

# Fight the good fight

The church needs to be reminded of the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people's lives and to give believers supernatural power. However that teaching needs to be balanced by the New Testament call to fight the good fight. In this paper we look at:

- Using your will
- Self control
- Triumphant over suffering
- Enduring persecution
- Overcoming anxiety

## A. USE YOUR WILL

The New Testament emphasises the use of the will, using various metaphors:

### 1. Stand firm

In view of the resurrection we are to stand firm in the faith (1 Cor. 15:58; 16:13) against legalism (Gal 5:1). We are to put on the whole armour of God and to stand firm, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel (Eph 6:11, 14; 2 Thess. 2:15). In the light of the Lord's return we must stand firm (James 5:8) and resist the devil even in the midst of persecution (1 Peter 5:9).

### 2. Walk

We are to walk (make steady, disciplined progress) in a way consistent with our calling (Eph 4:1), in newness of life (Rom 6:4). This means walking by faith (2 Cor. 5:7), in love (Eph 5:1) by the Spirit (Gal 5:16). We are to be careful to walk wisely (Eph 5:15) in the light of the truth (1 John 1:6-7; 2 John 4; 3 John 3-4). [NB. In some of these passages the NIV translates the Greek word "peripateo," to walk, by the word "live."]

### 3. Run

Paul urges Christians to "run in such a way as to get the prize" to undergo "strict training" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). We are to "press on ... straining towards what is ahead .... to win the prize" (Phil 3:12-14). We must "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and ... run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb 12:1). Confident of the love of Christ, even in trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword .... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom 8:35-37).

## B. CONTROL YOURSELF

In his early preaching Paul spoke on self-control (Acts 24:25) and the Pastoral Epistles call for people to be self-controlled (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8; 2:2, 5, 6).

### 1. The importance of self-control

a. *We have received a spirit of self-control (2 Tim 1:7)*

It is very encouraging to remember that self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). God doesn't even expect us to practise self-control on our own!

b. *We live in the light of the return of Christ*

We must therefore be alert and watchful (1Thess. 5:6, 8; 1 Peter 1:13; 4:7).

c. *We have a prowling enemy*

Peter warns: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8).

d. *We are called to be effective for Christ*

“Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:5-8)

## 2. Self-control means saying “No” to temptation

Paul teaches that because of the supernatural change in us – the new birth and reception of the Spirit – we are free to say “no” to sin. “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” (Rom 8:11-14).

a. *Say “No” to a self-centred life*

Jesus makes it quite clear that following him involves self-denial (Matt 16:24) and choosing the way of self-sacrifice (Luke 14:33).

b. *Say “No” to bodily lusts*

We are to say “No” to “ungodliness and worldly passions” (Titus 2:11-12) and to “put to death” sinful desires such as sexual immorality (even in the mind), lust, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying (Rom 8:13; Gal 5:24; Col 3:5-10; 1 Thess. 4:3-5).

c. *Say “No” to ‘men-pleasing’*

Jesus calls us to lay down our reputation (Luke 14:27) and the approval of those close to us (Luke 14:26; Matt 10:37).

## 3. Self-control means saying “Yes” to God

We are called to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) and “slaves” of righteousness” (Rom 6:13, 18-19, 22). We should no longer live for ourselves but for God (2 Cor. 5:14-15). By faith (knowing we are born again by the Spirit and have his power within us) we are to clothe ourselves (a deliberate action in faith) “with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,” to “bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances [we] may have against one another,” to “forgive as the Lord forgave [us]. And over all these virtues [to] put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Col 3:12-15).

## C. BENEFIT FROM SUFFERING

### 1. The normality of suffering

Jesus makes it clear that we will face suffering: “In the world you will have trouble” (John 16:33) and Paul and Barnabas taught the believers “We must go through many hardships to enter the

kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Peter writes: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

Christians are called to the fellowship of sharing in Christ’s sufferings (Phil 3:10). In contrast to the teaching of some “prosperity gospel” preachers (“Come to Jesus and experience a life of ease and plenty”) Paul, the great man of faith, experienced “troubles, hardships and distresses; ... beatings, imprisonments and riots; ... sleepless nights and hunger; ... dishonour, bad report ... [being] regarded as impostors; .... beaten” (2 Cor. 6:3-10). He writes: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” (2 Cor. 11:24-27).

## 2. The purpose of suffering

### a. *To ensure God gets the glory*

Paul explains this in 2 Cor. 4:7-9 “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

### b. *To fix our attention on the unseen world*

Paul, who, as we have seen, knew great suffering described it as “light and momentary troubles” compared with the glory of heaven. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). He also writes: “We are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17).

### c. *To enable us to witness through perseverance*

Paul writes: “We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance.” Clearly he believes that the way believers cope with suffering is a powerful witness to others, including unbelievers.

### d. *To make us holy*

The writer to the Hebrews says: “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” It is true to say that one of the main means God uses to make us more Christlike is allowing us to go through suffering.

### e. *To strengthen our faith*

It is easy to believe God loves us when things are going well. But our faith is strengthened when we still believe he loves us in the midst of pain, disappointment and perplexity. “For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

### 3. The reaction to suffering

#### a. *Take suffering seriously*

The writer to the Hebrews urges us to take God's discipline through suffering seriously (Heb 12:5). Ask what God is seeking to do through the suffering. It may be something specific to the immediate circumstances or it may be a more general purpose, perhaps dealing with an area of behaviour which needs to change.

#### b. *Don't be disheartened by it*

The fact that God allows difficulty and suffering in our lives is an evidence of his love, in that he wants to train us to be more like Jesus, more prepared for heaven. "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb 12:5-10).

#### c. *Consider it pure joy*

When one thinks of God's purpose through allowing difficulty suffering in our lives, it should bring a note of encouragement and joy. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

#### d. *Commit yourself to God's keeping*

When we suffer we can commit ourselves to God, confident in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God (1 Peter 4:19; Rom 8:35).

#### e. *Resist Satan*

We can give way to resentment, depression and anxiety.\* But we also have a supernatural enemy who will seek to destroy us through a bad reaction to suffering. So Peter urges us: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

*[\*I am not referring to people with clinical depression which needs special treatment but to people in fairly normal emotional health]*

## D. FACE PERSECUTION

### 1. Regard it as normal

Jesus warns us that Christians will be persecuted, even by those close to them (Matt 10:17-18, 21-22; John 16:2). He explains that we will receive the same treatment as he did: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also" (John 15:18-20).

Pauls says that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12) and this may explain why some Christians aren’t persecuted – because they aren’t really committed to being Christ-like and obeying God to the full.

## **2. Do not fear persecution**

Persecution cannot separate us from the love of God. It ultimately increases our reward from God and, as we have seen, given the right response from us, it will make us more like Christ and more able to withstand suffering. “Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened’” (1 Peter 3:13-14). Jesus said: “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10).

He also tells us not to worry about what to say when people persecute us because he will give the words to say. “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:19-20). “Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:14-15).

## **3. Do not retaliate**

Like Jesus, we are not to retaliate or take revenge, but rather to leave judgement to God (Rom 12:17, 19; 1 Peter 2:23). We are not even to repay insult with insult. Instead we should bless the person who insulted us (1 Peter 3:9) and turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39). We should answer those who slander us kindly (1 Cor. 4:12-13).

## **4. Love your persecutors**

We are to love those who persecute us, to pray for them, bless them and do good to them. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse .... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink’” (Rom 12:14, 20-21).

## **5. Persevere through persecution**

Jesus says: “Everyone will hate you because of me, but those who stand firm to the end will be saved.” “Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.” (Matt 10:22; Luke 21:17-19).

## **6. Rejoice in persecution**

The apostles did this in Acts 5:41 “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” Paul wrote: “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 Cor. 12:10). Then Peter urges us: “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ..... However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16).

## **7. Remember your reward**

The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are persecuted and they have great reward in heaven. Meditate on the following passages:

Jesus says: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:10-12).

“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (Heb 10:32-34).

“Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade— kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith— of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire— may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:3-9).

## **E. OVERCOME ANXIETY**

I am well aware of the fact that many people experience healing from anxiety through prayer for healing. I experienced a quite dramatic healing from fear myself 30 years ago. However, we all have to battle against anxiety too.

Some fear is healthy:

- It can be a warning to protect ourselves.
- It can be a test to make us rely on God.

It needs to be remembered that fear is a temptation not a sin (unless one wallows in the fear and allows it to grow).

Here are some ways to overcome anxiety:

### **1. By fearing God**

The Old Testament stresses the fear of God which overcomes the fear of man. Psalm 111:10 says: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Jesus warns: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). Similarly Peter writes: “Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear” (1 Peter 1:17).

## **2. By meditating on God's love**

The Psalmist writes: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him .... As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him ..... But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children" (Psa 103: 11, 13, 17). "The LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love" (Psa 147:11).

If God really loves us like that we can surely rely on him to protect us and bring us through any suffering.

## **3. By being continually filled with the Holy Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is not a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, love and sonship. As we yield ourselves daily to him and ask us to fill us he will overcome our fears. Paul writes: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15). "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7).

## **4. By finding security in God**

Meditate on these passages from the Psalms:

"The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing" (34:7-9).

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (46:1-3).

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. Because he loves me, says the LORD, I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation" (Psa 91).

David affirms: "The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident ..... For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock" (27:1-3, 5).

## **5. By praying earnestly to God**

Paul writes: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). Peter urges us: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

## **6. By remembering the past**

The Psalmist writes: “I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears” Psalm 34:4). We need to remember that God has brought us through many fearful situations in the past and he will do so again. Or, as the calendar motto put it, “Today is the tomorrow you were worrying about yesterday!”

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