

The Good Fight of Faith

TEXT: 1 TIMOTHY 6:12

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 TIMOTHY 6:11-16

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey

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Last week I emphasized a few things relating to faith that I noticed while reading about the life of Abraham. I noticed, first of all, that faith begins with revelation from God. Secondly, I saw how faith grows when we act upon the revelation we receive even when it seems to contradict the way things seem to be; and third, I realized that faith finds its reward in simply cooperating with God. A person of faith does not require seeing the final realization of his labors before he dies.

I think that these three truths about faith apply to everyone who has ever become a child of God. Grace that saves only comes to the person who has faith. The critical factor that determines whether or not a person receives the grace needed to become a child of God is not race nor is it religion. It is faith. The last time Pastor Tim preached, I thought he very effectively used the book of Judges to point this out. He brought to our attention the fact that many of the judges used by God were not even direct descendants from one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Faith and not race was and still is the determining factor in deciding who becomes God's child and who will be used by God to build His kingdom.

I hope you understood from what I said last week that it is not easy to have faith. It is not easy to believe revelation from God and act upon it even when you may never see the fruit of your labors before you die. It is especially difficult to embrace revelation when that revelation appears to contradict what you see with your own eyes.

When I first started out in the ministry, it was very difficult for me to believe I could ever be effective in the pulpit. I had very little positive experience as a public speaker. Stage fright caused me to become physically ill. I believed with all my heart that God had revealed to me that I should enter into the ministry. However my fear of public speaking made it very difficult for me to act upon that revelation.

And, I received little sympathy from a lot of people who were close to me. Some people thought I was crazy for leaving a promising career to enter into the ministry.

So when I look at a man of faith, such as Abraham, I feel I can relate. I must conclude that he lived a very challenging life. He had to live in a way that appeared

to contradict what things seemed to be and he had to subject himself to the criticism from those who did not live by faith.

Today, I want to add on to what I said last week about faith and emphasize even more how strenuous it is to live a life of faith. As if the challenges I talked about last week were not enough, we must now press on to consider even more challenges faced by those who live a life of faith. The challenges I will talk about today are directly related to the spiritual forces of evil that oppose anything related to faith. There are real forces present that are bent on preventing us from living a life of faith. The more we try to live by faith, the more Satan and the demons who work in cooperation with him will oppose us. And this reality makes living the life of faith more than just challenging. It makes it the most strenuous thing a human being can endeavor to do.

The words found in 1 TIMOTHY 6:11-12 emphasize the tremendous struggle in store for everyone who lives a life of faith. That is why I have chosen to use this passage. I want to impress upon all of us that the Christian life is an extremely strenuous, difficult life to live.

Verses 11-12 comprise a command that the elderly apostle Paul gave to the younger Timothy. There are four action words or phrases in the command that will form a two-point outline for this message. The first three action words are found in verse 11 and the first part of verse 12. They are "flee", "pursue", and "fight." These three words reveal the posture needed in order to live by faith. It is the posture of a person engaged in very strenuous activity. The last action phrase found in verse 12 is comprised of three words, "Take hold of"... "Take hold of eternal life." These words reveal the source of power needed to live the strenuous life that we call a life of faith. "Flee", "pursue", "fight", and "take hold of" are the action words and phrases of a command that Paul tells Timothy to keep. Paul realized that the only way Timothy could possibly live the life of faith was by keeping this command.

Before I go any further, let me clarify an important point. The command is not telling us to flee and pursue and fight so that we can take hold of eternal life. Some people would teach that is so. But, based on the apostle Paul's teaching found in other places in

the Bible, I must conclude that the command should be interpreted as saying a man must lay hold of eternal life so that he can have the ability to flee and pursue and to fight.

To ask, "Which comes first, faith or eternal life?" is like asking, "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" Of course an initial amount of faith is needed for a person to even ask God for salvation in the first place. A person would not even ask for salvation unless he believed God could save him.

But, faith does not end with the initial decision. That is just the beginning. What follows is a life that becomes increasingly strenuous as the days go on. And my interpretation of scripture is that we must take hold of eternal life in order to live this strenuous life of faith. The other viewpoint is to say that eternal life is something that a person works for while he is living and then comes to after he dies.

But, I believe the Bible teaches that eternal life is a life for all the ages, past and present and future. Throughout the ages it has been the force behind everything good. Eternal life is a quality of life that can be experienced in the present just as much as it can be experienced in heaven when we die. It is a life free from guilt and shame. It is a life filled with confidence, knowing that, at any given moment, there is help to do the right thing. The person who has eternal life never has to do the wrong thing. Finally, it is a life of hope, hope of actually dwelling in a place free from sin and decay.

The only way we can lay hold of eternal life is to enter into an intimate relationship with God. To possess eternal life is to know God in a very personal way. JOHN 17:3 says, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

So, eternal life begins when come to God just as we are and admit to God that we need eternal life in order to live the strenuous life of faith. Eternal life is not earned by living the strenuous life of faith. It is given freely to those who desire to live the life of faith and admit to God that they need eternal life to do so. JOHN 1:12-13 tells us that "God **gives** us the right to become children of God-children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

After we have initially laid hold of eternal life, we must continue to lay hold of it to find the strength needed to fight the battle. In other words, we have to talk to grow deeper and deeper in our relationship with God. Our conversations with God must grow and mature so we can know Him more and more. The devotional life

is the means by which we lay hold of eternal life. It includes reading and meditating on God's Word. It also includes bringing our worship and petitions before God's throne. It includes creating an environment with minimal distractions so we can talk to God. And, it includes learning how to serve God with a pure motive. The devotional life is the method by which we grow to know God more and more. And, knowing God is eternal life. We are to take hold of eternal life so we can flee and pursue and fight.

Let's now turn to these three action words in our text and use them to help us understand the strenuous nature of the battle. Notice the first two words: "flee" and "pursue." The things that the Apostle Paul told young Timothy to flee from are listed in the words preceding our scripture reading. They are things such as the love of money and selfishness that results in envy and strife and malicious talk and evil suspicions and constant friction. In contrast to these things that we are to flee from we are told to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. There is another place in the Bible where these traits are listed as "fruit of the Holy Spirit." In order to help us understand why living the life of faith is so strenuous, we should not look at these things just as good and bad things people do. We should view them as good and evil forces that are constantly tugging at our lives. One force is self-sacrificing. The other force is self-fulfilling. One force draws people together. The other force drives people apart. One force inspires people to make decisions based on revelation from God. The other force causes people to base their decisions upon fear. One force is determined to do good and the other force is determined to do evil.

Regardless how hard we try, we cannot run away from these two forces. The harder we struggle to pursue good, the more intense the force of evil will become. Don't tell me it gets easier to flee from evil as time goes on. I have learned better. The enemy never gives up. He attacks our hearts with fear and he entices our minds to take short cuts devoid of principle to reach our goals.

Every young man and every young woman sitting in this auditorium has been created with desire. Deep down inside you know that you are here to accomplish something. There is a craving inside of you. It is something that is good. It is something that should be, because God put it there. And whether you realize it or not, it is a craving after God. It is a desire to know God and to obey God.

According to God's design, young men and young women should dream dreams and see visions and build castles in the air and aim at success. And, God

will reveal those dreams to men and women and challenge them to embrace, by faith, those visions. But, Satan will lure men and women to use what appears to be the short and easy method of making their dreams come true instead of making sacrifice to walk the highway of stern duty and true principle. And if Satan fails to entice us to take the short cut, then he will place fear in our hearts as we travel the more difficult road.

This is why Paul told Timothy to flee and to pursue. To flee is to determine never to take a short cut to reach our goals. It means never compromising on holiness. And to pursue is to walk with confidence. It is believing that all the good things we do for God will result in final victory even if we do not see that victory before we die. We are confident of the final outcome.

Faith is being driven by confidence to walking the way of stern duty and true principle. Being driven by fear to take the short cut is the opposite of faith, and there is not a single person in this auditorium who is free from the tug of these two forces in his life. God works to influence us to walk with confidence and caution. Satan works to influence us to walk with fear and recklessness. Such is the battle we all face.

In the midst of this strenuous conflict we hear the third action word. It is the word "fight." There is no way I can exhaust the meaning of this word in one sermon. I don't think that Paul intended to give a detailed explanation of how to fight when he was writing this letter. More detailed descriptions of how to fight are found in other places in the Bible such as Ephesians, chapter six.

I believe the emphasis in 1 TIMOTHY is simply to fight as opposed to not fighting. Because the battle is so strenuous, the temptation to withdraw from battle is always present. Thus, Paul commands Timothy to persevere in fighting. Regardless of how strenuous and terrible the conflict, the soldier of Christ is to press right through until the end. He is never to take his eyes off his Commander in Chief. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." (HEBREWS 12:2). In His struggle to live the life of faith, Jesus never gave up the fight.

And, where is it that we face the greatest temptation to give up the fight? The severest battles of a man's life are fought out in secret places of his own soul. You will never be able to fight the good fight of the faith in your school or in your workplace until you have fought it, and are fighting it, in our own heart and life.

There is a story about a splendid castle in a forest that housed a company of brave knights whose job was to guard the castle from the cruel giants who lived in the

forest. Whenever a young man became a knight, along with his armor, he was given a special shield. They were not ordinary shields, but had been made by a great magician who had lived in the castle for many years. The shields were made of silver and sometimes shone in the sunlight with dazzling brightness. But at other times the surface of the shields would be clouded as though by a mist.

As each knight began to do service against the giants or went on expeditions to help poor travelers in the forest, his shield grew brighter and righter, so that he could see his face clearly reflected in it. But, if he proved to be a lazy or cowardly knight and let the giants get the better of him or did not care what became of the travelers, then the shield grew more and more cloudy, until the knight became ashamed to carry it.

But, this was not all. When any one of the knights fought a particularly hard battle and won the victory, or when he went on some hard errand for the lord of the castle and was successful, not only did his silver shield grow brighter, but anyone looking into the center of it could see something like a golden star shining in the very heart of the shield. At the time when this story begins, the lord of the castle himself was the only one of the knights whose shield bore the golden star.

There came a time when the worst of the giants in the forest gathered themselves together to have a battle against the knights. They made a camp in a dark hollow not far from the castle and gathered all their best warriors together. All the knights got ready to fight them. The windows of the castle were closed and barred, and the knights were so excited that they could scarcely rest or eat.

Now there was a young knight in the castle named Sir Roland, who was among those most eager for the battle. He was a splendid warrior, with eyes that shone like stars whenever there was anything to do in the way of knightly deeds. And though he was still quite young, his shield had begun to shine enough to show plainly that he had done bravely in some of his errands though the forest. This battle, he thought, would be the great opportunity of his life. And on the morning of the day when they were to go forth to battle, and all the knights assembled in the great hall of the castle to receive the commands of their leaders, Sir Roland hoped that he would be put in the most dangerous place of all, so that he could show what knightly stuff he was made of.

But when the lord of the castle came to him, as he went about in full armor giving his commands, he said: "One brave knight must stay behind and guard the gateway of the castle, and it is you, Sir Roland,

being one of the youngest, whom I have chosen for this task.”

At these words, Sir Roland was so disappointed that he bit his lip and closed his helmet over his face so that the other knights might not see it. For a moment he felt as if he must reply angrily to the commander, and tell him that it was not right to leave so sturdy a knight behind, when he was eager to fight. But, he struggled against this feeling and went quietly to look after his duties at the gate. The gateway was high and narrow, and was reached from outside by a high, narrow bridge that crossed the moat which surrounded the castle on every side. When an enemy approached, the knight on guard rang a great bell just inside the gate, and the bridge was drawn up against the castle wall, so that no one could come across the moat. So the giants had long ago given up trying to attack the castle itself.

This day the battle was to be in the dark hollow in the forest, and it was not likely that there would be anything to do at the castle gate, except to watch it like a common doorkeeper. It was hard for Sir Roland to accept the fact that he and not someone else was best suited for this task. It was hard for him not to doubt and question the wisdom of his commander.

It wasn't long before the knights of the castle marched out in their flashing armor. The lord of the castle stopped only to tell Sir Roland to keep guard over the gate until they all returned, and to let no one enter. Then they went into the shadows of the forest, and were soon lost to sight.

Sir Roland stood looking after them long after they had gone, thinking how happy he would be if he were on the way to battle like them. It was a long time before anything happened, or any word came from the battle.

The first thing that happened was when one of the knights came limping down the path to the castle. He went out on the bridge to meet Sir Roland. Now this knight was not a brave one, and he had been frightened away as soon as he was wounded.

“I have been hurt,” he said, “so that I cannot fight anymore. But I could watch the gate for you, if you would like to go back in my place.”

At first Sir Roland's heart leaped with joy at this, but then he remembered what the commander had told him on going away, and he said:

“I should like to go very much, but a knight belongs where his commander has put him. My place is here at the gate, and I cannot open it even for you. Your place is at the battle.”

The knight was ashamed when he heard this, so he turned around and went into the forest again.

Sir Roland kept guard silently for another hour. Then there came an old beggar-woman down the path to the castle, and she asked Sir Roland if she might come in and have some food. He told her that no one could enter the castle that day, but that he would send a servant out to her with food, and that she might sit and rest as long as she liked.

“I have been past the hollow in the forest where the battle is going on,” said the old woman, while she was waiting for her food.

“And how do you think it is going?” asked Sir Roland.

“Badly for the knights, I am afraid,” said the old woman. “The giants are fighting as they have never fought before. I should think you had better go and help your friends.”

“I should like to, indeed,” said Sir Roland. “But, I am set to guard the gateway of the castle, and cannot leave.”

“But, one fresh knight would make a great difference when they are all wary with fighting,” said the old woman. “I should think that, while there are no enemies here, you would be much more useful there.”

“You may well think so,” said Sir Roland, “and so may I; but it is neither you nor I that is commander here.”

“I suppose,” said the old woman “that you are one of the kind of knights who like to avoid fighting. You are lucky to have so good an excuse for staying at home.” And, she laughed a thin and taunting laugh.

It was all Sir Roland could do to hold back the emotions he was feeling inside. The struggle inside of him to simply obey his commander was great. The battle that raged in his heart and mind was fierce. But, he shut his lips and set his teeth hard together and held back his anger and his frustration. Just then the servant came with the food he had sent for. He quickly gave it to the old woman and shut the gate that she might not talk to him anymore.

It was not very long before he heard someone calling outside. Sir Roland opened the gate, and saw standing at the other end of the drawbridge a little old man in a long black cloak.

“Why are you knocking here?” he said. “The castle is closed today.”

“Are you Sir Roland?” said the little old man.

"Yes," said sir Roland.

"Then you ought not to be staying here when your commander and his knights are having so hard a struggle with the giants and when you have the chance to make of yourself the greatest knight in this kingdom. Listen to me! I have brought you a magic sword."

As he said this, the old man drew from under his coat a wonderful sword that flashed in the sunlight as if it were covered with diamonds. "This is the sword of all swords," he said, "and it is for you, if you will leave your idling here by the castle gate and carry it to the battle. Nothing can stand before it. When you lift it, the giants will fall back, your master will be saved, and you will be crowned the victorious knight-the one who will soon take his commander's place as lord of the castle."

Now Sir Roland believed that it was a magician who was speaking to him, for it certainly appeared to be a magic sword. It seemed so wonderful that the sword should be brought to him that he reached out his hand as though he would take it, and the little old man came forward as though he would cross the drawbridge into the castle. But, as he did so, it came to Sir Roland's mind again that the bridge and the gateway had been entrusted to him, and he called out, "No!" to the old man, so that he stopped where he was standing. But, he waved the shining sword in the air again, and said: "It is for you! Take it, and win the victory!"

Sir Roland was really afraid that if he looked any longer at the sword, or listened to any more words of the old man, he would not be able to keep himself within the castle. For this reason he struck the great bell at the gateway, which was the signal for the servants inside to pull in the chains of the drawbridge, and instantly the began to pull, and the drawbridge came up, so that the old man could not cross it to enter the castle nor Sir Roland to go out.

Then, as he looked across the moat, Sir Roland saw a strange thing. The little old man throw off his black cloak, and as he did so he began to grow bigger and bigger, until in a minute more he was a giant as tall as any in the forest. The giant shook his fist across the moat that lay between them, and then, knowing that he could do nothing more, he went angrily back into the forest.

Not too long after that, Sir Roland heard the sound of the bugle of the lord of the castle. After that came the sound of the bugles of many of the knights that were with him, pealing so joyfully that Sir Roland was sure they were safe and happy. As they came nearer, he

could hear their shouts of victory. So he gave the signal to let down the drawbridge again, and went out to meet them. They were dusty and bloodstained and weary, but they had won the battle with the giants.

Sir Roland greeted them all as they passed in over the bridge, and then, when he had closed the gate and fastened it, he followed them into the great hall of the castle. The lord of the castle took his place on the highest seat, with the other knights about him, and Sir Roland came forward with the key of the gate, to give his account of what he had done in the place to which the commander had appointed him. The lord of the castle bowed to him as a sign for him to begin, but, just as he opened his mouth to speak, one of the knights cried out:

"The shield! The shield! Sir Roland's shield!"

Everyone turned and looked at the shield which Sir Roland carried on his left arm. He himself could see only the top of it, and did not know what they could mean. But, what they saw was the golden star of knighthood shining brightly from the center of Sir Roland's shield. There had never been such amazement in the castle before.

Sir Roland knelt before the lord of the castle to receive his commands. He still did not know why everyone was looking at him so excitedly and wondered if he had in some way done wrong.

"Speak, Sir Knight," said the commander, as soon as he could find his voice after his surprise, "and tell us all that has happened today at the castle. Have you been attacked? Did you have to fight any giants alone?"

"No, my lord," said Sir Roland. "Only one giant has been here, and he went away silently when he found h could not enter."

Then, he told all that had happened throughout he day.

When he had finished, the knights all looked at one another, but no one spoke a word. Then they looked again at Sir Roland's shield, to make sure that their eyes had not deceived them, and there the golden star was still shining.

After a little silence the lord of the castle spoke.

"Men make mistakes," he said, "but our silver shields are never mistaken. Sir Roland has fought and won the hardest battle of all today." Then, the others all rose and saluted Sir Roland, who was the youngest knight that ever carried the golden star.

My message to you today is meant to inspire more than it is meant to give you an intellectual challenge. Most of us already know far more truth than we are presently putting into practice. And we continue to learn more and more.

But, far more important to our Lord than the amount of truth we possess is what we are doing with the revelation he has already given us. More than anything else, He wants us to fight the good fight of

faith which means determining with all of our hearts to obey all the commands He has given us instead of just picking and choosing for ourselves the commands that we feel are easy to obey.

The greatest struggle we will face will be in the private place. If we can overcome there, then God will take the victory that has been won in private and use it to build His kingdom and bring glory to Himself.