"I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being." (Psa 104:33)

I was talking to someone some weeks ago and was asked, in light of the number of times we reference putting off the flesh and to be spiritual – "what does it even mean to be spiritual?" Some might think this is a simple question and a thing that should be obvious to everyone, an easy thing to understand. But we're all at different places and sometimes considering a "simple" thing can uncover new understanding. Moreover, I'll tell you it isn't all that simple. Seeking a greater understanding of these ideas is an important part of our growth.

This took me down a little bit of an unexpected path because I found a lot of expository discussion around first, second and even third order causes that initially set me on edge because they tend to dance around some important core concepts. If you've never heard of this multi-tier order concept, it essentially tries to explain "why things happen" – the first order cause is God ordaining it. That's pretty simple and should be our starting and ending point in general. Put simply, people don't go to hell or heaven because they sin or didn't, they go to either place because He ordained it to be so from before the creation of time. There is literally nothing you can do to save yourself, and there is nothing you can do to damn yourself.

That's the first order cause – God is sovereign over literally every single thing in all His created universe. His will and His providence are by definition righteous, holy, true, perfect and just. This is by definition because He is uncreated, therefore there is nothing against which He can be compared; He exists out of time and creation, has always existed and is the creator of all things, including the brain cells giving rise to your thoughts right now and He has dictated – yes, dictated, that's what ordained means in this context – what you are thinking right this very second while I'm talking. Again, that's the first order cause. Sinful and righteous behaviors are secondary causes that make things make sense in our linear timeline.

Now, that sends some people into a bit of a tizzy to say things that directly. It has implications that make people who think of God in terms of men uncomfortable. "God isn't the author of sin" the so-called church fathers tell us, and in one sense that is true. He doesn't commit the sin. He is not a creature and therefore cannot sin, it's simply impossible for Him to do so. Sin is a disobedience of God and He cannot disobey Himself. He doesn't change, and to rebel or reject something of Himself would require change. So no, in that sense He is not the author of it. But He did ordain it. He controls the hearts of all men. He doesn't force, as it were, an unwilling host to commit some act they, were they left to their own devices, would not commit. The wheels of Ezekiel show us that He drives all things and sees all things through. He doesn't let anything deviate His providence from its course. The angels are the administrative arm of that execution, and they go to and fro in the earth to see that His will is done.

The sins, the good works, these actions that demonstrate depravity and salvation are not original thoughts or actions of mankind that are controlled by the creature. In our time-bound and limited view of things, they feel like we created the thought, the action, but that's because we don't see the wheels. Men's movings and shakings are secondary causes; better put, they are evidences that demonstrate God's will and His sovereignty every second of every day.

Now, we are told an almost innumerable number of times in Scripture to control our spirit, seek repentance, flee from fleshly lusts, reject sin, be holy, walk according to the will of God, to do battle against the flesh, to obey, etc., etc. And it is undeniably true that we should seek to do those things. The whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His commandments after all (Ecc 12:13). Fully understanding the relationship between that duty and God's perfect providence may be beyond man's ability to do – Ezekiel tells us the wheels are "so high they are dreadful" (Eze 1:18), i.e., they are beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Please be settled on this point – Scripture doesn't absolve men of responsibility because God ordains all things – Pharaoh was not excused because God hardened his heart, nor are Judas or Pilate spared condemnation due to their sins in crucifying Christ. These are both simultaneously true, that God has ordained the outcome ***and the means***. The actions Pharaoh took in the oppression of the Israelites for which he was condemned were second order causes. God was the author of them in the sense that His will – His perfect, righteous, unassailable will – set in motion from before time began that the Israelites would be denied their going forth to worship, and He would destroy Pharaoh due to his hardened heart and rebellion.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Do you struggle to find a way to defend that seeming paradox? I would encourage you to take a step back from that and rest in Him the way Paul does. When confronted with this question he doesn't mince words, he doesn't dilly-dally around trying to make it comfortable and to meet people where they are. We don't have to defend it. The truth is right in front of every person's eyes and they will see it if they're given grace to do so.

> Rom 9:19-20 "*Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? 20 Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?"*

Do you see here, how Paul doesn't directly answer the question? Or rather, he doesn't answer the way the questioner might want it answered. He gives the simple truth. This is so key to finding peace in this and being able to stand by it as the backbone of the Gospel – none of this is ours, friends. The cells of your body don't belong to you, and none of us gets to question the system our Creator has made and put into motion. I couldn't find a better way to drive home this point than to just quote Job and so I'm

going to read this whole passage to hopefully cement this point into a very real and tangible thing for us to lay our hearts on:

> Job 38:1-40:2 "*Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, 2 Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. 4 Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. 5 Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? 6 Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; 7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? 8 Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? 9 When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it, 10 And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, 11 And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? 12 Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place; 13 That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it? 14 It is turned as clay to the seal; and they stand as a garment. 15 And from the wicked their light is withholden, and the high arm shall be broken. 16 Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth? 17 Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death? 18 Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all. 19 Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for darkness, where is the place thereof, 20 That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou shouldest know the paths to the house thereof? 21 Knowest thou it, because thou wast then born? or because the number of thy days is great? 22 Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? or hast thou seen the treasures of the hail, 23 Which I have reserved against the time of trouble, against the day of battle and war? 24 By what way is the light parted, which scattereth the east wind upon the earth? 25 Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder; 26 To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man; 27 To satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth? 28 Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew? 29 Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? 30 The waters are hid as with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. 31 Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? 32 Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons? 33 Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth? 34 Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee? 35 Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee, Here we are? 36 Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart? 37 Who can number the clouds in wisdom? or*

who can stay the bottles of heaven, 38 When the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together? 39 Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions, 40 When they couch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait? 41 Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat. 39:1 Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? or canst thou mark when the hinds do calve? 2 Canst thou number the months that they fulfil? or knowest thou the time when they bring forth? 3 They bow themselves, they bring forth their young ones, they cast out their sorrows. 4 Their young ones are in good liking, they grow up with corn; they go forth, and return not unto them. 5 Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? 6 Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings. 7 He scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth he the crying of the driver. 8 The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searcheth after every green thing. 9 Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? 10 Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee? 11 Wilt thou trust him, because his strength is great? or wilt thou leave thy labour to him? 12 Wilt thou believe him, that he will bring home thy seed, and gather it into thy barn? 13 Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich? 14 Which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust, 15 And forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them. 16 She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers: her labour is in vain without fear; 17 Because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding. 18 What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider. 19 Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? 20 Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible. 21 He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. 22 He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. 23 The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. 24 He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. 25 He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting. 26 Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south? 27 Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? 28 She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. 29 From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off. 30 Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she. 40:1 Moreover the LORD answered Job, and said, 2 Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it."

My dearest friends, this is so vital to understanding how we grow spiritually. Really take these words to heart and consider all the aspects the Lord covers in His answer. Like

all things He does, it is ***complete*** in a way no man's answer could be complete. There is nothing He does not see and nothing He has not from before time commanded even in what we might think are the littlest of things.

We must spend time in these second order causes because that is the plane of existence on which we live. We are not spirits with infinite understanding and do not stand in the presence of the Holy God as the angels do, which gives them an experimental and physical understanding of His majesty, power, glory and holiness. We walk in the sight of faith but in the bounds of the flesh, which means all that we can truly do is operate in this flesh, except when the regenerated man in us is activated by the Spirit. We have to acknowledge and walk in that understanding and be at peace in that truth for the Spirit to work in us.

In our depraved state, we naturally fight against this truth.

> Act 9:5 "*And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: **it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks**."*

What this teaches us is that while we try to fight against the primary cause of God's will in ordering every single detail of His creation, winning that fight is impossible – His will reigns supreme. Whether you are a vessel made to honor like Paul, or a vessel unto dishonor like Judas; both vessels fight against it even though there is no effective resistance (Balaam learned this lesson in a most instructive way in Numbers 22).

For God's people, while we still resist His will every time we grouse about our lot, try to "solutioneer" our way out of what we see as some spot of trouble or generally reject what He has ordained for us, there is of course an additional conflict against the flesh. We fight our flesh and seek to be spiritually minded but literally cannot do it ourselves. Be clear here – it isn't that we can do some of it and just need a push over the finish line. We **require** the Spirit to work in us to produce even the smallest measure of His fruits. This isn't just a high-level theological construct. This is a real and practical thing to wrap our arms around.

To try and do that, let's first consider definitions from a couple of verses:

> Rom 8:5 "*For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit."*
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> Gal 5:17 "*For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would."*

The word translated "flesh" is the Greek *sarx*, Strong's G4561, which Thayer provides this definition for:

1) flesh (the soft substance of the living body, which covers the bones and is permeated with blood) of both man and beasts
2) the body
    2a) the body of a man
    2b) used of natural or physical origin, generation or relationship
    2b1) born of natural generation
    2c) the sensuous nature of man, “the animal nature”
    2c1) without any suggestion of depravity
    2c2) the animal nature with cravings which incite to sin
    2c3) the physical nature of man as subject to suffering
3) a living creature (because possessed of a body of flesh) whether man or beast
4) the flesh, denotes mere human nature, the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence, and therefore prone to sin and opposed to God

The word “Spirit” is the Greek *pneuma,* Strong’s G4151, which Thayer’s defines as

1) the third person of the triune God, the Holy Spirit, coequal, coeternal with the Father and the Son
    1a) sometimes referred to in a way which emphasises his personality and character (the Holy Spirit)
    1b) sometimes referred to in a way which emphasises his work and power (the Spirit of Truth)
    1c) **never referred to as a depersonalised force**
2) the spirit, i.e. the vital principal by which the body is animated
    2a) the rational spirit, the power by which the human being feels, thinks, decides
    2b) the soul
3) a spirit, i.e. a simple essence, devoid of all or at least all grosser matter, and possessed of the power of knowing, desiring, deciding, and acting
    3a) a life giving spirit
    3b) a human soul that has left the body
    3c) a spirit higher than man but lower than God, i.e. an angel
    3c1) used of demons, or evil spirits, who were conceived as inhabiting the bodies of men
    3c2) the spiritual nature of Christ, higher than the highest angels and equal to God, the divine nature of Christ
4) the disposition or influence which fills and governs the soul of any one
    4a) the efficient source of any power, affection, emotion, desire, etc.
5) a movement of air (a gentle blast)
    5a) of the wind, hence the wind itself
    5b) breath of nostrils or mouth

Both of those are a lot to take in, so let’s break them down.

The flesh isn't just about the skin, muscles and bone of man. It is that certainly. Much of what we do in a day is intended to satisfy some physical need of that flesh and bone; it also includes that ethereal thing called our nature – those things we do but don't necessarily know why or how we do. They can be physical things like breathing. I don't know why we need to draw these specific gases into our bodies and how they are then changed into things the physical body needs to function, but we do. I don't know where the electrical charge comes from that activates our heart. And before some of you smart people who have taken a bunch of anatomy and biology classes start telling me yes we do understand that, I'm going to just say we really don't. We have lots of fancy theories and things we like to call explanations to make us sound smart, but no one really knows why our body requires oxygen instead of methane to properly work. God made it that way is the only real answer. That's our natural existence.

But that's not the full measure of the flesh. Think of our nature as being the driver of instinct. Our nature is what is in play when we decide to do one thing instead of another without any real analysis. The instinct of fallen man is to disobey their Creator, stemming from the fall. Satan's temptation over-wrote, as it were the instincts our natural parents were created with and set those instincts at odds with God. That's probably a weak way to explain that, but it's the best I could come up with. Satan certainly overcame their "as-created" natural disposition in that hour, making sinful enmity the go-forward state of all mankind. Satan was the means by which this ordained state of affairs came into being – God's providence was the first order cause, Satan's temptation of Eve the second. Both belong to Him.

God calls us to be holy, but because of our fallen state, we resist and go to war against that call – even every person in this house. This is the problem so many have – they buy into the lying popular notion that people are naturally good. No, they're not.

> Rom 8:7 "*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."*

So the flesh, represented by the term 'carnal' here *is* enmity, that is active hostility, not has some enmity, not occasionally expresses a little passive enmity, but its **nature** is to be actively hostile toward and against God. It can't be avoided. There's nothing you can do, no tonic you can take, there's not a mantra to repeat hundreds of times a day, literally nothing in our sphere of control which can change this immutable fact. You would have better results trying to make the earth spin in the opposite direction than, by your own ability, changing your position with God.

Put another way – you can't **not** be carnal. Let's be perfectly clear about that. That's the starting position you're in from the moment you wake up because you are a carnal creature of flesh and blood. SO I say again the flesh itself is enmity against God. We say this a lot, what I want you to do is embrace that knowledge and see it as an

element of your practical understanding. This is not a theological theory or academic argument. It is a tangible physical thing to wrestle with. If you think you've overcome that enmity and are just superbly spiritual, you're deluding yourself and mired in the flesh. Don't lose sight of this fact; it is a critical piece of understanding our place in the universe and keeping ourselves properly grounded.

The spirit is nothing like the flesh. It is a different thing altogether. While we are body, soul and spirit (1 Th 5:23, Heb 4:12) we are not creatures of spirit where that property is our driving characteristic. Adam was made from the dust of the earth, a physical creature having the breath of life breathed into him (Gen 2:7). So while we have a spirit, we are not creatures of spirit; I hope that makes some sense.

Let's be clear about two things up front. When we talk about "the spirit" of a thing, i.e., how we present when we are discussing a matter or undertaking a work, that is not really what we're talking about here. Your spirit in a matter isn't necessarily representing whether you are "walking in the Spirit". It can, but it isn't all that is involved.

The second thing to plainly understand is that when someone says they "aren't religious, they're spiritual", they're not either. This is a declaration made in the flesh, an instinctually rebellious statement. What it really means when someone says this is that they don't want to be held to a standard. They want to be in charge and worship their way. Crystals, dream catchers, pagan rituals, use of hallucinogenic drugs to "experience things outside reality", drum circles, candle lighting, incense burning, flailing around while rock band "hymns" are sung, handling of venomous snakes, rote memorizing of Bible passages, etc., are not indicators of spirituality. Some of these things the world calls spirituality are in fact, indicators you might be crazy.

Like all things needful we don't have to wonder what being spiritual looks like.

> Gal 5:22-25 "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. 24 And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."*

Those who live and then walk in the Spirit exhibit these behaviors not because they wake up every morning and put on their spiritual underwear or their special formula hand cream of spirituality, but every single second they exhibit these behaviors it is because the Spirit is instilling these qualities in them and they can't help but exhibit them. When they are not on display, the Spirit is not working through them. It really is that simple.

Look at the list closely, noting the contrast between the "works of the flesh" and "fruits of the Spirit".

- Love – this isn't fake plastic love like you see screamed about on the streets these days by nose-ringed purple haired women who've killed three or four of their unborn children. This is brotherly love, that uncommon bond that true Christians have toward one another regardless of upbringing, race, or any other fleshly point of division. This is the fulfilling of the law.
- Joy – this is not happiness in some generic sense or what you feel when something makes you laugh. This is the joy of brotherhood that comes from you to me. The joy that comes from fellowship and compaction as lively stones. The genuine joy that comes from the presence of a true brother or sister in Christ.
- Peace – this is almost as overused a word as love. This is the peace that can only be felt, a tranquility of the soul that is simply unattainable without Christ. It is peace that comes from the assurance of salvation which Christ affords His people through the Spirit. This peace is not something you gain through meditation or just calm thinking. That can bring peace in the flesh, yes, but peace of the spirit, that only comes from knowing your sins are blotted out, knowing as Job declared, that your Redeemer lives and will raise you again at the last day.
- Longsuffering – this is the patience that enables God's people to adhere to the admonition "avenge not yourselves" (Lev. 19:18, Rom. 12:19). The more I see how shamefully this world is tearing itself apart, the more thankful and amazed I am at the way this group of people comes together, turns the other cheek in the face of persecution and leaves things in the hands of God. The creativity and intelligence of this group would make us formidable foes for those who wish to grind us into the fine dust of the balance. This longsuffering supplies us the patience not to do that, and it only comes from the Spirit, because our natural tendency – as you see all around us – is to conflict.
- Gentleness – the way that God's people treat not only one another but those in the world with kindness, benignity and integrity is a marker that makes them obviously different. There is a difference in how those who walk in the Spirit treat those of the world we interact with, the honesty we bring to our dealings, our approach to interaction that is so remarkable because at some level everyone we interact with wants to snuff us out. That again flies in the face of our natural tendencies and can only come about via the Spirit.
- Goodness – This is closely tied to gentleness but more focused. This is not some declaration that we become practitioners of good works, or that we are always good. It is a change in heart that comes from the Spirit so that we pursue goodness, Biblical goodness, not what the earth virtue signals as "good" in every possible context it can be pursued. The desire we have to be honest, law-abiding, individuals who genuinely desire and do all we can to live "peaceably with all men" and to "honor the king". All of those things go against our nature.
- Faith – As I've spoken to before, faith is not a work. It couldn't be, since it is authored and finished by Christ. Continued and increased faith is a fruit the Spirit works in us to enable us to walk with and in Christ. Without it, our life would only be spent pursuing the works of the flesh, which all lead to destruction.

- Meekness – There is a humility found in God's people that again makes them stand out from the world that walks in the way of the flesh. The Spirit instills in His people a way of thinking, talking and generally behaving that allows them to overcome the overwhelming pride and arrogance that permeates men. This can be achieved occasionally and meekness can be seen in natural men, but this is greater than what could possibly be achieved in the flesh. It is a constancy and consistency that permeates what His people do that is undeniable.
- Temperance – The Spirit provides us with the ability to overcome the insatiable desires of the flesh and be satisfied, content with what we have been provided, as well as thankful for it. Not desiring or pursuing the material things of the world or to use substances that silence the conscience is a unique fruit the Spirit instills in His people because it is literally the opposite of the machinations of the flesh.

So when we exhort one another to engage in spiritual work, we shouldn't be thinking that the person we're exhorting actually controls their ability to manifest these fruits. We should be exhorting them to embrace the intent, make these fruits valuable in their heart above all things; just as when we encourage to greater faith we should be encouraging each other to seek that faith from its Author, not to perform some impossible work. The work isn't making yourself spiritual, it's calling on the Spirit in humility to produce these fruits in you. The work is dwelling in the Word not for the sake of reading it, but so that it might have free reign in your heart and we might all individually and as a body glorify God with that work. That's the goal. That's the meaning of life for us – glorifying God.

> 1Co 6:19-20 "*What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? 20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."*

So, to do this spiritual work requires us to be at peace with the fact we are a vessel, not a free moral agent; to embrace that truth and seek to be used by the Spirit in spiritual ways, fighting against the fleshly enmity against His ways. It means to not put our own standards to what another's spiritual abilities are as though we have done something by our own will to be spiritual and to pray without ceasing in search of this state. It means to seek more time in the things of God than the things of the world and praying for these fruits to abound in us through grace.