

XV. The Struggle with Indwelling Sin

April 12/13/14, 2016

Romans 7:13-25

Aim: To recognize the struggle the Christian has with remaining indwelling sin.

A. The Controversy of This Passage (Romans 7:13-25)

Barnett: The question to resolve is this. Is Paul referring to himself retrospectively as a Jew under the Law, or currently as a Christian coming again under Law? Perhaps we do not have to decide. It is quite possible Paul has both situations in mind. What is clear is that, given the presence of Sin in mortal flesh, the introduction of Law as a basis of righteousness is devastating. Let Jewish Christians in Rome reject any idea of a return to Law-keeping, either for themselves or for the Gentiles.

Hughes: This section of Romans 7 has known centuries of controversy: who is the subject? There are basically three views. The first is that this passage describes a *non-Christian* Pharisee under the Law (this was the view of the Greek Fathers). The second view is that it describes a *normal Christian* (the view of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin). The third position is that it describes a *carnal Christian*. I believe the second view is correct, mainly because Paul continues to write in the first-person singular but in the present tense. It seems most natural to understand this section as Paul talking about what he was then experiencing.

Schaeffer: Paul describes his own ongoing struggle with sin even after becoming a Christian.

1. Describing a Non-Christian (Moo)

As we approach this controversial paragraph, we must keep in mind that Paul's focus is still on the Mosaic law. And what Paul says about the Mosaic law comes to much the same thing, whatever we decide about the identity and spiritual condition of the person whose situation is depicted in these verses. The law, Paul insists again, is *God's* law (cp. vv. 22, 25), 'spiritual' (v. 14a), 'good' (v. 16), 'I' find myself to be a 'prisoner' of sin (v. 23), a situation from which only God in Christ can deliver me (v. 24; cp. 8:1-4). In these verses, Paul shows again that the Mosaic law is impotent to rescue people from their sin. For the law informs us of our duties before God, but it does not give us the ability to fulfill those duties. Paul's essential teaching about the inability of the Mosaic law to rescue sinful people from spiritual bondage is the same whether that bondage is the condition of the unregenerate person – who cannot be saved through the law – or that of the regenerate person – who cannot be sanctified and ultimately delivered from the influence of sin through the law. Once can preach this paragraph, in its *basic* intention, without even making a definite identification of the *egō*.

Few of us, however, would be satisfied to leave this question unanswered, and rightly so. For while not substantially affecting the main point of the text, our identification of the person whose struggle Paul depicts in this text does have an impact on several theological and practical issues. One of the most important of these is the nature of the Christian life. Should we expect Christian existence to be characterized by the sort of severe struggle described here? Or is this struggle one from we believers have been rescued by Christ (ch. 8)? Can a Christian suffer the experience described here if she or he fails to live by the Spirit?

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a) Arguments for the Regenerate View

Most of the early church fathers thought that these verse described an unregenerate person. This was Augustine's early view, but, partly as a result of his battle with Pelagius over (among other things) the freedom of the will, he changed his opinion and decided that the person depicted in these verses was a Christian. This interpretation was adopted by almost all the Reformers (except Bucer and Musculus). None gave it more theological significance than Luther, who saw in these verses the classic statement of his view of the believer as 'at the same time a justified person and a sinner' (*simul iustus et peccator*). Justification, being an entirely forensic declaration of the believer's status 'before God' (*coram Deo*), does not remove from the believer the presence and influence of sin. Thus, even the child of God, as long as he is in the earthly body, will struggle with sin and fail to do God's will. The interpretation of vv. 14-25 in terms of 'normal' Christian experience was typical of Lutheran and Reformed theology right into the twentieth century and is still widespread.

The most important reasons for thinking that the experience depicted in 7:14-25 must be that of a *regenerate* person are the following:

1. *Egō* must refer to Paul himself, and the shift from the past tenses of vv. 7-13 to the present tenses of vv. 14-25 can be explained only if Paul is describing in these latter verses his present experience as a Christian.
2. Only the regenerate truly 'delight in God's law (v. 22), seek to obey it (vv. 15-20), and 'serve' it (v. 25); the unregenerate do not 'seek after God' (3:11) and cannot 'submit to the law of God' (8:7).
3. Whereas the 'mind' of people outside of Christ is universally presented by Paul as opposed to God and His will (cp. 1:28); the 'mind' of *egō* in this text is a positive medium, by which *egō* 'serves the law of God' (vv. 22, 25).
4. *Egō* must be a Christian because only a Christian possesses the 'inner person' (cp. 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16).
5. The passage concludes, *after* Paul's mention of the deliverance wrought by God in Christ, with a reiteration of the divided state of the *egō* (vv. 24-25). This shows that the division and struggle of the *egō* that Paul depicts in these verses is that of the person already saved by God in Christ.

If these arguments are found to be decisive, then vv. 14-25 will describe an important aspect of 'normal' Christian experience: the continuing battle with sin that will never be won as long as the believer, through his or her body, is related to this age. The new age may have dawned, but the believer until death or the parousia, remains tied to the old age and its powers of sin, the flesh, and the law. Deliverance will come only when God intervenes to transform the 'body of death' (vv. 24b-25a; 8:10-11) into the body conformed to the glorious body of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20-21).

b) Arguments for the Unregenerate View

The most important reasons for thinking the experience depicted in vv. 14-25 is that of an *unregenerate* person are the following:

1. The strong connection of *egō* with 'the flesh' (vv. 14, 18 and 25) suggests that Paul is elaborating on the unregenerate condition mentioned in 7:5: being 'in the flesh.'

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2. *Egō* throughout this passage struggles ‘on his/her own’ (cp. ‘I myself’ in v. 25), without the aid of the Holy Spirit.
3. *Egō* is ‘under the power of sin’ (v. 14b), a state from which every believer is released (6:2, 6, 11, 18-22).
4. As the unsuccessful struggle of vv. 15-20 shows, *egō* is a ‘prisoner of the law of sin’ (v. 23). Yet 8:2 proclaims that believers have been set free from this same ‘law of sin (and death).’
5. While Paul makes clear that believers will continue to struggle with sin (cp., e.g., 6:12-13; 13:12-14; Gal. 5:17), what is depicted in 7:14-25 is not just a struggle with sin but a defeat by sin. This is a more negative view of the Christian life than can be accommodated within Paul’s theology.
6. The *egō* in these verses struggles with the need to obey the Mosaic law; yet Paul has already proclaimed the release of the believer from the dictates of the law (6:14; 7:4-6).

For those who find these arguments decisive, vv. 14-25 describe the struggle of the person outside Christ to do ‘what is good,’ a struggle that is doomed to failure because it is fought without the power of God that alone is able to break the power of sin. Deliverance from this situation comes with the converting, regenerating work of God in Christ, who transfers the believer from the realm of ‘sin and death’ to the realm of ‘the Spirit of life’ (v.24b; 8:2).

Our conclusion is that vv. 14-25 describe the situation of an unregenerate person. Specifically, I think that Paul is looking back, from his Christian understanding, to the situation of himself, and other Jews like him, living under the law of Moses. We might say, then, that Rom. 7:14-25 describes from a personal viewpoint the stage in salvation history that Paul delineates objectively in Gal. 3:19-4:3. As I have argued previously, Paul in Romans 7 uses *egō* to represent himself, but himself in solidarity with the Jewish people.

Decisive for me are two sets of contrasts. The first is between the description of the *egō* as ‘sold under sin’ (v. 14b) and Paul’s assertion that the believer – *every* believer – has been ‘set free from sin’ (6:18, 22). The second contrast is that between the state of the *egō*, ‘imprisoned by the law [or power] of sin’ (v. 23), and the believer, who has been ‘set free from the law of sin and death’ (8:2). Each of these expressions depicts an objective status, and it is difficult to see how they can all be applied to the same person in the same spiritual condition without doing violence to Paul’s language. In chapters 6 and 8, respectively, Paul makes it clear that ‘being free from under sin’ and ‘being free from the law of sin and death’ are conditions that are true for every Christian. If one is a Christian, then these things are true; if one is not, then they are not true. This means that the situation depicted in vv. 14-25 cannot be that of the ‘normal’ Christian, nor of an immature Christian. Other points are significant also – the lack of mention of the spirit, the links with 7:5 and 6:14, and the connections between vv. 7-12 and 13-25 – but I think these arguments are the most important.

This conclusion does not mean that Christians do not struggle with sin. Paul makes it abundantly clear, both explicitly – for instance, Gal. 6:1 – and implicitly – by the amount of time he spends scolding Christians in his letter! – that believers are not delivered from the influence of sin. While ‘transferred’ into the new realm, ruled by Christ and righteousness, believers are still prone to obey those past masters, sin and the flesh. I do not, then, deny that Christians struggle

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with sin – I deny only that this passage describes that struggle. For, while the believer continues to be influenced by both ‘realms,’ Paul makes it clear that he *belongs* to the new realm.

[Note: Moo is in the minority on his opinion that this passage portrays the struggles of an unregenerate person. I’ve indicated text from Moo that holds this position in order to set it apart from the bulk of the commentators.]

2. Describing a Christian

a) *MacArthur*

This passage is obviously a poignant account of a person’s inner conflict with himself, one part of him pulling one direction and another part pulling the opposite. The conflict is real and it is intense. For perhaps as long as the church has known this text, however, interpreters have disagreed as to whether the person described is a Christian or a non-Christian. One side maintains that the person is too much in bondage to sin to be a believer, whereas the other side maintains that the person has too much love for the things of God and too much hatred of sin to be an unbeliever. Those who believe Paul is speaking about an unbeliever point out that he describes the person as being ‘of flesh, sold into bondage’ (v. 14), as having nothing good dwelling in him (v. 18), and as a ‘wretched man’ trapped in a ‘body of...death’ (v. 24). How then, it is argued, could such a person correspond to the Christian Paul describes in chapter 6 as having died to sin (v. 2), as having his old self crucified and no longer being enslaved to sin (v. 6), as being ‘freed from sin’ (vv. 7, 18, 22), as considering himself dead to sin (v. 11), and as being obedient from the heart to God’s Word (v. 17)? Those who contend Paul is speaking about a believer in chapter 7 point out that this person desires to obey God’s law and hates doing what is evil (vv. 15, 19, 21), that he is humble before God, realizing that nothing good dwells in his humanness (v. 18), and that he sees sin as in him, but not *all* there is in him (vv. 17, 20-22). He gives thanks to Jesus Christ as his Lord and serves Him with his mind (v. 25). The apostle has already established that none of those things characterized the unsaved.

In Roman 6, Paul began his discussion of sanctification by focusing on the believer as a new creation, a completely new person in Christ. The emphasis is therefore on the holiness and righteousness of the believer, both imputed and imparted. It seems certain that in chapter 7 the apostle is still talking about the believer. Here, however, the focus is on the conflict a believer continues to have with sin. Even in chapter 6, Paul indicates that believers still must continually do battle with sin in their lives (6:12-13).

Some interpreters believe that chapter 7 describes the carnal, or fleshly, Christian, one who is living on a very low level of spirituality. Many suggest that this person is a frustrated, legalistic Christian who attempts in his own power to please God by trying to live up to the Mosaic law. But the attitude expressed in chapter 7 is not typical of legalists, who tend to be self-satisfied with their fulfillment of the law.

It seems rather that Paul is here describing the most spiritual and mature of Christians, who, the more they honestly measure themselves against God’s standards of righteousness the more they realize how much they fall short. The closer we get to God, the more we see our own sin. The level of spiritual insight, brokenness, contrition, and humility that characterize the person depicted in Romans 7 are marks of a spiritual and mature believer, who before God has no trust in his own goodness and achievements. It also seems, as one would naturally suppose from the use of the first person singular (which appears forty-six times in 7:7-25), that Paul is speaking of

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himself. Not only is he the subject of this passage, but it is the mature and spiritually seasoned apostle that is portrayed. Only a Christian at the height of spiritual maturity would either experience or be concerned about such deep struggles of heart, mind, and conscience. The more clearly and completely he saw God's holiness and goodness, the more Paul recognized and grieved over his own sinfulness.

Paul uses past tense verbs in Romans 7:7-13, which doubtless indicates he was speaking of his pre-conversion life. Beginning in verse 14, however, and continuing throughout the rest of the chapter, he uses the present tense exclusively in reference to himself. That abrupt, obvious, and consistent change of tenses strongly supports the idea that in verse 14-25 Paul is describing his life as a Christian. Beginning in verse 14 there is also an obvious change in the subject's circumstances in relation to sin. In verses 7-13, Paul speaks of sin as deceiving and slaying him. He gives the picture of being at sin's mercy and helpless to extricate himself from its deadly grasp. But in verse 14-25, he speaks of a conscious and determined battle against sin, which is still a powerful enemy but is no longer his master. In this latter part of the chapter, Paul also continues to defend the righteousness of God's law and rejoice in the benefits of His law, which, although it cannot save from sin, can nevertheless continue to reveal and convict of sin in the believer's life, just as it did before salvation.

b) Sproul

What follows from here is Paul's description of the battle that goes on between the spirit and the flesh, between obedience and disobedience. A large portion of Christendom believes that what Paul describes is his own pre-conversion era; in other words, he is describing the struggles he had with sin prior to his conversion. Not for one minute do I believe that. When the apostle speaks autobiographically in Romans 7 of the struggle that continues between the flesh and the spirit, he is talking about the struggle that characterizes every Christian's life. This dashes to dust all false doctrines of sanctification that promise perfection this side of heaven. It debunks the idea of some kind of higher Christian life that only an elite group can experience.

Several movements throughout church history have taught the idea that in addition to the singular moment of regeneration, there is a second work of grace that effects instant, complete sanctification. The advocates of the perfectionist view have argued that although Paul writes in the present tense, he is not referring to his present situation but is recollecting the state in which he lived prior to regeneration. This passage has been worked over by the best Greek interpreters in history. I can say dogmatically that I find absolutely no justification whatsoever for seeing here anything other than the contemporary struggle that the apostle was having with respect to his own progress in sanctification.

Contained in the doctrine of so-called 'Holiness churches' is the idea of a second work of grace available to all Christians by which they can experience instantaneous holiness. The beginnings of modern Pentecostalism were also tied in with this perfectionist idea. Speaking in tongues was considered to be evidence of this second work of grace. Only in recent times with the advent of neo-Pentecostalism have adjustments been made to that doctrine. Now the thinking is that the baptism of the Holy Spirit empowers Christians for ministry but does not necessarily produce in them an immediate victory over sin.

It is important that we not be deceived into thinking there are shortcuts to Christian maturity, to growing up into the fullness of the conformity to the image of Christ. It is a lifelong pursuit. None will achieve that perfection until we enter into glory and all the remnants of sin and the

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flesh are removed from us. In one sense, it is comforting to know that even Paul had to struggle against the temptations of the flesh, because there has probably never been another more dedicated to the pursuit of holiness and obedience to his Lord Jesus Christ than the apostle Paul. If Paul had struggles like this, I take comfort in it, not because I want to rejoice in evil or in somebody else's weakness, but because I am not left hopeless when I consider my own weakness.

I can feel the anguish of the apostle in this text and elsewhere in his letters as he talks about the war that goes on in the soul of the Christian between the spirit and the flesh, between the old man, who does not want to die, and the new man, who is working for inward renewal and maturity in Christ. I cannot tell you why sometimes the Lord allows us to struggle for years before liberation comes, but He does. However, at every moment the grace is there to overcome, no matter what the sin problem is.

B. The Content of This Passage (Romans 7:13-25)

We should note right at the start that chapters 7 and 8 are simultaneous. Chapter 8 (the chapter of victory) is not subsequent to chapter 7 in Paul's experience, for he experienced both alternately and continued to do so in the years that followed. In this self-portrait Paul describes himself not as a so-called 'carnal Christian,' but as one who loves the Law of God and longs to please God, but is trying to do so in his own strength. A so-called carnal Christian does not have such a goal. This is Paul's autobiography, but it is also the experience of every Christian. Anyone who has seriously followed Christ has known something of this. This is reality!

1. The First Lament (7:13-17)

Many interpreters attach verse 13 to vv. 7-12 since it summarizes the three main points that Paul has made in that paragraph: the law is good; sin is made 'manifest' through the law; and sin works through the law to produce death. Like v. 7, however, this verse contains a question and a brief answer, which is then explained in vv. 14-25. Therefore, other interpreters take this verse with what follows. These conflicting considerations suggest that v.13 is a bridge between the two main parts of Paul's discussion, summarizing the teaching of vv. 7-12 as the starting point for vv. 14-25.

a) *The Question (7:13)*

¹³*Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*

The question Paul asks here restates the basic objection of v. 7. Does not the intimate involvement of the law in securing the death of *egō* reveal again its true nefarious nature? As in v. 7, Paul strongly repudiates any such idea: 'By no means!' But hasn't Paul already answered this question? In a sense he has, and the explanation he gives in this verse does not really go beyond what he has already said about the relationship of sin, the law, and death in vv. 7-11. However, Paul's return to the matter suggests that he is not yet fully satisfied with the answer he has given. Accordingly, he moves forward in vv. 14-25 to explain in detail the role of another key player in this drama: *egō*.

Continuing his main theme from vv. 7-11, Paul places full responsibility for the death of *egō* on sin, absolving the law from blame by making it an instrument used by sin. The two purpose

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clauses state the divine and ultimately positive purpose behind sin's destructive use of the law. The first restates the revelatory role of the law that Paul described in v. 7; in bringing death, sin has 'been made manifest' for what it really is – 'sin.' The second purpose clause elaborates the first. Sin is revealed 'as sin' in that the 'commandment' causes sin to become 'exceedingly sinful.' What Paul means, in light of Rom. 4:15, 5:13-14, and 5:20, is that the 'good' commandment of God, by strictly defining sin, turns sin into conscious and willful rebellion against God. Sin is always bad; but it becomes worse – even more 'sinful' – when it involves deliberate violation of God's good will for His people. The law, by making sin even worse than before, reveals sin in its true colors.

The law was given so that sin 'might appear sin,' so that it might be seen to be 'exceedingly sinful.' It is through the law that a man comes to realize his guilt and therefore his need of a Savior. And, of course, even as Christians we need constantly to see our sinfulness and our need of grace. Sin is shown to be really sinful whenever I truly understand the law, whether that be when I first turn to Christ for justification, or later on in my Christian life. We can forget the sinfulness of sin. We need to be constantly brought up short to the awful fact of what sin is. As I study the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, as I look at the commandments of Paul and look at the example of Christ's life, the sinfulness of sin will become apparent if I am sensitive and letting the Holy Spirit speak to me.

It is not the law that is the cause of spiritual death, but rather it is sin. Sin's deadly character is exposed under the pure light of God's law. God has given His holy, righteous, and good law in order 'that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.' Paul's point here is that sin is so 'utterly sinful' that it can even pervert and undermine the purpose of God's holy law. It can twist and distort the law so that instead of bringing life, as God intended, it brings death. It can manipulate the pure law of God to deceive and damn people. Such is the awful wretchedness of sin.

b) The Condition (7:14)

Paul now explains how it is that 'sin' has been able to 'work death in "me" through that which is good' (v. 13). This could happen, Paul asserts, because, while the law is indeed good and 'spiritual,' 'I' am 'fleshly.' Verses 15-25 justify and develop this statement about himself, concluding from his tragic inability to put into practice what he knows to be right (vv. 15-21) that he is controlled by an alien and negative force – 'the law of sin' (vv. 22-23). It is because of his captivity to the power of sin that the law can become the instrument of death.

(1) The Law Is Spiritual (7:14a)

¹⁴*For we know that the law is spiritual...*

Throughout these verses Paul continues to write in the first person singular, yet in v. 14a he breaks this pattern with a first person plural, 'we know.' This serves to draw the readers of the letter into the argument. Paul implies that these readers – who 'know the law' (7:1) – would already agree that the law is 'spiritual.' In calling the law 'spiritual,' Paul is asserting its divine origin. Paul has chosen the word 'spiritual' in order to set up the strongest possible contrast between the 'spiritual' law and the 'fleshly' *egō*.

The conjunction 'for' carries the idea of *because* and indicates that Paul is not introducing a new subject but is giving a defense of what he has just said. He begins by again affirm that the Law

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is not the problem, because it ‘is spiritual.’ Salvation by grace through faith does not replace or devalue the Law, because the law was never a means of salvation.

The law is spiritual. It has a good purpose. I am free from the law when I accept Jesus as my Savior, in the sense that it no longer binds me (7:1-4). I am no longer condemned by the law. Still, however, the law sets before me the character of God. The law sets before me what it means to love God.

(2) I Am Fleshly (7:14b)

...but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

However, as I look at the law, I realize that ‘I am carnal, sold under sin.’ The problem is not the law. The problem is me.

‘But I,’ Paul continues, ‘am still of the flesh. I am still earthbound and mortal.’ It is important to note that the apostle does not say he is still *in* ‘the flesh,’ but that he is still ‘of’ it. He has already explained that believers are no longer ‘in the flesh’ (7:5; cp. 8:8), no longer bound by and enslaved to its sinfulness as they once were. The idea is that, although believers are not still in the flesh, the flesh is still in them. The phrase ‘sold into bondage to sin’ has caused many interpreters to miss Paul’s point and to take these words as evidence the person being talked about is not a Christian. But Paul uses a similar phrase in verse 23, where he makes clear that only his members, that is, his fleshly body, is ‘a prisoner of the law of sin.’ That lingering part of his unredeemed humanness is still sinful and consequently makes warfare against the new and redeemed part of him, which is no longer sin’s prisoner and is now its avowed enemy. Paul’s strong words about his condition do not indicate he was only partially saved at the time but rather emphasize that sin can continue to have dreadful power in a Christian’s life and is not to be trifled with. The believer’s battle with sin is strenuous and life-long. Sin is so wretched and powerful that, even in a redeemed person, it hangs on and contaminates his living and frustrates his inner desire to obey the will of God.

The contrast is clear. Law is ‘spiritual’ but I am ‘fleshly.’ The related word ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) appeared in verse 5 and will become dominant at 7:18-8:13. ‘Flesh’ describes the spiritual ‘fallen’ condition of Adam and his tribe. This condition of ‘flesh’ is no light thing. Speaking representatively for all – Jews and Gentiles – Paul declares himself to be ‘sold under Sin.’

This is the biblical basis, the biblical proof-text, for the doctrine of the carnal Christian. The idea of the carnal Christian was invented to deal with the problems inherent in mass evangelism. Many come forward and make a decision for Christ, but the next day most are living just as they were before. Rather than attribute this to a false profession of faith, some say, ‘Oh, they were converted. It just has not taken yet. They are carnal Christians.’ A true Christian believer, one born again of the Holy Spirit, cannot have self on the throne of his or her life. Defining a carnal Christian as someone still in the flesh altogether is a contradiction in terms. There is no such thing as a carnal Christian by that definition.

When we are born again of the Spirit, the carnal disposition of our original nature is not destroyed. We have to fight against it from the day we are converted until the day we enter the gates of heaven. We all have a residual force of the flesh, the *sarx*, and we have to fight against it. In that sense, every Christian is a carnal Christian, but there is no such thing as a completely carnal Christian. The completely carnal are not Christians. On the other hand, there is no such

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thing as a Christian who is carnal-less, one who is so Spirit-filled that he does not have to struggle with the remnants of his own carnality. Such is the Christian life.

Moo - unregenerate: In calling himself ‘fleshly,’ Paul may mean no more than that he is human, subject to the frailty of all human beings, whether Christian or not. But the contrast with ‘spiritual’ points to a more negative mean. As in 1 Cor. 3:1-3, where ‘fleshly’ is contrasted with ‘spiritual,’ ‘fleshly’ means ‘carnal,’ subject to, and under the influence of, ‘this world.’ Since ‘fleshly’ in 1 Cor. 3:1 is applied to Christians, it is clear that this adjective does not require that the *egō* be unregenerate. But it is the additional description, ‘sold under sin,’ that clinches the argument for a description of a non-Christian here. While it is true that Christians are still very much influenced by sin and will, perhaps, never finally overcome sin’s influence in this life, Paul appears to say more than that here. His language points to a condition of slavery under sin’s power. However, Christians have ‘died to the power of sin (6:2) and are therefore no longer ‘slaves of sin’ (6:18, 22). Earlier in Romans 3:9, Paul summarizes his teaching about people outside of Christ by asserting that they are all ‘under sin.’ Christ delivers the believer from this condition, but the *egō* here in Romans 7 confesses that he is still in that condition.

c) *The Proof (7:15)*

¹⁵*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

Paul’s proof that sin still indwelt him was in the reality of his experience. *Ginōskō* (‘understand’) has the basic meaning of taking in knowledge in regard to something or someone, knowledge that goes beyond the merely factual. By extension, the term frequently was used of a special relationship between the person who knows and the object of the knowledge. It was often used of the intimate relationship between husband and wife and between God and His people. That seems to be the meaning here and is consistent with the last half of the sentence. Paul found himself doing things he did not approve of. It was not that he was unable to do a particular good thing but that when he saw the fullness and grandeur of God’s law, he was not able to measure up completely. It was not that he could never accomplish any good at all, nor that he could never faithfully obey God. The apostle was rather expressing an inner turmoil of the most profound kind, of sincerely desiring in his heart to fulfill the spirit as well as the letter of the law (cp. 7:7), but realizing that he was unable to live up to the Lord’s perfect standards and his own heart’s desire. It was his inner man, recreated in the likeness of Christ and indwelt by His Spirit, that now could see something of the true holiness, goodness, and glory of God’s law and was grieved at his least infraction or falling short of it. In glaring contrast to his pre-conversion self-satisfaction in thinking himself blameless before God’s law (Phil. 3:6), Paul now realized how wretchedly short of God’s perfect law he lived, even as a Spirit-indwelt believer and an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Paul expresses some confusion. He is perplexed, but not by some abstract theological mystery. He is perplexed by his own behavior. *I don’t understand myself. I just don’t know why I do the things that I do.* He goes on to describe a conflict that is rooted in the will. Paul is not engaging in a philosophical discussion of how the will functions; he is speaking in concrete language that we can all relate to.

How many thousands have said words like these to their pastors or counselors in recent months. It is the cry of the believer who is trying, but is relying on himself. Paul finds himself dominated by sin.

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Moo - unregenerate: In one of the most famous passages of the epistle, Paul now graphically portrays his failure to do what he wills. The conflict between ‘willing’ and ‘doing’ dominates the narration of this conflict (vv. 15-20) and the inference Paul draws from it (v. 21). What Paul wills is that ‘good’ required by God’s law; the ‘evil’ that he does, which he hates and does not acknowledge, is, then, a collective term for those things prohibited and in conflict with God’s law. As I have argued above, the conflict Paul depicts here leading to defeat (v. 23) and despair (v. 24), is a conflict he experienced as a Jew under the Mosaic law. To what extent Paul was conscious of that conflict and his failure *at the time* of that conflict is difficult to ascertain. Undoubtedly his perspective as a Christian enables him to see that conflict more clearly and more radically than he did at the time. Surely Paul knew that he, along with other Jews, succeeded in keeping many of the commandments and infringed only a small percentage of the whole. It is this knowledge, coupled with his pre-Christian, Jewish interpretation of ‘righteousness,’ that enables Paul to claim he was ‘blameless according to the righteousness of the law’ (Phil. 3:6). But, as a Christian, Paul has a new perspective on God’s law. He now sees it as a unity, an expression of God’s will for His people that, when broken in any part, is broken in the whole. That which Paul ‘willed’ to do was keep the law; and it is just this, in the light shed on God and His law by Christ, that he failed as a Jew to do. The fact that Paul is describing the experience of the Jew under the Mosaic law does not mean, of course, that the conflict described here is peculiar to the Jew. All non-Christians are in a similar situation, and many – probably most – Christians can find in this description of nagging failure to do what is good an all-too-accurate reflection of their own experience. But, without denying the similarity, I must say again that the conflict Paul describes here is indicative of a slaver to the power of sin as a way of life (v. 14b) that is *not* typical, nor even possible, for the Christian. Paul’s confession here is similar to others found in the ancient world, the most famous being that in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.21: ‘I see and approve the better course, but I follow the worse.’

d) *The Source (7:16-17)*

(1) The Law is Good (7:16)

¹⁶*Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.*

Paul now deals with the reason, or the source, of his inability to perfectly fulfill the law, and he begins by staunchly defending the divine standard. ‘Whatever the reason for my doing the very thing I do not wish to do,’ he says, ‘it is not the law’s fault. I agree with the Law in every detail. My new self, the new creation that placed God’s incorruptible and eternal seed within me, is wholeheartedly confessing that the law is good. In my redeemed being I sincerely long to honor the law and to fulfill it perfectly.’ Every true Christian has in his heart a sense of the moral excellence of God’s Law. And the more mature he becomes in Christ, the more fully he perceives and lauds the law’s goodness holiness, and glory.

Paul has asked, ‘Is the law sin?’ (7:7) and has shown that in fact the law is good, especially in that it shows us our sinfulness and therefore our need for Christ. Now Paul is saying the same thing from a slightly different angle: whenever Paul does something wrong and then realizes that it is wrong, he is in essence acknowledging that some kind of law is needed. In verse 16 Paul is saying, ‘Even if a man wants to say that the law is evil, the very fact that he desires to do better demonstrates that the law is good.’ Even the non-believer knows that he should not covet. The very fact that he knows this, and the very fact that the law says, ‘Thou shalt not covet,’ shows that the law is good. Even those today who try to deny all moral absolutes hold up self-sacrifice

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as a moral virtue. None of us can perfectly live up to our own standards. Our own standards condemn us as surely as the law condemns us.

Moo - unregenerate: The fact that he does not do what he purposes to do means that he ‘agrees’ with those who say – as Paul has done in vv. 12, 13, and 14 – that the law is good. Assumed in Paul’s argument is that what he wills to do (v. 15b) is what the law demands. The very fact that he has a will that conflicts with the evil actually done shows that there is a part of this person – the ‘part’ that has to do with the will – that acknowledges the just demands of God’s law.

(2) Sin Is Indwelling (7:17)

¹⁷*So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

What then, is the problem? What is the source of our failure to live up to God’s standards and our own inner desires? ‘Now it is no longer I who is the one doing it,’ Paul explains, ‘but sin which indwells me.’ Paul was not trying to escape personal responsibility. He was not mixing the pure gospel with Greek philosophical dualism, which later plagued the early church and is popular in some church circles today. The apostle was not teaching that the spirit world is all good and the physical world all evil, as the influential Gnostic philosophy of his day contended.

Paul is not looking lightly upon sin. Rather, he is saying, ‘When I constantly do those things that I don’t want to do, I’m just like a slave.’ When we sin, we become separated both from God and from ourselves, so that with Paul we feel like saying, ‘I’m not the one doing this! I’m just a slave to sin.’

Throughout this chapter Paul has spoken in personal, non-technical terms. He has not been drawing precise theological distinctions between the old pre-conversion life of a believer and his new life in Christ. He was certainly not teaching that a Christian has two natures or two personalities. There is just one saved person, just as previously there was one lost person. In verse 17, however, Paul becomes more technical and theologically precise in his terminology. There had been a radical change in his life, as there has been in the life of every Christian. *Ouketi* (‘no longer’) is a negative adverb of time, indicating a complete and permanent change. Paul’s new ‘I,’ his inner self, ‘no longer’ approves of the sin that still clings to him through the flesh. Whereas before his conversion his inner self approved of the sin he committed, ‘now’ his inner self, a completely new inner self, strongly disapproves. After salvation, sin, like a deposed and exiled ruler, no longer reigns in a person’s life, but it manages to survive. It no longer resides in the innermost self but finds its residual dwelling in his flesh, in the unredeemed humanness that remains until a believer meets the Lord at His second coming or in death.

Moo - unregenerate: At first sight, Paul would agree to be saying something unlikely and, indeed, dangerous: that he is not responsible for his actions. But this is not what he means. His point is that his failure to put into action what he wills to do shows that there is something besides himself involved in the situation. If we had only to do with him, in the sense of that part of him which agrees with God’s law and wills to do it, we would not be able to explain why he consistently does what he does not want to do. No, Paul reasons, there must be another ‘actor’ in the drama, another factor that interferes with his performance of what he wants to do. This other factor is indwelling sin. Sin is not a power that operates ‘outside’ the person, making him do its bidding; sin is something resident in the very being, ‘dwelling’ within the person, ruling over him or her like a master over a slave (v. 14b). Because of this power of ‘sin dwelling in me,’ Paul is frustrated in carrying out what he knows to be God’s good will. Paul does not, then,

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transfer responsibility for doing wrong from the individual Jew to an outside influence; he fixes that responsibility on that power *within* the person which leads that person to do what is wrong.

2. The Second Lament (7:18-20)

a) *The Condition (7:18a)*

¹⁸*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.*

In order that his readers will not misunderstand, the apostle explains that the ‘me’ in whom ‘nothing good dwells’ is not the same as the ‘I’ he has just mentioned in the previous verse and which referred to his new, redeemed, incorruptible, Christlike nature. The part of his present being in which sin still dwells is his ‘flesh,’ his old humanness, which has not yet been completely transformed. The ‘flesh’ in itself is not sinful, but it is still subject to sin and furnishes sin a beachhead from which to operate in a believer’s life.

Moo - unregenerate: The assertion in v. 17 that indwelling sin is finally responsible for Paul’s tragic failure to do God’s will is the center of vv. 15-20. Verses 15-16 have led up to it; vv. 18-20 expand on it. Verse 18a is closely related to v. 17b, continuing with the language of ‘dwelling in me.’ Paul has just said that ‘sin dwells in me’; now he restates this same basic point from the negative side: ‘good does not dwell in me.’ But Paul adds a very important qualification to this statement: ‘that is, in my flesh.’ Rather than taking ‘flesh’ in its typical Pauline ‘ethical’ meaning, the word is more likely to have a simple material meaning here. This is suggested by v. 25, where ‘flesh’ is contrasted with ‘mind,’ and by v. 23, where the ‘other law,’ ‘the law of sin,’ is said to be ‘in my members.’ Paul wants to reveal the ‘dividedness’ of Jews under the law as a way of explaining how sincere respect for that law could be combined with failure to perform it. It is not that Paul is viewing the ‘flesh’ as inherently evil, or as necessary leading to evil, but that he considers the material body to be that ‘part’ of the person which is particularly susceptible to sin, and which in the non-Christian falls under the dominion of sin. On this view, that is, in my flesh’ qualifies the absolute assertion that ‘good does not dwell in me.’

b) *The Proof (7:18b-19)*

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Paul had a deep desire to do only good. The ‘wishing’ to do God’s will was very much present within his redeemed being. The ‘me’ used here does not correspond to the *me* of the first half of verse 18, but to the *I* of verse 17. Unfortunately, however the perfect ‘doing of the good’ that his heart wished for was not present in his life. Slightly rephrasing the same truth, he says in verse 19, ‘For the good that I wish, I do not do.’ Paul is not saying that he was totally incapable of doing anything that was good and acceptable. He is saying that he was incapable of *completely* fulfilling the requirements of God’s holy law (cp. Phil. 3:12-14). As a believer grows in his spiritual life, he inevitably will have both an increased hatred of sin and an increased love for righteousness. As desire for holiness increases, so will sensitivity to and antipathy toward sin. The other side of the predicament, Paul says, is that ‘I practice the very evil that I do not wish.’ Again, it is very important to understand that this great inner struggle with sin is not experienced by the undeveloped and childish believer, but by the mature man of God.

The new man in our heart has the desire to please God, but there still lives in our members the vestigial remnants of the old man of the flesh, which has declared war on the leanings of the spirit. When the conflict comes, many times we would rather follow the old man than the new

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man. In the moment, it is more desirable to sin than to obey Christ. Part of us wants to obey Christ, but not all. We have evil inclinations and desires that bump up against our good intentions.

Moo - unregenerate: Verse 18b reasserts the conflict between ‘willing’ and ‘doing’ as a way of demonstrating the extent to which the ‘flesh’ has fallen under the control of sin. We should make clear that, in attributing this ‘performing’ to the sphere of the material body (v. 18a), Paul does not mean to suggest that the mind and will of the non-Christian is pure and only the body corrupted. As the whole context, and the fact that the ‘will’ is unable to carry out its desires, makes clear, Paul is drawing a dichotomy between a certain element within the ‘mind’ or ‘will’ of the non-Christian and the ‘rest’ of that non-Christian – the flesh. His point is that the Jew under the law, and, by extension, other non-Christians, do have a genuine striving to do what is right, as defined by God (cp. also 2:14-15). But this striving after the right, because of the unbroken power of sin, can never so ‘take over’ the mind and will that it can effectively and consistently direct the body to do what is good. Verse 19 repeats the substance of v. 15b, with the difference that the ‘good’ that is willed and the ‘evil’ that is done are made explicit.

c) *The Source (7:20)*

²⁰*Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

Paul repeats what he said in verses 16-17, with only slight variation. The apostle again uses the phrase ‘no longer,’ referring to the time before his conversion. Before salvation it was the inner ‘I’ who sinned and agreed with the sin. An unsaved person cannot truthfully say he is not doing it. He has no moral or spiritual ‘no longer.’

Twice Paul has said, ‘it is no longer I who do it’ (vv. 17, 20). He is not actually saying he does not do it, but that it is not what his deep inner self, renewed in Christ, wants to do. He is dominated by sin. How often we have tried with all our might to follow Christ, but have been pulled down by our flesh and failed.

Paul is not trying to absolve himself from responsibility for his sin. His point is that he does what he does not want to do because of sin. He recognizes where that sin dwells—within him. Even though he is involved in this conflict, the new man is still what defines his personality. Despite the ongoing struggle and the failures into sin that mark his Christian life, Paul knows that he is a new creature. What God has done with him can be seen not in the remnants of his old man but in the triumph that God gives him through His Holy Spirit in the new man. Regeneration accomplishes our rescue and release from the total bondage of sin that marks our fallen condition. When we are born of the Spirit, that bondage is broken. We are set free. We experience a liberty that man has not had since the fall, but even with the renewal by which we are dramatically changed inside, that change does not instantaneously eradicate all the impulses of sin. That struggle goes on until heaven. Paul says that although sin still dwells in him, that indwelling sin lacks the same captivating power that it had before his conversion.

Moo - unregenerate: Paul continues to go over the same ground, making sure that his point gets across. In this verse, he brings together a clause from v. 16b and v. 17b in a new combination, but he does not go beyond what he has already said there.

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3. The Third Lament (7:21-23)

a) *The Condition (7:21)*

²¹*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.*

Paul is not talking about the Mosaic law or even about the moral law. He has discovered a fundamental truth that describes his current situation.

The continuing presence of ‘evil’ in a believers life is so universal that Paul refers to it not as an uncommon thing but as such a common reality as to be called a continually operating spiritual ‘principle.’ Lingering sin does battle with every good thing a believer desires to do, every good thought, every good intention, every good motive, every good word, every good deed.

Here Paul uses the word ‘law’ in another sense, as a dynamic principle whereby inevitably and invariably whenever someone seeks to do good, evil is crouching nearby. Possibly in Paul’s mind were the Lord’s words to Cain, ‘...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you’ (Gen. 4:7). It is a ‘law,’ in this case a ‘law’ of fallen nature, that desire to do good (i.e., keep the commandments) is accompanied by the presence of evil.

Moo - unregenerate: On the basis of the unsuccessful struggle to do the good demanded by the Mosaic law, Paul now draws a conclusion. Consistency would suggest that the ‘law’ (*nomos*) Paul refers to here is the Mosaic law. But it makes better sense to give *nomos* here its well-established meaning ‘principle.’

b) *The Proof (7:22-23a)*

Moo - unregenerate: Verses 22-23 belong together antithetically, as Paul once again contrasts the conflicting tendencies toward the Mosaic law within himself: genuine deep-seated delight in that law and acceptance of it in ‘the mind’; unrelieved and successful resistance to the demands of that law in ‘the members.’ These verses, then, restate in objective terms the conflict that Paul has subjectively described in vv. 15-20. His immediate purpose is to explain the ‘rule’ he has discovered with respect to himself in v 21.

(1) The Positive (7:22)

²²*For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being...*

The first part of Paul’s proof that sin is no longer his master and that he is indeed redeemed by God and made into the likeness of Christ is that he is able to say, ‘I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.’ In other words, the apostle’s justified ‘inner man’ is on the side of the law of God and no longer on the side of sin, as is true for every unsaved person. Paul’s ‘inner man,’ the deepest recesses of his redeemed person, the bottom of his heart, hungers and thirsts for God’s righteousness (Mt. 6:33; cp. 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16).

If there is any question about whether Paul is talking about his pre-conversion state or his ongoing struggle after his regeneration, this one text should put that to rest forever, because no unregenerate person delights in the law of God in the inward person. According to Psalm 1, the godly man delights in the law of God and is therefore like a tree planted by the rivers of water bringing forth its fruit in its season. In contrast, the ungodly man is weightless, without substance, like the chaff that the wind drives away. In that portrait of the godly man, we see that his godliness is defined by his delight. The godly man is the one who delights in the law of the

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Lord and meditates on it day and night, which is how Paul is describing his condition. This language describes the difference between pre-conversion and post-conversion humanity.

Moo - unregenerate: Paul begins with the positive side: I rejoice in the law of God according to the inner person. One of the strongest arguments in favor of identifying the *egō* in this passage with the Christian is that only those regenerated by God's Spirit can truly 'delight in' God's law. There is weight to this argument; but it is not conclusive. We have abundant evidence that Jews in Paul's day professed a delight in God's law, and passages such as Romans 10:2 – 'for I bear witness that the [Israel] have a zeal for God' – show that Paul regarded that delight as genuine. Certainly these people did not fully understand, and did not fully obey, the law – but neither do Christians. Taking as his example the 'best' in the non-Christian world, Paul reveals the utter helplessness of the person apart from Christ who has nothing but his 'works' on which to rely for salvation. But advocates of the Christian interpretation of these verses insist that the last phrase in the verse settles the matter. 'Inner person' occurs only twice elsewhere in Paul, and both times the reference is undoubtedly to a Christian (2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16). But this does not mean that the phrase is a 'technical' designation for a Christian. This phrase was used in secular Greek to denote 'man...according to his Godward, immortal side.' The context of Romans 7 favors an anthropological interpretation. Throughout this passage, Paul has used words to contrast the 'outer,' or bodily, aspect of the person with the 'inner,' or mental, or spiritual, aspect of the person: 'flesh' (vv. 18, 25) and 'members' (v. 23) on the one hand and 'mind' (vv. 23, 25) on the other. In this context, it is much more likely that 'inner person' has its well-attested anthropological meaning than a questionable soteriological meaning.

(2) The Negative (7:23a)

...²³*but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind...*

The second part of Paul's proof that sin is no longer his master and that he is indeed redeemed by God and made into the likeness of Christ involves a corresponding but opposite principle (cp. v. 21), 'a different law,' which does not operate in the inner person but in 'the members' of the believer's body, that is, in his unredeemed and still sinful humanness. That opposing principle is continually 'waging war against the law of' the believer's 'mind,' a term that here corresponds to the redeemed inner man about whom Paul has been talking. Paul is not setting up a dichotomy between the mind and the body but is contrasting the inner man, or the redeemed 'new creature' (cp. 2 Cor. 5:17), with the 'flesh' (Rom. 7:25), that remnant of the old man that will remain with each believer until we receive our glorified bodies (8:23). Paul is not saying his mind is always spiritual and his body is always sinful. In fact, he confesses that, tragically, the fleshly principle undermines the law of his mind and temporarily makes him 'a prisoner of the law of sin' which is in his members.

Paul is contrasting (1) his 'innermost being' (mind) with his 'members' (organs and limbs, and (2) the 'Law of God' with the 'law of sin.' Using vivid battle language, he sees Sin as an aggressor laying siege to his 'innermost being' (which shelters the Law of God) and taking him captive. Yes, his mind agrees with the Law of God but Sin easily has his way: Paul is his prisoner. His 'innermost being' is at the whim of a body captured by a foreign invader.

The principle Paul recognizes is that he is a man with two natures. One delights in the Law of God. The other wages war against God's Law. The Christian is subject to two forces simultaneously and thus lives in a state of tension.

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Paul's struggle against sin has given him a divided personality. On the one hand he 'delights' in God's law, but on the other hand there is 'another law in my members' that is constantly warring against his delight in God's law. Through Christ we have become justified before God. His Word informs, calls, corrects, and encourages us. Yet in our body, we are still part of a fallen world. Legally, our problem of guilt before God has been resolved, but factually we are still waiting for the full redemption that will be ours only when Christ returns. Till then, our battle with sin continues. It is truly a 'captivity' to sin, and Paul longs for deliverance.

Moo - unregenerate: Now comes the negative objective evaluation of the condition of *egō*. Ranged against his delight in God's law is 'another law,' 'in my members,' 'fighting against the law of my mind and holding me captive in the law of sin that is in my members.' I believe that 'the other law' is not God's law in any form, but an 'authority' or 'demand' that is like, but opposed to, the Mosaic law. Here is what Paul is saying: 'I, in my inner being, delight in and accept the authority of the Mosaic law, but I see a competing "authority," operating in my members.' It is simpler to take 'law of my mind' and 'law of sin' as two further and more specific designations of the 'law of God' and 'the other law,' respectively. The Mosaic law is that law with which the mind agrees, that 'I' confess to be good and seek to obey (vv. 15-20), while the 'other law' is nothing more than that authority or demand of sin which works through, and becomes resident in, my 'member' (cp. vv. 17b-18a; sin dwelling in the flesh).

c) *The Source (7:23b)*

...and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

As Paul has already mentioned in the first part of this verse, the source of his sin is no longer the inner man, which is now redeemed and being sanctified. Like all believers while they are in this earthly life, Paul found himself sometimes to be 'a prisoner of the law of sin,' the principle that evil was still present in him (7:21). But now sin was only in the 'members' of his body, in his old self (Eph. 4:22), which was still 'dead because of sin' (8:10). It is not that Paul's salvation was imperfect or in any way deficient. But as long as he remains in his mortal body, in his old unredeemed humanness, he remains subject to temptation and sin (cp. 2 Cor. 10:3-4). In other words, although a Christian cannot avoid living *in* the flesh, he can and should avoid walking *according to* the flesh in its sinful ways.

Moo - unregenerate: Thus sin, working in and through the flesh, makes demands on and gains authority over *egō*; thus Paul calls it 'the law of sin.' Using military language, Paul describes this 'law of sin' as 'waging war' against 'the law of my mind.' 'Mind' refers to the reasoning side of a person. Paul makes clear that this 'reason' of people apart from Christ is perverted and darkened, preventing them from thinking correctly about God and the world. Continuing the military metaphor, Paul claims that the result of the battle between 'the law of sin' and 'the law of my mind' is an unqualified victory for the former: 'I' have become a 'captive to the law of sin.' That the struggle between the law of God, the mind, and the will, on the one hand, and the 'law of sin,' the flesh/members, and what is done, on the other, has so negative an outcome is an important reason for thinking that Paul must be describing the experience of a non-Christian. The believer, while he or she may, and will, struggle with sin, commit sins, and even be continually overcome by a particular, individual sin, has been freed from sin's power (ch. 6; 8:2) and could therefore hardly be said to be 'held captive in the "power" or "authority" of sin.'

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4. Fourth Lament (7:24-25)

a) *The Cry (7:24)*

²⁴*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

Paul's final lament is even more intense than the others. He cries out in utter anguish and frustration. 'Wretched man that I am!' Because this person describes himself in such negative terms, many commentators believe he could not be speaking as a Christian, much less as an apostle. If Paul was speaking of himself, they argue, he must have been speaking about his pre-conversion condition. But the Scottish commentator Robert Haldane wisely observed that men perceive themselves to be sinners in direct proportion as they have previously discovered the holiness of God and His law. Consider the laments in the penitential Psalms (e.g., Ps. 38:1-4; 130:1-5).

Because of the power of Adam's Sin living in him, he experiences a fundamental dislocation between his mind (which approves of Law) and his body (subject to Sin). It would be a mistake, however, to infer that Paul is a tortured soul wrestling unsuccessfully with deep and dark sins. At the same time Paul is not implying that he was morally reprobate and corrupt in every way. His only point throughout is that Sin ruled in his fallen flesh and that Law only made things worse, both before and after baptism into Christ.

The adjective 'wretched' means 'a miserable distressed condition.' Paul has come to the end of himself. Actually, Paul is now in fine shape, because when the believer realizes his helplessness he will receive God's help. As long as we think we can do it ourselves, we are in Romans 7. How does Paul handle coming to the end of himself? Beautifully! 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' Notice that he does not say, 'What must I do?', but rather 'Who will rescue me?'

Here we have an exclamation that declares a condition of misery. Paul cries out in anguish after just relating his ongoing struggle with the weighty burden of sin pressing against the inclinations he has toward obedience.

Our problem with sin isn't just some theoretical problem, and Paul's language in this verse brings it right down to the physical level, here in this space-and-time historical world in which we live: 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'

Paul next asks a question to which he well knows the answer: 'Who will set me free from the body of this death?' He again makes clear that the cause of his frustration and torment is 'the body of this death.' It is only a believer's 'body' that remains subject to sin and death. *Rhuomai* ('set...free') has the basic idea of rescuing from danger and was used of a soldier's going to a wounded comrade on the battlefield and carrying him to safety. Paul longed for the day when he would be rescued from the last vestige of his old, sinful, unredeemed flesh.

Moo - unregenerate: Paul has now concluded the description of his pre-Christian situation, as a Jew who reverences the Mosaic law but finds that the power of sin is too strong to enable him to comply with the demands of that law. No wonder, then, that he decries his condition and calls out for deliverance: 'Wretched person that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?' Certainly the Christian who is sensitive to his or her failure to meet God's demands experiences a sense of frustration and misery at that failure (cp. 8:23), but Paul's language here is stronger than would be appropriate for that sense of failure. Here, in the personal plea that brings to a climax the narrative of vv. 7-23, the condition from which deliverance is sought can

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be nothing but the condition Paul has depicted in these verses: the status of the person under sentence of spiritual death, condemned, bound for hell.

b) *The Praise (7:25a)*

²⁵*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Without hesitation, the apostle testifies to the certainty of his eventual rescue and gives thanks to his Lord even before he is set free: ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ he exults. Here he anticipates something else he knew so very well—the victory of the power of the indwelling Spirit (see chapter 8). ‘Now that I have come to the end, I know where to look—to Christ and His indwelling Spirit. Praise God!’

The answer to Paul’s question in v. 24 can be found only ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ The law is not enough. There must be a yielding to the power of Christ (cp. 6:11, 23).

Who will deliver us? God. How will He deliver us? Through Jesus Christ our Lord. We have a redeemer. We have a deliverer who promises to deliver us fully and finally from the body of death, from this awful, substantive burden that plagues us all our lives.

Moo - unregenerate: Paul immediately supplies the answer to the plea of v. 24b: ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Yet the chapter does not end on this triumphant note but returns to a final description of *egō* in conflict, as this has been delineated in vv. 15-23. This sequence is one of the most oft-cited arguments in favor of the view that Paul is describing Christian experience in 7:14-25. For Paul’s renewed confession of struggle, *after* the thanksgiving for deliverance, suggests that the ‘divided’ *egō* is precisely that *egō* which knows that deliverance comes through God’s work in Christ. Without, however, denying the force of the argument, I do not think that it is decisive. On the unregenerate view, it must be assumed that Paul the Christian, has at this point interjected his own thanksgiving.

c) *The Summation (7:25b)*

So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

The term *sarx* is used repeatedly in the New Testament, particularly by the apostle Paul, to refer not to our physical nature but to our fallen nature. Here is the problem linguistically: not every time the word *sarx* is used in the New Testament does it refer to our fallen, corrupt nature. Sometimes it refers to our physical, earthly existence (e.g., Jn. 1:14; 3:5-6). Paul also uses the term *sarx* from time to time to refer to our physical humanity (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:16). There is a linguistic key that helps us over the hurdle. Almost anytime we see in the New Testament a contrast between spirit and flesh or mind and flesh, the term *sarx* is being used to describe not the physical body but the corrupt nature of the whole person. The corruption of *sarx* is not just a sinful corruption of physical appetites. *Sarx* refers to the body, the soul, the spirit, and the mind. Every part of an unregenerate person is in a state of flesh. By nature we have a mind of flesh, a soul of flesh, and a spirit of flesh, but any time we see Paul contrasting flesh with spirit or flesh with mind, he is talking about the distinction between the old man, the flesh, and the new man, the inner man, which has been made alive by the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s primary emphasis in the present passage is not on the believer’s eventual deliverance from sin’s presence, but on the conflict with sin that torments every spiritually sensitive child of God. He therefore ends by summarizing the two sides of that struggle.

Romans – Lesson 15

Moo - unregenerate: ‘Now, then,’ introduces v. 25b as a summarizing recapitulation of the ‘dividedness’ of the *egō* that Paul has portrayed in vv. 15-23. For the first time in this context, Paul contrasts his two responses, or situations, in terms of ‘serving,’ but the other terms reflect the language Paul has already used: serving ‘the law of God’ (v. 22) ‘with the mind’ (cp. v. 23) versus serving ‘the law of sin’ (v. 23) ‘with the flesh’ (v. 14b, 18). The emphatic pronoun ‘I, myself’ is used to stress that there remains *one* person, who is caught in the conflict between mental assent to God’s word and practical failure to do it.

As we have followed Paul through this seventh chapter, we have seen him wrestling with the same problems that we wrestle with every day. The picture he paints is certainly not one of the possibility of sinless perfection, but neither is it one of hopeless defeat. For we, like Paul, can ‘thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord’—once for all for our justification, but then also as a moment-by-moment thing as we pursue sanctification. We need the power of Christ for our lives, whether for justification or for sanctification, and it is only possible to have this power through Jesus Christ, and the agency by which we acquire this power is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The seventh chapter of Romans is a passionate piece of writing. Paul wants us to feel the emotion he experiences in trying to live up to God’s standards in his own strength. A believer who tries to please God in his or her own strength will always come to disheartening, aching frustration—*always!* Moreover, this will happen to ‘good Christians’—even super-Christians. Paul was perhaps the greatest Christian ever, and this was his experience. He had more theology and passion in his little finger than most of us have in our entire life. Despite this, he sometimes tried to live up to God’s standards on his own.

Moo - unregenerate: While Paul is not, in my opinion, depicting a Christian situation in this paragraph, there are important theological applications for the Christian. First, we are reminded of our past – unable to do God’s will, frustrated perhaps at our failure – so that we may praise God for His deliverance with deeper understanding and greater joy. Second, we are warned that the Mosaic law, and, hence, all law, is unable to deliver us from the power of sin; the multiplication of ‘rules’ and ‘commands,’ so much a tendency in some Christian circles, will be more likely to drive us deeper into frustration than to improve the quality of our walk with Christ.

For next time: Read Romans 8:1-13.