multiple territories all around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. Christianity had exploded out of Jerusalem and into corners of the globe that it had never been to before. A lot had been accomplished by God's Word through Paul's missionary journeys and, despite the ongoing persecution, the Christian community was beginning to thrive as Paul's life came to a close.

But the battle wasn't over. Even though it was close to getting over for Paul, the battle itself still raged on. Those coming after Paul would have to pick up where he left off. They would not be able to simply rest on his laurels; they would not have the luxury of sitting back and coasting on the accomplishments of his efforts. They were going to have to fight too! They were going to have to contend for the faith just as doggedly as Paul did! And Paul realized how difficult it was going to be. And so when he writes his last letter that we have in the Bible addressed to a young pastor named Timothy, Paul warns him that he was going to have to face some tough times in the future as the battle still raged on.

**Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 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.**

Paul was about to die, but it wasn't over for Timothy. Not in the least. Timothy was one of the men who would take the baton from Paul and run with the gospel. But it wasn't going to be easy. It wasn't going to be simple. Even though Paul had trail blazed a path in which Timothy could walk, he could not let his guard down. Paul predicted that people would not put up with genuine teachings of Scripture anymore; they would be content with listening to those who said what they wanted to hear; and they would not hesitate to turn aside from the truth. The battle would rage on after Paul was gone because the war had really just begun.

### Just a Little

We are now five days removed from the celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. And it might be easy for us to look back at that time and at those events and think,

“I’m glad the Lord did what he did through those people back then. I’m so grateful that they were able to rediscover the truths of the Bible again in the middle of such a tumultuous situation so that we can still enjoy them today. What a relief!” But don’t get too comfortable! Because the battle that the Christians during the time of the Reformation fought still rages on today. And if we don’t keep our heads on a swivel, we’ll be blindsided by the enemy just like those Christians were soon after Luther’s death.

Martin Luther died in 1546. And although it was obviously God’s Word that was the effective power of the Reformation, the Lord did use Luther in some amazing ways to spread his Word to the world. Despite his faults and his failings, Luther was a leader. And so when he died, there was a power vacuum of sorts. The man who was seen as the successor to these Lutheran Christians was a man named Philipp Melanchthon. And although he was a well-known scholar and had been Luther’s right hand man, he wasn’t as strong as his predecessor. And so Melanchthon fudged with some documents, just a little. And he tweaked some phrases, just a little. And he compromised on some teachings, just a little. Many people didn’t notice. Other people didn’t care. And it wasn’t just him either. There were plenty of Christians inside that camp that began to do what Paul had warned Timothy would happen: they didn’t tolerate solid Christian teachings anymore and to suit their own desires they gathered around them teachers who would say what their itching ears wanted to hear and they turned from the truth towards myths. And the Christian church stumbled and it wavered and it was in danger of being watered down to the point where it could have been washed out completely. The battle raged on, but there were very few at that time who were still fighting the fight.

The battle rages on even right now. Sometimes it’s obvious; sometimes it’s subtle. Sometimes the attacks are right in your face; at other times they sneak up from behind and slowly infiltrate your thoughts and contaminate your thinking year after year after year. Just a little. A little here and a little there, picking away, seeping in, worming its way through... just a little. Until the “little” adds up into a really big problem.

It happens to all of us: “I don’t know if I agree with that teaching, so I’m just going to ignore it. I’m not going to tell anyone about it either. It’s just a little disagreement anyway.” “I don’t like that part of God’s Word that tells me that I’m wrong, so I’ll just pretend like he never said it. It’s just a little thing, no big deal.” “I want to indulge in that specific activity even though I know it’s not going to be good for my faith. Not for long, not forever, just for a little bit.” “I know I probably shouldn’t be reading that or listening to that or filling my thoughts with that, but it won’t hurt anything. It’s so small, it’s so minor, it’s so little.” Just a little, just a little, just a little....

And before you know it we’re overrun by the little, the trivial, the seemingly insignificant. The enemy has found his way behind the walls because we let him in. We decided to listen to what our itching ears wanted to hear instead of what our hearts needed to be told. The battle was raging on but we were unaware. We thought we were safe and so we didn’t lock the doors! We thought we were far removed from the danger and so we failed to post the guard! We thought we were untouchable! How wrong we were. The battle still rages on and we’re right in the middle of it. The battle still rages on and there’s nothing we can do to hold it back. The battle still rages on – not just from the outside, but also from within. Our own natural inclinations and feelings and emotions can do the most damage of all. In fact, sometimes we even seem to be on the side of the enemy.

### **Victory despite the Battle**

The battle rages on, but we do not fight alone. In fact, we aren't even expected to be able to defend ourselves. God knows that we aren't capable of doing that! That's why he sent his Son. Jesus took it upon himself to stand on the front lines so that we aren't crushed in an instant. And all we need to do is look at Jesus' battle scars to see the violence of the war he has already went through.

Look at Jesus' feet: those he used to walk on water, those he stood on for hours on end preaching to the people, those that took him hundreds and hundreds of miles over the course of three years as he traveled up and down the land of Israel meeting as many people as he could. Those feet were nailed together by Roman soldiers because the battle for our lives was that intense.

Look at Jesus' hands: the ones he used to heal countless people of countless diseases, the ones he held out to the winds and the waves and shut them up, the ones he reached out to touch a leper and to grab Peter when he was drowning and to hold the hand of a dead girl before bringing her back to life. Those hands were also pierced through with iron stakes because he could not win the battle otherwise.

Look at Jesus' head: the one that shown like the sun on the mountain when he showed his disciples a glimpse of his glory, the one dripping with water at his baptism, the one dripping with sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane. That head was riddled with thorn-sized holes from a mock crown because the battle was always meant to include the death of a King.

Look at Jesus' back: the one that didn't have a bed in which to rest, the one talked behind as people scoffed at his claims, the one figuratively stabbed when his disciple Judas betrayed him. That back was torn open and ripped apart by a scourging whip because the battle required blood – and lots of it.

Look at Jesus' side: the one against which little children were held when their parents brought them to Jesus, the one on which his disciple John leaned at the table of the Lord's Supper, the one near which the criminal crucified to the right of him was promised Paradise. That side was gashed with a spear to make sure that the Christ had really and truly died in battle.

These battle scars of our Lord – his feet, his hands, his head, his back, and his side – are undeniable proof that he has fought for you, that he died for you, that he lives for you again, and that he fights for you still. Oh, the battle rages on, of course. The battle is still as hazardous and as threatening as ever. But you have the One who has already defeated the enemy out in front of you! You have the one who has literally gone through hell and back in the lead! You have the one who has already won the victory on your side! And so even though the battle rages on, the victory is yours right now! You have been forgiven. You have been cleared of all charges. You have been rescued from any self-afflicted consequences. And just like Paul, you'll be able to say when you're life is coming to a close, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for you the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to you on that day--and not only to you, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." You will end up in heaven, not because you're such a good soldier, but because your General has determined that he will never leave one of his own behind.

### **Don't Put Down the Sword Just Yet**

But don't put down your sword just yet. Just because Jesus has won the victory and the devil is for all intents and purposes defeated and death has lost its hold and the effects of sin have

been neutralized, that doesn't mean the danger is passed! That doesn't mean the coast is clear! The devil is still out to get you, the world is still filled with pitfalls, your own sinful self is still capable of terrible harm. You need to hold that sword of the Holy Spirit – God's Word – in one hand and hold the shield of faith in the other. You need to do what Paul encouraged Timothy to do: "Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

The battle rages on and your faith is at stake. The eternity of everyone else is on the line as well. And so keep yourself buried behind the bulwarks God's Word and make sure that you give everyone else you know as many opportunities as possible to barricade themselves behind God's Word too. Do not get lazy. Do not get lulled to sleep. Do not give in – not even a little. Every Word of God is important. Every teaching of the Bible is essential. Every single syllable of Scripture is from your Lord himself. Do not let it be compromised in any way. Cling to it with the fingers of faith that will not lose its grip. Because the battle rages on and you're right in the middle of it.

As you continue to fight and claw and scrape your way through, as you continue to fend off attacks and push the enemy back, as you continue to duck behind the powerful presence of your Savior and his Word, don't forget to look above the fray and the clamor, peek out over the pandemonium and the chaos once in a while, and keep your eyes focused on how it will all end. It will end with you at the side of your Savior, it will end with you wearing the crown of life, it will end with you in heaven forever enjoying the celebration of those who have won with their Savior. The battle rages on for now, but there's nothing to worry about, there's nothing to be sacred of. With your Savior by your side and you behind his Word, God guarantees that the victory is already yours.

Amen.

**"The Lord will rescue us from every evil attack and will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." 2 Timothy 4:18**