

The Fight Against Unbelief

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July 2008

Revision 8

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Introduction

We are saved through faith in the Jesus of the Bible and nothing else. Therefore, the front line battle for

the Christian is the battle against unbelief. Every sin is the product of unbelief and must be diligently fought against through belief in the promises of God to those who believe in His Son for their salvation. We must become skilled at identifying our unbelief and finding promises in Scripture that we can trust in if we are to resist sin and keep the faith effectively. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says, “Fight the good fight of the faith.”

Biblical Context

1 Timothy 6:12

1 Timothy 6:12 —But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Paraphrase

My personal paraphrase of **1 Timothy 6:12**—Christian, flee from pride, self-reliance and all the sins of the flesh. Chase after the characteristics of Jesus and tenaciously crush anything that would try to keep you from believing Jesus's words. Grab onto the reality that you will spend eternity rejoicing in God's glory with Jesus and live like everything Jesus says is true and will happen.

Argument

If we could believe perfectly and respond perfectly we wouldn't need Jesus

If we could believe everything Jesus said AND live out that belief perfectly we would not sin and we wouldn't need Jesus. But we do sin and we do need Jesus. We fight to believe perfectly and live perfectly so that we will be like Jesus.

Original Sin

Sin came into the world through unbelief. Adam and Eve fell into sin when they chose to believe the Satan instead of God (Genesis 3).

Out of the root of unbelief spring weeds of pride and self-centeredness

Out of the root of unbelief spring the weeds of pride and self-centeredness. The fruit produced by these weeds attack belief by tangling our feet and wrapping us up in sins such as anxiousness, bitterness, envy, impatience, regret, lust, covetousness, and misplaced shame. When we persist in these things who are we glorifying? It certainly isn't God.

The goal of a Christian is to have faith like Abraham in Jesus Christ. This faith results in glorifying God and enjoying Him forever. If we are to fight pride and self-centeredness we need to fight for faith.

In Romans 4:19 & 20 Paul tells us that Abraham did not weaken his faith or waver because of distrust. In 1 Timothy 6:12 Paul exhorts Christians to, “Fight the good fight of the faith.”

At this point the Christian should be asking:

- What am I fighting for?
- What am I fighting against?
- Why fight, is it possible to loose?
- What's at stake if I loose the fight?
- What weapons and defenses does God provide?
- What are the signs of success?
- What are signs of failure?

Let's work through each question, one at a time.

What am I fighting for?

Believe what God says.

The fight is a fight to keep on believing that Jesus's promises to you will be kept. Ultimately, the fight is to believe all of what Jesus said, including the meaning of His death, burial, and resurrection; the statements of his power; and his proclamation to be God.

Do you believe God created the world in six days? Do you believe God will take you into heaven to live with Him for eternity? Do you believe God will work all things together for your good, even if it means the child you have waited so long for has to die in what seems like a senseless car accident? Do you believe God would have your best interest in mind if he made you blind, or deaf, or paralyzed?

Most people have no issue with the first two questions but the second two questions cause them pause. That is because it doesn't cost them anything to believe the first two but it costs a lot to believe the second two. In order to continue to believe after your precious child has been taken or your precious senses and abilities have been taken you must believe that God is supreme and is directing the course of your life. You need to believe that God is who He says He is, otherwise it is impossible to continue to believe after such tragedies.

It is my sincerest hope that you will all be equipped for whatever happens in your life and the best way I know how is to exhort you to fight to see God for who He is.

What am I fighting against?

Fight against the influence of the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

The enemies are the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Satan wants to be glorified and will do whatever God allows to keep people from trusting God (Ephesians 6:12, 13). Our flesh is at war against the Holy Spirit within us (Galatians 5:17). The world is overflowing with sinful people who want themselves to be glorified. All of these are enemies of our faith.

In Matthew 4:1-11 God led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan just before Jesus began His ministry. Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days and nights and He was hungry. The first was a temptation to use His supernatural powers to make his body feel good by turning stones into bread. The second was a temptation for Jesus to prove His identity by commanding angels to save Him. The third

was a temptation to have worldly power by worshiping Satan instead of God. In all three cases Satan was unable to stand against God's Word. As soon as Satan left angels came to minister to Jesus.

This sounds like James 4:7-8, "Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

If Jesus had to fight for faith against temptations to distrust God's Word and sovereignty, then we can expect to have a fight on our hands as well.

Paul says in Romans 7:25, "So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." He recognized that the Holy Spirit within him gave him the desire to do what was right but that the flesh was working against what the Spirit desired.

James 4:4 says, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

So, what is there to fight against? Plenty!

Why fight, is it possible to loose?

Christians cannot loose but we must still fight.

The Christian life is a fight and a race (2 Timothy 4:7). It's a long fifteen round fight for faith in Jesus's word even though we are tempted to sin, even though catastrophes abound, even though the world tells us there is no God, even though it will be painful, uncomfortable, and inconvenient (Matthew 7:14).

Paul calls believers to test themselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). If we fail the test we are not Christians and we will loose the fight unless the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Jesus.

We can't talk about faith and testing without talking about Abraham. His faith was credited to him as righteousness and he was called God's friend (James 2:23). Remember when God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son (Genesis 22)? Abraham didn't delay, he woke up early and got going to do what God told him to do. Abraham trusted God and as a result God provided a ram and Isaac was unharmed. God said to Abraham, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

Do you trust God that much? Do you trust Him with your most precious relationships and resources? Certainly if Abraham can trust God with his son we can trust God with our children, our marriages, our money, our time.

Can a Christian loose the fight of faith? A true Christian cannot loose the fight (their salvation) because Jesus began the work and He promises to finish what He started (Philippians 1:6). So, we can have full assurance that our faith is not in vain (Hebrews 6:11, Hebrews 10:21-22).

If this is true then why would Paul tell believers to fight the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12)? Why would he mention that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7)? Why would he tell us to do our best to present ourselves as approved before God (2 Timothy 2:15)?

There is a clue in Philippians 2:12-13 where Paul says, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure". He is not saying that salvation is through works. He is saying that God is at work in you, through the Holy Spirit,

so you should be depending upon Him to help you conquer unbelief so you will be holy (Leviticus 11:44).

For the believer, the fight against the tendency to glorify and rely on ourselves remains, at least to some degree, because we still struggle with the flesh. There is no lack of temptation for us to fight against (Matthew 18:7) but temptation itself is not sin. Even Jesus was tempted and had to fight against temptation (Matthew 4, Matthew 26). However, putting up no fight and giving into temptation is sin (Matthew 26:41). God says he will provide a way out of temptation and we must take it (1 Corinthians 10:13). Thankfully, if we do fall into temptation He is willing and able to restore us.

What's at stake if I loose the fight?

Eternity with Jesus is at stake.

The stakes are as high as they get. On the one hand you have eternity in constant torment, with no hope of relief. On the other hand you have eternity rejoicing in God's glory and enjoyment forever. No matter what a person says, as long as he continues to live like he is the center of the universe and seek glory for himself, even if he works to earn his salvation by trying to be a good person, faith in Jesus will be impossible (Mark 10:21). The Holy Spirit must clear out enough unbelief for faith to be possible.

Our Testimony to the world

All Christians are subject to the great commission. We need to fight so that we will each have an effective ministry for the Lord's holiness and grace in our life, otherwise we are no different from the world and we have nothing of value to offer them. People notice hypocrisy quickly. How are we supposed to go into all the nations and make disciples of Jesus if what we're telling them doesn't work for us? But the more we believe, and live what we believe, the more different we will be from the world.

Faith in Jesus's words *does* work for us. One of the most powerful testimonies a Christian has is the way he responds when catastrophe touches his life. If we respond with sorrow *while* rejoicing in these situations people will notice, and when they ask us we will not be able to keep the glory for ourselves. We will have to give it to God because it was only possible through his grace and peace.

What weapons and defenses does God provide?

The Armor of God equips us to keep the faith.

Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh (Galatians 3:3)? No.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit (**Galatians 5:25**) .

The two offensive weapons against unbelief are the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. All enemies of faith are powerless against the sword of the Spirit (which is the Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit).

The whole purpose of the armor of God (**Ephesians 6:10-18**) is to equip Christians with the defenses they need to fight the fight of faith.

Good armor always represents the type of battle in which it's designed to be most effective. This is the reason you won't see too many catapults on the battle field today. Bombers and artillery have pretty much made them obsolete. Likewise, all of the elements of the armor of God represent the battle against unbelief.

Belt of truth

Like a physical belt the belt of truth helps us not to get tripped up by our clothing and holds our outfit together. Scripture is truth and the promises of God are truer than what the world, the flesh, and the Devil want us to believe. The promises of God help us not to get tripped up by sin and keep us held together.

Breastplate of righteousness

A physical breastplate protects the vital organs. We are sons and daughters of the Living God and he counts us righteous before him, it takes faith to live like we're children of God because it is contrary to the system of the world. Righteousness before God is what gives the Christian life, without it we cannot have a personal relationship with God because He is holy.

Feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace

When we have time to think through our actions we can arrive at a proper course of action, through Bible study, prayer, and godly counsel. But what about our flinch reactions? These are a good test of what's in our heart. If we are not constantly being renewed through Scripture reading we cannot hope to have our flinch reactions be pleasing to God. Through the Word we are continually renewed and made ready for every good work.

Shield of faith

When darts of unbelief are fired at us we must block them by trusting that God will come through on what He promises. After becoming skilled in the use of the shield of faith we are able to take greater risks as God calls us into greater dependence upon Him.

Helmet of salvation

A physical helmet protects the brain and helps to keep the fighter thinking clearly. Salvation is through faith, there is no other way to be saved. If we are to make the right choices we must grab on to our salvation and live like what Jesus says is true and will happen.

Like believers, unbelievers will experience God's promises but they will get the bad end of them. Instead of inheriting all the riches of God's kingdom God promises that unbelievers will inherit torment for eternity. There are real consequences for unbelief.

It's been sixteen years since I strapped on a football helmet but I played long enough to know that when it was on I felt free to take risks that I would never have attempted without it.

The sword of the Spirit

If the fight is to believe what God says you have to know *what* He says. The Bible is a powerful offensive weapon against unbelief when illuminated and brought to mind by the Holy Spirit. Not only does it contain God's promises it also shows us how faithful God has been to keep his promises to those who have come before us. In combination this is a powerful defense against unbelief.

Prayer

Prayer requires faith that God hears us and will do what is best for us. Persistent prayer especially requires faith in order to not lose hope. I've heard prayer called air support in the war for faith. Like special forces on the ground we can call in air strikes by getting in contact with central command.

In addition, prayer is a weapon we can easily share to aid others in their battle against unbelief. If we see a brother battling against unbelief we can call in air strikes for him.

Stay alert

You never know where the attack will come from next. Always be on guard against temptation and be on watch for your fellow Christians. You may have an opportunity to be used by God to save a brother from falling into unbelief.

Are you armoring up daily? Are you trusting in God for all things? Are you believing that God knows what's best for you and will be faithful to do it? It is easy to lose hope but we must put on the armor so that we can be steady in our growth and service for Jesus.

What are the signs of success?

The Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...

In John 15:1-11 the apostle Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches. Branches give no concern for the fruit, all they care about is sucking the life out of the vine. The result of diligently sucking the sap out of the vine is fruit.

If you are diligently sucking the sap out of the vine of Jesus you will produce the fruit of the Spirit.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35). Love is displayed through the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**). If you see these developing in your life you can know that you are growing in your faith.

What are the signs of failure?

The works of the flesh are sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry...

If you are diligently sucking the sap out of the vine of the world you will produce the fruit of the flesh.

Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die. (Proverbs 11:19)

The fact is, if you confess to be a Christian but you live your entire life like Jesus's words are not true or like He doesn't exist you are not a Christian. The Pharisees heard Jesus teach but refused to believe what He said, they went to hell. True Christians respond to Jesus. Unbelievers and fakes do not.

Unbelievers act according to the flesh. "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (**Galatians 5:19-21**) If you see these increasing

in your life you should be very concerned. You should test yourself to see if you are a believer.

What now?

Armor up!

Periodic Assessment

I've heard of people who do an annual assessment of their faith for the past 365 days each new year. They look back at the year and determine if they have kept the faith and make plans to focus in on the areas where they struggle to believe in the coming year. They identify the key Scripture passages that will aid them in their fight of faith for the coming year.

I think this is what Solomon meant when he said it was better to spend time at a funeral than at a party (Ecclesiastes 7:2) because it makes us think about how we want to finish the race well and not waste our lives.

An annual assessment is a great way to stay on course as we run our races and fight our fights. I would encourage you to look back at the recent period of your life and ask God to help you assess it. Have you kept the faith? Ask God to identify areas in your life where you need to do some focused Bible study, memorized scripture, and prayer. If we imagine the fight of faith as climbing a mountain, then Scripture is the climbing belt (the belt of truth) and prayer is the rope.

Study the Bible

The Christian's sap is the Bible. Study Scripture so that you know who God is and what he's promising. Memorize promises that will help you stand up against the enemies that try to get you to stop believing God's promises. Don't forget to read the Old Testament and not just Psalms and Proverbs. If you want the complete picture of who God is and how he operates you will be missing a large chunk if you skip over the Old Testament. God doesn't change, the picture you have of God needs to include the Old Testament perspectives as well.

God does all things for his own pleasure

Is life all about you? The antidote for self-centeredness is God-centeredness. Ask the Lord to reveal himself to you and ask Him to cause you to respond in the right way to Him. Ask the Lord to put himself at the center of your life and to show you the joy that was set before Jesus.

If God is God-centered then we need to be God-centered too. Turn to Jesus as the ultimate focus and treasure of your life, looking to Him for all pleasure. God is the only way to be happy.

Gather your close friends

Are you going it alone? You need to seek out godly friends. If you can't name anyone that you can share your soul with and ask to pray with you then this is an important area for you to be praying about. Ask the Lord to bring godly friends into your life to help you as you fight. Get involved in one of the small group Bible studies that does group prayer. The best place to find godly friends is at these small groups where you have a chance to share your struggle and people will pray for you and help to spur you on to love and good works.

Godly friends are like climbing pitons, the small device that mountain climbers jam into cracks in rocks so they can attach their rope. Using our mountain climbing metaphors, godly friends are the pitons that

God can use to help keep us from falling too far in the event that something goes wrong. This is why isolation is so dangerous and unity with the body is so powerful.

Jesus gathered His inner circle together to pray with Him in the garden before we was crucified. Take a lesson from Jesus and don't go it alone. Find some close godly friends, share your soul with them, and ask them to pray for you.

Pray

Pray without ceasing. Bring all your needs to the same One who created and sustains all things. Throw all your anxieties at His feet trusting that He will do what's best for you.