

Did you know there was a time when two of the most famous people in history — the Apostle Paul and the Roman Emperor Nero — actually lived in the same city. Their paths crossed. At the time, nobody really noticed Paul. Everybody was fascinated by this young and loud and flashy emperor. Nero would have been a guest on all the daytime and primetime talk shows to share his philosophy on power and popularity. Nero was a hero. Paul was more like a zero.

If anyone knew about Paul, it would have been that he was some fanatical Jew, who switched his loyalty. Instead of passionately speaking out against some teacher named Jesus, who claims he came back from the dead; he now, just as passionately, speaks up for him.

In Rome, at that time, they locked up people like Paul. So, while Paul was suffering in a prison, Nero was enjoying the palace. If you asked anyone on the streets of Rome: *“Who’s going to make the biggest impact on the world, Nero or Paul?”* It would’ve been a no-brainer. Nero had the bright future ahead of him.

He seemed to have everything going for him. He was married to a beautiful wife. At his extravagant parties, he WAS the entertainment. When he turned 25, he declared himself to be a god, then had a statue made of himself.

Paul, according to a first century description, wasn’t much to look at. There wasn’t anything special about him that jumped out at you. His parents were both Jewish, and Roman citizens. If you looked closely at him, you’d see scars on his back from all the beatings and the floggings he endured. It had been a long tough road for Paul.

- Imprisoned frequently (7 different times) and flogged severely.

Listen to Paul’s personal catalog of perseverance:

- 5 times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one (the maximum number allowed by Jewish law).
- 3 times I was beaten with rods (by the Roman government).

- Once I was pelted with stones (the first mention of Paul in the Bible is in connection with a stoning - Stephen’s, not his own).
- 3 times I was shipwrecked, and one of them caused me to spend a night and a day in the open sea.
- I have been constantly on the move (3 long mission journeys).
- Wherever I went, I faced danger ... from rivers, from bandits, from my fellow Jews, from Gentiles; I faced danger in the city, in the country, at sea and from false believers.
- I have labored (as a tent maker) and toiled (as a preacher), often with little or no sleep.
- I have been hungry and thirsty, cold and naked.

There are people who feel that when life becomes a struggle, they can’t trust God because God has failed them somewhere along the way. They prayed that God would let a friend live, but the friend died. So now, they can’t trust God because God wasn’t there when they needed him most.

When life for you becomes a struggle what are your first questions? *“Why are people doing this to me?” “Why is God doing this to me?” “I’ve been keeping up on my prayers and obeying his Word the best I can, so why would God let this happen to me?”*

A better question to ask: *“What is God teaching me through this?”*

Everywhere Paul turned, he faced struggles. Struggles were part of a normal, typical day in Paul’s life. Thankfully, our typical days don’t look like Paul’s. But our typical days can be discouraging and challenging. What’s so encouraging for us is that as Paul faced challenge after challenge, they didn’t push him away from his God, they served to push him closer, so he would rely on him even more. That’s how he could persevere. Like Paul, we too can persevere.

Paul traveled to Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Colossae, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Crete, Malta,

Athens, Syracuse, Iconium, Philippi, Antioch and Rome. These weren't vacations. He was teaching and healing and telling Jews and Gentiles about the hope he had in Jesus.

Paul would work as a tent maker in the morning, and then teach and preach all afternoon and evening. He was a tireless worker for Jesus. And when he wasn't visiting a city or preaching, he was writing letters to the Christians who would gather in the cities he visited. God inspired Paul to be the author of almost half the books in the NT. He is one of the most influential writers in the history of the world. Next to Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul is recognized as the most influential person in the Christian Church.

We cherish his letters and read them in worship every week. In those letters are passages, some we've memorized, which help us in times of trouble, encourage us and remind us of God's grace. Passages like:

- **Do not be anxious about anything.**
- **A person is justified by faith apart from observing the law.**
- **The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**
- **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.**
- **If God is for us, who can be against us?**
- **I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.**
- **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is a gift of God.**

That's just the tip of the iceberg. But now you know how Paul persevered through one beating after another, one hardship after another, one rejection after another. He took what he wrote in his letters and applied it to heart first. As we read Paul's words, his passion and dedication for his Savior Jesus are clear. He considered it a privilege to suffer for Jesus, to struggle because of Jesus.

For every Christian, for you and for me, this is personal. While our situations may not be as intense as Paul's, we're still going through things in our own lives which cause us to struggle.

Our struggles, our storms don't come through shipwrecks, but we feel our life has been wrecked by health or family or financial issues. Or maybe there's depression, unhappiness or an addiction. Our struggles don't land us in a Roman prison, but we still feel beat up and trapped.

Does it help to know that Paul, one of the most impactful Christians ever, faced challenges and struggles, too? Does it help to know the secret of Paul's ability to persevere and the source of his strength?

He anchored himself to the One who was larger than life itself. Do we do the same? Are we anchoring ourselves in the One who is larger than life itself? Are we anchoring ourselves in the One who gives life ... who secured our salvation so he could also give us eternal life?

God has a plan which began before time, and God fits you into his perfect plan and purpose, just like he did Paul. It doesn't always seem perfect while we're living it. We may not completely understand it, but like Paul, God gives us the strength to persevere.

In the end, Nero sentenced Paul to death for proclaiming God's grace. According to many of the early church fathers, Paul was beheaded. Most people didn't notice. Remember, Nero was the one who was going to be the difference-maker in the world. Not some guy who changed his name and was later executed. But only 4 years after Paul's death, at the age of 29, Nero killed himself, before his own people could.

You won't find a church named St. Nero. But you don't have to look far to find one named St. Paul. You've never read an epistle written by Nero. But God made sure Paul's 13 epistles found their way into the Bible so we can read, re-read and study them.

Paul is a model for you, for me, for every Christian who hangs in there, who perseveres when life's road gets bumpy along the way.