

Section III

Dealing with the Devil, the World, and the Flesh

Introduction

In this section, we are returning to themes which were mentioned in Section 1. In that section I quickly explained that our spiritual problems come at us in several ways:

1. Spiritual problems come from the unseen supernatural realm. Evil supernatural beings pressure and tempt us, seeking to divert our interest in God. (Ephesians 6:12; I Timothy 4:1)
2. Spiritual problems come from our surroundings — our culture, political and religious systems, economy, etc., — conditions which influence our attitudes, control our activities, pressure us to think like, live like, and be like, non-believers. (James 4:4) This is warfare with the world. (I John 2:15-17; John 15:18-21)
3. Spiritual problems come from within the human nature. This is the sin nature which we inherited from Adam. (Matt 15:19-20a; Romans 1:18-3:20; 5:12, 15-19; 8:5-9; Galatians 5:16-18)

Note: All three of these aspects — the devil, the world, and the flesh, are mentioned in Ephesians 2:1-3.

Only One Ultimate Enemy

While it is true that our problems include the world and the flesh, we need to remember that there is only one ultimate enemy, the devil. Satan causes both the world system and the flesh nature in people to rebel against God. Satan is the god of our world system and this present age (see I John 5:18-19; John 16:7-11).

Although Satan has great power to disrupt the spiritual lives of mortals, believers can rejoice that he has already been defeated on the believer's behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ. (I John 5:18-19; Hebrews 2:14) Note Jesus' prayer for His followers in John 17:15-16. In the model prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, note that we are to pray "deliver us from the evil one" (this is the best translation of Matthew 6:13).

Part 1 The Believers' Warfare Against Evil Supernaturalism (the Devil)

The Schemes and Strategies of Satan.

The word "scheme" refers to a plan, purpose, or objective. Satan doesn't need a complicated strategy for non-believers because they are already under his control.

Satan's general objective for believers is to hinder and defeat them in their spiritual lives and ministry. At a minimum, he wants to "neutralize" their witness and, if possible, he wants to pervert their behaviors. To do these things:

1. Satan tries to keep believers ignorant of his ways. However, Scripture gives us numerous details about his ways. See II Corinthians 2:9, 11; 10:5; I Peter 4:7; Ephesians 4:22-23; Romans 8:5-7; 12:2. There are lots of verses that encourage mental alertness. Believers are responsible to know what to do.

2. Satan tries to make believers afraid of him. He can gain an advantage if believers are afraid to challenge him and resist him. Satan would like to get believers to retreat from him. Believers are not to be fearful (II Timothy 1:7). They are to stand their ground and resist Satan's attacks. See Ephesians 6:11, 13, 14; James 4:7; I Peter 5:9; I John 4:18.

3. Satan tempts believers to satisfy their legitimate human needs in ways never intended by the Creator. Legitimate needs include physiological (food, sleep, health), safety and security (protection from harm, freedom from worries), love and belonging (friendship, family, intimacy), esteem (self respect, independence, confidence), spiritual (transcendence, purity, purpose), cognitive (awareness, creativity), and aesthetic (beauty, wholeness). God created all the physical and emotional desires that people have, and He provided proper and appropriate ways and habits by which people can satisfy their desires. In his temptations, Satan tries to create selfish desires in people in order to get them to turn away from the ways of God.

Some examples: The serpent's appeal to Eve in the garden of Eden; the thinking which is behind sexual immorality and lusts; the activity of a thief.

4. Satan creates evil by perverting what God created to be good. Satan would like believers to think of good and evil as opposite ends of a spectrum. Actually Satan "bends" the truth just a little bit so that his evil doesn't seem to be really bad, at least at first. For example, the false teachers in Scripture, sometimes called "deceivers," were successful because they did not at first communicate radical ideas. They began by "bending the truth," not by replacing it. This is why the Bible speaks of the need for discernment. Satan often appears as an "angel of light," but he is the master deceiver. See Genesis 3:1, 4-5; II Corinthians 11:3-4, 14-15. The Apostle John urged believers to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" or not. He gave instructions about how to recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (see I John 4:1-6).

Satan uses many different approaches in his temptation activities, but his techniques seem to fall into one or the other of the four schemes mentioned above. Believers must be spiritually alert, discerning, and prepared to stand and resist.

The Primary Location of Spiritual Battles Is in the Mind.

Ignorance, fear, incorrect thinking, and being deceived; these are matters of the mind. God expects us to use our minds to think and then our wills to make correct choices — to decide to do correct actions. Believers are to “be self-controlled and alert” (I Peter 1:13; 5:8). Mental passivity is intellectual laziness, represents poor stewardship of our God-given abilities, and can be spiritually dangerous.

The “footholds” and “strongholds” of Satan

The most common and effective tactic of Satan is his ability to gain a “foothold” in some area of the believer’s life. The word “foothold” comes from Ephesians 4:17. The word “stronghold” comes from II Corinthians 10:4. The following paragraphs describe these two words.

The devil can gain a foothold through:

- 1) Demonic inheritance, also called “genealogical sin” or “familial sin.” There are no specific examples of this in Scripture. However, there are warnings that the sins of parents have potential consequences on their children. See Exodus 20:1-5; 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 5:5-10. The most obvious possibility is when parents engage in evil practices and their children are raised in such circumstances.
- 2) Child or youth molestation and abuse. Sexual abuse, physical abuse, and psychological abuse can cause severe negative trauma, leading to abnormal fear, anger, low self image, and other psychological damage. Multiple Personality Disorders are common where there has been abuse.
- 3) Extreme bitterness, hatred, rage, and rebellion against authority figures, family, circumstances, and God. These characteristics lead to undisciplined and uncontrolled lifestyle.
- 4) Sexual sins, immorality, and other forms of moral impurity. Uncontrolled lust, rape, homosexuality, and addiction to pornography, are examples of evil that can be rampant in a person’s life.
- 5) Vows, curses, hexes which are brought against an individual by malevolent practitioners operating in the spirit world. This is common in voodoo cults, the practice of sorcery, Satanic cults, and witch covens, etc.
- 6) Occult activities. The use of ouiji boards, horoscopes, séances, belief in reincarnation, efforts to contact dead people, ESP, clairvoyance, and astral projection are examples of occult activities.

Note: There are even some forms of “Christian” occult activities in which the participants seek for spiritual experiences with improper motives and without examining the activity for its doctrinal content. The result can be counterfeit spiritual gifts which dominate the thinking, desires, and actions of believers. Sometimes physical objects, including charms, idols, icons, books, pictures, symbols, and music can ensnare believers when they are used in worship activities.

Strongholds

“Strongholds” are similar to “footholds.” See II Corinthians 10:3-5. Satan’s strongholds are called “arguments,” “pretensions,” and “thoughts” which are set up “against the knowledge of God.” Satan’s strongholds are in the mind: they are patterns of thinking, fantasies, anything we might focus our attention on instead of God.

The forces of spiritual destruction tend to gather and be strongest at the sites of the old sins, old habits, and old thoughts in which we used to engage. These things form “old patterns.” We may have been declared righteous through union with Christ, but old sinful habits and inclinations remain with us in our memories (thoughts) and inclinations (patterns of behavior and habits). Memories, especially those memories which are burned deep within us, and longstanding habits cannot be easily erased or altered. And each time we think about them, it becomes easier to return to them. The pathways in the mind can become more and more connected and this makes it easier to quickly go back to the old pattern or stronghold.

Satan uses these strongholds to keep us tied to the old nature. These patterns have a great deal of power to keep us focused on things which are displeasing to God. The more we turn to them and the deeper we enter into them, the tighter the grip they have on us. Simply stated, the power they have over us is the power we give them.

The Strongholds in Our Lives Can Be Identified

The frequency and ease with which we return to these patterns makes it easy to identify and anticipate the “strongholds” in our lives and, of course, as soon as the stronghold is identified, it should be dealt with. We will talk about dealing with persistent thoughts later, but first we will answer an important question.

How Does a Person Enter a Stronghold?

There are several steps necessary before a stronghold is established in a person’s life.

The process begins with curiosity and casual interest. Sometimes the process begins with questions and doubt. For example, the serpent created both doubt and interest in Eve when he said, “Did God really say that?” To ourselves we might say, “I wonder what that tastes like, or feels like?” “I wonder if I could do that and not get caught?” Or, “I don’t think it works like that; I want to find out.”

Curiosity leads to Persistent Curiosity. This is active thinking, not occasional transitory thoughts. Thoughts keep returning to the stronghold because we want them to. Through daydreaming, imagining, and fantasizing, people can intentionally direct the images in their minds toward immoral behaviors. Many people are active fantasizers because they enjoy the stimulation (often sexual) which comes from the thoughts which they allow to run through their minds. In essence they say to themselves, "I enjoy the unreality in which I place myself through my imagination and fantasizing." Most people think that there is nothing wrong with what happens in their thoughts, even though their thoughts are about actions they know are wrong.

The third step is Succumbing to Temptation. This is when the desire becomes indulgence. At first it may only be enough to satisfy curiosity. We think, "It's probably OK to try one time." However, if the first time is enjoyable, then it becomes easy to do it again.

Preoccupation. At first there will be only occasional indulgence, but the initial indulgence can descend into Preoccupation. This is the stage in which the temptation has become a priority in the person's life. The sinful behavior begins to fill the thoughts of the person. There is eagerness to seek fulfillment. The passion for the sinful activity approaches the point in which life without the indulgence is intolerable. There is a significant loss of personal control because the pattern has become so strong. (Maybe that's why the Bible calls it a "stronghold!")

The Last Stage is Obsession. This is the stage of wholehearted indulgence. It is the stage referred to as addiction, spiritual bondage, and slavery to sin. The person can think of little else than to satisfy the desire for indulgence.

There is actually one more stage: the ultimate stage is Demon Possession.

How Do Believers Deal with Strongholds?

The answer to this question is discovered in Psalm 27. Please read and meditate on the Psalm.

Notice in verse 1 that the Psalmist describes "the LORD" as his "light and salvation." Also that "the LORD is the stronghold" of his life. Because the LORD is the deliverer and protector, there is no reason to fear any enemy.

Consider verse 2 and 3 as a description of Satanic forces of evil. They may "advance against me," they may "attack me," they may "circle around me" and "make war against me," but there will be no reason to be afraid. The enemies will stumble and fall because the LORD fights against them and is victorious.

In verse 4 the Psalmist mentions the “one thing” that he wants from the LORD. This “one thing” is explained in verses 4-5. He wants to “dwell in the house of the LORD” all the days of his life. He wants “to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD,” and “to seek the LORD in his temple.” He knows that he will be “safe in the LORD’s dwelling,” and that he will be hidden “in the shelter of the LORD’s tabernacle.” There are four words in verses 4-5 which represent the presence of the LORD (“house,” “temple,” “dwelling,” and “tabernacle”). The “one thing” that the Psalmist seeks after is to be constantly in the presence of the LORD.

In verse 6 the Psalmist explains that he will be “exalted above the enemies” who surround him if he can be in the LORD’s presence.

The LORD Himself is the stronghold to which the believer must go in order to find release from the strongholds of Satan. The secret of demolishing the evil strongholds of our fleshly nature is to replace them with the desires to be constantly in the presence of the LORD. We may not be able to eliminate the old evil memories from our minds, but those old memories will not have any impact on us if we are overwhelmed with the “beauty of the LORD.” They will be pushed to the back of our minds if we deliberately focus our attention of the LORD.

Now look at II Corinthians 10:4-5 again. Our weapons “have divine power to demolish strongholds,” and “we demolish arguments and every pretension (thought, memory, imagination) that sets itself up against the knowledge of God,” and “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” As believers we can “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” The key is a relationship with Christ, not cognitive knowledge. The relationship with Christ requires actual intimacy, not just awareness. **We must be so preoccupied with God that the stronghold is neglected.** God must become our obsession. This idea is repeated in other verses in the New Testament. For examples, see Hebrews 3: 1 and 12:2.

Verses 7-12 are a prayer for deliverance from enemies. The main threat is the accusations of false witnesses and their violence (verse 12). In the prayer the Psalmist states that he will seek the face of the LORD (verse 8) and wants to be taught and guided by the LORD (verse 11). In response he wants the LORD to be merciful to him (verse 7), to not hide His face from him or reject him (verse 9), and to keep him from being turned over to the desires of his foes (verse 12). This is an appropriate prayer for believers to pray, but it is necessary to keep in mind that the words of faith and confidence which underlie the prayer are in the other verses of the Psalm.

Look at Psalm 27: 13-14. If we seek to be in the presence of the LORD (verses 4-5), we “will see the goodness of the LORD.” Notice verse 13 states that we “will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” This is not a reference to heaven some day. “The land of the living” refers to life on earth. As believers, we can see “the goodness of the LORD” if we spend time in His presence in order “to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.” This “gaze” will keep the mind of the believer focused on the LORD rather than on the threats of the enemy.

The instructions of verse 14 are to “Wait for the LORD.” The emphasis must be placed on the object of the waiting, not on the verb. In other words believers are to wait (be focused on with expectation) the LORD.” Believers must not allowed their thoughts to focus on anything else. We do not have to give in to Satan. Rather we must “be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”

How do we become preoccupied / obsessed with God? There is the necessity of prayer and the study of the Scriptures. We must “pray on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Ephesians 6:18). We must make our relationship with Christ and the work of His kingdom the top priority of our lives, and if we do, our lives (with all the thoughts, desires, actions, energies, etc. that make up our lives) will not be drawn toward unspiritual areas. We must spend time in the presence of the LORD, simply gazing upon his beauty.

The Holy Spirit is our Guide.

Part 2 The Believer’s Warfare Against the Influences of the World

The world’s influence on people is powerful, but it works in subtle ways. Believers are usually unaware of how the world around us can have its impact on us. The world system includes religious, cultured, refined, intellectual aspects, and all of it is hostile to God.

The world makes an especially strong appeal to human pride. There are enticements to power, influence, gaining advantage, and “doing things on our own.” Satan’s rebellion was caused by pride (“I will be like the Most High”). Eve was tempted when she saw that the fruit “was desirable for gaining wisdom.” According to Scripture “when pride comes, then come disgrace” (Proverbs 11:2), “pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18), and “a man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor” (Proverbs 29:23).

Two Definitions of the Word “World”

The word translated “world” is often the Greek word “aion,” which mean “age,” referring to a period of time. This word “aion” refers to the moral and spiritual characteristics in which we live rather than the physical / material world. Galatians 1:4 states that this present age is intrinsically evil, and one of the purposes of the redemption of Jesus Christ was to deliver people out of this evil situation, and to free people from the influence of the age. The word “aion” appears 122 times in the New Testament. Some of the other verses in which the word “aion” is used are:

Matthew 12:32 “Anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Romans 12:2 “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this age.”

II Corinthians 4:4 “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers.”

Ephesians 1:21 The Father “raised him from the dead and seated him in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”

I Timothy 6:17 “command those who are rich in this present age not to be arrogant.”

When the Scriptures make specific reference to the physical / material world, the most common word translated “world” is “cosmos.” This word appears 186 times in the New Testament. “Cosmos” can refer to “the universe” (John 1:10; Romans 1:20), the earth we live on (John 16:33), or the people on earth (John 12:19). When “world” refers to people, it is used of mankind in opposition to Christ. Scripture declares that Satan is the head of the “cosmos,” and that the demons are part of the “cosmos,” and that non-believers are the subjects of the “cosmos.” This “world” we live in has been corrupted by the fall. Some of the verses which use the word “cosmos” are

Matthew 16:26 “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”

John 12:31 “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.”

John 14:30-31 “the prince of this world is coming, ... the world must learn that I love the Father.”

Romans 5:12 “sin entered the world through one man.”

I Corinthians 3:19 “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”

Colossians 2:20 “you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world.”

I Peter 1:20 “He was chosen before the creation of the world.”

I John 2:15 “do not love the world or anything in the world.”

God has a love / hate relationship with the world. He loves the people of the world. See John 3:16; II Corinthians 5:18-21. However, God hates the world system which blinds people to His love and keeps people bound in their sin and separated from Him. This world system will be judged at the end of the age (described in Revelation 16:17-19:4; also see I John 2:17).

All of us are products of our cultures. The world controls the values of non-believers, promotes godless ideologies (scientific enlightenment), and encourages moral decay (satisfaction of personal pleasures). The world influences through media, political structures, religious structures, educational institutions, and other ways. Neither this “cosmos” nor this “age” is what God intended it to be. See Ephesians 2:1-3, which uses both words.

Current Influences in Our World

The following is a list of some of the most prevalent “systems” which influence the world:

Materialism — The belief that physical matter is the only reality and that everything can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena. Materialism is also the desire for wealth and possessions. There is very little interest in ethical or spiritual matters

Humanism — The belief that people can live independently of a revelation or deity. It is the belief that human beings can solve their own problems without reliance on God. Humanism is the basis for agnosticism.

Hedonism — The belief that pleasure or happiness is the objective of life. Hedonists seek pleasure and entertainment, especially the pleasures of the senses.

Existentialism — This belief denies that the universe has any intrinsic meaning or purpose. It requires people to take responsibility for their own actions and shape their own destinies.

Addictive Habits — An addiction is the persistent compulsive need for something that controls a person’s thoughts and behavior. The most common addictions are drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Violence — Violent behavior springs from a disregard for authority and human rights. Pride and the desire for personal advantage are also motivating factors.

Occult Activities / Magic — People can be attracted to unwholesome interests in magic, astrology, or any system which claims to have secret knowledge beyond the range of ordinary knowledge or understanding or uses supernatural powers.

Deception — Deception occurs when truth is withheld or altered by a false informant, usually in a deliberate way and for an unethical purpose. False information, also known as “propaganda,” comes from governments, religious groups, political parties, scientists, or any source which tries to persuade people to accept its way of thinking.

The world pressures people to conform to its ways. Images and pictures which are in media advertisements (television, radio, newspapers, magazines) are especially effective ways in creating desires in and shaping the attitudes of people. Movies and the internet are other tools which deeply influence many people. The cultures, ethnic groups, levels of social status, religious backgrounds, families, traditions, and surroundings that we belong to all put pressures and restrictions on us, thus forcing us to conform to others and the world.

The Difficulty of Living Righteously in This World

The person who chooses to live righteously in the world (that is, chooses to live according to the standards of God) will experience the anger of both Satan and the people of the world. Jesus said, “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.” He also said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you,” and “They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me” (John 15:18-21). I Peter chapter 4 offers encouragement to believers who are suffering, but within the chapter Peter wrote that the people of the world “think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.”

In recent years, the Chinese and Russian governments, which are atheistic in their orientation, have tried to eliminate Christian influence. Believers have been harassed, tortured, imprisoned, and killed. Muslims in the Middle East and Asia, and Hindus in India, would like to eradicate Christianity from their areas of influence. In some places, the conversion of a Muslim or Hindu is considered an act of treason. Believers have been harassed, tortured, and killed. In the western nations, there is very little actual violence against Christians, but believers are being pushed further and further out of the mainstream of society. As we get closer to the end of the age, the pressures on the Church everywhere will increase.

In spite of the hatred and pressure put upon them, believers must be countercultural in attitudes and in choices and lifestyles if they are to please God. Believers are citizens of heaven, and they are to represent God and God’s ways while they are here on earth.

Scripture Explains What Believers Must Do to Overcome the World

Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good pleasing and perfect will.”

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters. 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 (material things).”

See Gal 6:14 “Through the cross the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Notice that for the believer, a double crucifixion is needed — the world has been crucified to the believer and the believer has been crucified to the world.

I John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” Notice that there is a double command in these verses: “Do not love the world,” and “do the will of God.” If a person considers the “world” and the things in the “world” to be valuable and desirable, then God will not be the high priority in that person’s life. Love for God and love for the world are mutually exclusive.

James 4:4 “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.” This verse is similar to I John 2:15-17. Notice that a person can “choose” the object of friendship.

Notice that in these verses the believer has two responsibilities — he / she must turn away from the old life and old ways in order to focus attention on God and God’s ways.

The Apostle John gives us a 4-fold description of the world system in I John 2:16

- 1) “The Lust of the Flesh.” This will be discussed in detail later. “The lust of the flesh” is what originates from within us. “The lust of the flesh” is the passionate desire or craving that comes from our fallen evil nature. See Romans 8:5-8.
- 2) “The Lust of the Eyes.” People are easily captivated by the material things which surround them (the things which are “from without”). We want what we see, especially the things that we see in the possession of others. The “lust of the eyes” assumes that happiness will be found in the things which can be acquired. For Eve the fruit on the tree was “a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6). When David saw Bathsheba bathing, he had a passionate desire for her even though she was the wife of another man (II Sam 11:2). When Achan saw the Babylonian garment and the silver and gold, he took them in spite of the fact that it was forbidden to do so (Josh 7:21). Think about how many people have seen things which have led to theft, inappropriate behavior, broken relationships, death. Even good things can become worldly to us if allow our desires for clothes, houses, wealth, sex, prestige, fame, power, to get out of hand.
- 3) “The Boastful Pride of Life.” The word “life” here means the things that “keep us alive” and “sustain our living,” such as food, clothing, shelter, money. When people have the desire to accumulate far more than is actually necessary, it is because these people have become selfish, proud, boastful, egotistical. They want to be recognized as better and more important than others. They want to be self-sufficient; they don’t want to be dependent on others.
- 4) “The World is Passing way and Its Lusts.” This present “age” and the physical / material world around us is temporal. If we build our lives on the things of this world, they will pass away.

In Luke 12:15-21 Jesus told a parable which described the foolishness of people who work only for the benefits of this life. Jesus said the driving force behind their efforts was greed. God

called these kinds of people “fools” because they cannot take their possessions with them into eternity. Jesus continued in verses 21-22 to explain that life is more than the necessities of this life. His instruction in verse 31 was to “seek his (the Father’s) kingdom.” I John 2:17 informs us that “the world and its desires pass away, but the person who does the will of God abides forever.”

Part 3 Believer’s Warfare with the Flesh

Sin did not originate from the earthly creation which God prepared for mankind nor from within mankind (the flesh). Sin was introduced into God’s creation from the outside realm of evil supernaturalism. See Genesis 3; John 8:44.

Sin continues to be implanted into believers by Satan through temptations, doubts, fantasizing (imagination) within the mind, and through pride, greed, etc. See Matthew 15:19 with II Corinthians 4:3-4; Acts 5:1-4; I Corinthians 7:5; I Thessalonians 3:5; I Timothy 3:7, 5:5-15; II Timothy 2:26; I Peter 5:8; Ephesians 6:10-14a.

We live in physical bodies which are affected by genetic predispositions, organic disorders, diseases, as well as natural instincts which are part of our humanity. Our lives are affected by pain, appetites, biochemical processes, psychological drives. God created humans with the capacity for all these characteristics, but after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, people did not use their capacities as God intended. After Genesis chapter 3 humanity had a fallen sinful nature.

What is the “Flesh?”

The word “flesh” has several meanings in Scripture (“old nature”, “sin nature”, “old man”, “un-crucified self”, “unspiritual self”, etc.)

The word “flesh” comes from the Greek word “sarx”. A general definition of “flesh” is the inborn moral defect we all have within our physical bodies, souls, and spirits which make us inclined toward independence, self-centeredness, and self-indulgence, and which enhance and build up our sense of self-importance, self-sufficiency, and pride.

In Scripture, the “flesh” is always characterized by its opposition to the Holy Spirit. See Galatians 5:16-17.

The principle of overcoming the “flesh” is explained in Romans 6:12-14, 16. Verse 12 informs us that sin, if we allow it to reign in our bodies, will control us; we will have to obey its evil desires. We must not give in to the desires of the flesh.

Romans chapter 7 explains the difficulty of dealing with the pull of the flesh. The power and influence of the flesh is described in Romans 7:14-23. The way to overcome the influence of the flesh is explained in Romans chapter 8. See 8:3-14. The simple solution is: “do not be controlled by the sinful nature, but be controlled by the Spirit.”

What is necessary if the Spirit is to be in control? It requires us to be yielded to God, and to be obedient to the Word of God. It requires us to live a disciplined life, and to keep our eyes fixed on the LORD.

The Apostle Paul gave us a comprehensive list of the operations of the flesh.

See Galatians 5:19-21. Some commentators separate the list of sins into three categories:

Moral Sins (3 kinds) (v19)

Fornication, literally “immorality” or “illegitimate sexual activity,” usually thought of as between men and women in a relationship outside of marriage.

Uncleanness or Impurity refer to attitudes and behaviors which are detestable to God; they have the opposite meaning to “holy” and “acceptable to God.” The terms uncleanness and impurity includes homosexuality, incest, sexual abuse, sexual self-stimulation, and forms of unclean talk, joking, and story telling (see Romans 1:18-31).

Sensuality, Lasciviousness, Lewdness, a term referring to “shameless conduct”, “absence of restraint,” “indecent.”

Note, the Moral Sins are not only “in the body,” they can be “in the mind”. See Matthew 5:27-28; 15:19. Sins of the mind includes imagination, fantasy, lust, pornography.

Spiritual Sins (2 kinds) (v20)

Idolatry is the practice of making physical symbols into objects of worship and veneration. See Exodus 20:4-6. Paul stated that demons receive the worship offered to idols even when the worshippers are ignorant of the fact. See I Corinthians 10:19-22.

Sorcery or Occultism, sometimes translated “witchcraft.” This includes any practice which attempts to contact the spirit world for selfish purposes, such as to gain power, or through the use of magic. Can involve drugs, chants, ceremonies.

Social Sins (11 kinds) (v20b-21)

Strife
Disputes
Dissensions
Factions
Bitterness
Enmity (hatred)
Outbursts of anger (rage)
Jealousy
Envyings
Drunkenness
Carousings (partying, reveling)

Notice that Galatians 5:19-21 is not a complete list. The last words in v 21 are “and the like” (literally, “and things like these”). There are other lists in Matthew 15:19; Romans 1:29-32, 13:13; I Corinthians 5:9-11, 6:9-10; II Corinthians 12:20-21.

The Underlying Problem of the Flesh and the World

The flesh and the world are linked. The basic problem is the human effort, inspired by Satan, to obtain what the flesh wants without God. Human desires are not wrong. God instilled desires in people at creation. Evil is evident in the way people try to obtain and fulfill their desires.

Galatians 5:24 “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” This verse speaks of the crucifixion of the flesh of the believer. As believers, “we have been united with Christ in his death, for we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom 6:5-6). Galatians 5:24 is closely linked to 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.” From the believer, deliverance from both the flesh and the world is through identification with Christ in His death.

The Believer Cannot be Neutral in Spiritual Relationship

We will close this section by considering the warning in I John 3:7-10. “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. ... No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God.”

Believers cannot avoid the pressures of Satan by trying to be neutral in their attitudes and lifestyles. Jesus said that people must make a choice about their relationships. The principle is in Matthew 12:30 “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” This means that any aspect of our lives which we do not offer to God is automatically offered to Satan. A few verses later Jesus said “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit,” and “How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” (Matthew 12:33-35). The point is that from within a person there will come either the characteristics of evil or the characteristics of good, depending on the person’s spiritual relationship.

Paul talked about this in Romans chapter 6. The general context is that people are either dead in their sins or alive in Christ. A person cannot be both dead and alive at the same time. Romans 6:11-13 “Count yourselves (consider yourselves, think about yourselves) dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, . . . but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.” In verse 16 “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” See also Romans 8:5-14.

To summarize this point: It is impossible for believers to submit themselves to both light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell, to God and Satan.