

Know Your Enemies, The Unholy Triad

In any battle, it's crucial that we know our enemies, yet not as essential at knowing our own resources and trust our good commanders. On this adventure of life, we have three active enemies, who make up a sort of unholy triad. They conspire together against God to assault our hearts. One is within (our "*flesh*" or self-life) and two are outside, the fallen world-system and Satan/devil and his minions.

God fashioned us in His image, as much like Him as a created being could be so we could have **heart-connection**. Our **heart** is the core of our being, the seat of our *affections* with its feelings, our *mind* with its thoughts and reasonings, and our will with its choices to act. God fashioned us to be filled with the Spirit of God.

After God banished Satan for his attempted coup against God, he waited in the shadows for an opportunity to take his revenge against God's people, the only available soft targets to get at God. In Genesis 3, he came with His deceit to break our **heart-connection** with God...and the devil still attacks God's people to undermine our **wholehearted** allegiance.

1. The Fallen World-System: God designed His world "*very good*" with Adam and Eve before the Fall. Although God's creation still reflects amazing displays of His glory (Psalm 19:1-6), it's also not how God created it. Creation now groans, awaiting its renewal with eager anticipation when Jesus returns (Romans 8:19-22).

Society is driven by a world-system or philosophy that pulls diametrically against radical Christianity. This approach subtly pervades all of society so consistently that we may become spiritually numb, unless we re-calibrate our inner compass to God-Reality. My observation is that even in solid churches, we leaders are often blind to how much the world-system has influenced our structure, decisions and programmatic approach to ministry. This world is **not** getting better over time.

James, the first book of the NT, calls us adulteresses, cheating on our Husband, if we develop friendships with the world.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4).

John, inspired by the Spirit, adds this view of the world-system. "*Do not love...*" is a command to Jesus' followers, not a suggestion.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2:15-16).

Even though Jesus warned His disciple that we would experience crushing pressures in a fallen world diametrically set against Him, but don't fear because He overcame the world and provides us with His peace (John 16:33). Therefore, He never calls us to fortress up against the world. **Just the opposite!** He calls us instead to engage with a different attitude, response and Source of life than the world has. **Why? So that** He can send us into the world as equipped followers.

"They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:16+18).

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33b).

2. Our “Flesh” or Self-life: When we were born again through faith in Christ, Paul tells us that our old self (or “*old man*,” NASB¹) was crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6).² Crucifixion means death. All we were before salvation separate from God *has been* crucified, past tense, done deal. All things have been made new; the old has gone (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Yet...

How does Scripture explain why I still get assaulted on my journey and stumble?

Embrace the *Both/And* paradox that releases mystery as a creative tension to thrust us towards God. Yes, all things are spiritually new, yet God never pushed “*reset*” on our memories when He gave us new life. A “*traitor*” within now targets our hearts as the spiritual battleground for the unholy triad.

Jesus calls this traitor within “*self*” and Paul “*flesh*.”

This “*old man*,” who I was before Christ, no longer lives. I’m forever different. To be crucified means death (Romans 6:6). **Yet also** I have a “*break-off*” remnant still alive and kicking up problems, like guerilla insurgents fighting against the legitimate government. This traitor lives within me and often *seems* like me since it’s a fragment from damaging aspects of my former life, my crucified “*old man*.” However, be clear that it is **not** me.

No more graphic portrayal of this inner warfare exists in Scripture than Romans 7:14-25 (especially 7:17-19, NASB).³ Paul sharply distinguishes between his identity in Christ and this terrorist residing within, the “*flesh*.” The “*flesh*” is **not** me (Romans 7:17-20, NASB), although it responds a lot like I did before salvation. And I’m still responsible whenever I yield to my “*flesh*.” Paul never denies his responsibility for his actions with an “*oh, well, I’m helpless anyway because I’m broken*.”

Don’t get confused here with this creative tension.

Not all our self-responses look ugly, at least not from the point of view of those around us. Look at Paul’s description of his pre-conversion responses in Philippians 3:4-6. He was top-rung in the Jewish religion. Please read these verses.

These describe Old Covenant religious accomplishments, pursuits and heritage. They reflected strong morality. None were sin from the perspective of his religion. These would have made him a hero in his religious circles. He was the kind of man parents pointed to as the up-&-coming model for their sons. A leader. A crusader for his faith. Popular. Well-versed in rhetoric and persuasion.

Yet actions that Paul counted “*dog dung*” compared to the surpassing riches of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:4-7).

Our “*flesh*” may simply be the easiest way out. It seizes upon some sort of competence as our counterfeit identity or rejects anything that we cannot adequately control. The “*flesh*” is not only self-indulgent drives, but also whatever we can do in our own strength to follow our own passions. Today this may be filled with extraordinary secular accomplishments or even Christian pursuits.

Since God did not push “*reset*” when I came to Christ, my “*flesh*” today is still capable of great damage, although I simply don’t yield to this traitor within as often as I used.

I like the analogy of our old *self-life* or "*flesh*" as a traitorous guerilla band, splintered off after the legitimate government regains control of its county. The usurper is soundly defeated. The newspapers flash headline, "*Unlawful Government Smashed!*" The people rejoice in the streets because the oppressors are gone.

Yet a splinter terrorist faction takes to the jungle, warring within the country against the legitimate government. They are not citizens, just like our flesh is *in* us, but *not us* (Romans 7:19-20). They are pretenders, yet powerful, relentless, ruthless. If the government reads its press clippings, they take their foot of their neck and yield space to operate. In some areas of the country where the enemy previously held the most power, it may *feel as if* the new regime with the authority to do good has not yet been installed.

This is a powerful analogy of our "*flesh*."

To continue the analogy, if the legitimate government ignores this breakaway group, they will gradually take more control in the country. The terrorists may have great freedom in certain segments, even though they have *no legal rights*, and no rights at all, unless we yield them.

If the government musters its troops with its overwhelming superiority against every outbreak of the guerilla group, it can corral the band into a small, less vulnerable corner of the county. The breakoff group is not annihilated. The rebel band however has been herded over time to a place where it can be controlled. It then causes fewer significant problems.

This describes our lifelong battle against our "*flesh*" or self-life.

The answer to combat our "*flesh*" is not the sin-management strategy of "*Try harder!*" The NT provides no growth-strategy to improve or annihilate our "*flesh*." After decades, my "*flesh*" has not improved. It still has a restless pull to tempt me to succeed in life by my unaided abilities, if I yield to it.

Romans 8:1-39 sketches out a summary of God's solution, "*His overwhelming superiority*" over our self-life as we cultivate His presence. We take responsibility for our life by partnering with the Spirit in our delegated *authority* to wall up my "*flesh*" into an ever-shrinking corner. Then it feeds on itself like wolves feed on other wolves when they are starving.

As we see the Triune God for who He is, our pleasures in Him will multiply. This in turn pushes out lower pleasures, like light dispels darkness. We grow, not by will-choices, but by partnering with the Spirit in the "*expulsive power of a higher affection*."⁵

When we struggle with sin, the problem is not that our desires are too strong. They are actually too weak because they are focused on lesser pleasures. We live in the creative tension of this *Both/And* before Jesus returns a second time. This keeps us dependent on our Family-of-Three, Father, Son and Spirit.

3. *The Devil, also called Satan:* Of all bad men, the wickedest is the one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God. Satan or Lucifer was probably the highest of angels. He apparently fell when He was not satisfied to be God's highest and most trusted angel. He coveted God's throne and the worship and adoration only God Himself could receive. And a third of the angels joined the devil in his rebellion and fall.

Humanity first experienced this personal, evil presence, Satan, disguised as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, deceiving Eve. Because of his deceit, all the universe fell, including God's crown-jewel as they forfeited their God given authority as co-regents of the world when they went rogue (Gen. 3).

Satan does not change over the millenniums. Jesus called him Beelzebub, “*Lord of the Flies*,” the one who feeds on dead carcasses. In contrast to life to the full that Jesus offers, the thief, the devil, comes only to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10). Our archenemy prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8b). At the end of time, John calls him a dragon who is thrown into the Lake of Fire for all eternity.

And the devil, Satan, the dragon attacks our *hearts* to win them away from our Team-of-Three. He utilized his favorite weapon of deceit on our forefathers, disguising himself like an angel of light in order to deceive even God’s children (2 Corinthians 11:14). Life is very confusing if we do not take into account that our once perfect world now has a villain and that we now have an active enemy.

Assaults on our lives may come from one, two or all three of these unholy allies.

As an important postscript, it seems that our enemy is assaulting the Reality of a real “*hell*” today, and even using Christian voices. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus gives us insight that the original purpose of the eternal fires of hell were for the devil and his henchmen. God created His image-bearers for relationship with one.

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matthew 25:41).

But what about when a person rejects the wonderful love of God then dies physically? True love must be willing so may be freely received and can be freely rejected. His desire is for none to perish yet He design us for authentic love.

If a person set against God were to enter heaven, then heaven would be spiritually polluted like the earth is today. Hell is an unfortunate necessity if heaven is to be truly heaven.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

What’s God’s heart though when a person dies outside of Christ?

If you read any of the *Ten Baseline Essentials*, then you have gotten in touch with God’s loving heart. I believe hell must be expanded every time a person dies outside of Christ. And God weeps over them like Jesus wept over Jerusalem because His heart desires all to willingly follow Him.

¹ In a study of the “*flesh*,” I strongly suggest using the *NASB* translation, which stays truest to translation in this arena.

² Paul’s precise wording in Romans 6 is fascinating...and the nuances also beyond this teaching. ***If you are interested in more, go to my website under the tab for my books and download my free PDF on Romans 5-8.***

Briefly, “*Our body of sin is therefore rendered powerless*” (6b). The result is that our “*body of sin*” is deprived of its power to control.. Now, let’s also be careful here. Our body itself is not sinful. It’s however the seat of sin. Our physical body expresses most of our sin in some way or another. The “*must*” of sin however has been removed like a thorn. This word “*rendered powerless*” is a good translation. Look up its range of meanings in other translations. It does not mean to “*become extinct or annihilated*.” It means to be deprived of power, to be defeated, to be placed where it can be controlled, like a terrorist band pushed into the jungle. It also does not mean that sin has no power at all or 7:14-25 would be nonsense. The careful wording informs us that we won’t live in sinless perfection without any remaining battles.

³ This is one of the highly controversial passages in Romans, with godly advocates on both sides, who love Scripture as much as you or me. Some feel the whole of chapter 7 is speaking to Jews

about the Mosaic Law. Others see the entire passage speaking to Gentiles. I understand the first two sections deal with the Mosaic Law, our present relationship to it (7:1-6) and the good purpose of the Mosaic Law (7:7-13). Then in 7:14-8:4 (a bad chapter break), Paul switches to the *present* tense and talks about “*law*” in general as powerful principles that draw us into rules-keeping for relationship, and the inner battle we may still experience as Christians, except when we live in Romans 8. You need to make your choice as a Spirit-led interpreter of Scripture.

Some commentators believe Paul continues with his pre-Christian experience. I believe, along with Stott and many others, that this section is autobiographical of Paul’s post-Christian experience as a believer. It’s from this basis I am writing, without adequately explaining the other side.

Note the sharp change of tense in the verbs, from mostly past in 7:7-13 to mostly present. In 7:7-13, Paul describes how sin sprang to life through the law and killed him. In 7:14 and following, Paul is in the midst of a fierce battle, and refuses to admit defeat. How could a mature believer experience such inner warfare? Easy. Count the number of 1st person pronouns. Slipping into doing battle with our own unaided abilities (the “*flesh*”) is the experience of even the most mature saints...at times.

⁴ See *NASB* translation rather than more recent translations for a more accurate rendering of this term, especially in Romans 7 and 8.

⁵ A quote from a 19th century scholar from across the pond, I think.