

# SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE, PRACTICAL CHOICES

*SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS*

By Steve Zeisler

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4690) we studied Galatians 5:13-24. We focused on the theology of the struggle between the sinful nature and the Spirit. In this message, largely from the same text, we'll extract some practical statements concerning real-life choices that we can make to advance in this struggle.

In order to expand our consideration of 5:13-24, we'll be skipping over 5:25-6:6. You may refer to Discovery Paper 3930, a message I preached in 1984, for a study of that text.

Galatians 5:13-24:

**You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.**

**So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.**

**The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.**

When I was a brand-new Christian I had no church background. I was given a New Testament and was urged to read it. I thought that was great. I dove right in and read it quickly. I was very proud of myself, and it felt good to me to carry my New Testament around with my new Christian friends. I was sure I was on the right track, except that I understood very little of what I was reading! There was one part I did understand, though—Romans 7. I couldn't believe the Bible said something like this! I had assumed the Bible was all about doing well, not about doing badly. These verses gripped me: "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:19, 24). This was an honest description of wanting to do well and failing at it, being stuck in something and not being able to get out of it, finding actions and thoughts and attitudes in oneself that were wrong and hurtful, yet persistent.

Galatians 5:17 has exactly the same awareness: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." Being faithful to Christ does not lead to a beautiful, untroubled existence. You can't really do what you

want! You are the locus of tension and struggle. In you is the sinful nature (the Greek word *sarx*), a deep-seated, relentless antagonism toward God and a commitment to prefer yourself above all. It will not give up or go away! It will not change its tune. But God himself is present in you in the Spirit, and so you find your life has real tension, questions, and struggles.

I spoke of that in the last message, and also of the witness of Galatians 5:24: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” Belonging to Jesus means that something within us that really existed, a voice that persuaded us toward ruin, was put to death! We are not who we once were. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (1 Corinthians 5:17). The Scriptures insist that the cross of Christ was not just a romantic ideal of a good man dying for the wicked and a heroic example that we can follow. It’s not just poetic language. The cross of Christ was about our own execution. We were joined to him in his death.

The illustration I used in the last message was of a voice that can no longer speak, yet the old words echo as loudly and clearly as ever. Something can die, yet remain surprisingly forceful. For instance, you may have voices in your head that come from important people in your past, perhaps parents or others, trading on your self-interest, speaking into your fears and your inadequacies and your pride: you’re worthless, no good will ever come of your life, you’ll always fail at certain things. And the ones who said these things can be long gone, but the voices still retain the authority to hurt and ruin.

Something like that is what Paul is describing here. There is a powerful resistance to change, and forces opposing us seem to loom larger. We are the locus of a battleground, and life can be very hard. We can feel ourselves to be the only one for whom the gospel message doesn’t work. Yet it remains true that we are destined for freedom, that we were united with Christ in his death, that the sinful nature has been crucified. Therefore we need to choose to face into every difficulty in our life with a sense of hope. And if our struggle is to believe the things that are true, God will persuade us that they are.

Let’s consider what sort of practical advice is available to us for the battle.

## **Become a lover of others**

This passage gives us some real help. One practical statement is in 5:13: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” The phrase “indulge the sinful nature” is not a very good translation. “Give no opportunity to the sinful nature” is better. The word “opportunity” is the Greek word *aphorme*. It is a military term in ancient literature meaning a staging ground from which an attack can be launched, a beachhead. Don’t give the sinful nature, your enemy, an opportunity to launch an attack. Don’t crack the door open.

What can you do, practically, to prevent such opportunities from being effective, to not give in to the sinful nature? Let me suggest an illustration that is not military but medical. An opportunistic virus is one that finds a way to enter your body—through a break in your skin, something you eat, or inhalation. Once in, it multiplies and flourishes, and you get sick. The options you have are twofold.

First, you can spend your life trying to avoid viruses. You can withdraw from circumstances where you might be exposed, protect yourself with surgical masks and rubber gloves, avoid contact with people, and so on. Avoiding the problem is what observing the law is like. The law teaches you to have boundaries, distances, withdrawal, and protection so that you never have to encounter sinful things.

The second option is to have such a healthy immune system that no matter how the virus enters your body, it never gets an opportunity to make you sick. This is the option this text advocates. You can allow the sinful nature no opportunity by, as verse 13 says, “serv[ing] one another in love.”

The practical idea is this: If I concentrate and think and observe and pray, if I try to apply Scripture as I discover it, the effect is that I will think less often of myself and more often of you. I will work hard to understand what your needs are. If there is a disagreement between us, I’ll assume you have something important to say. Every thought I have that promotes me, I’ll put you in the same light, to promote you and understand you.

Further, I’ll discover what spiritual gifts I have that allow me to serve the body of Christ. I’ll look for poor and needy folks and involve myself with them. I’ll work on getting over prejudices. I’ll pay less attention to getting credit. I’ll listen more often than I speak. In all of these I will be actively trying to serve, to become a lover of others. And what will happen is that my spiritual immune system will be strengthened so that the sinful nature fails in its efforts to derail and ruin me.

It is a practical choice to serve one another in love. It is active. You apply it to real arguments, real needs, real suffering. How might God use you? Instead of worrying about what you don’t have, what do you have that someone else could benefit from? And at the end of the day or week or year, you realize that the things that once made you vulnerable don’t have the same power to do so anymore.

Let’s look at another practical comment in the text regarding this battle between our sinful nature and the Spirit.

## **Let your Shepherd lead you**

You know that the sinful nature in you will never change. The voices won’t cease even though they’re no longer living. The worst persuasions in you, the preference of yourself above all, are relentless.

Remember the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? The heroes were lovable outlaws, but eventually those who were determined to capture them hired an intrepid detective who resolved to finally end the career of Butch and Sundance. They ran from state to state, from cities to the wilderness, and finally to Colombia to get away. And the detective and his men wouldn’t quit. Butch and Sundance were escaping through the mountains at one point, and they kept asking over and over, “Who are those guys?” Similarly, the sinful nature inside us never gives up.

What we need is a champion, a warrior who is equally relentless to fight on our side. The Spirit is our champion. We are to be “led by the Spirit” toward life. Yet in practice this is difficult. Where is the Spirit? He is invisible, and he doesn’t leave footprints! By what practical means can we accomplish this?

Psalm 23, the “shepherd psalm,” gives helpful instruction about what it means to follow the Spirit. It is the best-loved of all the psalms, perhaps the best-loved passage in all the Bible. People who don’t know any other Scripture know Psalm 23.

A shepherd is one who goes before his sheep, who leads, protects, instructs, helps, and challenges them. The Spirit is our Shepherd.

Psalm 23:1 says, “I shall not be in want.” What an amazing statement! Nothing that you need will be withheld from you. You might feel jealous of people, wish you had things that you don’t have, feel left behind and hurt. But if you’re following the Shepherd, he will give you everything you need.

“I will fear no evil...” (verse 4). That too is an extraordinary thing to say. Nothing that you are afraid of—whatever horrible, vicious, hurtful thing it is—will succeed! If you are following the caring Shepherd, you can

“walk through the valley of the shadow of death” and fear no evil, because he is with you. His hand, holding the rod that beats back enemies and pulls you out of thickets, comforts you. You’ll banquet someday in the presence of your enemies.

“Surely goodness and love will follow me...” (verse 6). You’re relentlessly pursued by goodness and love! How extraordinary!

What would it be like to have God give you rest and food and protection? What do you have to stop believing in order to believe that this is true? This familiar, sweet psalm can give practical help to those of us who don’t want our sinful nature to persuade us, who want the Spirit of God to lead us.

The third item of practical advice is found in 6:7-10.

## **Sow to please the Spirit**

**Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**

This is the final part of Paul’s discussion of the *sarx*, the sinful nature. The imagery in this text is of two different fertile plots of land in which you can plant something—that is, make choices about how to spend your time and energy. Depending on what you sow, the outcome is either corruption or life.

But consider: What you are harvesting now was not planted today! What you are harvesting now was planted some time ago. And most people, when they come to the end of themselves, when they are finally tired of destruction, ruin, and selfishness, call out to God, “Lord change this! I’m sick of the mess my life is in!” And he will! But for the new crop to grow, new seeds need to be planted. There is a time lag in this. That’s why Paul urges in verse 9, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time [in God’s time], we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” So the healthy choice to make is to begin today to be strong and faithful and quiet and courageous and obedient, with the expectation that over time life will change.

No one can change the past, but you can start making choices now to be a blessing to others. You can start saying no to things that are hurtful. You can begin to trust God in areas where you have been unable to before. And the day will come when this crop will grow too, and what seemed like a blasted and barren field will become a place of fruitfulness. The practical choice is to be willing to wait, to sow some seeds and let them grow. Don’t grow weary and give up. Trust God, and what will eventually come is what Paul calls here eternal life.

I want to close with the text of an old hymn, *How Firm a Foundation* (1):

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!  
What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

*“Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;*

*I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by my gracious, omnipotent hand.*

*“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flames shall not hurt thee, I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

*“The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!”*

## NOTES

(1) Author unknown.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Catalog No. 4691  
Galatians 5:13-24; 6:7-10  
11th Message  
Steve Zeisler  
October 15, 2000  
Updated April 10, 2001

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright © 2000 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.