I N T R O D U C T I O N

If God does not heal us, we will not be healed. By healed I mean

made whole—complete and righteous in Christ—as God

intended us to be when He first created men and women. And

we are in need of healing, for we are, in the fullest sense of the

word, deformed; we are desperately wounded, and without God

we know only one course of action: rebellion toward God and love

of self. As the Bible so explicitly says, we are enemies of God (see

Rom. 5:10). The prophet Jeremiah, however, confirms that God

can and does effect our wholeness: “Heal me, O Lord, and I shall

be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise”

(Jer. 17:14).

Sadly, however, this truth may not be immediately clear

to a generation raised to believe that “experts” hold the key to our

health in every dimension. In just about every important area of life

today, people turn to experts to find the key to health, happiness,

effectiveness, or some other benefit. For example, my wife has

introduced me to the new rage in our vicinity: essential oils. I have

read the materials and listened to the explanations. One would

think that there is an essential oil for every threat to health that

is ready to combat the ailment and give one pain-free living

or longer life or better skin or freedom from allergies. It would

be ridiculous for me to assert, of course, that we don’t need any

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experts, especially in areas like medicine, mental health, marriage,

business, or other practical matters. But should we assume that

these people or their knowledge or skills or medicine can actually

heal us—make us whole—especially in the most intimate places

of our inner beings?

This is a vital question to ask, because many believers in Christ

today are not experiencing God’s wholeness and its resulting joy,

spiritual maturity, and victory in Christ. Instead they are broken

and fractured, and the result is that many believers are missing out

on the wholeness God intends for His people and thus easily led

into sinful and damaging choices.

Os Guinness expresses our culture’s views on healing quite

succinctly:

Psychology is destiny, we are told. We cannot help ourselves.

We are the products of our past. It is genetic. We are

victims. Blend the language of the civil rights movement

with the language of the therapeutic movement and you

have an instant platform and a set of slogans for victim

parties of all kinds. We can all be walking billboards for

our own chosen grievance.1

It is in the deepest places of our beings that we have need

of healing, and this is the domain of God alone. But we have relegated

God to so-called spiritual dimensions of life and turned

to others for our emotional, social, and mental needs. In fact, when

some Christians are asked what “spiritual” means, their explanations

are so fuzzy and esoteric that they are meaningless.

If God’s healing is relegated to apparently spiritual things, and

people’s understanding of “spiritual” is so confused, how exactly

are we to receive God’s healing?

The answer is simple: we will find healing when we spend time

with God in His Word. As we will discuss in chapter 7 of this book,

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there is no substitute for spending regular time in the Word

of God—the written expression of God’s truth. In it we

find everything God wants us to know about Himself, the

world He created, our place in that world, how we are to

live in it, and what awaits us after the world ceases to be.

When we ground ourselves attitudinally and actively in

these words from God, we root our lives upon this firm

foundation. As we spend daily time engaging God through

His Word and the active ministry of the Holy Spirit within

us, we plant His words into our minds. Then, as we live

out the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years of

our lives, the Holy Spirit uses the time we’ve spent in God’s

Word to bring to our remembrance the words He has

spoken to us to assist us in making decisions that grow the

life of Jesus in us and glorify our heavenly Father.

God is clear in the Bible: He is God of everything. This includes

all that encompasses our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

God’s glory is seen in everything, because He made all of it. He sovereignly

sits over all things, because everything belongs to Him.

Thus He alone can make us whole.

God’s message in Jesus Christ is equally unequivocally clear.

I can’t imagine anything more definitive than what is written

by the author of Hebrews to help us understand just how comprehensively

God has operated in His Son: “He appointed [His Son]

the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his

nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power”

(Heb. 1:2–3).

This is a sobering mouthful, beyond our full comprehension,

but it supplies the answer to our need for healing. God the Father

has not only made the world through Jesus and sustains the world

through Him, but He has also redeemed it back to Himself so that

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Introduction

the healing we so desperately need can begin. He says of the Son,

“After making purification for sins, he [Jesus, the Son] sat down

at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3).

What does it mean to say that if God does not heal us, we will

not be healed? At least three things.

First, God is the only true healer—the only One who can make

broken people whole again. In the beginning God created us with

unconfirmed wholeness. We lacked nothing to be able to live in His

created world—personal understanding, personal meaning, and

relationship with others. Adam and Eve, in choosing self-defined

and self-managed lives, rejected God’s design and introduced

rebellion. The whole of human history since that day is an exercise

in men and women trying to build substitutes for God’s original

designs. Humanity is marred, and our deformities dominate us,

leaving us with cheap and unfulfilling substitutes for God’s planned

righteousness. The great news is that God was not to be thwarted

by our rebellion. In His Son, Jesus Christ, whom He calls the last

Adam, He restores some of the children of Adam and Eve to this

righteousness—and not only for eternity but also in time. We will

never be as whole as He intended this side of eternity, but we can

be much more whole than we ever could have been without His

healing of our rebellion through Jesus.

Second, while experts help us manage our deformities, they

do not heal us. They do not make us whole. The medical industry

does indeed help heal the most evident things wrong with us. But

does it truly make us whole? I have had diverticulitis for twenty

years at least—it never goes away. It doesn’t bother me, however,

until something causes the small ruptured pockets in my colon

to become inflamed and infected. At that point I seek out my doctor

and medicine to help “heal” that attack and get me back to a state

of health in which my ongoing problem is not inflamed.

Am I healed? No. Can I count on no reoccurrences of my condition?

No.

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Winning the War Against the Flesh

This is probably the case for everything in our bodies. A proof

of this from the Bible’s perspective is that we will receive our complete

healing only when we die and God takes us into His presence.

Indeed, we have to die to receive it. Our bodies are polluted with

rebellion. Even as followers of Jesus Christ, our infirm bodies will

die, and then God will give us new ones unencumbered with sin.

This may actually be the case for every dimension of life,

whether emotional, mental, or social. When we are less than emotionally

whole, our ideas about God as our Father are negatively

affected. If we equate Him to feelings resulting from having been

damaged by our fathers or mothers, we struggle to place full confidence

in Him as always reliable—as One who never makes

a mistake with our lives. If we have allowed laziness or drugs

or pornography to damage our God-given ability to read, reason,

and decide, we will find it hard to concentrate on reading and

contemplating God’s words in the Bible. Thus our ability to feed

our minds with the words and desires of God for us are limited—

and we remain unhealed. The most crushing blows of our ongoing

rebellion to God’s design are deep inside us, framed by what

we think about ourselves and our relationships to others. We are

so self-obsessed that we are unable to see ourselves as the deformed

people God knows us to be, and our blindness directly impacts our

relationships to others.

We can and do learn to manage our brokenness. Self-help, the

constraints of law and culture, or even organized religion helps

us control the most dangerous and grotesque realities lurking inside

us. But they do not heal us; they simply teach us to manage our

pain and engage in safer, healthier alternatives than we might otherwise.

I am not saying that this is always bad, only that it is.

Third, we can be healed! For those who are in Jesus Christ,

God will provide meaningful, restorative, and progressive healing.

As He does, we will see righteousness maturing in our lives and

in the decisions we make about ourselves and others. Our final and

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Introduction

complete healing will come only on our exit from this world, into

God’s presence and the eternity He has designed for those in Jesus.

Healing, however, cannot come to people who do not choose

it. So for those who are not in Jesus Christ, who do not choose His

offer of wholeness, I hold out no healing, only management. This

book is for those of us who are in Jesus Christ. For us, over the extent

of our lifetimes, we can experience much more healing of our

deformities than we have too often realized. But the reality that

God’s people have often looked to wrong sources for our healing

must be understood, admitted, and rejected even as we turn

to embrace dependency upon God, His Word, and His Spirit.

I pray that we will not allow the deformities of rebellion to overwhelm

the new life that God has worked in us in Jesus. I pray that

we will embrace the death to self that will bring forth the life

to God for which each of us was created.

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1

THE

UNSPOKEN

PROBLEM

Ten years ago I spoke with a friend about two urgent needs

in our present global context. One, the church today

largely lacks spiritual fathers for young leaders. And two,

a rising tide of leaders, especially young ones, are confessing to significant

immoral sexual thoughts, actions, and failures.

My friend and I launched an experiment. We sought out some

thirty, mostly young, leaders in churches and met with them for

weeklong sessions multiple times over two years to see if we could

help them build healthy spiritual disciplines earlier in life, since our

experience had taught us that such daily disciplines were necessary

to healthy Christian living. As a result, most of those men, and

their wives as well, have continued to grow not only in leadership

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influence in the church but, more importantly, in their daily walks

with God and in faith and holiness. I hear from them regularly and

see in them healthy marriages, good habits in growing healthy

children, wise decision making as to how much of the world’s noise

they allow into their lives, and thus good modeling to the people

of Christ whom they lead in their local church bodies. But my interaction

with hundreds of other leaders during and after those two

years have increased my apprehensions regarding the health of the

church and its leaders.

What is the central reason for these ongoing moral failures?

Sadly, two words vital to understanding this present difficulty

appear to have vanished from the English dictionary, even for

Christians: “flesh” and “evil.” By “flesh” I mean that which is “the

sinful element of human nature as opposed to the ‘Spirit,’ ”1 and

by “evil” I mean any and all actions that come from the flesh. Flesh

is in antagonism to God, and it sets itself up as the final arbiter, the

chief end of all a person’s decisions, actions, benefits, and outcomes.

It is the opposite of the righteousness of God, which God

designed in the beginning for Adam and Eve to choose. And

because of the anti-biblical notions of human wellness and therapy

that surround us today instead, many believers in Christ reject the

truth that evil decisions and actions are a result of fleshly desires.

We say instead to ourselves, “I am wounded.” “It’s not my fault.”

“My parents made life-changing mistakes in raising me.” “The

dominant culture around me defrauded me.” Our reasoning is endless,

and we are never willing to admit, “I made the decision that

resulted in this negative consequence.” Os Guinness writes of this,

Whatever became of sin? Karl Menninger asked his fellow

Americans a generation ago. The tough-minded realism of

the traditional American view of evil defined under God

as sin has softened into evil defined before the law as crime,

and then degenerated further into low self-esteem the

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infamous “hole in the soul” that was the poster problem of

the 80s and 90s.2

Too much of what is called worship music today reveals this

notion. For hundreds of years Christians sang about God, but

today too much of our music is about us, our wounds, our weaknesses,

our failures and too often tied together with emotionally

driven statements about God and grace that are just not true.

Christians, you probably have all been there. You are singing

along with a Christian song at church during worship

and you suddenly begin to feel uncomfortable. You have

been singing for a while now and it has been all focused on

you—I will do this or I will do that, I feel this or I feel that.

Or you are singing along and you realize that you are singing

a song that makes it seem like you and the Creator of

the Universe are either BFFs (in a junior high kind of way)

or in a syrupy high school first crush relationship. This is

awwwwkward!!!!! you think as you go nowhere near the

Throne of God and hope that it just ends soon and the next

song is better.3

The Bible is explicit about evil’s origin: it comes from the flesh.

Just a few verses suffice to show what God thinks about this topic.

The Flesh Still Lurks Within Us

In Romans 3 Paul, quoting from the Psalms, says, “None is righteous,

no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All

have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one

does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10–12).

In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul reminds us that without Jesus Christ,

we are indeed enemies of God and of righteousness:

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You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once

walked, following the course of this world, following the

prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work

in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once

lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires

of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of

wrath, like the rest of mankind.

In the flesh we are dead; instruments of Satan, the purveyor

of evil; possessed by our passions; sons of disobedience; and children

of wrath. A rather stark contrast to what we often think about

ourselves!

James describes us quite bluntly: “Each person is tempted when

he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has

conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings

forth death” (James 1:14–15).

The reason many in the church have avoided the topics of evil

and the flesh, even in our “worship” and preaching, is that they

create discomfort. These words describe our nature in unflattering

terms, and this offends us. Being convicted of our sins is not

so much the problem; we can and do recognize that we have failed.

The real trouble lies in the fact that most of us have a mixed idea

of whom exactly it is we have failed.

Many would say that they have failed their parents or their

potential or their friends. This is because biblical personal “responsibility

. . . is out of step in the modern world, for we live in the

golden age of exoneration. In most of the West we have seen a vast

defusing of responsibility. Everything is now explicable in terms

of our parents and our past, and so life becomes one long schooling

in blaming, resenting, and suing, while always excusing ourselves.”

4 What is lacking in such a superficial conviction is a deep

sense of shame—shame not of having been discovered in our sin

but over the fact that we have acted against a standard of

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righteousness seen only in God that demonstrates who we really

are: sinners.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes this well:

The dialectic of concealment and exposure is only a sign

of shame. Yet shame is not overcome by it; is rather confirmed

by it. Shame can be overcome only when the

original unity is restored, when man is once again clothed

by God in the other man, in the “house which is from

heaven” (II Cor. 5.2ff.). Shame is overcome only in the

enduring of an act of final shaming, namely the becoming

manifest of knowledge before God. . . . Shame is overcome

only in the shaming through the forgiveness of sin, that is

to say, through the restoration of fellowship with God and

men. . . . In shame man is reminded of his disunion with

God and with other men: conscience is the sign of man’s

disunion with himself. . . . It is the voice of apostate life

which desires at least to remain one with itself.5

It is clear from Scripture, specifically in the scriptures recently

quoted, that left to our own devices—our fallen nature—we are

not much! Indeed, we are dangerous—to our spouses, our families,

our colleagues, our society, and yes, ourselves. I am not saying that

we are violent, although of course violence does too often result

from our evil lives, but I am referring more to how dangerous we are

in relationships with others. We can do great damage to everyone

around us.

I am not primarily concerned with this flesh-driven evil

in a global context, for it exists in every single person, and its effects

are seen every day all around us. It is the reality of a world in rebellion

to God, the result of Adam and Eve’s choice, which every

individual confirms at birth and, by sinful subsequent actions, perpetuates.

Everybody handles this birth into evil and its “engine,”

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The Unspoken Problem

the flesh, differently. Most learn to control its most destructive

potential, for social pressure has a great molding influence on all

of us. But when in certain individuals the restraints of Scripture

and the Holy Spirit are reduced or eliminated, we see what life

in the flesh looks like. It is ugly! Its inner dimensions consume us.

This is to say nothing about the alienation it creates in us from

our Maker.

What concerns me most is that too many Christians have

no idea how evil the flesh can be without Christ, and they carry

that ignorance over into their relationships with God. Yes, we have

been born again in Jesus. Yes, the full debt for our rebellion has

been paid. Yes, we have been designed in the last Adam, Jesus

Christ, to live new and victorious lives to God. But the Bible is clear:

until we die and leave behind our present physical bodies, exchanging

them for new bodies that God has prepared, we still have

lurking in the members of our bodies all the potential evil and

self-centeredness that we inherited at birth. It would be fair to say

that there is a war going on in our bodies, and the flesh seeks

to bring us back under its control. As we will see, it cannot do so.

But for the naïve, unknowing, or simply lazy Christian, it can make

hell out of his or her life and relationships with God and others.

This is the challenge: God’s people must realize that the flesh

is more powerful than we commonly give it credit for, in all people

in general but even in true Christians.

Sin and Its Consequences

The essence of the flesh is seen in Satan’s challenge to Adam and

Eve to be like God—in other words, to be their own gods, or masters:

The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may

surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the

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day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” . . . Now the

serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field

that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman,

“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the

garden’?” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may

eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said,

‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst

of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” But

the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.

For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be

opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and

evil.” (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:1–5)

How enticing does that sound? “God is not the only One who

knows the difference between good and evil. He is hiding this

truth from you. Why? Because He knows that your true self

is greater than you realize, and He wants to keep that from you.

You have the capacity to be like Him, not just in His image and

likeness but also in power. You can know good from evil, just

like God!”

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and

that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired

to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave

some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6).

The result was immediate. Adam and Eve did indeed know

something new, and that something new was evil—evil resident

in their bodies, corrupting everything that God had created for

them to know and do. From that day forward, the deepest essence

of their thoughts and desires, now dominated by the flesh, would

be self-serving, self-preserving, self-defining, ugly, repugnant,

domineering, and self-centered. They would be gods.

Bonhoeffer continues, “Man at his origin knows only one

thing: God. It is only in the unity of his knowledge of God that

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he knows of other men, of things, and of himself. He knows all

things only in God, and God in all things. The knowledge of good

and evil shows that he is no longer at one with this origin. . . . The

knowledge of good and evil is therefore separation from God.”6

“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that

they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made

themselves loincloths” (Gen. 3:7). The results of their sin were

cataclysmic!

Adam and Eve lost the innocence of their relationship with God,

to say nothing of the unfettered, natural, easygoing nature of it that

they had experienced so far.

They also lost their home. No longer would God let them exist

in the place where, now dominated by self and corrupted in motivation,

they could make this status eternal by eating of the tree

of eternal life. So they were put out of the garden: “The Lord God

said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good

and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree

of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore the Lord God sent him

out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was

taken” (Gen. 3:22–23).

They lost their purpose in life. Adam and Eve were left with

a marred edition of the original purpose God had designed for

them. Adam would have to struggle in a world that God had created

to naturally multiply in order to procure the sustenance

necessary to survive:

To Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice

of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded

you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground

because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of

your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of

your face you shall eat bread.” (Gen. 3:17–19)

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Eve, who had been created as God’s interdependent gift

to Adam to help him accomplish God’s stewardship design, would

now have a polar opposite experience. First, she would have pain

in childbirth—physical, emotional, separating pain, even while she

experienced the euphoria of a creative process and of birth in bringing

new life from her body. Additionally, she would be drawn

to Adam, for that was her God-created design, but because of the

flesh now in her and in him, she would resist his headship, given

to him by his first-to-be-created standing: “To the woman he said,

‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall

bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband,

but he shall rule over you’ ” (Gen. 3:16).

They would die. As evidenced in the outline so far, Adam and

Eve would die to the original design God had for them. But equally,

they would die physically: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat

bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;

for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

God’s Answer Regarding Sin and the Flesh

Yes, for those of us who are in Jesus Christ, reconciled to God, the

condemnation that sat upon us has been removed, because God

took our deserved wrath upon Himself in the death, burial, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the Lord’s warning to Cain still

stands for us: “If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door.

Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it” (Gen. 4:7).

The Hebrew word used here for “crouching” is “employed only

to express the crouching of an animal, and frequently of a wild

animal. The picture, then, is of the wrong-doer’s sin lying at his

door there like a crouching tiger ready to spring, and if it springs,

fatal. ‘If thou doest not well, a wild beast crouches at thy door.’ ”

Hebrew scholar Alexander Maclaren continues his description

in detail:

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Then there follow, with a singular swift transition of the

metaphor, other words still harder to interpret, and which

have been, as a matter of fact, interpreted in very diverse

fashions. “And unto thee shall be its” (I make that slight

alteration upon our version) “desire, and thou shalt rule

over it.” Where did we hear these words before? They were

spoken to Eve, in the declaration of her punishment. They

contain the blessing that was embedded in the curse. “Thy

desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

The longing of the pure womanly heart to the husband of

her love, and the authority of the husband over the loving

wife—the source of the deepest joy and purity of earth, is

transferred, by a singularly bold metaphor, to this other

relationship, and, in horrible parody of the wedded union

and love, we have the picture of the sin, that was thought

of as crouching at the sinner’s door like a wild beast, now,

as it were, wedded to him. He is mated to it now, and it has

a kind of tigerish, murderous desire after him, while he on his

part is to subdue and control it.7

Maclaren’s words are compelling. Believers in Christ must

understand the warning that God has given fallen man and put

in place the remedies to daily overcome sin.

A war is going on inside us. As we have seen, the extent of the

damage effected by the fall of Adam and Eve was cataclysmic.

It deeply marred everything, taking from all of us the ability to naturally

live out the righteousness for which we were designed and

replacing it with a default of rebellion, or the flesh. We sin because

it is our nature to do so. Evil is merely the incarnation of sin—

doing things our own way. While it can be outwardly repulsive,

it stems from an inner repulsiveness that seeks the value, worth,

meaning, benefit of self. All that rebellion still sits inside even the

born-again believer. As we will see, the only hope of dominating

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it is to allow the Spirit of God to grow the life of Jesus in the new

man. That new man has to learn to say no to the natural inclinations

of the flesh still in the members of our bodies and yes, even,

and maybe most importantly, in our minds.

Not only is sin still lurking inside us, but we have the same old

enemy Adam and Eve did who wants us to fail as well: Satan.

He wants to entice every rebellion out of us that he can, especially

those of us who say that we are now in Christ, children of God.

He is our adversary:

When used as a proper name, the Hebrew word [for Satan]

so rendered has the article “the adversary” (Job 1:6–12;

2:1–7). In the New Testament it is used as interchangeable

with diabolos, or the devil, and is so used more than thirty

times. He is also called “the dragon,” “the old serpent” (Rev.

12:9; 20:2); “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30);

“the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2); “the god of

this world” (2 Cor. 4:4); “the spirit that now worketh in the

children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). The distinct personality

of Satan and his activity among men are thus obviously

recognized. He tempted our Lord in the wilderness (Matt.

4:1–11). He is “Beelzebub, the prince of the devils” (12:24).

He is “the constant enemy of God, of Christ, of the divine

kingdom, of the followers of Christ, and of all truth; full of

falsehood and all malice, and exciting and seducing to evil

in every possible way.” His power is very great in the world.

He is a “roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet.

5:8). Men are said to be “taken captive by him” (2 Tim.

2:26). Christians are warned against his “devices” (2 Cor.

2:11), and called on to “resist” him (James 4:7).8

As I close this chapter, allow me to center my concern: for all

those among the body of Christ who think the advent of grace

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means that the flesh has disappeared from the scene, let’s think

again. Many confessing Christians have suffered the pain of self-inflicted

wounds because, while they name Christ as Lord, they do not

embrace the living relationship God offers in His Son and instead

substitute for it a humanly contrived religion that does nothing

to stem the tide of bad decisions and its accompanying pain. Such

individuals do not spend enough time with God the Father through

His Word, and this is why they fail to understand the root of their

brokenness.

A friend of mine told me about a man who had been an elder

at his church, a teacher to the congregation, and apparently happily

married. One day he simply walked away from his faith, his confession,

his church leadership, his wife, and his family. As his wife went

through his Bible, which he had left behind, she discovered all the

notes and underlined thoughts one would expect—yet it would

seem that he did not allow God to work the truth into his heart

relationally. Today this man continues alienated from all that he previously

confessed. Such religiosity lacks the staying and healing

power of transformation that God begins in us at new birth and

leads us to look for healing by wrong means:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world,

why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit

to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not

touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are

used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These

have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting selfmade

religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but

they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

(Col. 2:20–23)

Guinness brings us back to our real need: we must realize our

ongoing battle with the flesh and take ownership of our sinful choices:

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Winning the War Against the Flesh

In the biblical view, there is no ducking the challenge of

individual responsibility. As Soren Kierkegaard wrote, the

significance of the Christian faith for a society “ought to

be to do everything to make every man eternally responsible

for every hour he lives, even for the least thing he

undertakes.” To be sure, we are only responsible for what

is ours to give and say and do. No more and no less. Those

with more—whether better health, higher intelligence,

fatter bank balances, wider social influence, stronger

friendships and family ties, or greater energy—are responsible

for more. But none of us is without responsibility. To

be a human is to be responsible.9

While this may seem like difficult medicine to swallow,

it is actually good news, because it means that we can take action

to tame the animal of sin we have been married to and the lion

outside who prowls around seeking someone to devour. God has

an answer. Maclaren spells this out:

If we rightly understand what sin is—namely, the taking

self for our law and centre instead of God—and how deep

its working and all-pervading its poison, we shall learn the

tragic significance of the prophet’s question, “Can the leopard

change his spots?” Then may a man cast out sin from

his nature by his own resolve, when the body can eliminate

poison from the veins by its own energy. If there is nothing

more to be said to the world than this message, “Sin lieth

at thy door—rule thou over it,” we have no gospel to

preach, and sin’s dominion is secure. For there is nothing

in all this world of empty, windy words, more empty and

windy than to come to a poor soul that is all bespattered

and stained with sin, and say to him: “Get up, and make

thyself clean, and keep thyself so!” It cannot be done. . . .

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The Unspoken Problem

Therefore these words, “Rule thou over it,” do really point

onwards through all the ages to that one fact in which

every man’s sin is conquered and neutralised, and every

man’s struggles may be made hopeful and successful, the

great fact that Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, came down

from heaven, like an athlete descending into the arena, to

fight with and to overcome the grim wild beasts, our passions

and our sins, and to lead them, transformed, in the

silken leash of His love.10

God has an answer not just for our salvation but also for our

transformation. This does not come overnight, and it has a cost.

But ignorance of our battle with sin is not bliss. In fact, recognizing

it will lead to our healing, as Watchman Nee so clearly stated:

“I appreciate the blessing fact of God’s forgiveness, but I want

something more than that: I want deliverance. I need forgiveness

for what I have done, but I need also deliverance from what

I am.”11 God wants His people to recognize our problem—that

we having an ongoing battle to fight against sin and the flesh—and

then walk in His provision for growing in victory and joy in the

righteous life and image of Jesus Christ.

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