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# Addictions: New Ways of Seeing, New Ways of Walking Free

by Edward T. Welch

**T**he unfolding of Your words gives light.  
*Psalm 119:130*

Addictions research needs something new. Its vision has been controlled by one particular lens, and even though this lens highlights certain features of the addictive experience, it can blind as much as reveal when it is the only way of seeing. To reduce all discussion of addictions to one image would be to sacrifice helpful perspectives that bring meaning and understanding.

In the case of addictions, the disease metaphor has been *the* controlling metaphor and it has jealously guarded its turf. No other perspective has been invited to broaden our understanding, let alone offer a major conceptual overhaul. Of course, the disease metaphor has usefulness. It highlights the way we can feel controlled by something other than our own will. What it doesn't highlight is that the bondage we experience is a *voluntary* slavery.

This exclusive reliance on one metaphor is not the only encumbrance within addic-

tion discussions. Even more troublesome is the fact that the metaphor of addictions is losing its metaphorical quality. Instead of saying that addictions are *like* a disease, more people are simply saying that addictions *are* diseases.

In its literal sense, a disease is a diagnosable condition with a physical cause. Used this way, addictions do not fit the definition. AA itself states that "alcoholism is largely a spiritual disease requiring a spiritual healing."<sup>1</sup> Although addicts can show some physical differences when compared to those who have not struggled with addictions, there is no reason to believe that these biological differences do anything more than either *result from* heavy use of a substance, or *influence* addictions. As an influence, these differences are similar to the effects of parenting, friends or socioeconomic status. They can pull or incline us in certain negative directions toward chemical dependency, but they can be resisted. They are not one's unavoidable destiny, as many addicts "in recovery" can attest. As such, the

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<sup>1</sup> "A Member's-Eye View of Alcoholics Anonymous" (New York, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1970), 12.

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word disease, in its most technical sense, is *not* an accurate way to describe addictions.

Given how the disease metaphor is hardening into a reality, and that the metaphorical use of *disease* has limitations, one task for a theology of addictions is to consider other available metaphors in Scripture. Consider five different metaphors for addictive behavior: idolatry, adultery, foolishness, attacks by a beast, and, then, disease.

### **Idolatry**

One of the most common portrayals of the human condition, and one which captures both the in-control and out-of-control experiences of addictions, is the theme of idolatry. From this perspective, the true nature

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of all addictions is that we have chosen to go outside the boundaries of the kingdom of God and look for blessing in the land of idols. In turning to idols, we are saying that we desire something in creation more than we desire the Creator.

This sounds like strange language to Western ears, but idolatry is perhaps the most dominant image in Scripture and it abounds in potential applications. Did you ever notice how many biblical stories could be summarized with these questions? “Who will you worship? The Creator or the created thing? God or man? The Divine King or worthless idols?” The basic story line of the Old Testament is about people who find idolatry irresistible. Then God, ultimately through Jesus, comes to rescue His people out of their enslaving practices. Accordingly, all sin is summarized as idolatry (e.g., Deut. 4:23, Eph. 5:5).

The Ten Commandments give special prominence to prohibitions against idolatry. They are the first two commandments, and they receive substantial elaboration.

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third

and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Deut. 5:7, 8)

Do we have idols in our society? In Western culture we rarely make visible gods. To detect our idols, we must begin by realizing that Old Testament idols were concrete, physical expressions of new loyalties and commitments that were established in the human heart. The prohibition against idolatry is ultimately about “idols of the heart” (Ezek. 14:3).

Notice the paternal warning at the end of 1 John: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” John’s letter does not even mention observable, physical idols. Instead, he speaks of “the cravings of the sinful man, the lusts of the eyes, and the boastings of what he has and does.” John is concerned about the pernicious, unseen Baals that are constructed more by the heart than the hands.

In other words, Scripture permits us to broaden the definition of idolatry so that it includes anything on which we set our affections and indulge in as an excessive and sinful attachment. Therefore, the idols that we can see—such as a bottle—are certainly not the totality of the problem. Idolatry includes anything we worship: the lust for pleasure, respect, love, power, control, or freedom from pain. Furthermore, the problem is not outside of us, located in a liquor store or on the internet; the problem is within us. Alcohol and drugs are essentially satisfiers of deeper idols. The problem is not the idolatrous substance, it is the false worship of the heart.

We renounce living for God’s glory, and turn to objects of worship that we hope will give us what we want. The desired payoff? The purpose of all idolatry is to manipulate the idol *for our own benefit*. This means that we don’t *want* to be ruled by idols. Instead, we want to *use* them. For example, when Elijah confronted the Baal worshipers on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), the prophets of Baal slashed themselves and did everything they could to manipulate Baal to do their will. Idolaters want nothing above themselves, including their idols. Their fabricated gods are intended to be mere puppet kings, means to an end.

So it is with modern idolatry as well. We don’t want to be ruled by alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food, or anything. No, we want these substances or activities to give us what *we* want: good feelings, a better self-image, a sense of power, or whatever our heart is craving.

Idols, however, do not cooperate. Rather than mastering our idols, we become enslaved by them and begin to look like them. As idols are deaf, dumb, blind,

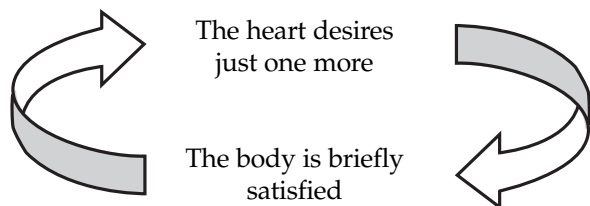
utterly senseless, and irrational, so “those who make them will be like them, and so will all who put their trust in them” (Ps. 115:8).

How can these lifeless idols exert such power? They dominate because of a powerful but quiet presence that hides behind every idol, Satan himself. As obedience to God demonstrates our allegiance to Him, so when we set our affections on created objects we demonstrate our affinity for Satan. Therefore, God’s Word reminds us, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [or alcohol and drugs], but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 4:12).

So far, this discussion is relevant to everyone. We set our affections on ourselves and choose idols that will, we hope, satisfy us, and we avoid the worship of the true God. But what about the different types of addictions? Can’t we make some distinctions between a person addicted to alcohol and one addicted to work? Should we stress the unity in all addictive behaviors at the expense of the obvious differences? After all, not everyone has a covert lifestyle for which they will seemingly sacrifice everything. What is the difference between idols that are satisfied by a big paycheck, respect of colleagues, or the adoring love of a spouse, and idols that are satisfied by mind-altering or physical sensations?

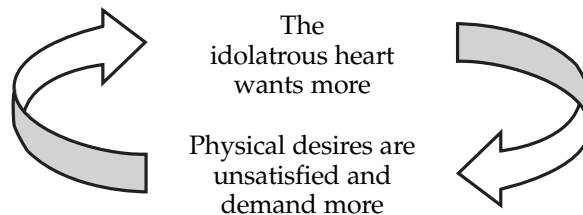
The answer is an important one: some idols hook our bodily passions and desires. This group of addictions includes drugs (legal and illegal), alcohol, sexual sin, and food. These idolatries can provide physical pleasure, relieve physical tension, and soothe physical desires (Fig. 1). Such payoffs can be difficult to resist.

**Figure 1.**  
**The Early Cycle of Addictions: Rebellion**



When physical sensations become entrenched as a habitual satisfier in someone’s life, another cycle is superimposed (Fig. 2). The heart becomes more than an idol factory. Along with its incessant idol production and demands for satisfaction, it also becomes a slave to the physical desires of the body.

**Figure 2.**  
**Later Stages of Addictions: Bondage**



In light of how our physical desires can easily get caught in the crossfire within our souls, it is not surprising that the apostle Paul implores us to be vigilant. “I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave” (1 Cor 9:26,27). In this, the apostle Paul reiterates that nothing short of a declaration of war will dislodge our favorite idols.

Now, make this more personal. Think of some of your idols that are expressed as bodily desires. Sex, drugs, and food are the most obvious. Consider one that seems less important, such as a craving for sweets. You know you don’t need them, and you may be full from a meal, but if they are available you might experience a strong craving for them. Then you rationalize or make deals with yourself: “I will have ice cream now and skip dessert tonight,” or “What difference will a handful of M & M’s make? Am I under the law?” The strategy is the same as that of a substance abuser. Interestingly, as in the case of most drug or alcohol abusers, if these sweets are definitely not available, the cravings are minimal.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever tried to diet? It is one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines. How many times have you started a diet, only to give up a few days later? Feeling guilty, you try it again, then again. Such is the experience of substance abuse.

Have you ever found yourself flirting with sexual temptation through a long gaze or sexual fantasies? Have you ever found yourself captured by the allure of pornography? Have you ever been involved in sexual immorality even though you were aware of God’s call to be holy (1 Thess. 4:3)? These are additional examples of how pleasurable, physical experiences are favorite targets of our idolatrous hearts. Instead of running from temporary physical pleasures that are ungodly, or simply enjoying but not being dominated by physical pleasures that are gifts from God, we quickly get tunnel vision and see nothing but “one more.” Self-control

<sup>2</sup> The exception is when a physical addiction to a particular drug develops through use. In these cases, the absence of the drug will make physical cravings *more* intense until the person is no longer physically addicted.

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over bodily desires is an exercise in faith that lasts a lifetime. "Relapses" are not uncommon.

Can you see how the biblical theme of idolatry fits hand-in-glove with modern addiction? Addicts often believe they have found life, but any payoff they experience is short-lived and deceptive. They are blinded to the fact that they are having a banquet in a grave.

For the addict dope is God. It is the supreme being, the Higher Power, in the junkie's life. He is subjugated to its will. He follows its command-

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ments. The drug is the definition of happiness, and gives the meaning of love. Each shot of junk in his veins is a shot of divine love, and it makes the addict feel resplendent with the grace of God.<sup>3</sup>

Tyler started smoking marijuana when he was thirteen. Peer pressure was the stated reason. Little did he know that he had already bowed low to another idol. Although he knew God, he worshiped the god "opinions of others" and "peers must think I'm cool." Drugs seemed to satisfy these ruling desires. Even though he didn't get high the first time he smoked (he didn't even like it), he felt accepted. He was proud that others knew he smoked, so he continued. Of course, his goal was not to worship marijuana, it was to use it for his own purposes.

Gradually, the drug began to represent the idolatry that was in his heart. His marijuana became an object of worship. He would think about it, plan how to get it, and even avoid friends in order to perform his cultic rituals. By the time he was fifteen, Tyler was in a drug rehabilitation clinic, enslaved and out of control. His idol had betrayed him.

Addicts have defected from the living God. Instead of worshipping in the temple of the Lord, they perform addictive rituals that give them more perceived power, pleasure, or identity. They see in their addiction a form of magic. The promises of the idol, however, are lies. Any identity, power, or peace that they bring is false and temporary. There are only two choices: putting your faith in a loving God and thus knowing freedom, or putting your faith in idols (Satan) and being

enslaved. Curiously, our selfish pride prefers slavery.

"Jim, I wonder if you have ever noticed that, for you, alcohol is very much like the idols of the Bible. These idols start out as helpers. The people thought that God could not be fully trusted to give them what they wanted, so they looked for blessing in other gods. In the Old Testament these false gods were the answer for rain or fertility. Today, we are less concerned with rain and fertility, but we are very concerned about being pain-free, or about our identity and self-worth. I wonder if alcohol was a way to fill in holes in your identity. I wonder if it became a way to find 'blessings' such as power or pleasure apart from God, or alongside of God.

"But here is the real killer about idolatry. Idols end up having dominion over us.

"It seems that there is no getting away from the basic questions of life: Who will you worship? Who will be king? Who will have dominion?"

Are addicts self-consciously making these idolatrous decisions? In most cases, no. Remember, we are looking at what is behind the scenes. Sin by its very nature is covert. As people who want to help, this means we need something very powerful to break the hold of idols. Pleading, tears, screaming, or threats will not penetrate. Reason is useless. We cannot simply say "Stop doing drugs, get control of yourself, stop worshipping an idol." They need the power of God (1 Cor.1:18), the message of Christ crucified and risen. Other therapies may offer sobriety, but only this good news is powerful enough to liberate the soul.

### **Adultery**

Idolatry is an especially prominent theme in Scripture that brings new light to the understanding of addictions. Adultery is a companion metaphor, especially since idolatry is ultimately a personal relationship gone wrong. Adultery emphasizes the more intimate features of idolatry. The sense of being controlled and being dominated by another, the lies, and the obsession are all there. The idolatrous object, however, is a person (or functions like one).

Go to an AA meeting and listen to the language. Chances are you might think that people were having affairs. They are talking about something they loved. They once thought of nothing but that object. They felt complete when they were with it.

[My wife] said to me that I was going to have to make a choice—either cocaine or her. Before she finished the sentence, I knew what was coming, so I told her to think carefully about what she

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<sup>3</sup> B. Meehan, *Beyond the Yellow Brick Road* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1984), 175.

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was going to say. It was clear to me that there wasn't a choice. I love my wife, but I'm not going to choose anything over cocaine. It's sick, but that's what things have come to. Nothing and nobody comes before my coke.<sup>4</sup>

The picture is reminiscent of the foolish young man who is being beckoned to the house of the adulteress (Prov. 7). This tale of surreptitious lust starts innocently enough. A young man is meandering down the street but there is a certain intention to his steps. It is as if he is throwing out the banana peel so he can slip. It is dusk, and he is walking in the direction of a particular house, one where he knows there is a sexually provocative woman. When the woman sees him she showers him with alluring words. His seduction soon follows. Yes, there was pleasure for a moment. But it was the pleasure of an animal eating meat from a deadly trap. His sensual banquet was, in reality, a banquet in the grave. Equally vivid is the story of Samson (Judg. 13-16). Perhaps no other narrative portrays the irrational nature of sin so clearly. By the time Samson met his match in Delilah, he was already a veteran of foolish relationships. But with Delilah his lust defied all reason. Over and over she was exposed as a betrayer, yet Samson was intoxicated with her. He was a classic example of a man who was both fully responsible and hopelessly out of control.

How can this be applied to a struggling addict? Adultery introduces more personal language for addicts. They indulge in a secret life that will eventually be exposed. Deception is commonplace. People are unfaithful to their spouses and enter into a relationship with their beloved. Why do they do it, especially when it could result in such pain for themselves and others? They do it because they love the pleasure and the fawning attention of the other person. They do it because they love their desires above all else. They do it because they feel like they need it. The relationship becomes their life.

But we still want to ask, "Why did you throw away everything you had for this affair?" Yet there will be no satisfactory answer. Sin is not rational. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't look into the future. It doesn't consider consequences. All it knows is, "I WANT—I WANT MORE." For example, Jim was a heavy drinker. How might adultery language—Jim's "affair" with the bottle—speak to him?

"Jim, it sounds like alcohol became your mistress.

Your identity was wrapped up in your relationship with her. She gave you all sorts of good

things. Whatever holes you felt in your sense of identity were filled with her. Chances are you will miss her, try to visit her, dream about her, and remember her fondly. You'll be surprised at the number of things that remind you of her. But remember, she was a betrayer. She was actually a poisonous snake, and your good times were actu-

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ally a banquet that was in a grave. Her goal was your death.

"The object of your love has been a bottle that sometimes met your desires. Our goal is to find something that is much more beautiful than her. Sure, we will talk about where you went wrong, but most importantly we must talk about Jesus, the one who is to be your first love. And the only way to learn to love Him is to know Him from the Bible.

"One more thing to remember: adultery is complex. We move toward it because of our own selfish desires, but in the end the adulteress controls us. So, although the bottle is in one sense the enemy, the real enemy is the selfish desires of our own heart. We will have to fight with things we see, like alcohol, and things we don't see, like our hearts' desires."

Of course, as we say this to Jim, God's Word expands this theme to include us all. Jesus said, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). James 4 indicates that those who quarrel experience the same root problem as Jim. We say "I want" to our desires. Remember, the experience of addictions is not far from any of us.

### **Foolishness**

Another theme that overlaps with idolatry and adultery is foolishness. The entire book of Proverbs, which examines wisdom and folly, is must-reading, getting right to the heart of our daily struggles. There are two different paths: the way of wisdom and the way of folly. Folly is characterized by thoughtlessness and decisions to pursue a course that is briefly pleasurable but ultimately painful. Our natural inclination is this particular path.

The fool, although wise in his own eyes, acts in

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<sup>4</sup> R. Weiss and S. Mirin, *Cocaine* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), 55.

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ways that are patently ridiculous. Some theologians talk about the “noetic affects of sin.” Noetic means that sin affects the way we think. Put bluntly, sin makes us stupid, not intellectually but morally.

They [idolaters] know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand...He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him. (Isa. 44:20)

The fool’s attention wanders, never focused on wisdom. He ignores all consequences. He is persuaded that his way is the right way, so there is no reason to listen to others. He thinks he will always get away with it, but he will be exposed. He goes with his feelings, not

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realizing that they can mislead. Of course, the fool feels the consequences of his behavior at times, and he might even have glimpses into how he has brought pain on others, but consequences are no deterrent. The destructive pattern is repeated because folly is enjoyed (Prov. 17:24; 9; 14:12; 28:26; 15:3; 14:8; 17:2; 27:22; 26:11).

As with idolatry, Scripture paints an unretouched picture, aiming to bring us back to our senses. It also promises that God will give grace to those who desire it so that they can leave their idols and take the path of wisdom. The triune God delights in giving wisdom to those who ask, and He gives it liberally.

#### **Attacked by a Beast**

So far, the evolving definition of addictions is that it is voluntary slavery, showing signs of both purposefulness and victimization. One metaphor that especially emphasizes the victimizing nature of idolatry is that of being captured by a wild beast. Both Satan and sin are like wild animals. “The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Similarly, sin crouches at the door and desires to master us (Gen. 4:7).

There is no subtlety here. No wooing attractive women. No idol that holds out promises it can’t keep. This is just plain old in-your-face, rip-you-apart warfare. Sin and Satan victimize. They enslave, and the ear-

lier we see their intent, the more opportunity we have to be prepared.

“Jim, do you ever find yourself getting spiritually lazy? Coasting? Some people might be able to—at least on the surface—get away with that. But part of God’s goodness to you is that you have to be consistently on alert. It’s as if there is a beast just waiting for you to let down your guard. In fact, there *is* a beast just waiting for you. It could strike anywhere and any time. It wins when we think it is gone.

“At first glance, the beast is alcohol, but when we look more closely, ‘We have seen the enemy, and he is us.’ It’s time to get ready for a fight. Even though you don’t feel able to defeat this foe right now (sometimes I don’t think you even want to), sobriety is God’s plan for you. If He has called you to be sober, He will give you everything you need to fight. And, it might not seem like much, but I am going to continue to fight alongside of you.”

#### **Disease or Illness**

Not surprisingly, Scripture *does* use illness as a metaphor for our spiritual condition. In fact, one of the best known passages in Scripture uses the imagery of sickness and healing.

Your whole head is injured, your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. (Isa. 1:5-7)

But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed. (Isa. 53:5,6)

Have you or someone you know been captivated by a disease model? Here is the point of contact. Scripture, indeed, emphasizes that sin has many things in common with a disease. For example, it affects our entire being, it is painful, it leads to death and it is absolutely tragic. Yet there are also ways in which sin is not like a disease. It is something we do rather than catch, we confess it rather than treat it, the disease is in our hearts rather than our bodies, and only the forgiveness and cleansing found in the blood of the Great Physician is sufficient to bring thorough healing.

#### **Common Features of All Biblical Metaphors**

We have highlighted a few useful biblical metaphors, but already there is a clear message. Since addictions are illustrations of idolatries that affect everyone, we should expect that principles of change for addic-

tions would be very similar to those for any other sin problem.

- Don't excuse it. That would simply encourage the self-deceptive consequences of sin.
- Confess it as sin against God.
- Look to Jesus as the One who shows grace and mercy to idolaters.
- Grow in faith by knowing your God as He reveals Himself in Scripture.
- Learn to delight in obedience. Search out Scripture to find ways to obey.
- Don't rely on yourself but partner with and be accountable to wise people.
- Pursue wisdom—the skill or godly living that comes out of reverence for the Lord. And pursue it aggressively. Don't just avoid sin; hate it.
- Realize that addiction, like all sin, doesn't impose itself on us unless we have been willing to entertain the seeds of it in our imaginations. Therefore, change must be deeper than overt behavioral change. We are targeting our hearts.

Does this seem harsh or unloving? If so, the problem might be a knee-jerk response to any discussion of sin. The word "sin" *can* be used as a club. But what we are examining, however, is called the *good news*: the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ, and He has liberated the captives. This is cause for celebration. It is beautiful. It is the path of life itself. It is the path on which God never fatigues in extending grace and mercy: "The Lord longs to be gracious to you; He rises to show you compassion" (Isa. 30:18). Addicts must know that they are being given a gift, and those who help addicts must know how to give this gift in a way that is suited to its cost and beauty. Beautiful gifts must be presented in the most attractive way possible. These beautiful gifts call forth a very active response, a new way of walking free. True freedom and true peace come from going to war with yourself!

### Staying Violent

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. (Matt. 11:12)

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. (Matt. 18:8)

There is a mean streak to authentic self-control. Underneath what seems to be the placid demeanor of those who are not ruled by their desires is the heart of a warrior. Self-control is not for the timid. When we want to grow in it, not only do we nurture an exuberance for Jesus Christ, we also demand of ourselves a hatred for sin.

So think again. When was the last time you said

"No" to something, out of obedience to Christ, *when it actually was hard to say "No"*? Maybe you can say "No" quite easily to cocaine, but you linger over salacious advertising. Maybe you can say "No" to the second or third drink, but you will never miss a dessert (though you vow weekly to change your eating habits). Whatever earthly desire doesn't take "No" for an answer is a lust that surpasses your desire for Jesus Himself. With

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this in mind, we quickly realize that self-control is not simply an exercise in self-improvement. It is an essential discipline in a high-stakes spiritual battle. The only possible attitude toward out-of-control desires is a declaration of all-out war.

Actually, the war has been declared. The enemy has already made a preemptive strike; sinful desires already "war against your soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). We simply need to be awakened by faith to engage in a counterattack.

Be very careful how you live. (Eph. 5:15)

Put on the full armor of God. (Eph. 6:11)

Prepare your minds for action. (1 Pet. 1:13)

Make every effort. (2 Pet. 1:5)

Be self-controlled and alert. (1 Pet. 5:8)

These are battle cries, and Scripture is full of them. But unlike our old conception of warfare, where battle lines are clear and the times of battle can almost be predicted, this is modern warfare in which you are not always sure where the enemy lurks. It is guerilla warfare. There are strategically placed snipers. You let down your guard for a moment and the village you thought was safe suddenly opens fire on you.

### Declare War

There is something about war that sharpens the senses, especially when the enemy constantly hides. Issues of life and death will do that. You hear a twig snap or the rustling of leaves and you are in attack mode. Someone coughs and you are ready to pull the trigger. Even after days of little or no sleep, war keeps us vigilant.

The problem is that we often forget we are in a war. Or worse, we don't even know that there *is* a war. Unlike most warfare, where soldiers at least know that there is an enemy *somewhere*, spiritual warfare tends to be especially covert. No one is getting shot and many

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people—even addicts themselves—seem to be managing their lives fairly well. It all looks like business as usual. Add to this the fact that we actually *like* the enemy, and it is easy to understand why many of us act as though we were on vacation.

A vacation is even more serene than times of universal peace. During peacetime, people still work and go about their normal duties, but on vacation, it is pure rest and recreation—nothing taxing. The idea of doing anything until it hurts is absolutely taboo. “Reduce stress in your life” is the motto.

Scripture understands that life is hard and busy. In fact, God Himself is the author of Sabbaths and times of

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*The desire for anything that Scripture prohibits is an evil desire that comes from our own hearts.*

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rest. (The difference between a Sabbath and a weekend is that the Sabbath reminds us that we ultimately find our rest in God alone.) God Himself is also the One who announces “comfort” (Isa. 40) and “peace,” and He invites us to a place of rest. In fact, His peace is even more profound than we can imagine (Phil. 4:7). But when you examine Scripture as a whole, it says more than “peace.” It is as if peace comes in installments. If we have turned to Christ in faith, we have peace with God and a conscience that is no longer troubled. Yet we are guaranteed that we will not, at this moment, have complete peace in all our relationships (Matt. 10:34), and we certainly do not have peace either in our battle with our own sin or with Satan. Instead, when we turn to Christ by faith, we are freed from the slavery of sin and are empowered to fight.

“The violent take it by force” is how the King James Version puts it (Matt. 11:12). That is the way the kingdom of God advances. With persecution outside, Satan fighting with us by way of temptations, and our own lusts within, every disciple of Christ is in a battle that demands spiritual strength and ongoing vigilance.

### **Show No Mercy to Your Sinful Desires**

The apostle Paul uses athletic imagery to exhort us to fight.

Do you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore,

I do not run like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

Paul is not teaching that our bodies are bad and our spirits or souls are good. He is using the body to talk about our appetites—natural bodily desires that dominate us when unchecked. He is talking about eating, drinking, and sexual desires. He is not suggesting that these desires are necessarily evil in themselves. They simply need to be watched carefully. Or, more accurately, since our sinful tendency is to carelessly indulge these desires, he implores us to have a battle-like, aggressive, rigorous, take-no-prisoners style of life. When your desires start growing into ungodly proportions, beat them into submission.

This is where a disease metaphor is weak. It doesn't lend itself to violence—vigilance perhaps, but not violence. When you are doing battle with sin, it requires preparation and a desire to absolutely eradicate sin in your life. To settle for a truce or peaceful coexistence is a thinly veiled commitment to falling back in love with the desired substance.

### **Fight the Temptations within You**

All temptations are a kind of lure, dangling in front of us, waiting to ensnare us. We are exhorted to do battle with them all. Yet not all temptations are the same. Some come from within us, and some from sources external to us. When doing battle, we need to know the source. Otherwise, it is easy to overlook the contribution we bring to the cycle of temptation and sin.

A popular biblical image of temptation is that of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It is the picture of the alluring woman waiting to seduce. This narrative is an excellent illustration of the temptation that is *presented* to us. However, other temptations arise from our own hearts and imaginations.

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13-15)

The desire for anything that Scripture prohibits is an evil desire that comes from our own hearts. We can quickly identify these temptations by asking ourselves which desires prefer to stay in the dark. Which desires do we want to hide from certain people? Illegal drugs? “Just one drink” when we know that “just one” will open the door to “just one more”? Pornography? More pain medication than we need? More ice cream than



we'd like people to know we ate? We can't blame these temptations on anything outside of ourselves, so "fleeing temptation" is certainly not the only answer. If someone actually can flee something that he deeply desires, then, once removed from the external temptation, he must still take his own soul to task. The reason we are attracted by the temptations outside us is because of the sinful desires we harbor within.

### Progressive Sanctification

The process of doing battle with internal temptations, of taking our souls to task, is called progressive sanctification. The battle with our sinful desires and the sins they produce will gradually progress. In God's sovereign plan, He has determined that conversion would not bring about instant moral perfection. Instead, sinlessness will wait for the return of Christ. Meanwhile, God's plan is that we fight indwelling sin. Since it is God Himself who makes the declaration of war, there is something praiseworthy about the fight as we participate in it. The fight itself brings glory to Him.

This is a very important point: *the battle is good*. It is a sign that the Spirit is on the move. It is a sign that we are spiritually alive and engaged in the process of sanctification. Some addicts are led to believe that the battle against sin is over after a short, name-it-and-claim-it skirmish. When the inevitable temptations arise, these don't fit the addicts' interpretation of what should happen. Eventually, the addict begins to question whether the Spirit is really powerful enough to conquer his addiction, and Scripture gradually becomes something *impractical*, increasingly separated from daily life.

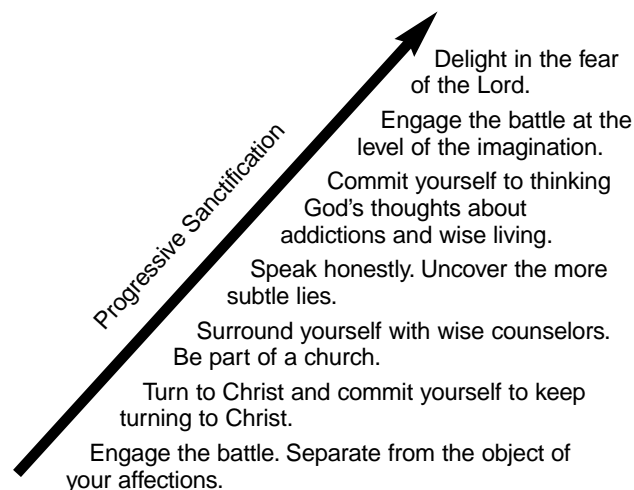
The real spiritual battle is similar to the way the Israelites were delivered from Egypt and taken to the Promised Land.

I [the Lord] have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Exod. 3:8)

This was God's promise. He said that He would bring His people out of slavery and give them a land that was their own. The land was theirs—but *they still had to fight for it*. Furthermore, not all the battles were successful. There were times when Israel fought without the Lord Himself leading them into battle. We, too, have been promised something truly remarkable in Christ: a holy and blameless life. Then we are told to fight for it (Figure 3).

### Satan Is Defeated and We Are Not Condemned

Does it sound odd to talk about Satan? Usually, it only sounds odd to someone who has never experienced the true bondage of addiction. There are many



**Figure 3.**  
**The Process of Change**

sins in which Satan's lordship is hidden—the subtle lies of polite conversation, the fudging on our income tax. But it isn't hard to detect Satan's oversight when it comes to addictions. The bondage, lies, and accusations are blatant.

The kingdom of God, that Jesus inaugurated, overpowers the kingdom of Satan. At one time, all people were easy prey, susceptible to Satan's devices. But now "the prince of this world" stands condemned (John 16:11) before Christ. He cannot dominate Christ or those who have His Spirit.

Scripture warns us to be alert to Satan, stressing that we can "be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power" and we can "stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph. 6:10,11). We can "resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:9). Even more, we can resist him and he will flee from us (James 4:7). Jesus has ushered in a new era in which Satan no longer has the power to blind the nations.

This changes the way we do battle. Instead of assuming that the battle will be lost, instead of just trying to last long enough to slow the inevitable onslaught of the enemy, in Christ we have been promised victory. We are given all the resources of Jesus Christ in our fight. The battle is waged with the passion of an army that knows the momentum has shifted. The fighting may be fierce, but those who know they can and will win can fight with abandon.

Satan tries to accuse us, suggesting that with every single slip we make, we are condemned. His goal is to take us out of the battle, incapacitated by despair. Like an enemy using false propaganda to demoralize its foe, Satan will tell us that we have been abandoned by the commanding officer. Addicts are easy prey for such accusations and lies.

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There is pride, arrogance, and an unwillingness to hear counsel among addicts, but “high-handed” pride is not the only feature of addictions. There is also a sense of hopelessness and uselessness. Addicts feel like they are getting what they deserve. Of course, even this despair can be used as an excuse for continuing their addiction, but it is also what they genuinely feel. Every addict lives with the experience of inner condemnation. Change will not take place under a load of guilt and

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*The reason we can fight with confidence against our sinful desires is that we belong to the One who is righteous.*

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condemnation, so Scripture invites us to the grace that comes from God through faith (Eph. 2:8).

Grace communicates two important truths. First and most importantly, it reveals the character of God. God delights in showing grace to those who turn to Him. God is one who surprises us in His eagerness to show grace.

Second, grace says something about us. It says that we can't pay God back for our sins against Him. Scripture has clear teaching about restitution: if you sin against someone, you pay that person back, plus a fine. This, however, only works in human transactions. If you steal someone's bike, you repay a bike and more. We cannot, however, repay God. Grace reminds us that what we could not repay, Christ Himself paid on our behalf. Contrary to what many think, when we see our sin clearly, as the rebellion against God that Scripture says it is, it actually leads to greater joy.

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? (Luke 7:41,42)

To receive grace is to acknowledge that we do not have righteousness within ourselves. The human instinct is to choose to be miserable and full of self-loathing as a way to do penance before God. This is typical of many addictive cycles. The world avoids any discussion of sin because it does not know the astounding grace of God. We can admit sin because we confess grace in Jesus.

### **Sin Is No Longer Our Master**

A weak and limited view of grace assumes that we

have to pay God back for some of our sins. The opposite misunderstanding of God's grace assumes that grace frees us so that we can do what we want. But we are either mastered by our desires (and Satan) or by Christ. We were bought out of slavery at the greatest cost possible. We were not set free to serve ourselves but to serve and love the living God.

“Everything is permissible for me” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me” – but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor. 6:12)

Our freedom is intended to lead us into more wholehearted service of Christ, not into license to satisfy our own desires. Knowing our penchant to twist God's truth into something self-serving, the apostle Paul reminds us that freedom can quickly drift into license, and license leads to slavery. He urges us not to be mastered by our appetites. Why? Because we were not freed from sin to pursue our own desires, which simply enslave us again. Instead, “you are not your own, you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19,20).

The reason we can fight with confidence against our sinful desires is that we belong to the One who is righteous. Sin no longer has the right to tell us what to do.

### **Tempted but without Sin**

The freedom and power not to sin does not mean we get a heaven on earth. Even though sin is no longer the master of those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, the conglomerate of sin, Satan, and the world wants us back. Temptations will continue. In fact, God Himself allows temptations.

Temptations know where we live, how we go to work, and what we do on weekends. Even if we don't beckon them, they still know where to find us. For those who have wrestled with food, drugs, sex, or alcohol, there are ways to avoid old haunts, but nearly every nook and cranny of life will contain some reminder of the previous obsession.

It is the ongoing saga of the Serpent in the Garden. You walk along, minding your own business, when temptation appears from the most unlikely source. You have distanced yourself from old drinking buddies, bars, certain parties, and places where you might “coincidentally” run into a drug supplier, but who could anticipate the article in the paper, the song on the radio, the sudden emergence of a good memory or a bad one? When a serpent comes across your path speaking lies, you must either run from it or kill it. Don't sit around for a friendly chat.

Addictive sin doesn't just show up and dominate you. It sneaks in quietly. It gently appeals to your imagination. It shows the best commercial you will ever see,

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falsely advertising itself in such a way that you are amazed that you have been able to live without it. This is where the battle is fought.

When temptations come, live mindfully. Look past the façade of temporary pleasure and notice the smell of death that goes with it. If the temptation hooks your desires, go public. Confess it to a friend, confess it to the Lord, get other people praying for you, ask for counsel that helps you to see that the Serpent is dangerous. Above all, remember that God's promises and commands are good. They are intended to bless us.

Notice the strong and pleading exhortations to us from Scripture.

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them....Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity. (Eph. 5:8-15)

Why would God allow temptations? They are divine testings that reveal our hearts. Isn't it true that we really don't know ourselves until we are put to the test? Our advocate, Jesus Christ, was successful in His time of testing. By faith we have His record rather than our own (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus is sympathetic to the testing and external temptations we face daily. He knows precisely what it is like. As a result, Scripture emphasizes that Jesus is eager to give grace and mercy during those times of special need (Heb. 4:15-16). God's Word could not be clearer: there is no temptation that can lead us irresistibly into sin.

### **From Affection to Affliction**

How long do we fight? We fight against the desires that wage war in our soul throughout our entire lives. This is the normal Christian life. It ends when we have been fully made perfect either through death or Jesus' return. In the same way that there are steps into addiction, there are steps out of it.

With regard to addictive sins, the sanctification process often loosely follows this pattern. At first, the ungodly desires are affections or cravings. We cannot understand how we could live without them. Since we know that they are attractive to us, we make clear plans to separate ourselves from any external temptations, because we know that we are vulnerable.

As the battle is waged, the focus is increasingly our own heart more than the external barriers we have erected to protect us. We commit ourselves to becoming ruthless with our covetous imaginations. As we do,

those objects that were once affections gradually feel more and more like afflictions. We still notice our heart's desire for the past idols, but these desires feel like a nagging salesperson more than an object of great love. We wish the desire would disappear but it still occasionally shows up. When we encounter it, we groan, anticipating the day when we will be fully perfected.

This is the course of progressive sanctification. As with a young child, growth is not always apparent over a twenty-four hour period, although careful observers might notice daily changes in vocabulary and interests.

What about those who seem to be stuck or regressing? For example, what if the addict is caught returning

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to his addiction? Is this just one of the predictable slips in the sanctification process? Or is it evidence that the person craves the darkness of the addiction and is once again actively worshiping an idol? We can't really know at the time. But there is enough that we do know. Both the means of escape from bondage and the way to get up after a slip are the same. Repent, remember who God is and what He has done in Christ, learn about our hearts' vulnerabilities, and get help to revise our strategies for battle. If the person is unwilling to participate in a wise plan, then don't hesitate. Introduce whatever consequences are appropriate—with the goal being to rescue rather than condemn.

If someone has turned to Christ, really seems to have engaged in the battle, yet change seems slow, sit down and review the strategies for growth and change. Are they clear? Does he feel like he needs more help than he has been given? Does she still believe lies about God? Does guilt control him? If the person is truly willing to change, and if this desire is rooted in a growing fear of the Lord, God's power is certainly able to transform. If transformation is not evident in the same way, however faltering, the problem is either in the heart of the struggling person or in the lack of suitable help in the body of Christ.

Telling addicts to fight is like telling very anxious people to calm down: it might be good advice but it goes against everything in them. Addicts have been running from things that were hard—and towards things that felt good. Now we say, "Fight." It is not that

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simple, of course. Such a lifestyle change will take time to develop.

This section began with words from Jesus.

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matt. 18:8,9)

In comparison with this, are your methods of waging war quite tame? If so, it is because you think you are fighting with a friend. You don't have the heart for it. Are you afraid to fight the way Jesus teaches you for

fear that you will no longer have addictions as an insurance policy, as something that is there "just in case"? The addiction is in fact your deadly enemy. And God is your friend, who gives pleasures that last and light that only gets brighter.

How priceless is Your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They feast on the abundance of Your house; You give them drink from Your river of delights. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light. (Ps. 36:7-9)

Addictions promise pleasures, but end in agonies. Learn to fight, and you will experience the pains of battle, but end up with delights!