

“Step 5 - Flee Don't Fight” Romans 8:4-6

Alright. I've been born-again. I see the death in this sin and truly want to be free. God has shown me His call on my life and I hate the temptations that are trying to derail my service to Him. I realize these intruding thoughts don't originate in my heart, but what I am experiencing are impulses from my body and spiritual assaults from the enemy and the torment of living in a fallen world. Yet when these temptations come they are very real and I need more help than this. I need to know how to respond in the moment when they arrive. I need practical steps not just theory. What must I do in order to let the Holy Spirit deliver me when thoughts of fear, anger, lust, envy, depression, etc. burst into my consciousness.

There are undoubtedly many ways to handle mental temptations, but the one I will share with you today is a simple, practical step I have learned that extinguishes the temptations and troubling thoughts that seem to arrive in my conscious mind from nowhere. I have practiced this discipline for many years and it really works for me. It's likely you have heard me recommend it before, but it's impossible for me to talk about “steps to freedom” without including it. Numerous people have reported to me that they tried it and it has worked for them as well. My first exposure to this process began years ago when I heard a pastor (Tom Ferguson) describe how he responded to temptation. Then these verses in Romans (8:4-6) took on new meaning.

Remember what's new

What actually changes in me when I become born-again?

- 1) My spirit, the essential me, has renounced my independence and rebellion toward God. Now I love Him and want to obey Him.
- 2) God has given me the gift of righteousness because I have placed my faith in the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus, therefore I am sinless before Him and a suitable dwelling place for the Holy Spirit.

Remember what's old

Even after I become born-again I still live in a fallen world, I am still exposed to spiritual assaults from the enemy and I still experience sinful impulses from my unredeemed body (until the resurrection). Let's listen again to how the Bible describes two of these:

- 1) My rebellious flesh
 - Romans 7:15-25; 8:10
 - Galatians 5:17
 - Matthew 26:41 “...the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”
 - The appetites and passions of the body are unredeemed
 - Old ways of thinking have to be renewed (Ro 12:2 “...and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...”)
- 2) My unseen enemy
 - Ephesians 6:12-16
 - “Flaming arrows”: the devil has access to my thoughts
 - What may begin as a normal body appetite, if left unchecked, will become a point of demonic control
 - John 8:34 “Truly, truly, I say to you everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin”
 - Romans 6:16
 - “Appetite grows with the eating.” Satiation is the momentary calming of an appetite when we give it what it craves. When the satiation passes the appetite returns even stronger and is harder to please.
 - When we repeatedly disobey an aspect of God's moral laws, we open the door for demonic influence to have a foothold in our lives. We must “lock the door” or the enemy will keep coming through it. The effect of demonic influence is like gasoline thrown on a flame, suddenly the temptation rages. It controls you, you don't control it (patterns of disobedience leave us vulnerable to demonic influence).

Remember, to gain victory you must not “own” these temptations. Don't look inside and ask, “What's wrong with me that I could have such awful thoughts?” Recognize the source.



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Flee, don't fight

The appetites of my body are a force of nature and the "flaming arrows" sent into my thoughts come from a tireless spiritual source, so to win this battle I must first recognize that I am too weak to fight alone. Those who promise to stop and rely on their willpower to do so are doomed to failure. We need many miracles a day to overcome. Having described the futility and frustration of someone trying to obey God without the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ro 7:15-25) Paul goes on to explain the solution that God has provided through Christ (Ro 8:1-6):

(v1): Even in the midst of this struggle a sincere believer is not condemned, but stands righteous before God.

(v2): We are no longer helpless slaves because we have received the Holy Spirit.

(v3): It is simply not possible to obey without the Spirit and God cannot give the Spirit until Christ washes a person clean.

(v4): As a believer I now have a choice. If I turn to the Spirit I will find the power to overcome. God's goal is not just to forgive me but bring me to the place where I completely fulfill His moral law (love God with all... and my neighbor as myself).

God had to free us from His judgment against us so He could take up residence inside us and empower us to obey Him. He forgave us so He could come to help us.

Verses 5 and 6

As we've seen there are many forces confronting us which we can't control, but there is one thing we can control and that is where we direct the attention of our conscious mind (phronousin, "to put the mind on," "to think," Romans, Sanday and Headlam, Int'l Critical Commentary, T and T Clark, Edinburgh, 1900, P. 195).

1) If I habitually focus my mind on fulfilling the various passions or appetites of my body I will be drawn back into bondage and spiritual death.

2) But, if when I am tempted I turn the attention of my mind away from the temptation and look to the Holy Spirit for help and guidance, He will show me what to do in the moment. By obeying God in this way, I will enter into a life of blessing.

A divine boundary

• 1 Corinthians 10:13: "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, so that you will be able to endure it."

• 1 Corinthians 6:18 "Flee immorality"

• 1 Corinthians 10:14 "...flee from idolatry"

• 1 Timothy 6:11 "But flee from these things you man of God..." (love of money)

• 2 Timothy 2:22 "Now flee from youthful lusts..."

• Wesley's journal: Friday, May 26, 1738.

The "oops" moment

We generally recognize a temptation only after it has started. We suddenly catch ourselves heading down a wrong pattern of thoughts. We recognize "I'm getting depressed, I'm thinking, feeling, looking at that again." This moment of discovery is the "oops" moment. Here's how I have learned to respond:

• Act immediately, the sooner the better.

• Shift the focus of your mind to Christ.

I do this by picturing Him in my mind (cross, blood, His glorious face). Please note: I don't find it helps to think theological truths about Him, or even to say things. I need to visualize Him in my imagination, and then hold my attention there until the temptation lets go (5-20 seconds?)

• If I perceive it to be a spiritual assault, I may forcefully rebuke it by saying, "no!" or "I bind this!"

• These steps can be done very subtly. I don't have to draw attention to myself. It can be carried on in the interior of my mind. I simply "set my mind" on Christ and let the Spirit break the temptation's grip. It's really quite easy.

Let's practice!

Questions

1) Has God shown you a way of fleeing temptation when it comes? Please share this if you can.

2) Please re-read 1 Corinthians 10:13 and tell us how you would explain this verse to a six-year-old child.