

## The Flesh and the Spirit

### INTRODUCTION: THE TWO REALMS

In Romans 8:5–11, Paul speaks of the mind ‘of the flesh’ and the mind ‘of the Spirit’. Some, who see a dualism within human nature speak of a part of man being flesh and part being spirit and these two in conflict. This is found in certain Greek forms of thinking, and in Eastern religious dualism. Often it is a thinking that anything material is evil or of a lower order of being, and anything unseen is spiritual and of a higher order. This is in no way Judaic or Christian thinking. Because God has created man he is a person, and does not have higher or lower, or good and evil elements. Man gives himself over to evil elements within the universe, if he chooses that way, or he obeys that which is of God and, so, good.

Paul can speak of some human beings having the mind of the flesh or of having the mind of the Spirit. What, then, does he mean? Within the world we have both good and evil powers. The Scriptures do not speculate as to the genesis of evil powers. Certain Scriptures lead us to believe that Satan was a high celestial power who became filled with pride in himself, and ceased to submit to God. In fact he rebelled and took a third of the angelic powers with him (Rev. 12:1 ff.).

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Because of his rebellion Satan has set up a system of his own, and in this not only fallen angels but other spiritual powers also take part. Amongst them is fallen man. Hence we have a dualism of a sort, but we can in no way call this a dualism of creation. At the best it can be called a dualism within creation, but it is not really of creation's essential order upon which God pronounced, at its completion, that 'it was very good' (Gen. 1:31).

The term *flesh* can have the simple meaning of body, or of humanity, and generally in its weak state ('All flesh is grass', Isa. 40:6). However it has a very powerful connotation of evil, and this we will trace. Someone has described flesh in this evil sense as 'humanity as conditioned by sin'. That is so, although it does not cover all aspects. We must be clear that the body is in no sense evil. It may be used for evil purposes but its various powers and abilities and capacities are not themselves evil.

We are aware that there is flesh and spirit. There is likewise Satan and God, the world system and God's order. There is the kingdom of darkness, and the kingdom of light. There are the children of the devil and the children of God. There is the old (fallen Adamic) humanity and the new humanity, that is, the humanity which is Christ and in which the redeemed participate. All these evil elements are linked in one whole system just as all the good elements are linked in one whole system. Hence when there is battle with one portion of either there is battle with the whole. It is on this understanding that we may proceed to the discussion of the Holy Spirit and the unholy flesh.

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**EVIL SEEKING TO SUBVERT  
THE CREATION**

We have argued somewhere that man is primarily spirit. He is body and mind, soul and other elements, but they are all of one being and that is spirit. When man is true man he can worship God in spirit and in truth, in other words, being in the image of God he has affinity with God, although he does not have deity. He is, if we wish, 'man-spirit', and God is 'God-Spirit'. The terms are unsatisfactory but indicative of our thought. As man was created it is doubtful that Jesus would have used the statement, 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit'. Adam, when he was unfallen, had no need to be reborn. Although Adam was a bodily creature, this saying did not apply to Adam in the way Jesus was suggesting to Nicodemus (see John 3:1-7).

Man was formed of the dust of the earth and God breathed into him and man became 'a living being [soul]'. He was told he would die (i.e. become a dead being) if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and we assume that is what happened. His physical death was to follow, but he had death of some kind through his sin.

This is described in Romans 1:19ff., where man rejected the nature of God and refused knowledge of Him. He became, as an existent 'dead to God'. Since God is the true source of life and he refused this, he remained in a state of death (cf. Rom. 5:12ff.; Eph. 2:1-3; Heb. 9:14). We saw that at the time prior to the flood God said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh' (Gen. 6:3, NASB). Bodily man had always been 'flesh'. Now he is just flesh. Jesus described the days prior to the flood, saying that they were 'eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage' (Matt. 24:38). There is surely nothing wrong with doing these things, but

there is something wrong in doing *only these things*. Man is not reaching out, fulfilling the powers of his being as created spirit. He lives in the death-state of separation from God and explores the ‘death-side’ of his fallen being.

We read the Bible with blinkers if we do not see the extent of man’s fall into idolatry, his selfishness, violence and cruelty. True, he does grand things also, and this may well be testimony to the fact that he is in the image of God whether he likes it or not. Even in his death-existence he can never accept his state as the creational *norm*. Satan is the god of this world, and blinds men’s eyes to the grace of God (2 Cor. 4:4). We have seen that from the fall God prophesied His plan of redemption. Man also had to reject this.

In Ephesians 2:1–3 we find that man is still spirit, albeit not living consonant with his created state. Paul says he walks according to the course (modes) of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now energises the children of disobedience. *Man is spiritually energised by evil spirit*. If man were not spirit in some sense then spirit could not energise him, even evilly. Likewise in Ephesians 6:10ff., Paul describes ‘*spiritual hosts of wickedness* in the heavenly places’. He is speaking about wicked spirits who give vent to spiritual evil. Such *spiritual evil* is really the perverse use of created powers as created beings within God’s created universe.

We must now try to answer more fully our own question, ‘what is flesh?’ When Jesus said to Nicodemus, ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh’, he meant that man as he is now born does not have spiritual comprehension. He is limited to where he has committed himself. Only when a new action takes place in him, from above and by the Spirit, can he become true (i.e. regenerated) man. Natural generation from human parentage does not allow him to have comprehension he would have were he truly spirit as God had created him.

## THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In 1 Corinthians 2:6–14 Paul puts forward the proposition that unless the Spirit teaches redeemed man he will not know the gifts of God. He adds, ‘The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned’. The natural or psychical man cannot know, of himself, things of the true spirit, or Spirit.

Another way of saying this is that man is blind. He cannot see the universe as it really is, because he cannot see God as He really is. His mind has been gripped by evil, although he would be the last to think he was really evil. His mind has been conformed to *the world*, that is, the aeon or system which Satan controls. In 1 John 5:19, it says (in the same vein as Eph. 2:1–3; cf. Heb. 2:14–15) that ‘the whole world is in the power of the evil one’. Even the Jewish religious leaders, who thought (and claimed) that they were truly of God, were told by Jesus, ‘You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires’ (John 8:44).

### THE MIND OF THE FLESH

In Romans 8:5–11 Paul speaks of the mind of the flesh, or, as it has also been translated, ‘the mindset of the flesh’. The word used is ‘incorrigible’—‘it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot’. This was ‘the mindset’ of the people prior to the flood. God saw that ‘every imagination of the thoughts of his [man’s] heart was only evil continually’ (Gen. 6:5). This is paralleled in Romans 1:19–32 where man sets about to do what he will. He seeks autonomy, and hopes to control his own world of his making. In one sense he reckons without Satan, who desires to have man for himself and in that process to debase him (John 10:10a; Heb. 2:14–15). On the other hand,

he reckons without God who loves him and sets about to redeem him.

### THE MIND OF THE SPIRIT

The mind of the Holy Spirit is life and peace, as against the mind of the flesh, which is death. The Spirit is the Spirit of love, and the Spirit of life, and he sets out to fulfil the Father's plan to redeem man. The kingdom of God is said to be, 'righteousness and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*' (Rom. 14:17). He seeks to have man enter the kingdom of God.

This, then, makes sense of the years of salvation history which lead up to the coming of Messiah. None of those years is wasted. The Spirit is blowing for good! He moved for beauty, life, and order across the primeval deep. He moves across Israel as a valley of dry bones and regenerates them, and this is some of the prophecy to which Jesus refers when he speaks to Nicodemus, 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things [of the new birth]?' (John 3:10, NASB).

We see now the import of the Spirit and John the Baptist. We see the import of the Spirit and Jesus. We see the significance of Isaiah 61:1-2 quoted by Jesus. He is to liberate men and women from their bondage, from sickness and disease, much of which has its origins in evil, and to proclaim the jubilation of the jubilee year, the year when captives, slaves and debtors were fully freed. It shows the significance of the anointing by which Jesus overcame Satan at the testing of the temptation and proved himself true Messiah to lead his people to victory. It gives full meaning to Peter's (later) summary of Jesus' anointing and ministry, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the *Holy Spirit and with power* . . . he went about doing good and *healing all that were oppressed by the devil*' (Acts

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10:38). It makes sense of Jesus' statement, 'if it is *by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons*, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt. 12:28). That is, the Spirit was in Jesus, led Jesus, empowered Jesus so that Satan and evil, the fleshly elements of rebellious creation, could be destroyed.

This is why the cross 'destroy[s] the works of the devil' and 'destroy[s] him who has the power of death, that is, the devil', and causes Christ to triumph over 'principalities and powers', thus proving that he is stronger than the 'strong man' (Luke 11:21ff.; Col. 2:14–15; Heb. 2:14–15; 1 John 3:8). The death and resurrection of Christ provided freedom from guilt, pollution, shame, and the fear of death, and so crippled Satan and his hosts. On the positive side, when man sees the love of God, and the holiness of God, and the pardon of God, he repents, believes, and receives his freedom. The Spirit has triumphed over the flesh.

### NEWNESS OF SPIRIT BY THE SPIRIT

'This woman . . . whom Satan bound for eighteen years' said Jesus of a woman who had been jackknifed with a U-shaped backbone (Luke 13:16). Jesus freed her. He cast seven devils out of Mary Magdalene. He liberated the paralysed man from his sickness, through forgiveness. He hunted down demons and cast them forth, he set out to free men from Satan's cruelty. He came to give life. Most difficult of all were the religious leaders who were of the mind of the flesh, but did not know it, and would not believe it.

Through Christ, the Spirit was the Spirit of liberation. Through the Spirit, following his ascension Christ was the Lord of liberation. In John 3:1–14 Jesus speaks of the Spirit blowing where he would. He would, if he willed, blow across

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the primeval deep, the deadness of Israel, and the first fruits of the harvest—Pentecost. When he blew and a man came under his influence, he was born anew. The old flesh received its deathblow. The Spirit worked first upon man, and then in man, after which he worked through man. His convicting power brought men to see the delusions of the mind of the flesh and to desire new life. The Spirit worked in the washing of regeneration and (spirit) renewal. Man was born again, forgiven, justified and sanctified in that he was now part of the people of God, a member of the living body of the church.

In this was the Spirit who had defeated the flesh, and had brought man to be true spirit, the new creation, able to worship God ‘in spirit and in truth’.

### THE CONTINUING MIND OF THE SPIRIT

Two significant passages—Ephesians 4:20–24 and Colossians 3:9–11—show us that the old man, or the mind of the flesh, fallen man’s participation in Adam, was finished at regeneration. Man is now ‘renewed in the spirit of the mind’. This is an act which has taken place. Continually, also he is ‘being renewed in knowledge after the image of [his] creator’. Every day the Spirit is keeping the mind clean and fresh and increasing the experience of life in the Spirit. Man then is in the kingdom which is ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’.

At the same time he is faced with unceasing conflict. The world around him is seeking to get him back to old ways of thinking. Powers of evil are persistently giving the old dreams, the old principles. Faithless human reasoning is tempted to get into the saddle again. Old patterns of training and old habits of the body seek to have expression. Whilst the new man does not



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have the mind of the flesh, the flesh is seeking to give back to him the mind he had!

The Spirit has a wide canvas on which he works, a broad perspective in which the plan of God is working out. He is concerned personally with each person but he will not allow a privatised holiness, a secluded ghetto sanctification. Man must be out where the battle is. The Spirit will make man strong in Christ, in the body, in the family, and make him pure and vibrant in action. He will not simply defeat his sin, but raise him up to be courier and proclaimer of victory. How will this be if the man is cowed by evil, introverted in some interior pilgrimage of holiness, some individualistic preoccupation with his problems?

Man must have the continuing mind of the Spirit, being constantly cleansed, refreshed, and defeating evil, even sin within.

## THE WAY OF WALKING IN THE SPIRIT

### The Way of the Conqueror

Ephesians 6:10ff. speaks of spiritual warfare, and tells of the armour, the spiritual armour, the people of God must wear (and not just the persons of God!). The battle is a close hand-to-hand combat, a wrestling with the very principalities and powers defeated at the cross. First John 2:14 speaks of young men being strong and having overcome Satan; 2 Corinthians 10:3–4 speaks of weapons which are not worldly or fleshly, but *spiritual*, that is, of the Spirit; and Ephesians 6:17 speaks of ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’. Such a sword Jesus used in his own conflict against Satan when he said, ‘It is written . . .’ and by this he defeated him.

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Romans 8:34ff. speaks of the believers being accounted as sheep for the slaughter and being killed all the day long, but also of being 'more than conquerors through him who loved us'. Revelation 12:10ff. speaks of Satan opposing and accusing the brethren and of them overcoming him.

These passages show us that although the new man in Christ is not powerful of himself, he is powerful in the Spirit. Yet he must be prepared for the conflict and must fight every device Satan brings into use, such as threatening, oppressing, accusing and even seducing. To have weapons of the Spirit which are mighty to the pulling down of many strongholds of the flesh is a powerful thought.

### **The Way of Being Led**

In Galatians 5 Paul speaks of another kind of conflict. The new man is caught between two powers. They are the flesh and the Spirit. In regard to the Spirit this is the normal situation of the new man. He must walk in the Spirit and be led by the Spirit. Romans 8:14 states, 'all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God'. Paul speaks of the power of the flesh, striving lustfully against the Holy Spirit, and seeking to draw the believer into old habits and patterns of the flesh. The Holy Spirit fights the poison and evil of the flesh. The requirement of the believer is that he goes along with the Spirit, that is, that he does what the Spirit commands.

One of the great temptations, having *begun in the Spirit* and having become aware of new strength, is to revert to one's own ego-operations. The old feel of 'I can do it'. The old delirium of fleshly endeavour, of (imagined) human autonomy. These are the ways flesh comes. And no greater delusion is there than that which 'law-way' provides. Law-way says, 'You can do it'. Paul says sin takes occasion by the law, deceives and slays

(Rom. 7:11). So man reverts to what he can do, and not to the law of love (the law of Christ) internalised in the heart as part of the new covenant, and obeyed by walking in the Spirit. When man reverts to law he reverts to flesh. This is what Paul means in Galatians 3:1–6 by saying that having begun in the Spirit will they (the Galatians) now end in the flesh? Did they receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

Walking in the Spirit has two aspects. In Galatians 5:16 the word *peripateo*, meaning ‘walk about’ or, perhaps, ‘walk everywhere’, means that in every case walk by the Spirit, that is, of course, according to the leading of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:25, ‘If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit’ has another verb which means to ‘march in step’ as does an army. The sense is, ‘all of you walk concertedly together in the Spirit’.

The point about all this is that the flesh is defeated as believers are subject to the Spirit, led by him and aided by him. The term ‘walk’ is really ‘live’. One’s walk is one’s life. Other passages such as in Ephesians 5, ‘walk in love’ and ‘walk in light’ (repeated in John’s first epistle) show us the kind of life which is the opposite to the mind of the flesh.

We have by no means finished with the matter of the Spirit’s defeat of the flesh and all forms of (spiritual) evil. This ultimate defeat relates to the *eschaton* and the Spirit of judgement. What we need to see is that the Spirit gives rebirth, releases from the realm and bondage of flesh. This he does when applying the work of the cross and resurrection. He keeps the new mind in constant renewal, and leads the people of God in love and light, giving them positive modes of living. He involves them in the mopping-up operations which stem from the time of the cross and Pentecost. Ultimately all evil will be cast into the lake of fire.

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Until that time we need to be alert, to be constantly filled with the Spirit, and be led by him. True life personally for each believer, and corporately for the people of God, is 'walking in the Spirit', that is, progressing forward at his behest.