

The Flesh and Salvation

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon explores the nature of the flesh, the necessity of regeneration, and God's plan for salvation through Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Luke 22:15, Romans 6:12, Romans 13:14, Philippians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:17, Titus 2:12, 1 Peter 2:11

Topics: "Sinful Nature", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

In the sermon 'Lusts', the preacher delves into the concept of epithumia, a term used in the Bible to describe strong desires or impulses, both good and evil, directed towards an object. While occasionally used in a positive sense, most often epithumia refers to perverted and unrestrained desires originating from our sinful nature. The sermon emphasizes the importance of believers resisting and fleeing from lusts, which can lead to spiritual decay and bondage, urging them to pursue righteousness, faith, and godliness instead. Various Bible verses and quotes are used to illustrate the detrimental effects of lusts and the need for believers to rely on God's grace to overcome them.

Transcript

THE WORD "FLESH" is basar in Hebrew and sarx in Greek.

Seen often in the Bible, it is used in various ways. Its most significant usage, observed and made most clear in Paul's writings, has reference to the unregenerated person. Speaking of his old "I" he says in Romans 7: "I am fleshly" (v.14 Darby). Not merely his nature or a particular part of his being is fleshly; the "I"-Paul's whole being-is fleshly. He reiterates this thought in verse 18 by asserting "within me, that is, in my flesh." It follows clearly that "flesh" in the Bible points to all an unregenerated person is. In connection with

this usage of "flesh" it must be remembered that in the very beginning man was constituted spirit, soul and body. As it is the site of man's personality and consciousness, the soul is connected to the spiritual world through man's spirit. The soul must decide whether it is to obey the spirit and hence be united with God and His will or is to yield to the body and

all the temptations of the material world. On the occasion of man's fall the soul resisted the spirit's authority and became enslaved to the body and its passions. Thus man became a fleshly, not a spiritual, man. Man's spirit was denied its noble position and was reduced to that of a prisoner. Since the soul is now under the power of the flesh, the Bible deems man to be fleshly or carnal. Whatever is soulical has become fleshly.

Now aside from the use of "flesh" to designate all that an unregenerated person is, sometimes it is written to denote the soft part of the human body as distinct from blood and bones. It may be employed to mean additionally the human body. Or at still other times it may be used to signify the totality of mankind. These four meanings are all very closely related. We should therefore note briefly these other three ways of using "flesh" in the Bible.

First, "flesh" as applied to the soft part of the human body. We know that a human body is composed of flesh, bones and blood. Flesh is that part of the body through which we sense the world around us. Therefore a fleshly person is one who follows the world. Beyond simply having flesh, he walks after the sense of his flesh.

Second, "flesh" as applied to the human body. Broadly speaking, flesh means the human body whether living or dead. According to the latter part of Romans 7 sin of the flesh is related to the human body: "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members- (v.23). The Apostle then continues in Chapter 8 by explaining that if we would overcome the flesh we must "put to death the deeds of the body" by the Spirit (v.13). Hence, the Bible uses the word *sarx* to indicate not only psychical. flesh but physical flesh as well.

Third, "flesh" as applied to the totality of mankind. All men in this world are born of the flesh; they are all therefore fleshly. Without exception the Bible views all men to be flesh. Every man is controlled by that composite of soul and body called the flesh, following both the sins of his body and the

self of his soul. Thus whenever the Bible speaks of all men its characteristic phrase is "all flesh." *Basar* or *sarx* consequently refers to human beings in toto.

HOW DOES MAN BECOME FLESH?

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh." So asserted the Lord Jesus to Nicodemus long ago (John 3.6). Three questions are answered by this succinct statement: (1) what flesh is; (2) how man becomes flesh; and (3) what its quality or nature is.

(1) What is flesh? "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." What is born of the flesh? Man; therefore man is flesh; and

everything a man naturally inherits from his parents belongs to the flesh. No distinction is made as to whether the man is

good, moral, clever, able and kind or whether he is bad, unholy, foolish; useless and cruel. Man is flesh. Whatever a man

is born with pertains to the flesh and is within that realm. All with which we are born or which later develops is included in the flesh.

(2) How does man become flesh? "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Man does not become fleshly by learning to be bad through gradual sinning, nor by giving himself up to licentiousness, greedy to follow the desire of his body and mind until finally the whole man is overcome and con-

trolled by the evil passions of his body. The Lord Jesus emphatically declared that as soon as a man is born he is fleshly. He is determined neither by his conduct nor by his

character. But one thing decides the issue: through whom was he born? Every man of this world has been begotten of human parents and is consequently judged by God to be of the flesh (Gen. 6.3). How can anyone who is born of the flesh not be flesh? According to our Lord's word, a man is flesh because

he is born of blood, of the will of the flesh, and of the will of man (John 1.13) and not because of how he lives or how his parents live.

(3) What is the nature of flesh? "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Here is no exception, no distinction. No

amount of education, improvement, cultivation, morality or religion can turn man from being fleshly. No human labor or power can alter him. Unless he is not generated of the flesh, he will remain as flesh. No human device can make him other than that of which he was born. The Lord Jesus said "is"; with that the matter was forever decided. The fleshliness of a man is determined not by himself but by his birth. If he is born of flesh, all plans for his transformation will be unavailing. No matter how he changes outwardly, whether from one form to another or through a daily change, man remains flesh as firmly as ever.

THE UNREGENERATED MAN

The Lord Jesus has stated that any unregenerated person born but once (i.e., born only of man), is flesh and is therefore living in the realm of the flesh. During the period we were unregenerated we indeed "lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" because "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God" (Eph. 2.3; Rom. 9.8). A man whose soul may yield to the lusts of the body and commit many unmentionable sins may be so dead to God (Eph. 2.1)-"dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of ... flesh" (Col. 2.13) -that he may have no consciousness of being sinful. On the contrary he may even be proud, considering himself better than others. Frankly speaking, "while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death" for the simple reason that we were "carnal, sold under sin." We therefore with our flesh "serve the law of sin" (Rom. 7.5, 14, 25).

Although the flesh is exceedingly strong in sinning and following selfish desire it is extremely weak towards the will of God. Unregenerated man is powerless to fulfill any of God's will, being "weakened by the flesh." And the flesh is even "hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot" (Rom. 8.3, 7). This however does not imply that

the flesh totally disregards the things of God. The fleshly sometimes do exert their utmost strength to observe the law. The Bible moreover never treats the fleshly as synonymous with the lawbreakers. It merely concludes that "by works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2.16 ASV). For the fleshly not to keep the law is certainly nothing unusual. It simply proves they are of the flesh. But now that God has ordained that man shall not be justified by works of law but by faith in the Lord Jesus (Rom. 3.28), those who attempt to follow the law only disclose their disobedience to God, seeking to establish their own righteousness in lieu of God's righteousness (Rom. 10.3). It reveals further that they belong to the flesh. To sum up, "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8.8), and this "cannot" seals the fate of the fleshly.

God looks upon the flesh as utterly corrupt. So closely is it linked with lust that the Bible often refers to "the lusts of the flesh" (2 Peter 2.18 Darby). Great though His power, God nonetheless cannot transform the nature of the flesh into something pleasing to Himself. God Himself declares: "My spirit shall not always strive in man forever, for he is flesh" (Gen. 6.3 Young's). The corruption of the flesh is such that even the Holy Spirit of God cannot by striving against the flesh render it unfleshly. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. Man unfortunately does not understand God's Word and so he tries continually to refine and reform his flesh. Yet the Word of God stands forever. Due to its exceeding corruption, God warns His saints to hate "even the garment spotted by the flesh" (Jude 23).

Because God appreciates the actual condition of the flesh He declares it is unchangeable. Any person who attempts to repair it by acts of self-abasement or severity to the body shall fail utterly. God recognizes the impossibility of the flesh to be changed, improved or bettered. In saving the world, therefore, He does not try to alter man's flesh; He instead gives man a new life in order to help put it to death. The flesh must die. This is salvation.

GOD'S SALVATION

"God," asserts the Apostle, "has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh (Rom. 8.3). This uncovers the actual situation of that moral class of the fleshly who may perhaps be very much intent on keeping the law. They may indeed be observing quite a few of its points. Weakened by the flesh, however, they cannot keep the whole law.* For the law makes it quite clear that "he who does them shall live by them" (Gal. 3.12 quoting Lev. 18.5) or else he shall be condemned to perdition. How much of the law, someone may ask, shall he keep? The entire law; for "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2.10). "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3.20). The more one desires to observe the law the more he discovers how full of sin he is and how impossible for him to keep it.

God's reaction to the sinfulness of all men is to take upon Himself the task of salvation. His way is in "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh." His Son is without sin, hence He alone is qualified to save us. "In the likeness of sinful flesh" describes His incarnation: how He takes a human body and links Himself with mankind. God's only Son is referred to elsewhere as "the Word" that "became flesh (John

1.14). His coming in the likeness of sinful flesh is the "became flesh" of that verse. Therefore our verse in Romans 8.3 tells us as well in what manner the Word became flesh. The emphasis here is that He is the Son of God, consequently sinless. Even when He comes in the flesh, God's Son does not become "sinful flesh." He only comes in "the likeness of sinful flesh." While in the flesh, He remains as the Son of God and is still without sin. Yet because He possesses the likeness of sinful flesh, He is most closely joined with the world's sinners who live in the flesh.

What then is the purpose of His incarnation? As a "sacrifice for sins" is the Biblical explanation (Heb. 10.12'), and this is the work of the cross. God's Son is to atone for our sins. All the fleshly sin against the law; they cannot establish the righteousness of God; and they are doomed to perdition and punishment. But the Lord Jesus in coming to the world takes this likeness of sinful flesh and joins Himself so perfectly with the fleshly that they have been punished for their sin in His death on the cross. He need not suffer for He is without sin, yet He does suffer because He has the likeness of sinful flesh. In the position of a new federal head, the Lord Jesus now includes all sinners in His suffering. This explains the punishment for sin.

Christ as the sacrifice for sin suffers for everyone who is in the flesh. But what about the power of sin which fills the fleshly? "He condemned sin in the flesh." He who is sinless is made sin for us, so that He dies for sin. He is "Put to death in the flesh" (1 Peter 3.18). When He dies in the flesh, He

takes to the cross the sin in the flesh. This is what is meant by the phrase "condemned sin in the flesh." To condemn is to judge or to mete out punishment. The judgment and punishment of sin is death. Thus the Lord Jesus actually put sin

to death in His flesh. We therefore can see in His death that not only our sins are judged but sin itself is even judged. Henceforth sin has no power upon those who are joined to the Lord's death and who accordingly have sin condemned in their flesh.

REGENERATION.

God's release from the penalty and power of sin is accomplished in the cross of His Son. He now lays before all men

this salvation so that whoever wills to accept may be saved. God knows no good resides in man; no flesh can please Him. It is corrupted beyond repair. Since it is so absolutely hopeless, how then can man please God after he has believed in His Son unless He gives him something new? Thank God,

He has bestowed a new life, His uncreated life, upon those who believe in the salvation of the Lord Jesus and receive Him as their personal Savior. This is called "regeneration" or new birth." Though He cannot alter our flesh God gives us His life. Man's flesh remains as corrupt in those who are born anew as in those who are not. The flesh in a saint is the same as that in a sinner. In regeneration the flesh is not transformed. New birth exerts no good influence on the flesh. It remains as is. God does not impart His life to us to educate and train the flesh. Rather, it is given to overcome the flesh.

Man in regeneration actually becomes related to God by birth. Regeneration means to be born of God. As our fleshy life is born of our parents so our spiritual life is born of God. The meaning of birth is "to impart life." When we say we are born of God it signifies we receive a new life from Him. What we have received is a real life.

We have seen previously how we human beings are fleshly. Our spirit is dead and our soul is in full management of the entire being. We are walking according to the lusts of the body. No good is in us, In coming to deliver us, God first must restore the spirit's position within in order that we may have fellowship with Him again. This occurs when we believe in the Lord Jesus. God puts His life into our spirit, thus raising it up from death. The Lord Jesus now declares that 11 that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3.6). At this juncture God's life, which is the Spirit, enters our human spirit and restores it to its original position. The Holy Spirit takes up His abode in the human spirit; and man is thereby transferred into the spiritual realm. Our spirit is quickened and reigns once again. The "new spirit" mentioned in Ezekiel 36.26 is the new life we receive at the time of regeneration.

Man is not regenerated by doing something special but by believing the Lord Jesus as his Savior: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1.12-13). Those who believe the Lord Jesus as Savior are born of God and are therefore His children.

Regeneration is the minimum of spiritual life. It is the basis upon which later building up takes place. One can neither speak of spiritual life nor expect to grow spiritually if he is not regenerated, since he has no life in his spirit. Just as no one can construct a castle in the air so we cannot edify those who are unregenerated. If we attempt to teach an unregenerate to do good and to worship God, we are simply teaching a dead man. We are attempting to do what God cannot do when we try to repair and reform the flesh. It is vital that each believer know beyond doubt he has been regenerated already and has received a new life. He must see that new birth is not an attempt to tinker with the old flesh or to transform it into spiritual life. On the contrary, it is receiving a life which he never had and could not have had before. If one is not born anew he cannot see the kingdom of God. He can never perceive the spiritual mysteries and taste the heavenly sweetness of God's kingdom. His destination is but to wait for death and judgment; for him there is nothing more.

How can one know he is regenerated? John tells us man is born anew by his believing on the name of the Son of God and receiving Him (1.12). The name of God's Son is "Jesus" which means "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1.21). Believing on the name -of the Son of God is hence equivalent to

believing in Him as the Savior, believing that He died on the cross for our sins in order to free us from the penalty and power of sin. To so believe is to receive Him as Savior. If one desires to know whether he is regenerated or not, he simply need ask himself one question: Have I come to the cross as a helpless sinner and received the Lord Jesus as Savior? If he answers affirmatively he is regenerated. All who believe in the Lord Jesus are born anew.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW

It is essential for a regenerated person to understand what he has obtained through new birth and what still lingers

of his natural endowment. Such knowledge will help him as he continues his spiritual journey. It may prove helpful at this point to explain how much is included in man's flesh and likewise how the Lord Jesus in His redemption deals with the constituents of that flesh. In other words, what does a believer inherit in regeneration?

A reading of several verses in Romans 7 can make clear that the components of the flesh are mainly "sin" and "me": 11 sin that dwells in me . . . , that is, in my flesh" (vv. 14,17-18 Darby). The "sin" here is the power of sin, and the "me" here is what we commonly acknowledge as "self." If a believer would understand spiritual life he must not be confused about these two elements of the flesh.

We know the Lord Jesus has dealt with the sin of our flesh on His cross. And the Word informs us that "our old self was crucified with him" (Rom. 6.6). Nowhere in the Bible are we told to be crucified since this has been done and done perfectly by Christ already. With regard to the question of sin, man is not required to do anything. He need only consider this an accomplished fact (Rom. 6.11) and he will reap the effectiveness of the death of Jesus in being wholly delivered from the power of sin (Rom. 6.14).

We are never asked in the Bible to be crucified for sin, that is true. It does exhort us, however, to take up the cross for denying self. The Lord Jesus instructs us many times, to deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow Him. The explanation for this is that the Lord Jesus deals with our sins and with ourselves very differently. To wholly conquer sin the believer needs but a moment; to deny the self he needs an entire lifetime. Only on the cross did Jesus bear our sins; yet throughout His life the Lord denied Himself. The same must be true of us.

The Galatian letter of Paul delineates the relationship between the flesh and the believer. He tells us on the one hand that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5.24). On the very day one becomes identified with the Lord Jesus then his flesh also is crucified. Now one might think, without the Holy Spirit's

instruction, that his flesh is no longer present, for has it not been crucified? But no, on the other hand the letter says to us to "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh" (5.16-17). Here we are told openly that one who belongs to Christ Jesus and has already the indwelling Holy Spirit still has the flesh in him. Not only does the flesh exist; it is described as being singularly powerful as well.

What can we say? Are these two Biblical references contradictory? No, verse 24 stresses the sin of the flesh, while

verse 17 the self of the flesh. The cross of Christ deals with sin and the Holy Spirit through the cross treats of self. Christ delivers the believer completely from the power of sin

through the cross that sin may not reign again; but by the Holy Spirit Who dwells in the believer, Christ enables him to overcome self daily and obey Him perfectly. Liberation from

sin is an accomplished fact; denial of self is to be a daily experience.

If a believer could understand the full implication of the cross at the time he is born anew he would be freed wholly from sin on the one side and on the other be in possession of a new life. It is indeed regrettable that many workers fail to present this full salvation to sinners, so that the latter believe just half God's salvation. This leaves them as it were only half-saved: their sins are forgiven, but they lack the strength to cease from sin. Moreover, even on those occasions when salvation is presented completely sinners desire just to have their sins forgiven for they do not sincerely expect deliverance from the power of sin. This equally renders them halvesaved.

Should a person believe and receive full salvation at the very outset, he will experience less failure battling with sin and more success battling with self. Rarely are such believers

found. Most enter upon only half their salvation. Their conflicts are therefore mainly with sin. And some do not even know what self is. In this connection, the personal condition of the believer plays a part before regeneration. Many

tend to do good even before they believe. They of course do not possess the power to do good nor could they be good. But their conscience seems to be comparatively enlightened, though their strength to do good is nevertheless weak. They experience what is commonly called the conflict between reason and lust. Now when these hear of God's total salvation they eagerly accept grace for release from sin even as they receive grace for forgiveness of sin. Others, however, before believing, harbor pitch-black consciences, sin terribly, and never intend to do good. Upon hearing of God's whole salvation they naturally grasp the grace of forgiveness and neglect (not reject) the grace for deliverance from sin. They will encounter much struggle over sin of the flesh afterwards.

Why is this latter case so? Because such a reborn man possesses a new life which demands him to overcome the rule of his flesh and to obey it instead. God's life is absolute; it must gain complete mastery over the man. As soon as that life enters the human spirit it requires the man to leave his former master of sin and to be subject entirely to the Holy Spirit. Even so, sin in this particular man is deeply rooted. Although his will is being renewed in part through the regenerated life, it is still tied to sin and self; on many occasions it bends towards sin. Inevitably great conflict will erupt between the new life and the flesh. Since people in this condition are numerous, we shall pay special attention to them. Let me remind my reader, however, that this experience of prolonged struggle and failure with sin (different from that with self) is unnecessary.

The flesh demands full sovereignty; so does the spiritual life. The flesh desires to have man forever attached to itself; while the spiritual life wants to have man completely subject to the Holy Spirit. At all points the flesh and spiritual life differ. The nature of the former is that of the first Adam, the nature of the latter belongs to the last Adam. The motive of the first is earthly; that of the second, heavenly. The flesh focuses all things upon self; spiritual life centers all upon Christ. The flesh wishes to lead man to sin, but spiritual life

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longs to lead him to righteousness. Since these two are so essentially contrary, how can a person avoid clashing continually with the flesh? Not realizing the full salvation of Christ, a believer constantly experiences such a struggle.

When young believers fall into such conflict they are dumbfounded. Some despair of spiritual growth thinking they are just too bad. Others begin to doubt they are genuinely regenerated, not aware that regeneration itself brings in this contention. Formerly, when the flesh was in authority without interference (for the spirit was dead), they could sin terribly without feeling any sense of sinfulness. Now new life has sprung up, and with it heavenly nature, desire, light and thought. As this new light penetrates the man it immediately exposes the defilement and corruption within. The new desire is naturally dissatisfied to remain in such a state and longs to follow the will of God. The flesh begins to contend with the spiritual life. Such battle gives the believer an impression that housed within him are two persons. Each has its own idea and strength. Each seeks victory. When the spiritual life is in ascendancy the believer is most glad; when the flesh gains the upper hand he cannot but grieve. Experience of this kind confirms that such ones have been regenerated.

The purpose of God is never to reform the flesh but to destroy it. It is by God's life given the believer at regeneration that the self in the flesh is to be destroyed. The life God imparts to man is indeed most powerful, but the regenerated person is still a babe-newly born and very weak. The flesh long has held the reins and its power is tremendous. Furthermore, the regenerated one has not yet learned to apprehend by faith God's complete salvation. Though he be saved, he is still of the flesh during this period. Being fleshly denotes being governed by the flesh. What is most pitiful is for a believer, hitherto enlightened by heavenly light to know the wickedness of the flesh and to desire with full heart victory over it, to find himself too weak to overcome. This is the moment when he sheds many tears of sorrow. How can he

not be angry with himself, for though he harbors a new desire to destroy sin and to please God his will is not steadfast enough to subdue the body of sin. Few are the victories; many, the defeats.

Paul in Romans 7 voices the inner anguish of this conflict:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. (vv. 15-23)

Many will respond to his cry of nearly final despair "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v.24)

What is the meaning of this contention? It is one of the ways the Holy Spirit disciplines us. God has provided a whole salvation for man. He who does not know he has it will not be able to enjoy it, neither will he be able to experience it if he does not desire after it. God can only give to those who believe and receive and claim. When man hence asks for forgiveness and regeneration, God surely bestows it upon him. And it is through conflict that God induces the believer to seek and to grasp total triumph in Christ. He who was ignorant before will now seek to know; the Holy Spirit will then be afforded a chance to reveal to him how Christ has dealt with his old man on the cross so that he may now believe into possessing such triumph. And he who possessed not because he sought not will discover through such battle that all the truth he had was merely mental and consequently ineffectual. This will stir him to desire to experience the truth he only mentally had known.

This strife increases as the, days go by. If believers will proceed faithfully without giving in to despair, they will incur fiercer conflict until such time as they are delivered.

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