

Sanctification and the Fight

by J.I. Packer

J.I. Packer explores the theme of sanctification as a continual battle against indwelling sin and spiritual opposition in the Christian life.

Duration: 1:11:43

Scripture: Isaiah 50:10-11, Matthew 6:33, Romans 7:21, Hebrews 4:12

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Sanctification"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the causes of conflict and the road to victory for Christians. He refers to a treatise by John Owens on the nature, power, deceit, and prevalency of indwelling sin in believers. The speaker emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing this sin, as well as the dangers of indulging in it. He also advises Christians to understand their own weaknesses and avoid situations that may trigger them. Overall, the sermon encourages believers to be vigilant in their spiritual battles and seek victory through the power of God.

Transcript

My title this morning is The Site. The paper follows on from what we were thinking about yesterday, and I hope that in the course of my paper I shall feel the satisfaction of the questioners. With two questions that were left over from yesterday, I might well read them at the outset, so that you'll know what they are.

The first concerns the method of mortifying the flesh in the practical application of it. How, for example, would the Puritan have dealt with a bad temper? What would the specific action be? And the second question was this. Please comment on the continual and irreconcilable war, that's the phrase you remember from the Westminster Confession, the continual and irreconcilable war between flesh and spirit.

A. Consciously waged against the enemy of our souls, and B. A by-product of being involved in the Christian life. Well there are two general inquiries wanting more in detail about this conflict with sin and Satan, and the way in which the Puritan vindicated and explained their certainty that through this conflict lay the road of victory. Well I hope that what I say this morning will answer those questions, in principle at any rate.

Now I suppose nobody will dispute my initial assertion that we evangelicals, in this generation, have been in the habit of assuring people that if they become Christians, they will find peace, they will find rest, and all their troubles will be over. I'm going to raise the question of whether we should have said it, but I don't

think that you can deny the fact that it has been said and said often. It is of course true that when a man becomes a Christian, it's the beginning of a joy and a peace, and a rest of heart which he never knew before.

But yet that is only half the truth about the Christian life. And if you treat a half-truth as the whole truth, it becomes a whole falsehood, never forget that. To be sure the old troubles are over.

Torment about one's relationship with God is finished. Perplexity about the meaninglessness or the seeming meaninglessness of life is finished. Fear of the future, fear of death, fear of what lies beyond death, that too is finished.

But new troubles come. Because as we said yesterday, the Christian, just by virtue of the fact that he is a Christian, walks straight into a war. He finds himself straight away attacked and opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The war into which he's walked is the eternal conflict between God and the devil, Satan, who has rebelled against God. And is now making it his life's work, if one may put it that way, to oppose and thwart and twist and spoil all the things that God is doing. So if a man is brought into the saving plan of God, and God forgives him his sins and begins to do the work of remaking him in the image of Christ, immediately along comes Satan to try and spoil what God is up to, and if he can, to bring it to nothing.

So that a Christian must reckon right from the outset with the fact that his life is, must be, can't help being, a life, not only of pilgrimage, travelling from where he is to glory, through the wilderness of this world, as Bunyan calls it, but also a life of conflict, a life of battle. The Puritans grasped this clearly. Their two standard pictures of the Christian life were the pictures of the pilgrim and the warrior.

And it's not enough to say of this, as some of the books will tell you, that this is simply a picking up of medieval themes and shows how medieval-minded the Puritans were. This is, of course, a picking up of scriptural themes, it was from the Bible that the Puritans got this view of the Christian life, and it's from the Bible that they expounded it. And so, just as Luther had grasped the fact that the Christian and the Church are in constant conflict with the devil, and that prompted him to write the great battle hymn of the Reformation, a faith stronghold our God is filled, so the Puritans picked up the same theme and carried it through in their preaching and teaching, and they produced a hymn worthy to stand alongside Luther's hymn, who would through valor see, let him come hither, bunions him about the Christian life.

The pilgrim fighting his way forward against opposition and through trouble. And so one finds in the corpus of Puritan literature, such works as the massive exposition by William Gurnall, on Ephesians 6, 10 to 20, 800 pages of it, the title, the Christian in complete armor, a treatise on the saint's war with the devil. And one finds John Owen, writing his great analysis of indwelling sin, in which he as it were takes the lid off, and shows us in detail the saint's war against the flesh.

It's a tremendous work this. Rabbi Duncan, one of the great first generation of teachers in the Free Church of Scotland in the last century, once told his students at the end of the semester, to go back home and read John Owen on indwelling sin that vacation. But gentlemen, he said, prepare for the night.

And that is a word in season, I hope you'll read John Owen on indwelling sin, and appreciate the truth of what Rabbi Duncan said. We are told in Hebrews 4, 12, that the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, dividing between soul and spirit, going right down to the joints of the

narrow, and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart. I think it will help you to understand the full weight of that verse, if you read John Owen on indwelling sin.

And he also wrote his little treatise on temptation, where he's thinking particularly of the machinations of the devil, with which the Christian has got to reckon, and which he's got to be prepared to repel. And he also wrote his treatise on apostasy, showing how the world, by all its anti-Christian influences, diverts the children of God, or those who profess to be the children of God rather, from the way of righteousness, and finally ruins them, despite the brave profession that they may have made, and the seemingly good start with which they've begun. And one could add a number more of Puritan book titles to these, but these are just specimens, showing you how seriously the Puritans took this theme, of the Christian conflict, the fight, as a subject for Bible study and exposition.

And as I said, in this, they are simply following the New Testament, which is insistent in telling us to watch against sin and against temptation, and to resist the devil, who will most certainly attack us. He goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. And the world is against us too, and we've got to seek by the grace of God to overcome the world, in conflict, in battle, in repaying its opposition to us.

And equally, the flesh and the spirit, as we were reminded, are in irreconcilable war, and there's a battle to be fought on that front too. And I think that any simple reader of the New Testament, just going through it once, would get the impression that conflict, fighting, is indeed a staple element in the Christian life, it's a major Biblical theme, and one that the Christian is going to neglect to his peril. And so, we're going to put the shot and the focus on this theme, and try to see how it was that the Puritans understood it, and how it was that they expounded it.

I said yesterday that one of the qualities of the Puritan doctrine of sanctification is that it's therapeutic. It puts in your hand the key to diagnosing all kinds of spiritual troubles, and dealing with those various spiritual troubles. It's through the Puritan understanding of this theme of conflict, that that therapeutic quality is imparted to their teaching.

This, I hope, is going to become clear as we go along. Puritans were insistent that there are many, many perplexities in the Christian life, due to the opposition, whether recognized or not, of our spiritual enemies, which one simply can't cope with, unless one understands this whole conflict situation, and the various factors involved. For those of us who are pastors, it seems to me, if I'm any judge, that a study of the Puritan teaching on this theme is simply invaluable.

And without it, we are really going to be very incompetent, and very sadly lacking in our ministry to poor, denigrated, tempted, opposed Christian men and women. So to our exposition, I've cast this material into a form in which one doesn't actually find it, in any of the Puritans. This is because I've attempted to bring together lines of thought that I've found in very many of the Puritans.

What I've done is divided the rest of this paper into two sections. The first I entitle, Causes of Conflict, four of them. And the second I entitle, The Road to Victory.

And here I try to offer you a digest of the lines of treatment, lines of pastoral counsel and advice, that the Puritans offer to the Christian who finds himself involved in this fight. First then, Causes of the Conflict. Cause number one, indwelling sin.

The flesh at war with the Spirit, as Paul reminds us in Galatians 5, 17. We saw yesterday a regenerate man, a man whose heart has been made new, a man who in heart is now on the Lord's side, finds that there's an extremely unwelcome guest still inhabiting him, if I may put it that way, constantly with him, constantly operating, constantly seeking to divert him from the way of God, constantly having some success, so that he's never able to be as good, as perfect, as thorough, as wholehearted in his service of God as he wants to be. And he finds himself living in the second half of Romans 7. And whenever the law of God speaks to him, whenever he's confronted with the law of God, the law reminds him of that fact.

Well that we've already seen. But I want us to carry our exposure of indwelling sin and its machinations and activities a little further. And so I want to summarise for you briefly, some of the main points in this treatise of John Owens, to which I referred before.

The treatise of which the full title, no I'm wrong, half the full title, but it's enough to go on with, is this. The Nature, Power, Deceit and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Deliverance. Together with a whole lot of things which I need not read out, because they come in smaller prints.

Owens starts his exposition, which is near 200 pages long, with a preliminary opening up of Romans 7.21. I find then a law that when I would do good, evil is present with me. This I told you yesterday is Owens regular method. He starts a treatise, a topical treatise, by taking some text that points you to the heart of the matter, and doing a preliminary exposition of the text, in order to set the perspective as it were, and ensure that the whole approach is going to be in terms of the way that the Bible presents the subject, and the interest that the biblical writers have in the subject.

Owens' perspectives are as biblical as is his subject matter. This is one of the great things about him. And he starts off, as I say, taking this text from Romans 7, and giving a preliminary exposition of it, in the course of which he suggests that the thought, the thought conveyed by the word law, is the thought of a power constantly operative, seeking to dominate.

And then he develops a little this thought, that sin, as an indwelling guest, in the heart of the Christian man, as something that in a sense is internal to him, natural to him, inbred in him, something which indeed in a real sense was him, before he put off the old man and put off the new, in regeneration and faith, as then an indwelling part of him. In that sense, sin has a peculiar advantage for opposing everything that he seeks to do in the purpose of God. Let me read you just one or two paragraphs of Owens.

At this point, they serve, I think, to alert us to the seriousness of this subject, and the universal scope of indwelling sin's activities, something of which I think we don't always take, which we don't always pay as much attention as we should. So, I quote Owen Wright. Remember, he says, Indwelling sin always abides in the soul, it's never absent.

The apostle twice uses the expression, It dwelleth in me. There's its constant residence and habitation. If it came upon the soul only at certain seasons, much obedience might be perfectly accomplished in its absence.

Yea, and as they deal with usurping tyrants whom they intend to thrust out of the city, the gate might sometimes be shut against it, but it might not return. The soul might fortify itself against it and bar it out. But that can't be.

For the soul is its home, there it dwells. It's no wonder. So wherever you are, whatever you're about, the law of sin is always in you, in the best that you do and in the worst.

Men that will consider what a dangerous companion is always at home with them. When they're in company, when alone, by night, by day, all is one, sin is with them. They're the living coal continually in their houses, which, if it be not looked unto, will fire them and it may be consumed them.

Oh, the woeful security of poor souls. And that's not all. Being an indwelling resident, says Owen, it's always ready to apply itself to every end and purpose that it serves unto.

When I would do good, says the apostle, it is present with me. And says Owen, there's something more in that expression than mere indwelling. An inmate may dwell in a house and yet not be always meddling with what the good man of the house has to do.

But it's different with this law. It doth so dwell in us as that it will be present with us in everything that we do. Yea, oftentimes, when with most earnestness we desire to be quit of it, with most violence it will put itself upon us.

When I would do good, it's present with me. Would you pray, would you hear, would you give alms, would you meditate, would you be in any duty acting faith on God and love toward him? Would you work righteousness, would you resist temptations? This troublesome, perplexing indweller will still more or less put itself upon you and be present with you. So that you cannot ever perfectly and completely accomplish the thing that is good, as the apostle said.

And furthermore, says Owen, it being an indwelling law, it applies itself to its work with great facility and easiness. It is the sin that doth so easily beset us. Hebrews 12.1, it has a great facility and easiness in the application of itself unto its work.

It needs no doors to be opened unto it. It needs no engines to work by. The soul cannot apply itself to any duty but by the exercise of faculties wherein this law hath its residence.

Is the understanding or the mind to be applied to anything? There it is in ignorance, darkness, vanity, folly, madness. So that you don't think straight. Is the will to be engaged? There it is also in spiritual deadness, stubbornness and roots of obstinacy.

So that you don't act right. Or if you act right, not wholeheartedly. Is the heart and affection to be set on work? There is sin again in inclination to the world and presencing of sensuality with proneness to all manner of defilement.

It's easy for it to insinuate into all that we do and of further all sin and wickedness. In all that we do it doth easily beset us. So let indwelling sin as our antithesis, ever present, ever active, as we said yesterday, a kind of demonic second self, cunning, devilishly cunning and always there trying to spoil what God is doing, trying to divert us from the will of God, trying to reassert its own nature as enmity against God.

Owing goes on. Indwelling sin, he says, is rooted in the heart, which we are told is both unsearchable and deceitful. It can bury itself deeper than you can ever dig it out.

But in its nature as enmity against God, a principle of opposition to the will of God, it operates coming out of hiding in a number of ways. First by what Owen calls aversation, that is turning us away from the path of

obedience, engendering in us a quality of what he calls loathing against the will of God, a quite unreasoning, a quite indefensible lack of desire to do the will of God and desire to do something else. Perplexing that it comes upon the soul again and again it's indwelling sin.

And so, says Owen, in a very vivid passage which strikes a chord in my heart, I suspect may strike a chord in yours too. Owen says, when you want to pray, you know you want to pray, and you go into your chamber and you shut the door and you get down on your knees to pray, straight away your thoughts run off and they wander away. And your affections run off and you suddenly find that you're dead and you're restless and you don't feel able to pray.

And something inside you is crying out, what a miserable, boring business this is. I don't want to pray, when will it be over? Let me read you Owen's passage in which Owen says it himself. Even when conviction, sense of beauty, dear and real esteem of God and communion with him have carried the soul into the closet, yet there'll be a secret lonesomeness in them unto beauty, and sometimes a violent inclination to the contrary, so that the soul would rather do anything and embrace any diversion, though it wound itself thereby, rather than vigorously apply itself unto that which in the inward man it breathes after.

It's extraordinary self-contradiction. I want to pray, I don't want to pray, and it's as though things are true of me in the same moment. It's indwelling sin, warring against the law of my mind.

It is weary therefore, the soul is weary before it begins, and says, when will the work be over? I said, prepare for the night, you see. I hear Owen going right to the heart of the matter, exposing indwelling sin. Just for a moment he glances at people who say, well I don't have this experience in me, I find that I have, I quote his phrase, freedom and liberty in and unto all the duties of obedience that I attend unto.

There is a class of Christians who sometimes are puzzled, or profess themselves to be puzzled by all this talk about wandering thoughts and inward distractions and deadness and coldness and all the rest of it. Christians don't seem to have this experience of inner contradiction when they would seek and serve God. Well, here's Owen's comment, I fear this pretended liberty will be found upon examination to arise from ignorance of the true state and condition of their own souls.

They don't know how it is with them, and therefore are not to be believed in what they report. And he goes on to reflect how amazingly ignorant people can be of what goes on inside them. How completely unacquainted they can be with the fact of their own heart's Godliness.

Well there it is, having said that, Owen goes on with the exposition. Not only does indwelling sin uphold, sorry, not only does indwelling sin seek to turn us away from doing the will of God, aversation, it also operates by opposition, he says. And vividly he describes how it fights and wars against the will of God and rebels against the law of God.

And in measure, by entangling our affections, it leads us captive, as Paul says in Romans 7. How it rages, irrationally pulling us away from doing the will of God. How it operates by deceit, drawing us off from obedience and keeping us from realizing that that's what's happening. Making us cease to be conscientious about doing the will of God and keeping God's law.

Drawing us into practical antinomianism, drawing us into slow laziness in Christian obedience, without allowing us to realize what's happening. So that we slide back, and we don't realize that our strength is going and our soul is, how we would say, ready to die. He speaks of the way in which indwelling sin

entices our affections.

Leading us to feel the things which we know or used to know are wrong, are nevertheless very desirable and can be indulged without danger. And sin puts us into a self-indulgent mood and suggests what he calls perverse reasonings, what we would call rationalizations, to justify self-indulgence once, justify self-indulgence this once, to assure you that it won't matter this time, and so on and so on and so on. Indwelling sin defies the law.

Indwelling sin even abuses grace. Indwelling sin tells you, well, because you're a Christian and your sins are forgiven, it won't matter if you sin now, you're eternally secure. The doctrine of eternal security is abused by indwelling sin.

To prompt rationalizations leading to present indulgence. And so then, if you allow indwelling sin, even at one point, to re-establish some measure of its former dominion, if, to use his phrase, you cherish some particular lust in your heart, well, as we said this yesterday, there's no limit to the damage that it can do to your whole spiritual life. Where indwelling sin has provoked, irritated, and given strength unto a special lust, just one particular area of self-indulgence, it proves assuredly a principal means of general declension.

For as infirmity of weakness in one vital part, one organ of the body, will make the whole body consumptive, so will weakness in any one grace, which a perplexing lust brings with it, make the soul. In every way weakens spiritual strength. It dries up your prayers, it darkens your mind, it galls your conscience, it makes you uneasy, it prevents you giving yourself to hearty, joyful obedience of God, at any point at all.

So down at the bottom of you, you've got this troubled conscience, this sense that things aren't right, and perhaps you try to suppress it, and days and weeks may go by when you don't think about it. Owen would illustrate from David, who never thought about Bathsheba until months later, when Nathan came to him. But, that'll be the effect of it, says Owen, all the same.

Whether you're conscious of it or not, you're getting your spiritual life getting weaker. Your whole Christian life is being blighted. That's indwelling sin.

It's fundamental to all that we're going to say, and so I've deliberately spent a little extra time in elaborating this. This is the fundamental ingredient in the situation in which a Christian has to fight, says Owen. He has to fight indwelling sin.

More briefly, there are three more factors too, involved as causes of this conflict. Second, the devil. Despite, sorry, in addition to indwelling sin, there is the old arrogant who stands behind it.

His name is Satan. He is the accuser, he is the destroyer of the work and the squatter of the will of God. And because he's opposed to God, he is opposed to you.

And anything that he can do to spoil your life as a Christian, he will. He tempts, says Owen. Sin tempts, and he quotes James 1.14 and following, and the devil tempts.

And the manner of his tempting is similar to the mode whereby indwelling sin comes over. The devil too is subtle. He's an angel of light.

He disguises himself. He manipulates circumstances in a way that makes us vulnerable because he knows our weaknesses, he knows at what points and in what circumstances we shall be most vulnerable. He suggests ideas and arguments to the mind.

Arguments for self-indulgence, arguments for going the wrong way. As he did in the Garden of Eden. It won't matter, no harm will come of it.

You'll enjoy it. You will not surely die, you needn't worry about that. It's a natural way to behave.

And the devil, by these arguments of deceit, prevails upon one eventually to call evil good and good evil and to reproduce the disastrous wrong choice of Eden itself. Also, Satan has other lessons. He's the patron, amongst other things, of the false conscience.

The heart of true godliness sorry, at the heart of true godliness is a conscience subject to the word of God. A conscience that looks to scripture and takes its standards and makes its judgments in the light of the Bible. Satan seeks to spoil this and so he induces the false conscience.

A sense of sin when in fact by God's standard you're not sinning at all. A sense of shame and doubt when by the scripture standard you're doing right. A bondage to some supposed law of God which isn't the law of God really.

And conversely, no sense of sin, no shame when you're doing something that the word of God condemns. But Satan uses the false conscience, says the Puritans, principally in the former of those two ways to entangle people with a false sense of sin, a false shame false ideals, false self-condemnation consequent loss of assurance, consequent spiritual uncertainty. Satan delights to make people miserable, says the Puritans and this is one of the ways that he does it.

He manipulates the false conscience and people who are susceptible, people who are sensitive people who are morbid perhaps, people who are open to impressions from other sources than the word of God. Satan leads them a dance with the false conscience and that's one of his ways of spoiling the work of God in them. And then again, Satan is the patron of pride and unbelief of conformity to the world, which after all is his kingdom and he's a very good salesman for it.

The world in any case is enemy-occupied territory and you can't wonder if you meet the devil at every corner as you walk through it. The Puritans would heartily have agreed with the man who said if there's no personal devil, well who's running his business? Someone is. The Puritans of course as simple Bible readers knew that there was a personal devil and they didn't in their day have to meet this particular trolley of the modern church.

Well there's two elements in the conflict situation indwelling sin and the devil. Number three, the body. The Puritans as we had occasion to say yesterday were quite clear about the unity of the human personality.

That man is one, a psychophysical organism and that the body and the soul have an intimate connection a contact interaction, a very direct effect upon each other. And the Puritans in their understanding of human nature and their personal dealing laid great weight on the fact that our bodies have been involved in the fall as indeed their mortality shows that sin in a special sense resides in our physical constitution this is not to say, this is not old-fashioned manichaeism it's simply an attempt to formulate the truth that we shall be rid of indwelling sin until we have a new body and are freed from this one not therefore in this life. And the Puritans would have said that Paul wouldn't have spoken of the body of sin or the body of this death had

he not there been recognizing and summoning others to recognize a close connection between indwelling sin and the physical life, the bodily life that we live here.

And the Puritans recognized that lack of physical health and certain forms of lack of mental health forms of lack of mental health, forms of mental illness that is which have a physical root in our physical constitution which are rooted in what they call the temperament of the body which phrase just about expressed what we mean nowadays when we say temperament simply these factors can be in themselves a hindrance to the life of God in the heart they can, the body as we might say can let the spirit down the body can itself be in such a state as to cast gloom over your whole mental and spiritual life and to sap your mental and spiritual energy and in that way to hinder you in vigorous fellowship with God and lively service of God a person who is ill especially with a kind of illness that

brings physical latitude may often find it hard to pray this is just one simple illustration of the kind of things the kind of things that the Puritans were concerned with under this head and said the Puritans we shall have to cope with this aspect of the conflict until the day of the day when we leave this world and until the day of redemption we long for a better body said the Puritans expanding Ephesians 8 verse 20 sorry Romans 8 verse 23 in this sorry not in this body we groan that's 2nd Corinthians 5 we groan longing to be longing for the redemption of our body and this is part of the answer that Romans 8 gives to the problem of Romans 7 who shall deliver me from the body of this death I thank God I have a hope which involves the bestowal of a new body and that is part of the hope

and the glory to which I look forward we but here in this present life we which have the first fruits of the spirit we ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption to wit the redemption of the body part of the hope for which we are saved this body just isn't good enough it's subject to illness it has a weak memory one wishes one could remember all the things that God teaches one and so often one forgets them so constantly one forgets them this body needs an awful lot of time and sleep one could wish for a body that didn't need so much sleep which didn't get tired in this way how much better you could serve God in a body like that well in heaven we shall have one and it is what we groan and what we long for but here says the Puritans we haven't got one we've got a body that is

infected and infected with and affected by indwelling sin a body which is mortal a body which is subject to illness and weakness a body which can cast a mood of depression over the whole soul a body which prompts moods prompts temperamental weaknesses timidity, thoughtlessness a body which makes us prone to besetting sin all these things you see are as they are in particular people partly at any rate because of their physical constitution in these days of psychology and character study this of course is all known and it's a commonplace and common sense indeed has been teaching people this for hundreds of years but what perhaps is not so generally known is that the Puritans were quite clear about it too and had taught it too in biblical and theological terms and they've taken these factors

up into their own account of the Christian warfare the conflict, the fight and in the directions of the guidance that they give to the warring Christians these physical factors and factors which spring from our physical constitution are dealt with just as are the machinations of indwelling sin so we have to learn to live with ourselves and we not merely have to fight the sin that dwells within us and the devil as he tempts us we also in a real sense have to fight ourselves dealing with some of our own some of the weaknesses that belong to us by reason of our physical constitution and we've got to become conscious of them and seek by the grace of God to master them temperamental weaknesses which if indulged become again and again the occasion of sin and finally fourth element in the

conflict God's training program the Puritans recognized that God for his own purposes will sometimes withdraw from us and make us walk for a time or leave us to walk for a time through dry and dark places in order that thereby we may gain spiritual profit which wouldn't have come to us any other way the Puritans knew the perplexity that sometimes comes to people who have been converted suddenly and strikingly at first they overflow with joy they're thrilled, life's wonderful and they as it were bounce along just fluttering over as Christians and then God seems to deal with them in a way which protects them because their tremendous effervescence of joy goes and they suddenly feel that the road is much harder than they used to feel it was and they wonder what's happened they wonder if the

fault's in them and not necessarily, said the Puritans God for his own purposes sometimes withdraws his light from us for a season remember Job and remember the word in Isaiah 50 verses 10 and 11 about the child of God having to walk in darkness remember those psalms in which again and again you find godly men crying to God for restored prosperity of spirit and joy able to profess before God that they've searched their hearts and there's no indulged sin in their lives but yet the blessedness that they knew doesn't seem to be theirs now and they're crying to God to restore it remember those things, said the Puritans these are elements too in the conflict when these times of divine withdrawal come then all kinds of thoughts and perplexities arise in the mind naturally so you wonder what God

is doing with you and so in that sense too there's an inner conflict and perplexity and puzzle and confusion and you need to understand the ways of God and know how to deal with yourself and behave yourself in that kind of situation it may be, said the Puritans and here are just a set of the headings under which they explain this kind of treatment that God wants to try his grace in you as he did in Job let it come out by leaving a man in a tough spot and then strikingly for the glory of God he demonstrates his faithfulness and God prays for it as the greater it may be that God wants to show the individual Christian his own power and remind him that it's only by the power of grace that he's upheld any moment so for a moment he allows the man to feel a little of a little of what spiritual

darkness is so that he may appreciate the glory of the power of grace when it returns it may be that God is wanting to teach a man to long for heaven it may be of course that this is chastisement for something that the man has foolishly done that he shouldn't have done and then its purpose is to lead him to repentance and greater hatred of sin it may be that the object of the operation is to bring the Christian to a deeper self-knowledge making him realize what a sinner he is and just how much evil still remains in him because when the light of God is withdrawn suddenly whoosh! sin will come out and he'll feel the strength of temptation more than he felt it before God will allow it to happen you see to teach these good lessons not indeed that God will allow his child to fall but for a

moment he'll find himself walking in darkness where these lessons can be learned and perhaps also this humbling experience and perplexing experience may be sent him said the Puritans to forearm him and shield him against some temptation some sin into which in presumption he might otherwise have fallen and equally it may be that God is dealing with him in this way to equip him to help others to enable him subsequently to comfort others with the comfort with which he has been comforted comforted of God out of this experience of spiritual desertion and darkness well these are factors which make up the conflict and create the situation in which the Christians got to fight now briefly the road to victory the way that these various situations have to be handled the way the victory is going to

be won I put this in military terms I think that it will help to make the thoughts more vivid what must be done a number of things the first list as in any military operation any fight reconnaissance of the terrain

once again get the mind clear before you do anything else said the Puritans truth enters the interest of the understanding the mind must lead so labor to understand the situation in which you are the various factors that are involved in it it may not really be as it feels to be remember then they said that you yourself as a Christian man as a regenerate man have been freed from the dominion of sin and you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and you are in the covenant care of Jesus Christ and that means that however strongly sin may attack you it never needs to have dominion over

you it is dethroned it can rage, it can act very fierce it can make you feel well there is no point in fighting any longer it is bound to win and so in despair you simply give in to it but you need never do that said the Puritans sin shall not have dominion over you that is the promise of God sin is a dethroned foe and at every point where it manifests itself and assaults you and opposes you you can fight it you have been set free by the grace of God to fight it and the second thing to remember under this heading the Puritans said is that your enemy sin and Satan they are both of them defeated foes both of them doomed foes both now needing to be dispossessed and both of them vulnerable if you use the resources that God has given you if you behave as you should in this situation you can

dispossess them their strategy is deception distraction direct opposition as we have seen you think of yourself as facing enemy strong points in an area where already the decisive victory is won and already grace is in control you now go out in the Christian life to carry out the mopping up operations that have to be carried through before the strong points of the evil one and the strong points of sin are finally reduced and brought to nothing think of this conflict in terms of a long series of mopping up operations and under this heading too says the Puritans be quite clear how dangerous how disastrous it may be to indulge sin and allow these strong points to continue and to allow the enemy to maraud from them if you do that well as we said before there is no telling what damage will

result so be clear on that and don't allow yourself to be seduced and tempted and equally enough still under the reconnaissance reckon with your own physical constitution work out think out how you've got to live with yourself take knowledge of your temperamental weaknesses and realise that henceforth you'll have to avoid the things which play on your temperamental weaknesses if you've got a particular weakness don't expose yourself to the things that feed and encourage and strengthen it and if say you're a depressive you suffer from what the Puritans call the melancholy if it's easy for you to fall into morbid and depressed states of mind well realise that you've got to live with that this springs from your physical constitution be sensible about it don't for instance spend a lot of time

on your own seeking God but seek God in fellowship pray with other Christians live in fellowship with other Christians and in their homely earthy way the Puritans would even say this let the joy of other Christians rub off onto you let them cheer you up it was in a paragraph giving directions along this line of the melancholy that Richard Baxter said the ever memorable word I don't know whether you expect to ever find a Puritan saying this but here is a Puritan saying it there is no mercy like the mercy of believers so if you're a depressed soul that will be God's special means of grace to you if you get alone to pray you may very soon find that after a few minutes the mood comes over you again and you cast back in your depression well you've got to reckon with that live with it cope with

it do the sensible thing about it you see this is not legalistic the Puritans take each case on its merits each person according to his own real needs now they say make a reconnaissance of the ground recognise your situation and deal with it accordingly and secondly putting it again in military terms guard your flanks it's no use launching an attack at a particular point if you can be outflanked by the enemy and he can get

round behind you and weaken you in the rear and similarly said the Puritans it's no use trying directly to assault and dispossess sin and Satan at one particular point in your life where you find that you're vulnerable to their assaults unless previously you've committed yourself to what they used to call universal obedience and are giving yourself to the practice of

holiness and the service of God all along the line says Owen he that hath a running sore the scripture expression for sin he observes a running sore upon him arising from an ill habit of body contracted by intemperance and ill diet let him apply himself with what diligence and skill he can to the cure of his sore if he leave the general habit of his body under distemper his labour and travail will be in vain if he doesn't labour to improve his overall physical condition this particular manifestation of it can't be effectively treated so will his attempts be that shall endeavour to stop a bloody issue of sin and filth in his soul if he's not equally careful of his universal spiritual temperature and constitution and if he does, says Owen this shows that he's attacking this particular sin

which troubles him from a wrong motivation it shows that if he's honest with himself he'll have to admit that it only the effective motivation leading him to attack it is not the glory of God not the desire to please God at all if that were the dominant motivation well it would lead him equally to attack every point at which sin was opposing him opposing him in the life of Godliness if he only bothers about this one thing, well that shows that his real motivation is no more than a desire to be free of the trouble of conscience and the shame and the self-condemnation and the miserable wretched feeling that it gives him and you expect God to bless you in an endeavour like that, says Owen canst thou think that God will set in with such hypocritical endeavours and ease thee of that which

perplexeth thee that thou mayest be at liberty to that which no less grieves him that is all the other forms of self-indulgence in which you're still being entrapped no, says Owen, you won't know the blessing of God if you haven't guarded your thanks and started by seeking universal obedience and made it your business to fight sin at every point and to perfect holiness at every point where the word of God leads you not just at this one third step in the campaign resist the enemy's attacks this is obvious and yet, said the Puritans, they knew it's hard to do when strong temptation and fierce assaults of the evil one come upon you well then, it's not easy to resist the devil and it's not easy directly to repel him as the Lord did in the wilderness and there is a great danger that one will

simply panic and if the soul panics, said the Puritans well, some ground will be gained by the enemy anyway just as always happens when the army panics it may be possible later to restore the situation but the immediate effect of panic is that you turn tail and run and meanwhile the enemy makes some ground so resist enemy attacks directly at the first stirrings of temptation at the first recognition that Satan is seeking to pull you away along some wrong line seek to drive him off say, get thee behind me Satan set yourself against the wrong thing set your mind on something else think about something else do something else make yourself do what you know you ought to be doing and meanwhile shoot up to heaven one of those arrow prayers with a message for help from God writes Richard Thibbs

none can take Satan off from a man but God God must rebuke him, no one else can a poor soul fighting with Satan in the darkness is like unto a man that was assaulted by someone carrying a lantern someone carrying a torch he can see the assaulted and how to bust at him and follow him where he goes but the poor man cannot see who is striking him nor be aware how to ward off the blow you can't see the chap behind the torch so you're vulnerable therefore the apostle when busted by Satan knew not what to do but only to have recourse to God by prayer for he could no more avoid or run away from these suggestions

than from himself nor could all the saints on earth any other way of freedom none could help him till God should cause the devil to depart so it's a matter of both of behaving as a

believer should directly setting oneself against the enemy attack and also of acting faith that's the Puritan phrase acting faith, crying to God asking the Lord to rebuke Satan as well as directly rebuking him so far as you can by your own word your own get thee behind me Satan your own profession to Satan that you're going to stick to the right way the scriptural way as our Lord professed in the wilderness to Satan that he was going to stick to the scriptural way Owen and the others have a very strong doctrine may I say in passing of the decisive power of prayer bringing down hope from God in times of trouble if you don't pray you won't receive you have not because you ask not seek and ye shall find ask and it shall be given unto you but if you don't ask don't expect the help but if you

ask then the whole power of the victor Christ the conqueror will be exerted to help and the enemy attack will be resisted and resisted effectively next element next step in the campaign reduce, reducing the enemy's strong points here they quote Colossians 3 Romans 8 14 mortify therefore your members which are on the earth if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body you shall live mortify means put to death there's a method for putting sin to death gradually draining the life out of it setting yourself against it in such a way as to weaken it you learn that method with the Puritans you practice the divine art of mortifying sin what's involved, well first taking sides against sin those habitual forms of wrong doing those distracting temptations which are bothering you take

sides against them dissociate yourself from them this takes some doing you need God's help actually to accomplish it it tangles our affections as we it's like resolving to pluck out an eye resolving to cut off a limb resolving to do away with what's a real part of you and this particular form of sin may have been an old friend that's been with you for years it's not easy dissociating yourself from old friends like that but you've got to do it said the Puritans you must honestly in the presence of God take sides against sin and set yourself to starve sin refusing it the things that you know stimulate it the reading, the company, the circumstances you're playing with fire if you allow those things to take their place in the course of your daily life when you know that they encourage and

strengthen the power of sin within you starve it this is one of the ways of mortifying it said the Puritans and finally pray, pray against it hold it up in the presence of Christ the crucified risen Christ as an evil filthy thing contrary to Him a thing that you want to see the thing that you want to see dead hold it up before Him and ask Him for His power against it the activities said the Puritans by which we secure the mortification of our sins is prayer including complaints in which one spreads before God one's sin and extremity afflicts one's soul by humbly acknowledging how sin of this kind provokes God's wrath against one that's complaint, there's plenty of it in the Psalms and then there's petition whereby one earnestly and importunately pleads God's promises of deliverance and

sustains one's faith in their accomplishment by recalling those events in which already the Lord's love has been shown for one and asking Him to prove that love again by bringing this particular sin to destruction this said the Puritans indeed says Owen, strengthens grace and it weakens sin let me quote you a few sentences of Owen as he sets this out grace is strengthened for he says the soul of a believer is never raised to a higher intention of spirit in the pursuit of, love unto and delight in holiness nor is more conformed unto it or cast into the mould of it than it is in prayer where you set God before your faith you set Christ before your eyes you look unto Him and your heart is drawn out towards Him and then the other aspect of the matter as grace is strengthened so sin is

weakened and withers as the believer looks in faith and love to Christ let faith look on Christ in the Gospel as He set forth dying and crucified for us look on Him under the weight of our sins praying, bleeding, dying and bring Him in that condition into thy heart thy faith and apply His blood so shed to thy corruptions the promise is that the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God the blood of Calvary does cleanse certainly therefore in my particular case will cleanse from all sin do this daily said Owen his thought is that sin nowhere appears so hateful as it does at Calvary and lust will shrivel up in the Christian's heart while he keeps Calvary in view and again he says this Christ as crucified is the great object of our love or should be in the death of Christ do His love, His grace,

His condescension most gloriously shine forth and the effects of love to Him as of all true love in the human level too are first adherence and second assimilation adherence one's soul cleaves or is knit to the one whom one loves there's a firm adherence to Christ crucified produced as one acts faith and love says Owen in prayer and then with adherence goes assimilation one becomes like the one whom one loves love begets a likeness he writes between the mind loving and the object beloved and a mind filled with love of Christ as crucified will be changed into His image and likeness by the effectual mortification of sin these transactions and this experience of the power of prayer is something which of course could not be worth not for the indwelling spirit who on the one hand brings Christ

crucified to you makes Him real before your eyes makes communion with Him a reality on the other hand strengthens you to go to Him and to stir yourself up in prayer and indeed in all the exercises of spirit that we've mentioned whereby one opposes sin in this sense it is by the spirit that one mortifies sin first to last but you'll notice that there is in this doctrine none of the kind of I must confess in my view injudicious talk that we sometimes hear about handing these things over to the spirit of God or to Christ to be dealt with and then as it were the soul taking up a posture of passivity and waiting for the Lord to act no in the strength of the spirit we act we by the spirit mortify the deeds of the body and this is how it's done said the Puritans and all the time one keeps in

touch with faith the last element of the military operation all the time one keeps in touch with faith by prayer by waiting on the Lord the Puritans insisted that waiting on the Lord daily regularly of which the psalms are so full is the again one of the preconditions of effectively coping with any particular enemy attack you keep in touch with faith then you keep up communion with God and so says Owen in a fine rhetorical passage which is strong but not perhaps too strong though indwelling sin will not be rooted out of you until this life ends yet by the power of Christ you may live to see this and that particular lust dead at your feet well this in outline is the way in which the Puritans expounded the sight and the victory of the Christian life viewed as a life in continual conflict

with all the hosts of hell Satan and sin and all the powers of evil they assault and hurt the soul or seek to the greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world and if one fights the promise is that one will conquer and work out in life and experience the victory of Christ and the dethroning of sin which says the Puritans and says the New Testament are the basic gospel facts in the light of which the whole process of conflict is carried on I hope that I vindicated my original assertion that this doctrine is peculiarly fruitful for purposes of spiritual therapy hasn't this searched our own hearts shown us some of our own weaknesses and shown us the way to deal with them in the strength of our master isn't this kind of material going to help some of us in dealing with the souls of

those committed to our charge coping with spiritual malaise guiding along the path of spiritual advance in our congregations this is the age of pastoral psychology I could wish that there was more in our present

day courses of pastoral psychology in seminaries and universities along the line of the Puritan teaching I greatly fear that some of these courses don't even help one to distinguish between psychological and spiritual troubles and if you can't draw that distinction well you'll not get very far in dealing with souls dealing with spiritual troubles in an evangelical way well it's because it seems to me we are so weak here that I've laboured again I fear overrunning a little but I've laboured these aspects of the Puritan exposition of the fight and victory of faith and I trust that

some of these things will indeed help us and strengthen us in our own ministry and our own witness for the Lord and in our own personal Christian living that we may be holy and triumphant Christians and may enable others to be so too shall we pray Lord we know ourselves to be surrounded by many and great dangers and to be opposed by strong and bitter foes and we cannot fight sin and Satan in our own strength and yet we know that they will constantly be fighting us with all the strength that they have Lord teach us the way to fight our spiritual foes in thy strength and a triumph that our lives may be appraised to thy name and that the victory of faith may be fully worked out in our experience and that we as ministers may learn to pass on this liberating secret to those to whom we take thy

word so teach us to fight and make us victors for the praise and the glory of our Lord and our Saviour Amen

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/3/SID3751.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ji-packer/sanctification-and-the-fight/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net