

The Christian in ROMANS 7

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In this chapter the apostle does two things: *First*, he shows what is not and what is the Law's relation to the believer—judicially, the believer is emancipated from the curse or penalty of the Law (7:1-6); morally, the believer is under bonds to obey the Law (vv. 22, 25). *Secondly*, he guards against a false inference being drawn from what he had taught in chapter 6. In 6:1-11 he sets forth the believer's identification with Christ as “dead to sin.” (vv. 2, 7, etc.) Then, from v. 11 onwards, he shows the effect this truth should have upon the believer's walk. In chapter 7 he follows the same order of thought. In 7:1-6 he treats of the believer's identification with Christ as “dead to the law” (see vv. 4, 6). Then, from v. 7 onwards he describes the experiences of the Christian. Thus the first half of Rom. 6 and the first half of Rom. 7 deal with the believer's *standing*, whereas the second half of each chapter treats of the believer's *state*; but with this difference: the second half of Rom. 6 reveals what our state *ought to be*, whereas the second half of Rom. 7 (vv. 13-25) shows what our state *actually is*.

The controversy which has raged over Rom. 7 is largely the fruitage of the Perfectionism of Wesley and his followers. That brethren, whom we have cause to respect, should have adopted this error in a modified form, only shows how widespread today is the spirit of Laodiceanism. To talk of “getting out of Rom. 7 into Rom. 8” is excuseless folly. Rom. 7 and both apply with undiminished force and pertinence to every believer on earth today. The second half of Rom. 7 describes the conflict of the two natures in the child of God: it simply sets forth in detail what is summarized in Gal. 5:17. Rom. 7:14, 15, 18, 19, 21 are now true of every believer on earth. Every Christian falls far, far short of the standard set before him—we mean God's standard, not that of the so-called “victorious life” teachers. If any Christian reader is ready to say that Rom. 7:19 does not describe his life, we say in all kindness, that he is sadly deceived. We do not mean by this that every Christian breaks the laws of men, or that he is an overt transgressor of the laws of God. But we do mean that his life is far, far below the level of the life our Savior lived here on earth. We do mean that there is much of “the flesh” still evident in every Christian—not the least in those who make such loud boastings of their spiritual attainments. We do mean that every **Christian has urgent need to daily pray for the forgiveness of his daily sins (Luke 11:4), for “in many things we all stumble” (James 3:2, R. V.).**

In what follows we shall confine ourselves to the last two verses of Rom. 7, in which we read, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with flesh the law of sin.” (vv.24, 25)

This is the language of a regenerate soul, and it sums up the contents of the verses immediately preceding. The unregenerate man is wretched indeed, but he is a stranger to the “wretchedness” here expressed, for he knows nothing of the experience which evokes this wail. The whole context is devoted to a description of the conflict between the two natures in the child of God. “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (v. 22), is true of none but born-again persons. But the one thus “delighting” discovers “another law in his members.” This reference must not be limited to his physical members, but is to be understood as including all the various parts of his carnal personality. This “other law” is also at work in the memory, the imagination, the will, the heart, etc.

This “other law,” says the apostle, warred against the law of his mind (the new nature), and not only so, it brought him “into captivity to the law of sin.” (v. 23) To what extent he was brought into “captivity” is not defined. But brought into captivity he was, as is every believer. The wandering of the mind when reading God's Word, the issuing from the heart (Mark 7:21) of evil thoughts when we are engaged in prayer, the horrid images which sometimes come before us in the sleep-state—to name no others—are so many examples of being “brought into captivity to the law of sin.” “If the evil principle of our nature prevails in exciting one evil thought, it has taken us captive. So far it has conquered, and so far are we defeated, and made a prisoner” (Robert Haldane).

It is the consciousness of this warring within him and this being brought into captivity to sin, which causes the believer to exclaim, “O wretched man that I am!” This is a cry brought about by a

deep realization of indwelling sin. It is the confession of one who knows that in his natural man there dwelleth no good thing. It is the mournful plaint of one who has discovered something of the horrible sink of iniquity which is in his own heart. It is the groan of a divinely-enlightened man who now hates himself—his natural self—and longs for deliverance.

This moan, “O wretched man that I am,” expresses the normal experience of the Christian, and any Christian who does not so moan is in an abnormal and unhealthy state spiritually. The man who does not utter this cry daily is either so out of communion with Christ, or so ignorant of the teaching of Scripture, or so deceived about his actual condition, that he knows not the corruptions of his own heart and the abject failure of his own life.

The one who bows to the solemn and searching teaching of God's Word, the one who there learns the awful wreckage which sin has wrought in the human constitution, the one who sees the exalted standard of holiness which God has set before us, cannot fail to discover what a vile wretch he is. If he is given to behold how far short he falls of attaining to God's standard; if, in the light of the divine sanctuary, he discovers how little he resembles the Christ of God; then will he find this language most suited to express his godly sorrow. If God reveals to him the coldness of his love, the pride of his heart, the wanderings of his mind, the evil that defiles his godliest acts, he will cry, “O wretched man that I am.” If he is conscious of his ingratitude, of how little he appreciates God's daily mercies; if he marks the absence of that deep and genuine fervor which ought ever to characterize his praise and worship of that One who is “glorious in holiness;” if he recognizes that sinful spirit of rebellion, which so often causes him to murmur or at least chafe against the dispensations of God in his daily life; if he attempts to tabulate not only the sins of commission but the sins of omission, of which he is daily guilty, he will indeed cry, “O wretched man that I am.”

Nor is it only the “backslidden” Christian, now convicted, who will mourn thus. The one who is truly in communion with Christ, will also emit this groan, and emit it daily and hourly. Yea, the closer he draws to Christ, the more will he discover the corruptions of his old nature, and the more earnestly will he long to be delivered from it. It is not until the sunlight floods a room that the grime and dust are fully revealed. So, it is only as we really come into the presence of Him who is the light, that we are made aware of the filth and wickedness which indwell us, and which defile every part of our being. And such a discovery will make each of us cry, “O wretched man that I am!”

“But,” inquires someone, “does not communion with Christ produce rejoicing rather than mourning?” We answer, It produces both. It did with Paul. In v. 22 of our chapter he says, “I delight in the law of God.” Yet only two verses later he cries, “O wretched man that I am!” Nor does this passage stand alone. In 2 Cor. 6 the same apostle says, “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (v.10). Sorrowful because of his failures, because of his daily sins. Rejoicing because of the grace which still bore with him, and because of the blessed provision which God has made even for the sins of His saints. So again in Rom. 8:1 after declaring, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,” and after saying, “The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (vv. 16-17); the apostle adds, “But ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” (v.23) Similar is the teaching of the apostle Peter, “Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations” (1 Pet. 1:6). Sorrow and groaning, then, are not absent from the highest spirituality.

In these days of Laodicean complacency and pride, there is considerable talk and much boasting about communion with Christ, but how little manifestation of it do we behold! Where there is no sense of utter unworthiness, where there is no mourning over the total depravity of our nature, where there is no sorrowing over our lack of conformity to Christ, where there is no groaning over being brought into captivity to sin; in short, where there is no crying, “O wretched man that I am,” it is greatly to be feared that there is no fellowship with Christ at all.

When Abraham walked with the Lord, he exclaimed, “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes. (Gen. 18:27) When Job came face to face with God, he said, “Behold I am vile” (40:4), and again, “I abhor myself.” (42:6) When Isaiah entered the divine Presence, he cried,

“Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.” (Isa. 6:5) When Daniel had that wondrous vision of Christ (Dan. 10:5-6), he declared, “There remained no strength in me: for comeliness was turned in me into corruption.” (v.8) And in one of the last epistles by the beloved apostle to the Gentiles, we read, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15). These utterances proceeded not from unregenerate men, but came from the lips of God's saints. Nor were they the confessions of backslidden believers: rather were they voiced by the most eminent of the Lord's people. Where, today, shall we find any who are fit to be placed along side of Abraham, Job, Isaiah, Daniel and Paul? Where indeed! And yet, these were the men who were so conscious of their vileness and unworthiness!

“O wretched man that I am.” This then is the language of a regenerate soul. It is the confession of the normal (undeceived and undeluded) Christian. The substance of it may be found not only in the recorded utterances of Old and New Testament saints, but as well, in the writings of the most eminent Christians who have lived during the last five hundred years. Different indeed were the confessions and witnessings borne by eminent saints of the past from the ignorant and arrogant boastings of modern Laodiceans! It is refreshing to turn from the present-day biographies to those written long ago. Ponder the following excerpts:

□Mr. Bradford, of holy memory, who was martyred in the reign of bloody queen Mary, in a letter to a fellow-prisoner in another penitentiary, subscribed himself thus: “The sinful John Bradford: a very painted hypocrite: the most miserable, hardhearted, and unthankful sinner, John Bradford.” (1555 A.D.)

□Godly Rutherford wrote, “This body of sin and corruption embitters and poisons our enjoyment. Oh that I were where I shall sin no more.” (1650 A.D.)

□Bishop Berkeley wrote, “I cannot pray, but I sin; I cannot preach, but I sin; I cannot administer, nor receive the holy sacrament, but I sin. My very repentance needs to be repented of: and the tears I shed need washing in the blood of Christ.” (1670 A.D.)

□Jonathan Edwards, in whose home died that remarkable man Mr. David Brainerd (the first missionary to the Indians, and whose devotion to Christ was witnessed to by all who knew him), and with whom he was intimately acquainted, says in his “Memoirs of Mr. Brainerd,” “His religious illuminations, affections, and comfort, seemed to a great degree to be attended with evangelical humiliation; consisting in a sense of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness; with an answering disposition and frame of heart. How deeply affected was he almost continually with his great defects in religion; with his vast distance from that spirituality and holy frame of mind that become a child of God; with his ignorance, pride, deadness, barrenness! He was not only affected with the remembrance of his former sinfulness, before his conversion, but with the sense of his present vileness and pollution. He was not only disposed to think other saints better than he; yea to look on himself as the worst and least of saints; but, very often, as the vilest and worst of mankind.”

□Jonathan Edwards himself, than whom few men have been more honored of God, either in their spiritual attainments or in the extent to which God has used them in blessing to others, near the end of his life wrote thus: “When I look into my heart and take a view of its wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell. And it appears to me, that, were it not for free grace, exalted and raised up to the infinite height of all the fulness and glory of the great Jehovah, I should appear sunk down in my sins below hell itself; far below the sight of everything, but the eye of sovereign grace, that alone can pierce down to such a depth. And it is affecting to think how ignorant I was, when a young Christian [alas, that so many older Christians are still ignorant of it.—A.W.P.], of the bottomless depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy and deceit left in my heart” (1743 A.D.).

□Augustus Toplady, author of “Rock of Ages,” wrote thus in his private diary under December 31, 1767—“Upon a review of the past year, I desire to confess that my unfaithfulness has been exceeding great; my sins still greater; God's mercies greater than both.” And again, “My short-comings and my mis-doings, my unbelief and want of love, would sink me into the lowest hell, was not Jesus my righteousness and my Redeemer.”

Listen to the words of that godly woman, the wife of that eminent missionary Adoniram Judson: “Oh how I rejoice that I am out of the whirlpool! Too gay, too trifling, for a missionary's wife! That may be,

but after all, gaiety is my lightest sin. It is my coldness of heart, my listlessness, my want of faith, my spiritual inefficiency and inertness, by love of self, the inherent and every-day pampered sinfulness of my nature, that makes me such a mere infant in the cause of Christ—not the attractions of the world.”

□John Newton, writer of that blessed hymn, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see;” when referring to the expectations which he cherished at the outset of his Christian life, wrote thus: “But alas! these my golden expectations have been like South Sea dreams. I have lived hitherto a poor sinner, and I believe I shall die one. Have I, then, gained nothing? Yes, I have gained that which I once would rather have been without! Such accumulated proof of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of my heart, as I hope by the Lord's blessing has, in some measure, taught me to know what I mean when I say, Behold, I am vile...I was ashamed of myself, when I began to seek it, I am more ashamed now.”

□James Inglis (Editor of *Waymarks in the Wilderness*) at the close of his life, wrote Mr. J. H. Brookes, “As I am brought to take a new view of the end, my life seems so made up of squandered opportunities, and so barren of results, that it is sometimes very painful; but grace comes in to meet it all, and He will be glorified in my humiliation also” (1872). On which Mr. Brookes remarked, “How like him, and how unlike the boastings of those who are glorying in their fancied attainments!”

One more quotation: this time from a sermon by the late □C. H. Spurgeon. Said the prince of preachers, “There are some professing Christians who can speak of themselves in terms of admiration; but, from my inmost heart, I loathe such speeches more and more every day that I live. Those who talk in such a boastful fashion must be constituted very differently from me. While they are congratulating themselves, I have to lie humbly at the foot of Christ's Cross, and marvel that I am saved at all, for I know that I am saved. I have to wonder that I do not believe Christ more, and equally wonder that I am privileged to believe in Him at all—to wonder that I do not love Him more, and equally to wonder that I love Him at all—to wonder that I am not holier, and equally to wonder that I have any desire to be holy at all considering what a polluted debased, depraved nature I find still within my soul, notwithstanding all that divine grace has done in me. If God were ever to allow the fountains of the great deeps of depravity to break up in the best man that lives, he would make as bad a devil as the devil himself is. I care nothing for what these boasters say concerning their own perfections; I feel sure that they do not know themselves, or they could not talk as they often do. There is tinder enough in the saint who is nearest to heaven to kindle another hell if God should but permit a spark to fall upon it. In the very best of men there is an infernal and well-nigh infinite depth of depravity. Some Christians never seem to find this out. I almost wish that they might not do so, for it is a painful discovery for anyone to make; but it has the beneficial effect of making us cease from trusting in ourselves, and causing us to glory only in the Lord.”

Other testimonies from the lips and pens of men equally pious and eminent might be given, but sufficient have been quoted to show what cause the saints of all ages have had for making their own these words, “O wretched man that I am.” A few words now on the closing verse of Romans 7.

“Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” “Who shall deliver me?” This is not the language of despair, but of earnest desire for help from without and above himself. That from which the apostle desired to be delivered is termed “the body of this death.” This is a figurative expression for the carnal nature is termed “the body of sin,” and as having “members.” (Rom. 7:23) We therefore take the apostle's meaning to be, Who shall deliver me from this deadly and noxious burden—my sinful self!

In the next verse the apostle answers his question, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” It should be obvious to any impartial mind that this looks forward to the future. His question was, “Who shall deliver me?” His answer is, *Jesus Christ will*. How this exposes the error of those who teach a present “deliverance” from the carnal nature by the power of the Holy Spirit. In His answer, the apostle says nothing about the Holy Spirit; instead, he mentions only “Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is not by the present work of the Spirit in us that Christians will be delivered “from this body of death,” but by the yet future coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for us. It is then that this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruption shall put on incorruption.

But, as though to remove all doubt that this “deliverance” is future, the apostle concludes by saying, “So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.” Let every reader

note carefully that this comes after he had thanked God that he would be “delivered.” The last part of v. 25 sums up what he had said in the second part of Rom. 7. It describes the Christian's dual life. The new nature serves the law of God; the old nature, to the end of history, will serve “the law of sin.” That it was so with Paul himself is clear from what he wrote at the close of his life, when he termed himself “the chief” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). That was not the exaggeration of evangelical fervor, still less was it the mock modesty of hypocrisy. It was the assured conviction, the felt experience, the settled consciousness of one who saw deeply into the depths of corruption within himself, and who knew how far, far short he attained to the standard of holiness which God set before him. Such, too, will be the consciousness and confession of every other Christian who is not blinded by conceit. And the outcome of such a consciousness will be to make him long more ardently and thank God more fervently for the promised deliverance at the return of our Savior and Lord, when He shall “change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself” (Phil. 3:21); and having done so, He will “present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). Hallelujah, what a Savior!

It is remarkable that the only other time the word “wretched” (the only other time in the Greek too) is found in the New Testament occurs in Rev. 3:17, where to the Laodiceans Christ says, and knowest not that thou *art wretched!* “Their boast was that they had “need of nothing.” They were so puffed up with pride, so satisfied with their attainments, that they knew not their wretchedness. And is not this what we witness on every hand today? Is it not evident that we are now living in the Laodicean period of the history of Christendom? Many were conscious of the “need,” but now they fancy they have received “the second blessing,” or “the baptism of the Spirit,” or that they have entered into “victory;” and, fancying this, they fondly imagine that their “need” has been met. And the proof of this is, they are the very ones who “know not” that they are “wretched.” With an air of spiritual superiority they will tell you that they have “got out of Rom. 7 into Rom. 8.” With pitiable complacency they will say that Rom. 7 no longer depicts their experience. With smug satisfaction they will look down in pity upon the Christian who cries, “O wretched man that I am,” and like the Pharisee in the temple, they will thank God that it is otherwise with them. Poor blinded souls! It is to just such that the Son of God here says, “And knowest not that thou *art wretched.*” We say “blinded” souls for mark it is to these Laodiceans that Christ says, “Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest SEE!” (Rev. 3:18). It is to be observed that in the second half of Rom. 7 the apostle speaks in the singular number. This is striking and most blessed. The Holy Spirit would intimate to us that the highest attainments in grace do not exempt the Christian from the painful experience there described. The apostle portrays with a master pen—himself sitting for the picture—the spiritual struggles of the child of God. He illustrates by a reference to his own personal experience the ceaseless conflict which is waged between the antagonistic natures in the one who has been born again.

May God in His mercy so deliver us from the spirit of pride which now defiles the air of modern Christendom, and grant us such an humbling view of our own uncleanness that we shall join the apostle in crying with ever-deepening fervor, “O wretched man that I am!” Yea, may God vouchsafe to both writer and reader such a view of their own depravity and unworthiness that they may indeed grovel in the dust before Him, and there praise Him for His wondrous grace to such hell-deserving sinners.