

WHY IT'S SO HARD TO FIGHT AGAINST GOD

By Paul Penno Jr.
November 5, 2011

Many people today fear God and think of Him as one who makes salvation difficult and the road to eternal death easy. It's time someone set the record straight on this important issue.

Deep down, how do you feel about God? One possible way to find out the truth about yourself could be to ask yourself whether this statement is true or false: "It's easy to be lost and hard to be saved." If you answer "True," it is likely that your basic idea of God is uncomfortably like that of the one-talent man, who dug a hole and buried his wealth in the ground. When the Lord finally confronted him, he retorted, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid" (Matthew 25:24, 25, R.S.V.).

Many people today fear God and view Him as a pretty "hard man," who lets it be difficult for us to be saved, but easy for us to be lost. And if that's true, then God sits by unconcernedly while the vast majority of earth's inhabitants get tricked into ultimate disaster. He lets the path to hell be a superhighway down which you coast effortlessly into eternal ruin; and the way to heaven He makes into a cleverly hidden steep trail with every conceivable obstacle fiendishly built into it to frustrate as many people as possible. And God stands back in the shadows content to watch the

masses slide down the slippery path to hell, while only a mere handful have what it takes to clamber over all those difficulties in the way of those who want to make it to heaven.

Don't be surprised if your answer agreed with the majority in this little self-test. This is the natural human state, apart from a distinct miracle: "The outlook of the lower nature is enmity with God" (Romans 8:7, N.E.B.). Anybody who thinks he never has had this problem is only kidding himself, for "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Ephesians 2:3, R.S.V.). A good way to start getting this buried "wrath" out of our system is to discover the truth that it is indeed hard to be lost, and easy to be saved. God is a much more likable character than we have been prone to think.

There ought not to be any question about something if Jesus says it plainly. Yet multitudes who say they believe the Bible balk at one of His clearest utterances: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Human nature seems intent on believing that His yoke is hard. Many feel that being a true Christian is a fiendishly difficult undertaking, a heroic achievement that only a few people can ever hope to realize. Naturally such an idea discourages multitudes who may want to follow Jesus.

Let's look also at the apostle Paul's report of a personal conversation with God on his way to

Damascus. Then known as Saul, Paul was truly hellbent, fuming with rage against the followers of Jesus, determined to fight against this faith to the last ounce of his strength. And he had money, official influence, public opinion, and ecclesiastical sanction on his side. Was he finding this path “easy”? Outwardly, yes; we might assume that he was on a toboggan ride to hell. But the same Jesus who tells us that His “yoke is easy” told Saul that the way he was going was actually “hard.”

This is how Paul described his experience: “I was travelling to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests; and as I was on my way, Your Majesty [King Agrippa], in the middle of the day I saw a light from the sky, more brilliant than the sun, shining all around me. . . . Then I heard a voice saying to me in the Jewish language, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you, this kicking against the goad. . . . I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 26:12, 13, N.E.B.).

Easy to be saved, “hard” to be lost! That’s what Jesus said. Why?

The fact is that God truly loved Saul. The poor man was hellbent, but the obstacles were placed in the supposed superhighway to hell, not the path to heaven! Sinner Saul was meeting up with all kinds of inner difficulties that made his way “hard.” The Holy Spirit loved him so much that He constantly pressed into his soul the conviction of sin. Day and night Saul felt the “goad”: “What you’re doing is wrong, Saul. Stop! Turn around! Danger ahead!”

No way did the Holy Spirit allow Saul to slide unhindered down a greased runway to hell. In order for him to go on in his mad campaign against Christ, Saul would have had to repress and stultify all these convictions and promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Lord loved Saul so much that He made it “hard” for him to destroy himself.

When Saul became the apostle Paul, he never forgot the lesson. Ever afterward he was to teach that it is easy to be saved and hard to be lost. He had discovered “good news.” And the Lord loves us no less than He loved this wayward man of old. Christ is the “true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). The Holy Spirit does not restrict this good work to only a handful of favorite people, but “he will reprove the world of sin” (John 16:8). “God . . . desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:3, 4, R.S.V.).

As an example of Paul’s irrepressible “good news,” consider one of his passages that is usually misconstrued to say the opposite of what he intended: “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would” (Galatians 5:17, R.S.V.).

There are two ways to understand this: (1) The evil that the flesh prompts us to do is so strong that even the Holy Spirit is powerless to help us, and we simply “cannot do the [good] things that . . . [we] would,” or (2) the good that the Holy Spirit prompts the believer to do becomes such a powerful motivation that the flesh loses its tyrannical control

over him, and the Holy Spirit prevents the believer in Christ “from doing” the evil things that he “would” otherwise be programmed to do.

Explanation (1) is bad news. As long as you have “flesh” in which to live, you are doomed to continual defeat. This is what many feel forced to believe. Their experience constantly seems to reinforce this idea, for they find the “flesh” all-powerful. Illicit love, sensuality, cigarette addiction, alcoholism, drugs, and materialism beat back the Spirit; and temptation makes them cave in repeatedly. Surely the Lord’s heart goes out to them. He knows how many times they have stained their pillows with tears as they review the day’s failures.

On the other hand, explanation (2) emerges as the best good news one could imagine. The Holy Spirit is actually doing the work; He is “against the flesh.” Whereas we always thought that the rocks were piled up to make our path to heaven as difficult as possible, it turns out that He piles the obstacles in our way to hell. He is stronger than the “flesh.” Every moment of every day, He makes His influence apparent “against the flesh,” against these promptings of our sinful nature, and *with our consent* completely defeats them all. He spends as much time with each person in this constant striving against evil as if that person were the only one on earth.

Which of the two explanations is the correct one?

When allowed to speak in context, the Bible unhesitatingly says the good news one, for it alone is in harmony with Jesus’ words about His yoke being “easy.” It is because He knows that the

mighty Holy Spirit does the lifting of the heavy weight that He assures us, “My burden is light.”

But don’t be fooled into thinking that when you are converted, your sinful nature will never again prompt you to do evil things. We won’t have “holy flesh” so long as we’re in this sinful world. A truly converted person is still temptable, maybe even more so than before. Jesus Himself was “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are” (Hebrews 4:15, R.S.V.), and is anybody better than He was? The one who follows Christ has the same sinful flesh he always had, but he is no longer a slave to “*gratify* the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16, R.S.V.). He is now “led by the Spirit” (verse 18, R.S.V.) into a new “freedom” (verse 1, R.S.V.).

We have Someone on our side who is more than a Saviour in name only: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3, 4, R.S.V.).

Someone may ask, “How come I never knew this before? I have wasted years while under a misapprehension!” An enemy has masterminded a scheme to obscure the pure, true gospel, and has twisted it into bad news. It’s time to get the truth straight, for, rightly understood, “the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith” (Romans 1:16, R.S.V.).

If you are beginning, ever so slightly, to see God in a different light as one who is on your side as you never imagined He is, be glad for the revelation.

Almost everybody these days has the feeling that TV is stronger than the prayer meeting; the lure of the world has more appeal than the service of God. Like a weak distant signal jammed by a powerful radio station nearby, the Holy Spirit seems barely to come through compared with the appeal of the world. But Paul says No: “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20, 21).

Before we understood the gospel, Paul says, “sin hath reigned” like a king, beating back the power of grace like Saul kicking against his “goad.” But when we understand the gospel, grace reigns like a king and beats back the power of sin. This *has* to be true, because if there is not more power in grace than there is in temptation, John would be wrong when he says, “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4), and the gospel could not be good news. But this is what makes it “easy” to be saved and “hard” to be lost.

Remember, the battle is never an even one: grace abounds “*much more*.” It is literally true that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). You have a new Father, so that the power working within you for good is as much stronger than our tendencies to evil as our heavenly Father is greater than our earthly parents.

When those dark glasses of misunderstanding are removed, we suddenly see that the Bible is full of this “good news.” Take another example of Paul’s explosive idea: “The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again” (verses 14, 15).

Constrain frequently means “to propel,” “to push.” To illustrate, try to imagine that you are a poor ignorant slave resurrected from some remote past era before the days of modern cars. Your master has a big, heavy Cadillac at the bottom of a hill, and he commands you, “Take my vehicle up to the top of the hill.” You begin the best you know how—to push. After the utmost straining of every muscle, you manage to move it a few inches and then put a rock under a wheel while you pant for breath. How will you ever get that car up to the top of the hill? (I don’t need to point out that many people think serving Christ is every bit that difficult.)

Then suppose someone tells you some “good news.” Get inside that vehicle and turn a key. You hear something humming under the hood and wonder what it is. Then your friend says, “Move that lever into the D position. Now press that accelerator pedal on the floor.” The Cadillac rolls quickly to the top of the hill!

The “constraining” love of Christ is a power plant that flattens out steep hills like a powerful V-8 engine. This is not some elusive emotional gimmick. It’s a sober equation that anyone can

grasp as easily as learning that two and two is four. See what Paul reports in his second letter to the Corinthians:

1. If One had not died for us, we would all be dead. Apart from Him, all any human really deserves is the grave.

2. Whether or not we confess it, the truth is that all we have and are, we owe to His sacrifice on the cross.

3. Believe this, says Paul, and “henceforth” you find that the “constraint” goes to work immediately. It’s not that we strain and push ourselves, trying to be good. The power plant of grace supplies more than sufficient motivation, so that we “henceforth live . . . unto him which died for . . . [us] and arose again.” (“Should not . . . live unto themselves” in the original language does not convey the idea of our usual vain exclamations, “I should do better; I should stop this or that bad habit; I shouldn’t be so selfish,” et cetera. The idea is that we will find it impossible *not* to serve our Lord enthusiastically once we see what happened at the cross of Christ.)

The Bible truth is that God takes the initiative in saving us. He is not as many conceive of Him, standing back, His divine arms folded in disinterested concern while we wallow in our misery. He is not saying, “Well, I did My part long ago; it’s up to you now. You must take the initiative. If you want to be saved, come and work hard at it. If it seems hard to you, you just don’t have what it takes to get to heaven.”

No. A thousand times No! But many feel that way about God. And some shy and timid ones think,

God does have plenty of good people ready to take my place—He doesn’t need *me*, and I’m not really sure He even wants me.

In contrast, Paul wants us to see the divine initiative at work for us: “Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

The *Good News Bible* says He “is trying to lead you to repent.”¹ The goodness of God is actually taking you by the hand and leading you toward repentance as surely as a fireman tries to lead a victim out of the smoke and haze of a burning building. If you don’t stubbornly resist, you will be led all the way to heaven.

Sometimes we pray agonizingly for some wayward loved one, assuming we have to beg the Lord to wake up and please do something. The idea is that He is unwilling until we touch His pity somehow. But the goodness of God is already working, leading your loved one to repentance. The trouble is that we often thwart what He is trying to do because we haven’t understood the goodness, mercy, and forbearance of the Lord in their true dimensions. We pile stumblingblocks in our loved one’s way to heaven.

True, not everybody repents. Why? Some “despise” this goodness of God. Stubborn, they break away from that leading. As far back as 1892, a thoughtful writer grasped this tremendous insight and expressed it well in a little book that has been

¹ From the *Good News Bible*—Old Testament, 1971, 1976.

printed in 101 languages: “The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 27.

This is a revolutionary idea to many people who have supposed that we must take the initiative and do something if we want to be saved. To them this idea seems backward—if we stop resisting, we will be saved! But however revolutionary it sounds, this is the “good news” of the gospel, for it presupposes the active, persistent love of God. It leaps at you in beautiful thoughts like this one from Paul: “This is what I mean: so long as the heir is a minor, he is no better off than a slave, even though the whole estate is his; he is under guardians and trustees until the date fixed by his father. And so it was with us. During our minority we were slaves to the elementary ideas belonging to this world, but when the term was completed, God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons” (Galatians 4:1-5, N.E.B.).

This explosive idea discloses the reality of God’s true character of love. He counts all humans as potential heirs of His “estate,” but “before this faith came” to us individually in our experience of comprehension, we are like the millionaire estate owner’s barefoot child who is bossed about by common slaves. We come of age when we grasp the truth by faith. Until then, we remain “prisoners,”

and the law is a “tutor” (Greek, a slave who drives the barefoot children to school) who maneuvers us to the Saviour. And what we don’t learn easily by faith, by His grace, we learn a harder way by discipline. All this infinite, loving care lavished upon us individually is to get us to Christ, that we might “be justified by faith”!

God’s circle. It’s so easy for us naive humans to conceive of the Lord as drawing a circle that shuts out bad people. But He draws a circle to include them, at least until they shut Him out by never-ending resistance. The Lord looks upon lost people not as wolves to be shot down as soon as possible, but as sheep who have wandered away—as potential heirs to His estate. His grace still seeks a way to intrude.

What a pity that so many church people don’t yet understand this and consequently treat “unsaved” people like they were wolves. The church has hardly begun as yet to love as God loves!

This being “justified by faith” is something that nearly staggers one’s mind when he realizes how wonderful it is. It makes you want to get up on the housetop and shout the good news to everybody. Christ’s death on the cross offers every sinner a provision for his or her salvation. God has no chip on His shoulder against anyone. And this “gift” is “out of all proportion” to sin, which is “*vastly exceeded* by the grace of God” (Romans 5:15, N.E.B.). Thus there is no reason why “all men” should not be saved except that they spurn the “gift” of salvation.

In his same letter Paul goes a step further and says that “God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). So, (a) God has provided justification for “all men” legally by the sacrifice of His Son, and (b) He has given “every man the measure of faith” to appropriate that justification, if only he will say Yes and exercise the faith already given him.

What more could God do?

It all adds up to the conclusion that if anyone is lost at last, it will be because of his or her own persistent rejection of what God has already done to save him. And if anyone is saved, it will be because of God’s own initiative in saving him.

C. S. Lewis expresses the idea in his *The Great Divorce*. He makes a parable of it, imagining the Holy City to be a mere bus ride away from hell, and all in hell who wish to move there are welcome. But when they come to visit, they can’t stand the place and want to board the bus back to hell as soon as possible. The lost shut themselves out of heaven. It’s not by any arbitrary decree of God, but by their own chosen inability to be happy there, that they end up outside the city.

We must choose. In the final analysis, therefore, whether one is saved or lost depends on his own *choice*. But in the light of the love of God revealed at the cross, even the choice to be saved becomes “easy.” Granted, if we eclipse the cross of Christ, we must admit that it becomes terribly hard to follow Christ. The springs of motivation dry up, and temptation to evil becomes overpowering in its appeal. The Saviour becomes “a root out of a dry

ground,” and His gospel contains “no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). But if we see the unadulterated grace of Christ, that choice to bear the cross with Him becomes easy.

Perhaps the familiar fact of power steering in our cars can help us sense how easy it is to be saved and how hard to be lost. Take a car or truck with power steering and try to steer it when the engine is not running. It’s possible, but extremely difficult. If it is one of those highway trucks, it takes a giant to turn the huge front wheels unless the engine is providing power to the steering mechanism.

But if the engine is running, even a child can twist the steering wheel this way or that. But as the driver, you still must *choose* which way you want to go. You can’t sit in your car and fold your arms and say, “Take me to the post office.” But once you choose to turn right or left and apply ever so little effort to turn the wheel, immediately the power mechanism goes to work and makes the task easy. So does the love of Christ constrain the one who appreciates what He has done and chooses to respond.

The Christian battle. Someone may ask, Didn’t Jesus say, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate” (Luke 13:24)? Aren’t we to be “striving against sin” (Hebrews 12:4)? Yes, there are indeed endless conflicts with temptation. We are soldiers in a battle. But the point is that we never have to fight alone. We are joined in a yoke with Christ—He does the pulling and our job is to cooperate with Him, to stop resisting. “*Let* this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Our own individual

effort is, of course, useless apart from the grace of Christ, but if we don't lose sight of Him being with us, our part is always easy.

Was His part easy for Him in Gethsemane or on His cross? No, His stern battle with self in the Garden and on the cross was so severe that He sweat drops of blood; even His very heart was ruptured in His final agony. Does that mean that He was telling us a lie when He said, "My burden is light"?

No. The burden He speaks of in Matthew 11:30 is simply the burden that we carry; His was infinitely heavy. The faith that works by love (Galatians 5:6) makes our burden light for us to carry, for we appreciate the heaviness it was to Him.

The only difficult thing in following Him, therefore, is the choice to surrender self to be "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). However, we are never called to be crucified alone—only *with Him*.

But, thank God, it is a million times easier for us to be crucified with Christ than for Him to be crucified alone for us. Look at the Lamb of God, and it does become easy:

"When I survey the wondrous
cross
On which the Prince of glory
died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my
pride."

—Isaac Watts

Even if this still seems hard, don't ever forget that it remains much harder to go on fighting against

love like that and beating off the persistent leading of the Holy Spirit in order to be lost.