

A GOOD WARFARE

by T. Austin-Sparks

"This charge I commit unto thee, my child Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that by them thou mayest war a good warfare" (I Timothy 1:18).

"Fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called, and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses" (I Timothy 6:12).

"Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 2:3).

If I were taking any one fragment from these two letters which really could be the key to them I think it would be in that eighteenth verse of the first chapter: "This charge I commit unto thee, my child Timothy... that thou mayest war a good warfare".

I want that our time shall be used to consider something - it will only be a little - of the significance of these two letters to Timothy.

First of all, may I say what you already know, but perhaps it is as well to underline it, that Timothy was a young man, and, I suppose, amongst the robust, and what we in our modern language call 'the tough', he was one of the weaker young men, physically evidently, and by all that the Apostle has to say to him in these letters, very much needing a stimulant in body and in spirit.

But I remind you of the tremendous things that the Apostle puts on his shoulders as a young man. These two letters contain some of the greatest things that could ever be committed to any man, whether he be young or old, and therefore the Apostle is not just accommodating everything to his youth. He is pulling the young man up to a very high level, seeking to make him realize that the grace and power of Christ can make a young man a man of very real stature.

The idea exists that you must bring things down to the natural measure of people, whereas we find in the Word of God that the Lord is always seeking to bring people up from their natural level to one very much greater, whatever they may be naturally. Now here, as we shall see, Timothy is not being spoken to as a poor, weak little thing who does not count for much, but he is being spoken to in such language as to make any man feel: 'My, what a thing it is to be a servant of Christ! What a tremendous thing!'

That is said because there are a number of young people, some of whom have only recently come to the Lord: but it is also said for the benefit of all, however

long we have been on the road. These letters are a tremendous challenge to stature, to rising to a high level, because the Lord calls to it.

Having said that, let us get into this message. We are dealing with the significance of these letters, not the detail. This is not an exposition of the letters, verse by verse, or even of the parts, but what they signify for us, and we have to begin with the writer himself, the Apostle Paul.

You will know that when Paul wrote these letters he did so from prison, the last imprisonment of several. The second letter brings us right up to the point where the executioner's sword is, so to speak, in hand. The Apostle says: "I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come" (II Timothy 4:6). The end of his life is reached with the second letter to Timothy. It is generally believed that there was a space between the two. The first letter was in the first part of his imprisonment in Rome, then he was released for a little while, after which he was re-arrested and condemned to death. Be that as it may, the fact is that Paul now is at the end of his earthly course, imprisoned, and in the second letter, almost alone. That we shall see as we go further.

The thing about these last letters of the Apostle Paul that is so impressive is that he is still in the glow and fire of the fight. Whatever the situation and conditions are, the fire is still aglow in his heart. It is the fire of the fighter. Notice all these words about soldiers and fighting the good fight; and apart from those actual words and phrases, the two letters are just full of the old fighting spirit of this heroic Apostle. It has not faded out, by any means, and he is seeking to stir up that glow and fire of conflict in the heart of this young man.

What a debt the Church, through twenty centuries, owes to that heroic, fighting spirit of the Apostle, that never surrendered, never gave in, though wounded, sometimes battered and broken, and bearing many scars of the long drawn-out battle! He is not giving up and not going down under. And, I say, the Church owes an immense debt to that spirit - and that is the spirit that will always put others in debt, under a great obligation.

If you and I, as so often we are tempted to do, let up, let go, yield, surrender, feel it is no use trying to go on, we shall not only lose out ourselves, but probably deprive many of the Lord's people of something that they would have if we just fought on to the last breath.

The Time Factor

The time, and the time factor, is one of the very significant things about these letters. You probably know that Paul had left Timothy at Ephesus, where he was in a position of responsibility in the Church, and Ephesus was the key to Asia Minor. Through Ephesus the word went out into all Asia Minor, and

Ephesus was the first of the seven churches of Asia referred to in the beginning of the Book of the Revelation. It is very important to remember those factors, especially in reading these letters, because they do throw a lot of light upon what is in these letters. It was a very significant time.

You see, Paul was executed in the year A.D. 68. John wrote the Book of the Revelation, with those letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, in the year 96 so that the conditions that are revealed in the churches in Asia in the Book of the Revelation have come about in the twenty-eight years between Paul's execution and John's writing of the Book of the Revelation - and what conditions! You think of all that the Lord gave through Paul to those seven churches in Asia, all the pouring out on that man's part to and for those churches, and those wonderful letters from his Roman prison to Ephesus, Colossae and Thyatira, and all the others, for they were circular letters to those churches. But if you took one letter only, the letter - so-called - to the Ephesians, which was a letter to the churches in Asia, and all that is in that letter, such depth as you and I with the longest life that we could live will never fathom - all that, and in twenty-eight years it is practically all gone! You read those letters to the churches in Asia and then the beginning of the Book of the Revelation. Twenty-eight years! You say: 'Tragedy! That is terrible! A man could give all that, give himself like that, they could receive all that, and then in twenty-eight years the Lord have to write to those very churches: "I have this against thee, and I have that against thee, I know this and I know that." It is a deplorable situation. Is it possible?' Well, you see, that is the time factor, and it is a very significant one.

Now the beginning, or beginnings, of that condition found in the Book of the Revelation twenty-eight years afterward are found in these letters to Timothy. You will find in them the beginnings of that slide downward, and in the attitude of the churches toward the Apostle at the end of his life. What is their attitude toward him, and toward his ministry? (Of course - the man and his ministry are one.) Well, he says: "All that are in Asia turned away from me" (II Timothy 1:15). That is comprehensive! That is a change of attitude toward him and his ministry. Then he speaks of some five men in particular who opposed him and his teaching. There is Alexander the coppersmith, of whom Paul says: "he did me much evil" (II Timothy 4:14). There are Hymenaeus and Philetus (II Timothy 2:17) and Hermogenes and Phygelus (II Timothy 1:15). Paul marks out these five men as being men who opposed him and his ministry - "did me much evil". That was their attitude, and apparently they were influential men in the church. When Paul left that church at Ephesus and met the elders, as he was committing them to God, he said: "From among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Right inside there were those who were against the ministry.

Then, almost as though it were with a sob, Paul says: "Demas forsook me, having loved this present world, and went to Thessalonica" (II Tim. 4:9). Well,

that is the tragedy of Demas. He "went to Thessalonica". If you read the Letters to the Thessalonians and the story of the Thessalonian church, I think you will feel that poor Demas could not have gone near the believers there. Those churches in Thessalonica were most loyal and devoted to Paul, and when Demas got there I do not think he would have been very happy there. Paul says: "Demas forsook me" ... 'one and another have forsaken me' ... "Only Luke is with me".

Here is a change, a big change of attitude toward the man and his ministry to whom they owed so much.

There is the evident need for Timothy to be strengthened. "Thou therefore, my child, be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.... Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier" - and the two letters are full of that sort of thing. Timothy is having a hard time, perhaps because of this change and because of his close association with the Apostle, for Paul says to him: "Be not ashamed therefore of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (II Timothy 1:8). You know, if someone is a 'speckled bird', under a cloud of suspicion, people who are not strong will avoid allowing other people to know of their association with that one. They will hide it all, and try to keep face by not letting it be known that they are closely associated with that one under suspicion. This is something that Timothy was evidently having to face... "nor of me", says the Apostle.

There is so much here with reference to warfare, and to fighting, and all this indicates so clearly that Timothy had to be strengthened, pulled together, and enabled to stand on his own feet, for he was in danger of weakening, letting go, because of the influences of these strong men, Alexander the coppersmith and the rest of them. Paul says: "Let no man despise thy youth" (I Timothy 4:12). You see what Timothy was up against? He needed some help!

Behaviour In The House Of God

In the next place, the emphasis in these letters, especially in the second one, is upon behaviour in the House of God... "that thou mayest know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God" (I Timothy 3:15), and then various things are gathered around that. There are the elders, the deacons, and matters concerning behaviour, position, office and conduct in the house of God. Why all this? Because things are beginning to go wrong. Evidently the whole situation in the house of God needed tightening up, correcting, strengthening, pulling together. If the letters signify anything, they signify, as I have said, that the state found in the letters to the churches in the Book of the Revelation was commencing at the end of Paul's life, and the decline would go on during the next twenty-eight years. Paul was aware of what was beginning and how things were going.

Because of the situation developing in the churches, and the enemies within and without, we have this repeated call to battle: "That thou mayest war a good warfare... Fight the good fight of the faith... A good soldier of Christ Jesus." There is no place for sentimentalism in Christianity, nor for smugness. The Church is not a recreation ground; it is a training place for soldiers. It is an equipment place for battle, and if there are wounded soldiers, it is a place for healing them in order to get them back into the fight. That is what these letters say about the Church. It is not the place just to have a nice, happy, pleasant time. We are in a terrible battle, and, mark you, this is not something that ended in the year 96, when John wrote the Apocalypse. This is the sort of thing we are in today.

What, then, were the particular occasions for this battle to which the Apostle calls Timothy?

The Battle In The Unseen

We must say here, as Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians, that this is not with 'flesh and blood', that is, it is not with man and not with things. You notice, even when Paul speaks so strongly about Alexander the coppersmith, he says: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil; the Lord reward him" (II Timothy 4:14; AV). Paul might have come out very vindictively and bitterly against that man. He might really have drawn his sword, for Paul was capable of using strong language if he wanted to. He did to the Galatian detractors: "Let him be anathema" - or 'let him be accursed' (Galatians 1:8). But no - 'Alexander the coppersmith did me personally much harm. The Lord will reward him. I will leave him in the Lords hands.' And again Paul says: "I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge" (II Timothy 4:16; AV). He is not fighting with men. He is not out against flesh and blood. This is a spiritual warfare, and we must note that as we just pick out some of the things which lay behind this appeal to rise up anew to conflict.

(a) Against Lowering The Spiritual Level

Quite obviously, there was to be a strenuous determination and strong attitude against the down-grading and lowering of the spiritual standard, of spiritual life. It is always a peril of the spiritual life of the Church - the declension, the decline, the lowering of standard, the down-grading of things. Sometimes it is said, in plausible language: 'Let us return to the simple Gospel!' That is only another way of saying: 'Let us not try to rise to such heights! Let us be content with something easier, something more pleasant!'

Now, you see, alongside that, the Apostle says: "For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heep to themselves teachers after their own lusts" (II Timothy 4:3). That is: 'Oh, say nice, pleasant things to us; soothe us in your way of speech; remove the

irritation of this constant appeal to something higher and greater. Modify; lower.' That, you see, was the thing that landed those seven churches into that awful reproach of the Lord twenty-eight years later. What the Apostle is in effect saying is: 'Look here, Timothy, have none of that. Gird yourself! The warfare is not with flesh and blood. It is against this terrible peril and tendency to down-grade the spiritual life, to take a lower level. Have none of it', he is saying, 'maintain your high standard to which you were called.'

(b) Against Loss Of Spiritual Measure

Next: 'Watch against the sacrifice and forfeiting or letting slip of the fullness which has been made known to you, which has been revealed, to which you have been called.' There is no doubt about it, the Apostle Paul did to all his converts - churches and fellow workers - present the FULLNESS of the divine calling in Christ, which is VERY full and very great.

Here the tendency has begun to sacrifice, to forfeit some of that measure, to let it slip away, and so he says: "Fight the good fight of the faith". And what the faith was to the Apostle Paul - well, you need to read all his letters to find that out. The faith was something very great, very full. The peril which is ever present, as much today as ever, is to let go something, to sacrifice something, to forfeit something of the great fullness of Christ to which we were called.

(c) Against Formality

Next: Against the supplanting of spirituality and life by mere form and ritual and officialdom.

Does it not seem perfectly clear, when Paul here has so much to say about elders and what they ought to be, the kind of people they ought to be, their abilities, their capacities, their standard of life and their gifts, and what he says, moreover, about the deacons, who are the servants of the church in the general matters - he says quite a lot about them, their standard of life and the kind of men they should be - and of other matters which go to make up the life of the Lord's people together - their corporate life - that it can be taken for granted that he was calling back from something? And what was it? From mere officialdom. Elders becoming officials, deacons becoming officials, perhaps desiring office and prestige more than sacrificial service. He is seeking to arrest a course which is letting go life and real spirituality in all these matters and allowing just form to settle down in their place. What Paul means, if we read him aright, is this:

An elder is not just an official. He is not just put into a position because he is a man of intellect or of means, or of social standing, or popular. The danger is to make men officials on those grounds. They have public position, they have money, they are something amongst men, and therefore you put them into

office. Paul is saying 'NO! An elder is a spiritual man, or he is nothing. These things must be safeguarded by spirituality and not allowed to drift into something else.' It is the same with the others who have position. The Church is not just an organized thing with a set form. The Church is a spiritual body, a living expression of the Lord Jesus, or it is nothing.

I would like to put in there quite a lot about the New Testament Church. You know, there is a lot being said and written about New Testament churches. I wonder what they are! That is not just a joke! For over fifty years I have been studying this matter, and today I have to say: 'I wonder what a New Testament church is!' We really do not know all that happened in the New Testament churches. There are certain things, of course, which are basic and which must obtain, but what I am saying is this: The thing then was a SPIRITUAL matter, not a formal ritual, a set way of going on.

The Apostle implies that everything is degenerating fast into formalism, legalism, officialism. 'Oh, Timothy, stand against that! Fight this thing. Fight for spirituality: fight for life... "Lay hold on life eternal, whereunto thou wast called"'.

(d) Against The Loss Of Spiritual Fervour

Then, further, the conflict against the loss of this glow, this fire, this dignity that is the true character of the Lord's people and the Lord's servants. Here Paul says: 'Stir up the gift that is in thee', and the thought there is: 'Stir the fire, get the fire aglow again. Things are fading out, things are dying, the glow is going', and you know that when it becomes merely a form the glow has gone. Is that not true? You go through a form, but there is no glow in it, no fire. It has lost that element that speaks of what is great, what is grand, what is fine, and what we have called dignity. How much these letters of Paul to Timothy stress the necessity for there being about him a dignity, a high standard, something that is infectious. 'Stir up... stir up... fight against the loss of spiritual glow.' In another letter he has actually used those words in the original. Our translation is: "Fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11), which is a good one, but the original says: 'Maintaining the spiritual glow'. I think it is Moffat that gives us that translation. That is what Paul is saying to Timothy - 'Stir up! Don't lose the fire; don't lose the glow. Resist everything that would have that tendency.'

(e) Against Loss Of Responsibility

Finally, the fight against the loss of a sense of vocation and responsibility. That, of course, comes in when Paul says: "That good thing which was committed unto thee guard" (II Timothy 1:14). Again I think it is Moffat who translates that more accurately: 'The trust with which you have been entrusted' ... 'That trust, which, being committed to you, guard against this

loss of a sense of vocation!

This is a word for every one of us. The youngest to the oldest should have this strong, deep sense of vocation, of responsibility. It is not optional at all, whether we like it or do not like it, whether it pleases us or does not please us. There is no option about this: it is obligation. It is responsibility. It is a trust that has been put into our hands. Drawing from Ezra, you will remember that when they started out on that long trek back to rebuild the city, they took the treasure, the gold and the silver, from Babylon, and they had to deposit it in Jerusalem, safe, intact and without any loss - and they did. They called upon the Lord for safeguards in order that they should get it through, and at last, we are told, they brought it and delivered it in the house of the Lord. There was nothing lost by the way. It was a deposit, a trust.

Dear friends, you and I have been entrusted with the testimony of Jesus in fullness, entrusted with a great revelation of Christ. It has been committed to us. Christianity has become, and is, I am afraid, becoming more and more generally a matter of whether you like it or not, something that you like, that pleases you. No, here is a challenge which says: 'Look here, if it costs you everything, even your very life, you have got to see that there is nothing lost.' It is not a case of whether it pleases you, of your having a good, happy time, but whether, through every adversity, you are determined to land this treasure intact at last at the feet of the Master and say: 'Here you are, Lord. Here is that which is Thine. Nothing is lost. You gave. I return.' To use the Lord's parable of the talents, the return is with interest, with increase.

Go back to these letters and you see that all this call and challenge to Timothy, as a representative member of the Church, is that there shall be no loss whatever of a sense of vocation, of a high and holy calling, of real responsibility - 'I am a RESPONSIBLE member of Christ, of His House, of His Church. I am not a passenger, not just someone to be carried and fed, but someone taking responsibility, with a sense of trust.' There has been given to each one of us a deposit by Jesus Christ, and at the end He will look to see what we have done with it.

Now, you see, this is the significance of these letters, and I think you will agree that all this is familiar to us today, this tendency to lower, to deteriorate, to decline, to lose something. It is a real battle, is it not, to maintain the high standard, to keep things on a high level, to maintain spiritual fullness. There are the pressures, the discouragements, the heartbreaks, the treacherous Christians; there is Alexander the coppersmith.

So, to end where we began, we note that the conflict is from the beginning to the end. Paul's life, from conversion to execution, was marked by conflict, and there was no let-up at the end. If the testimony of Jesus is truly and deeply bound up with a life or a people, it is only logical that the forces of evil will not

abandon their antagonism to what is predestined to be their doom, and anyone or any company called into that destiny will be marked for that antagonism. The warfare, therefore, will continue as long as we "Stand, withstand, and, having done all, stand".

The Lord help us so to do!

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