The Flesh

Described

In various contexts in the New Testament, the phrase “the flesh” means different things. In the New Testament, some of the primary meanings of the flesh are:

- “the state or condition of human nature and its instincts and desires, not as they first came from God before the Fall of the human race, but as they have been warped and corrupted by the sin inherited from Adam and further weakened and perverted by our own acts of sin.”
- “any tendencies or leanings to sin in our fallen minds, will, emotions and bodies.”
- “the fallen sinful condition of any area of our mind, will, emotions and body which is not submitted to God or under the rule of the Holy Spirit.”
- “the sinful state of what I am without the presence and rule of the Spirit of God which I am personally responsible for not having.”

The relevant Old Testament word

The Old Testament word for “flesh” has a more limited range of meaning than the New Testament word. In the original Hebrew Old Testament, the word for “flesh” is “basar” which means “meat, male sex organ…meaty part plus the skin of men…the meaty part of animals…the edible part of animals”. 1 Vine also says, “Flesh sometimes means blood relative…(Genesis 29:14)…About 50 times, ‘flesh’ represents the ‘physical aspect’ of man or animals as contrasted with the spirit, soul or heart…The term ‘all flesh’ has several meanings. It means ‘all mankind’ in Deuteronomy 5:26…In another place, this phrase refers to ‘all living creatures within the cosmos’, or all men and animals (Genesis 6:17).” 2 Brown, Driver and Briggs say “basar” means “the body of animals and men…male organ of generation, blood-relations, near of kin, man over against God as frail or erring, all living beings”. 3

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the word “basar” is often paired with the word “esem” or “bone” (see Job 2:5). This pairing shows “basar” primarily refers to the body. “Basar” is also used to mean the “body” without any reference to the bones (see Numbers 8:7 and 2 Kings 4:34). “Basar” can refer to all humans (see Isaiah 66:16 and 24) and to all living things (see Genesis 6:19).

The Old Testament teaches that the “basar” or “flesh” of humans is weak, will die, lasts only for a short time and is not to be trusted in (see Genesis 6:3, Isaiah 40:6-8 and Jeremiah 17:5).

Note the Old Testament does not use the word “basar” to refer to the sinful state of human nature. This is in contrast to many of the usages of “flesh” in the New Testament. Psalm

1 Vine, page 83-84.
2 Ibid, page 84.
3 Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 142.
84:2 refers to the flesh of the sons of Korah crying out for God. In the New Testament, the “sarx” or “flesh” never cries out for God but instead is always rebelling against Him.

“Basar” has more in common with the New Testament Greek word “soma” than “sarx”. When used in the New Testament in a literal sense, “soma” means “the physical body of persons, animals or plants, either dead or alive”. 4

The Old Testament sees human wickedness as originating in the “heart” or “leb” or “lebab” in Hebrew (see Jeremiah 17:9 and Ecclesiastes 9:3). Leviticus 26:41 and Jeremiah 9:26 state some Israelites were uncircumcised in heart. This is even though they were previously circumcised in body or “basar”.

The relevant New Testament word

In the New Testament, the word “flesh” has a broader range of meanings than it does in the Old Testament. In the original Greek New Testament, the word for “flesh” is “sarx”.

Bauer, the author of one of the best Greek lexicons defines the word “sarx” as, “the flesh, 1. literally of the material that covers the bones of a human or animal body. 1 Corinthians 15:39…2. The body itself viewed as substance….3. a man of flesh and blood…4. human or mortal nature, children by natural descent – Romans 9:8. According to the human side of Christ’s nature, as far as his physical descent is concerned – Romans 1:3…5. physical limitation, life here on earth. Of Christ, his body with its physical limitations…6. the external or the outward side of life as it appears to the eye of an unregenerate person, that which is natural or earthly…7. In Paul’s thoughts especially the flesh is the willing instrument of sin and is subject to sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likewise present and no good thing can live in the flesh. Romans 7:18…The Old Testament lays no stress on a necessary relationship between flesh as a substance and sin.” 5

In John 6:53-57 and James 5:3, “sarx” is used to refer symbolically to the complete person. In Hebrews 5:7, “sarx” is used in the expression “the days of His flesh” to refer to Christ’s past life on Earth in distinction from His present resurrected life. In John 1:14, 1 Timothy 3:16 and 1 John 4:2, “sarx” is used to refer to Christ’s total human nature. In 2 Corinthians 5:16, “sarx” is used to mean the outward and seeming in contrast to the inward and real.

In 1 Corinthians 1:26, Paul uses “sarx” to mean the standards of fallen sinful humanity in either Corinth, the Roman Empire or the whole world. In Philippians 1:24, “sarx” refers to living in this present fallen human life. In Matthew 19:5, the word “sarx” is used in relation to union in marriage.

The flesh as the fallen evil-tending condition of human nature

As stated earlier, the flesh can also be described as the state or condition of human nature and its instincts and desires, not as they first came from God, but as they have been warped and made abnormal by the original sin inherited from Adam and further weakened and perverted by acts of sin. It is wrong to describe the flesh as used in Romans 8:4-5, 8:8, Galatians 5:16-24 and 6:8 as human nature. In these verses, the flesh instead refers to the fallen sin-tending state or disposition of human nature.

4 Louw and Nida, page 93.
5 Bauer, pages 743-744.
In Ephesians 2:3, Paul says unbelievers are “by nature children of wrath”. He is referring here to the fallen condition of human nature. Before their Fall, Adam and Eve did not have a fallen sin-tending human nature but instead had a human nature which was pure, right and good. After their resurrection, believers will have a perfect unfallen sinless human nature.

The difference between pre-Fall and fallen human nature can be seen in the following examples:

- God has put within all humans an instinct or desire for self-preservation. Selfishness, jealousy and anger are perversions in the flesh of this original God-given desire.
- God has put an instinct or desire for food in all humans (see Genesis 1:29). Gluttony (see Proverbs 23:20-21) or anorexia nervosa are perversions resident in the flesh of the original God-given desire.
- God has put a desire for sexual intercourse in humans as a means of expressing love in marriage and producing children. Sexual immorality and any form of sexual impurity (see Galatians 5:19 and Ephesians 5:3-7) are perversions occurring in the flesh of this original God-given desire.
- God has placed a desire or instinct for order and levels of authority among humans. This God-given desire is perverted by the flesh in the forms of tyrannical dictatorial government, unjust selfish decisions by those in leadership and war.

Throughout church history, many Christians mistakenly thought that when the Bible condemns the desires of the flesh (see Galatians 5:19-21, 1 Peter 4:2-3, Ephesians 2:3 and 4:22) that the Bible was referring to the original God-given desires of the body. As a result, they developed weird body-hating, sex-hating, marriage-hating attitudes which are condemned by God in Colossians 2:20-23 and 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

The whole of unbelievers minds, emotions, wills and bodies are manifestations of the flesh. This includes even their good actions. But because of regeneration in Christ, believers’ flesh is less operative unless believers foolishly return to their previous sinful ways.

The flesh is not merely the human physical body

One wrong view suggests the New Testament expression “the flesh” is merely the human physical body. But note in the New Testament, the Greek word “sarx” which is translated “flesh” only strictly means the human physical body in a few verses such as 1 Corinthians 15:39 and Colossians 1:22. But note in Colossians 2:23, Paul distinguishes between the flesh and the human physical body or “soma” in Greek: “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

Verses such as Romans 6:6, 8:13 and Colossians 2:11 show the flesh includes the tendency to sin in human bodies and any usage of these bodies for actual sin. Romans 8:13 says: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

But note the human physical bodies of believers are also the temple of the Holy Spirit and owned by Him. So if they are used under His rule, they will not be manifestations of the flesh. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are
God’s.” Paul here reveals God owns our bodies and all of our other parts as believers. God purchased our bodies and the rest of our human nature at the price of Jesus’ terrible death.

Further evidence the “flesh” and the “body” are often used in different senses in the New Testament is that Galatians 5:19-21, 6:8 and Romans 8:3-9 say the flesh can only do evil, whereas 1 Corinthians 6:13 says: “...Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” If the Lord is for the body and the body is supposed to be totally evil, then this would suggest that God likes evil. But this is nonsense.

Also, Romans 13:14 says: “…make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.” If the “flesh” in the New Testament always means exactly the same as the physical body, then Romans 13:14 would mean it is sinful to provide food, water and sleep for the body. Such an interpretation, however, is totally contrary to many other verses of Scripture. The sinless Lord Jesus ate food (see Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 24:42-43), drank liquids (Matthew 11:19) and slept (Luke 8:23). He made provision for these needs of His human body.

If in the New Testament, the flesh and the body always mean the same thing and the flesh can only do evil, then talking, going to the toilet and sex in marriage would be evil also. These physical desires, however, are gifts of God. They are fleshly only if they are not under the rule of God’s Holy Spirit and are expressed in ways contrary to the teachings of His Holy Bible. Physical bodily desires are only “desires of the flesh” if they are not committed to God’s rule.

The more Holy Spirit-ruled we are in our mind, emotions and body, after we are born-again, the less flesh-ruled we are. God created the human body as something good. As 1 Corinthians 6:19 shows, He lives in believers’ bodies. Our body can produce evil only when it is not totally ruled by His Holy Spirit.

Here is a specific example which shows the difference between how the New Testament uses the word “flesh” and the word “body”: In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, we see God is happy to see the sexual needs of our human bodies He has created being fulfilled in marriage. In Galatians 5:19-21, however, we see God regards the immoral sexual desires of the flesh as being evil. The flesh is therefore any self-centred wrong use of our body, mind or emotions.

When our human body is under the rule of the Holy Spirit and we are married, God sees an expression of loving sexuality between us and our wife or husband, as being holy and non-fleshy. Use of our human body for sex outside marriage and not under the rule of the Holy Spirit is fleshly.

The flesh is not merely our physical senses

Another wrong view teaches the flesh is merely our five physical senses. The flesh can be manifested through our eyes, ears, taste and senses of touch and smell. But these can be used for God’s glory and will also. The physical senses are only one part of the broader human nature comprising mind, emotions and body which have fallen sin tendencies in them.

The flesh is centred on self

The flesh is centred around self ruling itself and not being submitted to Jesus Christ. It has multitudes of expressions, some of which are self-will, self-centredness, self-assertion, self-

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6 The flesh manifesting through our eyes is called the lust of the eyes. 1 John 2:16 refers to the lust of the eyes.

Our self only finds its right God-intended created purpose when it is in union with and totally surrendered to Jesus Christ.

Other features of the flesh

Galatians 5:17 and 19-21 reveals the flesh desires to do only evil things contrary to God’s will: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish...Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like...” Galatians 5:17 shows the desires of the flesh and God the Holy Spirit will always conflict with each other.

Galatians 5:16 reveals that whenever we are truly surrendered to the Holy Spirit, our flesh and its desires will not rule us: “…Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” Jude 23 commands us to hate anything even spotted by the influence of the flesh.

We will never lose the flesh until we physically die. We will have to battle against its influence until then. This is why it is crucial we continually aim to live very righteous, holy Holy Spirit-ruled lives.

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what the flesh is.
2. What are the meanings of:
   a) the Hebrew word “basar” and
   b) the Greek word “sarx”?
3. Explain why the flesh is not merely the human body.
4. What are some features of the flesh?