

## 5:1 HOLY THROUGH AND THROUGH

**May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.**

*1 Thessalonians 5:23-24*

**Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.** *Galatians 5:16-17*

Last night the TV showed us a mother sea-bird tumbling down a cliff with her five fledglings into a raging sea. She was obeying the powerful call of her nature to swim to an island, but the attempt was too much for the little ones. One was carried off by a large bird, the rest drowned as they were carried helplessly back and forth by the waves. She ended up on the beach bereft and alone. The documentary didn't tell us whether she made it across herself.

We all know Christians who have started out strongly but then packed it in. Are we guaranteed to make it to the final prizegiving day? Or is it frankly a lottery? If God has promised to see us through, do we just sit back and let him get on with it – and if he doesn't, it wasn't our fault?

This is where the work of the Spirit combines with our active trust in the Bible's promises. We have been thrown into the turbulent seas of moral choice and spiritual conflict, and we must battle it out. But we are not on our own. We have a God-given life principle within us, what John Owen calls 'the principle of a new nature'. We cooperate with this power, this Person, by depending on his word.

*As usual, I've been getting it wrong. I've allowed myself to feel defeated. If I've messed up, forgiveness and restoration are there at hand (1 John 1:9). I now need to get up and go on. Not in my own strength, but relying totally on the truth of his word and the presence of his Spirit. Otherwise I could end up permanently out of commission.*

## 5:2 DEAD OR ALIVE?

**The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.** *Romans 8:6*

**You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** *Ephesians 4:22-24*

Old attitudes run deep. After the liberation of Auschwitz 300 homeless children were brought to Windermere in the English Lake District; their prison camp clothes were burnt and they were given new disinfected outfits. But it took far longer to change their basic mindset, which had been to live for themselves and to suspect and hate everybody else. In the end that miracle happened too.

When Legion, the poor fellow possessed by a whole host of powerful demons, meets Jesus among the tombs by the lake, he resists violently. But then the spirits are cast out into the pigs (not the only mysterious feature of this account) and the man ends up 'sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind' (Luke 8:35).

How do I change who I am and what I really think? Answer: by being governed by the Spirit and being taught by Christ. These apparently two different 'agencies' are really the same. It is Jesus, not we, who casts out the old fleshly spirit and renews our minds with his sane and reviving word.

But if Jesus has cast out my former fleshly spirit, why am I still tempted by my old 'deceitful desires'? Answer: because they are deceitful. I don't have to obey them any longer, because Jesus is now my Lord, not them. This is why changing my clothes (which means having new attitudes to God, money, relationships, personal image, success) is a constant, deliberate act of faith.

*Lord, you know how deep my attitudes run. If I still need demons casting out, you must do it. Help me to go with your Spirit and think according to your word. Clothe me in the life and peace you promise.*

### 5:3 WINNING THROUGH

**As for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might.**

*Micah 3:8*

**You, dear children, are from God, and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.**

*1 John 4:4*

It must have been really frustrating to be Ben-Hadad, king of ancient Aram (modern Syria). Every time you invade Israel with a huge army, they turn out with a pathetic contingent 'like two small flocks of goats' (1 Kings 20:27) and you end up defeated. What is their secret?

The Philistines had the same problem. Their giant champion Goliath gets felled by a teenage boy. Their massive hordes are struck by panic and start cutting each other down, even though it's only Jonathan and his armour-bearer. The secret? 'Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few' (1 Samuel 14:6). Numbers simply don't count; having God on your side does.

David sings, 'With my God I can scale a wall' (Psalm 18:29). Micah had a farming background, but he could denounce the social injustice and top-down corruption of the whole nation. John, imprisoned on a small island, had a vision of the final victory of the Lamb.

To know the indwelling power of Christ isn't to achieve instant triumph. It may mean winning through after a long struggle against enormous odds. We are part of a team of fragile and fallible human beings who are called to stand against massive forces of evil. Yet the Spirit promises: 'To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations' (Revelation 2:26).

*'The battle is not yours, but God's' (2 Chronicles 20:15). 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31). The one who is in me is superior to anything the enemy can throw at me. One day I will know why it has all been so hard.*

### 5:4 THE LIVING GOD

**You are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.**

*2 Corinthians 3:3*

**We are the temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'**

*2 Corinthians 6:16*

Letters can bring bad news or good news. A young friend of ours has just received a rejection letter from the university of his choice. 'You showed great strengths etc, but other candidates were more consistently successful at interview.' Contrast that with a text message from Australia announcing the safe arrival of a new granddaughter in the family. Disappointing or joyful, the words themselves had to be believed.

Paul's credentials as a minister of Christ were being challenged by people in Corinth, so he produced the irrefutable evidence of the Corinthian church themselves, as his letter of recommendation. The good news wasn't a system or a set of ideas, it was people whose identity had been changed by the Spirit of Christ.

The description of God as 'the living God' recurs throughout the Bible. David confronts Goliath because he has 'defied the armies of the living God' (1 Samuel 17:36). Peter acknowledges Jesus as 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16:16). Paul commends the Thessalonians because they have 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

If each Christian is a 'temple of the living God', this must affect my attitude to my body and how I make use of it. It is not just mine to do what I like with, it is a walking recommendation for Christ.

*The Psalmist sings: 'My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God' (Psalm 84:2). If I am made in the image of God, I am shaped to be possessed and indwelt by him. I am a letter from the living God, who is inscribing his character on my heart by his Spirit. How legible am I?*

## 5:5 SEXUAL MORALITY

**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 4:7-8*

**Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.**

*Romans 13:14*

My laptop computer had gone completely dead, wouldn't respond to any key I pressed. Leads and connections were all in order. Then I remembered. 'Take out the battery, wait a moment or two, reinsert it.' I did, and there it was working as before.

It was a question of recalling instructions I'd been given, but had forgotten or disregarded in the pressure of the moment. So too with sex. The Maker's instructions are clear enough, but emotional or other pressures may cause us to ignore, override or just plain forget them. The consequences can be serious, ending in total wipe-out.

Augustine, brought up by a Christian mother in North Africa, had gone to university in Rome. Standards in the city were not what they had been at home and the youthful scholar was swept into a maelstrom of promiscuity, bringing him to the point of nervous breakdown. He heard a child's voice singing 'Open the Book!' so he picked up Paul's letter to the Romans and came across the passage quoted above. The Spirit switched on and light flooded in.

We get into trouble when we set aside God's declared will or deliberately plot mental pathways to achieve gratification. Opening the word, 'putting on Christ', handing back control to the Spirit, are proven means of rebooting the mechanism, so to speak.

*Yes, I constantly need resetting to the clear voice and bracing fresh air of Christ's call. Augustine was salvaged to a life of supreme usefulness and influence. His mother Monica and his friend Alypius had both been praying helplessly. God provided him with a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). He can do the same for me.*

## 5:6 OBEDIENCE

**Your teachings are wonderful; I obey them with all my heart.**

*Psalms 119:129*

**Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.**

*Romans 8:5*

Having Jesus to stay was always a delight for Martha and Mary. The trouble was, Mary was just sitting there at Jesus' feet dreamily soaking in his every word, while Martha was bustling round getting the lunch ready. 'Lord, tell her to come and help!' 'Sorry, Martha, she's made the right choice' (Luke 10:38-42). What exactly is going on here?

Jesus isn't exalting the contemplative life over the practical. Even in nunneries and monasteries there are jobs to be done for the sake of the community. Yet for someone like Brother Lawrence the supreme goal was to 'practise the presence of Christ' in whatever he did. It was to train himself in the conscious awareness of his Saviour, to whom he owed total obedience and in whose will he found his highest delight. This is living 'in accordance with the Spirit.'

The Spirit isn't like a comfortable armchair where we can avoid the hard grind of the day. He often presents us with difficult choices that have to be wrestled with. We may try to escape his demands by frenetic activity. But all the time he is seeking to align us with the will of God where we find our greatest joy and happiness.

So it is, or should be, with my relationship to Christ. The trouble is, I have pampered my self-will for so long that I can't understand how doing what he wants could be more pleasant than doing what I want. 'Take up your cross and follow me!' How could that be more satisfying than my natural inclination to opt for the easy life?

*Lord, what is your word and your will for me today? There are lots of things needing to be done, and other people to relate to. If only I had a Holy Spirit app which I could plug into my mindset and get perfectly aligned with you! Mmm. Perhaps I have. Is it activated?*