Freedom from Sin
Romans 7:14-25
P13

It is said that a flippant young man remarked to a preacher in mocking fashion, “You say that unsaved people carry a great weight of sin. Frankly, I feel nothing. How heavy is sin? Ten pounds? Fifty pounds? Eighty pounds? A hundred pounds?”

The preacher thought for a moment, then replied, “If you laid a four hundred pound weight on a corpse, would it feel the load?”

The young man was quick to say, “Of course not; it’s dead” Driving home his point the preacher said, “The person who doesn’t know Christ is equally dead. And though the load is great, he feels none of it”

The Christian, unlike the average non-Christian, is not indifferent to the weight of sin. He is actually hypersensitive to it. Having come to Jesus Christ, his senses are awakened to the reality of sin. His sensitivity to sin intensifies as he matures spiritually. Such sensitivity prompted a saint as great as Chrysostom, the fourth century church father, to say he feared nothing but sin (*Second Homily on Eutropius*).

The apostle Paul would heartily agree. In Romans 7:14–25 he says,

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicingwhat I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

That passage is a poignant description of someone in conflict with himself someone who loves God’s moral law and wants to obey it, but is pulled away from doing so by the sin that is in him. It is the personal experience of a soul in conflict.

The Controversy

There has always been debate whether Paul was describing a Christian or a non Christian in this passage. Some people say there is too much bondage to sin in view for this passage to refer to a Christian. Others say there is too much desire to do good for a non Christian. You can't be a Christian and be bound to sin, and you can't be a non Christian and wholeheartedly desire to keep the law of God. Therein is the conflict of interpreting the passage.

THE NON-CHRISTIAN VIEW

Those who believe Romans 7:14–25 is speaking of a non Christian say verse 14 is the key: "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" Then they point to verse 18, which says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not." They conclude that has to be a non-Christian because a Christian knows how to do what's good. There seems to be an obvious lack of the Holy Spirit's power here.

The despair of verse 24—"Wretched man that I am!"—seems far removed from the promise of Romans 5:1–2: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God."

Romans 6 has many examples of the believer's freedom from sin's power. Verse 2 says, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" Verses 6–7 say, "Our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin." Verses 11–12 say, "Consider yourselves to be dead to sin.... Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body." Verses 17–18 say, "Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." How can the person who said all that turn around and say, "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" (7:14)?

Chapter 6 emphasizes the new creation, the new nature, the new identity, the new person in Christ, and the holiness of the believer. In his new redeemed self, the believer is no longer under sin's dominion. However, chapter 7 gives the other side.

Every Christian knows from experience that though he is a new creature in Christ, sin is still a problem. In fact, that conflict is pointed out even in chapter 6: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness" (vv. 12–13). Because it's still possible for Christians to yield to sin, we are commanded not to.

Arguing that chapter 7 cannot refer to a Christian because of statements in chapter 6 is to misunderstand the intention of chapter 6.

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

Paul says, "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man" (Romans 7:22). That certainly isn't something a non Christian could accu-rately claim. Romans 8:7 says that the unregenerate

person is not subject to the law of God.

In Romans 7:25 Paul says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God.” That sounds like a Christian.

The following verses describe Paul’s thwarted desire to do what is right: “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.…For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want....I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good” (vv. 15, 18–19, 21).

Romans 3 tells us that the unsaved person has no such longing to do the will of God: “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God....There is none who does good, there is not even one....There is no fear of God before their eyes” (vv. 11–12, 18). Therefore the conflict described in Romans 7 can be true of a redeemed person only.

Another question comes up at this point that has sparked an equally furious debate: What kind of Christian is Romans 7 talking about?

Some believe he’s a carnal Christian—one with a low level of spirituality who is trying in his own strength to keep the law. However Romans 7:14–25 describes a believer who clearly sees the inability of his flesh to uphold the divine standard. The more spiritual or mature a believer is, the greater his sensitivity to his shortcomings will be. An immature Christian doesn’t have such an honest self-perception. The legalist is under the illusion that he is very spiritual. I believe Paul is describing himself in this chapter, judging from the extensive use of the personal pronoun “I.”

Some say Romans 7:14–25 describes Paul’s struggle before he was saved or right after he became saved and was still spiritually immature. But again, it is the mature Christian who possesses an honest self evaluation. And Paul exhibited that in passages other than Romans 7.

To the Corinthians Paul said, “I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:9–10). And to the Ephesian Chris-tians, he considered himself “the very least of all saints” (Ephesians 3:8). That 1 Corinthians was written before Ephesians shows he became more sensitive to sin as time went on. Although in our judgment Paul is the supreme man relative to other men, he saw himself as having fallen from the position of the least of the apostles to the least of all believers.

The terms Paul uses in Romans 7 are so precise that we can’t miss his struggle with sin. He states that he hates committing sin (v. 15), loves righteousness (vv. 19, 21), delights in the law of God from the bottom of his heart (v. 22), and thanks God for the deliverance that is his in Christ (v. 25). Those are the responses of a mature Christian.

The change in verb tenses is a clue that this passage applies to a Christian. The verbs in Romans 7:7–13 are in the past tense. They refer to Paul’s life before his conversion and the process of conviction he experienced when he stood face to face with the law of God. However in verses 14–25, where we see the battle with sin taking place, they are in the present tense.

I believe Romans 7:14–25 is Paul's own testimony of how it is to live as a Spirit controlled, mature believer. He loves the holy law of God with his whole heart, but finds himself wrapped in human flesh and unable to fulfill it the way his heart wants him to.

The Struggle

(Romans 7:14–23)

Romans 7:14–25 is a picture of indwelling sin in the life of a believer. This passage is unique in that it contains a series of laments—desperate, repetitious cries of a distressed soul in great conflict. Each lament follows the same pattern. Paul first describes his condition, then gives proof of it, and then explains the source of the problem.

PAUL'S FIRST LAMENT

"For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicingwhat I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law,confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (Romans 7:14–17).

The "for" at the beginning tells us Paul isn't introducing a new subject. He continues to answer the hypothetical accusation in verse 7 that his preaching salvation by grace through faith apart from the law implies that the law is evil. He states to the contrary that the law is spiritual, meaning that it comes from the Spirit of God, and is a reflection of His holy, just, and good nature (cf. v. 12).

While Paul delights in God's law, he confesses there's a barrier that prevents him from always obeying it: his carnal or fleshly nature. He doesn't say he was in the flesh or controlled by the flesh. Romans 8:8–9 says to its Christian audience, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh." The phrase "in the flesh" refers to an unregenerate condition.

Although Christians are not in the flesh, the flesh is still in us. Were no longer held captive to it, but we can still act fleshly or carnal. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul says, "I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.…For you are still fleshly; for since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?" (vv. 1, 3). He reproved the Corinthian Christians for acting in a fleshly or non-Christian way.

In Romans 7 Paul says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh....I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin" (vv. 18, 25). He admits that the flesh is still present. *Flesh* is simply a term for our humanness.

Any Christian could make the statement in verse 14. Saying you're carnal is the same as saying you're a sinner. For example, when I am angry, insensitive, or don't pursue God as diligently as I desire, I see my humanness getting in the way of accomplishing all I ought to do.

Paul states in verse 14 that he is "sold into bondage to sin." Verse 23 gives us a similar statement: "I

see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin." But how can that be since we as Christians have been delivered from sin? The phrase "sold into bondage to sin" is literally translated "having been sold under *the* sin" That refers to the sin principle, the product of the Fall of man, not to individual sins committed.

Being "sold into bondage to sin" doesn't mean Paul actively committed himself to sinning, as is said about Ahab in 1 Kings 21, verses 20 and 25. It means he recognized that in this life we as believers will constantly have to battle sin because of our human nature.

Can Paul's lament of being sold under sin come from a true believer? In Psalm 51:5 David says, "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (NIV). That sounds like a man who had never been redeemed, doesn't it? But David was simply looking at one reality about himself. His lament is similar to that of Isaiah, who upon seeing a vision of God said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). All the prophet could see against the glorious holiness of God was his own sin.

Paul put all our experiences with sin into words in Romans 7:14–25. We all know there sin in our lives even though it shouldn't be there. Although sin is not the product of our new self, we're still bound to some degree by the body we dwell in. Verse 14 could be paraphrased, "The law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, experiencing a bondage to sin at times."

A self-righteous person deceives himself into thinking he is moral, but Romans 7:15 shows that a Christian led by the Spirit will not. He sees the proof of indwelling sin. Paul's failure to do what he desired and his doing what he hated reflects a profound inner turmoil. His will was frustrated by his sinful flesh. It's not that evil won all the time, but that he was frustrated in his attempt to perfectly obey God.

If you're a Christian, you can identify with that frustration. For instance, no sooner are you complimented for having done something right that you become proud—and now you've just done something wrong. The spiritual person has a broken and contrite heart, realizing he can't be all that God wants him to be. Sad to say, many Christians have yet to reach that point. That's because their comprehension of God's holy law is so shallow.

Do you know what makes a Christian want to carry out God's law? His new nature within, which, according to 1 John 3:9, does not sin. When he goes against his new nature, it isn't the law that is responsible, but the sin that still resides in his frail human body. A Christian will naturally pursue the moral excellence of God's law. The more mature a Christian is—the more he loves the Lord, submits to the Spirit's direction in his life, and grows in his understanding of God's holiness—the greater will be his longing to fulfill the law.

Romans 7:17 sounds like Paul refuses to take the blame for his sin. It's as if he's blaming an inanimate object instead of himself. However in verse 14 Paul acknowledges that he himself is sinful. Accepting responsibility for our failure challenges the teaching that God doesn't hold us responsible for our sin because sin is tied to our old nature.

Yet verse 17 goes beyond Paul's admitting that he is responsible for his sin. He specifies what part

of him is responsible by making a more technical distinction: the sin that dwells in his flesh.

Paul's reasoning in verse 17 is reminiscent of Galatians 2:20: "I [the old nature] have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." After salvation, sin no longer resides in man's innermost self, which is re-created to be like Christ. Yet it finds its residual dwelling in our flesh. That's why Paul said nothing good dwelt in his flesh (v. 18).

There's a big difference between that surviving sin and reigning sin: Sin no longer reigns in us, but it does survive in us. We are like an artistically unskilled person who has a beautiful picture in clear view, but no ability to actually paint it. What we need to do is ask the Master Artist to put His hand on ours to help us paint the strokes we never could have painted independently of Him. We can experience victory over sin only when we yield ourselves to the One who can overcome the flesh.

Galatians 5:17 says, "The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." Romans 7 echoes that battle. Galatians 5:16 tells us how to win: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." The Holy Spirit gives us victory. But let me warn you that the more victory you experience as you mature in Christ, the more you will recognize sin in your life.

PAUL'S SECOND LAMENT

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me" (Romans 7:18–20).

In verse 18 Paul gives a more technical identification about the part of him that is actually sinning than he has previously: the sin that dwells in his flesh. The flesh isn't necessarily evil in and of itself, but it's where sin finds its base of operation.

In verses 18–19 Paul isn't saying he can't figure out how to do anything right. He's saying he can't obey to the extent his heart longs to. If you examine your spiritual growth, you should be able to recognize a greater hatred for your sin now than you did before you understood how serious sin is and how holy God is. Although spiritual growth results in a decreasing frequency of sin, it inversely involves a heightened sensitivity to it.

What Paul says in verse 20 is just like what he says in verse 17. Although he had a new nature, he still fought against sin and sometimes lost. Those losses seemed overwhelming to him compared to the perfection of God's holy law. Nevertheless his sensitivity to sin was a normal—not morbid—result of justification by faith.

At this point you might figure Paul would give up, having adequately made his point. But he starts a third lament to emphasize his frustration and sorrow over sin.

PAUL'S THIRD LAMENT

“I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:21–23).

Paul again laments the condition of indwelling sin. In contrast to the law of God, he saw another law or standard that was making demands on him: the law or principle of evil. Evil battles every good thought, word, and deed. Rather than our sin natures being eradicated in this life, as some theologians have concluded, Paul tells us that evil is present within us, creating conflict.

Verse 22 tells us that Paul delighted in God’s law. The phrase “in the inner man” could be translated, “from the bottom of my heart.” Paul, deep down, had a great love for the law of God. That part of us “is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16), “strengthened with power through His Spirit” (Ephesians 3:16).

In verse 23 Paul identifies the source of his problems as the sin that resides in human nature. Sometimes the battle went in favor of his unredeemed flesh and brought him into captivity. That implies Paul is speaking as a redeemed person because unredeemed people can’t be brought into captivity—they’re already there. When sin wins the victory in the spiritual struggle, the believer becomes a slave to the sin that, at least temporarily, masters him.

The author of Psalm 119 experienced the same conflict Paul did. His psalm reflects his deep longing for the things of God.

Verses 81–83—“My soul languishes for Your salvation; I wait for Your word. My eyes fail with longing for Your word, while I say, ‘When will You comfort me?’ Though I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, I do not forget Your statutes.”

Verse 92—“If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction.”

Verse 97—“O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

Verse 113—“I hate those who are double-minded, but I love Your law.”

Verse 131—“I opened my mouth wide and panted, for I longed for Your commandments.”

Verse 143—“Trouble and anguish have come upon me, yet Your commandments are my delight.”

Verse 163—“I hate and despise falsehood, but I love Your law.”

Verse 165—“Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble.”

Verse 174—“I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your law is my delight.”

The measure of spirituality that the psalmist expresses is somewhat intimidating. That is why the last verse in Psalm 119 is so surprising: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments” (v. 176). You might think that a person with such an intense love for

God’s law would not experience the failure of going astray spiritually. But that is the conflict all believers experience.

Why do we sin? Because God didn’t do a good enough job when He saved us? Because He gave us a new nature that isn’t complete yet? Because we’re not prepared for heaven yet and still need to earn our way in? No, it’s because sin is still present in our humanness, which includes the mind, emotions, and body.

In 2 Corinthians 10:3–4 Paul says, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.” Although we still have physical bodies, we are engaged in spiritual warfare using spiritual resources.

Paul’s three laments reveal the conflict every believer experiences with sin. From that conflict the believer cries out for deliverance.

The Solution

(Romans 7:24–25)

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (Romans 7:24–25).

As if three laments aren’t enough, Paul lets out a wail in verse 24 that exceeds them all in intensity. He cries out in distress and frustration with his spiritual conflict. Can this be the despair of a Christian—let alone that of the apostle Paul? But Paul wasn’t the only godly person who refused to keep silent about inner turmoil.

Psalm 6—David cried out, “O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am pining away; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are dismayed. And my soul is greatly dismayed; but You, O Lord—how long? Return, O Lord, rescue my soul; save me because of Your lovingkindness....I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears” (vv. 1–6). David was saying, “I’m sick and tired of not being everything I ought to be!”

Psalm 130—The psalmist wrote, “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope” (vv. 1–5).

In Romans 7:24 Paul rhetorically asks who will rescue him from the sin that resides in his body. “The body of this death” literally refers to our physical body, which is subject to sin and death.

I remember reading that near Tarsus, where Paul was born, lived a tribe that inflicted a most gruesome punishment upon a convicted murderer. They fastened the body of the victim to that of the

killer, tying shoulder to shoulder, back to back, arm to arm, and then drove the killer from the community. The bonds were so tight that he could not free himself, and after a few days the decay in the dead body transferred itself to the living flesh of the murderer. Paul might have had that ghastly punishment in mind in expressing his desire to be rid of the sin that clung to his flesh.

In Romans 7:25 Paul says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” That’s a dramatic change from his laments over sin and death. Paul always kept things in proper perspective.

Romans 8—Paul was assured of ultimate triumph through Jesus Christ over the conflict with sin: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (vv. 18–19, 22–23). We Christians await the final phase of salvation. We’re still looking to that day when we are redeemed in body as well as soul. So Paul thanks God in Romans 7:25 that the end of the conflict will come through Christ when we enter into His presence and are glorified.

1 Corinthians 15—“For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality....Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 53, 57). That is almost the same phrase Paul uses in Romans 7:25 in reference to our bodily resurrection and glorification.

2 Corinthians 5—“While we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what ismortal will be swallowed up by life” (v. 4).

Philippians 3—“We eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (vv. 20–21). Ours is a triumphant hope!

Yet the battle goes on. We cry with Tennyson, who wrote, “Ah for a new man to arise in me, that the man I am cease to be!” (*Maud*, x. 5). The battle won’t be over until Jesus gives us immortality. Full deliverance awaits glorification. But we can experience victory here and now in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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