THE TRUE “WAR ZONE” OF THE COVENANTS

While we have noted some significant differences between the old and new covenants (the different rituals involved, and so on), we have also seen that at the most fundamental levels they share the same spiritually defining DNA and gospel of Christ. In fact, God’s historical covenants wage war as allies against the enemy of souls through their presentation of “the gospel of Christ.”

This week’s passage, Romans 8:1–17, focuses on the internal “war zone” of the covenants.

Satan cannot change the gospel. It is an objective reality. The covenants speak with one voice affirming them. What Satan can, and does do, is attempt to keep people away from the gospel, to blind them to God’s covenantal love for them and His promises to redeem them from the pit (cf. Ps. 103:4). He can seek to turn them away from the gospel when they do hear it, luring them to reject it outright or, alternately, lure them to “accept” it and relate to it aberrantly, thinking they are safe when they are not.

The true battle of the covenants is not between God’s historical covenants but is experiential and relational. God will force no one to accept Him or His love for them. His love draws and woos us, but does not strong-arm into submission. Despite Satan’s efforts everyone will hear the gospel in one form or another (John 1:9). And everyone will respond—either with an old covenant experience (rejection, legalism), or with a new covenant experience (faith and the obedience spawned by faith). The Bible describes it as a war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit.”

Welcome to the true “war zone” of the covenants.
Write out Romans 8:1–17 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Romans 8:4–14. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
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Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you

Draw Arrows to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases

What special insights do your marks seem overall to point to?

Memorize your favorite verse in Romans 8:1–17. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

The chart presents major New Testament contrasts of the "flesh" versus "Spirit." Dwell on each horizontal contrast individually, and then on each of the two vertical columns. Note the contrasts.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/cov05-3

THE NATURE OF THE “WAR”

In the New Testament, the terms flesh (Greek, sarx) and spirit (Greek, pneuma) are used in a variety of ways. “Flesh” may refer to the body (Acts 2:26) or people (Matt. 24:22); “spirit,” to the superstition of “ghosts” (Luke 24:39), one’s spiritual commitment (Mark 14:38), or to evil spirits, but most often to the Holy Spirit and the lives of those influenced by Him.

But, with rare exception, whenever “the flesh” and “the Spirit” are used together in the same context, they refer to starkly opposite inclinations, mindsets, and lifestyles leading to diametrically opposite destinies. In these contexts, “the flesh” and “the Spirit” are mortal enemies at war with each other. While this holds true throughout the New Testament, the densest description of this conflict occurs in this lesson's inSpect passage, Romans 8:4–14 (see this week’s chart).

Jesus’ statement in John 3:6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” refers to our natural birth in the spiritual pit we have alluded to in previous lessons, with no hope for the future beyond this life. His reference to “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” refers to the new birth and conversion which occurs when we respond to the gospel in faith and a desire to have His law written on our hearts, to have our character brought into alignment with His character of love, forgiveness, and grace.

The references in Romans 8:4–14 present “the flesh” as a life completely out of harmony with God, “not subject to God’s law,” mind fixated on whatever the flesh desires, jogging down the road to eternal death. By contrast, it presents “the Spirit” as a life at “peace” with God, mind set on what the Spirit desires, and destined for eternal life.

The references from Galatians 3:2–6 and 5:19–24 reveal the two primary ways that “the flesh” expresses itself: the one overtly irreligious (an anything-goes, no-one-is-going-to-tell-me-what-to-do attitude); the other, surprisingly, religious, at least outwardly (avoiding the overtly "bad" things), but with an unspiritual heart inwardly (does not hunger and thirst for more of God and His righteousness; is not alert to opportunities to encourage and bless those within their circle of influence). “The Spirit,” by contrast, represents a life of “faith” and “the fruit of the Spirit,” characteristics manifested in Jesus’ life and increasingly evident in the life of one who is being sanctified by the Holy Spirit as He writes God’s law on their hearts.

The biblical teaching on the covenant(s) cannot be rightly decoded until this war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” is understood. We are both targets and players in this war, whether we choose to be or not. (Scan the QR code for the graphic.)
The “War Zone” Gets Personal

The spiritual conflict that the New Testament designates as the war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” began in heaven eons ago with Lucifer’s rebellion. Adam’s fall created the pit into which his descendants were born, with sinful natures inclined away from God, away from “the Spirit,” and toward “the flesh.” This is the battleground of the covenants. The cosmic conflict between the two great powers of good and evil in the universe—Jesus Christ and Satan—is focused like a laser on every human heart: the one fights to enslave us to “the flesh”; the other, to set us free in “the Spirit.” Whether we spend much time thinking about “religion” or not, we will feel those two great powers striving within us. The one is pushing and pulling us toward eternal destruction; the other, loving and wooing us toward an eternal inheritance to which we were destined from the beginning. We are not merely students studying about this war; we are participants in it. We are not only being fought over; we are also soldiers in this war, fighting for one side against the other.

The war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” for the hearts and souls of humanity is trans-generational, crossing dispensational (Old and New Testament) lines, with the stakes equally high on both sides. Even though the war is not described as “flesh” versus “Spirit” until the New Testament era, the story of Cain and Abel attests to the existence and effects of this war from the fall of Adam to this very day. The first gospel promise, made in Jesus’ first post-fall covenant with fallen man (Gen. 3:15), assured Adam and his descendants that a seed of the woman would one day win the war on humanity’s behalf, though He would be wounded in the process. But, while the battle has been won historically and cosmically, it still rages in every human heart.

The war of the covenants is not between the historical covenants; they are all gospel partners allied against the powers of hell that are seeking “to steal, and to kill, and to destroy” (John 10:10) (note Lesson 1’s chart). The war of the covenants focuses on how people respond to the gospel presented and the appeal made in the historical covenant(s)—“the flesh” designating an old covenant experience destined to death, “the Spirit” designating a new covenant experience destined to life (note lesson 2’s second chart). “The flesh” and “the Spirit” are not terms that apply to God’s historical covenants, but only to the experiential responses made to those covenants. It is hard to overestimate how important this concept is to understanding the New Testament’s teaching on the old and new covenants. To miss this point is to miss the evangelistic appeal in the covenant(s) entirely. The evangelistic appeal of God’s covenant(s) has been practically silenced due to centuries of theological misinterpretation of the New Testament’s teaching on the old and new covenants.

In the next six lessons we will be doing some serious analytical work to put this understanding of the covenants to the test. It will be vitally important during this intense investigation not to miss the forest for the trees, so to speak. As we analyze six critical, often misunderstood and misapplied New Testament passages, be asking yourself, What does this passage we are studying in this lesson teach me about what it means to respond to the gospel so as to avoid an old covenant experience that results in death, and to gain a new covenant experience that results in a life of purpose now and eternal life ultimately? How does this passage help me to that end?
Review your memorized verse from Romans 8:1–17.

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

John 3:3–6  
Galatians 3:2–6; 5:19–24  
Hebrews 2:14–18; 4:14–16  
2 Corinthians 5:20–21  
Romans 5:20

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Romans 8:1–17?
JESUS IN THE “WAR ZONE”

While we may never fully understand the relation of Jesus’ human and divine natures and how His substitutionary death on our behalf works in the divine economy, Scripture makes numerous avowals about Him and His ministry that we affirm. Adam was created in the image and likeness of God with a nature naturally bent toward God—naturally unselfish, loving, treating others as he would want to be treated. After his fall, his descendants were born in the pit, with natures bent away from God and toward the desires of “the flesh,” with all of the attendant liabilities enumerated in Romans 3:10–19. We must be “born again,” converted, and enabled by a power outside ourselves in order to live a life in “the Spirit,” reflecting the image and likeness of God and making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Jesus was born in the pit, “in all things . . . made like His brethren” (Heb. 2:17), “in all points tempted as we are” (4:15), fully immersed in the “war zone” of “the flesh” and “the Spirit,” fully experiencing their push and pull on His sensitive heart. Yet, being “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3), He never had to be converted, and He lived “without sin” from the cradle to the grave. “He . . . who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (Heb. 4:15; cf. 2 Cor. 5:20, 21). Thus, Jesus, by His sinless life and sacrificial death, “condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3, 4).

When Jesus came to earth as Yahweh incarnate, He did not isolate Himself from the war zone, did not insulate Himself from the exhausting battle between “the flesh” and “the Spirit”; He fully engaged it. Nor did He come clad as Yahweh but clothed with full humanity, that He might “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15). It is not just intellectually but also experientially that “He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). “Let us therefore,” when we find the war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” exhausting, “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). He is there on that throne, inviting us to come to Him. He has no condemnation but only sympathy in His heart, “for in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

Jesus has made an enormous investment in you; He is totally committed to protecting His investment. Whenever you are struggling spiritually in the war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit,” He feels it as if it were happening to Him again. You are ever on His mind. His revelation that “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Rom. 5:20) is His assurance that He has stacked the deck in your behalf. If you do not resist His constant efforts to draw you deeper in and higher up, you will not only be saved but will be enlisted as one of His soldiers to be engaged in important missions to assist others who need someone to come alongside them in their struggle. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

This is the message of His covenant(s) and the response they elicit!
NOT TO BE DISCOURAGED

“Where there is not only a belief in God’s word, but a submission of the will to Him; where the heart is yielded to Him, the affections fixed upon Him, there is faith—faith that works by love and purifies the soul. Through this faith the heart is renewed in the image of God. And the heart that in its unregenerate state is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be, now delights in its holy precepts, exclaiming with the psalmist, ‘O how love I Thy law! it is my meditation all the day.’ Psalm 119:97. And the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, ‘who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.’ Romans 8:1[, 4].

“There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Said the beloved John, ‘These things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’ 1 John 2:1. And do not forget the words of Christ, ‘The Father Himself loveth you.’ John 16:27. He desires to restore you to Himself, to see His own purity and holiness reflected in you. And if you will but yield yourself to Him, He that hath begun a good work in you will carry it forward to the day of Jesus Christ. Pray more fervently; believe more fully. As we come to distrust our own power, let us trust the power of our Redeemer, and we shall praise Him who is the health of our countenance.

“The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan’s delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you.

“No deep-seated love for Jesus can dwell in the heart that does not realize its own sinfulness. The soul that is transformed by the grace of Christ will admire His divine character; but if we do not see our own moral deformity, it is unmistakable evidence that we have not had a view of the beauty and excellence of Christ.

“The less we see to esteem in ourselves, the more we shall see to esteem in the infinite purity and loveliness of our Saviour. A view of our sinfulness drives us to Him who can pardon; and when the soul, realizing its helplessness, reaches out after Christ, He will reveal Himself in power. The more our sense of need drives us to Him and to the word of God, the more exalted views we shall have of His character, and the more fully we shall reflect His image.”

(Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 63–65.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How have both the old and new covenants been allies in your life against the enemy of souls?

Explain further the two primary ways that the flesh expresses itself.

Which of the two has been tangible in your life?

How has this study on covenants affected your response to God?

How did this war zone manifest itself in the life of Christ?

Why is it crucial to understand the complementarity of the two covenants?

How does this impact your personal spiritual walk and development?

Share an experience in which the Spirit won over the flesh. If you haven’t had this type of experience, why not?

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