

# Picking Fights

## Winning The Right War

July 14, 2024

Today we're working out the way to win the war within. Cuz down here, every day is jam packed with all sorts of *struggles* – but *regardless* of the *situation*, our biggest *opponent* is often *ourselves*. Which means, it's necessary to *constantly* question: **are you fighting the right fight?**



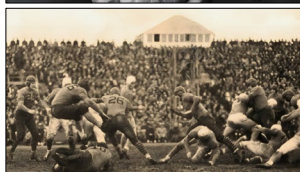
Cuz **it's alright to fight if, and only if, you're aimed at the right opponent.** Remember, there's a *time* for peace *and* a time for war, so gentleness and *fierceness* can coexist and *not* contradict. You can have a tender *temperament* and still fight with *ferocity* – as long as *love* leads the way.



[The way a *loving* God might straighten out *His* kids] He will surely turn violently and toss you like a ball into a large country – Isaiah 22:18 NKJ



We call it *tough love*. But hang on... a violent *turn* and *toss* of a *ball*? Where have I seen that? Isn't *that* the *run-pass-option* used by the more mobile *quarterbacks*? Believe it or not, It actually *could* be, cuz 1911 American football historian Parke H. Davis traced the history of *football* all the way back to *this* verse's sports metaphor. And although it ain't the NFL, this *is* generally accepted as an 8th century B.C. reference to some *similar* game played by *wrestling* over a *ball*. It's even *supported* by Homer's *Odyssey* from the same time: "**Having bathed and anointed well with oil they took their midday meal upon the river's banks and when satisfied with food they played a game of ball.**"



But if football is "*Old Testament*" old – the real question is *why*? What makes *recreational* combat worth a *Bible* reference? Well, in short, like *all* competition, **it separates the winners from the losers.** And like a lower-stakes *war*, **arranged fights prove who has power** when it's called into question. In fact, *that's* how American football started: By the late 1800s, the Civil War was highly *glorified* in popular culture and because many young men had *fathers* or *grandfathers* who proved themselves in the *war*; *these* kids turned to *football* to prove their *own* power.



But in the *same* way these guys fought *pre-arranged* conflicts as a *substitute* for the *real* wars that tested their *ancestors* – **all of our earthly battles really reflect the original power struggle** of our *oldest* ancestors back in the *Garden*. Cuz when *humans* teamed up with a shady *snake* to try and take on *God* – He didn't just *toss* us like a ball, He kicked us out of the arena to eliminate any *chance* of a return.

The LORD God *banished* [Adam] from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.- Genesis 3:23 NIV

And by making us live *apart* from everything He *provided* with His *presence*, He set us up for a life-long *fight of futility* so we'd be *constantly* reminded of the power we *don't* have:

[God said to *Eve*] "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with *painful labor* you will give birth to children." ... [And] To *Adam* He said ... "Cursed is the *ground* because of you; through *painful toil* you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and *thistles* for you, ... [So] By the *sweat* of your brow you will eat your food – Genesis 3:16-19 NIV



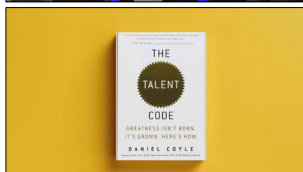
Believing we have power on par with our *Heavenly Father* isn't just *stupid* – it's deadly *dangerous*! Imagine a three-year-old child trying to prove *he* can do what *dad* does by taking his *tractor* for a spin; it can't end well! Cuz **kids aren't ready to wield real power**! So the most *loving* thing Dad can do is *make us see* how *capable* we are not. And *that's* what we learn from *struggle*; our *inadequacy*. Which is *why* God built it *into* our curse.



Since *then*, **every endeavor is thwarted by thorns and thistles** – and even our *best* days are spent *struggling* to *sustain* and *survive* in a world where everything *decays* and *dies*. And *every* element of our lives – from *work* and *social* to *intellectual* and *emotional* – is *affected*. Cuz we *can't* ever seem to *completely* conquer *anything*. Like the myth of Sisyphus, *we're* sentenced to forever *fight* against the *world* as we *painfully* push our rocks to the *top* of a mountain we *can't* reach. And every *agonizing* minute acts as a nagging *reminder* of the *reality* that *proves* **our best efforts aren't ever enough**.



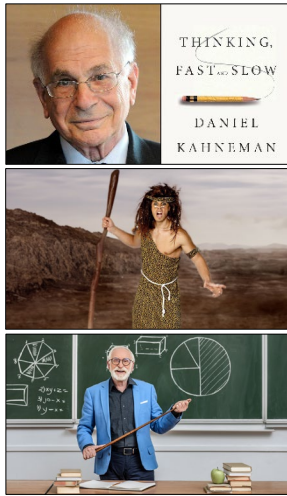
What an *uplifting* sermon, *huh?* Well, *here's* where things change; whether it's *baby* labor or *manual* labor, **hard living is a curse with a purpose**! Living in *some* level of ongoing *discomfort* and *failure* isn't all *bad*; because we **often learn more from surrender than success**. Losing teaches us some *hard truths* about both our *opponent* and *ourselves*. And those *difficult* lessons don't just make us *better fighters*, they transform us into *wiser people*. Which is exactly what **Daniel Coyle** found in his book *The Talent Code*; cuz after studying what makes us *skilled* and *successful*, he concluded *difficulty* was the difference, saying **"Struggle is a biological requirement of greatness."**



And while that's a great *insight* – it's kinda what the book of Ecclesiastes was always getting at:

Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. – Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 NIV

But whether it's the wisdom of *Solomon* or the conclusion of *Coyle* – the *takeaway* is the same; the **more we reject comfort and accept conflict, the more we grow**. Fine. But if the best way to truly transform is *living* through a life-long struggle, how come it still sounds like bad news? Well, that's because **there's two yous**. And one can't *stand* struggle.



And **Daniel Kahneman** won a Nobel Prize after a *lifetime* of studying the *differences* between the two *yous* – culminating in the landmark book *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow*. And *in* it, he identifies two different *systems of thought*; one is all about *survival, sustenance, and sensual experiences*. It's *selfish, shallow*, and all its reasoning is *reflexive*. While the other is all about *concepts, consequence, and connecting experiences*. It's *deep, deliberate*, and all its reasoning is *reflective*.

So even when the higher *reflective* you *can* see the long-term *value* of enduring ongoing *struggle*, the lower *reflexive* you *can't* see past the immediate impulse to *stop* the struggle. And as Kahneman's book continued *explaining* all the studies used to *discover* and *describe* the two *yous*, I realized, *like Coyle, he too* was just *preaching Scripture!*

For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that *you are not* to do whatever you want.  
 – Galatians 5:16-17 NIV

Long before *behavioral economists* and *cognitive psychologists*, *Scripture* made it clear *why* it's hard for our *spirit* to *sustain* our life-long struggle; **our flesh isn't willing to wait for the win**. It's too *lazy* to fight *through* life's thorns and thistles for a *delayed* gratification. And because of that:

The way of the sluggard is *blocked* with thorns [*cuz quitting is the easy way*], but the path of the *upright* is a highway. [*cuz the right way is through the thorns*] – Proverbs 15:19 NIV



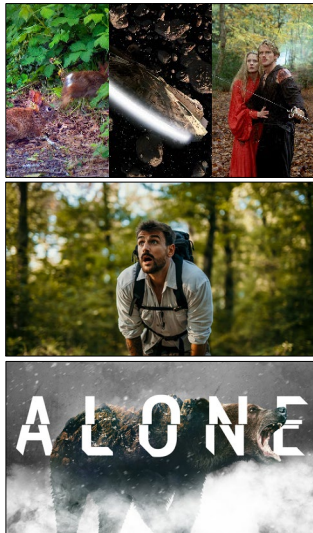
Listen, all our *reflexive* flesh can see is "*hard things hurt*" – so **it aggressively argues for the path of least resistance**: Hungry? Who cares how *processed* or *preserved* it is – we want whatever *drive-thru, pre-packaged, just-add-water, microwavable, or ready-to-eat, instant* option is *closest* to my mouth! *Cuz any drop* in blood sugar and I'm pitching a *fit!* It's only our *reflective* spirit that can see "*struggle builds strength*" – so **it pushes for the path of maximum benefit**. Hungry? Let's *weigh* the options – I want the most *sustainable, non-GMO, ethically-sourced, farm-to-table, and made-with-love organic* option that improves *my* health.

Y'see, **our flesh sees struggle as an obstacle to avoid** but **our spirit sees struggle as an opportunity to grow**. And that means *every* struggle in our *life* is *infinitely harder* due to the *fight* for *control* – in *ourselves*. *Cuz when the flesh gets its way, our obstacles remain*. But **when the spirit gets its way our obstacles get overcome**. And Paul sticks with *sports* to make that point:

Do you not know that in a *race* all the runners *run*, but only one gets the *prize*? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. *They* do it to get a crown that will not last, but *we* do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air [*fighting fake fights as a substitute for the real ones*]. No, I strike a blow to my body [*Cuz the flesh is the real opponent*] and make it my slave so that ... I myself will *not* be disqualified for the [*real*] *prize*. – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 NIV

Our flesh will only fight for a few things and **suppressing your spirit is at the top of the list!** Because *survival* is the flesh's #1 priority and **without your spirit, your flesh is dead!** Your flesh knows your spirit is all that makes it more than a pile *meat* so of course it'll fight to hold it in! But just realize what that *also* means; **without your flesh, your spirit is free.** Our *spirit* on its own is ready and *willing* to take on the world cuz it *understands* **there's no win without a war;** even against *death!*

[So:] Let us *throw off everything* that hinders and the *sin* [of the flesh] that so easily entangles. And let us *run with perseverance* the race marked out for us – Hebrews 12:1 NIV



Did you catch that? That's *two* sides of the same plan; **we drop dead weight by just running the race!** With every *struggle* we *endure*, **the spirit is freed cuz the flesh falls behind.** It works the same way a rabbit runs *through thistles* to evade a *fox*, or the way Han Solo flew through an *asteroid* field to escape the *Empire*, or better yet, the way Wesley and Buttercup fought *through* the Fire Swamp to lose Prince Humperdink! And that's how *our curse* fulfils *its* purpose: **Enduring our obstacles allows us to outrun our enemies!** By letting our spirit lead the way *through* the tough stuff, we slowly *lose* the influence of the *flesh!* And *God* has a *name* for the struggle to separate, know what it is? *Sanctifying.* It's the same word for *holiness* – and they *both* literally mean to "*set apart*" or "*separate*"! And it ain't *football*, but **this life is an arranged fight that separates the winner from the loser between the two yous.** And *God's* got money on your *spirit* outrunning your *flesh!*

Cuz He gave us the gameplan *guaranteed* to win – ready for it? Do **hard things.** Work *through* challenging *situations, thoughts, and people;* cuz *that's* all it takes to *leave* your lazy flesh behind.

[And] after you have suffered a little while, [God] will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. [as the new you – *unburdened* by flesh] – 1 Peter 5:10 NIV

I was just watching the TV show "Alone" where contestants compete to survive alone the Arctic wilderness and on the last episode of a season, it opened with this Sigmund Freud quote: "One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful." And near the end of the episode, we drop in on the *last* survivor... on day 77! And on the *brink* of starvation, he picks up a small *animal skull* and says: **"I think everyone should be so hungry – that they enjoy sucking the eyeball out of a rabbit."** And I thought, "Wow, truer words have never been spoken!" **Cuz when struggle separates us from our earthly eyes we start to see with spiritual clarity.**

And as things come into *focus*, we begin to realize our *real* battle is *not* with *people* at work, *politicians* in office, *gender* we're assigned, or any of the *million other* painful parts of life – **the struggle has always been against our own foolish flesh which is willing to surrender to sin.** Cuz your *spirit can* handle *all* your tough stuff with a smile – we've all *felt* it in our *better* moments – all we need to *do* is set it *free* by *outrunning* our *sinful* self. *Do hard things.* And when your *flesh* makes a *fuss*, ask *God* to help the *real* you keep your *real* eyes on the *real* prize; like Jesus *advised:*

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. [So *finish it off* and *embrace* the thistles that leave it behind!]. – Matthew 26:41 NIV

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Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.