

## **Declaring war**

### **The battle with addiction in union with Christ – A glimpse of the counselling process**

Shaun [not a real name and a composite story] had suffered terrible neglect and harsh treatment as a young person. From early secondary school, he found escape through alcohol. Even now as an adult, his drinking has continued to offer a friendship group who are more accepting of him than his family, and at times a sort of pleasure that feels like refuge from what he calls ‘the noise in my head’.

We had spent some months walking through his story of shame. Through gradually bringing his experiences into the light, recognising the wrong he suffered, and beginning to see that it didn’t define him, the Lord grew in Shaun a more secure sense of his adoption in Christ. But alcohol remained a problem. He wasn’t getting intoxicated, or experiencing withdrawal. It wasn’t life-dominating. But his drinking levels were not healthy. And, as that came to light, it was clear he was hiding his consumption from his wife and minimising the amount he was truly taking. Although connected to his suffering and shame, Shaun felt he now wanted to deal with his drinking and over a series of further conversations, it became the focus of our time.

#### **It’s a deeper struggle**

‘I think I just want a bit of peace and quiet at the end of a long day,’ Shaun said, reflecting on his motivations. ‘Which isn’t wrong,’ I agreed. ‘Space and relaxation are God’s gifts.’ We acknowledged together that to desire rest is to desire a good thing. But something is amiss when we seek it in ways that involve harm to our body or deceit and hiding from those we love. If the behaviour or ‘fruit’ is off, then something spiritually is off - something isn’t right with the Lord.

Romans 6 became a source of help. ‘Paul puts it this way in verse 12 - “Don’t let sin reign...that you should obey its evil desires.” In those moments when you sneak some alcohol into the house or sway the truth with your wife about how much you’ve had, those ‘evil desires’ as Paul puts it are wanting to rule, replacing the Lord’s rule in your life. What’s happening outwardly is reflecting what is going on inwardly.’

#### **Believing what doesn’t feel true**

But the question is, what does Shaun do with those desires? ‘Paul starts with a mindset: how we view ourselves in Christ. “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God through Jesus Christ” (v11). By faith we have to grasp a new way of seeing ourselves as we move into the battle with our desires. That bit of it is crucial.’ We discussed how Shaun’s relationship to sin was dead - its power broken - and he was now in a new living

relationship with God. 'It can be hard to understand, which is why I think Paul gives water baptism as a picture in verses 1-4. Buried in water, then rising again, is an image of dying to sin's power and rising to having a new King in your life.' Shaun was able to recall his own baptism as a vivid illustration.

### **But it still feels like war**

When we next met, Shaun wasn't very encouraged. 'It doesn't feel like I'm dead to sin – the relationship feels very alive and well,' he reflected ruefully. He admitted a number of slip-ups. It was important to allow Shaun's frustration to be expressed, and for us to face the reality that the battle remains real. 'I think Paul is saying that sin will be very much lurking nearby, enticing, flirting, tempting, stirring up cravings and trying to rule', I responded. 'It's perhaps why he speaks of "counting yourself dead to sin". It's a call to keep believing the spiritual reality when it doesn't feel real.'

'Can it feel more real?' asked Shaun. Making what we know to be true actually feel real can be helped by at least a couple of things. Faith: we turn to the Lord for help in specific need. Obedience: acting on what we believe even when we don't feel it. That led us to talk over the practical implication of being dead to sin and alive to Christ: "do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness" (v13a). 'It's battle imagery, Shaun. You're a soldier to the King and your body is an armoury of weapons that you present either to God as King, or to sin as a rival power. So, after dinner in the evening, when you feel the desire to relax with more alcohol, what you do with your body matters. Will you allow your mind to imagine a drink, your hands to reach for a drink, your mouth to consume it? Or could we envisage turning to the Lord, praying through these words of Romans 6 and looking for good alternative?'

Our conversation gets into how the body can be a weapon for unrighteousness. Shaun is warned that the battle will, quite literally, feel visceral. Individual battles are won over time, but it is important to remind him that in Christ, the decisive war is won, the power of sin to reign is broken and, alive in Christ, he is able to begin to say no to his cravings.

### **Under grace**

Further conversations lead us to focus more on what it will be like to offer every part of ourselves to God as an instrument of righteousness (v13). 'It sounds a bit abstract, perhaps, Shaun. But Paul is envisioning a life that radiates with all the energy, beauty and goodness of the righteous life of Jesus. Let's think about what that could look like for you.' As Shaun moved into persevering towards change, it was important that it didn't become merely a behavioural programme. The danger would be that such help becomes a burdensome law of dos and don'ts. It's why we need the encouragement that we are no longer under law but under grace (v.14). We have a master whose burden is easy, and yoke is light because he, Jesus Christ, bore the burden and won the battle. He died for our sins, that Shaun, might no longer die because of them.

[Please note that this is one phase of one man's battle with shame and alcohol, worked out over many weeks and multiple conversations, and itself part of a much longer journey of recovery for him.]