

Sinful Flesh

Today's study is called "Sinful Flesh," and it is an examination of a sermon given by A.T. Jones in 1899. We know that there is a blessing in going over the writings of our forefathers in the faith. We know that inspiration has pointed out the importance of reviewing these works. I mentioned, last week, that I want you to be aware, and notice, that we as Creation Seventh Day Adventists need change not a single word from these pioneer works to draw a full and undiluted blessing from these witnesses.

This week's study is no exception. In fact, I find that this study deals with a key issue that we sometimes encounter as an objection to the Gospel that we bear, especially from conservative (but rarely mainstream). We teach victory over sin. We teach that when one is born again, he or she does NOT commit any known sins any longer. And further, he or she enters the "judgment of the living," a life of repentance that will, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, be able to identify any defects of character, and errors in thinking. When these are identified, we are purified from them, replacing them with true and holy thoughts, as our minds are transformed, daily, more closely into the mind and character of Christ.

This is the "faith of Yahshua." It is more than just faith IN Yahshua, or Jesus. It is not only believing IN Him, but believing AS He believed, and overcoming sin AS He overcame sin. But we also teach, and this quite clearly, that while the "mind" is transformed, the "body" is generally not. I say generally, because we have seen miracles of the body as well. We have had those among our present membership broken from all manner of habits and dispositions. We have seen physical changes to sin-sick bodies that are partially due to better diets (of course) but also due to the transforming power of Yahweh's love.

But in general, the body does not experience any sudden, dramatic change upon conversion. In fact, it remains just what the topic of today's sermon indicates, "sinful flesh." Some have said, "If you claim to be free from sin, truly free, this must mean that you are teaching even the perfection of the body, since we all sin due to our flesh."

Those who make this statement do not understand the difference between sin and the temptation to sin. Experiencing temptation is not sin. Christ Himself, the most hated by Satan, was tempted supremely, and through the avenue of His flesh, and Yet He was entirely, utterly, and perfectly "without sin." We reside this day in sinful flesh. We do not teach any kind of "holy flesh" doctrine, but say that the power of Yahweh is so great that we overcome sin completely – despite this sinful flesh. Those who are seeking reasons to avoid the conviction that this Gospel brings will, at times, accuse us of teaching a false understanding of conversion, and we need to be able to intelligently deny this subtle attack.

Let our agreement with the following study bear formal record to this truth of our beliefs.

We will start here:

[quote]

There is a serious and very bothersome mistake which is made by many persons.

That mistake is made in thinking that when they are converted their old sinful flesh is blotted out.

In other words, they make the mistake of thinking that they are to be delivered from the flesh by having it taken away from them altogether.

Then when they find that this is not so, when they find that the same old flesh, with its inclinations, its besetments, and its enticements is still there, they are not prepared for it and so become discouraged and are ready to think that they never were converted at all.

[endquote]

Here, Jones sets the stage for this (relatively short) study. We notice that he singles out “inclinations,” “besetments” and “enticements.” The appetites may remain, and must be overcome by a force of sanctified will, but the temptations that were pleasing to us before may well remain pleasing to us after our second birth. What we must understand is that, although “every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed,” (James 1:14) “blessed is the man that endureth temptation, for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.” (James 1:12)

This is not a holy flesh idea. Quite the opposite, we teach that we must “endure temptation” in order to receive the crown of life, which is manifested in the glorified body at Yahshua’s return.

We continue...

[quote]

And yet, if they [who are disappointed at still being tempted after conversion] would think a little, they ought to be able to see that that is all a mistake. Did you not have exactly the same body after you were converted that you had before? Was not that body composed of exactly the same material--the same flesh and bones and blood--after you were converted as that of which it was composed before? To these questions everybody will promptly say Yes. And plainly that is the truth.

And now there are further questions: Was not that flesh also of exactly the same quality as before? Was it not still human flesh, natural flesh, as certainly as it was before? To this also everybody will say Yes.

Then also a still further question: It being the same flesh and of the same quality--it still being human flesh, natural flesh--is it not also still just as certainly sinful flesh as it was before?

Just here is where creeps in the mistake of these many persons. To this last question they are inclined to think that the answer should be "No," when it must be only a decided "Yes." And this decided "Yes" must be maintained so long as we continue in this natural body.

[endquote]

I would add here that there is another “mistake” that the worldly mind is trained to make. Perhaps through traditions, or false religions, or perhaps through the reading of certain kinds of fiction, anything “supernatural” is considered to be “magical” and therefore incomprehensible to normal thinking. Just because something is supernatural – perhaps we should use the word “miraculous” – does not mean that there is no science behind it, that there are no rules.

Yahweh is a God of order, of rules, and of common sense. He created mathematics, and physics, and chemistry, and all the other “natural sciences,” and is the absolute Master of forces, matter, and time. Magic and mysticism are, to a large degree, Satan’s answer to Yahweh’s principles of the universe, and it is these things that defy logic, that are based on chaos and unsanctified imagination.

Now, what does this have to do with what Jones is talking about? Quite a lot, actually. People may think that because their conversion is a miracle, in every true sense of that word, that all their spiritual and even material problems are solved. Things will start to go their way.

Becoming a friend of Yah, and a member of the Body of Yahshua, makes all the difference in the world to the way that we view our life, and the things that happen to us. But the same rules that applied to our physical bodies apply thereafter, and except where specific miracles are taking place, the body and all its “baggage” is taken through with us into the new life. Paul, after all, years after his conversion was saying, “When Christ returns, I’m getting rid of this old, sinful body, and putting on my new, immortal and glorious one.” This is not mysticism, or spiritualism, it is the science of spirituality, and of salvation, which the world’s science still knows very little about.

Continuing:

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And when it is decided and constantly maintained that the flesh of the converted person is still sinful flesh and only sinful flesh, he is so thoroughly convinced that in his flesh dwells no good thing that he will never allow a shadow of confidence in the flesh. And this being so, his sole dependence is upon something other than the flesh, even upon the Holy Spirit of God. His source of strength and hope is altogether exclusive of the flesh, even in Jesus Christ only. And being everlastingly watchful, suspicious, and thoroughly distrustful of the flesh, he never can expect any good thing from that source, and so is prepared by the power of God to beat back and crush down without mercy every impulse or suggestion that may arise from it, and so does not fail, does not become discouraged, but goes on from victory to victory and from strength to strength.

[endquote]

I want to stop after just that one paragraph, because that is really the “heart” of the thing. Brethren, when you study the Word, and when you look at any doctrine, and any teaching, to see if it is true or counterfeit, or even just to learn for your own edification... let this always be the question you ask yourself: “What does this tell me about the character of Yahweh? What is the blessing of this teaching?”

There is always a blessing in true doctrine. Yah gave us the commandments, and the other principles of His Kingdom, that it might be “well” with us, even here on earth and on into forever. (Deu 5:29)

There is a blessing in the way that Yah has set up this perfect plan of salvation. There is a blessing in leaving us in sinful flesh, to stand against – and overcome – sin IN the flesh before the glorification of the entire person. Jones points out just what it is. If the “saved” were immediately glorified in the body, the mind would not be prepared to accept the “heavenly things” of Yah’s Kingdom.

We must learn, and teach others, not to rely upon the earthly, the seen. We must have no confidence in the flesh, nor in our “own understanding” which it grants, so that our minds are trained to recognize spiritual blessings even in the darkness of this generation. We can have no reliance upon the “self,” and even those who may be in the message for many years may still find something to learn, and to put away, and to understand more clearly, because we learn as we grow to rely entirely upon the Spiritual and everlasting.

We continue:

[quote]

Conversion, then, you see, does not put new flesh upon the old spirit but a new Spirit within the old flesh. It does not propose to bring new flesh to the old mind, but a new mind to the old flesh. Deliverance and victory are not gained by having the human nature taken away, but by receiving the divine nature to subdue and have dominion over the human--not by the taking away of the sinful flesh, but by the sending in of the sinless Spirit to conquer and condemn sin in the flesh.

The Scripture does not say, Let this flesh be upon you which was also upon Christ, but it does say, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Phil. 2:5.

The Scripture does not say, Be ye transformed by the renewing of your flesh, but it does say, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Rom. 12:2. We shall be translated by the renewing of our flesh, but we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

[endquote]

It is amazing, really, just how completely Satan has perverted and inverted the order set in place by the kingdom of Yah. Yahweh created man to have dominion over the world. But under Satan’s banner, the world has dominion over the man that Yahweh created. As long as we are subject to the principles of the Enemy’s kingdom, we are under the dominion of others. Until man is free from sin, and free in Christ, the powers of this fallen world will control man’s thoughts, and words, and actions.

We see people of moral character fighting against some of the principles of this world. We see people making war against abortion, and homosexuality, and adultery, and child abuse... and to be sure, of course, these things are terrible, and ought to be reviled and condemned as hateful to our Father and injurious to us. But unless, and until, we can lay the axe to the root of the tree – that people need Yahshua the Savior, and need to have their minds transformed – we can never “win” against these evils. As it is, we cannot “win” so much as a lawsuit about something as apparently simple as the freedom to call ourselves what divine inspiration and our religious convictions have instructed us to, because the heart of man is evil.

The problem is not “out there,” and society is a product of the people that constitute it. The problem is in the hearts of the fathers, and the children, which must be turned to one another, and turned to the Almighty, as we, the Eli-Yah people, are commissioned to facilitate. We must be about our Father’s work, and that work is a mental surgery, on all who are willing to submit to the Great Physician.

And speaking of Him, we continue with the last section of the study:

[quote]

The Lord Jesus took the same flesh and blood, the same human nature, that we have, flesh just like our sinful flesh, and because of sin, and by the power of the Spirit of God through the divine mind that was in Him, "condemned sin in the flesh." Rom. 8:3. And therein is our deliverance (Rom. 7:25); therein is our victory. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." "A new heart will I give you, and a new Spirit will I put within you."

Do not be discouraged at sight of sinfulness in the flesh. It is only the light of the Spirit of God, and by the discernment of the mind of Christ, that you can see so much sinfulness in your flesh, and the more sinfulness you see in your flesh, the more of the Spirit of God you certainly have. This is a sure test. Then when you see sinfulness abundant in you, thank the Lord that you have so much of the Spirit of God that you can see so much of the sinfulness and know of a surety that when sinfulness abounds, grace much more abounds in order that "as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

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Even when speaking of sin, and the sinful flesh, we find that the Adventist message is the Gospel of Victory through Christ Yahshua. As unusual as that last paragraph may sound in isolation, Jones does not once say that we submit to that which we find in our flesh. We identify it, only to see what our Father is showing us as the thing He wishes to cleanse away. And of course, this was written with those specifically discouraged by false thoughts in mind.

Now we, in the course of our years of ministry, have encountered all kinds of ideas about the nature of Christ. Some have taught that He could not possibly, theoretically, have sinned. Some have taught that He was omniscient, all-knowing, even in this limited human body. Some have taught that His suffering and death were mostly an illusion, designed to teach us a spiritual lesson, because "God cannot truly suffer."

But what we believe is simply what is written: that we were made in Yah's image, and then Yah sent an image of Himself, His Son, like unto us, to be our Sacrifice, and also our Example. The value of an example is that it can be emulated; it can be followed and imitated. It can be understood and embodied. Those to whom we look up cannot be so different from us that we cannot understand them, and Yah has drawn near to us in Yahshua, so that we might know Him whom we worship.

It is our salvation that Christ was like us and, while like us, condemned sin in the flesh. It is our salvation that Christ, as fully human in limitations, perceptions and temptations, was without sin, and defeated all the powers of Satan, opening up the way for the redemption of every man.

It is only the light of Yah, the judgment of Yah, that reveals sin. Satan conceals sin, to more effectively work. On the rare occasions he reveals it, and points it out, it is only to condemn and ridicule. But while we may speak of condemning sinful actions, we seek to uplift and heal people themselves. And of our own sanctification, when we see some sinful tendency in us, we know that as children of Yah we only experience what the Father and Son allow for our edification. Thus, when we see some troubling thing due to the flesh, we are not to question our experience as a child of light. We are not to become

discouraged, or to think that we have been deceiving ourselves. We do not excuse the things we find. We do not ignore them as “just a part of life,” but we experience the impact of their presence.

That is the time to cling to Christ, who is not taken by surprise at the revelation. Understand, the moment that you realize some sinful tendency in the flesh that you had not seen before, that is not the moment that Christ realized it; He knew it, and drew us near despite its presence.

He does not love His children any less for the realization of their faults, but draws near at such a time to see that they will call upon Him for forgiveness, and then for cleansing. This is the life of repentance to which we as Christians have been called. This is the life of active sanctification that is vital for our ability to believe, and to act, as Christ did, always and consistently.

When we are called, we go. When we are challenged, we overcome. When we are tempted, we triumph. And why is this so? Because we have entered into the Sabbath rest, and we experience – with amazement and joy – that which Christ’s power is able to accomplish, even in this sinful flesh.