

Lay Aside Every Weight

Overcoming The Difficulties and Sins That Hinder Christian Growth



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Table of Contents

About the Author	7
Introduction	9
GROWTH IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE	11
Pursue Growth for God's Glory	13
Recognize God's Work in Your Growth	20
THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD	27
Dismiss the Winds of Doctrine	29
Abandon Your Worldly Pursuits	34
Cling to the Saints	41
THE WEIGHT OF THE FLESH	47
Rekindle the Flame	49
Set Your Desires on True Satisfaction	54
THE WEIGHT OF THE ENEMY	60
Understand Your Enemy	61
THE WEIGHT OF GLORY	68
Finish The Course	69

To my great Savior and King, may this work be glorifying to You

To my bride, my lily among the thorns, thank you for your support and love

About the Author

Bob Dillon Argenbright was saved from his sin by the grace and mercy of God in 2010. He enjoys spending time with his beloved wife, Jessica, and their three children. Bob loves the outdoors, going hiking, and exploring God's wondrous creation. He also delights in spending time studying God's Word and reading heaps of books written by old dead guys who loved God greatly (like the Puritans). Bob serves currently as a Community Group leader at Faith Bible Church in Murrieta, CA. He is engaged actively in shepherding and discipleship.

Introduction

“How did I get here?” This is the question we sometimes ask ourselves after we have fallen into the trap of sin. We look back at the last few months, even years, and see that we have not grown at all, but instead have become stagnant, like the stale water of a dammed up creek. You struggle with the same old sins. No fervency for the Lord. No furthering of your understanding or love for His Word. No great working of God in your life (that you can see). You may have even, at some point, asked yourself, “Am I really a Christian?”

Maybe you need to ask yourself this question. In 2 Peter 1, Peter addresses those who do not pursue the character of godliness, who do not have a fervent love for God and His Word, and he refers to them as either “blind” or “short-sighted.” Blindness refers to a lack of saving faith. They are dead in their sins, and blind to their own helpless state. The short-sighted are those who have been saved, they know God’s grace and kindness, yet have been distracted and forgotten their Savior. In this book, we are addressing both the short-sighted and the blind. The short-sighted are being hindered in their race, and they likely do not even see it.

Hebrews 12:1-3 gives us an incredible exhortation and action plan for weathering the storms of trial and tribulation, and I believe it is a foundational passage to consider in the light of Christian growth. The author of the letter to the Hebrews addresses the problem of enduring under suffering and persecution, and builds upon this hill of suffering a need for striving against sin, and therefore growing up into godliness, to the point of remembering that God our Father will discipline those He loves so that we would grow mature in Christ and run our race unhindered.

So embark on a journey with me to discover the things that are holding you back! God desires that we would “be holy as He is holy” (Leviticus 19:11) and “walk in a manner worthy of Him” (Colossians 1:10), which requires constant growth! He is faithful to cause us to grow, but we must also be faithful to walk in obedience. As you read this book, make sure you are praying for growth and looking for any and every way to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Christ. If you read this book with any other attitude, you will likely be irked or offended by the content. There is no easy way to grow in Christlikeness but to consider your old self crucified with Christ and to continually put on the new self in righteousness and holiness of truth (Ephesians 4:24).

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Edition.

PART I

GROWTH IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Chapter 1

Pursue Growth for God's Glory



For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ~ Colossians 1:9–10

May every part of my character and conduct make a serious and amiable impression on others, and impel them to ask the way to the Master. ~ The Valley of Vision

Years ago I severely fractured my ankle and was forced to rest it for weeks before I could get into surgery. Finally, a successful surgery came and went, and I was again required to rest for six weeks before I could have the cast removed. After the cast removal came several months of strenuous therapy and painful exercises to build strength, with the end goal and purpose of regaining normal mobility. The many months of toil felt useless. I felt as if I would never regain my former strength. However, the day finally came when I was able to walk without a limp and to run without reservation because the bones and muscles had fully healed. The growth that occurred in my once-broken bones and atrophied muscles produced the satisfying fruit of a steadfast stride. Growth was the necessary means to produce the necessary result.

The growth that God calls us to, growth in Christlikeness and holiness, produces in us an even greater and more glorious result; this result, with the most noble and significant purpose of all—to glorify the King. This, in fact, is the purpose and design of all mankind. The Westminster Shorter Catechism phrases it in this way¹:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

God's children are called to be conformed to the image of God, bound to His standard of holiness, for His glory:

¹ Westminster Assembly, Douglas F. Kelly, Philip B. Rollinson, and Frederick T. Marsh. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1986.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:14–16)

As we await the day when we are transformed and brought into God’s presence for all eternity, we are to grow into the image and character of God as an act of obedience to Him. It is an overflow of our desire for Him that we would walk in obedience and grow in Christ. The bad news is that we cannot, alone, cause ourselves to grow. In Colossians 1, Paul’s prayer for the church in Colossae is revealed to us. He does not pray that they would fill *themselves* with all spiritual wisdom, but instead he prays and asks:

*...that [they] **may be filled** with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...*
(Colossians 1:9)

And again, he prays that they would be:

*...strengthened with all power, **according to His glorious might**, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience. (Colossians 1:11)*

We are to *be filled with knowledge*, emphasizing that we cannot fill ourselves with the understanding of God, and we are to *be strengthened with all power*, but we do not strengthen ourselves, we are strengthened in God’s glorious might. True growth is only possible when the inadequate, insufficient, incapable sinner is changed by the infinite power and inexplicable work of God. Never will we be able to boast in our own efforts because our deeds are as filthy rags before the living, holy, and sovereign God (Isaiah 64:6). That is the “bad news,” in a way, but there is also good news!

Good News for You: the Gospel

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12–14)

Before we can experience growth in Christ-likeness, we must first be made new, we must be born again (John 3:1-21), and that requires first that we know what the gospel means. Simply, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news; it is the good news that the Sovereign God of all creation condescended to redeem His people, who have all sinned and fallen short of His glory (Romans 3:23). But, a glorious truth as this cannot be left to simplified definitions. We must grasp and fully live in light of this gospel. As all things do, let’s begin with God.

There is one God, holy and righteous, sovereign and supreme over all creation. He has always existed, having neither beginning nor end (Psalms 90:2). He is the source of all things and is infinite in power and wisdom. His glory shines throughout all of His creation and therefore, as we have seen the works of His hands, we have seen Him and known of Him (Psalms 19:1).

After God created all things, mankind turned against his Maker. Adam, as the representative for man, violated the perfect Law of God in the Garden of Eden. Man was created in innocence, but chose sin over God, and is now by nature a prisoner of sin, the “domain of darkness” (Colossians 1:12), and subject to the due penalty of his error. This does not mean that Adam is the cause of our sin, for Scripture clearly shows us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23), but it is his representation that failed. This failed representation in Adam points to the perfect representative that we needed in Christ.

Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless Son of God, bore the sins of His people on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). He has broken the power of sin and darkness, taken the sting away from death, and achieved victory over the grave (1 Corinthians 15:55). This victory has provided a way for us to be reconciled with Him (2 Corinthians 5:18). Christ alone is able to rescue us out of our sinful estate. Christ alone is sufficient to be our substitute, mediator, and advocate. Thus, salvation is granted by God as you place your trust completely in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross as your substitute; it is a work of God alone in the heart of sinful man, which brings Him the ultimate glory. He is glorified when His lost children are brought home.

Then those lost children, the sinners who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, are given the gift of faith and made new (Ephesians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18). All of their sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven. They are washed in the blood of Jesus, which cleanses them from all sin (1 John 1:7). They are given the grace and power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within to then live under the sovereign rule and supremacy of Jesus. They love God (Matthew 22:37), they delight in His Law (Psalms 119:47), and they pattern their life after His commandments (John 14:15). This is not merely a philosophical redirection, but a veritable dedication to Christ and His Kingdom; it is a life now entirely lived for God and His glory.

Persevere in Your Pursuit

...if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (Colossians 1:21–23)

A prominent mark of the true Christian is a continual and ever-increasing submission to Christ in all aspects of life. As Lord and Savior, Christ demands and deserves complete devotion from His people. We are no longer slaves of sin, but slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18). We exist for Him and we exist through Him (1 Corinthians 8:6). We are a people for His own possession, and we have been set apart so that we would proclaim the excellence of His Name (1 Peter 2:9). We must, therefore, “continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast” to bring Him glory.

By continuing in the faith, growing in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, we prove that our foundation is in fact Christ. Our faith is firmly established in Him, and we are able to proclaim Him and His excellencies all the more thoroughly. We must set out to achieve “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13), which requires perseverance through trial and tragedy. As believers, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to this end, rendering our efforts no longer fruitless, but fruitful. Conversely, a falling away from the faith is the mark of a false conversion—one who is Christian by profession only. Scripture identifies these as the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), they mimic Christ’s people, but they are lost. Christians by profession only. John says that if those who profess to believe turn away from the faith, they were never truly saved to begin with (1 John 2:19).

Therefore, true Christians are not those who just profess to know Christ, but who persevere in pursuing God and His glory. They “seek His face continually” (1 Chronicles 16:11). This pursuit necessitates effort on our part.

Get Going

*so that you will **walk in a manner worthy** of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, **bearing fruit** in every good work and **increasing in the knowledge of God**.* (Colossians 1:10)

We are obligated to remember that though we cannot grow without the sovereign grace and orchestration of God, it is necessary that we work towards our own growth while relying on His strength (Philippians 2:13). We need to understand where sinful tendencies remain, and then move towards God, knowing that He will complete the work He has begun (Philippians 1:6). We must plot a path towards growth, and faithfully walk in it.

In the remainder of this volume, we will focus on the hindrances to our growth, but we must have a firm grasp on the purpose and practicality of Christian growth first. It is possible for us to summarize these areas of growth into a few broad categories. These generalities are helpful for setting goals, marking growth, and

recognizing the Lord's hand at work in our lives. They may also serve for you as indicators of a wayward heart. Render them useful, not useless, as you consider your own growth in Christ.

Grow in Maturity

...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. (Colossians 1:10)

Maturity in Christ is the pinnacle of Christian growth. The very purpose of our existence is to bring God glory, and as previously stated, God is ultimately glorified in our growth and conformation to His will. When we grow in love for God and the knowledge of Him, we are then equipped to live according to His will and must, by way of our transformation, delight in what is good, acceptable, and perfect (Romans 12:2). Therefore, our growth in Christ will require growth in character and knowledge, which culminates in our walking in a manner worthy of the Lord and pleasing Him in all respects. This growth is otherwise defined as spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not superficial; it is not just our outward deeds that change, but more importantly our heart meditations, disposition, and inner desires. The entirety of the Christian must be continually conformed to the image of Christ. God has chosen men to lead the church who will aid believers in pursuing this very goal, which is God's glory in our reflection of Christ:

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)

Grow in Character

...bearing fruit in every good work. (Colossians 1:10)

It was Charles Spurgeon who said, "Doctrines in the head, without holiness in the life, are of no service." (Spurgeon 1910). Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord and growing into a mature believer means we should be bearing fruit. True growth in Christ will, by necessity, produce growth in godly character. God is glorified and delighted when His children "walk in the truth with all their heart and with all their soul" (1 Kings 2:4). To walk in the truth is to be practically producing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), obeying the Law of God (Ezekiel 18:9), and striving after holiness and purity of heart (James 4:8). The heart that has been made new by God beats for Him and for His glory (Ezekiel 36:26-27) and must not settle for anything less than God's standard of perfection, which is His own holiness.

Each day we are challenged to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4), letting go of anything and everything we desire that is not in accordance with the will of God. There is no aspect of the Christian life wherein our character escapes refinement. Our speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12) are all beacons of light, revealing to the world the Redeemer, the Creator, the One who has saved our souls and calls all men to repent. A Christian who does not pursue growth in godly character is a Christian by name only, and has not understood the kindness of God (1 Peter 2:2-3). Along with bearing fruit for His glory, we must also grow in knowing our God whom we serve.

Grow in Knowledge

...increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:10)

You may not think of yourself as the most educated or knowledgeable, but we are all to be students of God, for God is the greatest topic that can be studied. As we study our Father, we will become like Him and we will thirst for Him all the more (Psalm 63:1). He has given His Word to us as the primary gift of grace in our growth in knowledge, which helps to satisfy this thirst for Him, but the thirst will not be fully quenched until we are with Him in glory. Those who truly believe in Him have been born again and given a gift that will cause them to see, understand, and long for His Word. This gift is the Spirit of God within, who reveals to us the truths of God (1 Corinthians 2:2). There is no greater knowledge, no higher experience, than to know God through His Word.

As we embark on the journey through the remainder of this work, and the laying aside of the weights that hinder our pursuit of God, keep your eyes fixed on growing in Christ, knowing Him, and desiring Him all the more for His glory.

Reflection Questions

1. Does your pursuit of growth in Christ match how Paul describes the Christian life in Colossians 1:9-10?

Chapter 2

Recognize God's Work in Your Growth



So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. ~ Philippians 2:12-13

*Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?
Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil. ~ Jeremiah 13:23*

In American culture, there is a terrible lie that says you have in yourself all the power you need to do whatever it is you want to do. This self-help and empowerment rhetoric is in line with the religion of the new age which makes humans out to be “gods” who contain infinite cosmic power, yet have to run through rituals and jump through hoops in order to tap into this power. This lie is in direct contrast to everything that God says about humanity and sin. As Jeremiah 13 states, we are only capable in ourselves to do what we do naturally, that which emanates out of our sinful nature. The leopard cannot change his spots, and neither can humans free themselves from their own sin.

We must be keenly aware of the fact that we are dependent upon God to produce any good fruit; the fruit of righteousness and the fruit of repentance are all works of His hand sovereignly orchestrating our good and His glory. Even as we seek to honor Him by studying His Word, praying fervently, and pursuing Christ-likeness, it is God who in fact grants the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7), and it is He who deserves all the glory for what He has done in and through us (1 Corinthians 15:10). But how does He perform this work within us? What means has He provided for this growth to happen to us? It is our greatest delight and joy to see the fruit of the Father's hand, but there is much work the Father does in pruning the branches of His vine for maximum produce. So our first task is to understand God's power to change.

By What Power?

It is God who is at work in you... (Philippians 2:12)

In a word, it is God's power that changes us, as has already been stated, but this needs to be explored a bit before we can expand on the resources which God uses alongside His raw power. Even though we are responsible to work and to wrestle with our growth, God is the only capable executor of sanctification in

the Christian life. As Paul stated clearly when defending the truths of the cross and the fruit which it has thus produced:

*“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, **yet not I, but the grace of God with me.**”* (1 Corinthians 15:10, emphasis mine)

We are only able to perform the will of God by the grace that He has given to us. A large majority of the grace He has given to us is through His own Spirit who indwells believers. In Acts 1:8, Jesus announces God’s plan for empowering His disciples:

*but **you will receive power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.* (emphasis mine)

God’s Spirit is the source of our growth, as He is also the source of our creation, regeneration, disbursement of gifts, etc. This is the power which God has promised to His people that enables us to live for Him (Ezekiel 36:26), to walk in His ways, and to be shaped into the image of Christ. It does not stop there though. The Bible tells us that we are changed by the Spirit working within, but also that God has prepared several means in conjunction with the Spirit’s work to spur us on towards godliness.

God’s Means for Our Growth

God has planned and ordained our growth, even from before the foundations of the earth, just as He has planned and ordained our salvation by faith in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). God has promised and is undoubtedly faithful to complete the work that He began in each one of us (Philippians 1:6). This work is the work of sanctification. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism², sanctification practically would be understood as:

the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

This definition contains within it two key concepts which mirror the use of the term “sanctification” in Scripture. It will be helpful for us to understand these uses for this term before we go any further.

² Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Q.35

The first use of “sanctification” is positional sanctification. It is positional because it entails an immediate change of position before God. This is how it is used in the Old Testament, and this pattern continues in the New Testament concept of regeneration and new birth. Positional sanctification could be defined as “the act of setting something or someone apart for a particular purpose.” God firmly established in the Old Testament that His covenant people Israel had been set apart as holy unto Him (Leviticus 20:26). The Sabbath day was set apart as holy (Exodus 20:8), the tabernacle was “sanctified,” or set apart (Exodus 40:9), and Mount Sinai was sanctified (Exodus 19:23). Even Jesus Himself is said to be sanctified—set apart by God for a special, glorious purpose. God has performed this work through the Holy Spirit in every believer upon conversion. 1 Corinthians 6 contrasts sanctification with the nature of our life before Christ:

Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Progressive sanctification would then be the latter aspect of this definition, which is being *continually* set apart unto God. This is the daily experience of our growth as we are further set apart from the world and increasingly live unto righteousness. This aspect of sanctification is where we will focus. The weights that hinder us in our Christian life affect our daily growth but have absolutely no effect on the once-for-all positional sanctification that God has accomplished for us.

So with this understanding of sanctification, we can now look to the ways in which God accomplishes growth in His people. This will be foundational as we begin carving out a path that helps us avoid the deceitfulness of sin and lay aside the weights that hinder us in our race.

The Helper and Teacher

The primary way God produces this growth in us is through the conviction and teaching of the Holy Spirit who indwells us (1 John 2:27) and who continually works to conform us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:13). The Spirit of God, as the means of our sanctification, uses various tools to shape us into Christ’s image.

The Piercing of the Sword

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

God continually uses conviction from His Word as a primer for Spirit-led growth. This “piercing” is the necessary incision that causes the greatest good with the least collateral. In other words, Word cuts directly to the heart. The Word “restores the soul” (Psalms 19:7), it “makes wise the simple” and “enlightens the eyes” (Psalms 19:8). In the light of the Spirit’s quickening (1 Corinthians 2:12), God’s Word accomplishes all it has set out to do (Isaiah 55:11), and becomes the very necessary guide for every Christian (Joshua 1:8; Psalms 119:105).

The Faithful Wounds of a Friend

Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it, For still my prayer is against their wicked deeds. (Psalm 141:5)

Thirdly is the sharpening from other believers through Christ-centered relationships. The key result of “teaching and admonishing one another” (Colossians 3:16) is that we would grow to be more like Christ. Sometimes the truth that is spoken in order to achieve this goal is hard to hear, but this is the nature of how iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). It files off a little bit, sparks fly every direction, from each side, and it continually reshapes it until it is effectively sharpened.

The Testing of Trials and Suffering

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4)

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you can attest to the power of trial and suffering to reshape your heart and mind. The burdens we bear cause us to come to the feet of the King and lay them down, for His burden is easy and His yoke is light (Matthew 11:30). We exchange the weight of our burdens for the peace that exists in His perfect care. Yet through those burdens we carry (in His strength) we come to learn valuable lessons and, as James says, our testing actually produces good fruit; it produces endurance. Endurance will be the key to our finishing the race and receiving at the end the crown of life (James 1:12). Paul also attests to this in Romans 5:3-5, that because of what Christ has done we are able to rejoice in our tribulations because it produces “proven character.” Isn’t this our hope, that we would grow steadfast and mature in Christ and display then Christlike character in His service? So then we need trials, and God plans them to be used for the edification of His church.

Suffering similarly awakens in us a need and desperation for God. We are always dependent upon Him, but suffering drives us further and more humbly to the throne of grace as we search for His good hand of mercy. God has planned these moments of suffering for His purposes, and though we may not find full relief from them, we will find God to be a solid refuge in the storm (Psalm 46:1) and a source of strength for us, even unto the development of our own character and convictions:

And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9–10)

So do not then go about your daily activity without recognizing and rejoicing in God’s means for your growth. As you read the Word and hear it preached, you will be convicted by the power of the Spirit. As you interact with other believers, you will be encouraged, confronted, and sharpened, into a useful tool for the Master. As you persevere through trial, you will be drawn into a deeper intimacy with the God of your salvation. He is always about equipping us to walk in the good works which He has prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10), and we must run to Him and receive every daily mercy He offers. In every single one of these moments where He is refining us He promises to provide the grace we need to carry on (Hebrews 4:16). This daily sanctification and growth in Christ works to change and transform us for acceptable service to Him.

Reflection Questions

1. There is a tension that exists in Philippians 2:12-13 where God and man are both responsible for the work in a Christian’s growth. How can you practically depend on the Lord, while also taking steps towards growth?
2. Romans chapter eight provides several examples of the Spirit’s work in our lives. Read through the entire chapter slowly, noting along the way the examples given. How does this explanation of the Spirit’s work encourage you to keep growing in Christ?

PART 2

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

Chapter 3

Dismiss the Winds of Doctrine



As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. ~ Ephesians 4:14–15

The very first principle we must discuss that hinders us from growth in Christ is the debilitating effect of false teaching and errant doctrine. Without the anchor of sound doctrine, Ephesians four tells us that we will be like “children, tossed here and there.” Children are naive, they are easily convinced, and they lack the judgment to be able to stand firmly on truth. Matthew Henry commented that “they are like ships without ballast, and carried about, like clouds in the air, with such doctrines as have no truth nor solidity in them, but nevertheless spread themselves far and wide, and are therefore compared to wind.”³ We must take heed so as to avoid being “carried about,” and instead to be fully anchored in the truth.

The world is full of ideas contrary to the gospel, philosophies that stand juxtaposed to the sound doctrine of Scripture. Because of this, the world and its erroneous thinking, trickery, and craftiness, may easily become one of our greatest stumbling blocks. Paul’s warning to the Colossians stands as a critical reminder to us today of the deceptiveness of the world:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

So where do we begin? How do we battle worldly error and grow in knowledge? We must first know what sound doctrine is and then begin to acquire it and put it into action.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*. January 1, 1710.

What Is Doctrine?

holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1:9)

When we speak of doctrine, some Christians may get frustrated or nervous. In the broad realm of Christendom there has been an intense reaction against doctrine from our generation. Many congregations saw the legalistic bent of churches who emphasized knowing the Bible, and so they turned away from it altogether and emphasized the spiritual experience over knowledge. They took the relational and familial aspects of Christianity and left the theology to be dealt with in the seminaries. This has created many churches where the environment is seemingly loving, yet there is almost no knowledge of God. We must be very careful to hold in proper balance the necessity of both faith and works, knowledge and duty, learning and loving.

Doctrine is simply a set of teachings for instruction in a certain discipline. For us as Christians, we are concerned about biblical doctrine. Biblical doctrine refers to all that God has desired us to know as He has revealed it through His Word.

The Word of God

Since biblical doctrine is rooted in the Bible, “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) being brought to bear on our souls, we must be reminded why the Bible is so critical to our growth. God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalms 119:105), and it is profitable “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible is the collection of God’s words “breathed out” by Him for our instruction. Since 2 Peter 1:20 affirms that “no prophecy is a matter of one’s own interpretation,” we know that God has determined for us to seek to understand the one proper interpretation of His Word--what He meant by what He said--so that we may be instructed, led, and nourished by it. God’s Word is the refuge that keeps us from the worldly philosophies that entice the hearts of men. Store up God’s Word in your heart so that you may identify these counterfeit teachings and avoid being led away by the alluring appearance of such damning deception.

False teaching comes in many forms, and it is helpful to know its common features so that we may identify it more easily. We are concerned with the destructive result of these teachings, but we must also

be familiar with the subtle ways they begin to betray and lead astray. We must observe the philosophies of men in contrast with the pure doctrine of God.

Philosophies for Every Desire

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires. (2 Timothy 4:3)

There is, for every desire in a man's heart, a philosophy or worldview that matches that desire. This is what Paul warned about in 2 Timothy 4. The imagination of man can conjure any deity of his liking, and these idols become the deadly mascots of destructive worldviews. There will be times where even those who claim to be part of the body, the "members" whose desire is not for God but for themselves and their own benefit, will produce their own version of god. They will "accumulate for themselves," or gather together and submit themselves to, teachers who spoon-feed them what they desire instead of God's Word. Herein lies the great danger, not that the teachers appear and lead many astray, (though this also will happen) but that accumulating error begins with your own straying mind and wayward desires. Like a ship on the open sea, the further we drift off course the easier it is to remain there. A ship that begins to sail even a few degrees from its charted course will soon find itself many miles from where it should be. Without the corrective rudder of biblical doctrine, drifting from the truth will be welcomed and celebrated in the church. Therefore, we must keep an eye on the desires of our hearts and make sure they are aligned with our Father's heart and what He has promised in His Word.

Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

If we do not delight ourselves in the Lord, we will by nature give in to our inward-focused desires and gather together all of the necessary ingredients for a "me" centered theology.

A "Me" Centered Theology

wanting to have their ears tickled...

The captivating nature of worldly ideas lies in their appeal to our sinful desires. We take the spotlight off of God and put it on ourselves. We have very little thought about God and increasingly large thoughts of ourselves. Oftentimes all it takes is for us to hear something that comforts or excites us, that tickles our ears, and we will completely overlook the emptiness of its promises because it has resonated with us as

something we desired, something that we desperately hoped to be true. The Greek word used in this passage gives the sense of an itching, a burning need, something so relevant and important to us that we must give it our attention. This temptation to believe lies that serve our desires can carry us away and entice us (James 1:14). Like a moth to the flame, we are captivated by them. Yet, as new creatures in Christ, believers are given the confidence to “make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:14) and instead to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” for whom we have been set apart to serve, to follow, and to pledge all of our praise and honor to Him. The lies that appeal to our flesh are to be as dead as our old self, for “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh along with its passions and desires!” (Galatians 5:24).

A Different Gospel Entirely

...they will not endure sound doctrine.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel. (Galatians 1:6)

Besides appealing to sinful desires, the false teachings of the world succeed in deceiving immature Christians because they distort and undermine the gospel. This may come in the form of adding unnecessary requirements to salvation (Matthew 23:4; Romans 5:1), abusing the grace of God for selfish gain (Jude 4), misrepresenting the person and work of Christ (Romans 6:1), and many others. As all of Scripture is meant to testify of Christ (John 5:39), we must preserve the centrality of the gospel and hold it in proper reverence in our hearts. Each individual element of the gospel holds critical significance to the hope of the believer and must not be minimized or misused. As Romans 1:16 testifies:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The Remedy for the Unsteady

Does anyone ask me, What is the best safeguard against false doctrine? – I answer in one word, ‘The Bible: the Bible regularly read, regularly prayed over, regularly studied.’ We must go back to the old prescription of our Master: ‘Search the Scriptures.’ (John 5:39) ~ J.C. Ryle, Warnings to the Churches⁴

⁴ J. C Ryle, *Warnings To The Churches* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992).

So what do we do in response to the philosophy and empty deception of the world? How do we combat false teaching and press on towards maturity? It is by diligently seeking the Lord and knowing Him through the study of His Word and prayer. We must anchor ourselves in what He has said, since God is faithful and trustworthy in all His ways (Numbers 23:19), so that when the storms of self-delusion come we are able to stand firm on what is true. J.C. Ryle said it well that it is in the regular reading and regular study of the Word that we are then safeguarded from destructive heresies. We cannot expect an hour each week of preaching alone to form us into mature and steadfast servants of Christ. We cannot hope to develop godly character and convictions when we are saturated in the minutiae of the world but not saturated in the Word of God. Joshua, as he was being prepared to lead the Israelites into the promised land, was instructed directly by God how to accomplish the great task set before him. God's instruction centered wholly on His perfect Law:

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. (Joshua 1:8)

Therefore, we rest on the firm foundation of God's Word. Meditate on it day and night. Memorize it, and hold it closely as the only sure antidote to your afflictions. It is as the beacon of a lighthouse on the hill, keeping you from running aground upon the rocky shore, and continuously providing hope as it guides you home.

Reflection Questions

1. How should you respond when you hear something about God or His Word that seems "new" or "different"?
2. What desires keep you from embracing sound doctrine? Make a list of specific desires you hold onto and pray through them, submitting each one to God's will for you to remove ungodly desires.

3. If you are not doing this already, how are you going to start developing the habit of daily studying God's Word?

Chapter 4

Abandon Your Worldly Pursuits



For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? "For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. ~ Mark 8:35–38

If you want to be an olympic athlete, you only have one choice: you must train. You must devote your life to eating the best diet, working out everyday, getting the best coach, and giving all of your time and energy to training for the event. Unfortunately, the medals and praises of men will all fade away in the end. The world will find another star athlete, and the medals will collect dust in their display case until they waste away. What good is it to be praised by men, knowing in the end the world will go back to the way it was, and on the day of judgment, when you stand before God He will say, "Depart from Me, I never knew you..."? The pursuit of a servant of God is not based upon worldly accomplishments, but wholly to the glory of God! An athlete who competes for Christ makes every moment centered on the mission to which he has been called, and his life is not for the praises of men or the pleasures of the world, but only for His Lord and Master. He does not look unto the worldly commendations, but eagerly awaits the heavenly reward he will receive on the day he meets God face-to-face.

For many of us, our life does not look quite like this. We have normal duties, responsibilities, and desires that demand our attention every single day. Sometimes these revolve around Christ, and sometimes they revolve around us. In whatever the task or goal it is you set out to accomplish, the question you must ask is: what am I pursuing?

What Are You Pursuing?

Perhaps you are a business owner with a thriving and successful business that needs your constant attention. Maybe you are a mom who is striving for excellence in raising your kids, and your life is consumed by their needs and their achievements. While these are good goals, and can be done to the glory of God, it is more often the case that these pursuits grab hold of us rather than us pursuing them. We become

engrossed in doing whatever needs to be done to accomplish or achieve that which we set out to do. But if we are caught up in the task, then how do we continually pursue Christ?

Aside from these good goals, there are also many things you and I pursue every day that do not carry any lasting benefit for God's Kingdom. This is generally understood, but we often overlook how much these daily tasks steal our attention. Whether your goals are beneficial or not, the Bible tells us that what we pursue, and what we naturally choose to do even without purpose, reveals the inward desires and intentions of our hearts. In Matthew 15, as Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees for questioning the disciples who ate without performing the necessary cleansing (washing their hands), He says:

"...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those things defile the person."

The Pharisees should not have been worried about what was going into the mouths of the disciples, but instead they should have been concerned about the rotting rubbish of their own words and deeds which emanated from their wicked hearts. Their deeds pointed to their utter wickedness. What you and I pursue and what we desire will reveal the same about us.

In Christ, we must be hard at work rooting out unfruitful pursuits. Selfish desires must be condemned, vain idols exposed, and all of this should cause us to rejoice for the furthering of God's glory in us! In our quest to lay aside our burdens that keep us from living this life solely for Christ, we need to understand that Christ Himself and His glory are to be our goals. In your prayers, your work, your parenting, your ministry, your finances, your service, both in and outside of the church, in every moment and every mission, you must recognize your motivation and reasoning for accomplishing that goal. A true slave of Christ must do all in the name of their Master (Colossians 3:17). The goal of this discourse then is to identify a few areas where we are hindered in our attention and devotion to the Lord. A natural starting point is to look at the distraction borne from a desire for wealth.

The Lure of Worldly Treasure

Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,

Cease from your consideration of it.

When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.

For wealth certainly makes itself wings

Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens.

Proverbs 23:4–5

Let us take a look first at worldly treasure: money. Money is a defining factor for many because success in the world is often measured by the balance of your bank account. The complete portfolio of your assets may tell a lot about you, but it is not a biblical measure of success. Christ teaches in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) about the danger and emptiness of money when held and hoarded. He begins by examining the futility of building up great wealth:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19)

His initial criticism of this intention to gain wealth is based on the temporary nature of it. We have very little time on the earth; we are here one day and gone the next, as a mist that vanishes at dawn (James 4:14), and anything gained here is the same—it will all be destroyed in the end (2 Peter 3:10). Paul went so far as to say that he counted all things—accomplishments, money, and everything else—as loss in the view of the much greater value of knowing Christ.

After this, Jesus contrasts the temporary nature of the world with eternity in heaven:

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:20)

Notice the final culmination of His exhortation, where He adds the even greater purpose statement, the “why” for our building up treasure in heaven. It is not merely because of the temporary nature of the world, but because our heart will be where our treasure is.

What do you consider your greatest treasure? Is it possible that your treasure lies in something temporary, like your hobbies, your job, or your accomplishments? Listen to the final words Christ offers to us in regard to our treasure:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:19–24)

We live under the headship and authority of Christ as King. If we have been mastered, controlled, or subverted by money, we have failed to serve Christ our King, and stand guilty of idolatry. Money is said to be “the root of all sorts of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10), so be careful to examine and excise any love for worldly treasure. Lay desires for wealth aside, and put a love for the incomparable riches of Christ in its place.

The Lie of Worldly Success

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. (Ecclesiastes 9:10–12)

The British missionary to the Chinese, Charles Thomas Studd⁵, penned a famous poem:

*Two little lines I heard one day,
Traveling along life's busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart,
And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

This essentially mirrors, in a more succinct fashion, what the preacher of Ecclesiastes purposed to convey. Those who live this life pursuing all there is to pursue in the realm of worldly influence, success, power, and achievement may as well pursue it without hesitation, because the depths of Sheol await them when they are through. It is not the concern of the worldly man to consider the things of God, nor does he have time to weigh out such things, for his finish line—his end goal—is defined by the world, and he is determined to “make it.” Once you have been transformed by Christ, being washed and renewed by the waters of sanctification (Titus 3:5), you have an entirely different definition of success. Though the results of success may look similar at times, the heart and intention of it must look vastly different, as we cannot boast in anything but Christ. Give heed to the words of God from the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23–24)

⁵ C.T. Studd. *Only one Life, Twill Soon be Past*. (1860-1931)

The Christian's definition of success is radically different from the worlds. Are your goals, desires, and intentions in line with the heart of God or the nature of the world? Is your reward on earth or in heaven? Saul, before he became Paul following his salvation on the road to Damascus, was a high-ranking Pharisee. He testifies in Philippians chapter three of his varied accomplishments in the Pharisaical system:

although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (Philippians 3:4–6)

However, he condemns these accomplishments immediately after in verses seven and eight.

Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ. (Philippians 3:7–8)

There is no lasting gain outside of Christ. The burdens of worldly success, achievements, and accolades can bring even the most zealous servant of Christ to a grinding halt in their mission to serve the Lord.

The Lust of Worldly Pleasures

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (1 John 2:15–16)

We will take a deeper look at this topic later, but for now it is worth mentioning that this world, in God's grace and providential plan, does offer us many pleasures. These pleasures are not bad in themselves, but can easily become a hindrance to us if we are not careful. The book of James tells us that our pleasures are the source of our quarrels and conflicts (James 4:14). Worldly pleasures will take us places we never thought we would be. We may be deceived into depending on people instead of God. We may be lost in hopeless addiction to food/drink/substances. The remnants of our flesh and our greatest enemy, the Devil, will use anything they can to keep us from the Lord. We must know Christ, and know Him as the source of all lasting and infinite satisfaction. We must also know ourselves—our limits, our temptations, and our lusts—so we

may keep watch over ourselves, and flee from those things while looking unto Christ as our chief desire, for the Word of God testifies that in Him are pleasures forevermore (Psalms 16:11).

Fix Your Eyes on Christ

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Christ is sufficient for you. There is no greater strength for our weakness, satisfaction for our desire, or delight for our pleasure than could be found in God Himself; He alone satisfies the longing soul (Psalm 107:9), and His steadfast love causes us to rejoice all of our days (Psalm 90:14). In Hebrews 12, we are reminded that our only motivation for running this race we have been given is by focusing, “fixing our eyes,” on our Savior. Christ persevered because of the joy set before Him, which was our redemption and the fulfillment of the Father’s will. His perseverance in bearing the greatest punishment of all must cause us to take our eyes off of ourselves and our pursuits, and firmly fix them on Christ.

I will leave you with the words of Spurgeon, who emphasizes the capability and responsibility we have now to pursue Christ, leaving behind everything that does not profit Him. It is not within us naturally to do so, but with the Spirit inside of us we now have a power that is beyond understanding, a wisdom that is not of ourselves, and a nature that is no longer subject to the temptations of the world. Let us fix our eyes on Christ as we aim to run this race for Him unhindered.

Believer, you are anticipating the time when you shall join the saints above in ascribing all glory to Jesus; but are you glorifying him now? The apostle's words are, "To him be glory both now and forever." Will you not this day make it your prayer? "Lord, help me to glorify thee; I am poor, help me to glorify thee by contentment; I am sick, help me to give thee honour by patience; I have talents, help me to extol thee by spending them for thee; I have time, Lord, help me to redeem it, that I may serve thee; I have a heart to feel, Lord, let that heart feel no love but thine, and glow with no flame but affection for thee; I have a head to think, Lord, help me to think of thee and for thee; thou hast put me in this world for something, Lord, show me what that is, and help me to work out my life-purpose: I cannot do much, but as the widow put in her two mites, which were all her living, so, Lord, I cast my time and eternity too into thy treasury; I am all

thine; take me, and enable me to glorify thee now, in all that I say, in all that I do, and with all that I have."

~ C.H. Spurgeon⁶

Reflection Questions

1. What are you pursuing? Make a list. As you read through your list, do you see a correlation to Christ and His purposes, or does your list more reflect the world and its pressures?

2. Read and reflect on Psalm 16, specifically verses 5-11. In what ways does God "satisfy the thirsty soul," as is the testimony of the Psalmist in Psalm 107 and Psalm 16?

⁶ C. H Spurgeon and David Otis Fuller, *Morning And Evening* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1948).

Chapter 5

Cling to the Saints



So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. ~ Ephesians 2:19-22

Throughout the Christian life, we will be entrenched in strife with the world and resistance to its temptations. It will be an ongoing battle, yet God promises that enduring the trials will lead us away from the world and closer to the Lord. Through the strife, we must be dependently leaning on God's means of grace for His people. There are several means of grace God prescribes which act as instruments to sever the ties that bind our hindrances to us. One of the most critical, which we will examine now, is the fellowship of the saints.

Who are the Saints?

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household... (Ephesians 2:19)

One of the greatest mysteries of all is that God would condescend, come down from His throne, and redeem sinful people for Himself. Creation was marred by the fall of man, the sin which imparted the curse upon us all, yet God was not content to leave us to destruction. Rather, in His infinite wisdom, power, and glory, God determined from eternity past that He would call some to Himself who would be saved from the wrath to come by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Those who were enemies of God would be changed, transformed, set apart, and sanctified for His kingdom. They would be known as friends of God (James 2:23). They are called to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16), and they are being built up into a temple as living stones, precious in the sight of God (1 Peter 2:4). These people are Christians, and they are affectionately known as the saints.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses this term, "saints" (ἁγίων, hagion) which means "holy ones," to address disciples of Christ. Disciples by nature are the people of God, those who follow Christ. These

people together represent, in Christ, His “body,” yet individually are members of the greater body (1 Corinthians 12:27). As we are individually members of the body of Christ, just like a physical body, we have several responsibilities within the body to work together. As we work together, we help one another to “grow up in all aspects into Him who is the Head,” which is Christ (Ephesians 4:15). Let’s consider some of the practical reasons for this relationship of each believer to the body of Christ.

The Comfort of the Saints

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

THEN Christian spoke to the porter, Sir, what is the purpose of this house? And may I reside here for the night?: The porter answered, This house was built by the Lord of the Hill, and he built it for the relief and security of pilgrims.⁷

John Bunyan in his most famous literary work, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, dedicated a chapter to a place called the Palace Beautiful, which was portrayed as a place of rest. The palace was meant to be an allegory for a local biblical church, but it is portrayed as an earthly spiritual residence distinguished by the graces of wisdom (Colossians 1:9), devotion (I Timothy 5:4), and love (I Peter 1:22). In this illustration we see a glimpse of what it is like for believers to be a functioning member of a church. In the outpouring of affliction, the body of Christ bands together to embrace, refresh, and encourage its suffering members, creating a structure that provides comfort and refuge from the storm. The second letter to the Corinthians tells us more about this comfort in the church. It is not that being around people is comforting, but rather that our God, who is here called the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort,” is the one who guides us into comfort, that we may also be able to comfort others. There is no similar comfort in the world; it is purely of God, and is given by Him through His people. So let us look at a few practical examples of the comfort found in God and His saints.

Alice was a hard-working mother and housewife, devoted to the Lord, who loved her husband, and cared well for her three children. When her husband abandoned his family for what he deemed a better life, leaving his wife and children in complete disarray, Alice faced the dreadful pain of rejection along with the reality and full weight of raising her children alone. In response to her situation, the elders and their wives

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678.

walked alongside her, helping her to depend on the Lord through the trial and to forgive her husband for his selfishness. Her Bible study group surrounded her with love practically and spiritually. They repeatedly delivered groceries, babysat the kids, and made a point to support her financially until she was able to figure out a long-term solution.

Jack was a businessman who was very successful in his industry and built what seemed to be a very promising career path forward. But when his company revealed that they were being shut down, all of their assets seized, and the top executives hauled off to prison for violating federal law, he was left with no financial support and no prospective work due to the reputation his company had obtained. The men from the college ministry he attended worked tirelessly, around the clock, to help Jack submit hundreds of resumes, and use his savings account wisely. They protected him from bitterness that may have taken root from the way his previous company operated and pointed him to the sovereign God he serves, knowing that what the Lord has allowed to take place in his life would produce hope and endurance in his faith (James 1:2–4).

Both of these cases reflect trials that Christians might encounter any day. Wickedness runs rampant throughout this world, and therefore the trials will come, as Jesus promised (John 16:33). But, these trials have purpose. God uses trials and difficulties of the world to draw us nearer to Himself. As much as we are to be prepared to turn to the Lord in the midst of our trials, we are called also to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:1) and in doing so, comfort others with the same comfort with which we are comforted (2 Corinthians 1:11). Our growth in Christ allows us to better care for others.

Thus, there should be a triumphant celebration in the grace that God gives through the church to carry us through trials. The church acts as a God-given means of support and encouragement to stand firm in Christ. You and I, as believers, have this opportunity and responsibility every day to walk with others in seasons of difficulty and to provide practically for needs, which beautifully displays to them the love of Christ.

The Exhortation of the Saints

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12–13)

Living in the world, as I have previously stated, means we will encounter much trouble. But in the unlimited and unmerited grace of God, we find a measure of solace in the people He has placed around us, the saints who minister to one another and demonstrate the love of God.

In Hebrews 3, we see this beautifully illustrated in the continuous striving towards holiness that should take place in the context of the church. When one strays into sin, it is the duty of those around him to encourage him in the faith and to call him to repentance. In this passage the emphasis is on rooting out an “evil, unbelieving, heart.” Sin is deceitful; it binds itself to our greatest worldly desires, and lures us into an adulterous and idolatrous vice. We must be as watchmen, constantly on guard for the good of one other. In Galatians, Paul addresses this attitude of watchfulness:

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” Galatians 6:1

It is the responsibility of the body of Christ, the local gathering of the saints, to hold one another accountable in their service to Christ. The motivation for this exhortation, this pattern of accountability, must be love. It is in love for one another that we reprove, and it is in that same love that we rebuke. The first letter to Timothy explains this principle in the context of pastoral ministry:

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” 1 Timothy 1:5

Paul’s emphasis on love is critical, as it drives the point that the exhortation and correction of our brothers and sisters must always be working towards another aspect of its desired result—restoration. Restoration is the blessed outpouring of hard conversations, gospel truth, and forgiveness in the life of believers. It is seen all throughout our lives, primarily in our own salvation. God “reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Brothers and sisters, our correction must be with the heart of reconciliation, lest we harm the body of Christ. Parents, when we instruct and correct our children, it must always be done out of love. Acting in anger because of a child’s disobedience demonstrates to our children that we care more for our own hurt feelings or harmed egos than we do for their character and godliness. Patience and long-suffering, discipline for the purpose of godliness, these are the marks of a loving parent as we see in God’s dealing with us. We must likewise extend great patience and grace to our children, even as we discipline. Children need to see the gospel clearly in our parenting, as we remind them of their straying from God’s commands

with corrective, corporal, discipline. In this correction, they are restored to a right relationship with their parents, and they must be reminded that your hope is they would one day be reconciled to God.

“Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid.” Proverbs 12:1

The Body Needs Every Member

...but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

(Ephesians 4:15–16)

The body of Christ is a people united together by one God, one Spirit, and one Lord (1 Corinthians 8:6). While we are united in God, He has seen it fit that we would be dependent also on one another. The dependence we have on each other is similar to the human body. In the body, there are many organs and members, all performing different roles and functions, yet all are a part of the one body, and are held together by the same substance.

In the body of Christ we express different passions, perspectives, gifts, and talents. Every saint will bring something different to the table, and we all have been gifted in different ways for that purpose, so that we would walk in whatever good works we have been prepared for (Ephesians 2:10). We should not desire that every saint preach in the pulpit or that every saint have the same level of desire to meet practical needs. We all will serve the Lord in the variety of spiritual gifts we have been given (1 Peter 4:10), some as teachers, some with mercy, others with knowledge, etc. This does not relieve us from the practical love and service we are to show one another, but rather we are encouraged by the extravagant gifting of the other members of the body, and are challenged to continue growing in Christlikeness.

As we continue looking at the hindrances to our race and examining how to lay them aside, remember that God has given us means of grace to advance us in our race, to remove the weights that hinder us. The local church and its members keep us running the race well. As we function as members of the local church, God is glorified in unique ways that could only be done through His providential and purposeful work.

Reflection Questions

1. Ephesians 2:19-22 sets a very clear premise, that we are all one family in the body of Christ. This has many implications for us as believers and our mindset towards the church. Do you tend to think of yourself

as an individual follower of Christ, walking alone on the narrow path, or as a member of the body of Christ, being built up together into what Christ would have us all be? Why?

2. Think back on times that you have either been helped or helped someone else in the body. How did you see God's work on display through them?

3. What ways are you, today, contributing to the body of Christ in your local church? What ways can you look toward serving the body of Christ in the weeks and months to come?

PART 3

THE WEIGHT OF THE FLESH

Chapter 6

Rekindle the Flame



To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ~ Revelation 3:14–16

The saddest symptom about many so-called Christians is the utter absence of anything like conflict and fight against spiritual apathy in their Christianity. They eat, they drink, they dress, they work, they amuse themselves, they get money, they spend money, they go through a brief round of formal religious services once or twice every week. But of the great spiritual warfare – its watchings and strugglings, its agonies and anxieties, its battles and contests – of all things they appear to know nothing at all. Let us take care that this case is not our own. ~ J.C. Ryle

So far we have attempted to understand what growth in Christ looks like, and what hindrances the world can bring to obstruct our pursuit of Christ. Now we come to the weight and hindrances caused by our own flesh. But before we can really examine these weights, we must first answer the question of what we mean when we refer to “the flesh.”

The Flesh

The true Christian has been completely renewed, given a new heart, and a new life. They have been born again (John 3:7). The old man has passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17), and the flesh has been crucified (Romans 6:6; Galatians 5:24). Then what is the sinfulness we still possess? Why does it continue to tempt us, drawing us away from the Lord?

The flesh of a Christian refers to the desires and affections that still remain in us, even though we have been freed from sin (Romans 6:7). We have spent years prior to salvation living in the flesh, and though God could have wiped our sin from our memories, along with any lasting desire to chase after sin, He did not. Instead, we are to continually “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), recognizing that it is God who is at work in us, but that we are responsible to pursue Him and His glory. Furthermore, when we give way to sin, our Father will lovingly discipline us and bring us back to Himself.

Paul recorded in detail his wrestling with the flesh that remained after his salvation. As we read, this passage should resonate with us in the struggle that we endure each day. He stated in Romans 7:

For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 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... So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:22–23, 25)

We must recognize that we are in a battle between the flesh and the Spirit. The inner man desires the things of God; this is the Spirit of God, the new creation. But the flesh is hostile to the Spirit. Therefore, as we are “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), we are less and less susceptible to the flesh, and we labor and strive toward this end. John Knox put it this way:

I know how hard the battle is between the flesh and the spirit under the heavy cross of affliction, when no worldly defense but present death doth appear. I know the grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh... ~ John Knox⁸

In the midst of this fight, our flesh desires to make alliances with various enemies and temptations. We will explore the first of these many enemies in this chapter, which is apathy. Apathy is the condition of the Christian who has lost sight of his Savior and, by definition, will surely hinder our race. Without motivation to continue, you cannot progress in any pursuit!

When Did the Fire Go Out?

Yet I have been the Lord your God Since the land of Egypt; And you were not to know any god except Me, For there is no savior besides Me. I cared for you in the wilderness, In the land of drought. As they had their pasture, they became satisfied, And being satisfied, their heart became proud; Therefore they forgot Me. (Hosea 13:4–6)

A steam engine locomotive is powered by burning combustible material—usually coal—to produce steam in a boiler. Once the fire goes out, and the coals run cold, the boiler no longer produces steam and the locomotive is powerless. The fire that is kept stoked and fed with coal will produce the power needed to keep moving forward. If you are wondering why you have not grown in Christ, and you feel God is far-off,

⁸ John Knox, *The Select Practical Writings Of John Knox* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011).

distanced from you and the comings and goings of your life, you must ask yourself: when did the fire go out?

For the church in Laodicea, they had become comfortable in their prosperity, and had forgotten their dire need of Christ. They had placed their hope and trust in earthly security rather than the sovereign hand of God, who is the source of all things and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17).

Christ and His Mission

Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:8–10)

In order to rekindle the flame, to get back into the race, to re-engage the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12), you must first remember Christ and the mission He has called you to carry out as His slave.

Christ, the King

In every stage and facet of life we come face-to-face with the reality of eternal efficacy; that is, our deeds will be judged by the righteous Judge of all (2 Timothy 4:8), the ruler of the nations (Revelation 1:4-5), the Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5), the Savior of our souls (Titus 2:13), and they will be tested for their usefulness to the Kingdom. This reality must afflict the comfortable “Christian.” It places a stark reality before the one who cries “Lord, Lord, in Your Name did I not prophesy?” (Matthew 7:22). The reality is that we bring nothing to the Lord that merits our salvation, yet we owe Him everything. We owe Him our very lives for who He is and for the indescribable mercy and grace He has shown us.

His Mission

In John 6, as Jesus continues to testify through His works and wonders, He is asked to give them further signs of His power. To this He responds with a statement of His mission and purpose:

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. (John 6:38)

This mission is further clarified in verse thirty-nine, when He states,

This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.

This is Christ's mission, and He has called us to follow Him in making disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). We must align our mission with His. For the believer, there is no mission outside of Christ; everything is to be done for the Lord and His purposes. Therefore, making disciples of Christ, and obeying all He has commanded us to do, are our chief concerns.

Run Hard, Christian!

But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:11–12)

As we have seen, a Christian who is entangled in the daily hindrances and encumbrances of life is prone to wander and desperate for correction. We now turn our attention to the antithesis of our apathy: purpose. If our hearts and minds are engaged in the mission of Christ and we understand our role in the Kingdom of God, we are safe from the danger and futility of apathy. We will be exhausting ourselves for His glory with all perseverance because we adore our King and desire to please Him. His will for us as His subjects is clear, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, and we therefore singularly focus on His mission. The believer who is persevering in faith will flee from the things that distract and destroy—the sin that previously bound us unto death—and will pursue what Paul exhorts Timothy to pursue. These characteristics of holiness lay the groundwork for us to honor Christ with the entirety of our life—a life of purposeful pursuit, selfless sacrifice, and undistracted devotion.

*"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep
to gain that which he cannot lose." ~ Jim Elliot*

Reflection Questions

1. Read Jeremiah 2 in its entirety. Compare the heart attitude of the Israelites with the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3. What is the difference between being “lukewarm” (Revelation 3) and “forsaking the Lord” (Jeremiah 2)?

2. In Luke 19, Zaccheus' response to Jesus is radical. It contains radical steps to not only right the wrongs of the past, but makes a plan to show the evidence of his faith through good works. Does your heart reflect the heart of Zaccheus? Are you striving to do everything in your power to ensure your life is lived fully for Christ?

Chapter 7

Set Your Desires on True Satisfaction



But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. ~ Philippians 3:7–10

As we have considered the apathetic heart and the need to fan into flame a desire for the Lord, now we examine how to fix our eyes on Him and continue on the path towards unhindered passion. The question that naturally arises is rooted in our affections. As the premise of this question implies, we must evaluate where our satisfaction truly lies, and the thesis I would like to propose is the biblical one: that Christ is fully sufficient to satisfy every need and desire. But you first must be honest and admit to yourself when your heart does not desire the Lord. So let me pose the question: do you delight in, and devote yourself to, Jesus Christ? More simply stated: is Christ your chief desire?

Is Christ Your Chief Desire?

whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss. (Philippians 3:7)

Hope, a 7-year-old girl, was given the choice to receive a plastic necklace or a genuine pearl necklace. The plastic necklace, though it looked dazzling on the outside, was worth very little, and in comparison to the genuine pearls, even less so. Yet, due to her naivety and fascination with appearances, Hope chose to keep the plastic necklace. Soon after, the plastic necklace was broken, the dazzling colors were faded, and her delight faded with it. The pearls remained, on the other hand, glistening and precious for years to come.

Oftentimes we treat the things of the world this way, as if they are going to remain forever and bring us endless delight, only to realize their passing nature when it is too late. How naive we are to base our contentment and joy on the passing delights of this withering world. Even the things that last longer, like genuine pearls, will wither away, and the value they offer while on earth is nothing compared to the eternal

value of Christ! We must be counting all of the temporal worldly achievements, comforts, pleasures, and blessings we have gained as loss in the view of Christ. This does not mean that we do not thank God for them, but rather we magnify Him and rejoice in Him all the more. Whether we are in a season of plenty or poverty, we rejoice in the eternal, not the temporal.

As the Psalmist sings of the certain demise of all mankind, our temporary and volatile nature, he calls us to a sober understanding of our own mortality, and a deep desire for the eternal God above all else:

*“O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness,
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us,
And the years we have seen evil.”* Psalms 90:14-15 (LSB)

God is the one who makes us glad. It is in Him we find our lasting satisfaction. Let us examine the incomparable value of Christ, the unfathomable depths of His wisdom, and the riches of His glory and His grace (Romans 11:33; Ephesians 2:7; 3:16).

The Surpassing Value of Knowing Christ

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8)

The word “surpassing” (ὑπερέχον, hyperechon) in Philippians 3:8 is describing the value of Christ, and points to something that is incomparable. The sense is that there is nothing greater than knowing Christ. Nothing is equal to knowing Him, nor can there be any more profitable pursuit or more fulfilling desire. The value gained from a relationship with Christ outweighs the sum of the riches of the entire world from all of history to now and into the future, until Christ Himself returns! He alone is sufficient for us. Christ supplies to us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). But this statement—that He is all we need for life and godliness—while true, does not inherently answer the question why. Why is Christ sufficient for us? Why is He to be our all-satisfying desire? Here we will expound on this statement in three parts: He is God, He is Savior, and He is Lord. As way of introduction, John MacArthur spoke⁹ to the sufficiency of Jesus Christ in this manner:

⁹ John MacArthur. *The Sufficiency of Christ*. February 22, 1987.

No clearer a statement exists than that of Colossians 2:10, “You are complete in Him.” Having the Lord Jesus Christ is to have everything needed in spiritual life for time and eternity. To have Him is to have everything, not to have Him is to have absolutely nothing at all. All joy, peace, meaning, value, purpose, hope, fulfillment in life now and forever is bound up in Christ. And when a person receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, they enter into an all-sufficient relationship with an all-sufficient Christ.

So we have this understanding, but let us examine a few key aspects of Christ that reveal why He is sufficient for us. One of the most basic reasons for His sufficiency is because Christ is God.

He is God

In Christ we see the manifestation of the glory of God (1 Timothy 3:16; John 1:14). He is God the Son, the word of God made flesh, God with us (Romans 1:14; John 1:14). Each of these statements is an expression of His relationship to the Godhead (the essence of the one, true, trinitarian God). The value of knowing Christ is incomparable because He is the supreme being, God Himself.

Colossians 1 is perhaps the greatest testament in all of Scripture to Christ’s deity. There He is presented as the very image of the invisible God (v.15). Though God is invisible, Christ represents Him in physical form, possessing the fullness of deity. He is also shown to be simultaneously the agent of all creation and its sovereign authority, since all things were created through Him and for Him (v.16). There is much more to be said, but this must suffice for now to bring us to the realization that His deity is the foremost evidence of His sufficiency.

He is Savior

Christ paid the penalty for your sins. He satisfied God’s wrath on your behalf, as the perfect Lamb of God. Therefore, one of the major reasons for our satisfaction in Him is the gift of salvation that comes through Him. Christ as Savior, as Rescuer, and the only mediator between God and man, makes Him infinitely valuable and invariably necessary. Without Christ and His death and resurrection, we stand as “strangers to the covenant of promise and without hope in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Do you regularly consider your need for Christ? Your helplessness only magnifies the beauty of His sacrificial love for you, and therefore we must, in response to these truths, be fervent in zeal and desire for Him! Put another way, in light of who Christ is, and because of His incomparable value, we are to be crucified with Him and live by faith in Him (Galatians 2:20).

He is Lord

Jesus Christ is to be our chief desire because He is Lord. The lord of the land sets the laws and limits by which we live. He gives assignments, tasks, and jobs to his subjects. He asks things of His people in order to advance his kingdom. He is honored by his subjects through loyalty, dedication, and service. Each of these descriptions may relate to worldly lords, but significantly more to the King of kings and Lord of lords. It should be our greatest joy to serve the one and only holy and righteous King.

Abide in Him

so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him. (Philippians 3:9)

So what is our response then to Jesus Christ, the King? The greatest desire for every true follower of Christ is to abide in Him. Each morning you awake to the world, facing the same worries and woes of the day before, yet in Christ these things exist as momentary light afflictions which are producing, currently and continuously, for you an eternal weight of glory. We look to Christ for our satisfaction in every moment because as we abide in Him, as weak earthen vessels, we receive the hope of heaven, the glory of His grace, and the riches of His kindness. The words of Jesus comfort us as we are reminded that only in Christ do we fulfill our purpose in the world, and receive true satisfaction.

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.” (John 15:5–9)

Reflection Questions

1. Read Philippians 3. What were the things that Paul identified as the source of his “confidence in the flesh”?

2. What accomplishments, people, or possessions in your life lead you toward confidence and comfort in the flesh rather than Christ?

3. Read Luke 14:25-35 and consider the call to be a disciple of Christ. How does this description Jesus gives compare to your own relationship with Jesus? Do any of the things Jesus identifies take precedent in your heart above Christ?

4. Abiding in Christ is the natural posture of a true believer. What do you need to change in your day to day life in order to abide in Him more?

PART 4

THE WEIGHT OF THE ENEMY

Chapter 8

Understand Your Enemy



Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. ~ 1 Peter 5:8–10

In the animal kingdom there are generally two categories of animal: predator and prey. The prey lives in a state of constant awareness, an unending vigilance, knowing that it may be under the threat of death at any turn. But most predators serve as prey to larger predators, and this only heightens the tension. In this environment, the predator or prey that does not remain on high alert will become lunch for their predator. How vigilant are you against the predator who preys on unwary believers?

As Christians, we are called to consistently be on the alert. There is a predator, an adversary, that “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). As we have already discussed the weights of both the world and the flesh, we have now reached the final topic of our discourse: the enemy. His power is at work in this world, and his desire is to lead us astray. We must know this adversary and his tactics so that we can stand firmly against him.

Who Is the Enemy?

The enemy to every Christian is the evil one, who opposes us at every turn because he is opposed, in every respect, to God. Jesus calls him “the evil one” (Matthew 13:19) and “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The Pharisees call him “Beelzebul, the prince of demons” (Matthew 12:24). Paul calls him “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2).¹⁰ He is the serpent of old (Revelation 12:9) and the deceiver of the nations, and he is referred to often simply as Satan.

Isaiah 14 sheds light on who this “Satan” is. He was once regarded as the “star of the morning, son of the dawn” (Isaiah 14:12), yet he was cast down to the earth when he fell from grace. Satan’s prior glory is

¹⁰ *The Fall of Satan and the Victory of Christ*. John Piper. August 19, 2007.

evident in verse twelve, and the reasons for his fall are recorded further in Isaiah's prophecy in verse thirteen:

But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. (Isaiah 14:13)

This verse reveals that his fall was due to a heart filled with pride and ultimately a desire to be in the place of God. Revelation also, looking back to the beginning, provides a vivid picture of his fall:

And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."(Revelation 12:9)

Here is recorded for us the events immediately following the rebellion in heaven, where Satan and his angels turn their backs on God and become His enemies. It describes here also Satan's purpose in the world: to deceive. He now "blinds the minds of the unbelieving" (2 Corinthians 4:4) and masquerades as the "ruler of this world" until the day when Christ returns to put all of His enemies underneath His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25).

If Satan is at work in this world, ruling it in a sense, and constantly working in people here referred to as "the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2), we must be aware of how he works and be able to stand firmly against his tactics, which surely are able to hinder us in our pursuit of Christ if not addressed.

A Primer on Spiritual Warfare

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10–12)

The warfare we experience is almost entirely spiritual, though it may include some aspects of the physical. Our enemy is not clad in armor, bearing a sword, or threatening with fire. He will, however, use his tactics to "steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10:10) the souls of men. Therefore, we will look at the tactics of the evil one to draw away the people of God and to cause them to stumble.

But first, we must examine the problem of demons and possession because it has become a hindrance in itself. Strange activities are oftentimes attributed to demons by well-meaning Christians. Usually what they mean to do is to bring the reality of spiritual warfare to our attention, but in actuality, they distract from the sin and grant unnecessary attention to the devil.

Ephesians 6 gives us a solid structure upon which to build our understanding of our warfare in the world. Here, Paul exhorts believers to put on the armor of God, which refer to Christian disciplines and graces given by God to stand firmly (defense), not to fight demonic powers (offense). This is evident also in what Paul says we are to stand firm against, which is the “schemes of the devil.” The devil’s schemes are outlined throughout Scripture as chiefly of the heart; simplified greatly, they could be expressed as distraction or deception. In summary, distraction speaks to the events and things of the world that are used to pull our attention away from Christ, and deception is the manipulation of our affections and perceptions to draw us away. John MacArthur put it this way in a sermon¹¹ on spiritual maturity:

Now...but how does he attack Christians? How does he attack those who believe? How does he go around as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour among us? Well, the system comes at us through the same three gates. First John 2:15 to 17, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life...those are the only three ways he appeals to us. If you want a real simplification of the spiritual battle it all comes down to three things...lusting for what you see, lusting because of what you feel, and pride. That's always and only Satan's approach.

We will look at these tools of the devil in a bit more detail, but it is important to see that either of these tools can be used at any moment by the devil and his minions in an attempt to undermine the work of Christ. But in contrast, keep in mind the most significant reality of spiritual warfare: God is not subject to Satan in any manner. Everything Satan does is allowed by God and effective for God’s purposes. No persistent sin, painful memory, prideful people, or paralyzing thoughts are too powerful for God. Put to rest an unhealthy perception of spiritual warfare, and be ready to fight the real spiritual battles, leaning on your God who is able to defeat every foe.

¹¹ John MacArthur, “Fundamental Attitudes for Spiritual Maturity, part 2” (sermon preached at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, March 4, 1990), accessed April 1, 2021, <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/60-49>.

The Devil's Primary Tools

so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:11)

Distraction

I was driving with a dear friend of mine to grab some coffee before an event and we began catching up on life and God's faithfulness as we typically do. As we talked and laughed during our drive, he was consistently missing the turns we needed to take to get coffee and still arrive on time to the event. Finally, he looked around and, looking very confused, asked me the question: "Where am I going?" By the time he noticed what was happening, we had gone too far off course. His distraction from the task and his ignorance of our drifting kept us from both our goal of acquiring coffee and arriving punctually to the event.

How often have you and I put ourselves in this position? Our lack of awareness is evidence we are bereft of discernment. Our lack of vigilance to the dangers around us leaves us vulnerable to its deadly grip. This negligence is the result of letting our priorities, principles, and purposes be driven by the pattern of the world (as we discussed in chapter 4) and our fleeting desires. If we are to grow firm and steadfast in Christ, we must be on the alert in our thinking, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Before we are made new in Christ, the heart is subject to distraction by every pleasant thing of the world. Yet, God's rich mercy shatters our partnership with the world and reconciles us to Him (2 Corinthians 5:18), enabling us to no longer walk in ignorance and instead to choose those things which bring Him honor and glory.

Deception

This is Satan's most common scheme: He presents the bait and hides the hook. Satan presents sin as fun, satisfying, profitable, and pleasurable, while concealing the miseries and pain that always accompany sin.

~ Thomas Brooks¹²

This has been the primary scheme of the devil since the beginning (Genesis 3:1-7). As the ignorance and laziness of the believer allows him to be led away into sin, so too does the clever deceit that beckons him

¹² Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000).

to distrust. This usually includes the “bait” of sin being used as a disguise for the hook. The analogy here should be crystal clear: you are the fish. Satan uses lies to make sin look acceptable, and he leaves out its destructive end.

Satan hath snares for the wise and snares for the simple; snares for generous souls, and snares for timorous souls; snares for the rich, and snares for the poor; snares for the aged, and snares for youth. Happy are those souls that are not yet taken and held in the snares that he hath laid! ~ Thomas Brooks¹³

Victory in Christ

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Revelation 20:10)

As has already been stated on an individual level, in regards to the spiritual warfare we encounter every single day, God is powerful and faithful to allow only that work of the devil which serves to further His purposes. Satan’s work does not continue unabated.

In fact, Satan’s future is written in stone. When the day comes that Christ returns to establish His kingdom here, he will be forever condemned to the lake of fire, never to deceive or scheme again. Christ has already proven His power over the devil in His death on the cross and His resurrection, where He effectively destroyed the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). By rising from the dead, He rendered death powerless (Hebrews 2:14) and secured eternal life for all who believe. The victory has been won, for death has been forever defeated!

So though Satan continues to scheme against us, for now, we are not left hopeless to be stung and scorched by sin until the end. Christ ransoms people for His glory, people who would be built up as a spiritual house to offer living sacrifices—their lives—to Him (1 Peter 2:5). When His blood is then applied to those who believe, He sets us free from the bondage of sin and death to live lives free in regards to sin, yet joyfully subject to Him in His Lordship. Under His rule and with hearts that have been made new (2 Corinthians 5:17), we pursue unhindered devotion to Him and put to death the sin that once held us in bondage. All praise to Him!

*All praise to Him whose love is seen
In Christ the Son, the Servant King...*

¹³ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*.

*All praise to Him Who humbly came
To bear our sorrow, sin, and shame
Who lived to die, Who died to rise
The all-sufficient sacrifice¹⁴*

Reflection Questions

1. Read the accounts of Satan's fall in their entirety from Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-19. What does this teach you about who Satan is and how he relates to God?
2. Consider the armor of Ephesians 6:10-17. Write a description of what Paul is indicating about each piece of the armor and how it plays a part in the spiritual protection of a believer.
3. What should you do to better prepare for the spiritual warfare that is raging each and every day and to defend against the devices used by Satan against you?

¹⁴ Bob Kauflin and Matt Merker, *All Praise To Him*, online (Sovereign Grace Music, 2018).

PART 5

THE WEIGHT OF GLORY

Chapter 9

Finish The Course



For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. ~ 2 Timothy 4:6–8

We have briefly examined various weights that hinder our pursuit; our pursuit being the laying aside of the weights that hinder our race. Now we come to the final weight, but this weight is vastly different; it is a weight that we desire. This is the weight that we want to bear; the weight of glory. It is an unobtainable reward outside of Christ, but in Him we can have complete confidence that we will grow in godliness, finish the race we are given to run, and receive the prize (1 Corinthians 9:23-24). It is the reward promised to all those who are truly disciples of Christ who continue in the fight and who press on through the entirety of life's trials and tribulations to the end, for the honor and glory of their Master.

While we labor and strive now, in our earthly existence, this promise of a future reward in heaven is shown to us through various avenues: in the character of God, who is our daily refuge and strength, in our progress—our laying aside of the weights that hinder our race so that we can run with our eyes more fully fixed on Christ, and in the joy of knowing He will fulfill all He has said He will do. In all of these things, we partially see the prize. We see the streaks of His glory shine through the clouds, but we do not yet behold it in all its brilliance. One day, we will receive our full inheritance of glory, and it will far outweigh any worldly treasure. It will be revealed clearly when we stand before Him on that final day, as He grants us the crown of life, and allows us to enter into the joy of our Master. In order to fully take joy in this promise now, we must evaluate God's faithfulness to provide the reward, and truly come to hold dear the reward itself.

The Lord's Faithfulness

God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Numbers 23:19)

Once trust is broken it can be very hard, even at times seemingly impossible, to rebuild it. This is because the nature of trust is that it is evaluated as a level of risk based on past faithfulness. If you have a child who tends to deceive, you will find yourself having a hard time believing them when a situation arises where they must explain themselves. Are the promises God has given to believers in regard to their growth, and the final reward, something that can be trusted? Has his past faithfulness proved that in all things He can be trusted? As we will come to see, the answer is emphatically and undoubtedly yes!

God, being apart from us, entirely separate, righteous and holy in all His works (Psalms 145:17), cannot sin. In the book of Numbers, God uses the prophet Balaam to remind Balak, the king of Moab, that God is “not a man, that He should lie.” God’s nature being holy and divine necessarily means He is “upright,” and there is no “unrighteousness in Him” (Psalms 92:15). On top of that, James testifies that in Him there is no variation or shifting shadow (James 1:17). God does not change, and He does not err. His will cannot be swayed, and His purposes cannot be thwarted (Job 42:2). If God makes a promise, it is good and righteous, and it will be fulfilled.

Although, when we speak of God’s promises, we must be clear as to what we intend. There are principles in Scripture that serve to be a helpful guide, and not a hard rule. For instance, the proverb below could be very disheartening for parents who instructed and disciplined their children faithfully, yet have not seen them come to knowledge and faith in God:

Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

But as we properly understand the Proverbs as guiding principles and not promises, then we can rest assured because His wisdom stands. The Proverbs show us this in that wisdom, applying the truths of God’s character and commandments to our lives, leads us to lives of abundant praise, and we can rejoice in God’s wisdom without questioning God’s goodness when God’s will does not align with ours. We must have this same understanding towards all of Scripture; being able to discern what is a promise, and what is a principle. Armed with this knowledge, we can stand firmly on the promises of His word, because His word is truth.

The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting... Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17)

The Believer's Race

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7)

The premise of our discourse is centered on this very thing: what is the believer's race? We answered this already, but it is helpful to be reminded. The growth of the believer into "the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13) is the race we have been given to run. It is the course in which we run towards Him, laying aside every weight, pursuing Him above all else, glorifying Him with our entire being, and enjoying Him thoroughly in this life and unto the next. This is the mark of the true believer, that his path has been set, and his eyes fixed on Christ.

This distinction cannot be emphasized enough. The world knows nothing of sacrificing for the Lord; even their good deeds are rubbish (Isaiah 64:6), being done for internal gratification and not for the glory of the Lord. They are not giving Him the praise He is due, but rather exalting themselves or other created things. The servant of the Lord Jesus Christ is just that, one who does all for the Master, for the One who will judge and issue our commendation on that final day.

What does your course look like? If it does not reflect the Master's course, it will not bear the eternal reward. For the reward is given only to those who compete according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5).

The Believer's Reward

in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day. (2 Timothy 4:7)

Finally, we have come to the point where we look to the eternal reward. Better than any earthly praise, greater than all worldly accomplishments, and more valuable than the sum of all the riches of the world, is the believer's reward in Christ. The reward is simple, and yet unimaginable. God promises that there is reward, both here and in eternity, for those who fight the good fight and run the race to win, and He also promises to walk with us the entire way. The earthly reward is the intimacy with Christ we experience as we grow in knowledge and faith, relying on His grace every single day to continue laboring and striving for this calling, the upward call of God (Philippians 3:14). But the eternal reward is far greater, in that it is realized in God Himself.

Paul speaks in Second Timothy four of the "crown of righteousness" that has been laid up for Him. The crown of righteousness is based on the righteousness of Christ, for we have no righteousness of our

own, yet it is a reward for those who endure, longing for Christ and His Kingdom. This is an example of a heavenly reward, but not the only heavenly reward.

In Second Corinthians 4, Paul writes about the eternal weight of glory that is being produced for us:

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17–18)

Consider the struggles and ills that fill our days on earth: The sin that corrupts all things, the pain of strained relationships, the loss of a job, failing a test, sickness that looms over our frail bodies, or the bitter sting of death. We see in these things the dreadful result of sin, but even more so the gracious kindness of our God, as we look to and long for the heavenly reward herein described as the “weight of glory.” These things, though terribly burdensome, stirring up darkness and anguish in our souls, are cast down to nothing when compared to the incredible weight of God’s glory.

Paul, alongside the other inspired Biblical authors, uses weight to describe God’s glory because worth, or value, is often measured in weight. Diamonds and precious metals are measured and their value calculated by weight. The weight of God’s glory then refers to the incalculable, incomparable, and indescribable value and worth of God Himself. There could be no greater reward than the promise of eternal life in the presence of God, where His glory will be our light and joy forevermore.

Finish the Race Well

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (Hebrews 12:1–3, ESV)

Athletes train their entire life, painstakingly focused and fervently disciplined, to receive their desired prize. Whether that prize is accolades, a trophy, or sheer pride in breaking records and being counted as “great,” they will give everything to the task before them. How much more must we persevere to the end? Why would we let the hindrances of the world keep us from finishing well? Our reward, as we have just

seen, is not a mere earthly trophy, which moth and rust will destroy (Matthew 6:19), but the eternal riches of Christ in glory; a prize that cannot be compared in value or worth to any created thing.

As the author of the letter to the Hebrews said, we must run with endurance. Our course has been laid, and our motivation is to arise from the person of Jesus Christ, who is the “founder and perfecter of our faith” (v.1). He endured greater pain than we ever will, to secure a redemption for us that we could never attain. Have you considered Him today? Dear reader, have you looked unto Jesus? Lay aside every weight, look unto Jesus, and run, lest you stumble and fall, only to receive condemnation from the Judge when you stand before His throne.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24–25)

Reflection Questions

1. Read Hebrews 11. As you consider the faithfulness of God to those who had faith, do you see areas in your life where you have not trusted Him fully?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9, 1 Thessalonians 2, 1 Peter 5, and Revelation 2. Identify what other rewards are laid up for the believer in heaven based on these passages. When you think of the joys and riches of heaven, what is it that you most look forward to?

3. Coming to the end of this work, you may have identified several “weights” that you have yet to lay down. Record them, and attach Scripture to them, identifying why they are taking you away from Christ. Then, repent of your stumbling and pray fervently for the Lord to remove these obstacles from your path.