Are you struggling in your walk of discipleship?

Many of us may be struggling to live the life to which we are called. Why do we struggle?

Why does struggling often seem the right course to take? I think this is probably because it seems the only way to obey Scripture. Let us look at some Biblical exhortations:

"Fight the good fight of faith." (1 Tim. 6:12)

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you." (James 4:7)

"Resist, steadfast in the faith." (1 Pet. 5:9)

"So run that you may obtain." (1 Cor. 2:24)

"I press towards the mark." (Phil. 3:14)

"So I fight not as one beating the air." (1 Cor. 9:26)

And finally, out of many possible verses, ***"We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."*** (Eph. 6:12)

These verses make it clear that our lives are never meant to be ones of passivity but rather of intense activity. So we struggle because we make the assumption that if there is no struggling then there is no activity. We assume that the struggling we are involved in is commanded by Scripture. We certainly want to guard ourselves against the delusion that the life of a believer is a life of indolent inaction – a life not of rest but of coma. So we conclude it must be one of constant struggle, of pain and very often of ineffectual effort – always difficult and often very irritating.

But at this point it is important to distinguish between 'struggle' and 'activity'. It is not an issue of activity vs. passivity. The issue is: **Is there just painful effort and fruitless exertion or is there a possibility of continuous effective action and victorious power?** Can there be intense activity without any struggle? Is it really possible to eliminate strain, friction and disappointment from our inner lives resulting in effective ministry?

What do we struggle for?

What is the goal of our efforts? What is the aim of our struggles? There are many possible answers:

- to deliver myself from the power of sin
- to overcome difficulty
- to resist temptation
- to conquer the spiritual forces of wickedness

It appears to us that not to struggle would be to yield to the power of evil and ultimately be overcome and defeated. It seems logical that the only way is to continue the struggle since no other course of deliverance seems possible.

The other reason we struggle is because it seems the only way we can demonstrate God's power in our lives and ministry. We feel keenly the necessity of God's power working through us and to make this happen we struggle to exercise spiritual power and authority. Two major reasons why we struggle are:

- ➢ to get deliverance from evil – the struggle to be holy
- ➢ to minister in spiritual power and authority

Imagine a small bird captured and put in a cage. If it thinks the only way to gain its liberty is by flying with its wings at the bars before long it will fall to the bottom of the cage exhausted, sore and probably despairing!

We are not so different! We think the Lord Jesus has won for us pardon for sins and acceptance as a child of God, but now to become holy is all up to us. Under this delusion we beat ourselves sore, become exhausted and despair of ever overcoming the tendencies of our hearts which the Word of God says are, ***"desperately wicked"***. (Jer. 17:9)

We know the futility of this, so why don't we leave it to the Lord Jesus in quiet dependence on His grace? Allow Him to open the prison/cage door for you. Then you can fly out into the arms of the Lord Jesus and find complete rest there.

The answer is to place into His hands your heart, your life, your ministry, your family and your work. You will then begin to have the delightful experience of His power making you holy day by day and flowing through you in ministry.

Deliverance from sin's power is as much the work of the Lord Jesus in His Crucifixion and Resurrection as deliverance from sin's guilt. In both cases self-effort is useless. Both are gifts of God obtained by faith and not by struggling.

Why do we fail in spite of all our struggles?

How is it that failure is always the experience of those who persist in struggling instead of trusting? If, by struggling, we were always living in victory and effectiveness, then it would be proof that the method worked and we may as well continue with our self-efforts. But experience shows that it is not the way to victory. The reason is obvious!

When we struggle we are acting from our own resources. We are using our own strength, not God's strength. Inevitably our own strength soon runs out, we break down with weariness and we fail. When we struggle to gain deliverance from sin's power, we are doing exactly what we once did to justify ourselves in our own sight and in God's.

There are often two distinct stages in our experience of failure. First we struggle to be holy – to be like the Lord Jesus. We try to subdue our temper and conquer our pride and selfishness. But we fail and become disheartened. Then we stir up our will again and become more disciplined. We make greater efforts. We throw our whole energy into it. But we soon fail again. We almost give up in despair. What can we do?

We need to see that the victory over sin, lack of discipline etc. is to be gained by faith and never by our own efforts. So now we struggle to have faith. We see the stupidity of expecting victory through our own strength. It must be the power of God and this power is only ours through faith. So what do we do? We struggle for faith! And we get the same result – failure and disappointment!

So is there to be no effort, no activity on our part?

There must be a great deal of activity. But there is a vast difference between struggling in weakness **for** power and acting **in** power for effectiveness and victory. All our ministry is to be action **from** power and not **to** it. The power is obtained not by struggling but **by trusting**!

There is a counter argument that is sometimes used. A toddler is learning to walk. He is so helpless that he can hardly stand on his own, much less walk across the room. The argument goes that if the toddler is ever to learn to walk, it must be accomplished by his own efforts. For him to refuse and to insist that his mother carries him might be an easy option and a comfortable way to cross the room, but it wouldn't teach the toddler to walk. It wouldn't develop either his sense of balance or the relevant muscle groups.

This is true, but there is one thing God promises to do that a mother cannot do. This is the really vital factor in the walk of faith that the above example ignores. The point at issue is how to get power in order that we may act. There must be activity. This activity is needed for two reasons:

- to achieve certain objectives in our outward ministry
- to bring out and develop the capacity of our 'inner man' – i. e. the development of character

A mother can't put strength into a child. But God is ready to work in us by His own power, ***"Both to will and to work for His good pleasure."*** (Phil. 2:13)

Activity is essential for effectiveness in ministry and for the development of our character and this is the result of God's power working in us. So how is this power to be received?

Here is an illustration that I hope is not too inadequate. A growing number of cars run on electricity. There are two essentials in the power system – an electric motor that drives the mechanics – the gearbox etc. (as in a conventional hydrocarbon-driven car) and there is the battery – the source of electricity. Essentially there is the motor and the battery. It is essential that these are connected in a circuit of wires. The battery power then produces motion in the engine.

In this illustration the battery is the Lord Jesus – an inexhaustible source of power to the believer. But two things are needed:

- the contact of faith
- the maintenance of that contact

Contact produces power, power produces activity and this activity is the outcome of God's power and will result in:

1. Triumph and effectiveness in ministry

2. Development in our character

But it is very easy to lose that contact. Thin paper separating the contact between the battery and the motor is enough to stop the flow of power. So it is with the Lord Jesus. The most common 'sheet of paper' stopping the flow of spiritual power is **unbelief**.

This inadequate illustration is meant to teach us the relationship of **faith** to **effort** in our lives. Faith is the means of bringing our spiritual life into contact with the immense power of God. So faith must precede effort because effort is the outcome of divine power. Paul puts it this way, ***"For this I toil.*** (for the 'this' see v. 28) ***Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me."*** (Col. 1:27-29)

The 'struggling' that fails is when we work with our own energy, with efforts that spring out of our own resources. Paul fully recognised that the power in which he worked was God's power and it worked in him in a mighty way. ***"And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them."*** (Acts 19:11-12)