

# THE SERMON MESSAGE

**TITLE:** STRUGGLES OF LIFE AND CHURCH

**Rev. Ted Althouse**

**TEXTS:** II TIMOTHY 3:1-7 4:1-10

**November 21, 2021**

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Last Thursday, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2021, the United States and our church honored the sacrifice that our veterans made and still continue to make to keep our great country as safe and secure as possible. These are the men and women who put aside their regular comfortable life to provide our country with the freedoms we enjoy. Also, this coming Thursday, many American people will gather around a table laden with lots of food as we give thanks for the freedom and liberty we enjoy. But my question is: how many individuals just go through the routine of celebrating these two special days without thinking how Almighty God fits into these holidays...as well as all other secular and religious holidays?

When humankind was created by God, he declared: *"It is good!"* (Genesis 1:31). God created humankind in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by His love and provision. We were created to exist in the joy of knowing that He is Lord and we are His creation. Humankind has created holidays out of a purpose and they should somehow also reflect God's purpose for peace, love and understanding. Unfortunately, today we live in a world that generates issues in which we all struggle with life in many ways. (Incidentally struggles are defined as: *to contend with an adversary or opposing force. Make a forceful effort to get free from restraints*). Some of life's issues make us endure some serious issues with adversary or opposing forces. No one is exempt from life's struggles of various degrees. But, praise God, he provides us relief through prayer, scripture reading, attending church and spiritual intervention...all providing a richer and deeper meaning to life. Many times, just coming to Sunday morning worship services, we can receive help to better cope with life's struggles. Hearing the holy scriptures explained, listening to beautiful music and of course receiving a good bible-based message are positive ways to overcome some of our struggles.

I can probably say without fear of retribution that for everyone who attends a church service of any kind considers it a very special day...a day to hopefully feel and get closer to your spiritual self. Worship is a time to put aside the conflicts and struggles of our mind for a few minutes and allow the presence of the Holy Spirit of Almighty God to become more meaningful. Worship should also be a time when we gather together to receive the blessings which God reveals to us personally and collectively. It is also a time to regenerate our spiritual engines that will carry us through the coming week...as well as through all...the struggles of life.

Dr. Roland Trapp, a writer for a well-known publisher Westminster Press said: *“What is the future of our Sunday services? Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves some serious questions. If we are uneasy about the service, it may be because we have a reason to question our own commitment to God. Are people attending worship services because they find what they urgently need or because of only loyalty or habit? Worship is a choice that provides individuals with positive spiritual understanding, inspiration and direction. We must be cautious as to expressing any negative reasons for attending worship services because if we are worshipping only for selfish reasons and not to give God the glory, then we are missing the real purpose and presence of the Holy Spirit. If any of these are your reasons to attend church, then you need to rethink your own personal depth of spirituality, as well as your commitment to Almighty God.*

The apostle Paul strongly believed in deepening our personal spiritual development. But because he was also human, he knew that he had moments when he struggled with his own depth of spirituality. Paul had a deep commitment to Jesus Christ but he was also surrounded by the problems of the world. However, Paul had a strong faith...a strong solid faith firmly grounded in the teachings of Almighty God through Jesus Christ. Paul had a faith he knew would assist him when the struggles of his life were excessive. Sure, even a great man like Paul was tested and struggled with serious issues in his life. Even though he dedicated his life to the work of God, through Jesus Christ, he was still a human person with human imperfections.

As we continue to move through the Advent season, we find today’s message and scripture reading was inspired by Paul and hopefully it will help us more fully understand our own depth of faith in our personal struggles of life. Listen to Paul speaking to Timothy and each of us: *“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings...what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”* (v10-11) In this brilliantly expressive text, Paul is speaking about his faith, his worship, his persecutions and sufferings, as well as, his struggles of life. But he says; *“Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them”.* (repeat). What a profound statement of confidence and assurance.

I recall reading a true account about an incident in the fierce battle of the union and confederate soldiers. Many of the confederates were retreating when one tall confederate officer refused to turn his back to the enemy union and quickly gathered his troops and spoke about a deep faith which he had in his Lord Jesus Christ...and how he believed this faith would protect and guide, not only himself, but his troops as well. General Thomas Jonathan Jackson stood firm on his convicted faith in God and from this proud example of his faith, he and his troops went on to conquer the enemy in the civil war at Fredericksburg VA and win the battle. It is from this faithful struggle in life that he received his name ‘Stonewall Jackson’...and brought peace to our country.

You see, not all struggles of life end in disaster. Sometimes life's struggles make us stronger and with sincere faith in the Trinity (Almighty God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit as one Entity). With the Holy Trinity by our side, we can approach all our struggles with courage and have a victory. I must also add that some struggles can bring us closer to God as well. Not all victories from our struggles have the outcome which we might desire. But remember, if you have sincere faith in Almighty God...then our victory over our struggles are also his victories...and we move forward no matter what the outcome may be.

When the apostle Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, he had experienced many struggles in his life and was victorious because of his faith in Almighty God. At the time of this writing, Paul was near the end of his earthly life when he said, in chapter 4, verse 6; *"I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"*. Paul was an old man but his faith was still as strong as it was when he first committed his life to following the teachings of Jesus Christ. Even though his body was weak and his earthly life was coming to an end, his mind was clearly directing Timothy (and you and I), toward a closer relationship with Christ Jesus. He further said; *"...continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* (v14-17)

Contained in those few sentences with lots of words are a great quantity of profound material to help us. (I ask that when you get home today, take some time to re-read this scripture and ask God to apply it to your life...please). In a brief explanation of this scripture, Paul is telling us that we must be steadfast (steadfast meaning: loyal, faithful, committed, dedicated). Be steadfast in whatever comes before you, because our faith in Christ Jesus will sustain us. All that we have learned about Christ's work and learned from God's word (great or small) has equipped us for any and all struggles which may come upon us because our faith in Christ Jesus will sustain us. Again, I implore you to please reread this scripture on your own time and feel the sincerity in Paul's words...as it applies to your own personal struggles in your life.

At almost any given time, everyone is usually experiencing some degree of struggle in their life. These struggles can be with our health, family, financial, personal relationships, happiness, sadness, coping with issues and the list is endless. Now listen to me closely: there must never be a time in your life when you allow yourself to feel totally isolated from the love of God. (repeat) Throughout your life you have been equipped with the knowledge of God's grace, his love, his powerful protection...and this learned knowledge will sustain you during each and every one of your life's struggles...if...you continue to allow Jesus Christ to be the major guiding factor in your life. Oh, I agree that there could be times that you may come to the brink of wondering where God is during

your times of struggles...but never...(hear me carefully)...never allow yourself to deny the existence of Almighty God's ultimate power. He is there, walking with you always...even in those deepest and despairing struggles of your life. And, at times, because of your own human choices, God might allow you to feel the temporary pain of these struggles...but he will bring you relief and direction in his own time and manner. God wants us to be whole and happy.

Paul was telling this same truth to Timothy so that Timothy would remain faithful to God and this truth is also very real to each of us today as well. So here was Paul, coming to the realization that the end of his earthly life was close at hand. He was loyal to Christ and Christ's newly established church. And he wrote to Timothy, saying; *"and the time has come for my departure."* (v6). Paul knew that no one can avoid physical death....even Jesus Christ could not avoid a physical death. But Paul also knew he had to do the very best he could for God's purpose...not his own purpose, during what time he had left on this earth. And so, it is with each of us also. We need to do the best we can for God during whatever time we have left on this earth. And one of the things we can do that doesn't take physical energy in our old age is reading scripture and be in prayer. Prayer for yourself and others and for this world which God created.

When I was the pastor at Estero United Methodist Church, I was asked to conduct a funeral of a young 21-year-old girl. She died of an unknown circumstance. It had the appearance that she had been murdered but at the time of the funeral service, no one really knew for sure. So, what does a new young preacher prepare to say to the family and friends of someone who was in the prime of life and was taken from them in this manner? I prayed about my message and God led me to these scripture passages of Paul explaining that physical death is real but not final because we have a new eternal life. I told them that there is a heavenly place which is the dwelling place of Almighty God...and that we can be in that place if we want to be there. And also, that it is important how we spend each breathing moment while we are here on earth. About two weeks later, a young couple came to my office and told me they were there at the funeral service and because of my message, made a commitment to turn their lives around. They wanted me to help them come closer to this God that I shared at the funeral. I told them that, by acknowledging they felt God speaking to them during my funeral message and that by the very fact of admitting that they needed to change their life, that God was present, not only at the funeral service, but in their lives as well. I lead them to the sinners prayer of salvation through Jesus Christ and they continued to come to the church. Struggles of life can lead anyone to Christ and His church.

Paul's messages were usually simple and called the listeners attention to making a commitment to following Christ. In verse 7, he tells us; *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have*

*kept the faith.*" (7) Paul did not fear physical death and neither should we. You see, Paul and each of us who have made a commitment to follow Jesus Christ knows that the end of our physical life brings to us a glorious new life with Almighty God. Paul had fought the good fight of life. His life was a course of action and reaction...to and with God but he kept his faith in God's purpose and direction for his life.

Paul is also telling us that we must endure the struggles of life because all these struggles of life can be overcome...if we have faith....faith in the Trinity (Almighty God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit as one entity). No matter how difficult life's struggles become, we are compelled to fight them as best we can because God helps us to go forward. Remember, never give up because God never gives up helping us.

Finally, Paul tells Timothy; *"there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day....(and the next is an important point)...and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."* (v8) Allow me to quickly define the "crown of righteousness". A crown is usually a reward of victory/triumph/success. A crown is usually a mark of honor and righteousness is to be morally correct or justifiable. So, to receive the "Crown of Righteousness" one should live as honestly as possible so that when we leave this earth, God will give us the ultimate victorious reward of eternal life. What joy...what pleasure...what comfort to be able to know that God will bestow this crown of righteousness on us when we depart this earth. Paul was encouraging all the Timothy's of this world to have faith in all struggles of life and reach out to Jesus Christ and his church for help.

Paul ended his message to Timothy, saying; *"To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."* (v18) That is what faith in the struggle of life is all about...giving God the glory for ever and ever and when we do this, he will see you through each and every struggle of life. *"To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."* And we all say Amen! (Sing: To God Be The Glory #99)