

THE CONFLICT OF FLESH AND SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION.

Something takes place supernaturally when a man or a woman receives salvation. When they are born again a fantastic transaction takes place in the spiritual realm as they are transferred out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. There's huge rejoicing in heaven at that moment. But...they soon become aware of two things, which complement each other – 1) they haven't totally left the old behind, and 2) they often find themselves confronted with situations that are beyond their ability to understand, leave alone control.

In the first case the problem is something that may be called 'The Adamic Nature,' or alternatively 'The Old Man.' What these titles are referring to is the fact that, prior to salvation, we were slaves to Satan. We have all been born according to the flesh – descendants of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. **They** had long ago decided to discard **life** in favour of **knowledge** – a common failing, even today – and so came under the authority of Satan. In other words they became slaves. Now, Satan is not a particularly pleasant slave owner. He makes a point of being exceedingly disagreeable, and making life uncomfortable for his people and, above all, he hates it when one of his minions gets saved. Having started our lives, then, as children of Adam we are, of necessity, slaves, and we bear the marks of that slavery, something a bit like the tattooed numbers on the arms of the Holocaust survivors.

These marks actually reveal themselves in the way we react to certain situations; in the way we find it so easy to slip back into the old ways that we thought we had left behind, including into sin. Those old ways, whatever they may have been – whether wicked, or not so wicked – are what we may euphemistically call 'The Old Man,' or any one of its other derivatives. That's one problem.

The second problem has to do with something Paul spoke of, in Ephesians 6:12. We see from this, then, that the issue now is not so much to do with 'The Old Man', but more to do with a battle that takes place in the spiritual realm. And because it's spiritual, and it's a battle, we are quite justified in calling it 'Spiritual Warfare.' Even if you have attended the

leading theological college in the land, maybe indeed be the principal of it, you are probably not fully equipped for the battles that will take place for your soul.

But why should I speak of battles? Surely all our problems disappear when we are submitted to the Lordship of Jesus? At least that's what a popular chorus says and, in any case, it's the view promoted in some segments of the Church. Yet there is a flaw in our belief systems, if not in our theology, if we accept that, for the truth is they do not. If anything, our problems are intensified, and to believe otherwise renders us vulnerable and defenceless.

Why should this be? Aren't we in the kingdom now, surely God will protect us! Absolutely! Unless the problem lies with us – and it invariably does. You see, Satan hates losing – it drives him nuts. He hates it when his methods are exposed and he uses all sorts of tricks and stratagems to retaliate. One of his most successful techniques is to convince folk that he doesn't exist – that hell, demons and evil spirits are a myth perpetuated from the dark ages. And even if they do exist they certainly have no effect on the true believer. For these reasons he is well named Deceiver. And it is in the area of deception that he is most often successful. So many cults, sects and false religions – including areas of the Church – have fallen prey to his subtle and seductive challenges.

So how can we be prepared for the endless conflicts that lie ahead for each one of us – the final episode of which comes only with the return of the Messiah – or death, if it intervenes first? Well, the first thing is to admit that we are in a battle, and also to accept that we aren't always as successful in it as we might wish to be.

In any warfare situation a military commander needs to build up an intelligence network. He needs information on the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, his location and likely areas of attack. He also needs to put in place secure defences to handle any enemy offensives, and to ensure adequate resources to be able to mount a counter attack. So does the believer. Analysis will soon show him that his enemy has established three fronts, and that attacks may be expected from any, or all, at any time, all of which must be fought differently, using different tactics. Paul states the facts very clearly, in Ephesians 2:1-3.

In these three verses we see Paul clearly highlights these three aspects of our warfare, the three forces of evil that are loose in the world. The first is in verse 2 and is described as **The World**. In this context the term has neither geographical nor geological significance, but simply refers to a system or programme. It's the social environment in which we live, the culture that surrounds us, the pressures of the media, advertisers, politicians, etc., seeking to cause us to conform to the world's standards.

The second aspect Paul reveals, also in verse 2, is personalised as **the prince of the power of the air**. Here we have the identification of the demonic powers that are ranged against us; Satan, and his demons. As with 'the world' the attack comes from outside of ourselves, and usually manifests itself in rebellion and disobedience against God.

Then, in verse 3, Paul identifies the third aspect, which he calls **The Flesh**. This is perhaps a slightly misleading term for we are not speaking of actual flesh but of that which is hidden deep within each one of us, our inward nature or, as in the definition used before, our 'Old Man', our Adamic Nature.

Our emphasis in this article is on the third of these fronts, **The Flesh**, and the inevitable conflict that will take place in the spirit.

THE OLD LIFE – NATURAL MAN.

Lets take a look at our 'old life.' All these terms, The Flesh, the Old Man, the Old Life, the Adamic Nature, and so on, all mean the same thing and are referring to what can best be described as 'our sin nature.' By that I mean that there is within each one of us a propensity to sin. We don't want to, perhaps, but it just seems to happen. We all make our decisions to be good, to be faithful to God's command and then, suddenly, whoops! we've done it again. The reason is our 'sin nature,' and the best way I can think to describe it is that it is our ability to do that which pleases us, that gratifies our own desires – and leaves God out. It doesn't mean everything we do is bad, in fact we do both good and bad things in serving 'the Flesh,' it's just that our sin nature causes us to exclude God from our choices.

Our sin nature is there from our birth - it's not something we take on board as the result of something we've done – we're born with it, and it very soon finds expression. As I said

earlier it's roots are in the sin of our forebears, Adam and Eve, and we are the inheritors of all the consequences, (Romans 5:12). The ultimate consequence of that sin is death, but there are many other consequences that reveal themselves in our own sin, whatever that might be. We are therefore unable to please God because of that sin, and actually come under God's judgment of that sin. We discussed this aspect earlier.

David, in Psalm 14:2-3, and Paul, in Romans 3:23, tell us that none of us attain to God's standard of righteousness. Well, that may sound a bit depressing, and it would be if God hadn't provided a way out. And it all began with the Passover, many centuries ago, when He put into operation His plan for the redemption of the Hebrew people from Egypt. All that is contained within the Passover is a picture of a future reality. Just as the redemption of a nation was achieved through the death of a lamb, so the atonement for sin, the redemption of mankind from slavery to sin, became possible through the sacrifice of another lamb, the perfect Lamb of God. And that's the reality.

Although man, with his active sin nature cannot please God, however hard he tries with good intentions and good works, since all of us fall short of God's standards, notwithstanding, God made a way. In coming Himself, in the form of His Son, as the God/Man, he brought redemption, and opened the gates to righteousness through His own righteousness. Thus, when all who come to Him come in confession and repentance, the way is open to a new birth, we are born again, not of the flesh but of the spirit.

Jesus explains the need for this to Nicodemus in John 3. But because of our beginnings there still remains within us the Old Man, he's still there, he doesn't just disappear, but now there is a **New Man**. The New Man is of the spirit and the Old Man is of the flesh, and the battle is an on-going wrestling match between the two. Take the analogy of Ishmael and Isaac, the son of the flesh and the son of the promise. The outcome of the battle is determined by our choices – do we yield to the pressures of the Old Man, and thus sin, or do we follow the leading of the New Man, the re-born spirit? Paul has much to say about this in Romans 7.

In one sense it's much easier for the **un**-believers, because for them there is no spiritual battle going on, regardless of the type of people they are, because they only have the one nature. They are therefore able to do things both good and bad – but leave God out,

basically because God does not feature in their lives anywhere. It's unfortunate, but true, that this aspect can also apply to those whose lives may be thought of as 'religious.' Not just the false religions, but also within the Church for, however regular in attendance, however busy in Church activities, if they are not born again and spirit filled they have only one nature, the old one. That is all they have. It doesn't mean they are not good people, they're probably as caring in their attitudes as any believer, perhaps more so, but without the New Man they only have the Old Man.

They may have a great deal of knowledge about God, they may know the scriptures back to front, they may talk a lot about God – but if they are not born again they do not have a personal relationship with Him. It's impossible, and sadly they only have the Old Man. I'm not saying they are lost, that's not for me to say – I'm just saying that they are missing an essential ingredient. This is made clear by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:14.

For the believer, therefore, there must be a constant awareness of this conflict, that within each one of us there are two capacities, two natures, coexisting, and that the battle is an ongoing one, continuous and sometimes severe. Paul is very descriptive of this ongoing conflict, in Galatians 5:16-17. As an aside, the Greek and Hebrew words for spirit that in this passage are translated, in most Bibles, with a capital S should, more correctly be with a small s, indicating that Paul is speaking of the reborn human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. This should help us to see that the battle is not between the flesh and the Holy Spirit, but that it is between the two natures. The fruit of the two natures is graphically defined by Paul, in Galatians 5:19-23.

THE NEW LIFE – SPIRITUAL MAN.

There is one particular verse which sums up the responsibility of the believer, and it's found in Acts 26:18. We see from this that our part as God's co-workers is to speak out that which will open men's eyes so that they may be transferred out of darkness into light – something called conversion. Salvation is something else, because it goes beyond making a decision, for, as the verse says, it means receiving something from God. The predicament for many who are included among those who have only the 'old nature,' is that they have received nothing from God. I do not think I am overstating it when I say that the majority of nominal

Christians fit into this category – their eyes have been opened but they have not received. You see, it is possible to recognize a need, but more is required for total regeneration. It's a bit like the situation where a blind man receives physical sight, but this is not the same as receiving spiritual sight. What has not been received fully is the Holy Spirit.

When a man is born again he knows that he has received something, it has come as a gift from God and not as the result of any conscious decision on the man's part. He knows, too, that the receiving of that gift brings something else too, something guaranteed on the authority of Jesus Himself, and that is the forgiveness of sins. This is what we call grace, (Ephesians 1:7). But then there is added to this another work of grace – Paul calls it 'an inheritance among the sanctified.' To be sanctified means to be set apart, and it is in sanctification that the reborn soul gives up any rights to himself in order to identify fully with the cross and the death of Jesus.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring us to the place where we are willing to receive. And we have to be willing otherwise we shall not receive. Nothing is forced upon us. Many in the Church are in that place of unwillingness, for all sorts of reasons; fear, bad experiences, or even ignorance. And they have not received. But for all who are willing the Holy Spirit comes, to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment, John 16:8-11; He reveals truth, John 16:13; He reveals mysteries, Ephesians 3:3; He opens hearts, Acts 16:14; and He gives power, Acts 1:8.

So all of this requires a response. Without the response, the cross and Calvary are a sad waste of time. And just as the cross required a resurrection to be effective, so the new convert requires the rebirth to be effective. This rebirth is described in Acts 2:1-4. Not that it is like this every time but it's the occasion when the Holy Spirit comes to be **in** rather than **with**. On the basis of the finished work of Jesus, through His death and resurrection, and in the person through conviction, confession and repentance, the new convert can now, if willing, receive the Holy Spirit, leading to salvation, 2 Corinthians 5:17. A 'new creation.' Not just a refurb. job, but completely new. It doesn't mean that the consequences of the past have been dealt with, but there **has** been absolute forgiveness. It is through this wonderful gift of grace that the change takes place.

Let me ask you a rhetorical question. What understanding do you have of the salvation of your soul? The reality of salvation should be that things in your life have changed, you no longer see things like you used to; you have new hopes and desires, old habits and expectations have lost their drawing power. One of the measures of our experience should be this: has God altered the things that matter most? Do you still hanker for some of the old ways, even slip in to them sometimes? Then you cannot claim to be totally born from above. Jesus Himself said, in Luke 9:62, that if we've put our hand to the plough, in other words begun our new spiritual journey, but have turned back, we are not fit for the kingdom. Just as the Hebrews in the wilderness hankered for the fleshpots of Egypt – and died in the wilderness – so, by turning back, we may find eternal life an illusion and unreachable.

But the door is always open, and the ground may be recovered through confession and repentance. This is a Biblical principle! And so we have to ask ourselves the question, *'What difference has salvation and sanctification made to me.'* The sustaining quality of the early Church was one of personal and passionate devotion to the Person of the Messiah. Piety, prayer and devoutness have so often taken the place of the passion, and the personal relationship has been detached in favour of following a pattern. Yes, He is our pattern, our example, but He is infinitely more than that, for He **is** salvation itself, He **is** the living gospel.

If our experience is not of the supernatural, if it's not of the miraculous, then it is not branded with the hall-mark of the Holy Spirit, John 16:14. When as a new believer I commit myself to the revelation of the Jesus of the New Testament, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, in teaching me of all that Jesus did, He continues the process within in me to create, and to recreate, the passion and the hunger.

THE BATTLE GROUND.

In a war situation one who fights for the right does so to achieve a goal, Philippians 3:14. As believers we need to be constantly restating to ourselves what is the purpose of our lives. The natural end for unredeemed man is not the health, wealth and happiness that so many seek after. Quite the opposite, in fact. The problem for man is that he has too many

affinities, too many desires, and a great deal of effort is dissipated in achieving, if possible, the wrong goals.

But for the believer, the one who not only recognized but has also received, the one thing that matters above all else is the total acceptance of the God who will make him holy. At all costs he must be in a right relationship with God. But this can place us in a quandary, because we're still human. Wonderful, my spirit is renewed, I am born again, my spirit is alive to God! But my body is still the same old body, my soul has not been changed and so the 'old man' has not yet been eradicated. The soul, the 'us' bit of our tripartite being, is made up of our mind, our will and our emotions, and it becomes the battleground for the fight between our 'old man' and our 'new man.'

Any, or all, of our three soul-parts; mind, will and emotions, can be controlled by either the 'old man' or the 'new man.' The objective of the 'old man' is to work through either the mind - or the emotions **and** the mind - to induce us into making the wrong choices in the exercise of our will, thus causing us to oppose the will of God for our lives, and so fall into sin. On the other hand the 'new man' gives a restored ability to be able to discern God's law – it's been there all the time but only now can we see it. The situation is that, through the new birth, we can still sin, but if we obey the life of God within us **we do not need to sin**. We have the power to choose. The choice is, do we bring our wills into line with God's will, or do we submit to the flesh, the world or the devil.

The desire to satisfy the appetites of the flesh can be very strong, even Paul knew that, as he says in Romans 7:15-17. But now we know we have the capacity to choose, to choose whether we submit or stand firm in our new walk, Galatians 5:16-17 again, for we cannot do both. While this life continues so will the struggle, it never leaves us. It may seem less hard at some times than at others, but it's always there. I know that sounds awfully discouraging, but hear what Paul says, in Romans 8:1-6, and something else, too, in Ephesians 4:17-24. Paul identifies the key in verse 23, *'Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.'* That's our responsibility, not God's. He has provided the way, but we do it. In that part of our mind where the 'new man' is in control we must constantly be on guard to restore and

to expand, to leave behind all the old thoughts and ways and to focus on the new relationship we have with God in Jesus.

THE WEAPONS OF OUR WARFARE.

It would be quite irresponsible of me to have simply dwelt on the inevitability of continuous struggle if I had not also shared something of how we can be successful in it. When we indulge in any aspect of the 'flesh,' which has the effect of leaving God out, we are introducing that which separates us from Him and so, in the process, we may fall into sin.

If we do I want you to know that we have an 'atomic bomb' in our arsenal of spiritual weapons, and painted on its side is the word **Confession**. 1 John 1:8-9 says:

'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

That's lethal! If that isn't an 'atomic bomb' in what it achieves, I don't know what is. There is tremendous power released through confession when that confession is from the heart. Repeating prayers that get no further than the mind is of little value. Neither is the confession that simply tells God we've done something wrong – because He already knows that. The Greek word used here for 'confession' means 'to say the same thing.' Now, how does that apply in context? Confession, that is, true confession, means we come to the place where we agree with God that what we have done constitutes sin. That's the first step. But we need to go on beyond that, for it is not enough simply to recognize that we have sinned. We must come to the place where we not only acknowledge that we did it, but we agree with God's judgment of it, and say the same thing about it that He says.

It's possible you will meet those who will say that what they have done, or where they have been, is beyond God's forgiveness, but that is a lie of the devil and must be resisted, for Satan does not have the ability to decide what God will, or can, do. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven – the Bible tells us that. But there will be those, too, who have to come to the place where, to receive God's forgiveness, they must first come to the place of forgiving those who have hurt and abused them. This is an issue we cannot deal with here.

There is definitely a place, too, for confessing to one another. That may seem impossibly hard for us, especially if we are in a leadership role in the Church. How on earth can I let

someone know I did that? I'm so ashamed of it, but if I tell anyone it could get around and they would all be so horrified, I might lose my job, I'd be condemned and rejected! After all, if people know me as I really am, such a revelation would destroy any confidence they might have in me. So I live a lie. But the truth is that none of us is without sin, Romans 3:23. God sees no difference between us, for we are all sinners – and redemption is by grace alone, not by how good we think we are, or the good deeds we do.

Not one of us is able to stand in condemnation over a brother or sister, whoever they are. To do so binds both the offender and the judge, and we have no right. And condemning **ourselves** as being beyond redemption is just as bad – for in so doing we spend too much time kicking ourselves to bits when we should be kicking the one who is suffocating us. You see, there may be areas where we seem to suffer manifest defeat, and so go on a bender of self-recrimination.

But it may be nothing to do with how bad we are, but simply on the fact that Satan has done the dirty on us and he has opened up another front, or even two. Kicking ourselves is not a very sensible thing to do in these circumstances and we need to remind ourselves again that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven. Then we need to identify that we may have to contend, in addition to the problems of our 'flesh' life, with pressures from the world and/or demonic activity. In the space left I'll just briefly outline the areas where these two fronts may affect us, and our weapons against them.

Lets look at how the **World** may affect us. We defined this front earlier as the world's systems trying to conform us to the world's patterns of behaviour. To just go along with the relaxation of moral standards, accept what feels good as good, don't be objective, just flow with it. After all we are now living in the twenty-first century, fully enlightened, not in some backwater of religious prejudice. But wait a minute, look at 1 John 5:19.

This is an example: Recently there was a quite excellent article in a magazine about the sea. Except for one statement, which spoke of the sea as being that *'from which all life evolved.'* This is typical of a worldview, which tries to impose itself upon our thinking. It attacks our minds by compelling us to accept evolution, and the 'Big Bang' theories, as truth. But it's not. The truth is that God brought all things into being by the power of His word. No

attempt is made to prove these theories because they cannot be proven. But the methods used are classical propaganda, that if you tell a lie loud enough, long enough, and often enough, even the ardent sceptic will believe it. But, again, turn to 1 John 2:15. That's clear enough, isn't it? So how do we deal with the world, for this is very much an attack on the mind? First, see Romans 12:2. Here it is again! Mind renewal!! Our responsibility, so how? Putting it as simply as possible we need to come to that place where we deliberately regulate our minds so that we think honourable thoughts and reject those that come (and they will) that are dishonourable to God. Our weapon, in this case, is not so much an atomic bomb as a time bomb! I say that because it has a three-fold development in its impact. It begins as we take, first of all, passages of scripture that are relevant to the issues we are facing at the time. It then comprises of **Memorisation**, then **Meditation**, then finally, **Proclamation**. Memorising takes the words into our minds; meditation takes them into our beings; and proclamation brings the power of God's word into action against the enemy. And it works. Take 1 John 2:14.

When we come to the **Demonic** we can be fairly certain that we are not likely to warrant Satan's direct, and personal, attention. He is, after all, a bit tied up with Ahmadinejad and Osama bin Laden, among others, at the moment. But we would be very remiss, and a bit naïve, if we thought we would not be attacked by demons and evil spirits from time to time. That they will, and do, affect us is without question, in probably one of the following areas.

- a) Temptation. The aim here is to capture our thoughts.
- b) Deception. The purpose is to induce rebellion.
- c) Control. To pervert our wills.

Satan seeks to gain a foothold in our lives. As believers in Jesus he cannot do that, unless... He has no rights to our lives unless we give them to him. How do we do that? Secret sins? Forbidden relationships? Inner vows? Unclean habits? If there is anything, you know what it is. And it must be dealt with. Paul, in Ephesians 4:27, says, '*...nor give place to the devil.*' In Greek the word translated as 'place' can mean 'room,' or 'license,' or 'beach-head.' The implications are therefore quite clear – do not give room – and it's our responsibility. So how do we deal with it?

Our weapon here is more defensive than offensive, it's like a bulwark or stronghold. The key word here, then, is **Resistance**. For the **first** aspect of this see 1 Peter 5:8-9. For the **second**, see James 4:7-10. There are six areas here...

- 1) Submit to God. Through humble confession.
- 2) Resist the devil. Through preparation.
- 3) Draw near to God. He will draw near to you.
- 4) Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Renounce sin in our lives.
- 5) Lament, mourn, weep. Agree with God's judgment of sin.
- 6) Humble yourselves. Deal with our pride.

For the **third** aspect, see Ephesians 6:10-18. Here the injunction is 'to stand,' which means 'to resist.' How do we do that? Be strong in the Lord, not in our own strength, knowing exactly who we are 'in Jesus.' Fully equipped with our spiritual armour, and well versed in scripture. And be fervent in prayer.

This is only a brief summary, so much more could be said but no time. So, finally, just two scriptures to encourage:

Hebrews 4:15 *'For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.'*

1 Peter 2:24-25 *'...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed.'*

Edward Thomas