

CONTENDING *for the* FAITH

BY LAYING HOLD ON THE ETERNAL LIFE

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In Mark 6, after feeding the five thousand, Jesus compelled His disciples to get into a boat and sail toward Bethsaida. The Lord did not travel with them, however. Instead, He bid them farewell and went away to a mountain to pray. The disciples were thus left to make the voyage alone. Darkness fell, the wind began to blow against them, and rowing became increasingly difficult. In this hostile environment the disciples continued rowing long into the darkest part of the night, the fourth watch. They were distressed. Perhaps they wondered when the difficult journey would be over, perhaps they asked each other why the Lord had not accompanied them, or perhaps they doubted His wisdom in sending them on such a journey. But the Lord saw what the disciples were undergoing, and in that darkest part of the night, He came to them.

We believers are, so to speak, in the same boat. In one sense our Lord has gone away (through His ascension), and we are left here to make our appointed journey in faith. The darkness of this age intensifies, and contrary winds increase against us. Many things arise that challenge our faith: atheism and agnosticism gain ground in society, prominent Christians stumble and fall, the condition of our local church may be poor, or our personal environments may be tumultuous. Distressed by these challenges, we inevitably feel the urge to stop rowing. Yet our Lord has called us to follow Him, and He has promised to return to us. Even if stopping seems to grant us a respite, it might cause us to miss the Lord's appearing. Additionally, we are not alone on the journey; there are others in our boat to consider. Our perseverance, or lack thereof, can affect the believers around us. Consequently, we must continue. Considering all of this, how can we press on until we meet our Lord? The surprising answer: "Beloved, . . . earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3).

The believers to whom Jude wrote faced similarly tempestuous circumstances. Even before Jude's Epistle was written, Paul had already warned the believers that

the faith of the gospel was under attack, necessitating a defense of and standing firm for it (Phil 1:7, 27). He alerted Timothy that "in the last days difficult times will come" (2 Tim. 3:1) and that "evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse" (2 Tim. 3:13). Shortly after Paul's martyrdom Peter also warned the believers in his second Epistle of a deteriorating environment, one difficult and contrary to their journey. By the time Jude took up his pen to write to the believers, heretics were already in their midst, having "crept in unnoticed" (Jude 4), daring to participate in the very love feasts of the churches (Jude 12), with the goal of undermining the believers' faith. As discouraging as the situation was, Jude refused to give up the journey. Rejecting passivity, this "slave of Jesus Christ" (Jude 1) indicated the urgency of the situation with intensified language, "using all diligence to write" to "exhort" the believers to "earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The Greek word underlying "to earnestly contend," ἐπαγωνίζομαι (*epagōnizomai*), is found nowhere else in the New Testament. It is composed of ἐπί (*epi*) and ἀγωνίζομαι (*agōnizomai*), with the prepositional prefix ἐπί functioning as an intensifier. The word ἀγωνίζομαι, etymologically related to our English word *agonize*, generally means "to fight, struggle" (Bauer et al. s.v. "ἀγωνίζομαι"). Although Jude could have simply used ἀγωνίζομαι, a word already giving the sense of exertion, he recognized that the environment required more intensity. Hence, Jude employed ἐπαγωνίζομαι, meaning "to exert intense effort on behalf of something" (Bauer et al. s.v. "ἐπαγωνίζομαι"). Thus, Jude urged the believers not only to fight but also to fight in earnest, to fight with heightened purpose and seriousness. And surely the Lord's call through Jude is for us as well. Our circumstances, often disheartening and discouraging on multiple fronts, are challenging to our faith, just as they undoubtedly were for the believers of Jude's day. Yet we "unto whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11) must not respond with resignation or passivity. Truly, "the night is far