

Paul's Struggle With Sin

Is Romans 7:14-25 Paul's testimony of his struggle as a believer or an unbeliever? The potentially troubling aspect of interpreting this particular passage is in discerning whether Paul was speaking as one who is regenerate or as one who is still dead in his trespasses and sins. Many who come to this text have a hard time admitting that Paul would battle with his flesh and sin to such a degree as he does as a Christian. Commentator R. C. H. Lenski points out that Pietists and all perfectionists and holiness sects reject the view that this text refers to a believer.¹

The most prevalent view of this passage is that it expresses the struggle Paul faced as an unregenerate man. Interpreters who take this position rely heavily on verse 14, since the Apostle says, "I am sold under the bondage of sin." Early Greek church fathers endorsed this view, including Augustine before he changed his position. In the 20th century, W. G. Kummel and H. R. Ridderbos perpetuated this view.

In a second view, interpreters believe this text is mainly about the law. To them, it pictures man trying to please God through his own efforts, yet he is overcome by his indwelling sin. "This interpretation, endorsed and embellished by Bultmann, was for years almost the 'orthodox' view in scholarship."²

A third view proposes that this is Paul upon conversion. Variations of this view state that Paul loves the law of God and longs to obey it. Proponents of this are many times in the "victorious life" circles³ or sometimes viewed as the Chaferian model in sanctification.⁴ Even the master-interpreter Bernard Ramm, who wrote the landmark work on Bible interpretation which was the standard textbook in seminaries for years on the discipline of the art and science of interpretation, suggests that chapter 7 is the picture of a carnal believer or one on a lower plain of spirituality.⁵

The final and preferred view presented here is that Paul presents himself in his current struggle as a believer. This is the view that Augustine held to after he retracted his earlier view of Paul as an unbeliever.⁶ Other proponents of this view are L. Berkof, G. C. Berkouwer, F. F. Bruce, J. Calvin, C. Hodge, J. Knox, R. C. H. Lenski, and J. Murray. They saw Paul as a Christian who was still a sinner. Their primary strength was found in verse 22 as Paul would "joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner man." There is also support at the beginning of the passage. J. I. Packer said, "the only natural way for Paul's readers to interpret the present tenses of verses 14 and following is as having a *present* reference."⁷ This position is held in

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 474.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 444.

³ L. S. Chafer, *He That is Spiritual*, 115-18.

⁴ For a survey of main views of sanctification see Stanley Gundry's *Five Views on Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987).

⁵ Bernard Ramm, "The Double and Romans 7," *Christianity Today*, 18.

⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.345, n. 4.

⁷ J. I. Packer, "The Wretched Man of Romans 7," *Studia Evangelica*, 624.

evangelical creeds such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Lutheran Creed.⁸

A basic principle in Bible study is that context is king. Notice both the immediate and near context of the passage. At the beginning of verse 14, the word “for” links this text to the preceding comments on the law that Paul has already discussed. As stated in the chapter (7:1, 4), Paul is talking to Christians of their common struggle with sin in their service to Christ (7:6).

Yet probably the most troubling phrase upon initial glance for one who takes this view of Paul the Christian is “I am carnal, *sold under sin*.” If isolated from chapters 6 and 8, these words would convey a wrong view of the Christian life. Those who do not accept this fourth view would state that it flies in the face of the Bible’s teaching on the victory promised to believers (cf. 1 Cor 10:13; 15:54ff.; Eph 3:14-20; 1 Jn 5:4). Many, like Bruce and C.L. Mitton, who do see verses 14-25 supporting Paul as a Christian, suggest that this is a stage in life that can be left behind once a Christian learns to depend on the Spirit rather than the flesh, as shown in chapter 8. The problem is that people let their experience or theology dictate their exegesis, rather than letting the text speak for itself. As C. E. B. Cranfield so helpfully states,

we are convinced that it is possible to do justice to the text of Paul—and also to the facts of Christian living wherever they are observed—only if we resolutely hold chapters 7 and 8 together, in spite of the obvious tension between them, and see in them not two successive stages but two different aspects, two contemporaneous realities, of the Christian life, both of which continue so long as the Christian is in the flesh.⁹

The tension remains as a constant part of the Christian’s experience in the flesh.¹⁰ Though God has saved him and declared him righteous positionally, the Christian spends a lifetime learning to more consistently manifest that righteousness in practice in the daily affairs of life.

Tension is characteristic of the life-long pursuit of holiness and sanctification. The previous chapter of Romans sets forth the break with sin’s slavery. “According to 6:2, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, for the Christian sin is the dethroned lord, the lord who has lost his ruling power.”¹¹ The *old man* connotes the whole self in its fallenness, or the autonomous man under sin, thus characterizing him enslaved to the sinful disposition and way of life.¹² The *new man*, on the contrary, expresses what the believer is and has in Christ or the human person in his regenerate state, thus characterizing him freed from such slavery.¹³ Newell goes on to present six points that reveal Paul’s regenerate condition throughout the struggle. A few noteworthy points are:

⁸ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*.

⁹ Cranfield, 356.

¹⁰ For a longer, more thorough treatment of this subject, see my “Progressive Sanctification: A Divine Co-op.”

¹¹ William Hendriksen, *Romans*, 226.

¹² Cranfield, 1:309.

¹³ See Newell’s *Romans*, 210 and Shower’s *The New Nature*, 123.

- Only born-again people hate evil (Ps 97:10; 119:104), but the wicked do not (Ps 36:4).
- The unregenerate resists the Law, rather than consenting to its goodness (v16).
- An unregenerate man can not say, 'Wretched man that I am!' for he can not see his wretchedness.
- Finally, Newell says, "this man of Romans Seven is crying for deliverance—not from sin's guilt and penalty, but from its power. Not for forgiveness of sins, but help against indwelling sin. This man is exercised, not about the day of judgment, but about a condition of bondage to that which he hates...no one but a quickened soul ever knows about a 'body of death'!"¹⁴

Donald Grey Barnhouse concurs, suggesting the student of Scripture merely needs to survey the verbs that are used. Notice that Paul here desires good (7:18, 19) and delights in the law of God (7:22). He has already developed in the rich first three chapters of Romans that no unregenerate man "desires good...righteousness...or delights in the law of God."¹⁵ When a person is born again by the Spirit of God, new desires are planted along with the new nature.

It will take a lifetime from justification forward to learn to put off the old way of life with its lusts and to replace sinful patterns of behavior with righteous ones. The Bible teaches what is indicative of the believer: he is new (2 Cor 5:17). It also teaches what is imperative of the believer: be new (Eph 4:24). Because his state of being is one of newness (the indicative), he is to show forth that new character (the imperative command). The believer is constantly in the process of becoming what he is. Thus, sanctification is inextricably linked to justification. Because God has worked in him, he is empowered to obey and do what brings honor to his new Master.

So what is the theological and practical impact upon missing the point of this passage? Sadly, some believers are self-deceived and deluded into thinking that when they came to Christ the struggle would be over. They wallow in a morass of doubt toward their salvation, wondering if they are truly regenerate. But it is key to remember that in our present state, we are still in the flesh; our unredeemed humanness remains. Through the struggles one learns how to perform spiritual battle. Yes there is victory, but sin remains a part of our existence.

The more seriously a Christian strives to live from grace and to submit to the discipline of the gospel, the more sensitive he becomes to the fact of his continuing sinfulness, the fact that even his very best acts and activities are disfigured by the egotism which is still powerful within him—and no less evil because it is often more subtly disguised than formerly.¹⁶

¹⁴ Newell, 276-77.

¹⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines*, 238.

¹⁶ Cranfield, 358.

In other words, the more a Christian understands the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the exceeding holiness of God, the struggle may have more of an aspect of intensity to it. It takes time to learn and grow, and the more a believer learns of the depths of God's majesty, the more repulsed by his own sin he becomes. Until the Christian reaches his glorified state where he is rescued from sin's presence, he will be in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction and discontent over the sin that he still gives way to.

Another support for this passage speaking of Paul the believer is the way he sides with the law of God. He attests to the law being spiritual (v14), which affirms its divine origin. Other passages (Matt 22:43; Mk 12:36; Acts 1:16; 4:25; 2 Pet 1:21) teach this same fact of divine origin, which in turn affirms divine authority. Such an affirmation can only come from one who is redeemed. It takes the Spirit of God to give such an understanding and submission (1 Cor 2:10-16). Paul's affirmation and submission to God's divine law is sprinkled throughout this text (v 16, 22, 23, 25) as well as the following chapters (8, 6, 10, 13).

True discipleship involves commitment. There is no looking back (Lk 9:57-62) nor ignoring this priority (Lk 14:25-35).

Hendriksen used this text in his Galatians commentary as a cross-reference in regard to the war between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal 5:17). He says, "Paul, writing as a converted man and recording his present state of grace experiences...complains bitterly about the fact that he practices that in which his soul no longer takes delight; in fact, practices that which his regenerated self hates."¹⁷

Additionally, Paul uses the first person singular pronoun "I" to show that he is giving personal testimony. Before verse 14 Paul had used the past tense to show his struggle as an unbeliever, but now in verse 14 he starts using the present tense to demonstrate his current struggle as a believer.

When Paul admits that "nothing good dwells in me," he clarifies that this lack of goodness is in his flesh. Though he wills to please God, he is limited by being in the flesh, his unredeemed humanness. Lenski points out, "As a Christian, Paul is not wholly rid of his flesh, and that is what causes this entire conflict with the spiritual law of God, which he would obey in all things but finds himself hampered in obeying by the presence of his flesh."¹⁸ In other words, there is a residual effect of the old nature trying to revive itself, though it is dead; it has been crucified (Gal 2:20).

In conclusion, it is of utmost importance that believers recognize that conflict is a perpetual part of the Christian experience. Through the law of God, the Bible, there is revelation of God's will for man as well as clear teaching that man will fail. Though there is conflict, there is also comfort found in the Holy Spirit as He sanctifies the believer. In the Christian there is a continual growth in understanding the will of God and, therefore, also an ever-deepening perception of the extent to which he falls short of it. Yet there is grace to persevere and submit to the Spirit's working. In simple words, it is not an emphasis on the perfection of your life but the direction that its headed that matters. Stated differently, there is growth in holiness

¹⁷ Hendriksen, 233.

¹⁸ Lenski, 477.

and pursuit of the things of God. For the true believer, though not as holy as he desires nor as holy as God demands, his goal and desire are to honor and glorify God, though he fails towards this ambition until he arrives at his glorified state.

Soli Deo Gloria,

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