

4:1 GOD'S CALL TO BE HOLY

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy.' *1 Peter 1:15*

It is God's will that you should be sanctified. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. *1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7-8*

When the men in the First World War trenches heard the command to go over the top, they simply had to go. They knew that even if they survived the perilous crossing of no-man's-land, they would meet the rolls of barbed wire guarding the enemy trenches. If by a miracle they got back alive, the same command would be given the next night. It was madness. Yet to disobey was unthinkable.

'You must be mad to become a Christian,' says a friend. 'On the contrary, it's the sanest decision I ever made,' we reply. God's call to 'live a holy life' may be death to my lower nature, but if Christ went to the cross for me, it's the only logical response. I simply can't hunker down in the doubtful security of my muddy trench and dodge the instructions given to every soldier along the line.

What is meant by 'being holy'? This kind of language is unpopular in an age of permissiveness; it smacks of moral imperialism. What right has God to tell me to be perfect like him? It also baffles the weak will. I simply can't match up to these ideals.

'The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4). The Spirit is given to us not only to stiffen our resolve but to enlarge our capabilities. By deliberately enlisting his help we can succeed against the enemy. 'Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:17). I may not feel strong, but I am.

I admit I'm a coward and a weakling. This holiness business reduces me to jelly. 'Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure"?' (Proverbs 20:9). But if you say 'Go,' I'll go. Only you've got to be by my side.

4:2 TEMPTATION

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. *Luke 4:1-2*

We do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. *Hebrews 4:15*

What exactly is temptation, and why does the Lord's prayer include a request not to be 'led into' it? Jesus' own extended period of temptation was initiated by the Holy Spirit, and his repeated reliance on the word of God is a model for our own resistance, so why may we not ask for similar times of testing, so that we may be spiritually strengthened as he was for the work of the kingdom?

The simple answer is that in our fallen weakness we are no match for temptation, and we should never actively seek opportunities for meeting it. An hour or two after being warned by his Master, 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41), Simon Peter is strolling into the governor's headquarters as if he is going to rescue Jesus single-handed – with the inevitable result.

Another classic example is Samson and Delilah. Aware as he must have been that she is acting for the enemy in tracking down the source of his great physical strength, Samson nevertheless allows his secret to be wheedled out of him (Judges 16).

Temptation is the urge to do what is contrary to God's will; it arises from the world around us, from the proneness of our own hearts to sin, and from the ultimate source of evil we call the devil, and following it results in spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1-3).

'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it' (1 Corinthians 10:13). Lord, help me to remember both my own frailty and the availability of your Spirit.

4:3 UNITED WITH CHRIST

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
Galatians 2:20

Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.
1 Corinthians 6:17 NRSV

There's a big difference between a Post-It note and superglue: the one is easily detachable, the other is an indissoluble bond.

Paul is writing to people who think sex is like a Post-It note. The Corinthians are assuming that you can have sex with a series of partners, and how true that is of our own world too, at least in Westernised society. He is saying in the most forceful terms: no, when you have sexual relations you are not only forming a temporary bodily bond with another person, something else is happening at the level of the human spirit. Two people are supergluing themselves together to become 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). A new union, a new entity has been formed.

This happens whether one is a Christian or not. But if I am a Christian, if I have become joined to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith, I have become 'one spirit with him.' A new person has been formed, who is Christ-in-me. I'm not on my own any more. The God of love has moved in to stay permanently with me (John 14:23); the Holy Spirit has united with my human spirit to make a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul sees this not just as a helpful idea, but as theological truth affecting moral behaviour. God is forming a new kind of people for himself, who think and behave differently, who *are* different, from their contemporaries. He says, if you commit to Jesus Christ as Lord today, you and he walk around Corinth tomorrow together as one. A new person has arrived on the block.

I will need to review all my relationships in the light of this radical teaching. Take me as I am, Lord, and make me all your own.

4:4 TWO NATURES

The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Galatians 5:17

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.
1 John 3:9

If I have been 'born of God,' that is, if I have received Jesus as Saviour and Lord and have become a new person through the Holy Spirit, how come I still find the old tendency to do what I want, to have what I desire and to be the most important person in my life and thinking?

During World War II many people were recruited as double agents: they appeared to be operating for one side while really working for the other. When we transfer from the 'dominion of darkness' to 'the kingdom of God's beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13), are we in effect adopting a dual role or even suffering a split personality?

Quite the opposite. When Christ comes into my life, he unifies my personality under his Lordship, enabling me to do what I found impossible before, like loving others, forgoing personal pride and having relationships without seeking my own pleasure or profit.

Nevertheless, he does not magically transform me into a sinless saint. 'Anti-God energy remains in the Christian's spiritual system,' says J I Packer, 'and the battle against its manifold forms of expression is lifelong.' So the Psalmist prays, 'Do not take your Holy Spirit from me I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (Psalm 51:11, 119:11). The word and the Spirit are decisive in this conflict. They are the dependable allies of the will.

I sometimes feel a complete fraud in this area of thoughts and attitudes. But the Lord, who knows me so well, is the one who 'forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases' (Psalm 103:3). Praise him!

4:5 CONSCIENCE

I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit. *Romans 9:1*

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. *Hebrews 10:22*

How do we deal with a guilty conscience? What if we are aware of a little voice niggling away inside us, constantly reminding us that we've done something wrong or need to put something right?

One way is to squash it, suppress it, pretend it's not there. This can happen when the alarm clock goes off in the morning. We were having such a delicious sleep, such an intriguing dream – if we ignore the bleeper long enough it will turn itself off and we can carry on where we left off.

Luther, urged to abandon his 'heretical' views at the Reichstag at Worms in 1519, said famously: 'My conscience is bound in the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to act against conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen.'

Conscience and the Holy Spirit are not quite the same thing, but they can be powerful allies against giving in to dodgy practices or plausible arguments. The more we obey our consciences, the more clearly we will hear the Holy Spirit telling us what is the will of God in a given situation.

What if we start praying and our conscience brings up a list of reasons why God can't possibly listen to us? This is where 'sprinkling' is such good news: it refers to the constant stream of forgiveness and mercy that pours from Christ's cross, like a cleansing shower that keeps us clean in God's sight.

This encouragement in Hebrews deals with three fears I have when I pray: (i) that I am not being sincere enough, (ii) that I haven't got enough faith and (iii) that I'm not clean in God's sight. No – the same Spirit who inspired these words then, invites me to be confident before God now.

4:6 FLESH AND SPIRIT

If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. *Romans 8:13*

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. *Galatians 5:24*

The Romans had no pity. They crucified the 6000 slaves who had rebelled with Spartacus, lining the Appian Way with crosses for mile after mile. In the film they had stood up one after another and said, 'I am Spartacus.' Now they all suffered the same fate as he did.

What is 'the flesh'? It can refer to our human body, which is a good gift of God. But more often it is the rebel principle of human nature, which rejects the will of God and substitutes our own self-will.

When I became a Christian, I was baptised into Christ. This wasn't just a gateway ritual making me a church member. Paul explains in Romans 6 that baptism was uniting me in a fundamental way with Christ in his death so that the old 'I' could be buried and I would rise again as a new person, no longer under the iron rule of sin.

There was no mercy for any follower of Spartacus. They followed him blindly and paid the penalty. But this is gloriously not God's sentence on those who declare allegiance to his Son. 'Mercy there was great and grace was free.' Instead of death, eternal life; instead of corruption, wholeness; instead of slavery, freedom.

Now here is the mystery. The flesh is dead, it received its lethal injection at the cross. But it will still be giving us trouble until the moment we die physically. To his dying breath Jesus was tempted. We remain vulnerable like him.

This is why I need the ministry of the Holy Spirit, day in and day out. I need his strength to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to lead a Christlike and self-controlled life (Titus 2:12). I can't crucify the flesh by myself. But I can say 'Yes' to the Spirit of Christ in me, whose service is perfect freedom.