

THE STRUGGLE

AN ESSAY ON THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FLESH AND SPIRIT

By David Morsey

The followers of Christ seem always to struggle—a struggle not only in the common conflicts of daily existence, but a life and death grappling with the issues of soul. Why does it have to be so hard? Why the pain? Why the conflict? Did not the angels announce Christ's mission as one of peace? Where, then, is the peace? Many are perplexed by the conflict they are going through, and feel that it must be a lack of spiritual strength. Quite the contrary. The conflict is normal. In fact, if one is not struggling in the process of faith, it is quite possible that he is not growing. In this sense, the very reality of one's faith is exhibited by the wrestling. The reality is the wrestling and the wrestling is the reality.

Paul considered his entire life to be one of fighting—an incessant struggle. Against what did he struggle? Against Satan and the flesh to which Satan has access. But, while Paul struggled in the flesh (and this, often in the areas of sin and natural desire as in Romans 7), he was strong in spirit. This pattern is clearly outlined in II Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul says, ***“Wherefore, in order that I may not be overexalted, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, that he may buffet me, lest I be overexalted. In regard to this, I besought the Lord three times, that He might remove it from me. And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is fulfilled in weakness.”*** Then Paul says, ***“Most gladly will I rather boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell upon me.”*** And he concludes by saying, ***“Whenever I am weak, then am I able.”*** The only way we can understand the paradox between peace and struggle is to understand the difference between the flesh and the spirit. Galatians 5:17 draws the battle line. ***“For the flesh has desires against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, for these are contrary to one another, so that you cannot do the things that you will to do.”***

What does the Bible mean by the terms, “flesh,” and “spirit?” If one will examine all the passages that refer to the flesh, (a task not possible here), it will be evident that while the word is sometimes used for the physical body, it usually refers to the physical and mental processes of the natural man. It involves the personality which we possess as a result of heredity and years of accumulated knowledge and experience. It is the area to which Satan has access by reason of the fall. It is said in the Bible, to be a dead thing and to have no good thing in it. (If it be said that this expression in Romans 7 refers to an unregenerated or unsanctified person, one should examine the passage again without presuppositions and see what it really says). Where the mental processes are referred to separately from the body, they are identified as ***“soul”*** (psyche). Thus, in Hebrews 4:12, ***“The Word is living and energizing and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the division of soul and spirit . . .”*** Apparently, all the natural functions of life—physical, intellectual, and emotional—are exercises of the flesh, or the natural man. In themselves, these processes are not evil, but neither are they good. They are, in a sense, mechanical. The quality of good, or evil is in the spirit. It is in this area that death occurred at the fall. Obviously, the functions of body and mind did not cease. Satan then took up his abode in the human spirit, and the heart of man became ***“desperately wicked.”*** In Ephesians 2:2 Satan is referred to as, ***“the spirit that now energizes the children of disobedience.”***

But now, we must define “spirit.” It should first of all be noted that there is a distinction between the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit, and the human spirit. The human spirit can perhaps best be described as the inner essence of our being. It is often referred to as the heart. Sometimes the word, **“mind,”** is used almost synonymously with spirit. In this usage, mind is apparently the thought process associated with the expressions of the spirit rather than the thought process associated with the expressions of the natural man. In support of this, I Corinthians 2:16, quoting Isaiah 40:13, refers to the **“mind of Christ.”** Isaiah says, **“Spirit”** instead of mind. Paul is quoting directly from the Septuagint (A Greek translation of the Old Testament). The Hebrew word for spirit is **“Ruach.”** The Hebrew scholars who translated the Septuagint evidently felt that the Greek word, **“Nous,”** best expressed the concept. It is in this light that we may understand Romans 7:25, **“Therefore, then, with the mind (nous) I serve the law of God, but with the flesh, the law of sin.”** Also, Romans 12:2—**“ . . . but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind (nous).”** Further, in Ephesians 4:23—**“Be renewed in the spirit of your mind (nous).”** The spirit is the fountainhead of our attitudes. While personality can be rather easily located and explained, the spirit cannot. It seems to permeate the entire being. The brain, which is part of our natural man, is only a computer, an instrument of the mind. The spirit is what controls the mind. As the Spirit of God governs the energies of the universe, so the spirit of man governs the energies of his brain and nervous system. It thus determines the direction of the mental processes. The spirit of man is where Christ dwells when He is accepted. (Note that the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, and the Holy Spirit are one and the same). When the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit enters our spirit, Satan is expelled and confined to the area of the natural man. The attitudes of our spirit are then in harmony with God, whereas, when Satan was in control, they were contrary to God. Romans 8 clearly explains this. When the Spirit of Christ occupies our spirit, it becomes a citadel—an impregnable fortress against the enemy. Philippians 4:6 tells us that the peace of God will **“garrison”** our hearts through Christ Jesus.

The struggle of the follower of Christ, then, is in the arena of the flesh. This battleground is never without conflict, because the flesh is always opposed to the things of the Spirit. Some day we will be delivered from the flesh, and our natural man will be replaced by a glorified person. That is what Paul pleads for when he says, **“O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?”** (Romans 7:24). (Paul is referring to the Roman practice of tying the body of the dead victim to the murderer.) Then he says, **“I thank God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** In that day of deliverance, we shall be like Him. But, meanwhile, we fight. Our foe is constantly engaging us. Every time we act or think offensively he has won a thrust. And he will continue making these thrusts as long as we are in this world. But he is battling for a dead thing. We try to change it and dress it up with a cloak of righteousness, (or rather self-righteousness), but we are only beautifying a corpse. When Satan makes a thrust in the flesh, we think he has wounded our spirit. In reality he has only ripped the cloak and exposed the corpse. Satan wants us to assume that a defeat in the flesh is a defeat in the spirit. Not so! Paul says that **“the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death”** (Romans 8:2).

Actually, the flesh is never changed. We only control it. The personality is not basically changed by regeneration. What is changed is the attitude and desire of the spirit. Paul says in Romans 7:25, **“With the mind I serve the law of God, but with the flesh, the law of sin.”** We dare not rest in the feeling that our flesh has been changed. If we do, we will be extremely vulnerable. That is one reason why apparently mature Christians fall victim to some snare of Satan. They thought a permanent change had occurred in their flesh, whereas it had only been controlled by the Holy Spirit within them. Sometimes when we begin to trust too much in the flesh, the Holy Spirit lets us have a taste of our weakness.

If there is always a struggle, where then is the peace? It is in the spirit. The spirit is the fortress of our faith, to which Satan does not have access. It is impregnable because it is guarded by the **“Captain of our salvation,”** who has said, **“I will never abandon (fail) you, nor desert you”** (Hebrews 13:5 as quoting Joshua 1:5). While Satan has access to the flesh, he cannot penetrate the spirit because Christ is there. Even while Satan is laying siege in the flesh, our fellowship with Christ in the spirit remains unbroken. (The exception would be where one has accepted as a way of life some known disobedience and is unrepentant). An attitude of humility and penitence before God in the midst of human weakness will always keep open the channels of communication. The very fact that you struggle at all is proof that the Spirit of Christ is in you. Otherwise you would not struggle, but would accept your natural inclinations. The magnitude of the conflict does not indicate weakness, but strength, else Christ would not allow the test. **“A test has not taken you, except a human one; but God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tested above that which you are able, but with the test will provide the deliverance that you may be able to carry it”** (I Corinthians 10:13). What is being tested is the capacity to carry the fight and still remain firm in the faith. No matter how badly the conflict in the flesh may seem to be going at the moment, remember that your spirit may still be at peace in Christ.

Peace is a fruit of the spirit. **“The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”** (Galatians 5:22). These are graces of the spirit. They are not true of the flesh, where there **“dwells no good thing.”** In the flesh all may be turbulence, but in the spirit, all is peace. Paul is a prime example of a man walking in the spirit, but troubled in the flesh. In II Corinthians 7:5,6 he says, **“For when we had come to Macedonia, we did not have any rest at all in our flesh, but in all things were under pressure; without were fighting, within were fears. But God, who comforts the lowly, comforted us . . .”** In Philippians 4:6,7 Paul says that the kind of peace God gives **“passes all understanding.”** God gives peace in the spirit when there is no reason for peace in the natural sense. If we try to achieve peace by considering all the reasons that a Christian should have it, it will be an exercise of the flesh, and hence very unstable. The Lord has not promised us peace in the flesh. If we look for it there, we may be disappointed. In fact, if the flesh is too much at peace, one may not be confronting life realistically. We must see the circumstances of our lives as instruments for the perfecting of our spirits. They are often distressing. As such, they make their mark on us. The Holy Spirit is the catalyst that translates these experiences into spiritual growth. Without the Spirit, circumstances tend to affect people adversely, leaving bitterness and despair, or arrogance and pride. The Christian’s spirit is fashioned on the anvil of circumstance, under the hand of the Master Craftsman.

How do we apply this principal of conflict practically? Let us take, for example, the loss of temper. This is a natural expression of the flesh. It should be controlled, but in human weakness it is not always. Now, when Christ is in our spirit, we have His attitude towards it, and judge it to be wrong. We ask forgiveness for it, and may have to set things right if we have offended someone else. Also, we do not like our behavior and we desire to control it. This is the evidence that Christ is in our spirit. If Satan were in our spirit, we would accept this expression of the flesh and would be indifferent to controlling it. The most mature believer can, in a moment of weakness, experience a loss of control in the flesh. This does not indicate a lack of spirituality, but only a moment of carelessness. As long as there is repentance and sensitivity to the problem, fellowship with Christ remains unbroken. There are, of course, many reasons why it is wise to control the flesh, but controlling it will not make us more spiritual. We do not control the flesh because it makes us more spiritual, but, having a spiritual perspective, we try to control the flesh.

But how, then, does one cope with the flesh? It is only done through strengthening the spirit. Multiplying rules has already been judged ineffective in the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. Paul says that the law only serves to bring guilt, and that depending on the human will ends in frustration and despair. The answer is clearly given in a prayer of Paul's in Ephesians 3, ***“For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that He may grant unto you according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may settle down in your hearts through faith, in order that you, having your roots and foundation in love, may be completely able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.”*** And in Philippians 3 he is even more specific, ***“We are they who worship God in the spirit, make our boast in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”*** He then shows wherein he has reason to have confidence in the flesh and considers himself to have been blameless in the righteousness which He had through the law. Then, referring to this righteousness, he says, ***“But what things were gain to me, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. But indeed also I count all things to be loss on account of the surpassing excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for the sake of whom I have suffered the loss of all things and account them but dung in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God on the basis of faith.”***

We are totally then dependent on the Holy Spirit working through our spirits to control the flesh. When the Spirit of Christ is in us we have His righteousness. We must therefore focus on growth in the spirit rather than rules in the flesh. But how does this growth come? It comes by vital fellowship with Christ. That means, living with Him and listening to Him day after day. If in our prayer and devotion we would give ourselves to the enjoyment of Christ rather than to self-analysis, our spirits would be enlarged and strengthened to cope with the flesh. To focus on self instead of Christ is like the traveler in the desert, who, burning with thirst, finds a spring, and instead of drinking the water, dips up the sand around it.

In summary, the follower of Christ struggles because he cares about his spirit. He is attempting to please Christ, while saddled with a flesh that constantly opposes Christ. It is this desire to please Christ that is the evidence that His Spirit dwells within. Thus, the more we are growing in the spirit, the more likely we will be battling in the flesh. It is a normal thing, then, to be in conflict in the flesh where Satan rages, and to be at peace in the spirit where Christ reigns. And you can be assured that Christ does reign in your spirit when you see the flesh through His eyes. Whatever the battle raging in your flesh, know that you may have unbroken fellowship with Christ in your spirit. Do not let an obsession with weaknesses in your natural man rob you of your enjoyment of Christ. He knows your struggles, so commit them to Him and let your spirit rejoice. Remember Paul's words—***“We are they who worship God in the spirit, boast in Christ Jesus and do not have confidence in the flesh”*** (Philippians 3:3).

Note: All scripture quotations are translations by the author directly from the Greek text.