

Spiritual Warfare: The Christian Versus the Flesh

By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, ©1983 (Rev. 86,89,92,95,05)

Introduction: Concerning the "spiritual war" which each Christian faces, Floyd Barackman writes, "Our spiritual enemies desire to dominate us and use us for their evil expressions. These enemies are the sin-principle [the flesh] (Rom. 6:12; Gal. 5:16-21; Jas. 1:14-15), Satan (1 Thess. 3:5), and the world (1 Jn. 2:16-17)."¹

Describing the "spiritual war" with the "flesh," John Walvoord and Roy Zuck write, "The indwelling principle of sin is constantly mounting a military campaign against the new nature, trying to gain victory and control of a believer and his actions, (Romans 7:23)."²

What is the flesh? Many reject the theological description of the "flesh" or "sin nature" that make it appear as though it is a "living entity," as though there are two people living within the Christian, the old nature and the new nature. Charles Ryrie gives the following insights about the flesh, "It is not some entity within, - some coarse, rough, hairy, ugly brute of a man who lives inside you and who is always fighting with that new nature represented by that tall, handsome, and, of course, blonde man. The flesh is the capacity to be self-controlled, to be uncontrolled by the Holy Spirit, and it encompasses all that has been made old by the presence of the new nature. The manifestations of the flesh conceived in this sense are not necessarily in filthy evil ways, but often in approved but evil ways."³

God's Word often personifies the "flesh" as a living entity showing how active sin is within our members. "Fleshly lusts are personified as if they were an army of rebels who incessantly search out and try to destroy the Christian's joy, peace, and usefulness."⁴

"The sinful flesh operates like a jack-in-the-box with its suppressed spring. Anytime the spring is not suppressed, the toy figure pops out. And anytime Christians fail to depend on the Spirit to keep the flesh suppressed, the flesh with its sinful deeds pops out."⁵

"Because of the guilt and corruption inherited from Adam, every person born by ordinary generation wrongly habituates his body from his earliest days. ...[Paul] does speak disparagingly of the body, as it has been captured and controlled by sin. ...More to the point is the fact that the body has been programed by one's sinful nature to sin."⁶

1. DEFINING THE FLESH⁷

The word "flesh" (Gr. "sarx") is used in a fourfold sense in the New Testament:

A. The "physical body" (the material)

In some instances the term "flesh" refers only to the material part of man. It is equivalent to its synonym, the "body," (Lk. 24:39; Acts 2:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:39; 2 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 5:29; Jn. 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 5:7; Gal. 2:20).

B. The "living humans" (the material and immaterial)

This reference is to living people of the earth, not to so many bodies composed of fleshly substance, but bodies ensouled and alive, (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 1:16; 2 Cor. 4:11; 1 Pt. 1:24, 25).

C. The "classifications of mankind" (the Jews, the Gentiles)

The flesh sometimes refers to or describes classes of men, such as "national designation," (Rom. 1:3, seed of David according to the flesh") or "a division of the human race," (Eph. 2:11, in time past Gentiles in the flesh").

D. The "fallen nature" (the "immaterial" package from Adam)

Theologically, the word "flesh" refers to all that we are in God's sight as a result of Adam's sin. It is from this perspective that we gain a clear picture of our "spiritual enemy" within and what we truly are without Christ, (Rom. 7:18; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 1:12; Gal. 5:17; Col. 2:11,18; 1 Pt. 4:2; 2 Pt. 2:10; 1 Jn. 2:16).

There are four insights J. Dwight Pentecost gives in defining the "flesh," (1.) It refers to one's own effort independent of God, (Rom. 4:1; Phil. 3:3; Gal. 3:3); (2.) It refers to one's infirmity, weakness, and helplessness, (Rom. 8:3); (3.) It refers to our state of sin or being controlled by sin, (Rom. 7:5); and (4.) It is the sum total of the old capacity which man has as a result of the fall, (Rom. 7:18; 8:3).⁸

"Defining the enemy called the 'flesh' is easy. I am constantly aware that there is a part of me that wants to go its own way. It motivates me to be self-serving. When I feel proud or self-satisfied, it is because my flesh has been in action, working in rebellion against the will and plan of God."⁹

"Flesh refers to the natural man's orientation away from God. It is the unregenerate human's way of doing or viewing things."¹⁰

"Thus it is disclosed that the term "flesh" when sustaining an ethical signification, refers to that part of man which, because of the fall, is opposed to God and to holiness. It is a fallen nature which, though expressing itself through the deeds of the body, is, nevertheless, to be identified as that which is immaterial and related to the material only as all that is immaterial is resident in, and expressed through, the material."¹¹

The flesh is "the sin-principle dominating the body (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:16; 6:8) and the body under the domination of the sin-principle (Rom. 7:18; Eph. 2:3); the sin-principle dominating us and our inner nature."¹²

"The flesh in the sense of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3) refers to all the sinful habits developed in and through a person's human nature by the dynamic sin principle. The sinful flesh produces evil thoughts, passions, desires, attitudes, communications, and actions in every area of human life."¹³

"The flesh is the willing instrument of sin and is subject to sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likewise present, and no good thing can live in the flesh. The flesh refers to the old nature of the flesh, that capacity which all men have to serve and please self, the capacity to leave God out of one's life."¹⁴

"When used of a facet of the immaterial nature it [the flesh] refers to that disposition to sin and to oppose God. ...Some equate the sin nature with the flesh."¹⁵

2. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE FLESH

The term "flesh" is similar to such expressions as:

A. "The old man," (Rom 6:6).

One theologian writes, "The 'old man' is what we were in 'Adam' the 'man' of the old era, who lives under the tyranny of sin and death."¹⁶

"Again Paul speaks to knowledge. He goes over some of the ground again as he hammers home his point that the believer has died to an old way. Our 'old self' is really 'our old man' an expression used twice elsewhere in the Pauline writings (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), in both cases with verbs expressing repudiation."¹⁷

B. "The body of sin" (Rom 6:6).

"Essentially synonymous with 'our old man.' Paul uses the terms 'body' and 'flesh' to refer to sinful propensities that are intertwined with physical weaknesses and pleasures (e.g., Romans 8:10, 11, 13, 23). Although the old self is dead, sin retains a foothold in our temporal flesh or our unredeemed humanness, with its corrupted desires (Romans 7:14–24). The believer does not have two competing natures, the old and the new; but one new nature that is still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh. But the term 'flesh' is not equivalent to the physical body, which can be an instrument of holiness."¹⁸

"The stress would rather be on the body as that part of the person that is particularly susceptible to, and easily dominated by, sin."¹⁹

C. "The body of flesh," (Rom 7:24; Col. 2:11).

D. "The law in my members," (Rom 7:23).

"Paul said he saw another law or principle at work within him. This is the principle of sin. Paul called it 'sin living in me' (Rom. 7:17,20), 'evil' right there with me, (Rom. 7:21), and the 'sinful nature' (Rom. 7:5,18,25). This principle is continually doing two things: waging war against the law of the believer's mind and making him a prisoner of the law of sin at work within his members. The indwelling principle of sin is constantly mounting a military campaign against the new nature, trying to gain victory and control of the believer and his actions."²⁰

E. "The members which are upon the earth," (Col 3:5).

F. "Carnal," (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

"The term 'carnal' is thus seen to be a description of the spiritual estate of a Christian who is dominated by the flesh rather than by the Spirit of God. He is one who is 'walking after the flesh."²¹

3. THE DEEDS OF THE FLESH

God's Word describes the "work" of the flesh, (Gal. 5:19-21). These works of the flesh are manifested in and through the body. Notice the following list.

A. immorality

- B. impurity
- C. sensuality
- D. idolatry
- E. sorcery
- F. enmities
- G. strife
- H. jealousy
- I. outbursts of anger
- J. disputes
- K. dissensions
- L. factions
- M. envying
- N. drunkenness
- O. carousing
- P. and things like these (meaning there are other things similar to these).

4. THE DANGER OF THE FLESH

"The flesh does not lie dormant within us like a sleeping enemy that goes into action only when aroused. Scripture teaches and experience confirms that the flesh urges us to carry out its passions, desires, and deeds."²²

- A. If we "live" after the flesh, we will "die," (Rom. 8:13).
- B. A "mindset" on the flesh results in "death," (Rom. 8:6-7).
- C. If we "sow" to the flesh, we will reap "corruption," (Gal. 6:8).
- D. Those who are "in the flesh" and "according to the flesh" have "no ability to please God," (Rom. 8:8).
- E. A "mindset" on the flesh is "hostile toward God," (Rom. 8:7).
- F. A "mindset" on the flesh "does not follow God's Word," (Rom. 8:7).
- G. Nothing "good" is associated within the flesh, (Rom. 7:18).
- H. The flesh can "enslave" one to sin, (Rom. 7:25).
- I. The flesh wants to "control" one's mind, (Eph. 2:3).
- J. The flesh wants to "govern" one's life, (Rom. 8:5-6).
- K. The flesh is at war with the Spirit, (Gal. 5:16-19).

"Since no unregenerate person is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the conflict here described is between what the Christian is in himself 'flesh,' and the Spirit of God who indwells him. Such warfare belongs only to the child of God. In respect to this conflict, a distinction is to be seen between the 'flesh' in its counterpoise to the mind (Rom. 7:23,25) and the 'flesh' in its counterpoise to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4-13; Gal. 5:16-26). In the former conflict, of that between the flesh and the mind, there is only defeat, though the truth is established that with the mind a Christian may serve the 'law of God,' and yet with the flesh serve 'the law of sin' (Rom. 7:25). In the wider conflict between the flesh and the Holy Spirit there may be victory."²³

5. THE DELIVERANCE FROM THE FLESH

"...Paul wants to say [Romans 6:6] that our capacity to interact with the world around us has been rescued from the domination of sin. Paul's point is that the real, though forensic, inclusion

of the believer with Christ in His crucifixion means that our solidarity with, and dominance by, Adam, through whom we are bound to the nexus of sin and death, has ended. And the purpose of this was that the body as a helpless tool of sin might be definitively defeated."²⁴

6. THE DEFENSE AGAINST THE FLESH

"Fighting the sinful flesh with self-effort is as futile as fighting a fire by pouring fuel on it. The more we struggle with the flesh in our own power, the more the flesh seems to overpower us with a vengeance. Only the Spirit can overpower our flesh...."²⁵

A. We must "mortify" the flesh, (Rom. 6:6; 8:13; Col. 3:5).

"What must be 'rendered impotent' if I am to be freed from sin (Rom. 6:6) is not just my physical body, but myself in all my sin-prone faculties. ...[Body] is chosen to connote the person as the instrument of contact with the world."²⁶

"Mortifying deeds means killing them off, getting rid of them altogether. But the tense is present, which indicates a continuing activity. It is not something that we can do once and for all and be done with. It is a daily duty. What is to be killed is 'the deeds of the body' or evil actions. Such actions are the objects of decisive and hostile action as far as the believer is concerned. There is to be no life in the deeds in question. They are not living options. And this is to take place through an action of the believer ('you put to death') through not an unaided action, for the mortification is to be done 'by the Spirit.' It is the energy of the divine Spirit, not the energy of the flesh, that enables the believer to put the body's deeds to death."²⁷

B. We must sow to the "spirit," (Gal. 6:8).

C. We must rely on the Spirit's help to suppress the flesh, (Gal. 5:16-21; Rom. 8:3).

D. We must present our body and its members to God as instruments of righteousness, (Rom. 6:16-19; 8:13; 12:1; Gal. 5:16-17).

E. We must realize the power of the flesh has been cut off, (Col. 2:11; Rom. 6:6).

F. We must make no provision for the flesh, (Rom. 13:14).

G. We must not allow the flesh to dominate our body, (Rom. 6:12-19).

H. We must learn to "put off the flesh," and "put on the Spirit," (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9; Gal. 5:16).

I. We must renew our mind moment-by-moment, (Rom. 12:1).

"We can experience victory not by eradication of the flesh but by walking in dependence on the Spirit to control it, (Gal. 5:16)."²⁸

Conclusion:

"Though human nature, including the physical body and its members, is not sinful in itself, human nature influenced and infiltrated by the sin principles constitutes the sinful flesh which is

hostile to God. The flesh does not lie dormant within us like a sleeping enemy that goes into action only when aroused. Scripture teaches and experience confirms that the flesh urges us to carry out its passions, desires, and deeds. Therefore do not leave your bodily members vulnerable because the sinful flesh is a raider who will seize your bodily members and use them as instruments of unrighteousness (Rom. 6:13)."²⁹

End Notes:

¹Practical Christian Theology, Floyd Barackman, Old Tappan: Fleming Revell, 1984, p. 427.

²The Bible Knowledge Commentary: The New Testament, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Ed., Wheaton: Victor, 1993, p. 468.

³"Modern Galatianism," Charles Ryrie, Grace Journal, 1:2, Fall 1960, p. 4.

⁴John MacArthur Study Bible, P. 1942)

⁵Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, p. 974.

⁶The War Within, Jay Adams, Eugene: Harvest, 1989, Pp. 62-63.

⁷Practical Christian Theology, Floyd Barackman, Old Tappan: Fleming Revell, 1984, p. 195; The Theological Wordbook, Charles Swindoll, Ed., Waco: Word, 2000, Pp. 127-128; Designed To Be Like Him, J. Dwight Penetcost, Chicago: Moody, 1966, Pp. 87-88; Christian Theology, Millard Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, p. 526.

⁸Designed To Be Like Him, J. Dwight Penetcost, Chicago: Moody, 1966, Pp. 87-88.

⁹Spiritual Warfare, Dick Denny, Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2004, p. 21.

¹⁰Christian Theology, Millard Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989, 708.

¹¹John MacArthur Study Bible, John MacArthur, Nashville: Word, 1997.

¹²Practical Christian Theology, Floyd Barackman, Old Tappan: Fleming Revell, 1984, Pp. 195; 427)

¹³Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, p. 975.

¹⁴The Moody Handbook of Theology, Paul Enns, Chicago: Moody, 1989, p. 313-314.

¹⁵Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie, Wheaton: Victor, 1986, Pp. 199, 231.

¹⁶Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, p. 390.

¹⁷The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, p. 250.

¹⁸John MacArthur Study Bible, John MacArthur, Nashville: Word, 1997.

¹⁹Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, Pp. 392-393.

²⁰The Bible Knowledge Commentary, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Wheaton: Victor, 1983, p. 468.

²¹"Anthropolgy," Lewis Sperry Chafer, Bibliotheca Sacra, 101:402, April 1944, p. 135.

²²Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, p. 975.

²³"Anthropology," Lewis Sperry Chafer, Bibliotheca Sacra, 101:402, April 1944, p. 136.

WHAT GOD'S WORD SAYS ABOUT TRIALS

Lesson 13: SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE FLESH

By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, 1983 (86,89,92,95,05)

page 8

²⁴Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, Pp. 392-393.

²⁵Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, p. 976.

²⁶Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, Pp. 392-393.

²⁷The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, p. 312.

²⁸Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie, Wheaton: Victor, 1986, Pp. 199, 231.

²⁹Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, p. 975.

Two theological debates have arisen from a study on "the flesh." (1.) does the believer have two natures; (2.) can sin be totally eliminated in the life.

"Many popular discussions of Paul's doctrine of the Christian life [old man and new man], argue or assume, that Paul distinguishes with these phrases between two parts or natures of a person. With this interpretation as the premise, it is then debated whether the 'old man' is replaced with the 'new man' at conversion, or whether the 'new man' is added to the 'old nature.'" Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, p. 390

"...The assumption that 'old man' and 'new man' refer to parts or natures of a person is incorrect. Rather they designate the person as a whole, considered in relation to the 'corporate' structure to which he or she belongs. 'Old man' and 'new man' are not then ontological, but relational or positional in orientation. They do not, at least in the first place, speak of a change in nature but a change in relationship. 'Our old man' is not our Adamic, or sin, 'nature' which is judged and dethroned on the cross and to which is added in the believer another 'nature' 'the new man.' Rather the 'old man' is what we were in 'Adam' the 'man' of the old era, who lives under the tyranny of sin and death." Romans 1-8, Douglas Moo, Chicago: Moody, 1991, p. 390