

How You Can Find Strength in Moments of Demonic Attack

In October 2019, the U.K./USA news magazine *The Week* published an opinion piece titled “The Coming End of Christian America.” The writer declared: “America is still a “Christian nation,” if the term simply means a majority of the population will claim the label when a pollster calls. But, as a new Pew Research report unsparingly explains, the decline of Christianity in the United States “continues at a rapid pace.” A bare 65% of Americans now say they’re Christians, down from 78% as recently as 2007. The deconverted are mostly moving away from religion altogether, and the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated—the “nones”—have swelled from 16 to 26% over the same period. If this rate of change continues, the U.S. will be majority non-Christian by about 2035, with the nones representing well over one-third of the population.”

The Christian church exists for the purpose of making disciples and expanding the kingdom. Something is seriously wrong if the church is losing disciples and shrinking the kingdom. Jesus told his disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV). If we were carrying out that commandment as the church in the 21st century, the headline would not be “The Coming End of Christian America” but “The Amazing Revival Across America.”

From the first century to the 21st, the greatest threat to Christianity has never come from the outside. Our greatest threat has never been persecution. It has never been the opposition of atheists. It has never been attacks from our godless culture. It has never been competition from other religions. In fact, external attacks have always strengthened the church.

The greatest threat to the Christian church has always come

from within. It has always come from those who claim to be Christians. It has always come from deceptive leaders within the church who preach falsehood, claiming they are re-imagining Christianity and even saving Christianity by undermining its teachings.

Demonic Confusion

No one understood the grave, internal threat to the church better than the apostle Paul. In fact, this internal danger is at the very heart of his final letter to Timothy. Paul understood that defection from God's truth starts with confusion. And who is the god of confusion? Satan. And Satan has been sowing confusion in the church from the beginning to the present day.

Today, there is confusion over marriage and the family. Should the church ordain marriage strictly according to the biblical pattern of one man and one woman? Or should the church adopt the world's view, in which the marriage might consist of two men or two women or any number of people of assorted genders? I'm not making light of the subject. This is literally a subject of discussion in many churches today.

There is confusion over abortion. Some in the church adopt the biblical position, as expressed in such passages as Psalm 139:13-16 and Jeremiah 1:5, that an unborn baby is a human being who deserves to be protected from murder. And Exodus 20:13 makes it clear that murder is a crime against God. Others in the church have adopted the world's view, which states that abortion is a women's health issue, and no other point of view (including that of the unborn baby) needs to be considered.

So there is confusion about what is right and what is wrong. There is confusion about sexuality, so-called sexual orientation and gender identity. There is confusion about whether or not the Word of God should have authority over our

lives and over the church. Satan, the god of confusion, is active in the church today. Because of Satan's confusing activity, along with the lack of biblical understanding of many in the church, people throw their hands in the air and exclaim, "I just don't know what to believe anymore!"

That's the moment when Satan and his demons high-five each other and pop champagne corks in the infernal realm. That's yet another victory the forces of hell have won over the church of Jesus Christ.

That's why Paul, in his last will and testament, 2 Timothy, appeals to his young friend and to future church leaders, saying, "Whatever you do, don't give up on biblical truth. Don't fall for satanic confusion. Don't get sidetracked by worldly notions and useless debates. Don't waste your time on people who just want to confuse you."

Be Strong!

The Word of God is our only true and lasting source of encouragement and joy. Human ideas and human belief systems only bring conflict and confusion. If we want to understand reality from God's point of view, if we want to eliminate confusion from our thinking, we must go to God's Word. And Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, offers us true encouragement and clear thinking when he writes to Timothy: "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you

insight into all this.

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:1-13).

Look again at what Paul says in verse 1: "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." How are we to be strong? By gritting our teeth? By pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps? By statements of self-affirmation—"Yes, I can! Yes, I can!"?

No. The strength Paul speaks of doesn't come from within. We only become strong through the grace that is in Jesus Christ.

We are saved by grace. We are justified by grace. We are sanctified by grace. We are to live every moment of every day by grace. We are empowered by grace to overcome all opponents and opposition in our daily lives by grace. And that grace will sustain us in upholding God's truth.

Soldiers for the Gospel

In 2 Timothy 2, Paul offers Timothy three word pictures to help him cut through our confusion and focus on what is important:

The soldier.

The farmer.

The athlete.

Why does Paul begin with the example of a soldier? Paul wants us to understand that the Christian life is spiritual warfare. Soldiers do not expect a soft or easy life. Soldiers take hardship as a matter of course. Soldiers are ready to take risks, including risking their own lives. And soldiers fight to win.

I have enormous respect for men and women who put on a military uniform and serve their country with honor and courage. And I also have enormous respect for Christian soldiers who go into spiritual battle, risking persecution and their own lives, often taking the gospel behind enemy lines into countries where it is forbidden to witness about the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the spiritual battle, there are only two kinds of people: victims and victors. If you want to be a victor in spiritual warfare, you must learn the rules of the battlefield. To win this war, you cannot watch the battle from the sidelines. You have to step out onto the battlefield. You must risk getting wounded and bloodied.

Why are secular forces—the atheists in academia, the anti-Christians in the media and the secularists in government—having so much success in eradicating the biblical worldview from our society? It's because Christians have surrendered the battlefield. Christians have surrendered the public schools, the universities, the halls of government, the entertainment media, the news media and on and on. When Christians deserted the battlefield, the nonbelievers took over. When Christians surrendered the battlefield of the mainstream denominations, the nonbelievers took over.

Wherever there has been a battle for some segment of our society, the nonbelievers have fought for dominance, and the Christians have given up and moved away. The hardship was too

painful and the conflict too unpleasant, so the Christians ran up the white flag of surrender.

The apostle Paul's message to Timothy and to us is this: "Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer" (2 Tim. 2:3-4).

Soldiers of Jesus readily endure suffering and hardship. Soldiers do not get entangled in civilian life—that is, they do not put worldly success, gaining power and fame, being entertained and other civilian pursuits ahead of serving Jesus. As good soldiers, we don't fall into the trap of pleasing other people. Our one and only goal is pleasing our commander-in-chief, the Lord Jesus.

Athletes for the Gospel

Next, Paul uses the image of an athlete to illustrate how we are to faithfully entrust the truth of the gospel to reliable people who will in turn teach others. In verse 5, he writes: "Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules."

As spiritual athletes, we do *not* compete against each other. We do *not* try to outperform each other. Our opponent isn't fellow Christians, but the world, the flesh and the devil.

In ancient Greece, the winning athlete was crowned with an evergreen wreath. To win the wreath, an athlete had to compete according to the rules. A Greek runner could not take a shortcut to the finish line. A Greek javelin thrower could not step over the runway mark while throwing. A Greek discus thrower could not set foot outside the throwing circle. Athletes must compete according to the rules. An athlete who breaks the rules forfeits the evergreen crown.

There are many people today, including many within the church, who want to rewrite the rules of the race. They have invented new rules for a reimagined, reinvented Christianity. They have invented new rules for a feel-good Christianity that has no moral judgment, no cross, no talk of sin, no need for repentance, no hell. They have invented new rules for a prosperity gospel in which we don't serve God, He serves us—and His will for our lives is a mansion with a Mercedes in the driveway.

If you run your race by the wrong set of rules, you'll reach the end of your life and find it has all been wasted. You won't find the rules of the spiritual race in the words of some silver-tongued false preacher. You'll only find the Lord's rules in his Word, the Bible.

Farmers for the Gospel

The next image Paul gives us is that of a hard-working farmer. Farming in Paul's day was backbreaking work. There was no mechanized farm equipment. Tilling the soil in those days was conducted by an ox, a plow and a very strong man. He would do his job whether the soil was good and rich or hard and rocky. He worked in good weather and bad. He didn't have the luxury of saying, "I don't feel like planting this year. I'd rather take a few weeks off." He didn't have the luxury, at harvest time, to say, "I just don't feel like gathering in the crop today. I'm going to take a mental health day."

I tip my hat to the farmers of the first century and the 21st century. Farmers today have modern conveniences that didn't exist in Paul's day. But farmers still have to work hard, even on days they'd rather be doing something else. The crops won't wait. They must be planted at planting time and harvested at harvest time.

As the book of Proverbs warns, "Sluggards [that is, lazy farmers] do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look

but find nothing” (Prov. 20:4). And that is why Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:6, “The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.”

Paul is telling us that we need to be very diligent and careful in tilling the soil of our lives and our character. We need to daily sow the seed of the Word of God into our lives. If we do so, we will harvest a crop of holiness and blessing in our lives.

As we sow the seed of God’s Word in our own lives, we must also till the soil and scatter seed in the lives of those around us: our spouse and children, the people we teach and disciple, the people we mentor in the workplace and on campus, the people we influence in our neighborhoods. We will not reap a great harvest unless we are sowing the seed of God’s Word wherever we go.

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