

# Why Do I Still Struggle?

## IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME?

Why do some people simply give up trying to be a Christian? There are surely a lot of reasons, but one of the most common is that people find the Christian life to be tough and demanding. Self-denial, sacrifice and service do not come naturally or easily.

Many find that, even after years of following Jesus, they still struggle to do the right thing. Pride, lust, fear, greed and bitterness are just a few of the vices that may seem to grow stronger, not weaker, with time. Is there something wrong with a Christian who struggles? Why is life so tough, and is struggle always bad?

It would help all of us to know the place that struggle is intended to have in the life of a child of God. Then, perhaps we wouldn't be so easily discouraged, and we wouldn't assume that something is wrong with us every time we find ourselves involved in a spiritual struggle.

## STRUGGLE – A SIGN OF LIFE

All of us can identify with the apostle Peter at some point in his life. Both his successes and failures were often spectacular. Perhaps the darkest time in his life recorded in scripture was the night of Jesus' trial. Luke records the following description of what happened after the third time Peter insisted he didn't know Jesus:

Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62).

Peter must have wondered that night if there was any hope for him. The pain of his failure was almost overwhelming. Yet, as we find from the rest of Peter's story, God was not finished working in this apostle's life. He went on to be the great preacher of Pentecost (Acts 2), the missionary who would reach the first Gentiles with the gospel (Acts 10) and an important leader when the unity of the early church was threatened (Acts 15).

All of Peter's later success causes us to go back and look at the night of his bitter weeping in a different light. His tears flowed from a heart that

was wounded by his miserable failure, but the tears also indicated that there was still life left in his soul. If he had given up on Jesus, it wouldn't have hurt so badly. As a matter of fact, it was his love for the Lord that made the pain so great.

Peter's tears on the night of Jesus' trial are like the following imaginary battlefield scene: Earlier in the day, a fierce conflict has taken place there. Both armies have moved on, leaving only death and destruction behind. As a few weary stragglers walk through the field of death, they hear a groan and see a faint movement in one of the bodies that lies by the side of the road. What is their response? Do they grimace and complain about how disgusting their fallen comrade is? You know they don't! They realize that the struggle they are witnessing is a hopeful sign of life, not death. All around them, in the dead bodies of other soldiers, is a fatal lack of struggle. But the groans, the pain and even the bleeding that they see, says to them that this man is still alive!

For Peter, for the wounded soldier and, often, for us, struggle is a sign of life. It signals that we still care and that failing God still hurts us. We are continuing to fight against the evil that torments us, working hard to live as people of God. In this light, struggle can be a very positive thing, an encouraging sign of life!

### **STRUGGLE – EVIDENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

When my daughters were young, they each received a kitten for Christmas one year. One of the new pets soon ran away, but the other one has been a member of our household ever since. Like most cats, it slinks around the house, sleeps about 20 hours each day and makes very little noise. However, a few years ago, following the death of my father-in-law, we inherited a cocker spaniel named "Snickers." He, too, had lived indoors, so we welcomed him into our home. That is when the conflict started.

Often during the day and sometimes in the middle of the night, we would hear the cat hiss or the dog yelp as the two animals crossed each other's path somewhere in the house. Both were wonderfully quiet alone, but together in the same house, they were in a constant state of conflict.

Scripture describes the clash of opposing forces within the human soul in much the same way. To the Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote,

The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit

what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want (Galatians 5:17).

Paul described two inhabitants that live in the soul of every Christian. First, there is the "sinful nature," sometimes called "the flesh." This is the part of all people that tends to be self-focused, self-willed and resistant to the will of God. Then, there is the Holy Spirit, a part of God himself, which God puts into the heart of every Christian (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 6:19).

These two inhabitants are even more antagonistic toward each other than my cat and dog. There is an intense struggle going on within us as we seek to "live by the Spirit" and "not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:16). There would be far fewer sounds of fighting if the "sinful nature" still inhabited the house by itself. But the Holy Spirit has moved into our hearts, and the sounds of conflict will continue as long as the two forces occupy the same space.

### **STRUGGLE – A SPIRITUAL BLESSING**

Not only are our spiritual battles a sign of life and an indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit, but they can even be a rich source of blessing. In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul wrote about a special vision he received from the Lord. It was an incredible experience and a tremendous blessing. Spiritual blessings, though, can produce ungodly pride. Consequently, God blessed Paul by allowing Satan to inflict the apostle with a "thorn in the flesh."

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

We don't know exactly what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was. Some have thought it was poor eyesight, others a speech defect, and still others a persistent sensual temptation. Whatever it was, Paul desperately wanted it to go away. Three times he asked God to remove the "thorn." We all know what he was thinking when he did this. Surely he thought that without the "thorn," he would be a much better apostle and would

be able to do a lot more good in the kingdom of God.

However, God left the "thorn" in Paul's life in order to teach him an important spiritual lesson. Without the problem, Paul might have become proud and overconfident in his own strengths. But with the "thorn," Paul was constantly reminded that it was only through the power and grace of God that he was what he was. Finally, after his long struggle with the "thorn," Paul conceded, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

I have seen this same lesson being learned by people with all kinds of "thorns" in their lives. I have heard people say that a terrible illness, something they had begged God to heal, was probably the very thing that saved their soul. I have known people who have spent much of their lives fighting against sexual temptations, and who will now humbly confess that their lifelong battle is the very thing that opened their hearts to God's grace and mercy. I have seen men and women wrestle for decades to free themselves from the bitterness and hatred that a betrayal had caused them and have then heard them admit that it was this conflict which had finally opened their eyes to the amazing forgiveness God had shown toward them. "Thorns," though we hate them and plead to have them taken away, often do a great work in our lives and, eventually, deliver a wonderful spiritual blessing.

### **GOT STRUGGLES?**

So, have you got struggles? Sure you do! Does this indicate that something is terribly wrong with you? Not at all! Your struggles indicate that you are still alive spiritually. They confirm that the Holy Spirit is doing his important work in your soul, and they may even be the means through which God's grace is most powerfully being demonstrated in your life!

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