

The Real Battle Within

When you wake up in the morning do you sense excitement and anticipation for the day? Is your life rolling along exactly as you planned it? If you can say yes to these two questions; great, but you would probably be in the minority. For most people life can be very challenging and disappointing; most people are struggling with the issues of life. When we talk about struggles I usually think of Job; he certainly knew about struggle and disappointment and shared his thoughts in Job 5:7 (KJV): “**Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.**”

Everyone will experience some level of disappointment in their life before it is over. How we handle that disappointment is the determining factor of our emotional and spiritual health. There is a wide range of speakers offering a quick fix to life. People gravitate toward the message because of the pain they are experiencing. The reality of life demands recognition of the struggle and pain that surrounds us. If you are a Christian, your view of life and struggles is very different from someone who does not acknowledge God as their Savior. Though people may reject God or the knowledge of God that does not make Him go away. In John 3:36 (KJV) we read; “*He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*” Clearly God says that He presently acts in the lives of the believer and the non-believer. The fact is many of our problems are simply the result of sin in our lives; whether a believer or non-believer.

Most of us cope with life by pretending. We pretend that what we have satisfies more than it does. This can be seen in people who have experienced traumatic experiences early in life. It is easier for them to suppress the feelings than to face the pain. To deal with what’s really going on inside is disturbing, too uncomfortable; so we hide the inside truth from others - and from ourselves. Those who do take a look sometimes crumble under the weight of what they discover.

For an individual to admit to sin and then look at that sin as the source of their struggle is a reality that many do not want and will not acknowledge. The fact is all of us are sinners by nature and this creates much of our pain; whether personal sin or the sin of others in our life. Sin is the violation of God's law; God's standard; thus creating the pain and struggles we experience. Since our actions are against God, the only source of help is God. For an individual to acknowledge the struggle is the first step in finding comfort and healing. We live in a fallen world and as such pain and suffering confront us daily. While we all want to avoid suffering there comes a time when it may be necessary to accept suffering as part of life. Ps 31:10: *"For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing: my strength fails because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed."*

Deep within all of us is a sense that something is wrong. We feel uneasy when confronted about our life; there is pressure to play it safe so we avoid truthful answers. We avoid subjects that put us in touch with unpleasant emotions. Dealing with other people creates much of our stress. Wanting to be accepted by others we do whatever is needed not to be rejected. Rejection is to be avoided at all cost and we will do whatever we can to escape being alone. All of us desire things to be perfect. However, perfection will not happen in this life. It is this unmet expectation that troubles and drives us to do things to handle the hurt immediately. Rather than change and eliminate we rearrange the same things, so nothing really changes. The majority of people make it through life by coping not changing. The lack of effort to change centers around the idea that change involves facing the real me, and that would be too painful. Therefore, denial becomes a way of life. Real change requires a real look on the inside. Obedience and dependence on God are essential to real change. But that is not all that is required.

Real change is more often found by people who realistically face difficulties than by those who manage to preserve pleasant feelings by ignoring the tough things in their lives. Very often, a commitment to obedience reflects not a passionate desire to pursue God, but a stubbornly fearful determination not to feel deep frustration and pain. God is sought the hardest in the midst of confusing

reality. When men sense their failures they retreat to whatever area of life offers them a sense of competence and safety. Many Christians have come to realize that their version of church involvement, time in the Word, commitment to do right and claiming God's promises are somehow not getting to the core troubles of their heart. It seems we always come up short. Nothing satisfies; nothing works. It is sin that frustrates us, and we cannot escape the presence of sin in this life. I cannot be perfect, but I can be better. Our Lord made it clear that doing right in His eyes required far more than the performance of certain activities. The entire law could be summarized in two commands: love God and love others. Moral effort alone can never produce genuine love. To love as God has commanded requires dramatic inner change. Learning to love is essential to overcome psychological problems.

Looking into the heart is important and touchy. The choice for many sincere, struggling Christians is either:

(1) Ignore the critical issues that weigh on us constantly and just try harder to be good Christians without ever understanding our sub-conscience battleground.

(2) Take an inside look guided by feel good counselors; who refuse to even acknowledge sin as an issue.

Neither of the two options moves us toward the kind of deep character change our Lord desires. In order to change we must first identify what needs changing. The Bible tells us to guard our heart (Proverbs 4:23) and tells us our heart is deceitfully wicked and impossible to understand (Jeremiah 17:9). If our heart is as difficult to know as the Bible states, then any hope of understanding our heart depends entirely on God's willingness to help. Without God's help, no effort to explore the heart will ever identify the real problems that need changing.

Two observations are suggested. First, people have a void, and emptiness in their lives that needs filling. Although the fact of this universal void is not directly stated it is clearly assumed. God designed us to enjoy life; filled with deep, loving acceptance and with opportunities to make a difference in

someone else.

Second, people are moving in the wrong direction in response to their emptiness. They refuse to trust God to fill this void. Instead, they insist on filling this void with things, people or power; none of which will ever fill the emptiness. The disease of self-management is our problem. Fallen man is both terrified of accountability and committed to maintaining independence.

The Scriptures consistently expose people as both thirsty and foolish. We long for the satisfaction we were built to enjoy, but we all move away from God to find it. We have a need and we seek to meet that need the wrong way.

Two categories of Christians emerge: those who have high standards of commitment and those who are content to live ordinary, respectable lives. The first group includes people who are frustrated with their inability to measure up to their ideals and a few who are satisfied with their performance. The second group consists mostly of people who live reasonably happy lives as long as money, health, and relationships are doing well.

Our Lord severely rebuked people whose lives merely conformed to high standards of religious conduct (Matthew 23:13-36). Outside cleanliness, [whether the product of zeal or of complacency,] does not impress our Lord. For people who are disillusioned and discouraged after years of trying hard to do everything right, the news is good: more effort isn't the answer.

The goal of change from the inside out is not simply conformity to Christian standards or seeking new ways to be happy. Both conformity and happiness must develop as byproducts of a deep personal relationship to the God who created us. Our deep stubborn sinfulness is at the heart of the problem.

We want certain things. We want to feel a certain way; we want people to make us feel good by the way they treat us. We do everything out of motivation. It is okay to desire, but the desires must be handled biblically. Because we want or desire what we cannot have in this world, there will be disappointment and possibly pain. Accepting hurt as a part of life is essential to handling life properly. I

want to be respected and when I am not, hurt comes.

I need relationships that accept me fully the way I am without backing away when I am not perfect. We do not want to admit that people cannot handle all of my faults. Since the fall, no human being has the capacity to love us perfectly. We cannot rid ourselves of the desire to have more; we never seem to be satisfied with what we have.

We receive neither respect nor involvement to the degree we deeply crave. In order to deal with this loss, we focus on other matters in an attempt to hide the pain. It is okay to desire good things, but we need to realize that we will not get our desires totally met here on earth. Nothing less than perfect relationships in a perfect world among perfect people will make pain-free happiness a reality. Hurting is a reality and it's really okay for Christians to hurt. Not only is it okay to hurt, but we need to understand that sin is a bigger problem than we think.

The moment relief of the inevitable pain of living in a fallen world becomes our priority, we leave the path toward pursuing God. God's prescriptions for handling life does not relieve an ache that is not meant to cease this side of heaven; God is looking for us to be faithful in the midst of aching. Obedience may actually intensify the pain that we feel. In an attempt to eliminate the pain, we commit sinful acts that give short-term relief, constantly trying to eliminate the hurt represents a denial of reality. The fact is that something is wrong with everything. We must remember that our Lord's promise of paradise today was given to a man about to die; [the thief on the cross]. Faith is required because life can be overwhelmingly confusing. And God's love for us is the only approach to life that achieves God's purposes and gives us a sense of relationship. The confusion often comes when those who are following Christ the closest are experiencing the most difficulty.

The desires of life can be meant either by my efforts, the impute of others or God Himself. The simple longings can be filled by me, sometimes we need involvement by other caring people, and the really important longings can only be met by God. When my casual longings are not met I feel some discomfort. When my more complicated longings are not met I feel more than discomfort, I feel a deep sorrow, often causing an interruption in my daily life. Actually these two areas of my life are a result of my failure to have a proper relationship to God, resulting in pain, disappointment and depression. The need for a personal and submissive relationship to God is the key to every other area of my life. My relationship to God is what gives order and purpose to every other area of my life; including pain and suffering.

It is the acknowledgement of painful disappointments in our circumstances and relationships that should drive us to pursue Christ as the only source of relief. We rarely depend upon God when our lives are comfortable. We must honestly admit to deep sadness and disappointment, sometimes reaching the level of soul-wrenching despair, as we consider our human relationships. Frustration, properly handled, will drive us toward God. Those who walk the closest to God feel their disappointment the most. The knowledge of how things should be makes the reality of how things are all the worse. No matter how richly we experience the Lord, we cannot avoid the pain of living in a fallen world as a fallen being. When Christ was here the reality of the sinful environment impacted Him as well. He was in perfect fellowship with the Father yet was still a man of sorrows, brought to tears by the hardness of men's hearts.

We must remove the idea that being obedient Christians produces good feelings all the time. We cannot measure the quality of our walk with the Lord by the absence of unhappy feelings. God's unchanging love gives us purpose, identity, joy, and the courage to respond well to what life brings our way, good or bad. The longings of our heart must be faced. The disappointment of our soul must be experienced. Only then will we learn to pant after God in eager anticipation of His coming, when every desire will be forever satisfied.

The choice before us is clear: either live to be comfortable (both internally and

externally, but especially internally) or live to know God. We can't have it both ways. The pain of living apart from God is unbearable - exposes our sinfulness as horribly grotesque and foolish. If we insist on finding relief without coming to God on His terms, there will never be relief. Often when faced with trials we make demands on God. When God does not meet our demands to take away the pain, our only recourse is to handle the pain on our own. We are limited to either denying how badly we hurt or to medicating ourselves through some form of temporary gratification. We tend to make relief of our pain the goal of our lives. There must be a serious look at the decisions we make, not just the result of our disappointment. We cannot recognize self-protection until we see what we're protecting. When relieving pain becomes our priority, then we have left the path of pursuing God. Deficient love is always central to our problems. Love is never blind to others' faults. We must not ask more of others than they can provide.

Depressed people have been disappointed by others and feel a terrible internal vacuum. The struggle to live in disappointing relationships will continue until heaven. We are looking for a type of change that God never promised. We manage to interpret biblical teaching to support our longing for perfection. The idea that peace and joy might merely support us during times of struggle and sorrow rather than eliminate those times is not appealing. To make no effort to clean up the mess and to live without self-protection is terrifying. It makes no sense. It feels like the route to death.

Most people think that movement toward pain is suicide. But exactly the opposite is true. To explore and embrace our deepest hurts puts us in a small company of thirsty people who; because they feel their thirst, know what it means to come to Christ in deep and quiet trust.

We cannot live without God because we were built to enjoy what only He provides.

Our longings are therefore at the very center of our dependency. People who stay away from their hurt tend to keep Christ at arm's length. Those who simply dwell on the pain without seeking God's help and comfort will eventually be consumed with their pain. People who embrace their hurt with a sense of God's plan are able to pursue God more passionately. Only heaven offers complete satisfaction.

Learning how to acknowledge the void or emptiness could be organized into three suggestions:

1. Ask the tough questions that will identify the issue.
2. Acknowledge the areas that cause hurt and pain in the relationships involved.
3. Be willing to admit wrong motives and behavior.

Believing that any confusion over the issues of God should be avoided, leads to a forced, mechanical trust rather than to a real and vital confidence. It is easy to look for solutions to the problems, rather than simply trusting God through the problem. In every situation there is a way to respond that pleases God. Like the apostle Paul, the problem will not go away (the thorn in the flesh). We need to acknowledge that sometimes we need the struggle.

When the confusion comes it will either drive us away from the Lord; thinking that God has forgotten me, or we can cling to God; even though we do understand what is happening and wait on the Lord to show us His plan. There will always be some level of confusion that will never go away, and we must accept that fact. Tough faith never grows in a comfortable mind. Letting ourselves experience confusion; [admitting you do not understand why God has allowed the situation,] creates a mind that will be satisfied only by faith in God to work it out. At the very core of this faith is the knowledge of God's perfect love for me. While I may have many questions; I have the ultimate answer; God

will never leave me or forsake me. The love of God is critical for all of us to understand, because it drives everything in our lives. It is this same love of God that we are to duplicate and show to others.

Because of unmeant expectations by others we experience disappointment and hurt. When people do not treat me the way I think they should I get upset. It is the same with our relationship to God; we expect nothing but good times and happiness. The mature Christian does not make demands on God, but simply trust Him to work all things to His glory and our good. This same attitude should be present with other people; we need the ability to love people as they are, not as we wish them to be.

From time to time we may have a mountain top decision to follow the Lord and we get very excited, but this often fades in the daily routine of life. The outward conformity to Biblical principles is good, but an inward change of heart is essential. The danger involves looking only at outward acts of sin and ignoring the sins of the heart. God's command to his disciples was clear, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself." It is this command to love that creates the problem within us. The sins against relationships are overlooked on a consistent basis. Because relationships have the most potential for pain our commitment to self-protection is seen in the ways we approach people. Everyone develops a style of relating designed to avoid the experience of deep personal pain-and that is the sin of self-protection. All of us project either self-protection or love, mostly self-protection.

When our priority is to play it safe, love is left out. Demanding from others what we are not willing to give ourselves creates anger and resentment. God wants us to trust His love enough to freely love others, not to protect our longings from further injury. To change our heart requires that we repent of our self-protective attitude.

Paying close attention to how a person makes you feel will give an indication of their protection mode. Everyone has a mode of protection. In a counseling session the counselor will get a certain feeling, which will indicate what type of protective screen is being used. This approach can be very helpful in understanding what needs to be addressed. When people deny their void, they cannot recognize the what really is at the core of their problems. But when the void is acknowledged and self-protection is unmasked, then their trust in Christ can be the result. The mark of maturity is love, and the essence of love is relating without self-protection. But living without self-protection requires profound trust in Christ. We cling desperately to our acts of protection.

The tendency to demand, both from God and others, is a source of much of man's problems. Struggling with a problem produces a sense of commitment, and others may even sympathize with your struggle. Sin on the other hand makes us feel in need of cleansing. Many people attempt to deal with their problems and void by changing the outward behavior. In reality an inner search for the root cause is necessary.

When other people hurt us, we tend to struggle with the pain that follows. We cannot excuse our sinful responses to others on grounds of their mistreatment of us. We are responsible for what we do. We are strugglers and sinners, victims and agents, people who hurt and people who harm. When we decide it's time to get serious about our responsibility to pursue God, we come back to the issue of obedience. We must understand that God is opposed to a demanding attitude on the part of His creatures no matter how severe their suffering.

Job is a good example of one who sought an audience with God to plead his case. When God responded to Job, he was unable to justify himself. Even in the midst of our deepest pain God is still God, and we are still His creation. God will respond to the hurt in

our soul and our desire for relief, but He is unmoved by our demands. The person who concedes that God may not do for him what seems so right is farther along in his understanding of God than one who simply expects God to make everything the way he wants.

Taking a look at ourselves and realizing that we are the ones who need to change and not God is a first step. A demand for God to change is a challenge to His character, righteousness, and holiness. God asked Job, “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (Job 40:8).

Doing good things does not automatically turn us into good people. The deceitful character of our heart helps us believe that things are better than they really are. Very often we compromise an opportunity to love in order to stay safe? Trying to stay safe will force us to hold back from giving to others. To demand anything, including what we believe is essential to our well-being, reflects arrogant pride, a sin that tops the list of what God detests.

Disciplined people won't recognize their protective rigidity without help. Analytic types will fail to see that their cool logic, far from being admired, discourages those who would like to be close friends. Successful extroverts may go through life thinking everyone enjoys their social activity. Shy people may continue to regard themselves as quiet because of their temperament and never see that their quietness is a protective cloak.

We tend to focus on the wrong things. When things are going well we tend to drift away from God. We rarely listen to God's conviction concerning how we treat other people when we are on a roll.

It is possible to spend years studying the word of God and make no progress. Or we can become so intense about the word of truth that it separates us from people, sitting

in our study, doors closed, studying the word of God, but never touching the people of God. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (I Cor. 8:1). Biblical scholarship may be more important than impressions but it’s worth nothing if it doesn’t lead to personal contact. I need to see myself the way I really am. The body of Christ will give a good indication of where I am in the body. Giving and receiving feedback in a proper manner is essential.

Christians have only two options when it comes to forming relationships: either remain comfortably distant from the struggles and sinfulness in one another or open up and deal with the results. However; looking at lives honestly has the potential to divide and destroy, but there is also the power to bless. Honest sharing is not the final goal. Love is the goal. Good fellowship is characterized by support and kindness, not confrontation.

Sometimes the reality of human suffering is just too much. Something is really wrong with everything. An honest look at life will uncover problems everywhere. People refuse to deal with their sin. Self-protection is a category of sin people never consider. Most people never see how ugly it is to not love. When we face how deeply disappointed we are with our relationships, it then becomes possible to recognize the ugliness of what before seemed reasonable. No one is ever fully changed in this life. Identifying problem areas involves looking at problems in our world, pain in our heart, and sin in our behavior. There is another critical issue and that is sin in our heart.

Real change is available now; it’s just not the kind of change we want. We insist that the real change heaven will bring (an end to all pain) be ours today. That insistence is the problem we must overcome if the real change that’s possible now is to come.

The gospel’s power today lies in its resources to help us overcome a demanding spirit and to replace it with trust as we await the full revelation of its power. It is possible to fix

our attention on wonderful things about God in order to ignore terrible things about ourselves. Without repentance, a look at Christ provides only the illusion of comfort.

Every effort to change must involve at its core a shift in direction away from dependence on one's own resources for life to dependence on God. We will genuinely love only as we deal with the sin in our heart. Life is found by making no effort to keep it. "The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them" (Hosea 14:9). Repentance is neither a complete cure nor an easy one.

Spiritual depth frees us to be spontaneous in the midst of sadness. We must know what it means to be let down and see how we can protect ourselves from further disappointment.

Until we grasp how deeply we long for what we do not have, our enjoyment of life's pleasures is limited. We will depend on them to obscure the emptiness of our soul. The illusion that life in a fallen world is really not too bad must be changed. When we are on the brink of personal collapse we can begin to move the direction of our soul from self-protection to trusting love.

Repentance means to accept the truth that life without God is no life at all and to therefore pursue God with all the passion of someone who has been rescued from unimaginable horror.

When we realize life cannot give us what we want, we can better give up our foolish demand that it does so and get on with the noble task of loving as we should. The realization that every moment consists of a moral choice to look after self or to put others first is staggering. Real change is possible if we are willing to search deep within our hearts for the real issues of life.