

# *How The Words "Flesh" & "Spirit" Are To Be Understood In The Scriptures*

**John Bradford (1510-1555)**

FOR your better understanding of the scriptures, especially of the new Testament; for the forearming you against errors, which, through the ignorance or diverse acception and taking of terms or words used and written of the holy apostles, might happen; and for your consolation in the conflicts you are cumbered with in this present life; I am purposed, my dearly beloved, to write unto you some things (as God shall lend me his grace, the which I ask for his Christ's sake now and for ever) hereabout. Take it in good part, I pray you, at least for my good will's sake towards you in Christ.

In reading the scriptures, and especially Paul's epistles, we very often do see these words, "flesh" and "spirit." When therefore this word "flesh" is set against "the spirit" by the way of contrary, as Gal. 5, and almost everywhere, then must we know that it comprehendeth all and every of the natural powers, gifts, and qualities of man: yea, it comprehendeth all that ever is in man, whatsoever it be, (the "sanctification of the Spirit," which none have but the elect and justified, only excepted:) like as this word "spirit," when it is opposed or set against as a contrary to the "flesh," doth signify that which in man the Holy Ghost hath purged from evil and sanctified to righteousness. The which word sometimes Paul calleth "the mind," sometimes "the inward man," sometimes "the new man," and sometimes "a new creature." The word "flesh," taken as before I have said, is sometimes called "the old man," sometimes "the outward man," sometimes "the body." All which words do appertain, as to the soul that look inasmuch as it is regenerate, it is called "the spirit," "the mind," "the new man," "the inward man," "a new creature." Inasmuch as it retaineth the natural affections of man, it is called "flesh," "the old man," "the outward man," "the body." So that you may see in these terms and in every one of them is comprehended whole man, both soul and body, to be considered either according to regeneration and to the sanctifying of God's Spirit, or else according to all that ever he is or hath by nature or otherwise, by any means, inwardly or outwardly.

Whilst we live here, there is a fight and strife in us which are the elect and, children of God;" "the flesh," outward man, body, and "old man," striving against "the spirit," inward man, "new man," and "new creature:" that is, so much as we are regenerate and endued with God's Spirit, we do strive and fight against all the powers of our souls and bodies; retaining the natural and corrupt affections we have in us, and shall have so long as we live, to bring them as much as may be into obedience to the Spirit; at the least to bridle them,

that they bear not dominion or rule in us.

This battle and strife none have but the elect "children of God:" and they that have it are the elect "children of God" ("in Christ before the beginning of the world," whose salvation is as certain and sure as is God himself; for they are given to Christ, a faithful Shepherd, who hath so prayed for them lest they should perish, that we know his prayer is heard: — yea, he promiseth so to keep them that "they shall not perish." And therefore they ought to rejoice, and comfort themselves in their conflicts, which are testimonials, and most true, that they are the elect and dear "children of God;" for else they could not, nor should not feel any such strife in them.

But perchance you will say, that the wicked have strife also in themselves, and oft are grieved with themselves because they have done such a sin; and therefore this is no such certain demonstration of election. To this I answer, that indeed the wicked and reprobate have sometimes, as you say, strifes and conflicts; as in Saul we may see it against David, and in Antiochus. But this strife in them is not a strife or battle betwixt "the spirit and the flesh;" as you shall see if you mark the differences to discern these battles, which now I will give unto you.

When man is displeased with himself for any thing done amiss, and striveth thereagainst, in respect that the fault displeaseth God his Father and Lord, in respect of Christ, etc., then is the same strife the strife of a good man, of one elected and that is the dear child of God: and the same man so displeased with himself may assure himself that he hath the "good Spirit" of God, which hath wrought in him that affection. Let him therefore call to God and cry, 'Abba, dear Father,' and ask grace and mercy, which assuredly he shall find.

But when one is displeased with himself, and striveth to amend any fault, in respect of civil honesty, of men, shame, beauty, bodily health, profit, hurt, friendship, etc., and not in respect of God's displeasure and favour; then is the same sorrow after the world, and not after God; then is the same strife or battle a battle between the flesh and the flesh, and not between "the spirit and the flesh." Such battles have the wicked, as Saul had, in respect of worldly honesty, shame, civil justice, etc. The wicked have not God's Spirit of sanctification and regeneration to sanctify and regenerate them, though they have it concerning other gifts: and therefore they want the affections of the holy elect "children of God" and regenerated, although they have other affections by the which they are not discerned from the ungodly, or taken for holy in God's sight.

I say, you shall see that the doctrine of election is not a casting of the bridle in the horse's neck, or an overstrait curbing of the horse; that is, neither occasioneth licentiousness nor despair, but provoketh to battle against sin; and that not hypocritically, but in God's sight and for God's sake, (for they feel not their election that so fight not;) but it comforteth also in the cross and battle most comfortably, with comforts that never can be taken away: for what a comfort is it to see my sorrow and fight to be a demonstration of mine election! Wherein is true rejoicing, as Christ said,

"Rejoice in this, that your names are written in the book of life."

If any man would alter the natural course of any water to run a contrary way, he shall never be able to do it with dams: for a time he may well stop it; but when the dam is full, it will either burst down the dam or overflow it, and so with more rage run than ever it did before. Even so, if any man would have the streams of his nature and will altered, to run after the will and nature of God, the same shall never be able to do it, nor all the world for him, by making of dams; that is, by telling and teaching us how that we should do, speak, and think otherwise than we do naturally. For a time the streams of our affections may be stopped by telling and teaching, and other bodily exercise; yet these very affections will weasel out now and then, and at length break down all our dams and devices, or else so overflow them that "the latter end will be worse than the beginning." Therefore the alteration hereof must be at the head-spring by the making of other water ways, and rivers of incorruption for our will and our nature to run in.

But who can do this? The spring itself? Nay, God himself, and him alone, which worketh this in whom, when, and howsoever, it pleaseth him for his own good will's sake. And they in whom he worketh this are his elect children "before the beginning of the world;" who may and should feel their election by loving the good and bating that which is evil, although in great imperfection: whereas the hypocrites have a thousand parts more shew of holiness, but in deed less love to God and hatred to evil, yea, in deed none at all as it is in God's sight.

Wherefore let us pray for the daily increase of "regeneration," which is nothing else but the alteration of our natural streams, that, as from Adam we have received them running naturally contrary to his will, so we may receive from Christ, the second Adam, his "good, Spirit" to draw and lead us in all things after the through-ways of his good will: which he grant to us for his mercy's sake! Amen.

John Bradford was a fellow of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, and was martyred in 1555.



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