

THE FLESH

The item directly below is the 2nd part of a symposium: **“FOES OF THE NEW CREATION IN THE LAST DAYS”—THE FLESH** by T. A. Smith at the convention of the Associated Bible Students of Metropolitan Detroit, April 5, 1975.)

I am thankful that I have been assigned this part of the symposium—The Flesh as a Foe of the New Creation, as it affords me an opportunity to concentrate afresh on the dangers from this quarter.

In order that we may be balanced in our reasoning on this subject, I wish first to draw attention to the fact that the word flesh should not be automatically associated with that which is evil. The primary meaning is human nature, and human nature may be good or it may be fallen, all depending upon the circumstances. For instance in Matt. 19:5 and 6 we read of the marriage relationship that a man and woman become one flesh. Then in Luke 3:6 we read a prophecy concerning the future, that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Then John 1:14 is perhaps the most striking of all—“The Word was made flesh.” And in John 6:51 we read the statement of Jesus that the bread which he would give for the world would be his flesh.

Our present study is going to be concerned mainly with flesh, human nature which is fallen. We know the cause—our first father disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden and we, his children, have inherited flesh which is beset with weaknesses, fallen tendencies and general selfishness. By the grace of God we have been rescued from the sentence of death and we have entered into covenant relationship with God and now we are new creatures in a very important sense of the word. We are not only new creatures as far as turning our backs upon sinful tendencies and accepting the laws of God as pertaining to righteousness, but far beyond this, we are new creatures in the sense that we have made a covenant by sacrifice, and are no longer regarding this life as our aim for living, but we are in the Lord’s service and are informed that if we walk in the footsteps of the Redeemer—if we suffer with him we shall reign with him in his throne. This is contrary to everything that is human—we are pilgrims and strangers in the earth looking forward to the Kingdom of God when we shall reign with Christ as the Seed of Abraham for the blessing of all the families of the earth.

So literally we are going contrary to the flesh, in both of its aspects—the legitimate desires (if they interfere with our New Creature ambitions), and the illegitimate desires that are contrary to the laws of God—every kind of weakness and selfish tendency.

I notice that the subject includes the phrase “in the last days” and the meaning could be that we are confronted with a more powerful flesh than ever before. We sometimes speak of the weaknesses of the flesh, and rightly so, but I think it is quite correct to speak of the

flesh as being strong—we are confronted with strong tendencies even in legitimate things, and we are confronted with strong tendencies that are selfishly inclined.

First we want to touch upon some of the legitimate desires of the flesh, and then proceed to the weaknesses and selfish tendencies. Because we are in the “time of the end,” we are surrounded with great mental activity—the “increase of knowledge” and constant and incessant “running to and fro.” Human activities are increased many fold, over centuries ago and there are so many appeals to the natural mind. Inventions have increased by leaps and bounds.

What has this to do with our subject? Just this—that there are appeals to the legitimate cravings of the flesh and these legitimate cravings must be intelligently resisted and overcome. For instance there are the appeals to the intellectually minded. One could go on to great heights in the field of mathematics. There are many professions that glitter and beckon to certain minds. Making money and becoming rich is a possibility to some minds. In the scientific field there are many opportunities for achievement and advancement to high positions to those who might give their minds and talents to such ambitions.

What has the Lord provided for us to enable us as new creatures to rise above these powerful attractions? Our Pastor touched upon this one time and he said the Lord has provided us with an intelligent and glorious view of his plan that would enable us to resist the pull of the earth—the legitimate desires of the flesh.

As to becoming rich, we are reminded of a story that a brother told us not so long ago. He was an orderly in a hospital and there was a man on a hospital bed, and he called to the brother and said: “young man, I am an old man. I have spent all my life to accumulate money and now I am dying and I cannot take anything with me. Don’t make the mistake I made, for such a life is not worth the effort.”

And now let us consider some of the weaknesses and problems and the selfish tendencies of our earthen vessel. We don’t want to dwell on theory but approach our problems from a practical standpoint, so we can go away from this convention feeling that we have added to our understanding on how to control and conquer the flesh. We couldn’t hope to cover the whole subject, but just a few of our problems.

In Eph. 4:31 we are exhorted “to put away anger and wrath.” We will consider these two words together. In Strong’s concordance we learn that these two words are closely related. Anger is defined as “excitement of the mind, violent passion”; and wrath apparently is somewhat stronger—“passion (as if breathing hard)” and is translated fierceness, indignation. We as new creatures are taught to be just, merciful, kind, loving

and self-controlled. This being the case, would not “excitement of the mind, violent passion, fierceness and indignation” be entirely foreign to the Christian spirit?

Let us consider some practical life situations and see how we are to handle ourselves. For instance you phone for a service man to do some work on your washing machine, let us say. You get a bill for the job and find some simple parts listed and then you look at the labor charge—it just about bowls you over. You not only get a charge on paper which you can see with your eyes, but you also get a charge of something inside of you that you can feel. Your first reaction is “excitement of mind,” “indignation.” How does one control this? How does one keep from “fierceness”? Again it is the Truth that comes to our rescue and it quiets us down. We know we are in the end of the age, in the time of trouble, and we are in the Hour of Temptation when selfishness is in the saddle. We also know that we are on the way to the blessed times of the Kingdom of God when things will be perfect and righteousness will be the rule instead of selfishness. Then the quieting words of James come to mind (James 4:7) “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord.” How wonderful is the precious truth to quiet us down and give us peace and self-control!

Another situation: perhaps we have mailed out some truth literature and then an unsigned letter comes to us—no name only some words on a large sheet of paper: “don’t send me any more of this tripe. How did you get my name anyway? Take my name off your mailing list immediately!” Well we all have the faculty of approbateness and we crave the approval of everyone, and a letter like this gives us momentarily quite a jolt. Do we have power from the Lord to control our feelings and not get excited in mind? Yes, one truth is that man is terribly under the fall, and is thoroughly deceived by Satan and people don’t even know what an awful condition they are in; and so we are supposed to be sympathetic and merciful toward those who use such rude and cutting language. And we can consider the Apostle’s words that we will be evilly spoken of in this life, but in the day of visitation mankind will experience a great change of heart and bless us with words of appreciation and thankfulness.

Well, let us change to another facet for a moment or so. I think we all remember the Apostle James’ remarks about the tongue. In chapter 3, Vs. 8 to 10 we read, “But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.” And let us read Matt. 12:34, “... for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” Now we do not have any instrument for scanning the contents of the mind, but we do have ears and if we just listen carefully to the tongue we will be able to catalogue what is in the heart. I think many of us have been surprised when we listen to what the tongue is saying, and we are astonished—we didn’t know our hearts contained such things. We might even say, “I didn’t know I was that kind of a person.”

What does the tongue reveal or what might it reveal if we listen closely? Well, words of sarcasm might burst out; or cutting words of criticism; or words that are in the framework of a joke, but containing little hints of criticism or unkindness. I think husbands and wives, particularly husbands, need to be careful along this line. The world is fond of making fun of wives by jokes from the lips of husbands; and I suppose the same is true of wives joking about their husbands' weaknesses and their idiosyncrasies. All this is the worldly spirit and as new creatures we should rise above this irreverence toward our mates. Our mates deserve kind and respectful treatment. Good wives and good husbands are precious jewels.

Well, let us return to Eph. 4:3. What else are we to put away? Bitterness is another quality that must be recognized and put away. And we notice in the same verse that clamour, evil speaking, "with all malice" are also mentioned. As there seems to be a close connection in all these qualities, we shall consider them together. Now as to bitterness, the thought seems to be a feeling of resentment, a positive dislike, holding of a grudge. This is really a serious problem for us as new creatures, for we may have experienced some injury, some injustice of some kind; and this might include a continued situation that we cannot escape easily, or maybe not at all.

If there is resentment, if there is bitterness, a holding of a grudge, then this will automatically lead to evil speaking and malice, a desire to get even—return evil for evil. How are we to substitute the Lord's spirit for this unhappy state of mind and heart? This takes some doing, but if we judge ourselves, the spirit of the Lord is quite sufficient for this difficult task. Again the truth concerning the fall of man plays its part—man is fallen and we must expect to have him act unjustly, unfairly. Man is not in the same school as we are and cannot be expected to follow the high principles that are law for the new creation.

Another line of truth helps a great deal—Rom. 12:19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." We know it is not good for us as new creatures to harbor resentment in the heart (and we know also it is not good for us physically either—it is hard on the nerves and the blood pressure). We can and should rest our case in the hands of God to administer justice with wisdom in his own good time—if not in this life, then in the next life.

Another thought is extremely helpful and that is to remember that Christian love toward enemies does not mean intimate tenderness the same as we have for our brethren in Christ; but it means that we will have no desire to get even—we will be willing to be merciful and pitiful and do good to our enemy if he or she is in trouble. And sometimes enemies can be very close at home.

Another power from the Lord is Rom. 8:28, "... all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Paul is stating a positive fact here that applies to many situations and results. Character is developed in many different ways by the things that are permitted of the Lord. For instance we may have to be firm for what is right and this develops strength in the Christian graces. There may be times when it is not wise to submit to impositions and we must remove ourselves from such situations—this takes character. Then again there are times when we have to exercise a great deal of patience with some people and in such cases we develop strong self-control, when it would be so easy to do just the opposite—to be very impatient and give others some rough treatment.

Up to this point we have not considered clamour that we are to put away. According to Strong's concordance the literal meaning seems to be "outcry." This word is used several times in the New Testament. As recorded in Acts, 23rd chapter, Paul is before the council and he cried out that he was called in question regarding the hope of the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees responded with "a great cry" saying, "We find no evil in this man." Then in Heb. 5:7 we read, "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears..." The Pharisees "cried out" in Paul's behalf; and Jesus "cried out" in his prayer to God. But what would be meant for us to put away "clamour"—crying out?

We can think of one illustration—if we are enduring some ill treatment, we should not make a great disturbance, a public display to draw unfavorable attention toward those who might be ill treating us. If we did make a great outcry, this might indicate a desire on our part to get even. I can think of one scripture that would be an important guide to our conduct in whatever course we might pursue—2 Cor. 6:3, "Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed."

Well let us consider another facet of our subject. The flesh is full of tricks in trying to get its way. It rationalizes to try to win over the new creature, or to get the new creature to give its permission, or at least not stand in its way. This is an interesting field for study, and in some cases would be amusing if the results were not so serious.

Let us consider an example. A brother might have an opportunity to better himself in a change of jobs, but he would be disadvantaged in many ways spiritually. He would make lots more money, but he would have added responsibilities and very little opportunity to attend meetings and less time for study. The flesh would argue—"you know you would love this new job. It would increase your business standing and you would have the advantage of a generous pension when you retired; and best of all you would have more money to use in the Lord's service." Everything about this is appealing to the flesh, but

dangerous to new creature interests. One needs to be abrupt as was our Lord with Peter —“Get thee behind me Satan.”

There is another problem concerning the flesh that comes to my mind. In 1 Cor. 7:20 we read, “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.” And 1 Tim. 6:6, “But godliness with contentment is great gain.” And the words of Paul in Phil. 4:11, “... for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” There are times when we chafe at our condition. In fact we may do this without really knowing what is going on inside our heart. We find ourselves feeling impatient and annoyed and wanting to speak snappy. It is only when we stop to analyze our feelings that we discover that the flesh is champing at the bit because it is dissatisfied. It is wanting to have the tight cords loosed a bit. It is the job of the new creature to assert itself and take a firm hand and exercise its authority. If the new creature relaxes even the slightest, the flesh is right there, alert and willing at any time to rebel at the stringent conditions of the narrow way. If the new creature stops and reviews its position, then the power of the spirit of Truth will command again, and the new creature will overcome the rebellious feelings of the flesh, and be content to carry on with thankfulness and zeal.

There is another problem we have with the flesh. We know it is a fact that there are all kinds of personality types. Some find themselves the reserved type, and others find themselves the “bubbling-over” type. Some are disturbed by the fact that they are reserved and they are afraid the brethren will regard them as cold and unfriendly. Reserved personalities can overcome this by not trying to be the “bubbling-over” type and just be themselves. They know they do feel friendly and loving toward the Lord’s people, but they are more serious in their manner of approach and speech and there is nothing wrong with this at all. Just forget self and let your love for the Lord’s people show in your own serious way.

We have all kinds of beautiful flowers—the little forget-me-nots, the rose, the peony, the daffodil, the dahlia. I like them all. And so it is with the Lord’s people. I like the “bubbling-over” type, and I like the very opposite—the brother or sister who has a very serious manner of approach and speech. I feel refreshed and blessed by both types.

A very kind sister in Christ wrote a poem for my benefit one time. She entitled the poem “PUT UP THE BLIND.” So I say to all the brothers and sisters who know they are naturally reserved—don’t be dismayed, don’t be unhappy about yourself. Just “PUT UP THE BLIND” and let the brethren see the bright and warm Christian heart that you have inside—but do this in your own serious way.

We have said nothing so far about pride. Let us consider Matt. 5:23, 24, “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy

brother, and then come and offer thy gift.” So if we come to the Lord in prayer and there remember that someone has aught against us, we are to go and make amends before the Lord will accept our prayer. This is a very severe test because the flesh does not like to admit that something wrong has been done and we need to humble ourselves—go to the one wronged and confess our fault and ask for forgiveness. The new creature has to take over with resolute will and not allow the flesh to get away with conduct that is wrong. The flesh has caused the trouble, and it must be taught that such conduct is wrong and will not be tolerated by the new creature. The only way to discipline the flesh so it will be afraid to act up again in the future is to force it to go to the one wronged—either by a personal talk or by correspondence and admit the wrong and ask for forgiveness, and then ask for forgiveness from the Lord as well.

The new creature must rule in such cases and hold the flesh to strict account. If the flesh gets the proper drubbing, it will think twice next time before trying to act up again in the same manner. “He that ruleth his spirit is better than he that taketh a city” are the wise man’s words that apply. And we remember the words—“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.” Also “humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” If we are to judge mankind, we must learn to judge ourselves and keep the body under control.

Let us consider another slice of life along the line of pride. Perhaps there is a discussion in class concerning some plan of action. We might suggest a plan or idea of some kind, and then discover that our idea is given scant attention and the ecclesia votes in favor of something entirely different. If we feel stung and sense that we are heating up and are on the edge of getting indignant, we must take a warning and realize that we are putting too much importance on our way of thinking; and also remember that our ecclesia affairs are supposed to be conducted along democratic lines, and we are only one member and the others have a right to be heard, and have their proposals accepted instead of our own if the class so decides.

Now we would like to mention something that many of us have experienced. This is not related to overcoming the flesh as an enemy, but is related to our doing something for our spiritual advantage and then finding out that the flesh gains too. We might call this a “fringe benefit.” We have heard brethren say, “I was so tired when evening came and even had a headache and I just felt I would rather stay home than make the effort to go to meeting. But I didn’t give in to the tired flesh and went to meeting anyway; and I was so glad I did because I don’t feel tired now, and my headache is gone.” The explanation for this could be that there is a change to the flesh—to get away from home or the job and the new creature is nourished and made happy by the study or the testimonies, the singing of hymns and fellowship and prayer, and as the new creature is made happy, the flesh is relieved and refreshed. I think this is quite a common experience of the Lord’s people and something worth remembering when we feel tired and head-achey.

There is another tendency of the flesh and that is to imagine all kinds of things. I suppose story tellers have good imaginations and they can made good money by writing interesting stories. But we must curb our bump of imagination and bring every thought into obedience to Christ.