

## *Our Personal Best Will Ruin Us*

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I MADE SUCH A foolish choice! I *know* who I am in Christ. I understand what it means to have Him live through me. How could I fail so miserably?" Brit had come to understand his identity in Christ only a few months earlier. At that time, I had been seeing him and his wife to counsel them about problems they were having in their marriage. During the time we spent together, Brit had come to see that a big part of the problem was the way he tried to control his wife. He had a history of being sarcastic and critical when he didn't like something she did.

Jana was a quiet lady who struggled with feelings of inferiority. Whenever Brit went into his attack mode, she would generally give in to whatever he wanted her to do, then withdraw—refusing to communicate for days. Over the seven years they had been married, this pattern had repeated itself many times until they both had come to the place where they thought the best solution might be for them to go their separate ways.

They had come to see me for counsel on the recommendation of a friend. Never had I seen two people who were more ready to receive the truth about their identity in Christ. Both of them had been convicted of the way they consistently acted toward each other and had quickly come to the place where they understood

what it means to abide in Christ, allowing Him to control their lives and marriage.

Now, less than three months later, Brit sat before me in obvious despondency. "Last night, I did it. Jana didn't agree with me on something I felt strongly about, and I blasted her. I didn't stop until she left the room crying. I apologized this morning, but she won't talk about it. That's when I called you. Right now I hate myself."

### Trouble in Paradise

Before I continue with Brit and Jana, let's go back to what we've been learning about the nation of Israel in the promised land. With the taste of victory still fresh in their memories, the people of Israel moved onward from Jericho to the next city in their path. As they drew near to Ai, Joshua sent ahead a small unit of men who would spy out the land in order to determine what resources were needed to ransack Ai. Shortly afterward, the men returned with their recommendation: "Do not let all the people go up; only about two or three thousand men need go up to Ai; do not make all the people toil up there, for they are few" (Joshua 7:3).

At their advice, Joshua sent 3,000 men up to Ai to overthrow the city. In no time, the army of Israel came running back down the hill to their camp. Their report was tragic: The campaign had been a total loss. Not only had they failed to defeat the city, but 36 of their own men had been killed in battle. Breathless, the men explained how they themselves had barely escaped with their own lives.

It was at this point that Joshua fell on his face in prayer, asking the question posed by most believers when we suffer defeat: "O Lord GOD, why...?" (Joshua 7:7). In Joshua's case, the answer was apparent. God had specifically told the people not to touch any of the spoils of battle when they conquered Jericho. His

purpose was that the whole city should be set apart to show that it was not by Israel's power, but by His own, that Jericho would be overthrown (see Joshua 6:17-19).

In defiance of God's command, one of the Israelite soldiers violated the ban and took some of the things that God had clearly marked as His own. He acted independently and took some of the spoils, despite what God had said. His independence cost Israel dearly. Men died, and a nation of people were confounded. Perhaps when Achan stole the goods he thought that his action was insignificant. He might even have justified his behavior by reasoning that with so much wealth in Jericho, his decision to take a garment and a little silver and gold would make no difference whatsoever.

*The same dependent faith on God  
that was required to bring us safely into the land  
is necessary to guide us victoriously through it.*

Though God had miraculously led Israel into the paradise that had been promised to them since the time of their father Abraham, that didn't exempt the people from the possibility of failure. Likewise, both Brit and Jana, when they came to me again for marital counseling, were beginning to realize that just because God has led us into His land of grace, that doesn't exempt us from the possibility of failure. The same dependent faith in Him that was required to bring us safely into the land is necessary to guide us victoriously through it.

When I began to understand my identity in Christ, I first thought that I would never come down off the mountaintop experience I was enjoying. I was so thrilled about my newly realized understanding of my identity in Christ that I thought I would never falter in battle again. After all, Jesus would fight my battles, thereby ensuring my ongoing victory. However, just as Brit and Jana learned, I soon began to discover that walking in grace doesn't mean that we don't still face the potential for defeat. Like Achan, I underestimated the potential harm from acting independently of God.

One might wonder how Achan could rebel against God after having seen Him work on behalf of Israel in such a miraculous way at Jericho. It would be wise, however, not to be too harsh in our judgment of Achan. While his behavior can't be excused, the truth is that we have all known the experience of having failed. Each of us can relate to the kind of shame Brit felt after he had mistreated his wife.

What causes people who have seen God work in their lives in such a powerful way to choose at times to act independently of Him? If the old man we were in Adam is indeed dead, then why do we still sin?

### **We Must Understand the Battleground**

Perhaps it would be helpful for us to clearly understand the meanings of some common terms in order to clarify why we as believers still sin at times despite the fact that our very nature is holy. We do have the potential to say no to temptation every time we face it, but a lack of understanding of where the battle lies for the believer has led many to defeat. If we don't understand the method of operation used by the enemy in his attacks, we will always be vulnerable. Any enemy has the advantage when

attacking under the cover of darkness. To be equipped to sustain victory in our own battles in the new land, it's important for us to understand the meaning of certain words so that we know the terrain of the place in which we now live. Consider these three terms and their meaning:

*The sin nature*—this is the nature possessed by every person who is in Adam. It is the nature of the unbeliever (see Ephesians 2:2-3). At salvation, God puts one's sin nature to death so that it no longer exists within him (see Romans 6:1-3; 6:6; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3). This was discussed in depth in chapter 4. Much confusion has been caused in the minds of many believers because of the choice by the New International Version translators to render the Greek word *sarx* (flesh) as "sinful nature." These brethren were undoubtedly sincere in their effort toward accuracy in translation, but they simply dropped the ball on this one. If you read the NIV, don't be confused when you come to the phrase "sinful nature" in your Bible. Simply substitute the word "flesh" in your mind. That's the word used in other translations and it's a better choice. Christians don't have a sin nature because it died at the time of receiving Christ.

*Flesh*—this is the word often used in the Bible to describe self-sufficiency. Sometimes when the word is used it may mean "skin," but often the word refers to the techniques we use to manage life (see John 1:13; Romans 7:5; 8:4-13; 13:14; 1 Corinthians 1:26; Galatians 3:3; 5:17,24; Philippians 3:34).<sup>1</sup> *Flesh* denotes those learned strategies we have developed for handling our lives when we aren't depending on Christ. It is learned behavior that is expressed when we live in independence. When we became Christians, our flesh didn't die. Our learned patterns of self-sufficiency

remain filed away in our brains, ready to be activated at any time that we don't depend on Jesus Christ to live through us.

*Indwelling sin*—all Christians possess a new nature that causes them to have the desire to behave in a way that brings honor to Jesus Christ. There is, however, an indwelling force with which we must reckon. This power of indwelling sin is a force in our imperfect bodies that is always ready to pull us downward into sins. Paul personifies indwelling sin, separating its presence within him from his own true identity. Concerning the sins expressed through his behavior, he said, "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me" (Romans 7:17). Again, three verses later, he says, "But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (7:20). Twice in three verses Paul points out the reality of indwelling sin.

While a Christian's old sin nature has died and Christ has become his very life, he still lives inside the same body he has always had—a body that has not yet been completely perfected. One day we will receive glorified bodies that are free from the influence of sin, but in the meantime we are confined to bodies that still bear the consequences of the sin that they still have within them.

### How the Battle Is Lost

"I don't know what to do about a problem I'm having. I know the Bible teaches that my old man was crucified, but he keeps coming back to life!" I understood why Bruce would make such a statement. He didn't understand the difference between the power of indwelling sin and his old sin nature. He believed that his old man was still troubling him.

The old sin nature will never pose a problem for the believer because it has been put to death by the cross. Failure in battle comes when the Christian allows the power of indwelling sin to cause him to act out of his flesh. To function from our flesh is simply to act out of our own natural abilities instead of trusting Christ to give life to our actions.

Depending on our own natural resources usually doesn't *look* so bad if they are religious. I used to think that walking after the flesh referred to the man who stayed out drunk all night on Saturday and then showed up at church on Sunday morning with bloodshot eyes. *That* was "flesh" as I understood it. If a man was having an affair, *that* was flesh. If somebody was embezzling money from his company, *that* was flesh. It's true; all those things are an indication that somebody is living out of their self-life and not by the life of Christ. However, flesh doesn't have to look like that.

Many sincere Christians are walking after the flesh for one simple reason: they are depending on themselves to try to live the Christian life instead of trusting Christ to be the Source of their behavior. It's the same mistake Joshua made at Ai by sending spies to see what *resources* were needed to defeat the city there. We only need *one* resource in God's new land.

Charles Trumbull, while he was in Edinburgh, learned of a meeting in which the speaker was going to speak on the subject of the resources of the Christian life. He writes,

I went eagerly to hear him. I expected him to give us a series of definite things that we could do to strengthen our Christian life; and I knew I needed them. But his opening words showed me my mistake, while they made my heart leap with a new joy. What he said was something like this: "*The only resources of the Christian life, my friends, are just—Jesus Christ.*" That was all, but that was enough.<sup>2</sup>

Western-world Christians find that fact hard to believe. Our culture has programmed us throughout our whole lives to do our personal best, to excel by sheer effort and determination. Many have adopted that philosophy in their Christian walk, thinking that God is pleased by it. I have even heard it said that we are supposed to do the best we can, then God will take up the slack and do the rest. That is found *nowhere* in the Bible! Christians are not to live up to the best of their ability and then trust God to do *the rest*. We are to trust Him to do it *all*! Our personal best will ruin us because we aren't called to do our best, but to rely at every moment upon Jesus Christ as our Source of life. *He* is to be our personal Best. The whole purpose of Christ indwelling the believer is that we are now able to live out of *His* ability. Does this mean that our ability lies unutilized within us? Not at all. Our ability is to be energized by His life, thereby making it His ability.

*Our personal best will ruin us because  
we aren't called to do our best, but to  
rely at every moment upon Jesus Christ as our  
Source of life. He is to be our personal best.*

Someone once challenged me on my assertion that we are to depend upon Christ to do all that needs to be done and not ourselves. "Even Paul said that he labored and strived in the ministry," he said.

"You are right," I responded, "but look at the *way* that Paul put forth that effort. Colossians 1:29 says, 'For this purpose also I



labor, striving *according to His power*, which mightily works within me'” (emphasis added).

In no way am I advocating passivity in the Christian life. Joshua's army did indeed defeat Ai, as recorded in Joshua chapter 8. They fought in battle by setting an ambush, attacking their opponents, and overthrowing the city. However, they were quick to remember the promise of God that “the LORD your God will deliver it into your hand” (Joshua 8:7). We *do* strive, labor, fight. We *do* actively participate in what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world around us, but we do it as we depend upon His power, which works mightily in us. Concerning his own ministry, Paul said, “In Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished *through me*, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed” (Romans 15:17-18, emphasis added). Paul recognized that his ministry had actually been the result of Christ working through him. To live otherwise is to walk after the flesh.

The essence of flesh is self-effort, which stems from independent living. The Bible cautions repeatedly against walking after the flesh (see Romans 8:4-5,7-8; 13:14). However, many Christians spend their lives trying to find new ways to strengthen their religious flesh so that they can live the life they think God expects of them. Remember that the flesh can look *good* (see Philippians 3:4-6), but it is still flesh.

### You Aren't Your Own Enemy

It is important to understand that indwelling sin in the believer's body may be *in* us, but it is not a part of our identity. It's not who we *are*. Twice Paul said that sin dwelled *in* him (see Romans 7:17,20), but he never thought for a moment that

indwelling sin was a part of his identity. He didn't believe that he was an evil man simply because he at times found himself not practicing the things he wanted to do, but doing the very things he hated (see Romans 7:15). He understood that the source of his misbehavior was indwelling sin.

This fact doesn't minimize the seriousness of sin in our lives at all. In no way may we shirk responsibility for our sin because of indwelling sin. We are responsible for our own choices. However, understanding indwelling sin does equip us to experience victory over it when we come to realize that we aren't evil just because we do wrong things at times. The *deed* may be evil, but we as Christians can never be anything other than the righteous people God has created us to be.

Before I understood my identity in Christ, I often experienced self-condemnation in my life because of the sins I committed. I was an easy mark for the enemy because it took so little to cause me to feel like I must be basically evil. Perhaps I would become impatient with my children, start an argument with my wife, have a lustful thought, or commit some other sin that would cause me to go into the "God, what is wrong with me?" mode. I felt like I had a split personality, desiring at times to live a holy life and at other times wanting to act any way but holy.

I knew I was a Christian, but felt that at the core of my being there was something evil. I was completely sincere in my walk with Christ, but I saw this "evil twin" lurking within me, waiting to get out if I didn't keep a tight grip on him at all times. I thought that in some way I was my own worst enemy. I sometimes heard it reinforced by Bible teaching that cited that oft-quoted "theologian" Pogo by saying, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." I believed every word of it. After all, my experiences certainly seemed to validate that I was my own worst enemy.

Maybe you can identify with how I felt, and perhaps you still believe that way—but I hope your beliefs will be changed. Otherwise, you'll remain in the same bondage of self-condemnation that I often experienced. The truth that will set you free is this: *You are not your own enemy*. There is nothing wrong with you as a Christian. There is only something wrong *in* you, which is indwelling sin. Have you felt evil at times? That doesn't mean you are evil, but only points to the presence of indwelling sin, which is *in* you.

Paul boldly affirmed, "I find then the principle that evil is *present in me*, the one who wishes to do good" (Romans 7:21, emphasis added). He did not say that he was evil, but only that evil was present in him. Twice in one verse he cites the location of this indwelling sin, saying, "But I see a different law *in the members of my body*, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin *which is in my members*" (7:23, emphasis added). Paul said the power of indwelling sin was in his body.

A couple I know recently discovered that cancer was in the wife's body. Her husband has continually kept all their friends updated on her progress through e-mail. He often described the cancer as "that invader." The cancer *is* an invader that threatened her health and had to be attacked with a vengeance by medical professionals. As her doctors ministered life to her the cancer began to disappear, and at this point, it can no longer be detected.

So it is with the power of indwelling sin, which is in our body. It is a "disease" that every one of us inherited from our father, Adam. It is an invader that will only disappear as we continually receive the ministry of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ.

### Saved by His Life

Paul made an interesting observation in Romans 5:10: "If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the

death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” In this verse he speaks of two aspects of salvation: On the one hand, he affirms that we have been saved. He says that through the death of Jesus Christ we were reconciled. It is by the death of Jesus at the cross that we have been forever delivered from the penalty of sin. However, Paul doesn’t stop there, but goes on to say that “we shall be saved by His life.” Not only have we already *been* saved, but we also *shall be* saved by His life. From what? From the *power* of sin. It is by the indwelling *life* of Jesus Christ that we are continually saved from it. Jesus is the miracle cure for the cancer of indwelling sin, which is in our body. All Christians have enjoyed the remedy for the penalty of sin by the *death* of Jesus Christ, but many aren’t taking advantage of the ever-present cure for the power of sin in our lives. That cure is the *life* of Jesus Christ within us.

*Jesus is the miracle cure for the cancer  
of indwelling sin, which is in our body.*

As we apply by faith the sufficiency of the life of Christ over the power of sin, we will walk in victory. He has come to cause the sin of our lives to go into remission forever. Peter declared that “whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43 KJV—in the King James Version, note the promise of the *remission* of sins in Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; Romans 3:25). Sin has no power over the believer as he rests in the sufficiency of Christ. Andrew Murray illustrates the principle this way:

I have read of a young lion whom nothing could awe or keep down but the eye of his keeper. With the keeper you could come near him, and he would crouch, his savage nature all unchanged, and thirsting for blood, trembling at the keeper's feet. You might put your foot on his neck, as long as the keeper was with you. To approach him without the keeper would be instant death. And so it is that the believer can *have sin* and yet *not do sin*. The evil nature, [of] the flesh, is unchanged in its enmity against God, but the abiding presence of Jesus Christ keeps it down. In faith the believer entrusts himself to the keeping, to the indwelling, of the Son of God; he abides in Him, and counts on Jesus to abide in Him too. The union and fellowship is the secret of a holy life: "in Him is no sin; he that abideth in Him sinneth not."<sup>3</sup>

When Achan's sin was discovered, the drama in Israel's story became intense. When Achan was caught, he was brought before the people with his daughters, oxen, donkeys, sheep, his tent, and all that belonged to him.

*And Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day." And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger (Joshua 7:25-26).*

For many years I couldn't imagine why Israel's response to Achan's sin was so vehement, but since moving into God's grace-land I have come to make better sense of what happened. Achan's sin is a picture of the flesh being activated by indwelling sin, and there is no room for a gentle approach to that. Flesh in our lives *must* be attacked with a vengeance or it will eventually destroy us.

There is no room for mercy when it comes to an attack against cancer. Similarly, the cancer of indwelling sin must be dealt with by righteous ruthlessness, lest its influence in our lives destroy our walk of victory permanently. Only fierce faith in the indwelling Christ will put the flesh into remission and allow us to walk in complete spiritual health. We aren't our own enemy; our flesh is the enemy, and it must be put down with furious faith in the One who leads us each step of the way on our journey.



*Dear Father,*

*You know that I have sincerely tried to live as a victorious Christian. I have done my personal best, but now I realize that has been my problem—it has been “my best” that I’ve trusted, instead of Your life. I repent of self-sufficiency and affirm that from this moment forward I will trust You to live through me. I choose to rest in You, depending upon You to cause the power of indwelling sin in me to stay in remission. You are my Victory, oh Lord. For that fact, I thank You, Father.*

### **G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions**

1. Define these terms: the sin nature; the flesh; indwelling sin. What is the difference between the flesh and the sin nature?
2. What resources do people commonly depend upon in their efforts to live a victorious life in the modern church? What are the essential resources needed to live victoriously as a Christian?
3. Is passivity a biblical option for the Christian? Read Colossians 1:29 and discuss the method by which a believer is to serve God.
4. How does indwelling sin influence the Christian to sin? What is the cure for the adverse effects of indwelling sin in our lives?
5. Read Joshua 7:25-26. Explain what this Old Testament passage illustrates about the power of indwelling sin in a New Testament believer's life.