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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #28

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The War!

Romans 7:14-25

Can anyone who just heard the text we read from Romans 7 honestly say, “I can’t relate to that? I don’t recognize myself in what Paul says. I’ve never experienced this internal battle with indwelling sin. I don’t know what the apostle means when he describes himself as wanting to do one thing only to discover that he does its opposite. I can’t relate to his description of himself as doing the very things he hates while failing to do the things he loves.”

Anyone? Seriously. Anyone? If you can honestly say that Paul’s language in Romans 7 is far removed from your own experience, all I know to say is that you are horribly deceived and self-deluded. You are not in touch with reality, either in the world around you or inside your own soul.

Now, let me say this right from the start. I don’t base my interpretation of what Paul writes on the fact that it resonates with my personal experience. We must always let a passage of Scripture say what it means and mean what it says even if our experience is otherwise. The words in the passage and its context always determine meaning. That being said, after doing our best to interpret what Paul is saying, I can’t escape the fact that my heart honestly rises up within me and says, “Yeah. That’s me, Paul. I know precisely what you are saying. I personally bear witness to the truth of the text.”

That being said, let’s turn our attention to this massively controversial and yet equally massively important paragraph in Romans.

Romans 7 is one of the most disputed passages in all of Scripture, as the debate rages over such questions as: *Who is this “man” whom Paul describes?* Is he a Christian or a non-Christian? Does Paul portray for us here what some might call the “normal” Christian life, or is this a portrayal of what we were before being born again, a condition from which, by the grace of God, we have been delivered? Is the Christian life one of severe struggle and frequent defeat, or is it one of triumph over sin and victory over the flesh? Or are these questions themselves misleading? Is there a third or middle way between these two extremes?

A very brief overview of *the two main options* is in order. However, it’s important for you to know that there are probably upwards of a dozen different interpretations of this passage. I think you will appreciate the fact that I have chosen not to burden you with an explanation of each one!

The View that Paul is Describing a Christian

One view of Romans 7 insists that the man described by Paul in vv. 14-25 is **regenerate** or born again. Many who embrace this view, including yours truly, believe that the experience of vv. 14-25 is one which even the most sanctified and mature of believers may expect to encounter until the resurrection of the body. The battle Paul describes is thus one that we all should expect to fight until Jesus returns.

Others who believe that Paul is describing a Christian insist that it is an experience which may be overcome through growth and maturity in the faith. The goal is to exchange the conflict of Romans 7 for the victory of Romans 8. In other words, vv. 14-25 describe the Christian who has failed to avail himself of the power of the Holy Spirit. It may be “normal” in the sense that many languish in this condition, but it is by no means “normative” given the fact that God has provided us with everything necessary to live victoriously over such sin. Thus, according to the first of these two perspectives, the experience described in vv. 14-25 is always present in the life of the believer, whereas the second view envisions moving out of immaturity and into a more triumphant, victorious, higher Christian life.

The View that Paul is Describing a non-Christian

I wouldn't want you to think that there is absolutely no basis on which one might argue that Paul is here describing a non-Christian's battle with sin. I just don't have the time to articulate all the reasons, and I don't think you want me to. If you want to explore those arguments in considerable detail, I recommend that you read my article on Romans 7 in my book, **Tough Topics 2** (Christian Focus). That being said, I'll briefly describe the view that Paul is here describing his non-Christian or pre-conversion experience.

Quite a few claim that the “Paul” portrayed in Romans 7 is **unregenerate**. That is to say, he is unsaved. He has not been born again. Some believe this is Paul's *autobiographical* account of **his own pre-conversion experience**, either as seen and understood by him at the time of his non-Christian life, or as seen and understood by him at the time he was writing Romans. According to the latter of these, Paul looks with Christian eyes on his former, non-Christian state. He now discerns a discord or struggle which was actually present then but which he did not at that time see.

Others believe this is Paul's portrayal, not of himself, but of *MAN* under the law. The “I” is not Paul himself but a stylistic form making for a more vivid picture than our colorless “one”. Thus, it is Paul's analysis of **human existence apart from faith**, either as seen by the non-Christian himself or as seen by the Christian, in this case Paul. A somewhat similar perspective, but with a slight difference in emphasis, is the position taken by Douglas Moo. He believes 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. . . . Now, in vv. 14-25, he portrays his own condition as a Jew under the law, but, more importantly, the condition of all Jews under the law. Paul speaks as a ‘representative’ Jew, detailing his past in order to reveal the weakness of the law and the source of that weakness: the human being, the *ego*” (447-48).

Reasons to Conclude that Paul is Describing his own Personal Christian, Born-again Experience

I believe that what we read here is not only a portrayal of Christian experience, but of **healthy** Christian experience. Let me explain my use of the word “healthy.” If one were to ask how Paul could possibly have given expression to such agonizing feelings of frustration and failure, especially given his emphatic declarations in Romans 6 and 8 of the victory available to those in whom the Spirit lives and works, I would respond by saying that Paul’s language is not the result of his being a defeated sinner but precisely because he is a born-again saint.

In other words, someone who is not born-again would not, indeed could not, respond to the presence of sin in his life the way it is described here. Sin has a numbing effect on the soul; it anesthetizes us to the conviction of the Spirit. Paul’s apparent hyper-sensitivity to a sense of failure is due precisely to the fact that he has made such gracious and glorious progress in the Christian life and even the slightest tinge of sin wreaks havoc on his heart.

A few preliminary observations are in order.

In vv. 1-13 Paul has told us that the effect of the law is to awaken in us a keen sense of the reality of sin. He said that it wasn’t until he was confronted with the law of God that he realized how sinful he truly was. In other words, the law awakens us to this knowledge of sin by articulating God’s commandments and his will for how we should live. This serves to stir us into active rebellion and alerts us to how far short of God’s perfect will we have fallen. Finally, as good, holy, and righteous as the law is (and Paul made that clear in v. 12), it neither promises nor provides us with the power to obey it. The deficiency, however, isn’t in the law, as if to suggest it is evil. The deficiency is in us, in our fallen and rebellious and selfish ways.

That Paul is speaking of his own personal experience as a born-again believer in Jesus is supported by several facts.

First, the most natural way to take the “I” in the paragraph is as an autobiographical reference to Paul. He uses “I” or “me” or “my” approximately 40x in this text! This sustained and vivid use of the first-person singular is not easily explained any other way.

Second, Paul shifts from the *past tense* in vv. 7-13 to the *present tense* in vv. 14-25. In other words, what sounds like past, non-Christian, testimony in vv. 7-13 becomes current, Christian, testimony in vv. 14-25. Look at how Paul speaks of what is true of him in the present moment: “I am of flesh,” “I do not understand my own actions,” “I do not do what I want,” “I do the very thing I hate,” “the evil that I do not want is what I keep on doing,” “I delight in the law of God,” and “I serve the law of God.”

Third, if the struggle in vv. 14-25 is Paul’s pre-conversion experience, it would conflict with what he says elsewhere about his life as a Pharisee, especially in Philippians 3:6. There he described his pre-Christian experience in these words: “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law,

blameless” (see also Gal. 1:13ff.). In other words, Paul describes his life before his conversion in such a way that there is no hint of inner torment or conflict with sin, such as we read in Romans 7.

Fourth, I should also point out that Paul's description of the “I” in Romans 7 is inconsistent with what he says elsewhere of the natural, unsaved, or non-regenerate man. Note what Paul attributes to the man or the “I” of Romans 7, statements that I believe only a born-again Christian could say:

- “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (v. 22).
- The “I” of Romans 7 hates evil and wishes to do good (v. 15).
- He concurs with the law of God, acknowledging it to be good (v. 16).
- According to v. 17, Paul identifies himself with one who is in agreement with God’s law and appears to distinguish himself from the sin that is committed. He clearly places responsibility for the sin he commits on indwelling sin itself. Could an unregenerate, unbelieving person say this about himself?
- He acknowledges his innate depravity (v. 18).
- He wants to do good (vv. 18, 21).
- He does not wish to do evil (v. 19).
- He joyfully concurs with the law of God (v. 22; cf. Ps. 119:97).
- He feels imprisoned by and in bondage to his sin (v. 23).
- He confesses his wretchedness (v. 24).

In other words, the man of vv. 14-25 does bad things, but he hates them. They violate the prevailing bent of his will to do the good. In his inner man, the deepest and most fundamental seat of his personality, he loves God's law, delights in the good, hates and dissociates his will from evil. Can this be said of the unregenerate, unsaved man or woman? In the unregenerate there may well be a conflict between mind or conscience and the will. The conscience is convicted of sin and recognizes right from wrong. But the will resists and does not wish or want to do what the conscience says is right. But in vv. 14-25 the will of the man in view *does want* to do good.

Fifth, Paul's description of the man in vv. 14-25 *is* consistent with what he elsewhere says of the Christian person. According to v. 25b, this man is “serving” the law of God with his mind. Likewise, in Romans 6:18 Christians are they who have become “servants/slaves” to righteousness. Consider Galatians 5:17, where Paul says that “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

All admit that Galatians 5:17 is describing the Christian, and yet the struggle between “flesh” and “Spirit” in that passage is seemingly parallel to the struggle in Romans 7. Would we not say that a struggle as serious as the one in Romans 7 can *only* take place where the Spirit of God is present and active? Otherwise, would not an unregenerate person simply acquiesce altogether to the promptings of sin and the flesh?

Sixth, another argument in favor of taking the man of Romans 7 as a believer is v 25b which says that the struggle persists beyond the declaration of victory found in v. 25a. If vv. 14-23 refer to a non-Christian who becomes a Christian in vv. 24-25a, why does Paul say the struggle is still a reality? Paul clearly asserts that the battle between the inward man and the flesh is not overcome and left behind, it continues through and beyond the shout of thanksgiving. “In other words, the struggle so vividly depicted in

7:14-25 does not end when the Spirit comes; on the contrary, that is when it really begins” (James Dunn, “Rom. 7.14-25 in the Theology of Paul,” 263).

Seventh, in v. 22 the “inner being” would appear to be descriptive of a Christian, especially in light of what we see in 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16; 4:22ff.; and Colossians 3:9ff.

Eighth, look at the contrast between the man of 7:16, 21-22, 25 and the man of Romans 8:7. The former man confesses the law of God as good, wishes to obey that law, joyfully concurs with it, and serves it with his mind. The unbelieving man, however, as described in Romans 8:7, does not subject his mind to the law of God, being hostile to him and to it, being unable to sustain any attitude other than one of enmity.

Ninth, observe the intensity of language, the unusually strong feeling that is found in v. 24. If this is not the cry of Paul the believer, even as he writes Romans 7, it would be unduly dramatic and overplayed. To the objection that such a cry is inconsistent with the joy of salvation, I would argue this is precisely what a mature, Christ-loving believer would say when confronted with the lingering problem of indwelling sin. Paul is so utterly devoted to Christ that the slightest presence of sin in his life evokes from him this most emotionally anguished cry.

Tenth, that Paul should qualify his statement in v. 18 that “nothing good dwells in me” with “that is, in my flesh,” seems to indicate that there is more to Paul than “flesh,” namely, Spirit. In the unregenerate there is *only* flesh. Jesus himself said in John 3:6 that what “is born of the flesh is flesh.” It is only when we come to faith in Jesus, having been born again, that we can say, “I am more than sinful flesh. I now have the Holy Spirit dwelling within me.”

There is, of course, one more reason why I believe Paul is describing the experience of the born-again believer in Jesus. I mentioned this at the outset. I can personally identify with how he describes his own struggle. Can you? How could you not?

I have been greatly helped in my understanding of this passage by something J. I. Packer once said. He insists that Paul’s statement that he is “sold under sin” (v. 14) is *pictorial* rather than *theological* language. In other words, Paul is articulating quite vividly how the condition being described “feels” rather than expressing it directly in explicit and intentional theological terms. In other words, Packer insists that it is precisely because Paul is a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led man who loves God and his law that such moral failures “feel” as though he were a bond-slave to sin. His heightened sensitivity to sin in his life accounts for this elevated and emotionally intense language. It is not, therefore, a technical affirmation that he is in fact still under the power of sin and under divine wrath.

On this view the verb to be supplied in v. 24 is future tense: Thanks be to God “who *will deliver/rescue* me” in the coming age when I get my resurrection body. Thus the thanksgiving has for its focus neither one’s current state of having been justified nor the enabling power of the Spirit presently enjoyed. Rather, it is a declaration of personal Christian hope.

So, in vv. 14-25 Paul is not so much describing *defeat*, says Packer, but *discernment*. Paul becomes aware of his shortcoming, that he failed to do what he wanted and intended, and thus his text describes the reality of his frustration at this repeated discovery, rather than his despair over a struggle that brings repeated and persistent failure.

Paul is not describing complete moral failure, as if he never gets anything right or never obeys God's revealed will. His distress and bewilderment are simply the reaction of a heart that fails to attain the perfection it so deeply desires. In other words, Paul is not telling us that the daily experience of this "wretched man" is as bad as it could be, but rather that it is not as good as it should be. On this view, then, Paul is himself "the wretched man" who gives vent to his anguish at not being a better Christian than he is. Shouldn't we all react this way to the lingering presence of sin in our lives? Yes.

It bears repeating that Paul's obvious emotional anguish as he contemplates his personal experience is not because he was a hopelessly enslaved sinner, with little or no prospects for extricating himself from this wretched condition. Rather, his inner turmoil is due precisely to the fact that he was a mature and ever-growing saint.

The greater and more influential the presence of transforming grace in his heart, the greater and more intensely painful the lingering reality of sin would prove to be. Whereas a life immersed in sin anesthetizes the soul, rendering it increasingly incapable of feeling genuine conviction, a life in tune with the Holy Spirit and devoted to the supremacy of God's glory is ever more sensitive to even the least degree of sin committed.

There is a strange paradox here. In one sense we agonize over the fact that the experience described in Romans 7 will be ours as long as we are in this world. In yet another sense we take heart to know that the presence of this struggle is not a sign that we are unsaved, but that there is within us, by God's grace, a deep desire to do what is right and to honor God with our lives.

Is Assurance of Salvation Possible?

People often emerge from an exploration of Romans 7 and its bare-knuckled approach to the on-going war with indwelling sin and wonder aloud: If this be true, is assurance of salvation even possible? If I must continually wage war with indwelling sin, will I ever enter into the joy of knowing I'm saved?

Every born-again child of God ought to find the inexpressible delight that comes from knowing that he/she is the recipient of God's unmerited mercy and saving favor. To confidently know that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ is the pinnacle of Christian assurance. To live in the fullness of the knowledge of Christ's immeasurable love for us, a knowledge that Paul says surpasses all human calculation (Eph. 3:18-19), is at the heart of what it is to live as a Christian in this world.

But how does this come to pass? On what grounds are we justified in resting assured that we stand in union with Christ and at peace with the Father?

No one has a right to claim confidence in salvation who does not walk in the path of conscious and purposeful obedience to God. That is not to say that sinless perfection is the condition of assurance, but that when failures occur there is repentance. There is always the danger of self-deception that may even be of demonic origin. Therefore, inward assurance must always be checked and monitored by external moral and spiritual tests such that we find in 1 John. Do we consistently and happily embrace the truth that Jesus is God in human flesh? Do we demonstrate over time, in concrete acts of self-sacrifice and generosity, a love for the brethren? Are our lives marked by joyful obedience to the fullness of biblical revelation? These objective tests must combine with that more subjective, inner confidence to bring authentic assurance.

Conclusion:

The Christian's Hopeful, Expectant Cry of Ultimate Deliverance from Sin (vv. 24-25)

As I noted at the beginning, *if* Romans 7:14-25 is descriptive of the Christian, as I believe it is, one of two alternatives must be taken. On the one hand, it may be that Paul is speaking of the immature (possibly young) believer who is relying on self and the law and thus can be delivered out of this bondage and into freedom from sin, that is, out of Romans 7 and into Romans 8. This deliverance, of course, is relative, for sinless perfection is not possible in this life.

The other option is to say that, contrary to what appears to be the case, Paul is not describing complete and utter spiritual defeat in Romans 7. It must be taken as an expression of periodic, or occasional, rather than constant, defeat. Perhaps Paul's emphasis is on the sensitivity to sin which the mature believer feels, a sensitivity which increases as one is being conformed to the image of Christ. In other words, whereas Paul may be describing defeat in the Christian life, it is *not total* defeat. This is the view that I take.

If you should conclude that the man of Romans 7 is a Christian, you must be prepared to answer the question: "Is Romans 7 a description of the *normal* Christian life?" The answer to this question is "No" if by *normal* one means constant, with no hope of improvement or victory. On the other hand, it *is normal* if by that one means *universal*. Undoubtedly *all* Christians have at one time or another, some more and some less, experienced a struggle with sin analogous to what is described in Romans 7.

Whichever view one takes, we must conclude that Paul is not saying that Christians live in constant defeat, but that no Christian lives in constant victory. I must confess that hardly a day passes that I don't myself cry, "Wretched man that I am" (v. 24a)! In fact, the more I grow in Christ, the greater my conformity to his image, the more intense becomes my awareness of the remaining wretchedness of sin. But here is the glorious good news. As "wretched" and anguished as I may feel when sin rises up within me, I am not hopeless. The prayer of Paul, "who will deliver me from this body of death" (v. 24b), is assured of a wonderful answer from God.

Paul knows that deliverance from this body that is infected with sin is coming. It is called glorification. He will speak explicitly of this in Romans 8:23. There he says that the Christian "groans inwardly as we await eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." He speaks of it yet again in Romans 8:30. In fact, there he says that so unshakably certain is our coming glorification that it can be spoken of

as if it has already occurred! We will assuredly be delivered from this body of death. We will assuredly experience not simply the redemption and renewal of our souls but also of our bodies. It is so settled in God's purpose for us that Paul speaks of it as an accomplished fact (note his use of the past tense in Romans 8:30).

By no means does Paul attribute this coming transformation to human will power. It is not because of our personal striving that we will ultimately be perfected, never again to sin. Paul couldn't be any clearer that it is God's doing. That is why he "thanks" God instead of congratulating himself or the Romans or you and me. "**Thanks be to God**" that we will indeed be delivered from this body of death. It is because of what God has done for us "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 25a) that the struggle of Romans 7 will not define us forever. It is only because of the life, death, resurrection, and soon return of Jesus that we have hope of being finally and forever set free from this principle and power of sin in our lives.

Let me conclude with two final observations about Paul's anguished cry of v. 24 and his triumphant declaration in v. 25a.

First, he is not saying that a day is coming when we will be set free from living in a physical body. We will live in a physical body forever. Your physical body won't be trashed and discarded. It will be renewed and glorified! When the day of resurrection comes you will be given a body altogether free from indwelling sin, a body no longer susceptible to disease or cancer or weakness or any form of pain and suffering. In fact, Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:20-21 that "we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be **like his glorious body**, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

So, when Paul speaks in Romans 7:24 of being delivered or set free "from this body of death" he isn't saying that he will be divested of his physical body and live forever as an immaterial spirit. He is saying that his body will be set free from sin and death and that he, like all of us, will be made like unto the resurrection body of Jesus himself.

But note well. In the meantime, says Paul in v. 25b, we continue in our war with sin. The "law of God" vs. the "law of sin" is a battle that will only terminate when we are glorified, resurrected, and fully redeemed and the presence of sin is forever banished from our experience. The salvation that Christ died and rose again to secure for us does not happen all at once. It comes in stages. Our souls are saved now. Our spirits are alive now (Rom. 8:10). Our sins are forgiven now. But our bodies must await the return of Christ when they likewise will be made eternally alive, never to die or suffer the presence of sin.

Second, it needs to be noted how Paul endured this never-ending war with indwelling sin. We need to think deeply on how you and I can endure in our battle with sin. There is no denying the agony Paul felt. One should never minimize the deep longing in his heart to live free from sin. His heartache that came from doing the very things he hated is quite real. So, how did he cope? How did he carry on? What kept him from falling into despair and hopelessness? While asking that question of Paul, let's ask it of ourselves. How do *you* cope? What keeps *you* from quitting altogether and simply giving yourself over to those sinful impulses in your soul?

The answer in both cases, in the case of Paul and in our lives as well, is the same. Paul was confident, and so should you be, that a day was coming when Christ Jesus would set him free forever and finally and fully from the sin that corrupted his body and which he felt so often enslaved his soul. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” That day is coming. And it is the certainty of that day that sustains and strengthens Paul, and you and me, to persevere in our war with sin. Even so, come Lord Jesus!