

Is the Natural Man Capable of Doing Good?

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *Is the natural man capable of doing good?*
- *How were Old Testament saints able to make good choices without a new spiritual nature?*
- *Do we make better spiritual choices today?*

The Nature of Our Spiritual Nature

When Adam walked out of the Garden of Eden, he had a spiritual nature which God breathed into him at his creation (Genesis 2:7). But it was stained by the Fall to the extent that, in both the Old and New Testaments, it says: *There is none who does good not even one* (Romans 3:10-23; see also Psalms 53:1-3 and Romans 5:12-14). So we humans all have a spiritual nature that animals do not have. But it is perverted by sin, making it defiled, incurable, and unacceptable to God. So the question is: “How did godly men like Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, and the prophets become men of God, with such a nature?”

In this (church/grace) age, we have the opportunity to put on a new self, given to us by God at salvation. So Paul says: *be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth* (Ephesians 4:23-24, see also Colossians 3:9-10 and 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3).

Jesus paid for our old sin nature on the cross (Romans 6), giving us a **position** of being holy before God (2 Corinthians 5:19-21). But, this side of the grave, we still have, that is, we still **experience**, the old sin nature, which is what Paul calls the *flesh* in Romans 7. So our spiritual life is a battle between putting on *the new self* or battling the old nature. The new self is *the likeness of God ... created in righteousness and holiness of the truth*, but the old sin nature is summed up in the statement: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

The Spiritual Nature of the Old Testament Believer

Before this (church/grace) age, God continually called upon people with nothing but the old nature (the one with which Adam walked out of the Garden of Eden) to be good. For example, Cain was told: *sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it* (Genesis 4:7). Micah 6:8 reads: *He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you, But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?* Through Isaiah, God told the Southern Kingdom to *Cease to do evil, Learn to do good* (Isaiah 1:16-17). Even in Romans, speaking of the natural man, Paul says: *God ... will render to each person according to his deeds; to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life* (Romans 2:6-7; see also Matthew 25:31-46).

It is true that God gives us commands based on His holiness, not on our ability to keep them (Matthew 5:48). Nonetheless, there are many godly people in the Scripture who, though not perfect, were pleasing to God (Genesis 6:9; Job 1:8; Daniel 10:11).

So we must conclude two things about the natural man. **First**, his spiritual nature is stained by sin, making him unacceptable to a Holy God. His goodness is always polluted with evil.

The natural man can do good, but he cannot be good. That is, he cannot be holy.

It is only through the cross of Christ that he is able to have his sins wiped away and be holy, and thus have a relationship with God. Before the cross, God accepted the faith of the faithful as a righteous act (Genesis 15:6) because Christ would ultimate-

ly pay for their sins on the cross. After the cross, we are to receive Jesus Christ (John 1:12) in order to positionally *become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21). So salvation is not about goodness, it's about holiness. The holy character of God makes the substitutionary atonement of Christ essential for salvation.

The **second** thing we can conclude about the natural man is that he is capable, from within that old nature, of doing good. He can *master sin, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God*—not perfectly, not without some selfishness, pride, and other sinful tendencies mixed in. Nonetheless, he is capable of doing good. It would seem, then, that the spiritual nature everyone possesses, which Paul calls the *natural man* (1 Corinthians 2:14 ff), is the good spiritual nature, breathed into Adam in the Garden, which has been stained by the Fall (eating the fruit which made man morally independent from God—Genesis 3:22). So it seems like we must conclude:

Human beings (before the cross, after the cross, believers, and unbelievers) all have the same basic spiritual nature. We all have the nature with which Adam walked out of Garden.

For example, when Paul says: *put on the new self*, he is not speaking as if believers are a *new self*. They are somewhere outside of the new self, making a decision to put it on. But, if that is the case, then there must be something within us capable of a good decision or a bad decision, outside of the new self, or we couldn't decide to put it on or not put it on.

Bear with me for an illustration. It is as if we are looking in our closet, seeing a dirty shirt and a clean shirt. We could put on the dirty shirt (that would be to decide to sin), or we could put on the clean shirt (that would be to *put on the new self* of Ephesians 4, filled with Spirit of Ephesians 5).

But the clean shirt was not available to the Old Testament believers. They had no option but to clean the old shirt. Now, of course, we really don't know exactly what goes on in our spiritual nature. And this "shirt" analogy, like all analogies, breaks down after a point. For example, one would have to assume that the old shirt could never be completely cleaned and the clean shirt could never get dirty.

But it does seem that, in this church/grace age, there is a different approach to the godly spiritual life, in that we have the possibility of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

What we share in common with the Old Testament saints is that spiritual decision to live in sin or strive for righteousness. The real decision lies not in the shirt but in us as we face the closet. There is no way to escape the fact that, whether we live in this age or one of the Old Testament ages, we are capable of good and evil. Our good is always stained by evil and our evil is always a perversion of what was originally good.

We are like a cup of coffee where pure water is stained by ground coffee beans. There is pure water there (the spirit which God breathed into Adam in the Garden of Eden—Genesis 2:7), but it is all stained by coffee (the sin nature, resulting from the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3).

In my illustration, the believer looking into the closet today is different in one significant way. Unlike the Old Testament saint, the believer of this age has been regenerated (Titus 3:5), indwelt (1 Corinthians 3:16), baptized (1 Corinthians 12:13), and sealed (Ephesians 4:30) by the Holy Spirit. This results in an opportunity to be filled by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

It is as if the person looking into the closet in the Old Testament was a young boy with orders from his mother to "clean up that dirty shirt before you wear it" (like the Mosaic Law). So he has to make a decision, based on his preferences and the law from his mother. The New Testament believer is more like a teenage boy looking into the closet. If he is "in love" and going on a date with his girl (filled with the Spirit), he will be motivated (without any law) to pick the clean shirt (the new self). Because, as Paul told the Galatians, ... *walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh ... if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law* (Galatians 5:16, 18).

Does the Indwelling Holy Spirit Make Us Better People?

What is even more interesting is that there is no evidence that Christian believers of today are any better people, or more obedient to God, than the Old Testament Israelites. There is, for example, no evidence that the apostles were better people than the patriarchs or prophets of Israel. We have more available to us, yet we are not necessarily better saints. The same is true

of Israel compared to the ages before them. They had the advantage of the Law of Moses, but they were just as rebellious as the people before them, say, at the time of the Flood or the Tower of Babel. Those in the Millennial Kingdom will have more available than we do, and they will also rebel against God (Revelation 20:7-10). This side of heaven, the nature of the boy looking into the closet is to choose the dirty shirt.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is the natural man capable of doing good?*

A: If by “the natural man” we are referring to the spiritual nature Adam and Eve had when they walked out of the Garden of Eden, it appears to be capable of doing both good and evil, though it is not capable of being holy, fit for the presence of God. That requires the cross of Christ. The reason Paul says *There is none who does good not even one* is because he is talking about salvation.

Q: *How were Old Testament saints able to make good choices without a new spiritual nature?*

A: At some root level of our spiritual nature we are have the same nature—Old Testament, New Testament, today, believers, and unbelievers. It is from this spiritual nature that the Old Testament believers made spiritual decisions.

Q: *Do we make better spiritual choices today?*

A: Obviously, we do not. There is as much apostasy in the church as in Israel. We have the advantage of having the indwelling Holy Spirit. But it is still possible to grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) and quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19).