

## **Part Two**

### **Evil Enemies: Devil, World, and Flesh**

*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.*

*(1 Peter 5:8-9)*

*Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.*

*(1 John 5:4)*

*The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another. (Galatians 5:17)*

*From all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Good Lord, deliver us.*

*(Book of Common Prayer)*

## *Chapter Five*

### **The Devil's Attacks**

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil. (Ephesians 6:12)*

A pool shark can make hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in a single night, winning bets at barroom billiard tables. What does it take to succeed as a pool shark? At least two things. First, he must be very good at shooting pool. He won't win bets if he can't win games. But he also needs a second skill. He must be a convincing actor and give the impression that he's not that good at pool. If everybody knows how good he really is, nobody will bet against him.

When a pool shark goes into a bar, he tries to blend in. He gives the impression that he's just a regular guy out for a good time. He doesn't usually suggest a bet himself. He lets others suggest the bet and acts reluctant about putting money on the game. Eventually he agrees, and then proceeds to lose (on purpose, of course). Once somebody has beaten him and taken some of his money, they're sure they can beat him again. But when they play again, the shark wins, though not by very much. His opponent is eager for another game of "double or nothing," sure that in the next game he'll win back what he lost. In the end, all the person's money is in the pool shark's pocket.

In all of this, the shark never lets the other person know that he, the shark, is by far the better player. If the shark does it right, he can even come back to the same bar night

after night to rake in the money from other victims—or even from the same ones. The shark never shows off how good he really is. He makes sure to miss plenty of shots, though seldom when a game is on the line. He makes sure to lose a game here and there, though never with too much money on the table. He doesn't appear to be much better than those he plays against; the ball just happens to go in for him whenever it matters most. He seems lucky.

But luck has nothing to do with it. The shark has total control of every shot and every game. Even so, his victims, no matter how much they lose, are as sure as ever that he just got lucky and that they can beat him if they play again. They don't realize they never had a chance.

### **Taking Satan Seriously**

Pool sharks remind me of the way Satan operates. Satan is far too much for any mere human to defeat. He is so skilled and strong that his victims don't have a chance, yet so smart and sneaky that his victims seldom know what they're up against. Some people don't believe Satan is real. They don't think the devil and demons even exist. They say it's unrealistic to believe such things. But who is being unrealistic? How can you read history or watch the news and *not* believe Satan and his demons are real? What else explains the dreadful power of evil?

We see smart, sophisticated people get tangled in scandals or trapped by addictions, and we wonder how they could be so stupid; we don't recognize the tempter's cunning. We see wars, terrorism, torture, crime and cruelty, and we wonder how people can be so awful to each other; we don't recognize the devil, whom Jesus described as "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). It's not just a people problem; it's a demon problem. Humans can be sinful and silly, of course, but behind it all lurks demonic evil and deception. The real enemy is Satan.

But we still find it hard to take Satan seriously. We think it's more realistic to believe in our own ability and in that glorious thing called progress. We think we can conquer our problems if only we try just a little harder. We see war and hatred, and we think, "With just a little more negotiation, with just a little more international cooperation, we can make a new world order of peace and security." We see countless children without fathers, we see AIDS destroying millions around the world, and we think, "If we just spend billions of dollars on sex education, things will get better." But the harder we try, the worse it gets.

Who is being realistic: those who think we have human-sized problems with human-sized solutions, or those who believe we're up against something more than human weakness and wickedness, that we face a mysterious enemy of horrifying power? It's amazing that a pool shark can beat someone game after game and take all his money without the victim ever knowing what he's really up against. It's even more amazing that after Satan has done so much damage, many people still don't even think that the devil and his demons are real.

If you can't see Satan's power in crime, conflict, war, and massacres, just look at your own life. Here, too, Satan can be controlling you without you knowing it. He can be taking you for everything you've got, and you still think you can win. You give in to a temptation, and you think, "Oops! That was a mistake, but it won't happen again. Next time I'll do better." You might have a deadly habit. You might have a nasty temper. You might be addicted to pornography. You might abuse your wife or hold grudges or drink too much or have some other rotten habit and think, "This is getting to be a problem, but I can handle it. I just need to try harder. I'll do better next time." All the while, you keep losing to Satan, and he's so sneaky that you don't even know what you're up against.

Like a pool shark, Satan may even let you win once in a while. You resist a temptation, you're okay for a few weeks, and you think, "See, I can do it. I can beat this thing." You don't realize that Satan can beat you any time he wants.

Satan is a former archangel. He has powers you can hardly imagine. He's far more clever and powerful than you or I. He's been in the temptation business for centuries; he's been ruining people for thousands of years, many of them smarter and with greater will power than you or me. And yet you think you can make progress if you just keep trying, if you just give it a little more effort? It would be comical if it weren't so tragic. You'd have better luck against a pool shark.

Satan is real. His demons are real. That's not superstition. It's realism. Read your history. Watch the evening news. Look at your own life. The real enemy isn't just human but demonic. The Bible is utterly realistic when it says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12).

That may sound terrifying—it is terrifying—but it's a major step toward victory to know your opponent, to see your enemy for who he really is. If you have problems with other people, don't focus all your fury on them. See Satan as the real enemy. Also, don't think you can solve your problems on your own, and don't think human progress can solve all our troubles. Satan is too strong to be defeated that way. Depend on God's power to overcome the enemy.

### **Targeting Demons, Not Humans**

Our real enemies are not humans but demons. When you accept this fact, you see people differently. When someone does terrible things and harms you, you might be

tempted to hate that person and want him in hell. When you see a certain group of people as the source of everything that's wrong with the world, you might want them to be wiped out. But the real enemy is Satan. He is pushing people to do his dirty work. The main struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual powers.

Picture this: A boy throws a stone at a dog. When the stone strikes, the dog yelps in pain. Then the dog bites the stone furiously to get revenge. But as it bites the stone, the dog ignores the boy who threw the stone. The dog doesn't know the real cause of its pain. That, says John Calvin, is what it's like to ignore Satan and to attack humans who have wronged us. True, they may have hurt us, but Satan is the main culprit, and we should see him as our chief enemy.

If you're fighting a war against a brutal dictatorship, what is a better strategy: to blast civilians who have been dominated by a cruel regime or to go after leaders and military targets? It would be morally wrong and strategically stupid to attack people who are ruled by a horrid regime and not attack the regime itself. A successful strategy would target leadership. The main focus would be fighting strategic command-and-control elements and the hardcore divisions of the enemy military.

If that's the case in ordinary warfare, it's even more important in spiritual warfare. Focus on enemy leadership and on the most hardened, fanatical warriors. The real enemy is Satan and his demons, not people who are caught in the grip of the evil one. Many of those people can still be won over to the Lord's side. Even if humans are on the side of Satan, there is still hope for them. They might live under the power of evil and even serve the cause of evil, but they might become very different if only they are liberated from Satan's tyranny. Satan and his demons are wicked beyond repentance, hardened beyond all possibility of salvation. But most human sinners have not yet reached

that point. They might still be saved. God has saved some terrible people in the past and transformed his enemies into his friends, and he can do so again. So whenever you meet a human enemy, you may have to oppose that person, but don't demonize that person. Make the demons your main target, and regard human enemies as potential friends.

This does not excuse human sin. If you sin and go along with Satan, you are responsible. It's no excuse to say, "The devil made me do it," any more than it's an excuse for a soldier who commits war crimes to say, "I was just following orders." If you serve an evil commander and follow his commands, he is responsible, but so are you. If you keep resisting God and siding with Satan, you will meet the same terrible defeat as the demons.

But another possibility is open to you. God gives you an opportunity that he does not give to Satan or his demons. Surrender to Jesus, join the Lord's side, and he will show you mercy and rebuild your life. It is too late for the demons. God's full fury is targeted at Satan's regime, and all demons are doomed to everlasting hell. But it is not too late for you. You have the opportunity to receive God's mercy, abandon the doomed kingdom of evil, and become part of God's kingdom of joy.

God's main battle is not against flesh and blood, so if you're presently God's enemy, you can still become his friend by faith in Jesus. And if you're already God's friend, you should be ready to show other humans the same mercy God has shown you. Jesus tells his followers, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27). Knowing that the real enemy is demonic helps us to be more merciful to human enemies.

### **Effective Weapons**

Knowing the real enemy also helps us to depend less on human power and methods and to depend more on God. You and I are up against evil forces of overwhelming pow-

er. If all we have is our own best effort, we can't possibly come out on top. You may think it's gloomy and depressing to talk this way. But it's just the opposite! It's glorious to know what the Bible says about Satan. That way he won't be able to fool us any longer, and he won't be able to beat us either, if we use the right weapons.

If the enemy were not so dreadful, the gospel would not be so grand. The glory of the gospel is that God shows us the enemy in all his dreadfulness, and then he announces his victory over Satan and tells how we can share in that victory. The death and resurrection of Christ have dealt Satan a crushing blow. Satan is doomed. With that good news, the Lord calls us to put our faith in Christ, to join the battle against Satan till the victory is complete, and to use the weapons and armor that God provides. We're in a great spiritual battle, and it can only be won with great spiritual weapons. Nothing less will do.

This may sound foolish and backward to some people. They want to be more practical, more relevant. If the problem is war, we need stronger international organizations and better peacekeeping forces. If the problem is crime, we need more police, more prevention, and more sports programs in crime-infested neighborhoods. If the problem is teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, we need more education. If the problem is an addiction, we need a therapist or support group. If the problem is strange teaching in the church, we need a committee to study the matter. If the problem is bickering, we need a course in interpersonal skills and conflict management.

These things may be good, in some cases they can be helpful, but they're not enough. If we think a flurry of activity and techniques will solve our deepest problems, we're fooling ourselves—or rather, Satan is fooling us. We're in a spiritual war. We face a powerful spiritual enemy. The only way to win is with powerful spiritual weapons. It's tragic when even the church itself forgets this. The

church is tempted to think it can save individuals by becoming just another therapy group or save society by becoming just another political lobby. But Satan laughs if that's all we fight him with. We're fighting a war with squirt guns and paper airplanes. We're putting Band-Aids on gaping wounds.

What the world needs more than anything else, what you and I need more than anything else, is a gospel that strikes right at the heart of Satan's evil empire. We need a gospel that takes Satan seriously, and we need a gospel that exalts Jesus Christ as the only one who can defeat Satan. When Jesus called the apostle Paul to preach the gospel to the world, he said, "I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18). I can't think of a grander, more urgent, more practical message, than that. Satan is a dreadful enemy, but he is also a defeated enemy. There is one thing Satan fears, and that scares him to death: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Satan's Schemes**

Satan will do anything to keep you from laying hold of the gospel, because once you do, you will see him for who he is, you will be aware of his schemes, and you will have power to defeat him. If you don't believe that Satan is real and don't depend on Jesus to overcome him, that's just the way Satan likes it. He will do everything he can to keep it that way. People sometimes say the reason they don't believe the gospel is that they're free thinkers, well educated, and progressive. They can't accept the backward, old-fashioned teachings of the Bible. But unbelief isn't a sign of intelligence. It's a sign of blindness. Satan "has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light

of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Satan is scared of the gospel. He does all he can to blind you to it, and he does all he can to keep the church from spreading it. He's constantly trying to get church leaders and congregations to leave the biblical gospel behind. Sometimes it works. According to the Bible, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). There are those in the church who say that the Bible contains errors. They say Jesus isn't the only way of salvation. They say that there is no Satan and no hell. These people think that they follow the latest scholarship and bring religion up to date. But the truth is that they "abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." Isn't it ironic? They don't believe demons exist, and they're doing the work of demons.

Satan wants to blind you to the truth. He wants the church to forsake the gospel and follow his lies. But what if you believe the gospel anyway, and your church refuses to compromise the truth? What then? Does Satan just give up and take his attacks elsewhere? Dream on! It's often the strongest churches and the most vibrant Christians who are the target of Satan's fiercest attacks.

Satan can't destroy a church built on the gospel, but he can try to disrupt it and make it ineffective, especially if we're not alert to his schemes. He tries to cause arguments and bitterness and division in the church. He arouses suspicion and distrust and dissent. These aren't just human disagreements or personality conflicts. They are the work of Satan. He wants to rob us of our joy and make us miserable. He wants to disrupt our fellowship and destroy our united witness to the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior. He does all this because he hates the church and because he fears the gospel. He wants to make every biblical

church so cranky that it's unpleasant for those inside the church and unattractive to those outside the church.

Let me say it again: Satan's most terrible attacks are often on the strongest churches and the most vibrant Christians. Why? Because he hates them the most and because they are the greatest threat to his power. If you're a Christian, especially if you're eager and active, expect Satan to attack you. Expect that he will even try to make you doubt that you belong to God at all. Some of the godliest Christians, even on their deathbeds, have said that Satan was attacking them with doubts about their salvation. They didn't give in, but that vicious old serpent was taking one last opportunity to hurt them as much as he could.

If you belong to Christ, Satan cannot possibly separate you from God's love or take eternal life away from you, but Satan will do all he can to weaken your joy and your confidence. He does this out of hatred and because he wants you to be so crushed and exhausted that you won't be effective in relation to other people. Satan doesn't want your faith to be joyful, confident, and contagious. He doesn't want other people to hear about Christ from you or to see Christ at work in you. Otherwise, they might believe the great news that they can be saved in Christ and have victory over the devil. That's the last thing Satan wants, so he does all he can to weaken the witness of those who love Christ.

But no matter what Satan tries, don't give in. Don't let him fool you or defeat you. Don't be careless and ignore his power, but don't go to the opposite extreme and despair of ever defeating him. Satan is hateful, he is cunning, he is powerful, but he is also defeated. Jesus is Lord! Satan is scared of Jesus; he is scared of the Holy Spirit; he is scared of the gospel. So "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." With truth and righteousness and peace and faith and salvation as our ar-

mor, with God's Word as our sword, and with the power of prayer to energize us, we can do more to drive Satan back and change this world than all our other efforts combined.

If you've been living without Jesus, if you've been in Satan's grip, maybe without even knowing it, now is the time to change. Now is the time to recognize your real enemy and know what he's been doing to you. Get rid of Satan's domination. Pray for God's salvation. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome his Spirit into your heart. "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you" (James 4:7-8).

## Chapter Six

### The Devil's Defeat

*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (1 John 3:8)*

Satan seems to be very active these days. Pastors and counselors encounter people with memories of Satanic ritual abuse. These people recall that when they were children, some adults forced them to be involved in rituals involving blood and black magic and Satan worship. They may even remember being offered to Satan as his property. In many cases it's hard to prove if these things actually happened or if the memories are false. No doubt some people were victims of occult abuse, while others may be victims of horrid illusions planted in their minds by evil powers. Either way, these people feel torn, confused, and in bondage to the powers of darkness.

Other people run up against Satan in a different way. They experiment with the occult and toy with horoscopes, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and séances. They may do it out of curiosity or to get a thrill, and in some cases, it's more of a game to them than anything serious. But some get more than they bargained for. They sink deeper and deeper into the grip of dark powers that are beyond them, and they can't shake themselves free. In the Bible God strongly warns against fortune telling, sorcery, omens, witchcraft, spells, mediums, psychics, and séances to contact the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-11), but many people ignore the Lord's warnings. People have told me how they got into

these things almost as a game at first, but they ended up feeling trapped and terrorized by evil forces.

A disturbing number of young people commit suicide after mixing occult practices with drugs and alcohol and music that focuses on demons and death. Also, some of the most vicious serial killers have been fascinated with the demonic. This can even happen on a political and national scale. There's considerable evidence that Hitler, Hess, Goebbels, and Himmler were deeply involved in occult practices, and so were many other people in Nazi Germany at that time. A number of murderous tyrants were communists who acted in the name of Karl Marx. They claimed not to believe in God or Satan, but they did a lot of Satan's work. There are strong hints that Marx himself sensed the touch of demons. When Marx rejected God, he wrote,

The hellish vapours rise and fill the brain  
Till I go mad and my heart is utterly changed  
See this sword? The prince of darkness  
Sold it to me.

In another poem Marx wrote,  
Thus heaven I've forfeited  
I know it full well  
My soul once true to God  
Is chosen for hell.

After Friedrich Engels first met Marx, he described him as "a monster possessed by thousands of devils." Was all this talk of being moved by demonic powers just a poetic figure of speech, or was it a hellish reality?

### Satan's Many Methods

Satan doesn't just work through occult practices and witches and demon worship. Some of his deadliest schemes are carried out by people who don't believe the devil even exists, who don't resort to black magic or voodoo or rituals involving blood and bats' wings. C.S. Lewis



put it this way: “I like bats much better than bureaucrats... The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of iniquity’... It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.”

Perhaps the only thing more dangerous than Satan worshippers are those who don’t believe Satan exists. They are educated, sophisticated, efficient—and unaware of who is really calling the shots for them; unaware of the damage they are doing in the service of Satan. To sacrifice a child as part of a demonic ritual in some dark room is no more pleasing to Satan than to abort a child in a well-lit clinic full of stainless steel. To place someone under a voodoo curse is no more pleasing to Satan than to use the finest textbooks and computers to educate a child to think and act as though God doesn’t matter.

Satan is equally pleased by those who are obsessed with his power and those who deny his power. In some parts of the world, people live in such fear of demons and witchcraft and magical powers that they will do anything to please those dark forces. In other areas, Satan doesn’t have such an easy time scaring people into his service, so he uses the opposite strategy. He keeps a low profile and convinces people that there is no Satan—and maybe no God, either.

That works for a while, but many people find it hard to go on without any religion at all. They feel an urge for something spiritual and supernatural. Satan is waiting to fill the void. He offers an array of non-Christian religions and pagan gods and goddesses and occult practices. He offers New Age ideas that aren’t really much newer than Satan himself. When people in nations that were once largely Christian forsake Christ and the Bible, they may at

first swing to the extreme of not believing in a spiritual realm at all. But soon many swing to the other extreme and believe in paganism or pantheism.

Satan is very powerful and very tricky. Sometimes he uses witchdoctors, and sometimes he uses corporate executives to do his work. Sometimes he controls people by sheer intimidation, and other times he tells sweet little lies and lures people into temptations and habits they can’t seem to break. Sometimes he attacks the church through vicious persecution, and other times he sneaks into the church through false teaching and tries to destroy it from the inside. Satan has many methods but always one goal: to cut people off from God and destroy them.

### **Satan’s Conqueror**

I’m not saying all this because I want to focus on Satan. I want to focus on Satan’s conqueror, the Lord Jesus Christ. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). The devil is real. We need to know his schemes and realize that he’s dangerous. But we also need to know that he’s defeated.

How does Jesus defeat the devil and destroy his work? Shortly before Jesus was arrested and crucified, he said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:31-32). By being lifted up on the cross, Jesus would drive Satan back, break the devil’s hold on us, and draw people of every kind away from Satan and into relationship with Christ.

When Jesus died on the cross, he defeated Satan and broke the chains of sin and death that held humanity prisoner. All through the time of Jesus’ public ministry, he battled with Satan and cast out demons, but those encounters were just skirmishes compared to the decisive battle that was fought at Calvary. On the cross, Jesus drove Satan

back and won the victory that decided the outcome of the war once and for all.

It didn't look that way, however. To all appearances, the cross was Satan's greatest victory, the triumph of evil over good. And in a way that's true. It was the devil's hour. But Christ took Satan's finest hour, his greatest victory, and turned it into a devastating defeat. What happened that made Jesus' death such a victory for Jesus and such a defeat for Satan? The Bible describes a number of blows that Jesus dealt to Satan at the cross.

### **The Tempter Disregarded**

First, Jesus disregarded Satan the tempter. The Bible says that Christ was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Early in Jesus' ministry Satan tempted him to take a shortcut to glory. He promised Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus would worship him. No suffering, no humiliation, no need to follow the hard path laid out by God—just instant power. But Jesus refused. Later, Satan spoke again, this time through Jesus' friend Peter, again urging the Lord to follow the path of power rather than humility and suffering. But Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan."

Finally, the tempter pulled out all the stops as Jesus neared the end. The horror of death and hell loomed in front of Jesus. Would he finally cave in and disobey his Father's plan and take the easy way? Jesus said, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27-28). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Satan's temptation to take the easy way instead of God's way hit Jesus with even greater force, but Jesus prayed, "Father, not my will, but yours be done."

Another of Satan's temptations is to hate and seek revenge on those who hurt us. But again, Jesus disregarded

the tempter. Jesus' tormentors slapped him, but he didn't fight back. They mocked him, but he remained silent. The soldiers nailed his hands and feet, but did Jesus give in to hatred? No, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). When the onlookers mocked him and told him to come down from the cross, Jesus could have come down then and there and called on thousands of angels to destroy his tormentors. But Jesus knew he had to obey his Father and fulfill the Scriptures, not seek revenge. There at the cross Jesus faced Satan's toughest temptations and disregarded the tempter.

### **The Liar Disproved**

A second blow Jesus dealt Satan at the cross was that he disproved Satan the Liar. Satan would like us to think that the way of this fallen world is really better than God's way, even though it's rooted in sin and disobedience. But at the cross Jesus exposed the world system for what it is: utterly evil and deadly. How did he do that? He stood before the chief priests (representing the world's most advanced religious system) and the Roman governor (representing the world's most advanced legal system), and he brought out the worst in them.

Satan has always wanted the systems and peoples of this world to approve of business as usual, to think they're in touch with true wisdom. At the cross, however, Jesus exposed the fact that they are completely out of touch with true spiritual wisdom. "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Sometimes we maintain a mask of politeness. Things look okay on the surface, and we'd like to think there's nothing wrong with the way things are. We may even think we're in tune with God. But when God actually showed up in the form of a man, we attacked and killed him. Jesus forced the pretenses to fall away, and at the cross the

world, its people, its religious system, its legal system, and the devil who calls the shots were all exposed as enemies of God.

That means big trouble for Satan. He specializes in deception. He doesn't want us to admit our sin or think that there's anything seriously wrong with a world under his domination. He'd like us to believe the lie: "I'm okay, you're okay. Don't worry about what God says." But at the cross Jesus disproved that lie once and for all. If the world is okay, it wouldn't have killed Jesus. If I'm okay, and you're okay, then why did Jesus have to die? At the cross Jesus disproved the great Liar and exposed sin for what it is.

### **The Accuser Dismissed**

A third blow Jesus dealt to Satan at the cross is this: he dismissed Satan the accuser. Satan specializes in extremes. He tries to get you to believe the lie that sin is no problem and evil is okay, but if that strategy doesn't work, he tries to drive you to the other extreme. Satan tries to make you think your sins are so horrible and you're so rotten and worthless that there's no hope for you. But at the cross Jesus wrecked that strategy of Satan.

Satan the accuser likes to turn God's law against us and torment us with our guilt and frighten us with the punishments required by the law. But Jesus took the curse of the law upon himself. The Bible says, "He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13-14). Jesus suffered the punishment we deserve. His blood wiped the record clean. Now when Satan tries to accuse me or drive me to despair, Jesus defends me. All Satan's charges, all the evidence he can bring up about how rotten I am—it's all thrown out of God's courtroom.

Satan leads us into sin. He keeps track of every sin that marks each of us as his property. But when Satan tries to bring charges against us before God, Jesus' blood wipes the whole record clean. That's what happened to the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. Satan had lured that man into a lifetime of crime and wickedness. This man could say nothing in his own defense, and Satan could accuse him of everything in the book. And yet, in the end, this man looked to Jesus, and suddenly there were no more accusations, no more condemnation, just paradise and eternity with God. What a defeat of Satan's strategy! A life-long criminal, home free! The blood of Jesus neutralizes all Satan's work and all his accusations. Every time another person looks to Jesus on the cross and finds that a lifetime of sin is cancelled, the accuser from hell must howl with frustration.

And heaven rejoices. According to the Bible, a loud voice from heaven shouts: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:10-11). The blood of Jesus shed on the cross—that's what takes away our guilt and defends us against Satan the accuser.

### **The Killer Disarmed**

Let's look at a fourth blow the devil suffered at Calvary: Jesus disarmed Satan the killer. Satan is like a terrorist, holding us hostage to our fear of death. Death is his most fearsome weapon. But at the cross Jesus disarmed the killer. Jesus entered into death "so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery to their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The disarming of death became evident the moment Jesus died. “The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life” (Matthew 27:52). Poor Satan! One moment he was holding death as the ultimate weapon, and the next moment Jesus had disarmed him. Graves were popping open! And now, every time a person dies in Christ, he or she wakes up not in Satan’s clutches but in glory, with a splendid resurrection body guaranteed. Satan can’t intimidate us through persecution or fear of death any more. We can live our lives in the certainty that neither demons nor death nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39).

### **The Mocker Disgraced**

Still another aspect of Jesus’ victory over Satan is that Jesus disgraced Satan the mocker. Satan’s original sin is pride, but at the cross Jesus made the proud prince of this world look utterly ridiculous. The Bible says, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

Satan always mocks a “goody-goody.” He makes evil seem so daring and exciting. But Jesus turned the tables, and Satan was the one who ended up being disgraced. At first almost everyone was mocking Jesus as he hung on the cross. But then what happened? After Jesus died, a sense of shame descended on the people when they began to realize what they had done. “When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away” (Luke 23:48). Right there, in Satan’s proudest moment, his servants were filled with shame and disgrace.

That was just a glimpse of the shame Satan was enduring in the spiritual realm. The devil had given it his best shot and failed. Jesus disregarded the tempter, he dis-

proved the liar, he defended against the accuser, he disarmed the killer, and in the process he disgraced the proud mocker.

### **The Tyrant Dethroned**

A final blow Jesus inflicted on Satan at the cross was that Jesus dethroned Satan the tyrant. Satan’s power is broken. Now his defeat is sure. The war isn’t quite over, but the decisive battle has been won. Satan’s power is crumbling. The Bible shows that when Jesus died, Satan’s victims were liberated one after another. The thief on the cross beside Jesus went from sin to paradise. The mockers went away ashamed of themselves. The officer who supervised the execution suddenly exclaimed, “Surely, this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). Then two rich politicians who were interested in Jesus but afraid to identify with him—Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea—refused to hold back any longer. As they saw Jesus’ body hanging there, they stepped forward to be counted among Jesus’ friends, and they placed Jesus’ body in a tomb. They decided they would rather die with Jesus than live with Satan’s way of operating. And what happened out in the cemetery? Graves were popping open!

From there it only got worse for Satan. A few days later, Jesus rose from the dead. He ascended to the throne of heaven and poured out his Holy Spirit on his followers. He sent them out to tell others of his victory, “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). The news has kept spreading ever since. The devil is defeated. Satan can’t win.

But, you might wonder, if that’s true, why are there still so many troubles and horrors in the world, such as those I mentioned earlier? It sure seems the devil is alive and well. But the Bible explains: Satan “is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (Revelation

12:12). He's doomed, so he's doing all the damage he can in the time he has left.

Satan is still powerful and dangerous, but he *is* defeated. He's living on borrowed time. There's no way he can survive what Christ did to him at the cross. Satan is already restricted in what he can do, and in the end, God will cast him into the lake of fire.

In the meantime, don't let Satan bluff you. He's not winning. He's already lost. He's not the greatest power in the universe. Jesus is. Maybe you've been in the grip of occult or voodoo or demonic powers, but those powers can't hold you when you look to Christ and his cross. Maybe you're in the grip of habits that seem unbreakable, but don't despair. Jesus has broken Satan's power, and he can set you free. Maybe you think the outlook for the world is hopeless, but think again. Trust Jesus. He has already won the victory by his death and resurrection.

## *Chapter Seven*

### **Seduced by The World**

*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? (James 4:4)*

Once upon a time, a young king made a disturbing discovery. He found a newborn baby girl lying out in a field. She was a mess: naked, covered with bloody slime, her birth cord still dangling. Nobody had bothered to clean her up or put any clothing on her. Apparently she had been abandoned the moment she was born. Nobody wanted her. She had been left to die.

The king's heart ached with pity for the little one. He decided to give that filthy, helpless infant a chance to live. He picked her up in his arms, wiped her clean, wrapped her in his royal robe, and carried her to one of his estates. There, he placed her in the care of trusted friends and told them to give her an excellent upbringing and provide a superb education.

Years later, the king visited that estate and noticed that the baby he had rescued years earlier had become a lovely young woman. The king fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. She agreed, and they had a grand wedding. The king cherished his queen and lavished his riches on her. He gave her sweet perfumes, gorgeous dresses, costly jewelry, and a splendid crown. The queen became famous worldwide for her beauty. It seemed like a fairytale marriage.

But the fairy tale went bad. The queen became proud of her beauty, fine clothes, and jewelry. She got tired of her husband. She decided she could make money and enjoy herself more if she used her glamour to become a prostitute. She began selling her body to any stranger who was willing to pay, and she spent the money on wild parties. She didn't want the babies who had been born to her and the king, so she had them killed. After awhile, her beauty faded. Nobody would pay for her body anymore. So the queen started paying others to act out filthy fantasies with her.

How was the king supposed to react to all this? He had shown his wife great kindness and given her many gifts, but she had decided to seek satisfaction elsewhere. In the end, the king called her before his throne and roared,

“You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband! Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors.

“Therefore, you prostitute, because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because you gave them your children's blood, therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see your nakedness. I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger. Then I will hand you over to your lovers. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare. They will bring a mob against you,

who will stone you and hack you to pieces with swords.

“Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done.”

### God's Unfaithful Bride

That's not how a fairy tale is supposed to unfold, is it? But this is not a fairy tale. It's a story God himself tells in the Bible, in Ezekiel 16. Why would the Lord tell such a disturbing, disgusting story? God told this story to show what it's like when we forget his kindness, misuse his gifts, love other things more than we love him, and enjoy worldly pursuits rather than finding our supreme enjoyment in the Lord himself.

Originally, God spoke these words to his Old Testament people of Israel. Israel had once been a newborn nation, filthy, helpless, about to die in Egyptian slavery, with no one to help—but the Lord had loved her with tender pity and saved her from Egypt. As Israel grew and matured, she became a rich, impressive nation. The Lord loved her with the fierce passion of a husband for his wife, and he heaped blessings on her. What wondrous love! But Israel forsook her heavenly husband, went after worldly pursuits, and committed spiritual adultery by worshiping man-made idols instead of God. What hideous betrayal! God said that if Israel found other gods more attractive and wanted to give herself to the false gods of other nations, she could have them. God would hand Israel over to the cruelty of those nations and the ugliness and emptiness of their religions. Israel was invaded and carried off into exile.

Sad to say, history sometimes repeats itself. In the Old Testament, God spoke of Israel as his bride, and in the New Testament, the Lord speaks of the church as Christ's

bride. But how has Christ's bride been behaving? Many of us are church members and call ourselves Christians, but how faithful have we been to our heavenly husband? All too often, our conduct has been as rotten and offensive as a cherished wife who becomes a prostitute. The Lord has gone out of his way to rescue us from ruin, he's given us all sorts of good things, but many of us have responded, not by loving him, but by becoming proud of ourselves, misusing his gifts, and seeking satisfaction in anything but God.

When we don't find our happiness and satisfaction in the Lord, we look for happiness elsewhere. Some worship sex and money, and if a baby is conceived and hampers sexual freedom or interferes with plans to make money, abortion is used to kill the baby God created. God's story about a wife-become-prostitute, who kills babies as part of her lifestyle, is right on target. In ancient Israel people were killing babies as human sacrifices to idols of sex and success, and today many people—including some who consider themselves Christians—still kill babies as part of a lifestyle where sex and success matter more than the Lord.

### **Spiritual Adultery**

Baby-killing is often a bloody side effect of spiritual adultery, but that doesn't mean everybody who never aborted a baby or killed another person has not committed spiritual adultery. A spiritual adulterer is anyone who isn't satisfied with God and falls into the embrace of the world. A spiritual adulterer is anyone who enjoys the world's ways more than God's ways.

A spiritual adulterer would rather listen to ungodly music than sing God's praise. A spiritual adulterer would rather watch a show filled with filthy language, violence, and nudity than be entranced by the beauty of God's holiness. A spiritual adulterer would rather end an evening smirking

with late-night comedians than studying Scripture. A spiritual adulterer would rather dress in showy, expensive clothing or in skimpy, seductive fashion than dress modestly as God commands. A spiritual adulterer would rather divorce a dull spouse than keep marriage promises as the Bible commands. A spiritual adulterer would rather spend hours playing golf than praying to God. A spiritual adulterer would rather spend Sunday shopping than worshipping. A spiritual adulterer would rather show off a fine house or a fancy car than boast of God's riches in Jesus Christ. A spiritual adulterer would rather play the lottery or casino than be satisfied with God's care and the fruit of hard work. A spiritual adulterer would rather sue somebody for millions than patiently endure being wronged for Christ's sake. A spiritual adulterer would rather invest more and more in stocks and bonds than invest in spreading the gospel or helping the needy. A spiritual adulterer cares more about a healthy economy than holy morality.

Spiritual adulterers would rather fit in and be approved by the world than please God. Spiritual adulterers find their greatest pleasure in the world's entertainment, the world's success, and the world's enjoyments. They live by the world's standards. The underlying reason is that their love and desire is focused on the world rather than on God.

To all such people, the Bible says in James 4:4, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Those are strong words. God doesn't just mildly suggest that worldliness might be a bit of a weakness in the way you relate to God. He says worldliness makes you an adulterer and a prostitute! The Lord doesn't say that if you're worldly, you don't love God quite as much as you should; he says you *hate* God and are his enemy. Getting cozy with the world is a fatal friendship. It's fatal to the way you relate to God, and it's fatal for your eternal soul.

The Lord tells worldly people what he told ancient Israel: “You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband! You prostitute! You have enraged me, and I will surely bring down on your head what you have done.” If you think this sounds exaggerated, keep in mind that these are the words of God himself—and God always means what he says.

So if you’re not sure what it means to be worldly or why friendship with the world is fatal, you need to find out. You need your worldliness replaced with godliness, with a longing to know Jesus, to enjoy his riches and his love, and to love him with your whole being.

### **Undivided Loyalty**

There is nothing greater than to know Christ in his death and resurrection and to live in his love forever—and there is nothing worse than to despise God’s love and seek satisfaction in the world apart from God. Over and over throughout the Bible, God uses various pictures to make this point.

One picture is of working for a boss. “No servant can serve two masters,” says Jesus. “Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Luke 16:13). You can’t work for two competing companies and two rival bosses at the same time. You can be loyal to only one. If you work for this world, you don’t work for God. In fact, you hate God.

Another way the Bible pictures this is in terms of citizenship. You can’t be a loyal citizen of two different nations that are at war with each other. If you’re a loyal citizen of one, you are an enemy of the other. People whose mind is on earthly things are enemies of the cross of Christ, says the apostle Paul. Their god is their appetite, and their destiny is destruction. “But,” says Paul to follow-

ers of Christ, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:18-20).

Still another biblical picture is one we looked at earlier: marriage. You can’t have a healthy marriage with your spouse and at the same time be involved in adultery and prostitution with others. In the Bible God shows himself as a tender helper and loving husband with whom we could be forever happy. He also says that loving the world instead of him is spiritual adultery and prostitution. This is one of the most powerful pictures for seeing the wonder of God’s love and the horror of worldliness. “You *adulterous* people,” exclaims the apostle James, “don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?”

This helps us to understand what God means when he says, “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). The fact that God is jealous doesn’t mean he’s petty; it means he’s possessive, as any good husband is possessive. If a husband learns his wife is having an affair and smiles and says he doesn’t mind, does that mean he’s an excellent, loving husband? No, it means he doesn’t care about her or their relationship. A truly loving husband is jealous: he refuses to share his wife with others. So too, God’s love is jealous and possessive. He doesn’t want us to give our hearts to anyone but him. He won’t put up with spiritual adultery and prostitution. God requires undivided loyalty.

### **Adulterous Prayers**

Sometimes, though, we think we can have it both ways. We want everything the world around us wants, but at the same time we want to maintain some sort of relationship with God. Even if we don’t really love God or enjoy him, we figure we may need him in order to get some of the things we want. We don’t really like listening or talking with God, but we pray anyway, in the hope that he’ll give us more of the worldly things we love.



What are your prayers like? Is prayer a time first of all to enjoy the company of your Father in heaven and seek the things he wants? Or do you go to God mostly when you want something and need God's help to get it? In that case, don't be shocked if your prayers aren't answered. "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Right after saying this, James goes on to say, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?"

Of all forms of worldliness, perhaps the most disgusting to God is worldliness in prayer. What could be worse than going to God and asking him to give us the worldly things we love more than him? It's like a wife going to her husband and asking him to arrange an extramarital affair for her to enjoy or like asking a spouse for money to go out and hire a prostitute. Spiritual adultery is bad enough without praying to God for the resources to embrace the world even more than we already do.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus taught us to pray that God's name be hallowed, that his kingdom come, that his will be done, that we live in the grace of forgiveness, that we not be led into temptation but delivered from evil. That is true prayer for someone who loves God and hates sin. As we pray for God to glorify himself and free us from sin, we may also pray for our daily bread, for enough to sustain us for another day of life. But that's a far cry from presenting God with a long wish list of worldly things we think we need to be happy, without ever seeking the glory of his name or the growth of his kingdom. It's a far cry from being so attached to this world that we pray eagerly to be spared from disease and death and find nothing attractive about leaving this world to be with Christ.

Worldliness can appear when we dress in worldly fashions or watch worldly entertainment or laugh at worldly jokes or pursue worldly wealth, but worldliness may be at

its worst when we're on our knees in what we think are our most pious moments. We may be talking to heaven, but our mind is on earthly things. We don't want to talk to God about anything but our health, our finances, our success, our relationships, the big game we want to win, the good job we want to get, or whatever else in this world seems more important for our happiness than God.

You may wonder, "What's wrong with praying for God's help with day to day concerns?" Nothing—if you find your supreme happiness in God and not in those things. Many of these things aren't bad in themselves. In fact, they may be good gifts from God. But they may never replace God in our affections.

### **Unspectacular Worldliness**

It's helpful to notice two different meanings of "the world" and two kinds of worldliness. Sometimes the Bible speaks of "the world" as a sinful system. "The world" in this sense—a group mindset of evil desires and peer pressure and rebellion against God—is something we must utterly reject and leave behind.

Sometimes, though, the Bible speaks of "the world" in a more positive way, as the earth God created and populated with living things and with people made in his image. In this sense, "the world" is something God made and upholds and loves, and it is something we should value and enjoy with thanks to God. It is a terrible blunder to take Bible verses about "the world" as a sinful system and misapply those verses to "the world" as physical creation. At times some religious people have wrongly regarded food or bodies or sex or science as evils to be frowned upon. But it is not sinful to savor a delicious meal or to delight in union with your spouse or to pursue scientific discoveries. These things are good gifts from God. However, even when we think of "the world" in this positive sense, we must beware of loving the created world more than the

Creator. Many created things aren't evil as such, but even when they're good, we can become attached to them in a way that is evil.

We need to beware of two different forms of worldliness. One kind of worldliness delights in things in this world that are by nature degrading and sinful: pornography, perversion, immodest clothing, devilish music, cruelty to competitors, violence, gambling, gossip, lying, drunkenness, and other worldly practices that are just plain sinful and wicked. Doing these things, or being entertained by such things in movies and magazines, tabloids and TV, is evil and offensive to God.

But there's another form of worldliness in which the problem isn't so much loving bad things instead of good, but loving good things instead of the best. To enjoy a lovely spouse, to work hard and earn a large income, to read a fine book or watch a thrilling drama, to be healthy and good looking—there's nothing wrong with such things in and of themselves. In fact, they are good gifts of God. But when we love created things more than the Creator, when we love the gifts more than the Giver, when we become proud of who we are and of what we have, without loving God or being thankful for his kindness, then our haughtiness and selfishness bring us into a worldliness that is just as deadly as more obvious, filthy forms of worldliness.

Don't forget God's story about the wife turned prostitute. A king rescues a helpless child, supplies her with everything to grow intelligent and beautiful, marries her, and gives her clothing, jewelry, and perfumes. What goes wrong? Is it simply that the woman in the story falls into gross adultery and prostitution and baby killing? No, that's where she eventually ends up, but the trouble begins when she trusts her beauty more than she trusts her husband (Ezekiel 16:15) and when she takes the good gifts he has given her and turns them into gods (Ezekiel 16:15-19). Her clothes, jewelry, perfume, and beauty aren't bad things.

But she forgets she owes them all to her husband, and she prizes them more than she values her husband. Only after that do her more blatant crimes occur. So too, when we love God's gifts more than we love him, we have already turned away and become his enemy, even before we fall into more obvious and outrageous sins.

In C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape (a senior demon) advises Wormwood (a junior tempter) that in trying to ruin a decent, religious person, it often works best not to start by aiming for extreme evils but instead simply to get the person attached to some respectable, good things and make those things the supreme desire of his heart rather than God. Focus his prayers on earthly desires. Make him proud. Make him think the world he sees around him is all that matters. Lead him into sins that seem small, not grand and gory crimes. Screwtape tells the junior demon,

Doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [God]. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

The devil wants us to walk a road without signposts, love a world without standards, and end up in a hell without hope. Along the way, Satan doesn't care what we love most—as long as it's not God. Anything in this world will do.

But even as Satan tries to lead us down the broad, smooth road with no signposts, God keeps putting up signs that point us to the narrow way of Christ. When we love anything in place of him, God's voice keeps warning us,

“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

Have you been committing spiritual adultery? Have you chosen a fatal friendship with the world that makes you God’s enemy? Now is the time to change. Ask Jesus’ forgiveness, trust his love, and love him as your supreme satisfaction.

### *Chapter Eight*

## **Upsetting the World**

*If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. (John 15:19)*

Demetrius had a problem. His business had been making big money for years, but now demand was dropping and sales were shrinking. The money was drying up.

Demetrius was the head of a company that made silver statues of a goddess called Artemis. Demetrius lived in the city of Ephesus, which had a temple for Artemis (also called Diana). Artemis was a goddess of sex and success. Her priestesses served as temple prostitutes, so if you were a man going to her temple, you could enjoy sexual encounters. When you left the temple, you could count on Artemis to give you a good sex life, a fertile family, a prosperous farm or business, and lots of fun. But you couldn’t be at the temple all the time, so how could you make sure that Artemis would be near to help you when you were elsewhere? It was easy, though a bit pricey. You could buy a miniature silver statue, your personal icon of Artemis. You could take this mobile goddess with you to any location you wanted. The silver statue would be your charm for sex, prosperity, and pleasure. Selling statues of Artemis seemed like a can’t-miss business, and for a long time, it was. Demetrius made big money as chairman of Artemis Incorporated, and so did many other people in related trades.

But then sales began to slump. The slump started when a stranger came to town. The stranger, named Paul, said that there was only one God and that this God had come to earth in the person of someone named Jesus. Those who believed Paul's message about Jesus stopped worshipping Artemis. They stayed away from temple prostitutes and no longer bought silver idols. That upset Demetrius. His income was going down, so he decided to take action. He held a meeting of his fellow idol makers. The meeting became a noisy protest and then a full-scale riot. The Bible tells what happened in chapter 19 of *The Acts of the Apostles*, written by a physician named Luke. I've taken Dr. Luke's account and put it into a style more like Dr. Seuss.

*With a moan and a groan  
and a scowl and a growl,  
Demetrius snarled,  
"Shall we throw in the towel?  
We can't seem to sell  
all these idols we've made.  
The people won't buy them.  
We're not getting paid."*

*"Our idols were selling  
for oodles of money,  
but now we can't sell them,  
and that isn't funny.  
Shall we throw in the towel?  
No! I say we shall not!"  
As he spoke, his friends'  
tempers began to grow hot.*

*Then on went Demetrius,  
madder than ever,  
"You know who's been wrecking  
our business endeavor?"*

*This fellow named Paul!"  
(All agreed with a nod.)  
"This fellow keeps saying  
there's only one God."*

*"He says Jesus Christ  
is the one all should trust.  
When folks believe that,  
they stop buying from us.  
It's time to do something.  
It can't hurt to try it.  
Let's praise our great goddess  
and start a great riot."*

*So that's what they did,  
and they did it quite well,  
those furious men  
with a goddess to sell.  
They were stomping and shouting  
and screaming so loud  
that soon they attracted  
an oversized crowd.*

*Then yelling in rage  
seemed the "in" thing to do.  
But why they were there,  
most of them hadn't a clue.  
Before long the whole town  
had become one huge mob.  
How to calm it back down?  
An impossible job!*

*For two hours they screamed,  
till they barely could croak.  
Then the clerk of the city  
stood up, and he spoke:*

*“What’s all the commotion?  
We’ve got a great idol.  
We give her devotion.  
We honor her title.”*

*“But why attack people  
who’ve done nothing wrong?  
Why stand around squawking  
so loud and so long?  
This hubbub could get  
our fine city in trouble.  
So shut your loud mouths,  
and go home on the double.”*

*When idol-makers blow their stack  
and try to start a fight,  
it means God’s people are on track;  
we’re doing something right.  
But when we worship money, sex,  
TVs and sports and song,  
Demetrius gets filthy rich;  
we’re doing something wrong.*

### **Starting An Uproar**

If you read the book of Acts, you find that wherever the early Christians brought the message of Jesus, the gospel changed some people’s lives in a big way and upset other people in a big way. The riot in Ephesus wasn’t the first or last time there was a commotion.

Earlier, in Philippi, Paul used Jesus’ authority to drive an evil spirit out of a slave girl. That angered the girl’s owners, because the evil spirit had been predicting the future, and the girl’s owners had made big money on fees for fortune telling.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul

and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace ... and said, “These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in the attack (Acts 16:20-22).

Did the apostles really push unlawful, anti-Roman behavior? No, although Paul and Silas were Jewish Christians, they were also Roman citizens and broke no Roman law. Their only “crime” was transforming a young girl’s life by the power of Jesus and hurting the cash flow of those who had been exploiting the girl.

Paul and Silas next went to the city of Thessalonica and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and Savior. Quite a few people were persuaded to become Christians, but others formed a mob and started a riot in the city.

They shouted, “These men who are turning the world upside down have now come here... They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil (Acts 17:5-8).

Were the apostles really defying Caesar and trying to bring down the government? No, but introducing people to Jesus as the ultimate ruler did revolutionize the way people lived. The apostles were turning the world rightside up, but to people standing on their heads, the gospel seemed upside down.

When Paul later traveled to Ephesus, the home city of Demetrius and the temple of Artemis, the pattern repeated itself: the gospel transformed some people and made others want to riot. For two years Paul stayed in Ephesus and had daily discussions about Jesus. Practically everybody in the region heard the word of the Lord. Along with the gospel teaching came healings, release from evil spirits, and other demonstrations of God’s power. Response was dramatic. People revered Jesus. They openly admitted wrong things

they had done. Some even decided to have a bonfire and burn their sorcery books. They had paid big money for scrolls teaching them the secrets of sorcery, but now that they belonged to Jesus, they wanted nothing to do with sorcery. Those new Christians burned their evil books, which had cost them a total of about 50,000 drachmas. A drachma was a day's wage, so that was an expensive bonfire—50,000 days' wages, about 150 years of total income, up in smoke.

It was about this time that Demetrius and his cronies noticed that their idol-selling business wasn't doing so well, and they blamed the recession on Paul. He was bad for business. Paul wasn't pushing a political agenda or organizing a consumer boycott. He didn't try to pass a law against the worship of Artemis. Still, when people got to know Jesus, they lost interest in Artemis. Paul didn't push for government censorship of bad books, but when people heard the divine truths of Scripture, they knew their sorcery books were good for nothing but a bonfire. Paul didn't push new legislation, but the Christian way of life shook cities and societies to their foundations.

### **Demetrius Prospers**

That brings up the question: Why were there so many riots against Christians in that society and so few in our society? Well, people like Demetrius don't riot if business is good. If society remains profitable for idolatry and immorality, if not many people are decisively different because of the gospel, if those who claim to follow Jesus keep buying from Demetrius, he won't get upset. In the book of Acts, the new Christians were very different from non-Christians around them, and Demetrius' income went down as a result. But in our society, many church people remain much like those without Christ, and they are as likely as anyone else to buy from Demetrius.

If Demetrius is a Hollywood producer, does he worry about losing money because of people who follow Jesus? Not likely. When Demetrius of Hollywood produces entertainment filled with sex, slaughter, and foul language, church people are almost as likely as unchurched people to buy his theatre tickets, rent his videos, and watch his TV shows. If Demetrius runs a music company that cranks out godless, immoral albums, he can count on church teenagers to buy his garbage. Why would a modern-day Demetrius get upset at people who claim to be Christians? They are some of his best customers!

If Demetrius runs a casino, does he find that the profits from gambling are going down? No, gambling is big business and continues to expand. Growth in gambling is not just due to formerly illegal gambling being legalized, and it's not just due to non-churched people gambling more. It's also due to many church people buying lottery tickets and crowding into casinos. They are so in love with luck, so discontented with what they have, so eager for easy money, so bored with everyday work and wise stewardship of money, that they gamble away money God has entrusted to them. If Demetrius runs a casino or lottery, why would he start a riot against church people? He's too busy raking in cash from them.

If Demetrius runs a brewery, is he losing money because so many devout followers of Jesus have limited their drinking or have given up alcohol entirely? No, liquor sellers make big money, not least from churchgoers. Despite the Bible's strong words against getting drunk, many young people from churchgoing families think that getting drunk is the essence of fun. Many of their parents can't relax and have a good time unless they have several drinks to loosen things up. Many church weddings are followed by receptions with open bars, and what begins as a sacred ceremony ends as a drunken bash. If Demetrius is in the liquor business, does he object to churchgoers? Of course

not. He's too busy counting the profits from their latest party.

If Demetrius runs a store that's open seven days a week, does he lose money on Sunday because so many Christians want to keep Sunday special for God and won't shop on that day? If Demetrius runs a professional sports franchise, does he have a problem because Christian players won't play on Sunday or because Christian fans stay away from the stadium on Sundays and leave their television off? No, Sunday is the number one day for pro sports, and now it's becoming a day for organized sports leagues at all levels down to youth and children. If a child has practice or a game on Sunday, and if it is scheduled at the same time as a church service—well, why not skip church? Why would Demetrius start a commotion against churchgoers when Sunday is a super moneymaker for him?

### **Demetrius Complains**

Here and there some Christians still upset a modern-day Demetrius. If Demetrius is in politics, he doesn't mind religion if it doesn't interfere with him, but he will cause a commotion if Christians influence public policy in any significant way. Lord Melbourne of Britain was upset at a movement led by evangelical Christians, and he thundered, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life." What made him so angry? Those evangelical Christians were striving to end the slave trade. Slave traders would need to find a new way to make money, and the economy wouldn't profit from so much free labor. It would have been far more convenient for every slave-trading Demetrius if those Christians hadn't turned the world upside down by valuing slaves as children of God.

When Demetrius runs an abortion clinic, he is maintaining a temple for people who worship sex and money and offer human sacrifices to their goddess. He has no

problem with church people who see his business as a basic right and pay him to kill their unborn babies. But he hates those who consider life sacred. Demetrius claims to be pro-choice, but he wants the choice to be death, not life. Demetrius the abortionist howls about the horror of mixing religion and politics.

If Demetrius belongs to a non-Christian religion or has no religion at all, he doesn't mind churchgoers who keep their faith to themselves. But if Christians call others to trust Jesus as Savior and Lord, and if growing numbers of people become Christians, watch out! Demetrius denounces mission-minded Christians as proselytizers and bigots, and he launches a campaign against them. Demetrius won't cause a commotion over a brand of Christianity that says almost nothing and changes almost nobody. But he'll attack Christians who live and speak in the power of Jesus and spread the Christian way to others. A dead, decaying brand of Christianity doesn't upset the world; it fits right in with the world's way of doing things. But a living, spreading faith in Jesus arouses opposition.

### **God-Pleaser, Not People-Pleaser**

One of the chief differences between a lively Christian and a deadbeat is that the lively Christian wants God's approval, while the deadbeat cares most about the world's opinion. The apostle Paul was a God-pleaser, not a people pleaser. Paul said, "We dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition... We are not trying to please men but God" (1 Thessalonians 2:2,4). "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

Some of us want to impress intellectuals. But Paul didn't fear the scorn of scholars. In Athens, the intellectual capital of the world, some philosophers disputed with Paul and asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" When Paul spoke about the resurrection of the dead, some of them

sneered at him (Acts 17). But Paul spoke the gospel clearly, despite the mockery of many intellectuals, and some became Christians as a result. Why be intimidated by what intellectuals say about you? The Bible says that intellectuals in Athens “spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21). Many in our universities do the same thing. They have lectures and debates without end, but they have no grasp of the basic truths that give life meaning and direction. If they have no convictions about the things that matter most, why be intimidated if they sneer at your beliefs?

Don’t fear the jeers of intellectuals, and don’t worry about public opinion. In the riot at Ephesus led by Demetrius, a huge mob gathered in the temple of Artemis and yelled at the top of their lungs for two hours. It may have looked like an impressive demonstration, and if such a commotion took place today, it would certainly be featured on the TV news. But the Bible says of these noisy, showy demonstrators, “Most of them did not even know why they were there” (Acts 19:32). They were upset because—well, just because everybody else was upset. Being upset was the thing to do. That’s how it is with public opinion and noisy crowds. A few cunning ringleaders (like Demetrius) have an agenda, but many others join the commotion without even knowing why they are there. So let’s not be too upset if we don’t fit into the mainstream of public opinion or if we feel outnumbered. God’s evaluation is what matters.

Paul couldn’t afford to take people’s opinions too seriously. Some people differed wildly from others, and even the same people could swing from one extreme to another in a short time. In one city, Lystra, Paul used the power of Christ to heal a man who had been crippled all his life because of a birth defect. When the man jumped up and began to walk, the crowd shouted, “The gods have come down to us in human form.” But a short time later, that

same crowd turned against Paul and pelted him with rocks in an effort to kill him (Acts 14:8-20). One minute Paul was a god, the next minute he wasn’t fit to live.

On another occasion, Paul was gathering wood for a fire when a poisonous snake bit him. A crowd of people nearby thought Paul must be a murderer and this was the divine death penalty for his crime. “But Paul shook the snake into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god” (Acts 28:5-6). A criminal one moment, a god the next—when people’s opinions swing between such extremes, it’s far better not to worry what they think of you. Just focus on God’s evaluation of you.

In one of the many riots that broke out in reaction to Paul’s ministry, an officer asked him, “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?” (Acts 21:38) The commander was surprised to learn that Paul spoke his language and was a fellow citizen who had nothing to do with foreign terrorists.

You never know what rumors might spread about you or what people might think of you, and that’s all the more reason to focus on what God thinks of you. The early Christians were rumored to be terrorists, rumored to be atheists, rumored to be arsonists who set Rome on fire, rumored to be cannibals, rumored to be all sorts of horrible things, but the rumors were false. They were simply followers of Jesus who upset the world by trusting Jesus, living for Jesus, and calling others to Jesus. Still today, if you are a Christian worth your salt, some people will despise and oppose you, but your goal is not to be a people pleaser but a God-pleaser. You have one commander, not many. His name is Jesus.



### **Badge of Honor**

If Christians are accused of stirring up trouble, it's not necessarily a disgrace. It may be a huge honor. Jesus says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18-20). Religion that suits the world is out of touch with Jesus. If it never provokes opposition, it won't provide salvation.

The only kind of Christianity worth joining is the kind that's worth opposing. If churches offer religion that is so weak or so worldly that idol worshipers don't feel any need to oppose it, then it's not worth joining by those who seek the living God. This doesn't mean Christians are eager to make enemies. It simply means that a faithful Christian life and witness will unavoidably upset the world. It will provoke hostility from those who prefer life without Christ and who, like Demetrius, feel they have too much to lose if Christianity spreads too much. A gospel that never turns anybody off will probably not turn anybody on to the reality of salvation in Jesus and the revolutionary new life that comes from his Holy Spirit and is taught in the Holy Bible.

There's one thing I don't want you to miss in all this: the huge joy and privilege of serving Jesus. Why do you think Paul was willing to face so much misunderstanding? Why didn't he just stay home and keep quiet and not stir things up? Why do you think he kept telling people about Jesus, despite rumors, riots, beatings, and attempts to kill him? Because none of these problems mattered compared to knowing Jesus and having a relationship with him. Paul wanted to follow Jesus and stay close to him, no matter what the cost, because he had tasted the Lord's goodness. He knew that the benefit was so huge it would always out-

weigh the cost. Paul wanted to bring others to Jesus so that they too could enjoy what he already enjoyed: a transformed life now and eternal life with Christ in the future.

Many people outside the church have never tasted the joy of Jesus, and even many in the church have a wimpy, worthless religion. They don't upset the world; they are just like the world. They have none of the thrilling, life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. The church needs a revival of power and a renewal of holiness so that the impact of Christ will be impossible to ignore.

When that happens, Demetrius and his pals may be eager to start a riot, but many others will leave behind the emptiness of the sinful world for fullness in Christ. They will turn away from the goddess of sex and success. They will stop buying into lies. They will believe the truth and receive the free gift of eternal life in Jesus. Many people inside the church may discover for the first time the Lord they have always claimed to believe in, and many outside the church will get to know Jesus and become part of his living church. The world will be upset, but God's people will be uplifted.

## Chapter Nine

### Fighting the Flesh

*I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Romans 7:19)*

*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. (Galatians 5:17)*

Phil sits in front of his computer. His hand hovers over the mouse, hesitating. Then he clicks it. Soon the screen is showing him one dirty picture after another. Phil feels ashamed about looking at pornography, and he tells himself he should shut the computer off. But even as he tells himself this, he clicks the mouse and looks at some more dirty pictures. Something in him doesn't want to do it, but something else in him does it anyway.

Jennifer is a teenager. At breakfast her dad asks, "Where'd you go last night, Jen?" Jennifer hates lying, but how can she tell the truth? Last night she was out smoking pot with some of her friends. So for the umpteenth time Jennifer makes up a story and lies about where she was. Her dad's eyes narrow a bit, wondering, but he doesn't push the matter. Something in Jennifer doesn't really want to smoke pot with her friends or lie to her dad, but something else in her does it anyway.

George just got home from work. It's been a tough day. He asks his wife, "What's for dinner?" She says they'll be having leftovers. "Leftovers!" George shouts. "I work like

a dog all day, and the only thing I get is leftovers from that lousy meal we had last night? Why can't you give me some decent food?" George snarls a few swear words and then notices his wife's lip quivering and a tear trickling down her cheek. George shuts his mouth and sits down. He really does care about his wife, but this isn't the first time he's lost his temper and yelled at her. Something in George doesn't want to blow up, but something else in him does it anyway.

Amy has been on the phone for quite awhile. She has been drinking in all the latest gossip from her friend, and she adds several gallons of her own juicy gossip to the grapevine. After she hangs up the phone, she hangs her head. Some of what she said was unkind. Although some of it was true, she didn't have to repeat it. Amy knows that she gossips too much, and she knows it would be better not to spread hurtful talk. Something in her doesn't want to do it, but something else in her does it anyway.

Maybe you have your own habit or pattern of behavior that's bad for you or just plain wrong. Something in you wants to be different, but something else makes you keep doing the same old thing, and you wonder, "What's wrong with me? I know what's good, and yet I keep doing what's bad. Why do I have this war going on inside me, and why does the bad side seem to keep winning?"

The Bible describes this predicament in Romans 7. When we hear God's law in Scripture or sense God's will in our own conscience, we might see that God's way is best. But even if we agree with God's law, we often do the opposite. In Romans 7:14-20 the apostle Paul says,

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

What a tangle! When I'm caught between God's will and my own sinful tendencies, I don't understand what I do, and I don't understand who I am. I do bad things—but is it really I, or is it an alien power of sin living in me? Nothing good lives in me—in my sinful nature, that is—and yet something in me affirms and even likes what is truly spiritual and good. Who am I anyway? Is my real self the one that agrees with God's law, or is my real self the one that keeps breaking God's law? Am I two different persons? Do I have a split personality? Why can't I control my conduct or figure out who I really am? What's this war within?

Those are questions you may find yourself asking when you keep doing things you'd rather not do. Whether it's pornography or a drinking problem or drug use or lying or a hot temper or homosexual activity or gossip or whatever, when you're driven to do things your conscience condemns, you ask yourself, "What makes me go against my own better judgment? Am I to blame? Can I be forgiven? Can I ever be different? Is there any way out?"

Paul ends Romans 7 by talking about this war within and telling the only way to win it. He says,

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this

body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

No matter how wretched we are, no matter what's wrong with us, the Lord can forgive, rescue, and change us.

### **The Sinful Nature**

We desperately need God to forgive us and change us. Before we explore how that happens, let's probe a bit further into our core problem. We have a fallen self that is against God, is allergic to God, and reacts against his holy law. The Bible calls this "the flesh" or "the sinful nature."

Bible-believing Christians speak of three threats to a person's spiritual and eternal wellbeing: the devil, the world, and the flesh. That's a deadly trio. The devil, Satan, is strong and sneaky. The world can corrupt us and seduce us away from God. But the devil and the world aren't our only enemies. There's also the flesh, our own sinful nature. When we do something wrong, we can't just say, "The devil made me do it!" or blame it on the world around us. We have to admit that right inside us is a sinful nature that is all too quick to follow the devil, fall in love with the world, and war against what we know to be right.

This sinful nature is called "the flesh" in many Bible translations and other Christian writings. Don't be confused by this term. Don't think that "the flesh" refers only to sins of the body, like sexual sin or gluttony. "The flesh" means the entire self—body, soul, mind, and emotions—in the grip of sin. "The flesh" is the whole tangle of ungodly cravings and thoughts and habits of our entire fallen self.

Whether we call it "the flesh" or "the sinful nature," we have to face the reality of it. When we find ourselves doing things we know are wrong, we might want to say, "Oh, I just made a mistake," or "I could change that any time I want" or "I'm basically a good person; I just happen to slip once in awhile." But if we're realistic, we have to say with the biblical writer, "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.”

When the flesh, the sinful nature, is confronted by God’s law, the result isn’t pleasant. The law tells us what we should be doing and condemns us when we don’t do it, but God’s law doesn’t change our sinful nature. In fact, sometimes being told what’s right just stirs up more of what’s wrong inside us. The more we’re told not to do something, the more our sinful nature reacts by doing the opposite. And if we feel guilty about it, our guilt feelings may actually drive us to do it even more. Strange as it sounds, it’s true. The more we know God’s law and sense that it’s right, the more wretched we become.

### **Surrender to Sin**

The war within is so hard, so painful, that we want it to end. One tempting way of ending the struggle is to surrender to sin. This can seem appealing, especially if you’ve been fighting hard with little sign of progress. A young man had homosexual cravings that wouldn’t go away. He fought these feelings, and for a while he believed that God was against homosexual acts. But when he couldn’t change his desires, eventually he concluded it was okay to have a gay partner. He also convinced his parents of this, even though they had formerly thought homosexual behavior was wrong. If their son couldn’t change, God must not want him to change. His mother said, “God created my son gay for a reason, and he’s not out of his will.”

Such thinking is common among people from a religious background who are involved in homosexual activity. Regarding their same-sex tendency, they say, “I didn’t choose it, and I can’t change it, so that means I was born with it. If I was born with it, then God made me this way. And if God made me this way, then my homosexual craving is a beautiful thing to express and enjoy, not a sin to regret and repent of and struggle against.”

Sounds pretty convincing, doesn’t it? But the reason it sounds convincing is that so few of us think in terms of the biblical understanding of sin. When I mention the biblical understanding of sin, I’m not just talking about biblical commands against homosexual behavior. The deeper problem is the underlying assumption that any strong tendency ingrained in my nature, anything I’m born with, must be created by God and, therefore, good. That’s totally at odds with the biblical teaching about our sinful nature. It’s true that God created humanity good, but Adam and Eve fell into sin, and now every new member of the human race is born with a sinful nature. When God showed biblical writers the truth about themselves, what did they say? “Surely I was sinful at birth” (Psalm 51:5). “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature... What a wretched man I am” (Romans 7:18).

Arguing “I was born that way” to show something is okay would not convince anyone who knows the Bible and knows we’re all born with a sinful nature. But if we assume we’re born good, then whatever seems to come naturally can’t be wrong. Instead of crying, “What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me?” we announce, “This is the way I am, and I’m proud of it! Don’t anyone try to change me.”

If we experience a war within where our sinful nature fights against God’s will, we might try to convince ourselves that the Bible is wrong, or that God can’t possibly mean what he seems to be saying, or that it simply doesn’t apply to our situation. We can’t bear to believe that anything deeply ingrained in us can be totally at odds with what is right and good. If we were born a certain way, or if we have a cluster of feelings and a pattern of behavior that we’ve tried to change without success, it’s a relief to surrender, to tell ourselves we’re fine the way we are and we really shouldn’t want to change, after all. But if we take that approach, we’re lying to ourselves.

### Surrender to Christ

If we are realistic, we will see the truth and goodness of God's law, and at the same time we will see that our behavior is wrong and rises out of a sinful nature that all our efforts can't change. This is painful to accept, and it's even worse because we can't fix the problem ourselves. All we can do is give up and wonder in desperation if someone else might be able to help us.

If you have a bad temper and can't change, don't pretend it's not so bad to be a hothead. If you keep looking at dirty pictures and videos, don't pretend it's okay to see other humans as objects of your lust. If you misuse alcohol, stop telling yourself you can handle your liquor. If you're in the habit of lying whenever it seems convenient, don't pretend it's no big deal. If you gossip rather than building others up, don't pretend it's harmless. Let the sad truth sink in: God's law is spiritual, but you are unspiritual. Nothing good lives in you, that is, in your sinful nature.

I know it's no fun to hear this. I was once asked to speak at a convention of young adults. The people who invited me wanted me to speak about the holiness of God. "But," they said, "do it in a way that won't make people feel guilty." How was I supposed to do that? How can people sense the holiness of God without feeling guilty? When Isaiah saw God's holiness, he cried, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" When Paul considered God's holy law, he groaned, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?"

Let's not be so eager to avoid feeling bad. You're far closer to God's kingdom if you're miserable and frustrated in your struggle with sin than if you've surrendered to sin and think there's nothing wrong with you. If you have a drinking problem but think you don't have a problem, you won't feel as miserable as the person who admits he's an alcoholic but hasn't yet found a way to stop drinking. But the miserable person is closer to reality and more likely to

seek help outside himself. Before you can be free from what's wrong with you, you first have to admit that something *is* wrong and that you're powerless to change it.

One of the great purposes of God's law is to bring us to that point. The law can't forgive us or transform us, but God's law can show us our predicament and make us give up on ourselves and prepare us to depend entirely on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Watchman Nee, a Chinese Christian leader from an earlier generation, told of a man in deep water who wasn't able to swim. However, there was an expert swimmer nearby. As Nee watched, he expected this man to rescue the other one immediately. But he did nothing. "Don't you see he's drowning?" shouted Nee. But still the good swimmer did nothing. Meanwhile, the drowning man grew weaker and fainter. Nee thought to himself, "How awful that this great swimmer won't rescue a drowning brother." But just as the drowning man ran out of energy and stopped thrashing around, the swimmer sped to him in a few swift strokes, took hold of him, and brought him safely to shore. Nee scolded the swimmer for waiting so long, but the man replied, "Any earlier, and he would have pulled me under with him. A drowning man cannot be rescued until he is utterly exhausted and stops trying to save himself."

So too, when you and I are drowning in sin, the Lord may let us thrash around for awhile, trying desperately to save ourselves and change our ways. Of course God is not worried that we could pull him under, but he knows that before we are rescued, we must first give up any hope of earning the right to heaven or making ourselves holy on our own. God's holy law leaves us exhausted and helpless before the face of God. If our only hope of holiness and heaven were our ability to do the good things commanded in God's law, we would be ruined.

But just when we give up and cry, “Who will deliver me?” we may find ourselves saying, “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:1-2).

Jesus’ death pays for all the times we’ve broken God’s law despite knowing better, so we don’t have to be weighed down by guilt. Jesus died for us—and we also die with him. Our sinful nature is crucified with Christ, and God raises up a new nature within us that is alive with the life of the risen Christ. Jesus’ life-giving Holy Spirit transforms us and makes us truly ourselves for the first time. The Holy Spirit has power far greater than the sinful flesh within us, far greater than the power of Satan and the world around us. The Holy Spirit’s power transforms us in a way that our own efforts never could. Fighting the flesh by his power, we can win the war within.

Without the Holy Spirit, you can’t win the war within. If you’re caught in a war between your conscience and your sinful nature, the sinful nature will win the war. Conscience may say that God’s law is right and that sin is wrong, but conscience does not empower us to do right. The longer the war goes on, the less conscience fights. The more we sin, the more confused our conscience becomes, and the less it tries to be heard.

The Holy Spirit does what conscience cannot do. The Holy Spirit doesn’t just tell us that God’s law is right; the Holy Spirit encourages and empowers us to do right. The Holy Spirit is stronger than the sinful nature. The Spirit and the sinful nature fight against one another, but the Spirit is stronger. The Bible tells Spirit-filled believers, “You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you” (Romans 8:9).

### **The True You**

Does this mean that you become instantly perfect and free from sin the moment the Spirit of God moves in? No, as long as we’re in this life, there will still be times even for born again Christians when the sinful nature acts up—like a body that’s dead but still twitching. Whenever the sinful nature does that, it must be nailed back down to the cross. When you’re in Christ, your old sinful nature is killed, and it must stay dead. Crucifying the old nature isn’t a matter of hating yourself. It’s a matter of hating a sinful nature which is not the true self God designed you to be. When you sin, don’t say, “That’s just who I am.” Say instead, “That’s not the real me; it’s sin dwelling in me—and by God’s grace, sin is not going to have the upper hand.” Count on Christ to forgive your failure, and nail that sinful nature to his cross more firmly than ever. Then depend on the Holy Spirit to keep changing you, until one day you’re holy like Christ himself and at home with him in heaven.

To win the war within, you must depend on the Holy Spirit, not on your own will power. It’s like flying. If you want to fly, what should you do? Well, you can tape some feathers to your arms and legs and flap them as hard as you can, but you’ll never get off the ground that way. All your feathers and flapping can’t overcome the law of gravity. But if you get into an airplane, the law of aerodynamics will overcome the law of gravity for you. You can’t fly on your own, but if you’re in the airplane, you fly as the plane flies.

So too, if you want to soar higher morally and spiritually, you can try as hard as you want, but none of your efforts can overcome the weight of your fallen flesh, your sinful nature. But if you are in Christ by faith, the power of the Spirit of Christ overcomes the weight of sin and lifts you to a higher level in Christ. The Bible says, “What the law was powerless to do ... God did!” (Romans 8:3).

If you've been trying to do good but have kept doing bad instead, if you believe God's law is holy but haven't been able to keep it, then give up on yourself, and go to Christ. He will not condemn you. He will forgive and welcome you. Accept his forgiveness, and then trust him to help you to make the changes you cannot make on your own. Depend on his Holy Spirit for the power to fight the flesh. Get together with a group of other Christ-believing, Spirit-empowered people who have been through the same struggle you've been through, who know the addictive, enslaving power of the sinful nature but also know the joyous liberating power of God. When you live in the forgiveness of Christ, in the power of his Spirit, and in the encouragement and accountability of God's people, your sinful nature will give way to the new, true you. Pray each day for fresh strength from the Holy Spirit. A centuries-old prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism provides guidance for praying against evil:

Father in heaven, deliver us from evil. By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment. And our sworn enemies—the devil, the world, and our own flesh—never stop attacking us. And so, Lord, uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy Spirit, so that we may not go down in defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally win the complete victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Part Three

### Combat Equipment: The Armor of God

*Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.*

*(Ephesians 6:13)*

*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.*

*(2 Corinthians 10:4)*

*We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

*(Romans 8:37)*

*The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne.*

*(Revelation 3:21)*