

PAUL'S USE OF THE WORD σαρκ

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Why the word “flesh”? This question brings up many issues of thought that are not as easy to answer as one might think at first glance. Of all the words that Paul could have used to describe the corrupt part of man he chose to use the word σαρκί. He could have used heart, as many other writers of the New Testament did, or mind or spirit, etc. In fact at different times Paul does use these other words, but most often he uses the word “flesh”. According to the Webster’s dictionary “flesh” means, “the physical nature of human beings”. If one looks exclusively at the English this can create a sense of confusion and bewilderment. Why would Paul choose to use a word to describe man’s sinful corruption that is normally associated with his physical body? Especially, if it is made clear elsewhere in Scripture that man’s “sin nature” and man’s “human nature” are not the same thing. The only way to come to a clear understanding of Paul’s use of this word is to look at the Greek and understand how a person in Paul’s day would have understood σαρκί when it was used.

The three Greek words that Paul uses are: σαρκί (9 times) – a noun which means “flesh, body, human nature”; σαρκινος (3 times) – an adjective which means “human, natural, worldly, carnal”; and σαρκικος (1 time) – an adjective which means “human, material, natural, worldly, carnal”.<sup>2</sup> As can be seen, Paul uses these words a total of 13 times in his writings. In comparison he only uses the Greek word for heart καρδια 52 times, and the Greek word for mind νοου 2 times.<sup>3</sup> If one believes in the literal verbal inspiration of Scripture then these numbers are not by accident. God through the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to use the various forms of the word σαρκί for a purpose. In order for one to have a clear understanding of how these very important areas of God’s word are to

<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary Deluxe Edition, 1998; pg. 107

<sup>2</sup> Louw and Nida Lexicon – Bible Works 40

<sup>3</sup> Bible Works 40



Co. :2, 2 Co. :3, 2 Co. : , 2 Co. : 8, 2 Co. 2: , Gal. : 1, Gal. 2: 1,  
 Gal. 2:2, Gal. 3:1, Gal. : 3, Gal. : , Gal. :23, Gal. :29, Gal. 5: 3, Gal.  
 5: 1, Gal. 5: , Gal. 5: 9, Gal. 5:2, Gal. 1:8, Gal. 1: 2, Gal. 1: 3, Eph. 2:3, Eph.  
 2: 1, Eph. 2: , Eph. 5:29, Eph. 5:34, Eph. 1:5, Eph. 1: 2, Phil. :22, Phil. :2,  
 Phil. 3:3, Phil. 3: , Col. :22, Col. :2, Col. 2: , Col. 2:5, Col. 2: , Col. 2: 3,  
 Col. 2: 8, Col. 2:23, Col. 3:22, Ti . 3: 1, Phl . : 1

It is unfortunate that any interpreters read and expect Greek to work the same as  
 English. Often it is expected

On the one hand, Paul can say that a believer no longer lives in the flesh (Rom. 7:5; 8:8 f.; Gal. 5:2). But on the other hand, as a believer, Paul still lives in the flesh (2 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:22-24).<sup>8</sup>

They seem to contradict each other, when one attempts to take the word "flesh" to mean only the physical body or only the sinful part of man. However if we understand the passages in light of their full meaning as will be shown later, it can be seen that they in fact do not contradict each other.

From a study of the passages above it can be seen that Paul uses the word σαρκί to refer to three things: 1. The actual flesh of a human or animal (this one is not of concern to this paper). 2. The state of man before salvation. 3. A part of or aspect of man even after salvation. The issue that arises in 2 and 3 is whether Paul is speaking about man's actual "flesh" exclusively, so the inner part of man exclusively or is it possible that he is using one word to encapsulate both ideas at the same time? One thing that will aid in reaching the proper conclusion is to ask, what was affected by the Fall? Total Depravity applies to what aspects of man?

It is generally accepted that the Fall and therefore Depravity has affected man's spirit or his immaterial part. God told Adam "in the day that you eat of it you will surely die" Gen. 2:17. However, Adam did not physically die at the moment he ate of the tree. Later in Rom. 5:2 Paul reiterates this point, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned". Here Paul is clarifying the fact that all men die physically which is a result of sin and all men are dead spiritually, therefore necessitating the new birth. Death, the Fall and Depravity has affect the totality of man, physically and spiritually.

<sup>8</sup> New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Volume 1: 7

In Romans 7: 9 Paul uses the word σαρκί' in combination with a phrase that obviously refers to the use of man's physical body:

Romans 7: 9 I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your **flesh**: for as ye have **yielded your members** servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now **yield your members** servants to righteousness unto holiness. (emphasis added)

The phrase in "old yielded your members" is speaking specifically to the uses of man's physical body. Paul is saying that the way people use their physical body will determine what state they are in spiritually. He therefore uses the word σαρκί' to refer to the current state of his readers. However, given the context of this verse Paul cannot simply be speaking about the fact that his readers have physical bodies. But given his use of the phrase "yield your members", he must not be excluding the physical body. He is using one word σαρκί' to refer to both the material part of man and the immaterial part of man at the same time, and it is important to see both parts. Jay Adams fails to see both:

The specialized use of the word flesh refers to neither the man's sinful *nature* (i.e., the corrupt nature with which he was born) nor to the sinful *self* (or personality) that he developed (as so many others think), but to the sinful *body* (as Paul calls it in Romans 7:5). When Paul speaks of the body as sinful, he does not conceive of the body as originally created by God as sinful (as if he were a Gnostic), but rather of the body plunged into sinful practices and habits as the result of Adam's fall. There is no ultimate mind/body (flesh) dualism here, but only the tension in believers occasioned by the regeneration of the inner man and the indwelling of the Spirit in a body habituated to do evil.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Adams, Jay E. *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, pg. 10.

Dr. Adams sees the sinfulness of man's flesh as simply being affected by a "residue of sinful habits". The problem with this is, what about a person who was saved at the age of three or four? They have the same struggles as those who were saved at a latter age, but they did not have enough time before salvation to affect their body with these habits of sin.

I believe that Paul is using the word *σάρξ*' to give a picture to the fact that although having a human body does not make one sinful, one cannot be sinful without a body.

The believer still lives *in*" the flesh (*en sarki*) although not *according to*" the flesh (2 Cor. 5:3). To remain in the flesh is necessary (Phil. 2:4) and of positive value (Col. 2:4). For the fact that man has a physical existence as part of the physical world brings home to him the responsibility for his thoughts and actions in terms of visible and tangible consequences. Physical flesh is the raw material which reveals good and bad thoughts and attitudes for what they are, so that belief involves commitment to action and can never be a merely inner or private affair which has no consequences for the individual. What a man chooses to do with his one life becomes indelibly clear, and has permanent repercussions both on himself and on others with whom he interacts. 0

This one word *σάρξ*' would have meant to Paul and his readers much more than just the physical aspect of man. It would also have meant much more than the material parts of man. It would have been a beautiful word picture with just one word to show his readers and all of us today that our sin has completely affect our entire being including our physical body. So much so that without this physical body I would not be able to

manifest sin in this world. It is such a core that a sin has incarnated in the body". Therefore Paul refers to it as a "body of sin" Ro 7:5.

The other side of this coin is just as true and helpful. The only thing I have in this life to manifest my salvation with and show others that I am a child of God is my flesh", my body. This sheds light on other passages like Ro 8:2; Ro 8:9; Jas. 2:26; and Jesus teaching throughout the Gospels that "You shall know the truth by their fruit". Our bodies, our flesh" have been affected by sin, not in the sense of sinfully incarnated, but by the curse of sin. I am dying physically and my body is the instrument by which all my sinful actions are manifest in this world. However, in Christ I no longer have to yield my body to the sinful desires. I can yield my body to serve Christ, but I have to yield my body, my flesh.

The conclusion is the simply having flesh does not make one sinful (Christ proved that), but one cannot be sinful without flesh. Paul was able to show this to his readers not just using one word σάρξ, because to his readers that word carried with it a much fuller meaning than we give the English word flesh". My body is the tool with which I will choose to serve God, Satan or myself. In Christ I have the ability to serve God with my body, so that even though I still live in the flesh" I do not have to live according to the flesh".

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