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The flashbulbs were going all around him, and the noise was incredible. A roaring tide of sound that made it impossible for him to hear what was being shouted in his ear as he climbed through the ropes.

He was pushed and pulled onto the hard wooden stool. Someone was rubbing his shoulders, and giving stinging slaps to his bare skin, preparing him for what was to come. Another guy he had not met before was pulling at the strings on his gloves in a workmanlike way, not daring to look in his eyes.

There was a sad determination about the cornermen that scared him. These guys knew in detail what was about to happen to him, in a way he could only guess. But the man knew he wouldn't have to guess for much longer.

There was a renewed frenzy as the roar rose in pitch, and another explosion of flashes from the cameras. The ropes parted to let in the Adversary.

As the man caught sight of the Adversary, his ears were

suddenly deaf to the noise, as his guts did a somersault. It felt like his courage and resolve had turned to liquid, and drained out through a hole in his heart.

The man on the other side of the ring was simply enormous.

His muscles bulged and rippled. His biceps looked like iron. His fists great clubs that would soon be pounding him senseless.

But that wasn't what frightened him the most.

It was the look of snarling contempt and hatred that filled every part of his face, and the eyes that bored into him like a drill. It was a look that said loud and clear: "You are dead meat—and I'm going to butcher you".

The man shambled through the formalities in a daze. The echoing announcements were barely comprehensible. His head was low and he didn't dare look into that face again, for fear that he would turn and run. The only thought in his head was: "How can I get out of this?"

"Shake hands, and when the bell sounds, come out of your corner fighting." The familiar words had never sounded more like the last rites.

Still quivering, he returned to the corner. The team crowded round. A last swish of water in his bone-dry mouth. The gum shield shoved roughly in place.

And then he was all alone under the searing lights in a sea of noise which rose to a frenzy as a distant bell sounded.

This was it...

Introduction

This is a book for men who are involved in the greatest fight of all time. It's a daily struggle that anyone who has put their faith in Christ is involved in. It's a fight against three hostile and powerful opponents: the world, the flesh and the devil.

This is a book written *by* men, specifically *for* men. That's not to say that women are non-combatants in this war. They are fighting the same fight. But many of the battles are also subtly different because of the way we are put together. We wanted to express some insights from the Bible and from our own experience to specifically help men engage with the particular battles they face.

Let's be honest

And the first step towards that is some ruthless honesty about the *nature* of the fight. Men are often less able to talk about the deep things they are struggling with. And instinctively, men feel they ought to be able to deal with it on their own. We think it is manly to "do it yourself".

Not so.

The flesh: The Bible tells us that our fallen inner desires wage war daily against the new life that Christ has planted in our souls. And they just refuse to go away.

The devil: The Bible tells us that we have a powerful spiritual enemy in Satan, who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. It tells us he is the father of lies and only wants to kill and destroy. His timely temptations and whispered accusations threaten to derail us at every turn.

The world: As men of God we are called to live and work in a fallen world. But that world is constantly trying to squeeze

us into its own way of thinking. Anyone who wants to follow Christ knows that it is hard to be constantly swimming against the tide of opinion and lifestyle. But that is what we are called to do. To show the difference that belonging to Jesus makes as we live out our lives in ordinary ways.

Some of the battles are obvious—against pride, pornography and the lure of riches and comfort. Others are more subtle and can get to us “under the radar”. If you know you are struggling with a specific issue, we hope and pray that you will find help here. But it may be that this book will also awaken you to something that you were unaware of. As you read it, be prepared to be honest about where you are at in *The Big Fight*.

No magic bullet

We want to be *realistic* about the struggles that men face on a daily basis, but we also want to be *practical* about the way we fight. There is no knock-out punch that will end this war for a Christian man this side of the grave. No magic bullet to fire. But what we have tried to express in the following pages will make all the difference, because the Christian man will arm himself for this fight, not with techniques or clever strategies, but with the truth of the gospel.

That’s why the Bible is at the centre of this book. As we open its pages, we discover it is like a mirror—it strips away the false heroic image we have of ourselves, and shows us as we truly are. Weak and helpless sinners in need of a Saviour. Wayward and ungrateful children in need of a loving Father’s discipline. Proud and self-reliant rebels who need the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives to transform our hearts, and the caring company of other believers to help us keep going.

But the Scriptures show us far more than our need. They reveal to us the unfolding plan of our loving God, who sent His Son to die so that we might find forgiveness. Who raised

His Son from the dead so that we might have new life. Who sent His Holy Spirit so that Jesus' life would grow in us and in our churches. And it is this gospel that we must apply to our hearts, lives and struggles if we are not to be crushed by the assault of these fearsome enemies.

The final bell

Because, fierce as it is, we need to understand that this is a battle in which the *outcome is already known*. Complete and utter victory for Jesus Christ and those who belong to Him. A devastating, total and crushing defeat for the world, the flesh and the devil.

All of human history, and our individual lives, are moving towards the day when that victory will be revealed for all the world to see. But although the war has been won by our Captain, the enemy remains dangerous. The battles we face as individual Christians now are part of a desperate rearguard action by an enemy that knows it is defeated. They are the twitching corpse-like reactions of the “old me”, who has died with Christ. They are the struggles of those who have chosen the narrow way to life, but who daily live with those who are cruising a broad path that leads to destruction.

Our victory with Christ is assured—we just need to keep going until the final bell. Jesus tells us: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life”¹.

And God has given us all the resources we need to keep going to the end. In many ways this book is simply a reminder to you to make use of all the resources He has given us in the gospel.

1 Revelation 2 v 10

Ways to use this book

There are a number of ways in which you can use this book to help you.

1. If you are struggling with one particular issue, **just turn to the chapter** and use the resources to help you think through what your next step is. We hope you will find comfort in the stories of others who are struggling with the same issues, light from heaven in the Bible passages, and some practical pointers on what to do next.
2. You could read the book with a group of other men from your church or in your workplace, and meet to read the Bible together, to discuss and to pray for one another. This is a great way to grapple with the issues at the heart of *The Big Fight*, and you will find you are not fighting alone.
3. Hey—novel idea—you could read it on your own, and reflect on how these things apply to your own life, and where God is challenging you to grow.

However you use it, you should use it *prayerfully*. Talk to the Lord about the things you are battling with. Ask for His strength, and use the resources He has already given you: the assurance of your full and free forgiveness in Christ; the joy of being part of a band of brothers; the privilege of being an adopted child of God—a new creation in Christ; a mind being renewed by the Spirit of God; and the comfort and encouragement of God’s word.

And pray that, in turn, you would be a help to other brothers who are struggling, because we never need to struggle alone. We are called to “carry each other’s burdens and ... you will fulfil the law of Christ”.²

² Galatians 6 v 2

1. Guilt

How do I deal with the memory of the things I have done?

Richard Coekin

“My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.” Psalm 38 v 4

A young man came to see me recently who was emotionally paralysed by dreadful feelings of guilt. He’s a Christian who’s just married a terrific girl. But he confessed that he’s still addicted to hard-core porn.

Like the psalmist above, his guilt was overwhelming him “like a burden too heavy to bear”. Perhaps we all know something of such guilt for various failures of our own?

What should I say?

“Don’t expect sympathy from me. You’re guilty of disgusting sin and you’re a disgrace to Jesus, so stop it!”

Or perhaps instead,

“Hey, stop persecuting yourself. Many guys find it hard to kick the porn habit. Just remember that you’re not guilty because you’re forgiven by Jesus. Relax.”

Which is better? Is he right to feel guilty or not? What does God say about our guilt in the Bible?

The Bible teaches that we're **all guilty** of breaking God's laws. Breaking a law may not be serious if it's an "unwritten law" like not singing loudly on a train. Such guilt only suffers the mild penalty of threatening looks from fellow-passengers.

It's more serious if we're found guilty of breaking government laws like punching a traffic officer. We could find ourselves in prison. But it's *incredibly serious* when we're habitually guilty of breaking God's laws like loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

Unless we're pardoned, the Bible says we'll be sentenced by God to permanent exclusion from His blessing in heaven to suffer His punishment in hell. The Bible warns that God will "not leave the guilty unpunished" on the day "when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (Exodus 34 v 7; Romans 2 v 16). Being guilty of breaking God's law has dreadful eternal consequences.

God's love

Yet, amazingly, although we're all guilty of breaking His laws, God still passionately loves us. He's done something marvellous so that we can be declared "not guilty". The Bible declares that Christ our King "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4 v 25).

This means that Christ our King shrank Himself down to become an ordinary man like us (but never guilty of sin) in order to **swap** places with us on the cross. As our representative King, He was treated like us (guilty) so that we can be treated like Him (innocent). He was punished with degrading and

agonising exclusion in hell on the cross, so that we are welcomed by God as His perfect sons and heirs.

We know that this swap works because Jesus was then raised from the dead, and exalted to heaven, proving that the life He lived for us was accepted into heaven. Let me illustrate with a story.

Three apprentices

Imagine that a respected and successful factory manager selected three of his young apprentices to enrol on his year-long management training programme. There was **Matt** (*able but rather too fond of going to clubs and dating women*), **Phil** (*also gifted but annoyingly rebellious*) and **Chris** (*the manager's own son*).

“Right lads,” explained the manager on the first day of the programme. “I’m giving you each a box-file with your name on it. During the year I want you to fill this file with reports and studies prepared in your own time that record all that you’re learning this year in a presentable format. At the end of the year, any of you without a completed folder of 500 pages of carefully presented reports will be thrown off this course. Are we clear? Good luck gentlemen!”

You can predict how the year progressed. Clubbing Matt came to work each Monday morning bleary-eyed and exhausted but with nothing to add to his folder. Rebellious Phil came to work muttering about how ridiculous the manager was and hardly a scrap for his folder.

The manager’s son Chris quietly began to accumulate well-prepared reports for his Dad. He tried to persuade Matt and Phil to get started. He offered to help them. But they kept insisting that they’d catch up soon. But they never did, and as the year-end approached, it was clearly too late.

Matt swore he’d work all night through the last weekend, but his mates dragged him out to a party. Phil had given up

bothering—he knew he'd blown it. They both turned up at work on the Monday expecting to be sacked.

To their enormous surprise, Matt and Phil walked in to find the manager returning their box-files to their desks with approving smiles. "Well done lads! To be honest I'm rather surprised, but this is outstanding work and I have high hopes for your futures." Turning to his son Chris, however, he was clearly very angry. "Chris, you've totally let me down. This work is an utter disgrace. Now get out—I'm a man of my word and you must go!"

As Chris left the building he winked mysteriously at Matt and Phil, who were too stunned to speak. But when they opened their files, they both found beautifully illustrated and immaculately prepared reports and studies, clearly all Chris's own work. And on their desks a short note for each of them:

"Thought you could do with a hand. All the best, Chris."

Having done their work for them, the manager's son had borne the penalty for their failures.

Actually, the story has a happy ending. Three days later, the manager discovered what had happened. He was so impressed with Chris that he invited him back as Managing Director. And Matt and Phil have been happy to work for him ever since!

This story illustrates how Christ, having lived the innocent life we haven't lived, then suffered the penalty for our guilt, and why the Father raised Him to heaven and why Christians are so glad to work for Him. We can now make four simple observations about our guilt today:

1. Many men don't feel guilty before God when they should!

The Psalmist observed:

An announcement is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: there is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin.

Psalm 36 v 1-2

Many men don't seek the Saviour because they don't fear God as they should because they don't feel guilty enough about their sin.

2. Many religious men feel guilty before God about things that aren't wrong!

The Apostle Paul also warns us about false teachers who:

forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving.

1 Timothy 4 v 3

Many men are taught by human religions to feel guilty about thoroughly good things like getting married or eating certain food or other blessings from God eg: the food laws of Judaism, the fasting laws of Islam or the vows of Roman Catholic monks.

3. Many men rightly feel guilty before God when His Spirit is convicting them of their need for the Saviour!

Jesus said:

When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment...

John 16 v 8

This means that Jesus' Holy Spirit continues to convict us through the Scriptures of our guilt under God's law, to show us our need of Him. This is our experience when we're becoming Christians and throughout our lives as Christians. Our awareness of guilt is an encouraging sign of the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives. But His ministry doesn't end with guilt.

4. Christian men shouldn't keep feeling guilty because we are cleansed from our guilt by Jesus' blood!

The letter to the Hebrews says:

let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. **Hebrews 10 v 22**

He's been explaining that, like a high priest entering God's presence with the blood of a sacrifice for the sins of his people, Jesus has *permanently* entered God's presence in heaven as our High Priest with the sacrifice of His own blood shed for our sins on the cross. This means that the way is now open for us to live for ever in the presence of God **without guilt**, if we are "sprinkled" with Jesus' blood through trusting in His death for our sins.

Let me illustrate with a simple bathroom product. I use a shower gel which happens to be red when it comes out of the bottle, but turns white when used in the shower to scrub me clean. Whenever I use it, I'm reminded that when we put our trust in Christ we are "sprinkled" with Jesus' blood, and so our consciences are washed clean of all guilt before God. We can draw near to God, with a clear conscience that is free of guilt because we are men who have "showered" in the shed blood of Jesus.

In practice

So how do these gospel principles affect what I advised the young man paralysed by guilt about his hard-core porn addiction?

*Firstly, **he's right to feel guilty*** for offending God with his lust. Our sin is serious.

*Second, **he's not guilty of wanting sex***. It's a good desire that has been distorted by sin. He needs to invest in his relationship with his wife, so that intimacy with her becomes more satisfying for him than the twisted excitement he has been gaining from porn.

*Third, **the Holy Spirit in him is convicting him of his sin and his need of the Saviour***. In this sense, his guilt is good news. God has not given up on him, but is provoking him to repent, and showing him that he needs to look to Christ for forgiveness and the resources to deal with his addiction.

*Fourth, Christ loves him so much that, having lived a lust-free life for us, Christ fully suffered the penalty for his porn addiction on the cross so that **he is "not guilty" before God any longer***.

That's why Jesus was exalted. And that's why we love Jesus more than lust. That's why we pray for His strength to dry up the river of porn, and our desire for it. That might involve installing a computer "Net-Nanny". It will involve seeking God's strength from the fellowship of other Christian men who can encourage him. It will involve telling his wife to seek her forgiveness, understanding and help. But most of all, it will involve reminding himself that the cleansing blood of Jesus has washed him clean so that he is not guilty any longer.

Robert: “Guilt is good...”

When I first became a Christian as a student, there was an incredible feeling of being forgiven by Jesus. But a few months on, it all started to fall apart.

I read in the Bible about how God hates stealing. Before I was a Christian, I had done some casual shoplifting. Small stuff. Nothing to put me in prison, and probably unnoticed or long forgotten by the shops themselves. But as I read God’s word, I knew that real repentance meant I had to put it right. But, for various reasons, I convinced myself that it didn’t matter, so I put it out of my mind.

Mercifully, God doesn’t give up that easily.

I began to feel more and more guilty about it until my life was a misery. In the end, I turned to God and asked for his help to genuinely repent. The next weekend I hand-delivered envelopes to the managers at three shops in my home town with money, and a personal note explaining what it was all about. *Job done.*

I’ve seen that pattern repeated a number of times in my life, over things which might be considered much more serious. Sometimes I have needed the help of Christian friends to point out the stupidity of my ways.

Although I hate to feel guilty, I know that it’s a sign that God has not abandoned me. It’s a sign that His Holy Spirit continues to wrestle with the “old me”. It’s a sign that I am God’s son, and that He is disciplining me, and provoking me to grow. Contrary to what the world thinks, *true guilt is a good thing.*

I have known some Christian brothers who have very sensitive consciences. They are sometimes dealing with false guilt, which *is* a bad thing—endlessly agonising over things that they can do nothing about, and feeling

wretched about them. At heart it shows a lack of trust in God's forgiveness. Sometimes we believe the devil's whispered accusations. I've sometimes needed to tell them to just "stop worrying, trust Jesus and get on with life".

I, however, am in danger of the opposite extreme. I am too often hard hearted about sins I need to hate in myself. So I try to pray that God would point things out in my life that I need to work on.

It's an uncomfortable prayer to pray. But it leads to the kind of guilt that I know is good for me. Guilt that leads me to repent, grow and be filled with joy as I experience again God's love and forgiveness for me.

Bible study

Read Psalm 32

- v 1-2: *How can sinners like us be blessed?*
- v 3-6: *How can we be relieved of our guilt every day?*
- v 6-7: *When do we most urgently need to pray?*
- v 8-10: *Why should we stop stubbornly resisting God's instruction?*
- v 11: *How will we find joy in the LORD throughout our lives?*

Discuss

- *What things make you feel guilty?
Should you feel guilty about them or not?*
- *How does the world affect our view of guilt?*
- *How do the devil's lies affect our view of guilt?*
- *How does our sinful flesh affect our view of guilt?*
- *How does the word of God affect our view of guilt?*
- *How does the gift of the Spirit affect our feelings of guilt?*
- *How does the death of Jesus Christ affect our feelings of guilt?*
- *What would you say to someone who confessed their feelings of guilt over unduly harsh words spoken to a friend?*

Further help

You can change, Tim Chester (IVP).

The vanishing conscience, John MacArthur (Thomas Nelson).