

The War Within

📖 Romans 7:20-25

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

📅 March 15, 2015

🌐 fgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

Last time we breached the walls of the controversial Romans 7:14-25. What's the controversy all about? Whether Paul is narrating his struggle with sin before his conversion or after his conversion; as unregenerate or regenerate. As John Murray stated, "The main question in the interpretation of verses 14-25 is one on which there has been deep-seated difference of judgment in the history of interpretation. Does Paul continue to delineate for us his pre-regenerate experience as in verses 7-13? Or does the present tense of verse 14 indicate that he has made a transition to the description of his present experience in the state of grace?"¹ The arguments that Paul is still in his pre-regenerate state are essentially built on a number of expressions that many consider indicative of someone who has not enjoyed God's grace. How could a regenerate Paul say in verse 14, "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin."? How could he say in v 18, "nothing good dwells in me."? How could he say in verse 24, "Wretched man that I am!"? Robert Mounce, NT scholar, says, "Are confessions like these what we would expect from the very apostle who said, 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1)?"² On the other hand, other expressions are claimed, to the contrary, to support the argument that Paul was now in a regenerate state. How could an unregenerate Paul utter an expression like verse 22, "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man..."? How could he say verse 25, "on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God..."? These expressions seem to support the case that Paul was regenerate.

Both sides of the case are compelling but I am swayed in favor of the latter. An unregenerate man simply does not have the struggle between loving the Law of God and not being able to do the Law of God. That is a struggle reserved for the regenerate. The only struggle the unregenerate may have is violating his conscience but that is not the struggle Paul is recounting. Interestingly, Reformed theologian Murray agrees saying, "...we are compelled to conclude that 7:14-25 is the delineation of Paul's experience in the state of grace."³ Mounce agrees saying, "I believe that in this section Paul was revealing with considerable candor his difficulty in meeting the radical demands of the Christian faith. At the same time, he was using his own experience to describe the inevitability of spiritual defeat whenever a believer fails to appropriate the Spirit of God for victory."⁴ Even Covenant Theologian John Stott described the cry of the "wretched man" of verse 24 as "typical of many Jewish Christians of Paul's day, regenerated but not liberated, under the law and not yet in or under the Spirit."⁵ I

essentially agree. It seems to me that Paul is giving a sketch of his life primarily as a new convert. Some agree with this analysis, some do not agree. Some argue that if this was when he was a new convert Paul would not have used the present tense "I am..." but the past tense "I was" if he were reflecting on his early life as a Christian. I am inclined to think that the present tense "I am" is simply Paul stating the fact that when I am the source of the action then I am defeated. Of course, anytime I am the actor I am defeated. Paul's life seems to be one that was early on an intense struggle but later leveled out. This may not be the typical Christian experience but Paul nevertheless shows how not to live as well as how to live. So under this way of looking at it, Paul in Romans 7:14-25 is showing us that even if we are regenerate and have a new nature that desires to keep the Law of God that is not sufficient because when I am the source of the effort in trying to keep the Law I will be defeated.

Now, I would like to say that Romans 7 is not sketching what the normal Christian experience *should* be. It may be many Christian's experience. They may identify with this chapter. But this is a chapter that knows only defeat. This is a chapter that is I by self-effort trying to live the Christian life. This is clear by the fact that Paul says "I" twenty-four times in Romans 7:14-25 and by the fact that He does not say "the Spirit" even once; whereas he says "the Spirit" thirteen times in Romans 8:1-17 and there he does not say "I" even once. So the two chapters differ radically, as radically as night and day. So you only identify with Paul in Romans 7 when you are defeated over and over and over. That is when it is I that am the one trying to live the Christian life. But you identify with Romans 8 when you are victorious. That is when I am depending upon the Spirit of God to live the Christian life. So Romans 8 is where you want to be, granting that we all struggle in Romans 7 by saying I will do this, but Romans 8 is where we have learned that I cannot do this, I must depend upon Him.

In our verse by verse we are still in Romans 7, Paul's description of his defeat. In verse 14 he repeated the conclusion of all sober believers, "we know that the Law is spiritual..." The Law is spiritual because it is sourced in God who is Spirit. But in contrast Paul says, "I am of flesh..." This means Paul recognizes that he is still just a man. As a mere man he says, "sold under sin." This means that as long as Paul was living as a mere man he was under the power of the sin nature. In verse 15 this confused Paul. "For what I am doing, I do not understand." What Paul achieved was not what he set out to achieve. Paul wanted to do what is good but he ended up doing the very thing he hated. Showers says, "This great contrast between desire and performance caused real confusion. Paul could not understand why he couldn't live right since the law was good and since he agreed with it and desired to keep it."⁶ In verse 16 Paul concluded from this experience that "the Law is good," the very conclusion he had already stated in verse 14. In verse 17 he states another conclusion. "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me." He is not denying responsibility but as to source, the sin that is coming out of him was coming out of the sin nature which had a life of its own within Paul even when regenerate. In verse 18 Paul did not say "nothing good dwells in me," but "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;" By this Paul means that the sin nature dwells in that part of us that is merely human. Then he states, "for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not." Paul had a new nature with new desires also

within him, but that was not sufficient to accomplish the good, something more was needed. The proof was verse 19, "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I do the very evil that I do not want." Again, whenever I am the actor Paul says, I am defeated, I do the very evil that I do not want to do. So it is clear that we cannot bear fruit to God by keeping the Law, we cannot be sanctified by keeping the Law.

We pick up today in verse 20, **But if I am doing the very thing I do not want**, and this is a 1st class condition, so **if** and it is true that **I am doing the very thing I do not want**, then **I am no longer the one doing it, but the sin nature which dwells in me**. This sounds like Paul is avoiding responsibility for his sin. "I am just a victim." That's not what Paul is claiming. Paul is claiming that "the sin nature" within him seems to have a life of its own! Despite what I want to do it keeps doing what it wants to do. Showers says of the sin nature, "it is an extremely active force. It exercises great power to make him go contrary to what his inner self wills." "In essence Paul is saying: "Now that I am regenerate I hate the fact that the sinful disposition is still in me. It is continually usurping control of me against my will."

His seeming evasion of personal responsibility is really just a statement of the fact that the source of his personal sin was not what his will, what he wanted to do, but the extremely active force of his sin nature. It is a statement of what he stated in verse 17, "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but the sin nature which dwells in me." The sin nature opposed the will of Paul and the sin nature will oppose your will to do the will of God. Paul wanted to do good and you may want to do good. You want to do good because you are regenerate and you have a new nature or disposition that is inclined toward God. But the verse states clearly that if I want to do good but I do the very thing I hate, then I must have an old sin nature that is exerting itself against my will in order to fulfill its lusts. It is more evidence for the continuing presence of the sin nature.

He states his findings in verse 21, **I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good**. The words **I find then** signify something Paul discovered as a result of the opposition between what he wanted to do and what he actually did. He found there was a principle at work. The Greek word translated **principle** is *νομος*, which is usually translated as "law," but here has the idea of a principle at work. The principle at work is **that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good**. **Evil** is preceded by the definite article and so it is another way of referring to the sin nature. The sin nature is a disposition toward evil. It is an evil bent. Nothing good comes from it. The word **evil** refers specifically to that which is morally evil. The sin nature is morally evil and Paul says evil is **present in me**. This is when Paul was already regenerate. He said earlier in verse 18, it is "in my flesh," that part of Paul that is merely human. So despite the fact that we are regenerate we are still merely human and we have an evil sin nature within our "flesh."

He also says that **me** is **the one who wants to do good**. The word **wants** signifies that Paul is referring to his will. The will is where we want. Paul's will **wants to do good**. But the doing of the good he could not. The will cannot secure the doing of external action of moral goodness. It could only have the internal desire to do good. However, we may assume that if we did not still have an evil sin nature then we would be able to do good.

Verse 22 explains, **For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man...** The expression **I joyfully concur** is very strong. It means Paul greatly rejoiced **with the Law of God**. The location of this rejoicing is stated to be **in the inner man**. In **the inner man** Paul was joyfully serving God. The problem was not Paul's **inner man** but the effecting the external outworking of that joy. What then is **the inner man**? It's not the new nature. In verse 23 Paul refers to "the law of my mind" as a synonym for **the inner man**. Therefore **the inner man** is the mind or heart of the regenerate person. Since the mind or heart can be renewed then we know that what Paul says later in Romans 12 about the importance of being renewed in our mind is related to the inner man. If the inner man is the mind and can be renewed then we should find this concept affirmed in the two other uses of the expression **inner man** in the NT.

Turn to the first one in 2 Cor 4:16. In 2 Cor 4:16 Paul says, "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." Here the outer man is contrasted with the inner man. The outer man is in the process of decaying. This refers to ourselves as mere mortals. As mortals we are decaying. The inner man is in the process of being renewed. This refers to our mind. Our mind is in the process of being renewed "day by day." This renewal of the mind is part of experiential sanctification. It is a new component that we are introduced to today in Romans 6-8. There is the necessity of the inner man or the Christian's mind being renewed in order to be transformed by the Spirit of God. When you became regenerate you instantly had an inner man or mind that was in agreement with God as far as you understood His truth. But your mind needs to be renewed "day by day" in order for experiential sanctification to progress. So 2 Cor 4:16 agrees in concept with Romans 7:22 that the inner man is the mind and it needs to be renewed. Let's turn to the second one in Eph 3:16. This is one of Paul's prayers for the believers at Ephesus. It stems from verse 1 in the chapter which he picks back up in verse 14. "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." This is essentially a prayer for their experiential sanctification. And you see in verse 16 a critical component of this sanctification is that the Father "would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man..." The inner man must be strengthened and this strengthening comes from the Spirit of God. Thus, again, the inner man is the mind and what Paul is saying is that the Christian mind needs to be strengthened and that the Spirit of God is instrumental in strengthening it. And you'll note further that this is necessary for the fullness of Christ's dwelling in us through faith and further comprehension of God, all experiential sanctification concepts. Hoehner, in his monumental work on Ephesians says, "This inner person is the object of God's working. Both in Rom 7 and 2 Cor 4 Paul depicts the believer as helpless without God's power. This corresponds with the present context where it speaks of the inner person's need to be strengthened with power through God's Spirit."⁸ So we've done a short

expose on the inner man and we've concluded essentially what Hoehner concluded; from Rom 7 we learn that the inner man is equivalent to the Christian mind, that it agrees with the law of God, from 2 Cor 4 that it needs daily renewal in order to have greater areas of agreement with the law of God and from Eph 3 that it needs to be strengthened by the Spirit of God in order for further experiential sanctification to progress. So we are coming to see the importance of the Christian mind taking in the word of God as taught by the Spirit of God's. These are going to be critical categories to add to our doctrine of sanctification as we get closer to seeing the total picture.

So turning back to Romans 7:22 we find that Paul's inner man or Christian mind is where he joyfully concurred with the law of God, **but**, verse 23, **I see a different principle in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me prisoner of the law of the sin nature which is in my members.** Here we see the principal word used to describe the inner conflict in the regenerate person. Paul says there is a war waging. The Greek word is *αντιστρατευομαι* and is used here and here only in the NT. Greek scholar A. T. Robertson says it means "to carry on a campaign against." The campaign is being waged by one party against the other. Which party is the instigator of the conflict? **The sin nature.** It is **waging war against the** Christian mind. The reason it is waging this war we said before is because it is a law unto itself and any outside authority is a threat to its authority. So as new standards come into the Christian mind from the Spirit of God the sin nature is aroused to wage war against the mind in order to reestablish its authority.

The result of which is stated to be **making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** The sin nature wants to win the war and take the believer **prisoner.** The Greek word **prisoner** is *αιχμαλωτιζω*. The military use of this word is "taking captive." The general use of the word is "gain control of." Either one is valid in this context but the military use draws out more the intense spiritual struggle that is going on within us. When the sin nature wages this war and wins the war it takes the regenerate believer **captive**, meaning it gains control of the believer and uses him to fulfill its lusts through the parts of the human body.

Now the means of repelling this result is found in another military context where this exact word is used. Turn to 2 Cor 10. Here Paul is talking about the spiritual conflict we are engaged in. In verse 3 he says, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh." What does he mean we do not war according to the flesh? He means that we war according to the Spirit. And what is the sword of the Spirit? The word of God. So verse 4, "...the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses." So we have weapons that are divinely powerful, that means no less than omnipotence. The word of God which is the sword of the Spirit of God is omnipotent. Verse 5, these omnipotent weapons, he says, "are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God," that's what they do. Then he adds, "and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." He's talking there about the process of training in the sword of the Spirit. It's something we have to train in every day if we're to become proficient at depending on the Spirit. He says this training is ongoing, it involves every thought being taken captive. Note the taking captive. That's the same word used in Romans 7:23 where the sin nature takes you

captive. So Paul said, daily I take every thought captive. That means he studied the word of God. He allowed no thought to go unchecked. He put every thought under the microscope of the word of God and he said, yes, no, yes, no and by that he was taking every thought captive. Otherwise what happens is the sin nature takes Paul captive. Those are the only two options. And so we are back to seeing that the mind has a critical role to play though the mind alone is not sufficient.

Let's go back to Romans 7. Seeing in verse 23 that Paul saw that the sin nature was waging war against his mind and making him a captive of his sin nature he concludes his attempt to be sanctified by the Law with verse 24, **Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?** The word **wretched** means distressed or miserable. Paul was miserable trying to be sanctified by the Law. It did not bring life because the sin nature used the Law to bring death. Personal sin always results in an experience of death. The wages of sin is death. So he asks, **Who will set me free from this body of death?** Paul is not asking who will give him his resurrection body, but who will set him free from the use of his body by the sin nature to produce death. Paul realized that as a Christian he still needed deliverance. The pronoun **Who** is masculine and indicates a person. Paul realized that he could not be sanctified without the help of another person. Paul realized the most important thing in sanctification; and that is that I cannot be sanctified when I am the one trying to do it. I will only fail. That is why Paul says "Wretched man that I am!" But if I cannot do it then someone else must do it. So then Paul realized that sanctification occurs by the same means as justification; and that means is grace. Justification is by grace through faith and sanctification is by grace through faith too. All three tenses of salvation are by grace through faith; whether it's the past tense of justification, the present tense of sanctification or the future tense of glorification. Salvation is always by grace through faith. So then just as you come by faith for justification with nothing to offer so in sanctification you come by faith with nothing to offer. There's not a difference in the world in how you are sanctified. You are coming empty handed, in simple dependence upon another. At justification you rested solely in Christ, Christ alone; He is your righteousness. In sanctification you rest solely in Christ; He is our sanctification. Recall 1 Cor 1:30, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption." He is our everything and therefore, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

And so with Paul we proclaim verse 25, **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! God** by itself always refers to the Father in the NT. The Father is the architect of the plan of sanctification, Jesus Christ, the Son is the executioner of the plan of sanctification, the Holy Spirit, as we will see in chapter 8, is the applier of the plan of sanctification. But the Father and the Son are mentioned here because it was the Father and the Son who sent the Spirit. This is known as the doctrine of *filioque*. *Filioque* is Latin for "and the Son." It refers to a controversy that erupted in the Middle Ages relative to whether the Father sent the Spirit alone or the Father *and the Son*. The Eastern Church sided with the view that it was the Father alone. The Western Church sided with the view that it was the Father and the Son or *filioque*. We maintain that it was the Father and the Son and specifically we formulate the doctrine by saying, "The Father through the Son sent the Spirit to be our helper." Paul was looking

for a helper to set him free from this body that is used by the sin nature to produce death. The Father through the Son sent the Helper. John 14:26, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name..." And John 15:26, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father..." The Spirit is the Helper but the thanks is to the Father and the Son who sent the Spirit to be our Helper.

So then Paul, having alluded to the fact that the Father and the Son will provide the help, concludes his analysis of sanctification under the Law without any help, but when it was just I, Paul trying to do it. He says, **So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.** The picture is what Paul himself can do without any help. Notice here he does not just say I but he adds the pronoun **myself** to make it emphatically clear that this is what a regenerate person can do without any help. In our **mind** we can serve **the law of God**. This means, as we have seen before, that the new nature can cause us to agree with the Law, even to rejoice in the Law in our inner man. If we only had a new nature then it is conceivable that we would also be able to do the Law. But we have also found that we still have a sin nature and this is what Paul concludes with, **but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.** By **flesh** Paul is speaking as he was in verse 14 of the fact that he is merely human. Even though he is regenerate he is still just human. The fact that we are still human means we are beset with weaknesses. Consequently, even though we are set free from legal obligation to the sin nature it still tries to control us. And whenever we are the ones who are trying to be sanctified in our own strength it will be aroused to rebel and bring us into subjection.

So then verse 25 is a good summary of what Paul found that led him to cry out for help. We may summarize it as follows: when Paul became regenerate he had a new disposition that gave him the desire to please God by obeying His Law. In his mind he was serving God. However, whenever Paul tried to obey the Law through his body he found that he still had a sin nature and that this nature was aroused and caused him to do the very opposite of what he wanted to do. So then Paul found that sanctification can take place only by the same means justification took place, by God's grace. This is why he said in 6:14, we are not under Law but under grace. This does not mean to be lawless. It simply means that sanctification is not merited because it proceeds by dependence upon the one the Father and the Son sent to indwell believers during this dispensation, that is, the Holy Spirit, who is the Helper. So then I myself, left to myself, wretched man that I am, but thanks be to God that is not the end of the story, thanks be to God that the Father and the Son have sent the Spirit to indwell me as a source of power that is infinitely more powerful than the old sin nature dwelling in my flesh. So then we conclude simply with Gal 5:16, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." Constant dependence upon the Spirit is the only way to overcome the desire of the flesh. The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to one another and we will unfold this dichotomy in chapter 8 as we continue to build the doctrine of experiential sanctification. But we have already come a long way if we see that it proceeds in the same manner as justification, by grace through faith, and not by works lest any man should boast. Now we will only need to learn how it is that we can increasingly live this way, another subject of chapter 8.

¹ John Murray, *NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans*, p 256.

² Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 166.

³ John Murray, *NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans*, p 259.

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 167.

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995).

⁶ Renald Showers, *The New Nature*, p 97.

⁷ Renald Showers, *The New Nature*, p 101.

⁸ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p 479.