

The Apostle Paul and the Emperor Nero – two of the most famous people in history — crossed paths in Rome. Everyone was fascinated by the young, flashy and popular emperor. Nero would have made the rounds on the daytime and primetime talk shows, if they had them in 55 AD.

Paul, on the other hand, drew very little attention. If anyone knew him it was because he was the Jewish extremist who switched loyalties. As a pharisee, he spoke out against Jesus and persecuted those who followed him. But later as an apostle, he spoke up for Jesus and was persecuted because he followed him.

On the streets of Rome if you asked: *“Who was going to make the bigger impact on the world, Nero or Paul?”* It was a no-brainer. Nero, in his palace, bright future. Paul, in a prison, not so bright.

Nero had everything going for him ... beautiful wife ... lots of parties ... made a 120 feet statue of himself ... painted himself bronze ... proclaimed himself a Roman god.

Paul? Nothing special about him, unless you count the scars all over his body. Here’s a look at his medical chart: Flogged: 5 times / Beaten: 3 times / Pelted with stones: once / Shipwrecked and nearly drown: 3 times.

That list doesn’t even include the mental stress and physical toll of:

- 3 mission journeys, each lasting over one a year.
- Danger from rivers and robbers, Jews and Gentiles, on city streets and country roads.
- Little sleep as he held down 2 jobs, tentmaker and preacher.
- Frequently found himself starving, thirsty and needing clothes.

When people go through struggles, they often feel they can’t turn to God because they can’t trust him. He’s failed them somewhere along the way. They prayed that God would let a friend live, but the friend died. They prayed that God would

resolve a relationship situation, but things got worse. They can’t trust God now. He wasn’t there when they needed him.

When your life becomes a struggle, what are your first questions? *“Why did God let this happen to me?”* *“I’ve been saying my prayers and obeying his Word the best I can. Why would God do this to me?”*

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

God is not the cause of our troubles and struggles. He does permit and allow them. Sinful people living with other sinful people in a sinful world is not a recipe for blessings, blue skies and smooth sailing.

Everywhere Paul, the chief of sinners, turned, he faced struggles. Struggles were a normal part of a typical day in the life of Paul. Thankfully, our typical days don’t look anything like Paul’s. But they can still be very discouraging and challenging.

Today’s lesson is all about Paul’s example of **Strength in Our Struggles**. What’s so encouraging for us, as Paul faced challenge after challenge, he didn’t blame God, or use it as an excuse to push God away. Which is the temptation that Satan and our sinful nature would like us to fall for.

Rather, they served to nudge Paul closer to his God and rely on God even more. Like Paul, let your challenging days force you into the arms of your Savior where you find **Strength in Your Struggles** to go from one day to next. Which is the testing God uses to get our faith stronger.

Paul’s travels took him to exotic locations and far-away places. Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Colossae, Cyprus, Athens, Philippi, Antioch and Rome weren’t vacation destinations. They were teaching stations and mission outposts where he taught and healed and preached in the name of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles.

Tent maker in the morning. Teacher and preacher late into the evening. He was a tireless worker for Jesus. And when he wasn't visiting a city or preaching, he was pouring out his heart writing letters to the Christians who would gather in the cities he visited. God used Paul to author almost half the NT books, 13 out of the 27. He is one of the most influential writers in the history of the world. Next to Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul is the most recognized and influential person in the Christian Church.

We cherish his letters so much, we read them every week in worship. Some passages have been so meaningful and provided so much **Strength in Our Struggles**, we've memorized them. Passages like:

- **Do not be anxious about anything.**
- **The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**
- **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.**
- **Love is patient, love is kind. These three remain: faith, hope of love. But the greatest is love.**

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. That's how Paul made it through another day – one beating after another, one hardship after another, one rejection after another. He took the words God inspired him to write and applied those words to his own life first so they could provide him with **Strength in His Struggles**. Paul considered it a privilege to suffer for Jesus, an honor 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 storms don't come through shipwrecks, but we may feel like our life has been wrecked by health, or family, or finances. Maybe there's

hopelessness, unhappiness, or an addiction. Our struggles won't land us in jail nor prison, but we may feel beat up and trapped.

It helps to know that Paul also faced challenges and struggles. It really helps to know the source of Paul's **Strength in His Struggles**.

He anchored himself to the One who was larger than any issue in his life. Do we do the same? Are you anchoring yourself to the One who is larger than any issue in your life? Are you anchoring yourself to the One who gives life, who secured your salvation to give you eternal life?

God had a plan before creation, and you and I fit into his perfect plan and purpose, just like Paul did. 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 keep going, **Strength in Our Struggles**.

In the end, Nero and Paul's lives did intersect. Nero would sentence Paul to death for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Very few noticed the guy who changed his name and ended up getting executed.

What about Nero, the loud and flashy emperor who had everything going for him and was going to be a difference-maker? 4 years after Paul's death, at 29, Nero killed himself, before his own people could.

No church is named St. Nero. You don't have to look far to find a St. Paul's. We don't read anything Nero wrote. God made sure Paul's 13 epistles found their way into the Bible so we can read, re-read and read them again every day.

After Paul's life-changing encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, nothing and nobody could stop him from sharing the good news of Jesus wherever he went, even while in prison.

Paul is a model for you, for me, for every Christian who hangs in there no matter how bumpy, painful or dangerous life's road becomes. Let's give Paul the final word as we find **Strength in Our Struggles**. He said it best: **We know that in ALL things (not some things, but all things) God works for the good of those who love him, who've been called according to his purpose.**