

Struggling With All Energy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 32; Matt. 5:29; John 16:5–15; Col. 1:28, 29; 1 Pet. 1:13.*

Memory Text: “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (*Colossians 1:29, NIV*).

A man and woman sat together on a talk show. Both had experienced the murder of a child. The woman's son had been murdered 20 years before, and her anger and bitterness were as great as ever. The man was totally different. His daughter had been murdered by a terrorist a few years earlier. He spoke about forgiveness toward the killers and about how God had transformed his hurt. However terrible the pain, this man had become an illustration of how God can bring healing to the darkest moments of our lives.

How can two people respond so differently? How does spiritual change occur in the life of the Christian, enabling us to mature through life's crucibles rather than being completely overwhelmed by them?

The Week at a Glance: What is the role of our wills, and willpower, in the battle with self and sin? How can we avoid the trap of letting our feelings rule the decisions we make? Why must we persevere and not give up when in the crucible?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 10.*

The Spirit of Truth

Have you ever prayed, “Please, God, make me good!” but little seems to change? How is it possible that we can pray for God’s great transforming power to work within us, but our lives seem to remain the same? We know that God has unlimited supernatural resources that He so eagerly and freely offers us. We really want to take advantage of it all, and yet, our lives don’t seem to change in a way that matches what God is offering.

Why? One reason is disturbingly simple: While the Spirit has unlimited power to transform us, it is possible to restrict by our own choices what God can do.

Read John 16:5–15. In this passage, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the “Spirit of truth” (*vs. 13, NIV*). What does this imply that the Holy Spirit does for us?

While the Holy Spirit can bring us the truth about our sinfulness, He cannot make us repent. He can also show us the greatest truth about God, but He cannot force us to believe or obey it. If God did compel us in even the slightest way, we would lose our free will, and Satan would accuse God of manipulating our minds and hearts and thus be able to accuse God of cheating in the great controversy. When the great controversy broke out in heaven, our Father did not compel Satan or any of the angels to believe that He was good and just or compel the angels to repent. And in the Garden of Eden, when so much was at stake again, God made the truth about the tree in the middle of the Garden very clear but did not prevent Eve and Adam from exercising their free will to disobey. God will not act any differently with us today. So, the Spirit presents the truth about God and sin and then says, “In view of what I have shown you, what will you do now?”

It is the same when we are in the crucible. Sometimes the crucible is there precisely because we have not obeyed or repented of our sins. For our Father to work in such cases, we must consciously choose to open the doors of repentance and obedience in order for God’s power to enter through and transform us.

What convictions has the “Spirit of truth” brought to you recently? How well are you listening to His voice? And, most important, what choices are you making with your free will?

The Divine-Human Combination

What is your greatest accomplishment ever? Chances are, whatever you achieved did not happen simply by rolling out of bed in the morning. If we want to achieve something worthwhile in this life, it takes time and effort. Our discipleship to Christ is no different.

Read Colossians 1:28, 29. **Though Paul talks about God working in him, in what ways does he show the human effort also involved?** *See also Deut. 4:4, Luke 13:24, 1 Cor. 9:25, Heb. 12:4.*

In Colossians 1:29 there is a very interesting insight into the way Paul sees his relationship with God in this work. He says that he is struggling—but with the power of God.

The word for “labor” means to “grow weary,” to “work to the point of exhaustion.” This word was used particularly of athletes as they trained. The word for “struggle,” which comes next, can mean in some languages “to agonize.” So, we have the word picture of an athlete straining with everything to win. But then Paul adds a twist to the idea, because Paul is not straining with everything he has but with everything that God gives him. So, we are left with a simple conclusion about Paul’s ministry—it was a ministry done with great personal effort and discipline but done with God’s power. This relationship works in exactly the same way as we pursue the development of Christ’s character in us.

This is important to remember because we live in a world in which we want more and more with less and less effort. That idea has crept into Christianity, too. Some Christian evangelists promise that if you just believe, the Holy Spirit will fall upon you with amazing supernatural power and perform great miracles. But this can be a dangerous half-truth, because it can lead people to the conclusion that we just need to wait for God’s power to come while sitting comfortably in our seats!

What is your own experience with the kind of striving Paul talked about? What things has God laid upon your heart that you are struggling with? How can you learn to surrender to God’s will?

The Disciplined Will

One of the greatest enemies of our wills is our own feelings. We are increasingly living in a culture bombarded with pictures and music that can appeal directly to our senses, triggering our emotions—anger, fear, or lust—without us realizing it. How often do we think such things as “What do I feel like eating for supper?” “What do I feel like doing today?” “Do I feel good about buying this?” Feelings have thus become intimately involved in our decision-making. Feelings are not necessarily bad, but how I feel about something may have little to do with what is right or best. Indeed, our feelings can lie to us (“The heart is deceitful above all things” [*Jer. 17:9*].) and can create a false picture of reality, causing us to make bad choices, setting us up for a crucible of our own making.

What examples can you find from the Bible where people made choices based on feelings rather than on God’s Word? What were the consequences? See, for example, *Gen. 3:6*; *2 Sam. 11:3, 4*; *Gal. 2:11, 12*.

Read 1 Peter 1:13. What is Peter concerned about, and what does he want his readers to actually do?

Peter understood that the mind is the rudder for the body that we control. Take away the control of the mind, and we will be controlled by whatever feelings blow our way. Imagine walking along a narrow path to the Shepherd’s home. Along the way there are many paths leading in different directions. Some of these paths go to places that we would not want to visit. Others look tempting; they appeal to our feelings, our emotions, our desires. If, though, we take any one of them, we get off the right path and go in a way that might be exceedingly difficult to get off.

What important decisions are you facing? Ask yourself honestly, “How can I know if I am basing my choices on feeling, emotion, or desire, as opposed to the Word of God?”

Radical Commitment

“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:29, NIV).

Dwell on the words of Jesus in the above text. Would you call them radical? If so, why?

Radical action is necessary not because God has made the Christian life difficult, but because we and our culture have drifted so far away from God’s plans for us. People often wake up and wonder to themselves, “How could I have gone so far away from God?” The answer is always the same: just one step at a time.

Read Matthew 5:29, 30. Jesus is speaking in the context of sexual sin. However, the underlying principles apply to dealing with other sin, as well. Indeed, the principles can apply to our growth in Christ in general.

What crucial point is Jesus telling us with those words? Are we really called to literally maim ourselves?

Jesus isn’t calling us to physically harm our bodies—not at all! Rather, He is calling us to control our minds and therefore our bodies, no matter the cost. Notice that the text does not say that we should pray and that God will instantly remove the sinful tendencies from our lives. Sometimes God may graciously do this for us, but often He calls us to make a radical commitment to give up something, or start doing something, that we may not feel like doing at all. What a crucible that can be! The more often we make the right choices, the stronger we will become and the weaker the power of temptation in our lives.

God sometimes uses crucibles to catch our attention when there are so many noisy distractions around us. It is in the crucible that we realize how far we have drifted from God. The crucible may be God’s call for us to make a radical decision to return to our Father’s plan for us.

The Need to Persevere

Read the story of Jacob wrestling with God (*Genesis 32*). What does this story say to us about perseverance, even amid great discouragement? (Keep the whole context of Jacob's situation in mind before you answer.)

We can know what is right and exercise our wills to do the right thing; but when we are under pressure, it can be very difficult to keep holding on to God and His promises. That's because we are weak and fearful. Therefore, one of the important strengths of the Christian is perseverance, the ability to keep going despite wanting to give up.

One of the greatest examples of perseverance in the Bible is Jacob. Many years before, Jacob had tricked his brother, Esau, and his father into giving him the birthright (*Genesis 27*), and ever since, he had been running in fear of Esau's desire to kill him. Even though he had been given wonderful promises of God's guidance and blessing in his dream of a ladder reaching to heaven (*Genesis 28*), he was still scared. Jacob was desperate for God's assurance that he was accepted and that the promises made to him many years before were still true. As he fought someone who was actually Jesus, Jacob had his hip dislocated. From that point on, it could not have been possible to fight, as the pain would have been too excruciating. There must have been a subtle shift from fighting to hanging on. Jacob is hanging on to Jesus through unbearable pain until he receives an assurance of his blessing. So Jesus says to him, " 'Let me go, for it is daybreak' " (*Gen. 32:26, NIV*).

Jacob's blessing came because he held on through the pain. So it is with us. God may also dislocate our "hip" and then call us to hang on to Him through our pain. Indeed, God allowed the painful scars to continue—Jacob was still limping when he met his brother. To outside appearances it was a weakness, but for Jacob it was an indication of his strength.

What are some practical choices you can make (associations, lifestyle, reading material, health habits, spiritual life) that will help you better persevere with the Lord amid discouragement and temptation?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Night of Wrestling,” pp. 195–203, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “Consecration,” pp. 43–48, in *Steps to Christ*.

“This will, that forms so important a factor in the character of man, was at the Fall given into the control of Satan; and he has ever since been working in man to will and to do of his own pleasure, but to the utter ruin and misery of man.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 515.

“In order to receive God’s help, man must realize his weakness and deficiency; he must apply his own mind to the great change to be wrought in himself; he must be aroused to earnest and persevering prayer and effort. Wrong habits and customs must be shaken off; and it is only by determined endeavor to correct these errors and to conform to right principles that the victory can be gained. Many never attain to the position that they might occupy, because they wait for God to do for them that which He has given them power to do for themselves. All who are fitted for usefulness must be trained by the severest mental and moral discipline, and God will assist them by uniting divine power with human effort.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 248.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 To what extent do you think that we appreciate that our wills were “at the Fall given into the control of Satan”? How, by focusing on the character of Jesus, can we better appreciate just how fallen we are and how great God’s grace is toward us?
- 2 Read the story of Jesus in Gethsemane (*Matt. 26:36–43*). What were Jesus’ own feelings and desires, as opposed to God’s will? What can we learn from this example?
- 3 As a class, talk about the distinct things in your own culture that can work to break down our defenses and leave us more vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. What can we do to help other church members be aware of these dangers, as well as help those who feel the need for help?
- 4 Do you know someone in your church who hasn’t been there for quite a long time, who might be getting ready to give up or has already given up? What can you do as a group to encourage this person, to help him or her not turn away from Jesus? What practical things can you do to help?

Fighting for Faith

by ELIZABETH MURMU

I live in Bangladesh. I learned early in life that if I wanted something, I had to fight for it. And I wanted an education.

My father did not want me to study. He wanted me to work in people's homes and help the family. But I wanted to learn. Sometimes I hid outside the nearby school to listen to the teacher's lessons.

My elder sister, Sharoni, lived with an uncle who sent her to school. In high school, she studied at Bangladesh Adventist Seminary and College (BASC). There she became a Seventh-day Adventist, which angered my parents. But Sharoni would not budge, and in time my parents allowed her to return home. Sharoni found work as a tutor and helped the family financially.

My parents were set against Sharoni's religion. She challenged them to study the Bible with her and tell her where Adventists were wrong. In time they realized that Sharoni was right, but they refused to change their religion.

Sharoni knew that the local school could not provide the quality of education we children needed and urged my parents to send us to Adventist schools. My father refused, so Sharoni decided to send us to study in an Adventist school herself. When Father still refused, Sharoni told him, "You do not have to pay a single rupee for their education. I will pay it all." Finally Father and Mother allowed my two sisters and me to study at BASC, the Adventist school Sharoni had attended.

I stayed at BASC through eighth grade, when Sharoni transferred us to another Adventist school to study. She became dean of women at this school and could look after us there.

When each child in our family was ready to start school, Sharoni took them to study at the Adventist school. Several more brothers and sisters now study here. Only my youngest brother is still at home with our parents. Soon he will come to study at the Adventist school. Each of us has given our hearts to Jesus, and when we are old enough, we will be baptized.

Thank you for your mission offerings, which help make Adventist education possible in my country. It has made a big difference in my family!



ELIZABETH MURMU (left) is studying at Maranatha Seventh-day Adventist School in Bangladesh.

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By Jerry D. Thomas

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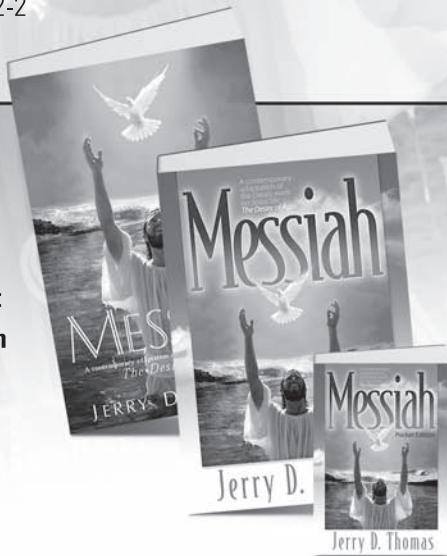
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I saw hundreds of people in India flock to evangelistic meetings and step forward to accept Jesus as their Savior. My heart was touched as I thought of the lives forever changed and the joy these people would find as Christians. But they will face difficult times, too, especially those whose families reject their new faith.

And most of these new believers have no church to welcome them. They are the church! In many places we have no schools where these new believers can send their children to receive a Christian education.

Membership growth is wonderful, but it's up to us to see that they have the tools they need to grow, such as a simple chapel, a school for their children, a pastor or teacher. I'm glad our Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help provide for some of the fastest growing areas of this division. For me it's personal.

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