

"What does it mean that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak?"



Just before His arrest, Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He said to His disciples, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). The command came after Jesus had been praying to the Father and had found the disciples sleeping instead of praying (verses 38–40). He had admonished them to stay awake and pray with Him, but "their eyes were heavy" (verse 43), and they kept falling asleep. They slept right up until the time the armed mob came to take Jesus away (verses 45–47).

Because "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," the disciples were caught unawares in Gethsemane. The word for "spirit" in this passage is the Greek word *pneuma*, which in this context refers to the soul of man or the mind. The word for "flesh" refers to the human body and nature, with its moral and physical frailties. When Jesus first found the disciples sleeping, He said to Peter, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40), and then afterward told them all to watch and pray in order to avoid temptation.

The disciples' spirits were willing to do what was right. In fact, just a few minutes earlier, all of them had pledged their lives to Jesus: "Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same" (Matthew 26:35). But, as it turned out, they couldn't even pray with Jesus for any length of time. Their flesh was weak. They fell asleep because of their physical human weakness. They were tired. By affirming that "the spirit is willing," Jesus was saying that He knew the disciples *wanted* to stay awake and pray, but the weakness of the flesh had overpowered the spiritual desire to pray and watch. Jesus was not scolding them but exhorting them to beware of the weakness of the flesh. The Lord Himself was fighting the same struggle against the flesh, but He had overcome it (verse 39).

The story of the disciples in Gethsemane rings true for all of us. We can so easily be distracted from prayer, worship, or a kind act by hunger, exhaustion, sexual desire, feeling too cold or too hot, thirst, pain, and even a persistent itch. The flesh shouts loudly when it wants something, and the ruckus it makes can easily drown out the desires of the spirit. Even when the spirit is willing to do whatever God asks, the flesh remains weak. The answer is just as Jesus said: watch and pray. What does it mean to watch and pray? How can that help us succeed against the weaknesses of the flesh?

Prayer is straightforward. We know that we can ask God for whatever we need. Jesus made a special point that whatever we ask "in His name" He will do (John 14:13). The phrase *in His name* means "according to His will." Is having the strength to obey, to worship, to do what is

right and true according to God's will? Of course! Jesus will answer the prayer for spiritual strength to overcome the flesh. When we feel the weakness of the flesh about to overpower us, we can always pray.

Watchfulness is the other weapon we have against the weakness of the flesh. The apostle Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). We should watch for the "way out." Spiritual watchfulness sees the temptation coming and prompts prayer. The fact that the flesh is a natural ally to temptation makes spiritual alertness all the more important. "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty" (Proverbs 22:3).

The spirit of a believer is willing to follow God, but the flesh is weak. The demands, desires, and fears of human nature can pull us way off track. Satan has set up the world to appeal to the weaknesses of the flesh: lust, greed, gluttony, and other sins are directly related to the demands of the body. Is it any wonder that almost every advertisement you see and hear speaks to the fulfillment of the lust of the flesh? Another weakness of the flesh is the fear that we will not be taken care of. But Jesus spoke to this fear too: "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:25–26).

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. All believers know the struggle. But when we watch and pray—when we remain spiritually alert and appeal to God for help—we can find strength in the time of need (see Psalm 46:1 and Hebrews 4:16). And when we fail, "we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1–2).

Blessings,
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