

From Section 4: Alluring Idols

*"The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips." Psalm 16:4*

God Is Faithful to Fight Our Sin: Idols, Israel, David, and Us

In the last section we looked at Psalm 16:3 and thought about what it means to delight in the saints. Here is verse 4, we see the most fundamental reason why David delighted in the saints: because the saints were those who worshipped the LORD instead of other gods.

Other gods. The gods of the peoples of Canaan. High god El and his wife, Asherah. Warriors: Baal, Anat and Astarte. Forces of destruction: Nahar the River; Mot, the god of burning, pestilence and death; and murderous Molech, abomination of children. Over 200 gods in the Canaanite pantheon have been recorded. Their worship required sacrifice, (some, even human sacrifice) and ritual sex. Their images were cast out of bronze and gold by their worshippers.

While they had no mouth of their own, no hands of their own, no life of their own to act or to speak, yet they were believed to promise fertility in families, animals and crops (which in this very agrarian society meant prosperity) and power to defeat their enemies. They required little from you in your day to day working out of life, but if you wanted something from them, they had to be negotiated with, appeased, persuaded to help. And hopefully, if you did the right things, they seemed to pay out... sometimes.

How very different they were from the LORD, who was like this:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."
--Exodus 34:5-6

But whom to follow? Whom to choose? Seems obvious, doesn't it? The LORD, the one, true, living God, right?

And yet it was no open and shut case. Israel, even at the foot of Mt. Sinai, just weeks after the LORD had rescued them, was allured to worship an idol--the golden calf. Idolatry would be a sad part of Israel's story, year after year. Kings, prophets, priests, and common people. They all were enticed to turn away from the Lord. Only by the LORD's gracious mercy, and for the sake of His covenant with Abraham, did He not abandon them, as they deserved.

David and Idols

But by God's grace, David was different. When the pressures of life closed in on him, he refused to turn to these other gods to meet his needs. He had seen the LORD rescue him, protect him, strengthen him, bless him. He knew He was the one, true God. Out of this heart, come the words of Psalm 16:4:

"The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take their names on my lips."

David appears to have held true to this vow his whole life. There is not even a hint of his worshipping the gods of the people around him.

However, that does not mean that David did not struggle with the same sinful desires that were behind the worship of those false gods. Was not Satan successful in tempting David to count his army of Israel because David's heart resonated with a desire to glory not in the LORD, but in his own strength? Was it not lust that made Bathsheba so enticing to David? Did he not let it bloom into the sin of adultery and later murder, as he tried to cover up what he did? And with this kind of idol worship came an increase in sorrow upon both David and generations of his family, as both he and they were to see.

"Do not commit adultery. . . . Do not murder." These are two of the most central commandments of God's laws that David loved; yet, he would knowingly break both. His was not a deliberate act of worship at the feet of one of those foreign gods—classic "idolatry." His temptation started as desire, entangled him as sin, and tripped him up as he ran the race set out for him by God. But the LORD still judged what David did as "utter contempt for His Word" and therefore, for Him. David deserved to lose not only his throne, but his life and relationship with God for what he had done.

Mercifully, God had plans for David that were different from what he deserved. While the consequences of David's actions indeed brought an increase in sorrow upon both him and generations of his family, these were softened and redeemed by God's grace. He sent Nathan to help David see his sin for what it was, to repent, and find mercy. Instead of removing David's family from the throne, the LORD held to His promise for David's family to reign forever.

How like David we are! We love God, and desire to obey His laws; but we are tempted and even fall like him, too. Praise God for that son of David who came as the Forever King! Jesus Christ! Through Him we have forgiveness. Through Him, we have power to fight the fierce battles against the sin we face. Through Him, we know the victory has been already won!

In this section of talks we will first look at why we struggle with sin, and the weapons God gives us to fight our struggles, whatever they are. Then, we will think about particularly common sin battlefronts of pastors and their wives. We'll end by arming you with encouragement to keep fighting by looking at the victory Christ has won, is winning, and will win for us!

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God's Faithfulness to Fight Our Sin: The War and the Weapons

Do you remember the old fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel? There is a crafty enemy who used the promise of a delectable treat to lure someone else's children away from home and trap them for his own evil purposes. Sounds a bit Genesis 2, doesn't it? In the Garden, the Satan tempts Adam and Eve in much the same way.

He engaged them with a thought.
He showed them the treat.
He enticed them with its attractiveness.
They reached out to eat.

It worked. They fell, and with them, all of us. And since the Garden, the enemy has continued his plan of taking what should be good and enlisting it as a masquerade for his evil purposes. Our hearts, meant to know and love the Lord, are darkened with sin. We rebel and die. People, meant to love God and to love each other, use each other to their own selfish satisfaction.

Who came to Hansel and Gretel's rescue? A woodcutter who followed a trail of breadcrumbs the children dropped as they followed the witch to her house of delights. Who has come to our rescue? The God who sought out His wayward children. Praise God for the promise of a Savior who would redeem all who put their trust in Him as they looked forward in faith, like David; and, look back in faith, like us! Through Jesus we have forgiveness of sin and a new heart that desires to love God and obey Him that is being slowly transformed into Christ's likeness. And one day, we will have complete freedom from our struggles, when we go to heaven or at the end of time, when sin and death are defeated once and for all.

But until the day we are called home, we are called to fight! God wove our fight against sin into His plans for our transformation. The change is all from Him, but it is through us that He does His work. Let's take a look at the roots of sin and temptation in our hearts, and at the weapons God gives us to do battle against them.

Wired for Desire

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." –Matthew 15:19, NIV

Our hearts are wired for desire.

- We were meant to be engaged with thoughts... of God.
- We were meant to see His treats... eternal life with Him
- We were meant to be attracted to... fellowship with Him and life lived His good way.
- We were meant to taste and see... that the Lord is good, all the days of our lives.

Those desires are meant to give birth to good things."

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:28

But sin has messed with that wiring. Our hearts have been re-routed to look for satisfaction in things other than what God intended for us. Our desires give birth to sin and to death now.

“Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” –James 1:15

The Weapons

As new creations in Christ, our hearts have been re-wired again: back to a love of God and His good ways. Through Jesus we have forgiveness of sin and a new heart that desires to love God and obey Him. But while the fundamental work has been done, this is a re-wiring project that will last our whole life and only be finished when we are home with God. Until then, there will always be leftover faulty connections luring our hearts away from God.

So, until that wonderful day when we go to be with God, there will be more work to do to transform our hearts. Praise God, it is His work! He is the One who makes it happen. But, He wove us into the work He planned in our hearts and in the hearts of other believers. Let's take a look at the tools God gives us to do this transformative work.

1. Start with the Heart

Ask God to show you where your tendencies and particular allurements lie. Ask your husband and close friends what they see, too.

- Look at your loves (What are your treasures?)
- Look at your temperament (Are you prone to certain tendencies, such as anxiety?)
- Look at your strengths and weaknesses (Where are you confident in your own competencies? What type of circumstance or job would you be quick to turn down?)
- Look at your past wounds and insecurities (What would you like to avoid experiencing again? What gives you reason to doubt your worth?)

Some other questions that might help reveal your heart's desires:

- Where do I weep, when I should rejoice with others?
- Where do I rejoice when I should weep with others?
- Where do I want to be the “only flower in the garden” (Don't want to share power with others).
- For what would I like someone to erect a statue to me?
- Where do I want there to be a hole if I'm not there to fill it? (want to make sure I'm indispensable)?
- How do I feel when someone else comes along with a better version of my own gifts?

I'm not saying this will be fun or easy to take a good, hard look at yourself. Jesus says in Matthew 6:21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Sinful actions spring out of desire. Desires come from our heart. We need to know ourselves better to know where we are more vulnerable to temptation.

2. Put a Name to Them

I found a scary compilation of the 122 sins named in the Bible. I was horrified to see how many sins there are and how many times I could write my name next to them because of desires in my heart or actions in my life. But, the good thing about looking at that list prayerfully was that I identified areas of temptation. Whether you look at a list like that, or many of the shorter lists found in Scripture (such as Mark 7:21-23; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-31), or simply notice what the Bible calls sin as a part of your Bible study, it is of great benefit to name your sin struggles.

3. Praise God for the Gospel!

Taking a serious look at the sin in your heart can be so discouraging. if you stop right there.

For we know that :

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

--Jeremiah 17:9,

But we know that God means for us to look at our sins to see the need for the Savior and to desire to turn away from them:

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.” --2 Corinthians 7:10

This means, that God can use our deeper knowledge of our sin to love Jesus even more!

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” --Romans 5:7-9

4. Prepare

Look for patterns. Try to understand the circumstances where you have seen these desires and sin struggles pop up. What seems to be at the core? Where are you most likely to be dragged away by your desires? What conditions are present when you struggle and fail; what conditions are present when you struggle and win? What could help you in the moment when you struggle? What could you change in the structure of your situation (such as not being alone in times you know to be tempting)? What strategy might help you to be prepared or to avoid these temptations?

With these answers in mind, go to your Bible and look for verses that address your sin struggles and the heart issues they come from. God’s Word can equip us to fight well. It is alive and active! We need it to fight with it and for us!

For example, you might struggle with jealousy when someone else is picked to lead an event that you previously led and hoped to continue to lead. As you look at your heart, you see this jealousy is coming from desire to be seen of value. To be un-needed is to seem worthless.

You might choose James 4:2-3 to help IDENTIFY your struggle:

“You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

You might choose this verse to FIGHT the sin-lie with truth that your worth is never found in what you do, but in what Christ did for you:

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. To remind you that God prepared certain good works for you to do.... And that also means there are certain good works He has for others to do.” --Ephesians 3:10

You might choose this truth to TURN YOUR MIND AWAY from yourself and onto the good that God is doing even through the circumstances of this other woman being chosen.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. --Philippians 4:8-9 ESV

5. Pray, Pray, Pray

Pray for God to work His Word in you by His Holy Spirit! Pray for Jesus to intercede for you! Pray at the beginning of the day. Pray as you go!

Pray for the promised way out of temptation, a la 1 Corinthians 10:13:

“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”

Pray for God to help you in your weakness and to give Himself glory by giving you sufficient power to win the battle you are in. Confess your sin. Ask for God to create a clean heart in you. Ask Him to help you keep fighting and not lose heart. Have others pray with you. Thank God that Jesus came and that heaven’s coming. God loves to answer these prayers!

6. Be Prudent

Look at the situations where you are likely to be sorely tempted. Is there anything you can do ahead of time to be ready for those circumstances? Would it be wise to some way limit or avoid those circumstances? Be prudent by choosing your fight by knowing your muscle tone! No beginner boxer would dream of stepping into the ring with a champion prize fighter. He knows he doesn’t have what it will take to win. He is headed for a bruising and a knock-out.

Same goes for us. There may be an opportunity that we would love to take part in, but they might put us in way of too strong of a temptation for too long. It would be more honoring to God to pass on it and say yes to something more our size.

One example of this for me is how worried I get before speaking to a large group. The anticipation eats away at me and even makes me sick! I’ve learned to not accept speaking obligations that are locked in months in advance. It’s ok, and even good, for me to fight my sin struggles with fear of (wo)man for a week or two, but months is just too much. I have more important stewardships, such as caring for my husband, that I need to do. I will trust God to find someone else better suited for the task.

7. Proclaim

Speak to others about your tendencies. Ask for their advice. Ask them to hold you accountable regularly. Don’t go it alone. Sin loves isolation and darkness. It shrinks in the light. Achan in Joshua 7:19. Confessing sin glorifies God. Remember “Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

One of the blessings of having a godly spouse is you have a built-in, all-committed person who loves you and longs to see you fight sin and grow in godliness. It may feel awkward, if this is new to you, but ask each other where you are struggling against sin and how you can pray. There are often “glaring” sin struggles, but there may be others that come out through your asking. But also ask God to help you find same-sex friends that you can each share your struggles with honestly. There is a different kind of help that comes from these friendships. Sometimes friends can say hard things we need to hear or hold us to accountability that can come across as nagging from our spouses.

8. Put to Death Daily

Don't you wish you had a chopping block where you could lay your sin and chop off its little head and be done with it! Too bad our sin struggles are like chickens... they find a way to keep running around even when we do cut off their heads! Even so, God's Word is full of admonitions for us to put to death our sin, so we must try. I think Jesus tells us what this putting to death looks like: not a “one and done” event, but a daily, even hourly, activity: “Then [Jesus] said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” -- Luke 9:23, NIV This seems to be God's usual plan for transforming us: little bit-sized pieces of obedience.

9. Persevere

Persevere in doing good, even if you are frustrated that the good is tangled up with mixed motives. On this side of heaven, very little we do will not be infected with sin in some way. Doesn't Isaiah 64:6 say: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” If we wait until we only have a pure heart to do good, then we will do no good at all. That doesn't mean we go fool-heartedly into a situation with we know will make us likely to sin. It doesn't mean that we don't need to ask advice of those who know us as to whether what we are doing seems wise. It does mean that God still has good works prepared for us, even with our not-fully sanctified hearts. Let's do them!

And remember, saying God's Word is power to change us does NOT mean that is an Insta-drug. Nor is prayer. God loves to grow us slowly. Hence the words “transform”, “renew,” “strive,” “persevere” and many other slow-change verbs are what pastors like Paul uses to encourage God's people to keep fighting sin. So, just because the “wallpaper” of Scripture keeps peeling off the walls of your heart and falling down, don't despair. Stick God's Word back up on your heart again! Confess your struggles to a friend again! Keep on praying! Where there's a fight, there is fruit on the way! Here are some of God's promises that He works as we persevere:

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” --Galatians 6:9

“We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” --Romans 5:2-5

Questions for You

1. What did you learn as you examined the desires of your heart?
2. What weapons have you found most useful in fighting the sinful desires of your heart?
3. How do you fight discouragement when you struggle and even lose against sin in your life?
4. Do you ever feel like you can't ask God to forgive you yet again for a sin struggle? What do you do in those times?
5. Are there any other weapons that you've found useful in fighting sin?