

The Struggle For Victory

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The Christian life is characterized by struggle. Most do not like or enjoy conflict. However, you cannot be a Christian and avoid such. Christians face struggles without and within. They face these struggles daily. Paul enjoins, “fight the good fight of faith” (I Tim. 6:12). Two Greek words capture the essence of this struggle. They are *agōn* and *agōnizomai*. *Agōn* is a noun. W. E. Vine gives the following meaning for this word, “akin to agō, to lead, primarily a gathering, then, a place of assembly, and hence, a contest, conflict, is translated “fight” in I Tim. 6:12, II Tim. 4:7” (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, II, 94). *Agōnizomai* is a verb. Thayer defines *agōnizomai* in the following four senses: “1. To enter a contest; contend in the gymnastic games; I Co. ix. 25. 2. univ. to contend with adversaries, fight: foll. by *hina mē*, Jn. xviii. 36. 3. fig. to contend, struggle, with difficulties and dangers antagonistic to the gospel: Col. 1:29; I Tim. 4:10...I Tim. vi. 12; 2 Tim. iv. 7. 4. to endeavor with strenuous zeal, strive, to obtain something; foll. by an inf., Lk. xiii.24...” (*Greek-English Lexicon*, 10).

Agōn is found six times in the Greek New Testament (Phil. 1:30; Col. 2:1; I Thess. 2:2; I Tim. 6:12; II Tim. 4:7; Heb. 12:1). It is translated conflict (twice); fight (twice); contention (once); and race (once). *Agōnizomai* is found seven times in the Greek New Testament (Luke 13:24; John 18:36; I Cor. 9:25; Col. 1:29, 4:12; I Tim. 6:12; II Tim. 4:7). It is translated strive (thrice); fight (thrice) and labor fervently (once).

Agōnizomai is used literally in John 18:36 where it refers to armed struggle. Jesus eliminates this type of struggle from the Christian life. Paul states, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). Christians are involved in a spiritual warfare. The primary use of *agōn* and *agōnizomai* in the New Testament is metaphorical. The following examination of these words will focus on the metaphorical use of these two terms.

The Struggle

The Christian life is characterized by struggle and conflict without and within. There are numerous foes from without including the hosts of wickedness to which Paul refers in Eph. 6:12. There are also struggles within that involve temptations, desires and passions of the flesh. The struggle is ongoing. It is a daily struggle. It is demanding. It is described as a *tense exertion* (I Thess. 2:2) and a *passionate struggle* (Col. 1:29) (Ethlebert Stauffer, *TDNT*, I, 137). The goal, which is the crown of righteousness, (II Tim. 4:8) is reached only by a full expenditure of all our energies. Stauffer comments on Luke 13:24, “the struggle for the kingdom of heaven allows of no indolence, indecision, or relaxation” (*TDNT*, I, 137). Remember Luke’s words, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate.” Many will seek to enter in, but will fail.

The struggle demands a rigid self-denial. In I Cor. 9:24-27, Paul uses the athletic metaphor for the Christian life. He emphasizes the need to exercise self-control in all things in order to attain the victor’s crown. A selfless investment of one’s entire being is demanded. In I Tim. 4:8-10, Paul mentions that strenuous training (*gymnasia*) produces godliness (*eusebeia*)

which is profitable for all things. He goes on to say that he labors and suffers reproach because he trusts (has hope) in God.

This self-denial is not asceticism. It is self-discipline. Stauffer comments, “If a man is not ready to set aside his egotistical needs and desires and claims and reservations, he is not fit for the arena” (*TDNT*, I, 137). Self must be conquered. This focuses on the struggle within. The old man of sin must be crucified. Fleshly appetites must be ruled over by spiritual desires that focus on pleasing God and not selfish whims. Self-denial is essential to slaying pride, controlling consumerism and materialism and exercising restraint in regards to sexual appetites.

The struggle involves persecution from without. You advance the cause of Christ in the midst of adversity. In I Thess. 2:2, Paul describes missionary work as *agōn*. Strenuous toil and labors and conflicts are undertaken in order to make proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Phil. 1:30, the congregation at Philippi experiences the same conflicts that Paul did when he was at Philippi and as he does now in his present imprisonment. Paul fought a good fight (II Tim. 4:7). He encourages Timothy to “fight the good fight of the faith” (I Tim. 6:12). It is a *good (kalos)* fight because it is appropriate for its purpose. The struggle produces the following results: (1) It purifies faith; (2) It identifies us with Jesus and the apostles; (3) It leads to personal salvation; (4) it leads to the salvation of others; (5) it develops personal character that is pleasing to God; (6) it prompts prayer; (7) it furthers the cause of Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel which engenders it; (8) it resists and overcomes the foe (Satan); (9) it unifies brothers and sisters in Christ in a common effort to defeat a common foe; and (10) it involves us in the *fellowship of suffering* that leads to eternal glorification.

Courage is demanded in this fight. The coward will fall into condemnation. The fearful and unbelieving shall have their part in the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8). Paul declared, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner; but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God” (II Tim. 1:7,8).

Prayer is an essential weapon in this fight. Paul commends Epaphras, a servant of Christ, because he always labored fervently for the Colossian brethren in prayers (Col. 4:12). Paul requested that the Roman brethren “strive together with me in your prayers to God for me” (Rom. 15:30). Stauffer remarks, “In prayer there is achieved unity between the will of God and that of man, between human struggling and action and effective divine operation” (*TDNT*, I, 139). He continues, “In prayer, too, there is fulfilled the fellowship of conflict and destiny between man and man” (*TDNT*, I, 139). Prayer connects us with God and with others in the daily conflict in which we seek to overcome the spiritual opponent that would seek to defeat us.

The Threat

The thought of the antagonist is seldom expressed in the New Testament in conjunction with the words *agōn* and *agōnizomai*. Stauffer comments, “Nevertheless there seems to belong to the whole concept of *agōnizesthai* the thought of obstacles, dangers, and catastrophes through which the Christian must fight his way” (*TDNT*, I, 138). Certainly, the apostle Paul exemplifies such struggles. In II Cor. 11:21-28, Paul lists several experiences in this regard, “...in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen,

in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” Paul was beset with a hundred perils without and with numerous perils within including the care of all the churches.

He was keenly aware of the ever present threat of sin. In Heb. 12:1-3, we find the word *antagōnizomenoi* (*striving against* sin, v. 4). The tempter, Satan himself, is behind the sin that could so easily beset us. We must resist. We must strive against Satan and sin. Set your eyes on Jesus. Look to Him for strength and guidance. Take courage and faint not!

The threat of heresy is the focus of Jude 3. The word *contend* in this passage is translated from *epagōnizesthai*. Christians must fight for the purity of the doctrine of Christ. They must fight for the preservation of the truth. This fight is conducted in the face of false teaching and false teachers that would seek to turn men away from the faith once delivered.

The Prize

The object of the struggle is summarized in two distinct but connected thoughts. The first is the salvation of the souls of men. Paul labored in this conflict in order to bring men to Christ. In Col. 2:1, he writes, “For I would that ye know what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.” Again, Paul declares, “Therefore, I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (II Tim. 2:10, see also Col. 1:28, 29). Paul labored, fought, suffered, and endured all for the sake of the salvation of others.

The second is obtaining the crown of righteousness, i.e. the victor’s crown. Salvation from sin ultimately means eternal life with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. The victor’s crown belongs to the one who completes the struggle with faith intact. The sublime words of the aged and battle worn apostle capture the essence of the prize, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (II Tim. 4:7, 8).

The victory crown is obtained only through the *agōn* (struggle, fight). It is assured through Jesus Christ. There simply is no other way to obtain it. We must be in Christ, and we must fight the good fight of the faith and finish our course and keep the faith!