(page 46 of Standard Edition)

Struggling With All Energy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

Memory Text: "To this end I strenuously contend, struggling with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:29, NIV).

man and woman sat together on a talk show. Both had experienced the murder of a child. The woman's son had been Amurdered 20 years before, and her anger and bitterness were as great as ever. The man was totally different. His daughter had been murdered by terrorists 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 a Christian, enabling that individual 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 mistake 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, August 6.

(page 47 of Standard Edition)

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 by our own choices to restrict what God can do.

Read John 16:5–15. In this passage, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the "Spirit of truth" (John 16:13, 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 also can 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 would 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 them 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 in 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.

ea		, ,	Paul talks about God v	
	,	V	the human effort also Cor. 9:25, and Heb. 12:	
	(see also Deal. 4.	4, Lune 13.24, 1	Cor. 9.25, and 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 Greek word translated "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 straining, not 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!

(page 49 of Standard Edition)

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 our 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.

Wh	at 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. 11:2–4; and Gal. 2:11, 12.)
Rea	ad 1 Peter 1:13. What is Peter concerned about, and what does he want his readers actually to 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 stumble, 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).

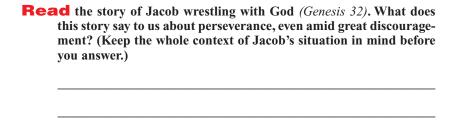
life diff from G selves, always Read sin. Ho sin, as in gene	icult, but becau od's plans for u How could I ha the same: just of Matthew 5:29, wever, the undowell. Indeed, the ral.	use we and our us. People ofte ave gone so far one step at a tin 30. Jesus is serlying principle principles causes making w	ause God has made culture have driften wake up and wo wawy from God? ne. peaking in the concles apply to dealing apply to our growth those words?	ed so far nder to t The answ text of so ng with owth in C
Jesus	isn't calling u	ıs to harm ou	r bodies physically	v—not a

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.

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.

The Need to Persevere



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 also may 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?

(page 52 of Standard Edition)

Further Thought: 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 actually recognize that our wills were "at the Fall given into the control of Satan"? How, by focusing on the character of Jesus, can we better understand just how fallen we are and how great God's grace is toward us?
- **2** Read the story of Jesus in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–42). 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 already has 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?

Part 6: Temple Plot Foiled

By Andrew McChesney

Months passed before Junior and Mother found out why Father had changed his mind and went to Junior's baptism. Evil spirits had forbidden Father from going to the Sabbath afternoon baptism, so he had turned down his son's invitation to attend. On the day of the baptism, Father felt restless and asked Mother to drive him to the Candomblé temple in Manaus, Brazil. Around 5:00 P.M., spirits at the temple told Father to dress in his high-priestly robes and go to Alpha Seventh-day Adventist Community Church. They promised to possess people in the church to prevent Junior from being baptized.

Father donned his robes and hailed a taxi. He could hear an invisible legion of evil spirits swirling around him. At the church's entrance, the spirits suddenly declared that they could not go in.

Father remembered the most important lesson that the spirits had taught him years earlier: Never leave a job undone. If he started a task, he had to finish it. Father boldly entered the church. As he walked into the crowded main hall, a sweet, sanctified energy flowed over him. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced, and it felt good. Later he realized that it must have been the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Father's anger about the baptism vanished. A deacon, Roberto Fernandez, met him at the back, gave him a hug, and led him to the baptismal pool. Father turned around and looked at the congregation, where he saw people with bowed heads. He thought they were frightened but later understood that they were praying. When he saw Junior in the baptismal pool, he realized that the spirits had lied to him. Junior wasn't being forced to join the Adventist Church. It was his own decision.

After a song, Pastor Ricardo raised his arm and said, "As a minister of the gospel, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." Then he immersed Junior under the water.

After the baptism, Junior took the microphone and looked at Father.

"Daddy, despite your religion, I love you very much," he said.

He hugged Father and started crying. His words broke Father's heart.

When the ceremony ended, church members showered Father with hugs. He was shocked. He never expected to be treated with such love. "This is such a nice place, and the people are so nice," he said as he got into the car.

Back home, Father called everyone he knew to announce proudly that his son had been baptized. He described the experience as incredible.

Mother realized that the Holy Spirit had started to work in his heart. An unbelievable peace filled their home for four days. Then the evil spirits ordered Father to kill Mother and Junior.

Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open eight churches in the South American Division, including four in Brazil, where Father (Eduardo Ferreira dos Santos) and his family live.

Key Text: Colossians 1:29

Study Focus: *Genesis 32; Matt. 5:29; John 16:5–15; Col. 1:28, 29; 1 Pet. 1:13.*

Part I: Overview

This lesson focuses on several essential elements that help us build a threefold strategy for overcoming crucibles. First, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must cultivate understanding of the truth about God, evil, and ourselves in the immediate context of our life and in the larger context of the great controversy. While it is true that merely understanding our situation is not enough, this understanding is the crucial, foundational stepping-stone upon which the other elements are placed to construct the right response to the crucible. We need to know why things happen and answer these questions: Whose side do we choose to stand on, and why?

Second, we must understand the nature of our God-given free will. Yes, it is true that God is sovereign and gives us salvation and all the good things for living and prospering. However, He created us with true freedom, without which we would not be the same. That is why God empowers and calls us to exercise our free will and collaborate with Him in the great work of salvation and the development of His kingdom.

Third, this collaboration requires of us radical commitment and perseverance. We cannot collaborate with two different kings that are at war with each other. We must know the truth, choose the just and loving King of heaven, align our lives with His principles, and fully commit to the cause of His kingdom, no matter what. These principles will give us the full, everrenewable energy to fight and overcome in the crucible of this life.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson highlights three major themes.

- 1. The role of truth in overcoming crucibles
- 2. The role of our free will in overcoming crucibles
- 3. The role of commitment and perseverance in overcoming crucibles

Part II: Commentary

Augustine and Pelagius on the Freedom and the Power of the Will

Many Christians find it difficult to understand how our free will relates to the origin of evil and suffering, as well as to salvation. Some fall into one of two extremes as illustrated by the fifth-century fierce debate between British ascetic

Pelagius, who settled in Rome (c. 355–420), and Augustine (354–430), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Their debate was over the issue of free will and salvation. Having arrived in Rome and seen the spiritual and moral laxity of the Christians in the capital of the Western Roman Empire, Pelagius concluded that the problem was rooted in the teachings of Augustine on original sin and grace.

Thus, Pelagius decided to confront the bishop of Hippo (present-day northeastern Algeria). Augustine taught that God is love, and the essence of love is freedom (there is no love without freedom). Further, Augustine posited that God created a perfect and good universe. He also created humans in His image, which means that humans were created perfect, good, loving, and free. Thus, according to Augustine, when Adam and Eve abused their freedom and sinned, they generated the original sin. As a consequence, they were covered in guilt, their nature changed from perfect to sinful, and they lost their freedom. They could still perceive the good or the perfect but could not live it out.

What Augustine proposed was that sin is more than an individual act or error; rather, it is a condition of human existence separate and against God. Original sin comprised guilt and proclivity to evil. After the Fall, all humans are sinful, Augustine opined, because we are born with Adam's guilt and with a sinful nature that enslaves our wills and lives. Thus, Augustine believed that we cannot be saved simply by choosing to do good, because we are sinful; we cannot be saved simply by receiving an instruction or encouragement or by following an example, because we cannot do away with Adam's guilt. Nor do we have the power to overcome our sinful condition and do good, Augustine further asserted. In his opinion, the only way to be saved is if we could die to the sinful nature and resurrect to another nature. But according to Augustine, we cannot do even this by ourselves. The only way we are saved is by God's grace. In His grace, Augustine explained, God exercises His sovereign will and decides to save us by Himself: He removes Adam's and our guilt from us through His grace and the sacrament of baptism and subdues our sinful nature through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates in us a new spiritual nature and gives us the power to live a righteous life. For this reason, Augustine introduced the concept of divine predestination: because we are enslaved by sin after the Fall, we cannot repent on our own; thus, God predestines some of us to salvation and the rest to perdition.

Pelagius thought that Augustine's position led to spiritual laxity, as Christians would now blame their moral decadence on the original sin and would shun personal responsibility for sin and evil. For this reason, Pelagius proposed another perspective. Like Augustine, Pelagius believed that God created a perfect universe and humans as free beings. Evil originated in Adam's free choice to sin. However, Pelagius rejected Augustine's idea that humans inherit a sinful nature and guilt from Adam. According to Pelagius, Adam's sin affected only him and not his children. Thus, Pelagius reasoned, the innocence and free will of Adam's posterity were fully preserved, and therefore, each child that is born into the world is born with a perfect nature and a perfectly operational free will.

Further, Pelagius asserted that all humans sin, not because they are born with Adam's guilt and sinful nature, but all sin because all of us are born and live in a corrupt social environment and exercise our will and choose to sin. According to Pelagius, a person is guilty, not because of the guilt inherited from Adam but because of his or her own choice to sin. Therefore, Pelagius maintained, God holds us accountable for our sins because we are truly free. God calls us to conduct a righteous life because He knows we can do so. Jesus lived a perfect life and showed us that this is possible. Yes, we live by God's grace, but in Pelagius's view, the divine grace consisted in the fact that God created us with free will, gave us His law and instructions for living out good and perfect lives, and gave us the example of Jesus. Furthermore, God gives us forgiveness in Jesus in case we fall by choosing to sin and gives us the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our spiritual journey. For additional reading on the Augustine-Pelagian debate, see, for example, Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 18–20.

Each of the two contenders were, no doubt, sincere and highlighted good points. However, each of them fell into extremes. Augustine fell into predestination and sacramentalism (God's grace comes to us through the sacraments). Pelagius fell into a superficial treatment of sin and salvation by works. The truth lies in the Bible! The Bible presents God as love (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8, 16). He created Adam and Eve innocent (Gen. 1:31, Gen. 2:25, Eccles. 7:29) and with freedom of choice (Gen. 2:15–17). However, our parents chose to sin (Gen. 3:6).

The Bible is clear that sin is not a simple past act of Adam and Eve. Rather, the Genesis account of the Fall describes immediate and profound changes appearing in their nature, relationships, environment, lifestyle, and descendants (Gen. 3:7-24, Gen. 4:1-16). The apostle Paul stipulates that with Adam sin and death "entered" (invaded) and pervaded the world in space and time (Rom. 5:12-14, NKJV). Sin brought upon humanity suffering, death, and condemnation for all men (Rom. 5:16-18). Because of the transgression of Adam, all people "were made sinners" (Rom. 5:19, NKJV). For this reason, all humans are born in sin, and none is born righteous (Rom. 3:9–18, 23; Ps. 14:1–3; Ps. 51:5). Thus, the Bible rejects Pelagianism and presents sin as more than an individual human act. Rather, sin is described as both an external and internal force that enslaves and destroys all humanity in all its aspects. Facing this grim outlook, Paul exclaimed desperately: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24, NKJV). By itself, humanity cannot solve the problem of sin and evil. The only hope for sinful humanity is in the sacrificial and transformative ministry of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24, 25; Rom. 5:6–19; Rom. 7:25) and in the regenerative and mediating ministry of the Holy Spirit, who gives us a new heart (*Ezek. 36:26, 27; John 3:5–8; Rom. 8:3–6, 9–17*).

Furthermore, the Bible does not teach the Augustinian concept of predestination and sacramentalism. Yes, at the foundation of the biblical teaching

of salvation is always God's initiative, intervention, solution (the sacrifice of Christ), and power for redemption (Gen. 3:8, 15; Exod. 20:2; Rom. 5:6–8). However, God did not predestine some humans for salvation and some for perdition. Rather, God always gave humans the individual freedom to choose (Josh. 24:15) and holds the individuals and nations accountable for their acceptance or rejection of His salvation (see, for example, Gen 4:4-12, Gen. 15:16). The golden text of the gospel declares that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, NKJV). The Bible insists that God wants, and invites, all to be saved (Ezekiel 33: John 1:12, 13: 1 Tim. 2:4: 2 Pet. 3:9: 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17). And once the people respond to God's invitation, they collaborate with God in His salvation (2 Pet. 1:10, James 4:8, Rev. 3:20). Scripture also rejects any sacramental view of the divine grace; on the contrary, the New Testament emphasizes that God gives all of us His grace, only—and directly—through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12; Heb. 5:9; Heb. 7:24, 25; Hebrews 9; Hebrews 10).

Historically, most Christians rejected Pelagius and embraced Augustine's understanding that all humans are born with a sinful nature and that sin is an invincible force for humans. Roman Catholics integrated into their theology Augustine's idea that all humans inherit Adam's guilt and the need for sacraments but rejected his views on predestination. In contradistinction, Protestantism rightly rejected Augustine's idea that we inherit Adam's guilt and that God's grace comes through the sacraments, but large parts of Protestantism erroneously accepted his concept of predestination. In the wake of the Enlightenment, modern and postmodern societies tend to reject the Augustinian ideas and think more in line with Pelagius. To reach people in these societies, we not only need to emphasize the biblical teachings on the free will and our profound responsibility for our individual and communal history but also share the biblical teaching about the seriousness of the power of sin and our only hope of salvation in Jesus Christ. This illustration helps us understand that knowing the truth is essential for our understanding of suffering and trials in our lives. But it also helps us understand our own nature and the power of free will. Such understanding helps us always seek and accept God's help, guidance, and power to overcome our crucibles.

Part III: Life Application

 Spiritual discipline and cheap grace. Of course, Augustine and Luther taught salvation by divine predestination as a celebration of God's tremendous grace. However, this concept has led some Christians to think that if we are irreversibly elected and saved by God, we do not, and cannot, participate at all in the process of salvation. This concept, also called "cheap grace," leads to a lack of spiritual discipline in many Christians. If God irreversibly elected us, why pray? Why read the Bible? Why be vigilant? Why participate in the life of the community of faith? Why evangelize? Great historical movements of revival in Protestantism, such as late seventeenth-century Philipp Spener's pietism in the German Lutheran context and several Great Awakening movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America, responded to this peril by proposing deliberate spiritual discipline programs for both families and communities. Examine your individual spiritual life, the spiritual life of your family, and the spiritual life of your community. What is the state of spiritual discipline in these circles? What can you do to make meaningful and profound changes so as to bring about a spiritual discipline in accordance with the biblical exhortations (see Col. 1:28, 29; 1 Cor. 9:23-27)? Design a project to promote a lifestyle of spiritual discipline for your personal life, and, if necessary and possible, for your family and community.

2. Radical Commitment. Some Christians think Christianity is synonymous with the absence of suffering and troubles. Other Christians do allow for some amount of inconvenience. But how many Christians are radically committed to God, to His call to follow Christ, to His kingdom, and to His mission in the great conflict between God and Satan, good and evil? In the context of increasing persecution of contemporary Christians in various parts of the world, numerous Christians feel the need for a better—indeed, radical—preparedness to go through crucibles. Examine your level of commitment to God and His kingdom. Design a scale of personal commitment. Based on your scale, what is radical commitment for you? To what extent are you ready in your Christian commitment to serve God in whatever way He may ask of you?