

Our Relentless War Against Sin

Scripture: Judges 3:1–3; Romans 7:24

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Have you ever wondered, “Why do I have to deal with sin at all? If God hates sin, if true Christians hate sin, and we’re all in agreement, then why must it remain?”

That’s not a bad question to ask. Why *would* a good God leave behind such a menacing enemy that corrupts your relationships, threatens your holiness, hinders your worship, and causes so much anguish in your life?

I’ve often wondered if the children of Israel entertained the same thoughts about their pagan neighbors—the Gentile nations who continually harassed them.

Remember their history? God empowered the Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua to enter Canaan, dispossess the inhabitants and seize control. Joshua was unstoppable. After the initial setback at Ai, Israel conquered nation after nation, killing the leaders, inhabiting the cities, and establishing control. It’s one of the most captivating portions of Old Testament history to read.

But when the dust settled and Joshua had grown old, a new generation of Israelites emerged to face a grim reality—the enemy was still alive. Scattered pockets of resistance still remained. Skirmishes ensued as the Canaanites sensed Israel’s battle fatigue.

Insurgents grow bold over time, and they want to take back what was once theirs.

And that’s exactly what happened to Israel. Those remaining nations harassed the children of Israel continually, forcing God’s people to cry out for fresh deliverance. And that’s the cycle of Judges.

Can you identify with Israel’s fatigue and frustration? Surely they too questioned God’s purpose for not completely removing the enemy from their new home. God anticipated their questions and provided some fascinating insight in the opening chapters of Judges:

Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly). Judges 3:1-3

Very interesting. God wanted to teach war to an inexperienced generation of Israelites. Why? Because it was important for them not only to *hear* of God’s power and deliverance, but to *experience* it for themselves. They needed to see God’s faithfulness—He was committed to their survival, He was always able to deliver, and He demonstrated His intention to preserve them. After all, experiencing God’s enabling power to conquer your enemies was better than, well, hearing about it from Grandpa Joshua.

Here's the point. God could have wiped out all traces of sin—effortlessly, just like he could have permanently wiped out the nations surrounding Israel. But He didn't do that for them, and He hasn't done it for us either—not yet. Full deliverance from sin's presence will come when we receive our glorified bodies. Then sin will no longer harass us. What a day that will be! But until then, God calls us to a relentless war against sin—a war with a divine purpose. But...what *are* those purposes?

First of all, we must remember that God does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). He works all things according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). We don't know the full extent of His sovereign will, and much of that remains secret (Deuteronomy 29:29). But we know this: in His wisdom, God has chosen *not* to remove fully the presence of sin from His redeemed.

A believer's struggle with indwelling sin somehow fits into God's overarching purpose to glorify Himself and conform believers into the image of His Son. Paul says:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.
Romans 8:28, 29

That's the most generic explanation you'll find in Scripture for the presence of evil in the world, including the evil that afflicts believers.

That said, I believe we can discern some reasons why God allows Christians to struggle with sins, some *divine purposes* for the war. Consider these possibilities:

(1) **To make us humble and dependent on God:** Whether you fail or succeed, have you noticed how your struggle against indwelling sin reveals your weakness and magnifies God's strength? Whatever the outcome of any particular battle, you can give thanks to God that He allows you to see yourself for what you really are—weak, prone to sin, and utterly dependent. At the same time, you can praise Him for who He proves to be—our all-sufficient Savior and Friend.

Consider Peter, who on the night of the Lord's betrayal boasted of his loyalty to Christ. Hours later he watched his self-confidence crumble as he denied Christ three times with oaths. Consider the failures, but resulting victory of many such men, and how they produced humble, courageous, Spirit-led servants of God.

(2) **To cultivate thankfulness:** Here's an instructive exercise. Reflect on some recent occasions you found to express thanks to God. Did any of those relate to your or another believer's ongoing struggle with sin? Maybe you thanked God for granting strength to face temptation, delivering you from a besetting sin, forgiving you for stumbling in a moment of weakness, or failing to share the gospel with a lost colleague.

(3) **To promote compassion:** You can relate to the lost, not only by remembering your former life of enslavement to sin (Ephesians 2:1-3), but also through experiencing present failures. When you face temptation, whether you resist and escape unscathed, or succumb through weakness, it should promote compassion toward others.

(4) **To keep your focus on the gospel:** What causes you to survey the cross each day and marvel at

the power of God's grace? Is it not the sin that clings so closely, the sin you find yourself confessing and forsaking each day? God wants to keep the cross fresh in our minds. He wants the gospel to occupy our thoughts. Think about it. We can hardly make it through a worship service without a wicked thought assaulting our minds. Even in the name of fellowship we often commit some of the most ghastly sins with our tongue. The presence of sin and our ongoing struggle keep us focused on the beauty of the gospel.

(5) **To make you long for heaven:** This world is not our home, and this body is not fit for eternity. When Paul lamented his unredeemed flesh (Romans 7:24), he was expressing a longing to be completely free from the presence of sin. He talked about that eagerness again and again throughout the New Testament. In Philippians 1:23, he said departing to be with Christ would be much better than remaining in his flesh. In chapter 3 he continued that thought: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory."

Paul longed for heaven because he grew weary of his struggle against sin. The seasons of victory he enjoyed on earth whetted his appetite for final, permanent victory in heaven.

Do you share Paul's longing to escape the flesh? Do you yearn for the Holy City, untouched by corruption? Our struggle against remaining sin helps point us to heaven, where true rest awaits us.

Well, those are just a few possibilities inferred from Scripture. Feel free to suggest others.

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