

FLESH

The Old Testament word *basar* and its New Testament equivalent *sarx*, both translated flesh, are words used to describe the outer tabernacle of the creature, the body. Flesh is used, therefore, to speak of the Whole animal creation, man and beast (Genesis 6:13, Matthew 24:22). Sometimes the term is used for the whole of mankind along (Luke 3:6), or the elect alone (Acts 2:17). The word is also used to speak of the body apart from the spiritual aspect of man (Romans 7:18, Galatians 2:20). Sometimes it is used to speak of the flesh of the body apart from other parts of the body, as bones, etc. (Luke 24:39). In this respect also it is used as our usual word for meat as a food (Exodus 16:12).

None of the Gnostic ideas of the flesh being inherently lower, base, evil or inferior is found in the Bible. The flesh of a human is inseparable from his whole personality. The Psalmist declares that his flesh longs for God as well as his soul (Psalm 63:1). A fleshy union is in the highest order of communion between two beings. Thus, husband and wife are said to be one flesh (Matthew 19:5). Describing our relationship with Christ, we are said to be "members of His body, of His flesh . . ." (Ephesians 5:30) as well as to be with Him "one spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

Redemption itself is solidly fixed in a setting of flesh. The incarnation itself declares this. "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). The validity of the Redeemer Himself is defended on the basis of His coming in the flesh to condemn sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3, Hebrews 2:14). That is why the teachings of AntiChrist strike out at the reality of the Lord's body of flesh (1 John 4:2-3). Salvation will not be complete until the body of flesh has been redeemed as well as the spirit (Romans 8:19-23).

This brings us to a new usage of the term "flesh" in the New Testament which is chiefly, but not exclusively, Pauline. Man, having died and fallen spiritually through the rebellion of Adam, is no longer ruled and dominated in his thoughts, affections and will by the Holy Spirit, but by his now fallen human nature. Paul uses this term, flesh, to describe this fallen nature. He uses the term flesh in the fallen man to contrast with "spirit" in the regenerated man. The man who is "in the flesh" is lost, under the law, and condemned by it. It is impossible for those who are "in the flesh" to please God (Romans 8:9). On the other hand, we who are in the spirit are justified, under grace, and free from all the condemnation of the law (Romans 7:5-6, 8:1-4). They who are Christ's are not "in the flesh" but "in the spirit" (Romans 8:9). These two are irreconcilable (Galatians 5:17). These two are diametrically opposed, and a man can only be in one state or the other, not both at the same time.

The word fleshy, *sarkikos*, translated "carnal," is used in reference to Christians only three times, and that as an adjective. The first is Romans 7:14 when Paul uses it of himself only as to contrast his physical being to the nature of the law which is "spiritual." The law is of spiritual essence, i.e., deals with things of a spiritual nature, whereas he, as a man (standing alone without consideration of Christ), is only flesh and utterly incapable of satisfying the law's spiritual demands. The other usage of the word carnal in describing Christians is in 1 Corinthians 3:3-4. These passages are misused as a basis for the unscriptural doctrine of second class Christians who are carnal, "in the flesh" and not scriptural. But we must understand that the Apostle had no intention of leaving such an impression. He is speaking only of their behaviour in their childish divisions over men. We use the same sort of language when we call a young man behaving immaturely a "baby," or an ill reared young woman as a "spoiled brat." We refer to a man behaving unwisely as an "ass" or a gracious one as a "prince." Note he says they "walk as men," i.e., behaving as natural men who are "in the flesh." They are behaving fleshy, but as Christians they are not "in the flesh" but "in the spirit," and as such, do not have their life and fulfillment in the flesh, but in the spirit (Romans 8:12-13, Colossians 3:1-5).

Therefore we must understand that the usage of the terms "in the flesh," "fleshy," and "carnal," contemplate man in his fallen unregenerate state. Flesh, used in this sense, speaks of a principle of sinfulness in man. In the unconverted man it is the whole ruling passion of his life. He is "after the flesh" (Romans 8:5). Man's affections being perverted by the fall, all his natural sensual desires are lent to wrong, hence his whole life is one of sin, and is unacceptable before God. It is characterized by selfish lusts (1 John 2:16, Galatians 5:16), enslaves the bodily members, and dominates the mind (Ephesians 2:3), so that he is blinded in his reasoning capacity, and unable to rightly evaluate right and wrong. He can, in such a state, never comprehend, appreciate, and embrace the gospel. The "god of this world" through the occasion of his rebellion has blinded his mind (Ephesians 2:2-3, 2 Corinthians 4:3-4). We are all "in the flesh," believer and unbeliever alike, as respects the mortal body of flesh, as respects the group of created beings to which we belong: But as to the figurative application of flesh to the fallen nature, it is never proper to refer to a child of God as in the flesh. He is in the spirit.

Now, it has become popular to refer to a host of activities, methods, means, mannerisms, attitudes, convictions (or lack of convictions), as "of the flesh." Having thus categorized them as belonging to the flesh, they, together with the folks who practice them, are then satisfactorily discredited and dismissed.

The problem with this is there is rarely a well-defined and comprehended statement of what we mean by flesh. And when we do give such a statement, we even more rarely adequately support our definition with scripture. With such a loosely defined term with which to judge our brethren and their activities, we have an ideal climate for railing, backbiting, criticizing, and general nit-picking of every one else, relegating all that we dislike or disapprove of as of the flesh.

Let us be honest with the scriptures and we shall be forced to be more honest with ourselves, and quite likely, more charitable with our brethren.

Paul speaks of a "law" warring in his members against the law of his mind (Romans 7:22-23). Since the mind referred to is that which delights in the law of God after the *inward* man, we must understand this law to be warring against spiritual truths and

principles. Galatians 5:17 says the flesh strives against the spirit. Peter tells us to abstain from fleshy lusts that war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11). We can say, then, that flesh is that which wars against the spirit, against spiritual principles, against the redeemed soul. All, then, that is destructive to spiritual life, that is contrary to spiritual principles, that saps our spiritual vitality, robs us of true Christian virtue, sets itself against truth and righteousness, may rightly be termed flesh.

It is true that much of this will be also demonic. It is not always easy to distinguish between the fleshy and the demonic, the chief difference being the intensity and power of the warring. There is always an intermingling of flesh and demonic influence, and it will be safe to say that where flesh is rampant, demons will be active (Galatians 5:20). That being considered, we will continue to speak of the flesh. We will see further on how these works of the flesh manifest themselves in attitudes and emotions.

Activities of the flesh can also be defined as that which springs from human passions and affections *alone*. These passions and affections either motivate them or are engaged with a view of stirring such passions. The key word here is *alone*. We might also include in this category those things which have their source in the human mind and natural reasoning alone. There are no activities in which we can lawfully engage in which the human mind and emotions do not play a prominent part. If we set these aside and despise our God-given faculties, we are not men at all. The only persons who are totally spirit-controlled are witches, sorcerers and demoniacs. Paul says that even when he prays or sings with the spirit, he does it not without his understanding (1 Corinthians 14:15). Activities such as preaching, teaching, praying, singing, and witnessing all involve the human mind and emotions. They can and ought to be enjoyed and felt. But when emotion is the sole motivation, when they arise out of nothing but human reasoning apart from truth and spiritual inspiration, they are nothing but flesh. When preaching is designed to act upon and excite human emotion apart from evangelical truth, it is pure flesh. It is altogether lawful to make an emotional appeal, but such an appeal must be on the basis of truth, not cunningly devised fables of men's inventions, theatrical stunts or psychological manipulation. We may enjoy good music, beauty, as well as good food and other creature comforts, if we do so acknowledging them with gratitude as gifts from a benevolent Creator Who made us aesthetic creatures with a pure psychological need to enjoy beauty and harmony. But when the lusts for such things and the desire to get them become the ruling passions of our lives, the motivating force behind our actions to the disregard of God and spiritual values, they become flesh, and war against the soul.

Singing and playing musical instruments ought to be done with all the skill and perfection possible. It ought to be beautiful and pleasing to the human emotions that are set on worshiping God (Psalm 33:2-3). But its motivation and purpose must be to magnify God before men. If it does nothing but entertain and display the performer's skill, it is flesh. Nothing else can qualify music or the way it is produced as being of the spirit or of the flesh.

Methods of evangelism cannot be strictly categorized on the basis of what is done alone. Door to door visitation, bus ministries, retreat camps, Sunday schools, evangelistic crusades, street preaching, public appeals at the close of sermons, all wait on a closer revelation of character before they can be called fleshy or spiritual. If visitation is regimented, trained and promoted and then implemented on the same basis as the world sells insurance and vacuum cleaners, without any regard to spiritual principles of evangelism, it is flesh. If people visit out of a spirit inspired burden for people, and with a true evangelistic witness, it is spiritual. The same can be applied to any particular evangelistic activity. Motivation and objectives will tell the story. Unfortunately, we cannot always know the other fellow's motives and objectives, so are poorly qualified to judge on the basis of *what* he is doing. While it may be observed that much of a certain activity is fleshy, or even most of it, we cannot embrace the faulty conclusion that *all* is flesh. Sinners make the same erroneous conclusion after encountering a few hypocritical church members.

It is of special significance that Paul puts a close connection between flesh and law. In fact, he equates being in the flesh as to being under the law (Romans 7:5-6). The natural man is in the flesh, under the law and condemned. Without faith in Christ, his only hope is in law-keeping. Never able to keep it, he is always condemned; nevertheless, he still vainly hopes in law-keeping. The victory in the gospel message is that we are not in the flesh, under the law and condemned, but in the spirit, under grace and free from condemnation (Romans 6:14, 8:1-4). That is the position of all justified men without exception.

This was the problem that Paul had with the Galatians from which we get so much of our information about the flesh. The Galatians were behaving like men in the flesh, inasmuch as they were going back to legalism, external law-keeping. Here is a mark of carnality, fleshiness. It delights in law-keeping. Nor should we make the error of thinking that this external law-keeping had only justification in mind. The Galatians hoped to *sanctify* themselves by the law. "Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the spirit are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). This is the very struggle Paul describes in Romans 7: The futile effort of a justified man to sanctify himself by law-keeping. Nor let us suppose that the law in mind was only ceremonial. That the moral law is in view is clear from Romans 7:7.

The attempts of men to make themselves holy *and* others holy by external law-keeping, by preaching and practicing the letter, not the spirit of the law, is called flesh. Flesh delights in what it can do. It can keep the externals. It can satisfy the letter of the law, and so it dwells, gloats, boasts, preaches on them. It attempts to force it upon all possible. It finds its great victory and triumph in forcing others into its own legalistic mold that it can "glory in their flesh" (Galatians 6:13). The Galatian legalists were trying to get everyone to conform to them and their own external pattern. They did not keep the law themselves (Galatians 6:13), but would force circumcision on everyone to make themselves look good (Galatians 6:12-13).

There is a further perversion of this already fleshy law-keeping. It is called "convictions." Certain moral codes of dress, food, social activities and grooming that have *no* Biblical basis in either Old or New Testaments are nevertheless imposed upon people and called holiness. This illegal legalism is one of the worst demonstrations of the flesh.

The archetype of the flesh is found in a man named Ishmael. We can learn much from him. Paul tells us that he was "born after the flesh" (Galatians 4:23), in contrast with Isaac, who was "born of promise." The flesh, therefore, is that which originates in the human mind, not in divine revelation. It is brought about by human scheming, not by divine power. From the circumstances

surrounding the births of Ishmael and Isaac, we can see that flesh is occasioned by unbelief, fear, doubt, uncertainty . . . a dependence upon self rather than God. Spiritual work is occasioned by faith, confidence in God alone . . . no confidence in the flesh.

Ishmael himself tells us something of the character of flesh (Genesis 16:11-12). “And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. “Wild man” is translated from the Hebrew *pere*, which appears ten times in the Old Testament, nine of which times it is translated “wild ass.” The ASV reads, “he shall be a wild ass among men.” Here, then, are three things to remember about flesh:

First, “he dwells in the presence of Israel.” God’s people will always have trouble with the flesh. You will never get rid of it until the body is redeemed. It will always be there to cause you trouble.

Second, “his hand against every man.” It wars against you. It will never be appeased, will never be satisfied and rest at peace. It will cause you sore conflict as long as you live.

Third, it is a wild ass. The man who is ruled by flesh cannot be controlled. He will not be under subjection to man or God. He is an outlaw, a professional rebel, and those who think they have him saddled or hitched will soon have the hind hoof of an ass in their face for their troubles.

Flesh manifests itself. The lowing of cattle and bleating of sheep betrayed the fact that Saul, instead of destroying Amalek, had brought flesh home to Israel. In like manner, the works of the flesh will always be manifest. Satan may be subtle, but not flesh. When its works begin to manifest themselves, flesh can unmistakably be identified. In Galatians 5:19-21, six categories of manifest works of the flesh can be noted.

1. Sex Sins: Adultery, fornication. Churches and religious activities that center around the flesh are rotten throughout with sex sins. How shocking it is when these ugly things begin to surface in what was thought to be a sound, fundamental, evangelical work doing great things for the Lord.
2. Sins of Intemperance: Lasciviousness, drunkenness, revellings. Fleishy lust run wild, cannot be controlled. Mania to make money, buy things, wallow in worldly luxury. Uncontrollable appetites shout their presence in manifest obesity, and in a score of other ways.
3. Sins of Carelessness: Uncleaness. Undisciplined, impure, lazy, slovenly and undependable people.
4. Religious Sins: Idolatry, Witchcraft. A lack of sound Bible truth combined in religious superstition opens the door for all sorts of hateful demonic deceptions. Neo-pentecostalism is a prime example of this. Carnal interest in mystic revelations that lowers confidence and esteem of the inspired scriptures. Worship of buildings, liturgies, creeds, Bibliolatry and even “churches.”
5. Sins of Malice: Hatred, murder. There is no meaner devil than a carnal religious fanatic. History bears abundant record that men will hate and kill over false religion quicker than anything else. Fleishy churches are often filled with grudges, factions, resentments and deep negative feelings.
6. Sins of Pride: Flesh is always exalting itself against others. It is significant that this is the longest list of all. Seven things are listed!
 - a) Variance (*eris*), to quarrel. Flesh loves a fight and knows a fight will draw a crowd. Announce that you are against something, especially something religious, and you will attract all the enemies of religion, including the enemies of Christ. Flesh unites people on the basis of what they are against, not the common Christ or the common salvation.
 - b) Emulation (*zelos*), zeal. This is the stuff that go-getters are made of. It is the fabric from which a competitive spirit is built and men are fired to outdo others for the sake of excelling over their peers, not from love and obedience to God.
 - c) Wrath (*thumos*), Indignation. Fire up the flesh in someone over a petty offence and how they will fight! This is quite often seen in the big hub-bub that strains at gnats and swallows camels.
 - d) Strife (*eritheia*), contention, struggle. Flesh strives. It knows nothing of resting in Christ. It is always out to fight for what it wants, is on the defensive to protect itself, and can never be at peace. It is preoccupied with self-preservation.
 - e) Seditions (*dichostasia*), a standing apart, factions, divisions. Flesh drives a wedge between Christian brethren. It breaks off from the unified body over insignificant issues. It gets together its own little group and stand apart from the rest of the Christian community, often saying that everyone else is “in the flesh.”
 - f) Heresies (*haireses*), choice, opinion, sentiment. Flesh is stubborn, self-willed, obstinate. It refuses to fairly consider the whole body of objective truth, seizes upon a few little “hobby horses” and rides off on a tangent. When it speaks, it can never get out of the issues that separate. Molehills are blown up to mountains and dominate the thinking. It has an obsession with these pet opinions that makes fellowship impossible.
 - g) Envy (*phthonos*), jealousy, desire for what others lawfully have. It is quite significant that fleishy people seldom have any trouble with people who have less or are less successful than themselves. It is always the person who has more or is more successful. Likewise, fleishy religion always envies and criticizes the person or activity that seems to be more successful than itself.

Where these things are being manifest, you are hearing the braying of wild asses; and Ishmael is not far away.