
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH

Kansas City, Missouri

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

The Sin Cycle

Breaking Free from What Bogs Us Down

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

— Hebrews 12:1–2 (NIV)

Dr. Stan Archie

Senior Pastor & Co-Founder

Christian Fellowship Baptist Church · Kansas City, Missouri

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SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 7:18–20, 24–25 (NIV)

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

When we were growing up, some of us wore ankle weights. You strapped them on in the morning and wore them all day, the idea being that they would make you stronger and faster—build up your calves, your thighs—so that when it came time to race, you could fly. And here was the strange thing about them: you wore them so long that you forgot you had them on. They became part of you. You stopped feeling the weight. You only felt it when it mattered. Walking home from school, some kid would yell, “Race you to the corner!” and you would take off—and somewhere between here and there you would realize that something was dragging you down, that you were not running anywhere near as fast as you knew you were built to run.

That is a parable of the Christian life. God has set a finish line in front of every one of us—a kingdom assignment, a purpose, a calling we were made to reach. And yet many sincere believers find that they simply cannot run the race they were designed for. It is not that they don’t love God. It is that they are carrying weights they have forgotten they put on. The drag is real, but the cause has become invisible.

“You can’t achieve the goal you were called to achieve, because you’re carrying weights that are bogging you down.”

This is why we have to draw a careful distinction at the very start of the week: there is a difference between committing a sin and being caught in a sin cycle. A single sin is an event. A sin cycle is a reproductive pattern—an internal algorithm of automatic triggers that we respond to without ever deciding to. Think of how it works in ordinary life: you smell food and you reach for a fork before you’ve thought about it. The algorithm is always feeding you, and when you are not paying attention, you simply do whatever it demands. Some of us have built spiritual algorithms. Many of us have built carnal ones—and they keep running in the background whether we are watching them or not.

The Apostle Paul names this exact frustration in Romans 7. “What I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” That is not the language of a man who fell once; it is the language of a man trapped in a cycle, feeling the drag and unable to find its source. And notice where it drives him: not to despair, but to a cry—“Who will rescue me?” The frustration you feel is not proof that you don’t belong to God. It is the holy ache of someone who has finally noticed the weights.

So here is our thesis for the week: God's kingdom agenda is often hindered not by our most dramatic failures, but by a cycle we have stopped noticing. Before we can ever be free, we have to feel the drag again. We have to become aware of what we've grown numb to. This week is an invitation to do exactly that—to stop, to feel the weights, and to bring them honestly to the only One strong enough to take them off.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *When I think honestly about the “race” God has set before me, where do I sense a drag I can’t fully explain—a place where I’m moving slower than I know I was built to move?*
2. *What automatic responses run in me without my permission—the words, reactions, or appetites that simply “come out” when a trigger appears? What do they reveal about the algorithm I’ve been feeding?*
3. *If I named one weight I’ve grown so used to that I’ve stopped noticing it, what would it be—and what would running without it actually feel like?*
4. *Like Paul, am I willing to stop privately managing this cycle and cry out, “Who will rescue me?”—naming today the One I am asking to do what I cannot do for myself?*

DAY TWO

UNDERSTANDING WHAT SIN REALLY IS

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 3:22–24 (NIV)

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Before we can break a cycle, we have to know what we are actually dealing with. And most of us are carrying a definition of sin that is far too small. We tend to think of sin as the bad thing we did—a line we stepped over. Scripture asks us to see it more accurately and more searchingly.

Here is a fuller definition: sin is failing to hit God’s intended target for our lives. The traditional phrase is “missing the mark,” but hear it precisely. There was an intended mark. You were responsible for hitting it. And it did not get hit. This matters, because some of us comfort ourselves by saying, “Well, I didn’t even try.” But not trying does not move you off the hook—it confirms it. The definition is not “I aimed and missed.” The definition is simply that the mark went unhit, and you were the one assigned to hit it.

Picture the difference between dodgeball and football. Dodgeball is a game of pure avoidance; you spend the entire time trying not to get hit. A great many believers are playing spiritual dodgeball—their whole walk is organized around “I didn’t do anything wrong.” But the Christian life is football. In football you take the hits in order to cross the goal line. Sin, then, is not only the wrong thing you did; it is also the assignment you never advanced. Some people aren’t accomplishing anything at all—they’re just not getting hit—and that does not advance the kingdom one inch.

“Dodgeball, you spend your life avoiding sins. Football, you take the hits to make the touchdown. Sin is not hitting the mark.”

This is why Paul says we have all “fallen short of the glory of God.” God did not receive the glory He intended from a life He designed for a purpose. James presses the very same nerve from the other side: “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them” (James 4:17). Sin is not merely crossing a forbidden line; it is leaving undone the good you were made to do. For many of us, that is the harder word—because we have been measuring ourselves by what we’ve avoided rather than by what we’ve advanced.

There is an old saying worth carrying into this week: touchdowns are not made on the field; they are made in the practice room and in the huddle. If you are not in the practice room, don’t worry about what happens on the field. Most of us, honestly, are not in the practice room. We hear the Word on Sunday like it was an entertainment show, and then we never live it out. This very devotional is part of the practice room—studying the playbook between huddles, taking the truth deeper than Sunday and pressing it into the ordinary places of your Monday-through-Saturday life. That is where touchdowns are actually made.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *Have I been playing spiritual dodgeball—measuring my walk mostly by what I’ve avoided, rather than by the assignment God has actually called me to advance?*
2. *What is the “good I ought to do” that I already know about and keep leaving undone? Where am I missing the mark not by what I’ve done, but by what I haven’t?*
3. *What would it look like this week to move off the field and into the practice room—to actually rehearse and live out what I hear, instead of only receiving it?*
4. *What is one specific kingdom target God has set in front of me that I’m willing to start running toward this week, even if it means taking some hits to get there?*

DAY THREE

TRESPASS AND SIN ARE NOT THE SAME

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 51:1–4 (NIV)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

One of the most freeing—and most convicting—distinctions in all of Scripture is this: there is a difference between a trespass and a sin. A trespass is committed against people; it disrupts someone else’s life. A sin is committed against God. They are not the same account, and we get tangled up precisely because we treat them as if they were.

Consider a car accident. You run a red light and strike someone’s car. In that single moment two different things have gone wrong. You have trespassed against that person—their day, their safety, their property—and you have also missed the mark of the law itself. Two distinct debts, settled in two distinct places. Apologizing to the driver does not square you with the law, and squaring with the law does not, by itself, repair what you did to the driver.

“You can trespass against everyone. You can sin against no one but God. Your sin is against God.”

Now look at David. We tend to talk about the affair and the murder—and rightly so; those were horrific trespasses. He took a husband’s life and shattered a household’s peace. Yet when David finally breaks open before God, he says something that sounds almost shocking: “Against you, you only, have I sinned.” He is not pretending Bathsheba and Uriah weren’t wronged. He is recognizing that the trespass against them and the sin against God are two separate ledgers. Saying sorry to the people he hurt would never have healed what was broken between him and the Lord.

Here is why this matters so much for the cycle: trespasses don’t usually pull us into a cycle—but sins always do. You can apologize for losing your temper and remain fully inside the anger cycle. David could have said “I’m sorry” and simply moved to the next rooftop, because handling the trespass leaves the sin cycle completely intact. This is the trap so many of us live in: “I lost my temper, I apologized”—and we think the matter is closed, when in truth we’ve only addressed the trespass and left the cycle alive and running.

But there is good news hidden in this distinction, and it is enormous: I don’t have to keep worrying about my trespasses if I let God fix my sins. When the cycle is broken at its root—between you and God—the trespasses against others begin to dry up at the source. Drive according to the law, and the accidents become far less likely. The goal of the Christian life is not an endless string of apologies for the same recurring damage. The goal is to bring the cycle underneath the apologies to God and let Him deal with it once and for all.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *Where have I been treating an apology to a person as if it settled everything—handling the trespass while leaving the sin cycle underneath it completely untouched?*
2. *Like David, can I name the place where I've been more concerned about who I hurt than about what I've broken with God? What is the "against You only" I have been avoiding?*
3. *What would change if I asked God to deal with the root of a recurring sin, instead of just managing the damage it keeps causing the people around me?*
4. *Is there a sin I need to bring directly to God this week—not merely as a confession of bad behavior, but as the surrender of a cycle I have never actually let Him break?*

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 5:20–21 (NIV)

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

There is a particular danger built into the sin cycle, and it is one of the quietest: normalization. What you normalize, you stop resisting. And we are remarkably quick to normalize sin—to let it become so familiar that it no longer registers as a problem at all.

Think about walking into a dark room. At first you can't see anything; the darkness is obvious and uncomfortable. But stand there long enough and your eyes begin to adjust. Wait a little longer and you forget it is even dark—you start moving around the room comfortably, and you can't understand why anyone would make a fuss. That is precisely what sin does to us. As long as we can still “see” in it, it stops bothering us. We don't turn on the light; we simply adjust to the dark.

Picture cleaning a movie theater under the dim house lights. Everything looks clean. It looks really, really good. Then someone flips on the bright fluorescent work lights, and suddenly there's popcorn all over the place, crumbs under every row, mess you never saw in the comfortable dim glow. God says that everything done in darkness will eventually come to light—He shines the full, fluorescent light on exactly the things we had grown used to and felt fine about. What looked clean in the dim light is exposed the moment the real light comes on.

“What you normalize, you stop resisting. As long as you can see in the dark, it seems okay.”

That is why Isaiah's “woe” is so sobering. It is not aimed merely at people who sinned—it is aimed at people who relabeled their sin. They called evil good and good evil. They switched the signs, put bitter for sweet, and got comfortable. Normalizing is never neutral; it is a quiet act of rebellion that renames what God has already named. And it is contagious—because once a thing is normal, no one in the room is willing to call it what it is.

Hear this plainly: sin is deceitful, and it is patient. In a sense it has been around far longer than you have, and it is smarter than you are—which is exactly why this cannot be a battle you fight occasionally, alone, in the dark. The longer we go without the light—without the Word, without honest community—the more our eyes adjust to things that should still horrify us. The call today is to refuse the adjustment: to keep asking God to turn the fluorescent lights all the way on, even—especially—where the dim light has started to feel more comfortable than the truth.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *What is something in my life that used to trouble my conscience but doesn't anymore—not because it changed, but because my eyes adjusted to it?*
2. *Where have I quietly switched the labels—calling something “not that bad,” “just how I am,” or “everybody does it”—that God still calls darkness?*
3. *If God flipped the fluorescent lights on over my private life today, what would suddenly become visible that the comfortable dim light has been hiding?*
4. *What is one area where I'm willing to invite the light back in this week—through Scripture, confession, or an honest conversation—instead of waiting for my eyes to keep adjusting?*

SCRIPTURE READING

Hebrews 3:12–14 (NIV)

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Yesterday we saw that sin is deceitful. Today’s passage tells us what deceitful sin actually does over time: it hardens us. And the hardening happens by drifting. Notice—nobody ever decides to drift. You drift precisely because you stopped paying attention, and you almost always drift alone.

The writer of Hebrews hands us the antidote, and he repeats it like a heartbeat: Today... Today. “Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today.” Why daily? Because every single day you let pass without connecting is a day that sin’s deceitfulness gets to work on you in the dark. Cut out the small groups, cut out the one-on-one relationships, cut out discipleship—and you don’t merely stand still; you drift, and the drift accelerates.

Let’s be honest about why community matters this much. When we get to do whatever we want with no believers around—no one we are jointly accountable to—sin has us. You can sit in a room where everyone is doing the same thing and never feel a flicker of conviction, simply because no one in the room is willing to call it what it is. That is not innocence; that is an echo chamber. The absence of a voice that tells you the truth is not freedom—it is danger dressed up as comfort.

And so comes the hard line, spoken as love: you don’t play for the team—you just wear the shirt. It is entirely possible to carry the uniform, the vocabulary, and even the church attendance while still running a carnal algorithm, because we never actually joined the huddle. Faith was never designed to be a solo, online-only, twice-a-month arrangement we quietly negotiate down to whatever we can manage on our own. “Today” is both God’s gift and God’s urgency—the relationships and rhythms that keep us soft, that keep us from hardening before we even notice the change.

“You don’t play for the team. You just wear the shirt.”

This is also where breaking the cycle becomes wonderfully practical. We can diagnose ourselves individually, letting the Word convict and correct us as we read. We can let a brother or sister speak honestly into our lives, one to one. We can sit in a small group where people are genuinely working to encourage one another. We can come to the gathering not as spectators at a show, but as students with a playbook open. The six-day devotional you are holding is one of those rhythms—one of the ways the sermon gets driven deeper than Sunday. Hear it clearly: the cycle rarely breaks in isolation. It breaks in the light, in community, today.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *Where have I been drifting—not by a dramatic decision, but by a slow accumulation of days I let pass without connecting to God and to His people?*
2. *Am I genuinely on the team, or have I been content to wear the shirt—keeping the appearance of faith while quietly negotiating my commitment down to what I can manage alone?*
3. *Who is one person I could invite to speak honestly into my life this week—someone actually allowed to tell me the truth about a pattern I cannot see by myself?*
4. *What rhythm of “Today” is God asking me to rebuild—daily Scripture, a small group, a discipling relationship—so that I stop hardening in the dark?*

DAY SIX

SLAVES, STRONGHOLDS, AND THE WAR WE CAN'T WIN ALONE

SCRIPTURE READING

2 Corinthians 10:3–5 (NIV)

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

All week we have been learning to see the cycle. Today we name what it really is and where the real battle is actually fought. Jesus is blunt about it: “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). A trespass does not enslave you, but a sin cycle does—because in the cycle you have surrendered authority and created a debt that you keep having to pay, again and again, with something valuable. The cycle is not just a bad habit. It is a master.

Now here is the liberating reversal in 2 Corinthians 10. We naturally assume the fight is “out there”—against people, against circumstances, against the world. But Paul says the weapons of our warfare have divine power to demolish strongholds, and the stronghold is in me. The war is not mainly against the world; it is against the fortress in my own thinking. And it cannot be won with the world’s weapons—manipulation, willpower, lying, hiding, performance. Absent God, you simply cannot win this fight. Everything the world hands you to fight with comes from the very system that put you in bondage.

So what exactly is the stronghold? Paul defines it: every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God—every place where I present myself as more important, more knowledgeable, more spiritual, or more capable than I actually am. Strip it down and the stronghold is simply the thought that I know more than God. And it rarely announces itself. It speaks politely: I’ll come twice a month and watch the rest online. I don’t really think it’s that bad. I’ve got this handled myself. Each of those is an argument with God—said courteously, but an argument all the same.

And we must be honest that sin always costs. What God gives us to last a lifetime, we can burn through in a single season of indulgence and then spend years accommodating the deficit—paying for what we used up in a moment we thought was free. Sin is never free; your sins are always going to cost you something, and the bill always comes due, even on a deferment. The things you don’t take care of will eventually take care of you.

“The stronghold is that you think you know more than God. Sin is never free.”

So how is this war won? Not by trying harder against the world, but by surrender: we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. We let God demolish the pretension that we know better than He does, and we hand the throne of our own thinking back to the One it was never meant to be taken from. This is where the cycle finally begins to end—not in our strength, but in our surrender. The full path out of the cycle is still unfolding, and

there is more for us to learn together; but it starts here, today, with a heart that stops arguing and says, “Lord, You are right, and I am Yours.”

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. *Where has a recurring sin become a master rather than a moment—something I keep paying for because I’ve handed it authority over me?*
2. *What “argument with God” have I been making politely—the area where I quietly insist I know better than He does about how I should live?*
3. *What has a particular sin already cost me that I’m still paying for—and what is it costing the people and the calling around me?*
4. *What thought, pretension, or stronghold is God asking me to take captive and surrender to Christ this week, trusting Him to fight the battle I cannot win alone?*

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we come to You as people who have been running with weights we forgot we were wearing. We have felt the drag without ever naming it, blaming our slowness on everything except the cycle underneath it. Open our eyes to what is actually bogging us down. Let us feel again the things we have grown numb to, so that we can lay them aside and run the race You have set before us.

Teach us what sin truly is. We have measured ourselves by what we managed to avoid, when all along You were calling us toward a mark we were made to hit. Forgive us for playing dodgeball with our discipleship—for being content not to get hit while Your kingdom assignment goes unadvanced. Move us off the field and into the practice room. Make us doers of Your Word, and not hearers only.

We confess, with David, that against You and You only have we sinned. We have apologized to people and called the matter finished, while the cycle stayed alive and running inside us. We have managed the damage and never surrendered the root. So we bring You not only our trespasses but our sins—the patterns we have hidden, the cycles we have never once let You break. You are right in Your verdict; You are justified when You judge. Have mercy on us, and cleanse us.

Forgive us for how comfortable we have become in the dark. We have let our eyes adjust to things that should still grieve us, switched the labels, and called evil “not that bad.” Turn the light on, Lord—all the way on—even where it exposes us. And rescue us from the drift. Where we have cut ourselves off, pulled back from Your people, and quietly negotiated our commitment down to something we could control, draw us back into the gathering, into honest community, into Today. Keep our hearts soft while it is still called Today.

We admit that the real battle was never out there. The stronghold is in us—the pretension that we know more than You, the arguments we keep making politely while we hold on to the throne of our own thinking. We cannot win this war with the world’s weapons; we have tried, and we are tired. So we take captive every thought and lay it at Your feet. Demolish everything in us that has set itself up against the knowledge of You. Be the Master where sin has been the master, and break the cycle we could never break ourselves.

And having seen the weights, named the sin, refused the darkness, and surrendered the stronghold, we now make ourselves available to You. Free us not merely to feel better, but to run—to cross the goal line, to advance Your kingdom, to stand where You have designed us to stand for the people You have placed around us. We are Your team, Lord, not merely wearers of the shirt. Send us out lighter, clearer, and wholly Yours.

In the mighty name of Jesus, Amen.