

Spiritual Warfare “Learning to Endure”

Having dealt with the whole armor Paul tells us we must put on the have victory in the last days, I want to turn our attention to the practical side of the armor and how we use this armor to win and maintain our victory.

Paul had established the congregation in Ephesus during his missionary journeys.

He established the church staying there approximately three years.

He appointed the young Timothy to stay and pastor this congregation.

It was a fast growing church, winning people out of the darkness of paganism and idolatry worship.

History tells us the church grew to the size of approximately 130,000; being one of the largest congregation until current times of Rev. David [Paul] Yongi Cho in S. Korea.

The congregation in Ephesus was under spiritual warfare due to the message of the Gospel was taking people out of darkness and bringing them into the Light of the Kingdom of God.

For the first three centuries of the Church’s existence, the tension between authorities and Christians was very tense and the Roman government was brutal and repressive towards believers.

Historical correspondence from the second century Emperor Trajan to a Governor named Pliny showed they were trying to determine how to deal with believers whom they determined had become a threat to the Roman government.

Such discussions of: “Shall I punish boys and girls as severely as grownups?”

“Is just being a Christian enough to punish, or must a true violation of Roman law actually be committed?”

“If the accused says he/she is not a Christian, should I let them go?”

I want to give the account of an early church leader who endured for the sake of Christ:

Polycarp was a Bishop of the church of Smyrna. He was 86 yrs. old when he was kill in 155 or 156 A.D.

His martyrdom occurred more than 100 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and illustrates how the poisonous fervor against Christians didn’t subside with time but actually increased to times during the rule of certain governmental leaders.

During a huge gathering of pagans, a hate-filled mob began screaming “Away with the atheists!” [Pagans were calling Christians atheists because the believers in Christ refused to worship and burn incense to the gods of Roman/Grecian culture].

As this mob frenzy grew, they began to rant and rave against believers and a person yelled out – "GET POLYCARP." The crowd took up this cry and an order went out to seize Polycarp and bring him before the crowd.

He wanted to surrender because he was not afraid of death, but his fellow believers urged him to hide in the country. He agreed to hide out of love for his loyal friends, but he was discovered and taken into custody soon after his retreat to the country.

Once brought before the crowd and put on trial, a sympathetic proconsul tried to persuade Polycarp to renounce Christ to save his own life.

Polycarp adamantly refused saying: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong, and can I revile my King who saved me?"

The governor instated again, "Swear by Caesar! I'll throw you to the beasts if you do not!" Polycarp answered: "Bring on the beasts!"

The governor replied with indignation: "If you scorn the beasts, I'll have you burned!"

Polycarp looked the governor straight in the eyes and said: "You try to frighten me with the fire that burn for an hour and you forget the fire of hell that never goes out."

Infuriated with Polycarp's boldness, the governor yelled to the crowd: "Polycarp admits he is a Christian!"

The crowd went wild, screaming: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of Christians, the destroyer of our gods!"

The crowd gathered huge bundles of wood and placed them around the feet of faithful Polycarp; as the fire swirled around him Polycarp prayed loudly:

"O Lord God Almighty, Father of Jesus Christ...I bless You that You counted me worthy of this hour, that I shall take a part among the martyrs in the cup of Christ and to rise again with the power of the Holy Spirit. May I be an acceptable sacrifice..I praise You. I glorify You through Jesus Christ...Amen."

This historical account paints a clear picture: The early Christians had a "very intense time to live in."

- No padded pews
- No air conditioning
- No stained glass windows
- No Christian radio or TV stations
- No Bible book stores

To be a Christian in the 1st Century meant **total commitment in the face of great opposition.**

It is difficult for us as believers in Western society to comprehend the horrific tribulation our brothers and sisters in the Early Church and even in many places today have to endure for their faith in Christ.

The greatest crisis the early believers faced was not the persecution itself, but rather the number of **defections** that took place because of the persecution.

The letter of Pliny to Trajan wrote: "The temples [pagan ones] which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere the sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found."

A number of those converted to Christianity were reverting to paganism in order to save their lives.

Persecution did and will reveal the GENUINNESS of a believer's faith.

- In that day, many forsook the Lord, deserted the Church and went back to their old ways.
- Timothy was seeing this happen in the church in Ephesus.
- He witnessed it among his leaders as well as participants in the congregation.
- They probably said something like: "See you later Pastor, we're out of here until the heat dies down!"

This was a very difficult time for Christians.

As their pastor, Timothy could have developed a grudge against these people.

- He'd been abandoned, upset and hurt by their forsaking the Lord and the Body of Christ, leaving him.
- Paul wrote to Timothy: 2 Tim. 1:8 "Be not ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner; but be a partaker of the afflictions [hardships] of the gospel according to the power of God."
- Another place Paul told Timothy: 2 Tim. 1:7 "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound [disciplined/self-control] mind."

There are times when you and I are hurt and feel we have a right to hold a grudge – but the truth is – holding grudges will always do us harm.

- Grudges, anger, animosity, forgiveness, contempt only bring ruin and destruction in our lives.
- Timothy had reason to be hurt, and you may also – BUT- HE COULDN'T GIVE PLACE TO THAT HURT AND STILL BE VICTORIOUS – AND NEITHER CAN WE. It's far too deadly!

- Paul's answer to Timothy and to you is: 2 Tim. 2:1 "**Be strong in the grace that we have because we belong to Christ Jesus.**"

When You're Wounded in a Christian Relationship:

When the Lord Jesus spoke to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 & 3, He was speaking to churches – Christians who had major problems.

- Ephesus was backslidden and had lost its 1st love for the Lord.
- Pergamum held to the deceptive doctrine of the Nicolaitans.
- Thyatira had a woman named Jezebel in its congregation who was seducing church members.
- Sardis was spiritually dying.
- Laodicea was lukewarm.

Those sound like trouble churches – Yes?

- Despite all of their shortcomings, Jesus still called them "GOLDEN."
- Rev. 1:20 He said: "The seven [golden] candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches."

From man's perspective, these churches [believers] didn't look golden at all.

They looked as though they were on their way to spiritual bankruptcy.

Yet – Jesus looked at them in all their mess and still saw them as unique and precious.

We must never forget that Jesus shed His blood for His church.

Even with all the problems in the Christian community today, after even 2000 years of trying to get it right; HE STILL LOVES HIS CHURCH. IT IS HIS BODY.

The Word says if we have been wounded by a brother or sister in Christ, we are called to forgive them.

If it seems like you are unable to forgive, you must seek the Lord to learn to forgive them.

In times when you are disgusted, angry, hurt, embittered with others in the church; you have to remind yourself – JESUS STILL LOVES HIS PEOPLE!

In spite of all the blemishes, spots, imperfections in the church [people of God] today, Jesus still calls us "GOLDEN."

Too many of God's people, good people who love the Lord, have avoided associating with other believers because of an incident of offense that occurred either last week or over 30 years ago.

They are holding onto grudges, hurts, resentments and unforgiveness – they've told their horror story a thousand times, displaying their wounds for all to see as the reason they should never again get involved with another church.

**The question is: ARE YOU GOING TO LET SATAN DO THAT TO YOU?
And for how long?**

As long as we live in this life, we will be surprised by a surprise attack.

- It hurts, it's not fun.
- Even good and strong soldiers are taken by surprise attacks at times.

This is why we are told to put on the whole armor of God and to be strong in the evil day.

- We are instructed to pray.
- Study the Word.
- Pray in tongues.
- Consecrate ourselves daily to His purposes.
- Attend fellowship of believers and encourage and build up one another.
- We must make a determined effort not to be blindsided by offense - refuse the spirit of being offended.
- Immediately forgive and allow the Holy Spirit to empower you to be healed and restored as soon as possible so we can return to the front lines where we are called to fight.

This is why Paul exhorted Timothy: 2 Tim. 2:1 "My son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

"Strong" = Greek = *endunameo* "speaks of an inner strengthening of empowering."
Refers to a "deposit of power in the inner man."

God's power will quicken your healing process.

There is no need, reason or purpose for us to sit around for weeks, month, or years.
God's power is available to take care of your problems.

Paul also told Timothy: 2Tim. 2:3 "You therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

"Endure Hardness" = "undergo hardship, be afflicted, suffer trouble."

Realize – 1John 4:4 "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world."