

This series that is ending today, a series on heaven and hell, has been, I hope, a helpful series to you. I know it has been to my own heart and to my own life as a believer. It has also been very difficult, as I have felt particularly the weight of the calling that I have been given. I'm now entering into my seventeenth year as a minister of word and sacrament, and I've preached many series. But when you begin to plunge the depths of the reality and the beauty of heaven, but also the reality and the horror of hell---and the weight of having to preach that to you straightly and without confusion from the Word of God, both its blessing and its warning---it bears a great weight. But it has been a delightful weight, nonetheless.

So we end today by looking at a charge to take hold. This passage from which I'll be preaching this morning is a passage that Paul wrote to Timothy, his young protégé and church planter. And these words were meant to embolden Timothy, to call Timothy, as it were, to preach the whole counsel of God to whomever that God would call him to preach, whether among Jew or Gentile, whether to those who are poor or those to who are wealthy. And he was to deliver to them the message of the gospel without confusion, being careful not to be caught up in speculative knowledge and things that are not clear from God's word. People use God's Word to twist and to obtain false doctrines that have enough truth in them to hook. He warns him to be careful, that when he preaches, regardless of his audience, to do so with boldness and clarity, to declare the nature of who Christ is and what he came to do. And to remind him that which he has been called to is nothing short of a battle. It is a battle, a spiritual battle. When I say spiritual battle it does not mean that it doesn't involve our flesh. It most certainly does. But our battle is not against flesh, as Paul would tell us. He also would say, of course, that our battle is not against flesh and blood. Our enemies are not other people, but rather Satan who is our ultimate enemy.

And so I have taken that charge from my ordination vows to continue to preach the word of God as faithfully as I can, as I have been trained by my mentors and through the encouragement of so many---so many of you in your prayers during this series. I finish this series with a word from Paul to Timothy, recognizing it wasn't just to be to Timothy, it is also to you. And that calling which was to Timothy is also a calling for each and every one of us. Take hold of the eternal life that has been given and offered to you through Jesus Christ alone.

And so now I encourage you, if you have your Bibles, to turn there to 1 Timothy 6:11-21. If you do not have your Bible, you can certainly follow along on the screens before you. Hear now the Word of God.

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. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time---he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.
Grace be with you.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Heavenly Father, on this day we would ask---at the culmination of this series on heaven and hell---that you would remind us of the eternal calling that you have placed on every human soul, that we were created to be with you for ever and ever. But because of sin, we have fallen from that state of perfect relationship with you. But you, O Lord, through your sovereign purposes, have promised from of old and brought to fulfillment the great promise of the covenant of grace, that you would send your son Jesus Christ to bring about reconciliation through his body and his blood upon the cross. And that you, through him, have offered us eternal life and have called us to yourself through him by faith, by grace. So Lord, I pray, enable us this morning to be reminded that we are indeed called to take hold. For we are in a battle. Lord, awaken us from our slumber to see the battle that is all around us for our very souls. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Today marks the 200th anniversary of the forgotten war, the War of 1812, which began in the northern part of the United States, in what is now at present Canada, all the way down into Plattsburgh, New York. What would begin in 1814 would be the Chesapeake Campaign. On this morning two hundred years ago, the Secretary of War said the following words: “They [that is, the British], they certainly will not come here to Washington, DC.” He said it. He was late for the very meeting which was called to order at seven a.m. two hundred years ago today. He arrived late and he said these words: “They will certainly not come here. What the devil will they do here? No, no. Baltimore is the place, sir, that is of so much more consequence,” he declared.

Yes, indeed, there was much consequence in Baltimore three weeks later. And in what would be, perhaps, one of the greatest acts of American political spin, we have forgotten the war that would see the first time that a sitting president was shot upon in war. That would see, perhaps, one of the lowest points in all of American presidential history---the Madison family fleeing Washington on horseback. That would find them just fifteen miles to our west two days later, on August 26, 1814. What happened on this day two hundred years ago was what no one could imagine. The British would float up the Potomac, the Patuxent River, and they would lay waste to Washington DC. They would set aflame the White House, on which you can still see to this day marks of the smoldering fire that laid waste to the White House. They would go into the White House, wear the president's clothes, eat the meal that Mrs. Madison had prepared that day for a grand feast that was to be celebrated at 3 p.m.

The soldiers that were called to arms that day came to the battlefield nowhere near prepared, for they had only been in training one time a year. And those who are military historians know that that one time a year largely involved their going down to the local tavern and getting drunk. They were not prepared for battle. The president was not prepared for battle. The Secretary of War was not prepared for battle. And three weeks later, by God's grace and God's grace alone, the American flag would still fly.

But I will tell you, if you think this series on heaven and hell is anything but a call to battle, you will have missed the call. It is a battle, which some of you may think: *No, surely, surely it's not a battle for my soul. That's just old-time religion stuff. That's just old fire and brimstone preaching.* Be careful. For this call to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to trust in him for salvation, is a battle for our souls. And to this is what Timothy was called and to what we turn our attention to today. May what will be said of us this day---may it not be the same were a history to be written---*Certainly Satan is not interested in us...* Oh, he most certainly is. And he wishes to turn you from the promise of heaven, from the glories of Christ and the beauty of his salvation.

How does he do that? Well, we learn that from this passage. First you'll see the warnings that are given to us, that are very clear in this passage. Then we'll see the calling. Finally, the promise.

Let's look together first at the warnings. Now, it's not written for you, or rather, it was not included in the reading simply because of time, but this passage which I've already read to you is in many ways bracketed by warnings. These warnings include fleeing from the idolatry of money. We hear that, of course, in verses 9 and 10 of that very same chapter where Paul would write "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." Now this is key: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." The warning first is to be careful of idolatry of money. The love of money. The worship of money.

It would also be not only the warning to flee the idolatry of money, it is also the warning to be careful of false security. We hear that in the verses where Paul gives to Timothy the warning and the command that he is to communicate to those who are wealthy. Verse 17. He says: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." There he's saying to him, warn them of the false security that so easily finds its place in our hearts, where we believe that which we have will be here tomorrow. And in that I can find my foundation, my security. And when the false security of riches or of status and class become the foundation of our lives, what becomes the fruit of that false security is that other warning---the warning about pride. It's translated here in verse seventeen---Charge them not to be haughty or to be arrogant. Pride and arrogance is the fruit of false security, of self-dependence.

And what is also interesting is that imbedded or implied in all of these warnings is this reality: Why do people find themselves desiring wealth, and in so doing they pierce themselves---what an amazing, incredible illustration---they pierce themselves with all kinds of grief. What is that? It's that they hope that the money will provide for them, but once they get it they realize it brings with it a whole other set of worries and concerns and distractions and decisions and temptations.

And then on the other side, those who are already wealthy---why is it so easy to find false security and pride? One of the reasons why we find it so easy to get involved in that is because of apathy. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of God, no longer holds an excitement or electricity. The good news just becomes yesterday's news. It's no longer good. It's no longer electrifying. And so we grow apathetic. It's just a gift that God has given, and we take it for granted. And when we take it for granted, what do we begin to do? We begin to look about for other things that will satisfy our souls, and so we plunge ourselves into these other pursuits. We don't just wake up one morning and go '*Hey, I want to go love money! Hey, I feel secure today!*' No, we don't end up there by a mere one-time decision. It's a series and a culmination of a hundred little decisions. Millions of decisions.

A large part of that finds its foundation in an apathy that so often accompanies many Christians today. We've grown so fat and happy, our life is so good, so many opportunities. Heaven, heaven---the new heavens and the new earth seem so remote and so far off and so the thing of childhood, that surely that's just imagination. But here I can taste heaven now and it becomes so palpable and so full of enjoyment. That begins with apathy. *Surely God's not coming back.* None of us would say it so nakedly. Right? But what do our lives say about what we long for? Let me ask you. If we were to do a Google metric on things that you search for when you're on the web, what would that bring back? What results would it bring back? What would rate the top? I wonder how many of the top ten things that we search for are really just more things to buy to scratch that itch.

The other warning is also cynicism. So oftentimes what leads to the pursuit of these other things to find the false security and a pride in money and possession and the pursuit of it, is, quite frankly,

Jesus is just not doing it for me anymore. I pray and I pray and I pray, but nothing seems to change. I feel like I'm on this treadmill. I go to church every Sunday and I go to Sunday School and I go to Bible classes and seminars, and everything else, but I still keep running up against the same patterns. And nothing seems to change day after day, year after year. And we give up hope.

Did God really say? [a child in the congregation answers "Yes!"] Yes, he did. So says a child not burdened with cynicism. Amen? Maybe instead of telling our children more often to be quiet, maybe we need to listen to a child's heart, because that is what we've lost. Because we've often forgotten that this Christian life is a marathon, and not a sprint. And when God does not stand up and take orders as we give them, we lose hope, and we bag it all together. Again, we would never say that so nakedly. But how many of our lives---those who call on Christ by faith---how much of our lives is marked by prayerlessness and a lack of worship? And I put myself at the head of that question line. So he gives us this warning. Be careful of these things. And then he says, 'Flee.' Verse 11: 'Flee from these things.'

And then beginning in verse 11, all the way through 21, we have nothing less than at least nine imperatives that Paul gives to Timothy. We can only look at a couple, but they stand out so clearly. And as we look at this calling, what we see so clearly is that he is calling him and calling us, therefore, to battle. We hear it. "Pursue," he says. We hear this in verse 11. "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." Pursue the biblical virtues, the practice of love, the practice of gentleness, the practice of faith, the practice of godliness. Let me say this to you. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, as I have said in earlier weeks, we are saved by grace through faith alone. Nothing that we can ever do can merit salvation. Nothing we can do can be offered before God to receive salvation. It is a gift pure and free through Jesus Christ alone. But in the words of John Calvin, "Though salvation is by grace through faith alone, faith is never alone." We don't just sit back on the couch, as it were, expecting for ourselves to just suddenly grow up to be righteous, faithful, godly, loving, steadfast, and gentle. It requires great practice, and you must pursue it. And you might say well, how do I pursue it? Look at those around you who you believe are marked by these virtues. Spend time with them, talk to them, learn from them, pray with them, ask them to pray for you, and learn from them to put these things into practice.

But he says not only to pursue, he says in verse 12, "Fight the good fight of faith." Now here he doesn't mean fight against other people, but fight. Why? Because it is a battle. Why? Because our souls are in a precarious position. We are surrounded like a besieged city with so many different temptations, so many things warring for our attention, so many things pulling at us. And when we begin to think on eternity, as we have these last number of weeks, so many things in our daily lives begin to pull us back, call us back into the moment, and we forget that we're living in the light of eternity.

I don't know if you know this, but we live, of course, in the land of crabs, right? We love blue shell crab or whatever they call it here in Maryland, right? I've been able to enjoy great Maryland crab cakes. You may wonder where is he going with this illustration, so watch this. I recently was able to travel past one of the great crab factories on the Eastern shore. And what they do with crabs, is that they put them in large baskets---baskets! Because you know why? Because crabs will try to climb out of the basket, but every time one of the crabs tries to climb out of the basket, guess what happens. Another one of the crabs reaches up, pulls him right back down again. It's true! Isn't that the case, that when we've been looking at heaven or the reality of hell, how many things, I wonder, in our minds and in our daily lives are simply trying to grasp us back down into the daily grind and say, God didn't really say that. He's not coming again. God and prayer really don't work. Look for happiness here! Stay in the basket with the rest of us.

One of the great writers of very old wrote these words as he contemplated culture and society. He said many of these writers regarded society as a shipwreck from which each single individual person has to swim for his life. These men believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they know as society, was purely and simply a disaster. Everything around us is screaming materiality, materiality, materiality and not eternity. And so he says to Timothy, "Fight the good fight."

And then he uses these words when he says to him, "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." What he says there is this phrase 'to take hold.' It's this strong verb, the strong imperative that has embedded within it this phrase that literally means to violently take hold, to wrench at it, to grab hold of it. So you've been given a gift. How do I take hold of that which is a gift? In other words, you've been given a gift. But the question is, do we see it as such? Do we see it as a gift of great value and great treasure? Here he's saying to Timothy and to us, this gift of eternal life---which we've been looking at through the biblical doctrines of heaven and hell---is something which we were made for, and it is a gift. And so he says take hold of it.

What does he mean by 'take hold of it'? He doesn't mean to just think about it. He means to give your heart to it, give your mind to it, give your hands to it. What that means is first begin with the word of God. Study the truths of eternal life, of both heaven and hell, of what God says and what he's coming to do again. And then in that reality, as we seek to pursue these things which he has called to pursue, we do it in our daily lives. It isn't that our daily humdrum work, go home, work, go home, family---whatever it is we're caught up in---makes no difference. No, we then begin to see that it's an opportunity---wherever we work, wherever we live, whatever we do---we are to do it in the light of eternity. But we are to take the promise of God, which is eternal life---we are to take hold of it and wrench it right back into my daily life. What does that look like? It looks like my integrity at work is not just about a job performance review. My integrity at work has to do with the fact that God, who has given me eternal life, has called me to pursue such things because I will have to give an account on the day that Christ returns---for his glory. So I take hold of the eternal life and I wrench it right back into my daily decisions. And then it begins to characterize more and more of our lives and how we live, because we are to take hold of it.

But there is one more that I would have us look at. It comes to us in verse 14. He says to Timothy, "I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." He says, "I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame." Does this mean that it's possible to live a sinless life? That's not what he's saying to Timothy. He's saying Timothy, I charge you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is coming again, to give your entire being to the pursuit of Christ and his glory, for he is the beginning and the end. Isn't that what he says? He says to Timothy, verse 13: "In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this commandment without spot or blame, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

He's given him this calling because he says by the way, you've been called by Christ. You've given a confession of faith before many witnesses. And then he says there are other witnesses. God is as a witness. Christ is a witness. And it is God who gives life to everything. And so he says Timothy, God has given you life, and so I say to you, pursue, fight the good fight, take hold of eternal life, of the gift that has been given to you, because you are called in Christ Jesus. And I charge you to keep this without spot or blame. Because why? You've given a confession before many witnesses. Christ and God are our witnesses. It is God who is life. He's saying what the Scriptures teach us, that God is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the one who has given life. He is life, and he is the goal of all of life. And why we've looked at the eternal reality of either heaven or hell is because of this very issue---of how quickly you and I grow apathetic. We grow fat and happy with life here and we forget to look ahead

and be aware of the battle that is around us and the enemy that is Satan, who seeks to distract, who is in and throughout all kinds of cultural attitudes and institutions and things that call us away from these things. And we are to look ahead to fight the good fight, to keep the faith.

I remember... This past week, as I was training on my bicycle with a friend, I recalled---and maybe I've shared this illustration with you. I'm sorry if I've done it, I'll do it again, probably, but here you go. I was seventeen years old. I was near the coast of South Carolina. I was with my father. I was at a bicycle race. We were in the last two hundred yards. Now before this moment, my father and I---and I had just become a believer a year before---we had never really shared a common interest in sports. He was more the football-baseball guy, and I was more the skateboarder-cycling guy. Two different worlds. But now after becoming a Christian, my father saw it as an opportunity to invest in something, and here we are at this bicycle race. And we're coming down to the sprint finish. The two guys who were expected to win, they're fighting each other---literally fighting each other, yelling at each other. Me and another guy saw this as an opportunity, and so we headed for the finish line. I'm a rather small cyclist compared to many. I'm not a strong sprinter, and I could feel myself wanting to give up. I'm almost at the end. I'm running out of energy, when at the finish line---just beyond the finish line---my father jumps out from the crowd that are around the finish line. He jumps out like this, and he jumps up and down. "Go! Go! Go!" And when my father did that, the pain in my legs, the cramping that I could feel sweeping up into my thighs went away from my mental brain, and I simply wanted to finish as fast as I could.

I didn't win the race that day. But that wasn't the point. I kept my eyes not on the battle that was right next to me, who I thought were my physical enemies---I was looking at the real goal, the finish line. And my father was there waiting, telling me to "Go!" And I want to tell you, Christian, God's word is God saying to you, "Go!" Take hold of the faith. Fight the good fight. Pursue these things. Because I give life to everything. And I have given you life, not so that we can sit by and by and grow fat and happy on the life that's so much around us, that allures us with its aroma. But it is a lie if we believe this is where we are to find our greatest joy.

And so the series on heaven and hell is to say to you we were built for eternity, and our goal will either be eternal life with God the Father through Jesus Christ, or it will be eternity with the wrath of God the Father in hell. That is what is on offer, because our souls are immortal and our bodies, though they go to the grave, on that day when Christ comes again our bodies will be united with our souls, and we will stand before the judgment seat of the Lord our God. And when we do, what will be the outcome? Today I tell you, there is an outcome which is on offer to every one of us, and that is the promise. Do you see it in the passage? It's right there. Verse 13. "In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession."

So not only is God the one who gives life to everything, in Christ he is the life. For when it says there he made his testimony before Pontius Pilate, it's the Greek word that is translated as 'martyr.' The only way we can keep going is because Christ has gone before us as a martyr to the slaughter for our salvation. He is the Lamb who is on the throne, the Lamb who was slain. The promise, first and foremost, is that Christ is the life, he is the foundation who has given himself over to Pontius Pilate and over to the cross so that we might have salvation. And not just forgiveness of sins, not just that we can be received, regardless of what part of life, whatever sin it is you believe is unforgivable. God calls you this morning to forgiveness that is on offer through Jesus Christ. But I will tell you, as he calls you to forgiveness through the body and blood of Christ, he calls you and he will make you new. He calls you as a sinner, but he will unite you as a son or daughter of Christ, the King. Isn't that what he says here in verse 14? "To keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time---God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light,

whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.” This is the one who is life---Christ.

That is the first promise. The second promise is the return of the King. He’s coming again, Paul tells us. He is coming again. But before he comes again, he gives us what he gave to us in his first coming. The promise of salvation.

Why do I know this? It is because it is all over this passage in one very short phrase, and here’s the third part of the promise. Christ the martyr, return of the King, but number three is in this great phrase: “Grace be with you.” Up until this point in this passage Paul’s been speaking to Timothy in the singular second person, but here it turns to plural. ‘Grace to y’all.’ Grace to y’all. The promise is that Christ, who was the Lamb of God led to the slaughter, who died for us that we might receive forgiveness of sins and salvation, is the King who has now risen from death to life. As we said last week in that great, great creed, the Apostles’ Creed, these words: He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell, and the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. The return of the King. But know this. Today, today is the day of his grace, and he’s coming again. It is not for me nor for you to know the time in which that will be. The Lord knows what time that will be. But he is coming again, and that grace, the grace of salvation, is offered to you.

Christian, may God by his Spirit awaken us from the slumber of apathy and awaken us to the God who gives life, who gives us grace to pursue the calling of taking hold of eternal life. But if you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, much of what I said has either confused you or angered you. But my hope is it would comfort you. For our God is first and foremost not a God of fire and brimstone, he is a God of grace. And he invites you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to take hold of eternal life that is offered to you through Jesus Christ our Lord, to believe on him, to cast yourself upon him today. Is today the day of your salvation? Is today the day of the rest of eternity with God?

So I give you as one final warning: Do not believe the evil one who whispers in our ears, ‘Did God really say?’ And with that child that I heard earlier in the service---Yes, God did say. And with a childlike faith we can say, ‘Come Lord Jesus, come.’

Let’s pray. Holy Spirit of the living God, fall fresh upon us this morning. Not because there is anything particularly attractive about us, not because we’re in a Presbyterian church, a fancy building, wearing nice clothes. Lord, before you and you alone, as the God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, we stand before you as needy people. We call out to you, and I call out to you on behalf of this congregation, Lord, by your Spirit fall fresh upon us and call us out of our slumber and into your marvelous light, the light of salvation through Jesus Christ, that we might be lovers of the light, lovers of truth, and those who pursue grace, those who pursue righteousness and faithfulness, love and gentleness. Lord, I pray, give us ears to hear. But Lord, by your grace make our hearts your home. Make our lives more and more into the image of Jesus Christ who died for us, who was raised for us, who has gone before us into heaven, and who will return. Oh Lord, by you, who gives life and is life, enable us, then, to take hold of eternal life. We give you thanks and praise. And now, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, I pray. Amen.