

# Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith

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## **Introduction**

In the essay “When an Immunization Becomes Fatal” I warned against the danger of viewing salvation as an event which, once experienced, guarantees a person a place in heaven even if that person later loses his faith in Christ. I argued instead, in keeping with the biblical data, that saving faith is *persevering* faith. The following are just two of the passages that I considered:

### **Colossians 1:21-23**

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard . . .

### **Hebrews 3:6, 14**

Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. . . . 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end . . .

These biblical exhortations to persevere in faith raise an important practical question:

How can I as a believer avoid the danger of apostasy? That is, how can I ensure that I “hold fast” and “continue” in my faith?

Simply by taking up this question I am revealing myself to be an Arminian, for to suggest that there is a danger of apostasy implies that it really can happen that someone who was once a genuine believer in Christ can later forsake his faith and, by doing so, lose his standing of salvation. Though I believe that the biblical evidence for this position is compelling, it is not my purpose in this essay to defend Arminianism. (That is a much larger project for a later date; for now I simply point the interested reader to Robert Shank’s two volumes *Life in the Son* and *Elect in the Son*, published by Bethany House. Though Shank’s presentation is not always as well organized as I would like, his analysis of the biblical text is objective and convincing.) My goal for this essay is instead to explore a bit what are the *means* by which someone might move from

a position of faith to apostasy. The point of this inquiry is, of course, to equip us to better guard against such apostasy, as we are exhorted to do in the above passages.

### **Biblical Evidence that Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith**

As I mentioned in the separate essay “Can Arminians Have Assurance of Salvation?”, the Bible mentions at least two main avenues to loss of faith (cf. 1 Timothy 4:16). The first way involves being seduced by and following after false teaching (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:1; Galatians 5:2f). The second way is the one that I want to focus on in the remainder of this essay, namely, being gradually hardened to faith in one’s heart by the effect of repeated, *deliberate sin* (Heb 3:13; 10:26; see discussion below).

I have chosen the word “deliberate” here carefully, for my intention (and I believe the Bible’s intention) is to include in this category those sins which (as the American Heritage Dictionary defines the word “deliberate”) are “done with or marked by full consciousness of [their] nature and effects . . . [and are] marked by careful consideration.” These are premeditated, intentional violations of our allegiance to Christ, perhaps best exemplified by the “deeds of the flesh” listed in Galatians 5:19-21. I do not include in this category less intentional sins (e.g., timidity in one’s witness for Christ), or the great body of sins (many sins of omission) that arise from what we might call an immature or imperfect character (e.g., not loving my neighbor enough, not worshiping God enough, not trusting God enough for future provisions). These less deliberate sins are, of course, still *sins*, and as such are equally an affront to God’s holiness. My point here, though, is that it is the more premeditated, deliberate sins that have the clearest eroding effect on one’s conscious faith-allegiance to Christ. [SEE ENDNOTE 1]

With these preliminary thoughts in mind, consider the following warnings to believers:

#### **Hebrews 10:26-31**

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

#### **Hebrews 3:12-4:1**

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; 15 while it is said, “Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your

hearts, as when they provoked Me.” 16 For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. 4:1 Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it.

In each of these passages, we are warned against the potentially catastrophic effects of ongoing deliberate sin in the life of the believer. Consider first Hebrews 10:26-31. In this passage we are warned against the danger of continuing to sin “willfully,” a term which draws on the Old Testament distinction between intentional (sometimes termed “presumptuous”) and unintentional sins. Sacrifices were unavailable under the Mosaic covenant to atone for defiant, intentional sins:

**Numbers 15:27-31**

27 ‘Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. 28 ‘And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. 29 ‘You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. 30 ‘But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. 31 ‘Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be on him.’”

The penalty mentioned here of being “cut off from among his people” has been argued by some commentators to refer not simply to excommunication but to death (see F. Duane Lindsay’s comments on Lev 20 in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*). Whether or not this is clearly so, the death penalty is explicitly mandated in the Old Testament for a number of serious intentional sins including kidnapping (Ex 21:16; Deut 24:7), adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), homosexuality (Lev 20:13), and persistent, stubborn resistance to authority (Deut 17:12; 21:18-21). The law of multiple witnesses mentioned in Heb 10:28 above is explicitly set forth as a prerequisite for executing the death penalty in the cases of idolatry (Deut 17:2-7; see also Deut 13:6-11) and premeditated murder (Num 35:30), though the multiple witness requirement seems to be applied more generally as well (even to cases not involving the death penalty) in Deut 19:15-21.

The main observation to be made from these facts is that the most deliberate, intentional sins were treated with the greatest severity under the Mosaic covenant, to the point (in many cases, at least) of not only physical death but spiritual death as well; that is, exclusion from continued participation in the covenant. The point being made in Hebrews 10:26-31 is that if deliberate, willful sin carried such a severe penalty under the Mosaic covenant, then “how much severer punishment” (vs. 29) should we expect such persistent, willful sin to carry under the greater New Covenant based on Christ’s blood. The answer which arises from an unbiased reading of

Hebrews is, I believe, that the one who breaks the New Covenant in this way is likewise cut off from any participation in that covenant.

At this point some may raise the objection that the above conclusion cannot be correct because it appears to promote a form of works salvation (i.e., the idea that one earns the right to continue participating in the covenant by being morally “good enough,” in this case by not committing too many serious, deliberate sins). Indeed, I think that this objection would be on target if the above conclusion entailed that participation in the New Covenant is conditioned directly on one’s commission of deliberate, willful sins. A broader reading of the New Testament data, however, suggests that the sole proper condition of participation in the New Covenant (i.e., being “in Christ”) is *faith*, or what I have elsewhere termed *allegiance* or *loyalty* to Christ (see my separate essay on “Allegiance”). It seems to me that Heb 10:26-31 as well can be read in this sense. Notice the descriptions of one who persists in willful sin as having “*trampled under foot* the Son of God,” as having “*regarded* as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified,” and as having “*insulted* the Spirit of grace” (vs. 29), with the result that he has rejected the only available “sacrifice for sins” (vs. 26). The verbs used here suggest that the ultimate outcome of persistent, willful sin is a direct, even conscious repudiation of Christ as the object of one’s faith. In keeping with the broader teaching of the New Testament, we may then conclude that the commission of willful sin is not *itself* the direct cause of one’s removal from participation in the covenant. Rather, the commission of willful sin has an important derivative effect or consequence--the erosion of one’s faith in and loyalty to Christ--and it is this derivative effect (i.e., the loss of faith) that when allowed to continue unimpeded ultimately endangers one’s standing of salvation.

This interpretation, that deliberate sin erodes faith (faith being the sole condition of salvation), is reinforced by the other main passage cited earlier, Heb 3:12-4:1, which I repeat here for ease of reference:

### **Hebrews 3:12-4:1**

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; 15 while it is said, “Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.” 16 For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. 4:1 Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it.

As in Heb 10:26-31, the writer draws a parallel here in Heb 3:12-4:1 to the Old Testament, this time regarding the Jews’ passage into the promised land (God’s “rest”). The writer’s main point is that we too risk failing to “enter God’s rest” if we like the Jewish pilgrims “provoke” God (vs.

16) through sin and disobedience (vss. 17, 18). Again, this may seem to smack of works salvation until we notice that both in vs. 19 (in the case of the Mosaic Jews) and in vss. 12-14 (in the case of those in the Christian era) the stated direct cause of not entering God's rest is *unbelief*. That is, it is not deliberate sin *per se* that bars one from participation in the covenant; rather, it is what the pursuit of deliberate sin *leads to*, namely, unbelief. This is why the writer warns against being "*hardened* by the deceitfulness of sin" (vs. 13). Willing submission to deliberate sin hardens our hearts to faith. This is what I referred to earlier as the erosion of faith.

That this erosion or hardening is a gradual process (rather than a sudden result of one or a few deliberate sins) is suggested by the writer's exhortation in vss. 12-13 for us to "*take care . . . [to] encourage one another day after day.*" This call for diligence in the body of Christ implies that such diligence is needed to detect the hardening effect of deliberate sin in its early stages, before it leads to manifest unbelief. The danger is that a member of the fellowship of Christ might slowly "fall away" (vs. 12) in a way not immediately noticed by his fellow believers. We are thus exhorted to "take care" (vs. 12) that this not happen, and exercise mutual encouragement so as to guard against even the initial steps toward a hardened heart in ourselves and others.

The relationship between deliberate sin and unbelief is seen as well in the following two passages from 1 Timothy:

#### **1 Timothy 1:18-20**

This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may fight the good fight, 19 keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. 20 Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.

#### **1 Timothy 6:9-12**

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. 11 But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

In both of these passages Paul exhorts Timothy to "fight the good fight" in order to persevere in faith and not "wander away from" or "suffer shipwreck" in regard to faith (6:10; 1:19). What would cause someone to thus abandon their faith in Christ? Paul provides a similar answer in both passages. In 1:19 it is the *rejection of a good conscience* (apparently involving to some extent the commission of blasphemy; vs. 20) that leads to a loss of faith, as demonstrated by Hymenaeus and Alexander. In 6:10 it is *the love of and longing for money* that leads one away from faith. Both of these (i.e., the rejection of a good conscience and the love of money) I take to be forms of persistent, deliberate sin which violate the believer's loyalty to Christ. To reject a good conscience (1:19) is by definition a deliberate act in which one acts contrary to what he

consciously knows to be the dictates of his conscience. In all likelihood, Paul is using the phrase here to indicate an entire series of related deliberate choices to sin in one or more areas over a period of time, as for example in the case of the “liars” he mentioned in 4:2, who as a result of their persistent sin had been “seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.” (Consider also the “gossips and busybodies” of 5:14, some of whom had “already turned aside to follow Satan.” (5:15)) Indeed, it may be that Hymenaeus and Alexander were two examples Paul had in mind of those who did “not agree with sound words” and rejected a “doctrine conforming to godliness” (6:3), having pursued faith as a means to material gain for themselves and thus falling prey to the love of money (6:5, 9-10). Whatever the precise nature of Hymenaeus’ and Alexander’s sin, it is clear that both in their case as well as in the case of those who pursue the love of money (the former perhaps being an instance of the latter), there was (is) involved the willful, persistent pursuit of sin. Thus, I conclude that the two passages from 1 Timothy cited above both support the conclusion reached earlier; namely, that persistent, deliberate sin works to erode one’s faith in Christ and can, if unchecked, lead to a complete loss of faith, with catastrophic results.

### **The Deceitfulness of Sin**

Having argued that deliberate sin erodes faith, there are two remaining questions that I would like to address below. First, admitting that the Bible draws this connection between deliberate sin and unbelief, *why* should this connection hold? That is, what is it about the nature of deliberate sin that enables it to have this effect on one’s faith? Second (and this question is closely related to the previous one), *how* does deliberate sin have its effect on faith? That is, what are the mechanisms by which faith is incrementally destroyed by the unchecked pursuit of deliberate sin?

Beginning with the first question, I think the key to understanding the connection between deliberate sin and unbelief is found in the phrase “deceitfulness of sin” in Heb 3:13:

#### **Hebrews 3:13**

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

A similar phrasing is used by Paul in Eph 4:22, where he refers to fleshly passions as the “lusts of deceit”:

#### **Ephesians 4:20-22**

20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit . . .

Both of these phrases, the “deceitfulness of sin” and the “lusts of deceit,” highlight the fact that sin (and especially premeditated, intentional sin) is rooted in the acceptance of a lie, or actually a

set of closely related lies. It is on the basis of these lies that sin presents itself to us as attractive, justifiable, even compelling. These lies include the following:

This sin is *necessary*.

This sin is *not fatal*.

This sin is *inevitable*.

I will discuss each of these lies in more detail below. The crucial point to first be grasped here is that sin always justifies itself on the basis these or similar lies, and it is precisely for this reason that deliberate sin is so destructive to faith, for faith is in its essential nature *an affirmation of truth*. When I exercise faith in Christ, I embrace the truths about Christ revealed in scripture, and yield my loyalty to the Person to whom these truths apply. At the most fundamental level, faith in Christ involves a trust in the truthfulness of Christ, and in the truthfulness of God's witness concerning Christ. In exercising faith we are taking God at his word. We are thus called to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).

When I commit premeditated, deliberate sin, however, I have bought into the lies that undergird sin, and I have thereby to some extent undermined my faith in and loyalty to Christ. The choice to willfully sin is motivated by the desire to *walk by sight* instead of by faith, to experience some tangible feeling of independence, power, passion, or other similar delusion, rather than forego such things for the faith-walk of trust in Christ. How this happens will become clearer as we consider in more detail each of the three above-mentioned lies that undergird sin. In so doing we begin to address the question of *how* deliberate sin erodes faith.

Consider again the lies by which sin attempts to justify itself:

1. *This sin is necessary.*

When I willfully sin in violation of the known will of God and in violation of my loyalty to Christ, I am in essence saying that I have needs which can only be met through the experience of this sin, and which God has failed (or is unable) to meet through my relationship to Christ. My decision to do what God has said not to do implies that I gain something *necessary* through committing this sin that I cannot gain in any other way. This is, of course, a direct slap in the face of faith, for faith affirms that Christ can be trusted to be my sufficiency, my all in all, in every area of life. Similarly, allegiance to Christ affirms that the highest value in life is to love, obey, and serve Christ.

2. *This sin is not fatal.*

Sometimes this second lie is wedded to legitimate theological truths such as that forgiveness is available after one has sinned, or that believers are secure in Christ. However, these appeals overlook the fact that each temptation to deliberately sin is part of a larger, calculated effort by the enemy of our souls to erode and ultimately destroy the believer's faith, in which case the "believer" will no longer be a "believer" and hence will no longer retain the security of being in Christ (i.e., given that salvation is conditioned on perseverance in faith; see my separate essay

“When an Immunization Becomes Fatal”). [SEE ENDNOTE 2] When viewed from this perspective, each deliberate sin does have deadly potential to contribute to an overall erosion of faith.

As a personal aside here, there was a point in my own Christian life when I would have inwardly scoffed at the idea that any intentional sin, or even a lengthy series of intentional sins, could have any serious corrosive effect on my faith in Christ. But in the years since that time I have, through the indulgence of deliberate sin in my life and the failure to diligently and consistently “fight the good fight” of faith, come to the brink of abandoning my faith in Christ on two significant occasions. (I am not proud of this fact; I would much rather be able to say that I have consistently set my face toward Christ the whole of my Christian life, as some others are able to say, to the glory of God.) At those critical times I faced a choice, to continue to entertain the lies by which I justified my sin to myself, or to repudiate the lies and the sin, and forcefully renew my allegiance to Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. I thank God for his incredible patience to allow me to still repent at those times. “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12).

### *3. This sin is inevitable.*

This is perhaps the most compelling of the three lies considered here. When one has allowed oneself to become trapped in a cycle of deliberate sin (as is the case, for example, with most or all addictive behaviors), this lie that the sin is inevitable comes to look very, very *true*. And yet, God’s Word promises that the believer has at all times the ability to withstand temptation and be free from the slavery of sin. Immediately after Paul presented the warning in 1 Cor 10:12 cited above, he gave the following assurance:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:13)

In his epistle to the Romans Paul deals with this question in detail, arguing that the believer, who has died and been raised together with Christ, need no longer be under the mastery of sin:

#### **Romans 6:11-14**

11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, 13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.

The power to live out this freedom comes from the Holy Spirit within the believer, as Paul makes clear in chapter eight:

#### **Romans 8:12-13**

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

This is another perspective from which to view the “good fight” of faith about which Paul exhorted Timothy (see my comments on 1 Timothy above). The believer’s “fight” to persevere in an active, worshipful, submissive faith includes a daily “putting to death,” *by the power of the indwelling Spirit*, any and all temptations to pursue deliberate sins that would erode the vitality of one’s faith in Christ. The first step in this fight is for me to recognize as a *lie* the claim being pressed upon my mind at the moment of temptation that the deliberate sin in question is inevitable (or else necessary, or not fatal), and to affirm the *truths* expressed in Rom 6:11-14 and Romans 8:12-13 above. To this end, I have often found it helpful when being tempted to willfully sin to immediately respond with an affirmation of faith along the following lines:

I have within me a *Spirit-enabled* ability to *refuse* this sin and be *free*.

This is no magic formula, of course, but stating it (often aloud) in faith has many times jarred my mind out from under the spell of temptation long enough to bring me back into the light of truth:

that I belong to Jesus now and have no place participating in the deeds of the kingdom of darkness;

that as attractive and as compelling as this sin may appear at the moment, its power is based on the mere vapor of a lie which need no longer have any authority over me;

that the Spirit of God within me desires my sanctification, and that He can, with my cooperation, enable me to not only seek but attain to this holiness, to the glory of the true and living God.

### **A Passion for Christ**

Because deliberate, premeditated sin is an attack on one’s faith in and allegiance to Christ, I believe that the best way to combat it and its destructive effect is to pursue a passionate, zealous love for Christ. Loyalty to Christ will be unassailable where love for Christ abounds. It is when our love for Christ begins to lessen in its intensity that we become most susceptible to temptations to indulge in deliberate sin.

The intensity of our love for Christ is, in turn, largely dependent on the degree to which we by faith perceive the beauty, holiness, and love of Christ--in short, the degree to which we perceive that He is profoundly *worthy* of our absolute love and allegiance. Consequently, we tend to most readily tolerate deliberate sin when we begin to lose sight of the reality of the holiness and love of God.

There are no purely mechanical means by which one may maintain the fervency of his love for Christ. The traditional “means of grace,” including prayer, Bible study, worship, and participation in the body-life of the church, are all necessary but not sufficient conditions for ensuring a passion for Christ. All of these can become merely dry forms if seen as ends in themselves. The passion for Christ itself must arise not externally but internally, as the believer continues daily to freshly encounter the living God and responds with ever-renewed faith. Having said this, the means of grace when properly employed can be the vehicles for such an ongoing encounter with God. We interact with the living God in prayer, constantly rediscover His glory through studying His Word, celebrate His worth in worship, and see His life displayed in the fellowship of His Body.

Perhaps as you have read this essay you have admitted to yourself that you are nurturing a seed of rebellion in your own life, a flirtation with deliberate, defiant sin against the Lord Christ. Or perhaps this seed of rebellion has long since grown into a full-blown addiction to one or another of the common delusions of the flesh. If you are in this position (I have been there before myself) and wish to renew the integrity of your loyalty to Christ, I can think of no better passage of scripture than King David’s Psalm 51 to which you might turn as a guide to repentance. Unlike some counselors today who too quickly offer false reassurances to believers on the brink of abandoning their faith for the pursuit of willful sin, David clearly recognized the potentially catastrophic effect of his deliberate sins (which included adultery, murder, and a series of lies and cover-ups). Consider David’s words:

**Psalm 51:10-12**

- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit.

In the midst of his repentance, David pleaded with God not to remove David from His divine presence (“do not cast me away”), nor for God to withdraw Himself from David’s presence (“do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me”). David realized that his pursuit of intentional sin had so mocked the integrity of his faith that it endangered his very relationship to God. David also understood that he could not by his own ability gain what he so desperately needed at that time: God’s forgiveness (“a clean heart”), and God’s restorative work in his spirit (“a steadfast spirit,” “a willing spirit”). Only God could perform this work in David’s heart.

Finally, notice one other important thing David had lost through his commission of willful sin: the “joy of God’s salvation.” In Psalm 32:3-4 we read of David’s condition prior to his repentance:

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away  
Through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;  
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

David had lost joy and found misery when in unbelief he withdrew the passion of his heart from God and substituted a lesser passion, the passion for a mere woman. He lost the joy that God provides when he chose to seek satisfaction through the fulfillment of his sensual desires rather than through God's salvation. It is a powerful testimony to God's patience and mercy that David's plea for restoration was answered by God, as can be the case with us in our day as well.

### **Summary and a Final Thought**

In this essay we have thus seen that:

- (1) the unchecked pursuit of deliberate sin erodes the integrity of one's faith in Christ,
- (2) deliberate sin has this power because it is based on lies that undermine faith's affirmation of truth, and
- (3) the best defense against temptations to deliberately sin is to pursue a passionate love for Christ.

My final thought is a reminder that our lives on this earth are too short to be squandered in ongoing struggles with deliberate, addictive sins. Each day of our lives is an opportunity to contribute our individual portions as members of Christ's body to His ongoing work in the world. The pursuit of addictive sins wastes so many irrecoverable hours that could have been used instead to serve Christ. As Paul said in Rom 6:13, we must each choose to whom we will present the members of our bodies, whether to sin as "instruments of unrighteousness" or to God as "instruments of righteousness." Let us then make the most of our time here on earth and be done with the folly of pursuing the "lusts of deceit." Let us "fight the good fight" of persevering faith as we pursue a passionate love for Christ.

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Some may object that deliberate sins are an inevitable part of the average Christian life, so that such sins could not possibly be posited to have the potentially deleterious effects for which I argue in this essay. To this I would make three responses.

First, as stated in the text, when I refer to "deliberate" sins I am referring to premeditated, conscious sins of commission such as the "fruit of the flesh" listed at various places in the New Testament. Though it is (sadly enough) true that even such sins as these are common (to varying degrees) in the experience of many believers, it is also true that there have historically been many believers who attest to the possibility of largely moving beyond the experience of daily deliberate sins of this sort. I believe that the Christian life envisioned as possible in the New Testament is for the believer to live consistently free of deliberate sin (as I have defined "deliberate sin" in this essay).

Second, I suspect that the general absence of this higher level of sanctification in our churches is due more to a lowered expectation among both the clergy and the laity than to any necessity in the nature of things. We have lowered expectations of what is possible in the area of Christian living because we do not or will not grasp the biblical truths of the genuine freedom available to us in Christ (John 8:32). (In the case of addictive behaviors, I do not mean that all of these can be easily solved; in some cases extensive counseling may be necessary before the believer will be able to adequately grasp and benefit from the freeing power of God's truth. Having said this, however, there is a danger that a person will too quickly assume that his situation is one of those that requires extensive assistance of this sort, when it may be that he simply needs to trust God in terms of the truths he already knows.)

Third, having granted the existence of many who claim to follow Christ and yet persist in ongoing deliberate sin, I suspect that some of these are in a more precarious position with God than their personal theology might allow them to realize. One need only read the words of Jesus regarding the qualifications for disciples (e.g., Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14:25-35) to conclude that Jesus' expectations do not necessarily match with the expectations of many today who wear the label "Christian." I do not say this out of a critical spirit or from any sense of superiority; rather, this conclusion seems to flow naturally from an objective look at the biblical data and our current situation in the church at large.

2. I believe that salvation is by grace, but that God's offer of grace is conditioned on the believer's continuance in a loyal faith in Christ. (See my separate essays on "Allegiance" and "Can Arminians Have Assurance of Salvation?"). The Scriptural teaching, it seems plain to me, is that *believers* have the full security of being "in Christ." *Unbelievers* (whether or not they have been believers in the past) do not have this security (see my essay "When an Immunization Becomes Fatal"). I see no contradiction in terms in saying (a) that *grace* may be *conditional*, so long as it is not conditioned on works of merit, nor (b) that salvation *conditioned on faith* is emphatically not what the Bible speaks of as *works salvation* (see the discussion of these points in my essay "Allegiance").

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