

# Victory Over Sin

by Dr. John Ankerberg

**Editor's Note:** *The recent arrest of John Mark Karr in connection with the death of JonBenet Ramsey has brought the issue of sexual perversion and addiction to the forefront of news reports. We will not here discuss his guilt or innocence in regard to JonBenet's death. That is a matter for the courts.*

*But with all the allegations about Karr's sexual addiction being reported, we wanted to address the question of whether or not you, as a Christian, can get victory over your sinful habits — whatever they may be. Dr. Ankerberg addressed this topic in the article reprinted below.*

Are you a Christian who has placed your faith in Jesus Christ, but struggle privately in your personal life with many different problems? Have you been surprised at how easy it is to still fall into sin? Has it made you wonder, How does the Christian life work? Have you discovered that as a Christian, you can know in your mind what God wants you to do, but your bodily desires can still lead you to give in to sin in a moment's time?

I remember while I was in college a bright, young fellow accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. He came from a straight pagan background. He truly believed in Christ to forgive him of his sin and eagerly started to live the Christian life.

But just a short time later he came to me and said, "I don't understand all that has happened to me. I became a Christian and really felt that God saved me and had forgiven me of my sins. I was thrilled to know that I was going to Heaven when I died. And I expected the Christian life to be one victory after another, but that has not happened. In fact," he said, "everywhere I go I seem to be tempted more now than before I became a Christian. What's worse, I find myself actually wanting to do some of these sins, and as a result, I have committed them, only to feel guilty after. How come these desires for some of my past sinful practices haven't disappeared? Am I not a Christian? Is this the normal Christian life?"

I wonder if his question is your question? I believe many Christian people are living defeated lives right now. They don't know the wonderful promises God has made and how He can give them victory in their lives. If that describes you, let me show you from God's Word what the answer is.

To begin, I want to look at what God says our condition was before we became Christians; second, after we believed on Christ what changed; what did God do for us and give to us? Third, after becoming Christians, why is it that we can know what God says, but still experience sinful desires which tempt us to sin? Why? What provision has God made for us so that we will be able to live victoriously each day?

Well, first, what does God say our condition was before we became Christians? The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 that man is made up of spirit, soul and body. It is through our spirit that we can communicate with God, or keep Him out.

Jesus said in John 4:24, “God is Spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” The Bible sometimes refers to our spiritual nature as our heart.

Ephesians 3:17 says, “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” We are told in Philippians 4:7, “The peace of God...shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So our heart, our spirit, is different and separate from our mind. What was our heart’s spiritual nature like before we became Christians?

Ephesians 2:1-2 says the spiritual part of us was dead to God. In this spiritually dead condition the Bible says we “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” — that’s Satan — “the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

In other words, before we came to Christ, Satan was at work in our lives and we were following his ways and ideas. This was so, even though we wouldn’t have called it that or believed it. We were deceived.

Before we became Christians, the Bible says we gratified the cravings of our sinful nature and followed its desires and thoughts. As a result, we were by nature objects of God’s wrath (Eph. 2:3).

How did we get this sinful nature? According to the Bible, before Adam and Eve sinned, their spiritual natures were alive, open and sensitive to God. But when they sinned, their spiritual nature died and their communication with God stopped. Adam and Eve didn’t physically die, but their spiritual natures died, that is, their spirit became dead to God. Every man born since the time of Adam has inherited a dead spiritual nature at birth.

Augustine said, “Every man is born with a God-shaped vacuum that only Jesus Christ can fill.” But the problem is, our God-shaped vacuum is empty. Without God, our dead spiritual natures have become hostile to God. We don’t want to submit to God’s ways. We live every day to gratify our own selfish desires and thoughts. Some theologians call this our sin nature. Our sin nature leads us to view God as unnecessary in our life, someone to whom we refuse to submit. In short, as a result of our sin natures, we refuse to acknowledge the true God and make ourselves our god.

But secondly, the Bible says man is not only made up of a spirit, but he has a soul. The soul of man includes our mind, our will and our emotions—three things

which make each of us the unique personalities that we are.

However, before we became Christians, the Bible describes how our sinful soul functioned. In Romans 8:5 it says, “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires.... the sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” In other words, our sinful nature influences our soul — and specifically here, according to the Bible, our sinful nature inclines our mind to rebel against God.

How about our will? Here again, because our spiritual nature was dead to God, with our will we just didn’t want to submit to God’s way of living. So we didn’t.

What effect did all of this have on our emotions? Well, our emotions were up and down. There is no doubt sin is pleasing for the moment, but as one writer has said, all the devil’s good looking apples have worms inside.

The Bible says, “Be sure your sin will find you out.” That is, sin may be fun for the moment, but in the long run produces dreadful consequences. The young couple that passionately delights in sex before marriage one night has fun, but such sin can result in their contracting a sexually transmitted disease, the girl becoming pregnant, or an emotional breakup. As a result, our emotions go up and down and find no peace or security.

But someone might ask, “Isn’t it possible for sinful people to make up their minds to do good things?” Yes, but our sinful disposition controls our will so that many times the motive for our doing good things is selfish—so people will see us doing good things. If we go to church, do a good deed, or help someone out, how many times do we do such things because we are worried about what people will think if we don’t do them? How often do we do good things simply because we love God? Because we willfully decide to live the way we want to live, our emotions fluctuate wildly, especially when we fail.

Then third, the Bible says we have a body. This body houses our soul and spirit. 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 says our body is an earthly tent. Before we were Christians, we used our bodies to gratify our own selfish desires. Keep in mind, when our body dies, the Bible says our spirit will continue to exist, either with God in Heaven or separated from God in hell.

So let’s summarize what the Bible says was the state of our spirit, soul and body before we believed in Christ. According to Scripture, each of us was spiritually dead to God. We were controlled by a sinful nature that inclined us to live without God and for ourselves. Our mind and thinking were hostile to God because we didn’t want to submit to His ways. We lived our life to gratify our own selfish desires and thoughts. We were sinners, candidates for hell and judgment, desperately in need of a Savior to rescue us from ourselves. But now the good news—which is point number two. One day we believed on Christ and asked Him to be our Savior. What happened at that moment? What did God do for us? What changed? How did God’s salvation affect our spirit, our soul and our body? Well first, it’s always good to remember that the Bible teaches salvation is a gift God provides for us; it is not something we work

to attain.

Titus 3:5-6 says, "God saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy, he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior."

When we believed on Christ, we were spiritually reborn. God gave us a new spirit. God did for us what He prophesied in the Old Testament He would do for people in the future.

In Ezekiel 36:26 God promised, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." So, when we believe on Christ, God gives us a new heart, that is, a new spiritual nature. In addition, He gives us the Holy Spirit who takes up residence and lives in our life.

In Jeremiah 31:33 we read, "'After that time,' declares the Lord, 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'"

God says He gives a new spirit. This new spiritual heart, this new spiritual disposition or nature desires to serve God, loves God, and wants to obey Him. This new spiritual nature begins to influence our soul. Our mind now begins to understand God's truth. Our will and our emotions begin to react to God's truth. For example, our emotions are relieved that God will not punish us for our sins and He now promises to be our friend. We are excited and happy to know that He will someday take us to be with Him in Heaven.

Third, at conversion our body, following our mind, will, and emotions, starts to become an instrument that Jesus lives in and through. He begins to use our body in ways that witness to the world that He exists. If God does all of this for us when we believe in Christ, then why do Christians still have problems?

Do you think you have a problem? C. S. Lewis tells a neat story about himself that shows the problem we have. He said one day he was trying to prepare for a speech, so he told his secretary, "Please, don't disturb me."

She went out of the room and closed the door. He got down to his books and started to read. As he was writing his speech, all of a sudden his secretary burst through the door and interrupted and said, "Hey, there's a special person that wants to talk to you!"

He got angry. He said, "Please, I told you NOT to interrupt me! Get out of here!"

She left and when she closed the door, he picked up his pen to write. Now he felt bad. He had just lost his temper. He had just said some angry words to his secretary.

He started reasoning in his mind, "Well, I told her! But I shouldn't have reacted that way. I'm a Christian." He said, "Well, if she had let me **know** that she was coming in, I could have prepared myself, calmed myself, and I wouldn't have acted that way and I wouldn't have said those words."

But then he thought some more about it. Yeah, it was a kind of “surprise attack.” He didn’t **know** that was going to happen and what came **out** when he wasn’t expecting anything showed what he really was—and he didn’t like that.

How do we change what we really are when we don’t like what we see? Only Jesus Christ has the answer to that and we’re going to look at that next.

If Christians now have a new heart, a new spiritual nature which desires to obey God, if the Holy Spirit lives in us, then why do we still experience such strong temptations? Why do we still experience sinful desires? Are we weird? Are we different from all other Christians? The answer is, we are not weird, just ignorant. We don’t know all God has said on this topic, nor do we know His answer of how we can experience victory. How do I know that true Christians struggle with this problem and that there is a victorious solution to it? It’s because the Apostle Paul struggled with this same problem and wrote all about it in Romans, chapters 6 and 7.

If you read Romans 6:11-19, you will see that Paul talks about his sinful disposition, his sinful nature, and personifies it. He calls his sinful nature sin in verses 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18 and personifies it in the form of a slave master who ruthlessly controls him and keeps him doing things he doesn’t want to do. Before Paul became a Christian, his sinful disposition, like a slave master, taught him how to live selfishly and to gratify his flesh. He kept leading him in sinful ways. But then when Paul became a Christian, he came to realize what God through sending Christ to die for him on the cross had done for him.

In Romans 6:6 Paul writes, “For we know that our old self was crucified with Him (that’s Jesus) so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” God took his old self, that is, his old unregenerate man with its sinful deeds, and crucified it with Christ. The reason God did this was so that our body of sin, our sinful track record, might be done away with.

But God did something else as well “so that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” Paul learned that when he believed in Christ, he was somehow united by God with Christ in Christ’s death.

Through Christ’s blood our sins were paid for. Through Christ’s body, in which He lived a perfect life, Christ broke the hold that our slave master, sin, had on all human beings who believe. Christ legally freed us from our slave master’s authority.

Romans 8:1 says, “Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.” The word condemnation here means that the believer is not condemned to a life of servitude to the sinful disposition. As F. F. Bruce writes in his commentary on Romans, Paul is teaching that “there is no reason why those who are in Christ Jesus should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and never been liberated from the prison house of sin.”

Paul, in Romans 6:18, says point-blank we have been freed from sin. But in what sense does Paul think he has been freed from sin? Is he saying that he is completely freed from sin’s temptations and desires? The answer is obviously no! In Romans 7 Paul says he still is struggling with his old master, sin. Paul is teaching that Christ freed him in the legal sense. His sinful nature has no official authority or

right, no legal right to control him anymore. because Christ has legally set us free, and we are not obligated anymore to serve sin.

Paul advises, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts; and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin."

Paul says, "Don't present your body to this slave master [sin] when he tempts you; rather, present yourself to God as those alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."

Because of Christ's life and death for us, God's Word promises, "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."

We need to know this and believe it. But if this is true, what's the problem, then? If we've been freed from sin by the grace of God to serve the Lord, if He has given us a new heart, a new spiritual nature, given us the Holy Spirit to take up residence in our life, if we have been legally freed from our old sinful master officially ruling over us, then why do we still have problems?

In the very next chapter the Apostle Paul tells us why. He teaches that, although we are legally free not to follow our sinful nature, it still exists and tries to illegally control us. Even with our new spiritual nature that God has given us, if we try in our own strength, our own efforts to live according to our new desires and to fight against our sinful natures' temptations and desires, we will fail. Paul tells us he himself failed in trying to live the Christian life by his own self efforts. He teaches us that the only way to live victoriously is to look to, and depend upon, the Holy Spirit to give us the power we need to conquer our old sinful nature.

Let's look at Paul's account of his personal struggle in this area after he became a Christian. It's recorded in Romans 7:14-24. Remember, he is writing as one who has become a Christian, one who has a new heart from the Lord.

He tells us up front, "For that which I am doing I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate." Paul is saying, God gave me a new heart, as He promised, and so now I desire to serve and obey God's law. But in spite of my new heart, I still find myself doing just the opposite and committing sins.

He says in verse 19, "For the good that I wish, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." Paul says he still practices doing evil. He sins. Why? It's because even though he is a Christian with a new spiritual nature, his old sinful nature is still trying to illegally control him. And apparently it is no match for Paul's good intentions. It can still trap and conquer him.

He writes: "If I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it but sin which dwells in me."

Here Paul is not saying that he is not responsible for giving in to these sinful desires. What he is saying is that the origination of these desires is coming from his old sinful nature, which now that he is a new creation in Christ, is not really his true self.

He continues, "I find then the principle that evil is present **in me**, the one who

wishes to do good. 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.... Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Here Paul admits that even though he is a Christian and has a new heart that desires to serve and obey the Lord, he has discovered, "Evil is still present in me." This evil present in him "wages war against the law of his mind. It makes him a prisoner of the law of sin." This can be none other than Paul's old sinful disposition that is still present within him even though it has no legal claim over him. So what is the bottom line?

Are Paul and all Christians everywhere condemned to being constantly defeated by their powerful old natures, even though they are Christians? The answer is no.

Paul indicates why he failed in his struggle with his old nature. Twenty-three times in eleven verses of Romans chapter 7 Paul uses the word "I." But in Chapter 8, 17 times in 16 verses Paul uses the word "spirit" or "Spirit of God." The point Paul is making is that when he depended on his own strength and power to live the Christian life, he failed. When he depended on God the Holy Spirit to give him the power he needed, he had victory. So when we become Christians, God can forgive our sins and give us a new spiritual nature. But that new spiritual nature which desires to serve the Lord, does not have the power in itself to actually give us victory over our old nature. That's why God also gave us the Holy Spirit to live within us. It's only when we look to and depend on the power of the Holy Spirit that we will be able to follow the desires of our new heart, and conquer those things we face from within and without. It is the Holy Spirit's power, not our own, that will bring us victory. Every believer who has the new spiritual nature that God has given him but who tries to live for God in his own self effort, in his own self generated power, will miserably fail. Is that you right now?

Even though Christ's life and death freed us from the legal mastery of our old sinful disposition, we must understand that our old sinful nature is still within us and can overpower us if we try to overcome it in our own power. But if we turn to the Holy Spirit, we can utilize His power to live the way we should. That is what the Apostle Paul is teaching here.

In Romans 8:11 he promises, "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead"—that is God—"will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you."

In Ephesians 3:16, Paul writes, "I pray that out of his glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." This power, God's power, is available to every believer. What are we to do with such a gift?

Paul advises, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh [our old nature] to live according to the flesh....but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

At home I have an electric power saw, a drill and a grinder. Like my mind, will and emotions, these tools all serve different functions. Yet all three tools plug into the

same power source, electricity. Electricity is their life. Without that life, without that power, all my tools are nothing but big paperweights. My mind, will and emotions also must be plugged into the power of the Holy Spirit so that God's spiritual life can flow through me and give me victory over sinful desires and habits. If you have failed God, ask Him right now to forgive you; then tell Him from now on you will, moment by moment, be asking the Holy Spirit to help you live for Him.

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