

PAUL THE SINNER  
AN EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 7:7-25

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## SYNTHESIS AND OUTLINE OF ROMANS 7:7-25

**Summary:** The apostle Paul explains the relationship between sin, law, and spiritual death, and recounts struggles with his sinful flesh as a believer that desires to follow Christ.

### **Outline:**

#### **I. The Relationship between the law and sin (7:7-13)**

A. The right use of the law is to reveal sin (7:7, 10).

B. Sin exploits the law, by using it to enflame the unsaved individual's wicked nature (7:8-9, 11-13).

#### **II. Paul's Struggle with sin (7:14-23).**

A. Paul's exasperation with himself (7:14-16).

1. He does not do what he really wants to do (7:14-15a, 16a).

2. He does do what he does not want to do (7:15b, 16b).

B. Paul acknowledges the division between the old nature, and the new nature (7:17-20).

C. The Believers struggle with sin (7:21-23).

1. The old nature will always try to do what is wrong (7:21a, 23).

2. The new nature, which delights in doing good (7:21b-22).

#### **III. The answer to Paul's struggle (7:24-25).**

A. Paul recognizes that the answer to his struggle with sin, is not within himself; his flesh is nothing but a hindrance (7:24).

B. Paul acknowledges that the answer to his present struggles is the finished work of Christ (7:25).

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian life is not an easy one. As the apostles could attest, those who desire to follow and serve Christ, can expect tribulation, persecution, and outright hatred. Even in the United States, where Christian martyrdom is rare (though not unheard of<sup>1</sup>), those who proclaim the gospel of Christ can expect derision, contestation, and even physical abuse. This is an unavoidable consequence of being a believer; Jesus, in fact, promised this kind of reception to His message.<sup>2</sup>

A much greater struggle, though, is the internal struggle which a Christian must face. Followers of Christ, from the moment they are saved, are placed into a life of tension, pulled between two worlds. A battle, not with Satanic forces from the outside, but with themselves; a struggle against inner depravity. This is due to two abiding forces which are at war within the Christian: the old, dead nature, which is constantly trying to draw a believer away from the things of God, and the new nature, as well as the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, which is constantly pulling in the opposite direction.<sup>3</sup>

This inner turmoil is exactly the scene which Paul pictures in Romans 7. The apostle Paul himself, is telling of his current state of struggling with sin. Romans 7 is not, as some have contended, Paul in a pre-salvation state, but instead, this passage shows Paul as a regenerate believer. As will be demonstrated, this is the best interpretation of the text, both in terms of its

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<sup>1</sup> Take for example the recent killing of Tite Sufra and Stephen Ocean, two street evangelists who were murdered in broad daylight in Florida. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,585031,00.html?test=latestnews> (accessed February 23, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:22, Mark 13:13.

<sup>3</sup> See Ephesians 4:22-24 and 1Corinthians 3:16, respectively.

own plain meaning, as well as consistency with other scripture. It is also presents a superior application in the Christian life.

## CONTEXT

Before the passage itself can be examined, the question must be asked; what was the purpose of Romans? The author of Romans had a particular objective in mind, when this book was penned, and to correctly interpret the passage, this original intent must be understood.

The book of Romans is an epistle; a letter written to a congregation of believers in the region of Rome. The author of the epistle, according to the text itself, is the great apostle of grace himself, Paul. Although a few have attempted to question this, there has never been any serious, scholarly challenges to this claim.<sup>4</sup> Paul says that he desires to “preach the Gospel” to the believers in Rome, and this is precisely what he does; he expounds on the good news of Christ, from beginning to end.<sup>5</sup> The “doctrinal marrow” in Romans, is perhaps the greatest theological work in the New Testament, if not the Bible, for it describes in great detail the work of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

In Chapters 1-4, Paul describes the need for Christ. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the state of unregenerate man. Jew and Gentile alike, all men are condemned because of their evil deeds, and continual rejection of God as creator and sovereign King.<sup>7</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 speak of the futility of seeking salvation through the law, and affirm that in terms of needing grace, all men, both Jew and Gentiles, are in equal need. God does not excuse the Jew, simply because of the covenants

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<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 393.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:1, 7, and 15, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black. *The New Testament its Background and Message* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 389-390.

<sup>7</sup> Compare verses 1:21 with verses 2:1. Paul states clearly that anyone who judges another is passing judgment on themselves, for they are just as guilty. The interpretation of Romans 1 as some special “hardened” individual, then, must be rejected. Romans 1 describes the condition of all of mankind.

made in the past. Even Abraham was not saved on account of his goodness, nor on account of his race; Abraham was counted as righteous, on the sole basis of his belief.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 5 begins the second major division of the book, which is dealing with the believer's life, and his relationship to the law.<sup>9</sup> In Verse 1, Paul says "therefore, since we have been justified by faith..." as if to say "now, all of this was true of you as an unbeliever; now let's talk about the results of Christ's justification of sinners, and how this works itself out in the life of the Christian." Because of this, the context of the verses that follow in chapters 5 through 8, should be understood as referring to the new life of followers of Christ.

## CONTENT

The theological teachings of Romans 7 has been the subject of no end of debate. On one side of this proverbial line in the sand, are those who claim that Paul was describing his life before coming to Christ; on the other, are those asserting that Paul is describing his constant struggle with sin as a believer. This discussion will of course not end this debate, but the following outline of the passages' significance will possibly help to illuminate the truth. This textual journey begins in Romans 7:7.

### **The Relationship between the law and sin(7:7-13)**

What is the purpose of God's law? That is the question that is asked in this section. In verses 7 and 13 Paul answers this question; the purpose of the law is to instruct people, in regards to the boundaries that God has placed. Law defines what sin is, and in fact, "apart from

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 4:3.

<sup>9</sup> Hae-Kyung Chang. "The Christian life in a dialectical tension? Romans 7:7-25 reconsidered." *Novum testamentum* 49, no. 3 (January 1, 2007): 257. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 2, 2010), 265.

law sin exists but cannot be designated as ‘sin’.”<sup>10</sup> This idea is mirrored in Romans 5:13, where Paul has already stated that “sin is not imputed where there is no law” (ESV). The law of God, then, is much like a speed limit sign on the highway. It is not there for the purpose of creating speeders, nor does it magically create good law abiding citizens; it simply sets a boundary by which all drivers are expected to abide.

Humans, however, have a tendency of pressing boundaries. It is an inevitable fact of life that people have a prideful desire to go their own way. This is exactly what is being spoken of in verse 8. Continuing the previous analogy, people are like the new teenage driver who sees a speed limit sign for the first time, and cannot seem to help but push the accelerator to the floor in defiance. The sinful nature in all human beings is not suppressed by laws and restrictions; instead it is aroused! As one commentator put it, “The command not to lust made me lust more.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Paul’s Use of “Alive” and “Died”**

It is important at this point to pause to consider the use of the words “alive” and “died” in verse 9. What does Paul mean when he says that he was once “alive” apart from the law, but when the commandment came he “died”? Some would say that this is simply reiterating what Paul is saying about the law inciting lust within man because of his rebellious nature, but this ignores Paul’s use of the words ζάω and ἀποθνήσκω. There are only two primary ways in which Paul uses these words: to refer to *physical* life and death (Romans 14:8), and to refer to *spiritual* life and death (Romans 6:11).<sup>12</sup> Since it is obvious that Paul is not speaking of physical life and

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<sup>10</sup>Robert H. Mounce. “Romans” *The New American Commentary* 27. electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001Logos Library System), S. 163.

<sup>11</sup> A.T. Robertson. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, 1997)S. Ro 7:8

<sup>12</sup> James Strong. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*. (Originally published 1890. E-Sword, electronic ed.).

death (since he is writing the book of Romans at the time, and is clearly alive), it must be concluded that he is speaking of the latter. Hence, Paul is stating that there was a time, when, because of a lack of the knowledge of God's law, he was spiritually alive.

When we consider this together with other verses, such as Romans 5:13, we come to the conclusion that certain individuals who are not yet knowledgeable about moral ideas of right and wrong, are still spiritually alive. This is most likely alluding to "the time of childlike innocence previous to the stimulus imparted to the inactive principle of sin by the coming of the law."<sup>13</sup> Thus children, though their natures are corrupted due to original sin, are nevertheless viewed as "innocent" by God.

### **Paul's Struggle with sin(7:14-23)**

It is within this section of Romans 7 that arguably one of the greatest controversies in biblical studies arises. The question at the center of this debate, is whether Paul is describing himself as an unbeliever, before Christ, or if he is describing what some would say is the normative day to day struggles with sin that all Christians will have; in other words, is Paul speaking of his present situation?

#### **The Controversy**

It must be said that there are excellent arguments on both sides. Hae-Kyung Chang, for one, does an excellent job of defending the Paul as unbeliever position. He attempts to demonstrate a diametrically opposed spiritual condition; what he refers to as the "I" of Romans 8 and the "I" of Romans 7(the "I" of course, referring to Paul). By way of example, in Romans 8

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<sup>13</sup> Marvin Richardson Vincent. *Word Studies in the New Testament*. (Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2002) S. 3:78.

Paul is “liberated from the law of sin and death” (v.1) while the Romans 7 man is “sold under sin” (v.14).<sup>14</sup> These positions are irreconcilable in the same person, according to Chang.

At the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum, Kevin Mills compares the believer in Romans 7 to “Jekyll and Hyde”!<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, in agreement with Mills, stated that

“See: as one and the same man at the same time serves the law of God and the law of sin, he is at the same time righteous and a sinner. For he does not say, My mind serves the law of God, neither, My flesh serves the law of sin, but I, he says, the whole man, the same person, serve both.”<sup>16</sup>

Although both of these positions have credence, it must be said that Paul is most likely referring to believers. The foundation for this position, can be seen in verse 17, where Paul states “So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” The question arises from this statement; how could this possibly be referring to an unbeliever? Are unbelievers excused because it is not them that is actually committing the sin? If Paul is not speaking of his present life as believer, what does he mean by the words “no longer,” which denotes his present condition as a new one?

Note also Paul’s statement in verse 18. He is very careful, when he states that there is “nothing good in me,” to clarify that he is speaking only of his “flesh.” Are we to understand, if Paul here is an unbeliever in these verses, that Paul’s spirit as a *non-Christian* is good? This would contradict other scripture, which would teach an unregenerate man’s heart is evil.<sup>17</sup> Since

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<sup>14</sup> Hae-Kyung Chang. "The Christian life in a dialectical tension? Romans 7:7-25 reconsidered." *Novum testamentum* 49, no. 3 (January 1, 2007): 257. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2010), 272-273.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Mills. "The stain on the mirror: Pauline reflections in The strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." *Christianity and Literature* 53, no. 3(March 1, 2004). *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2010), 346- 347.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, Martin. *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/prefacetoromans.iii.html> (accessed February 2, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 12:34, for one example of this.

the entirety of these descriptions are in the present tense, describing Paul in his present state (as a believer), the more plausible position, it would seem, is that he is speaking of the struggles with sin, which he has as a follower of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Apostle Paul's Inner Turmoil**

This being said, the battle pictured in these verses is one which most if not all believers can identify with. It is the cry of the exasperated follower of Christ, who cannot understand, despite his best efforts, why he continually falls into the trap of sin. Paul laments his inability to abide in God's word, and do as it instructs.

It should be noted that this clash between old and new natures exhibits itself in two ways (verses 15, 19). The first is that Paul seems powerless to act in accordance with his own desires. He wishes to do the right thing, and follow God's instruction, but he lacks the willpower to do so.

In addition to this, those things which he knows are wrong, which he does not desire to do, he keeps doing anyway. Like a drug addict, who has sworn off his former lifestyle, yet battles the unwanted desires within, Paul continually loses control of himself, and indulges in sin. He delights in God's law in his "inner being," yet his "members" (his fleshly desires), wage a relentless war against him.

### **The answer to Paul's struggle (7:24-25)**

In verse 24, Paul summarizes the spiritual agony which he has been describing, with the cry of "who will deliver me from this body of death?" Recognizing that his flesh is utterly wicked and wretched, Paul realizes that the answer to his problem is not to be found within his own human efforts. Instead his flesh is actually an additional burden which he must bear.

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<sup>18</sup> Mounce, *Romans*. The New American Commentary 27), S. 171.

The phrase “body of death,” in fact, is almost certainly referring to an ancient form of Roman punishment, where the dead victim of a murderer would actually be chained to the back of his assailant. The murderer was then released to go about his life, carrying on his back the great burden of a stinking, putrefying corpse. Paul pictures the old sinful nature in this way; a disgusting, decaying and burdensome weight, which the Christian longs to be free of.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, in verse 25 the answer to the Christians inner turmoil is given. Paul’s emphatic praise of Christ here is not just a random occurrence. It is a carefully placed cry of exultation, which gives hope to the believer. Though there is not hope in the disciples flesh, there is hope in his Christ. Total reliance on Christ will give the believer victory in his day to day struggles.<sup>20</sup>

The placement of the last sentence is troublesome for those who picture Paul in the bulk of chapter 7 as unregenerate. The Greek words *ἀρα* and *οὖν* (“So then”, ESV), gives this sentence cumulative, logical force.<sup>21</sup> Paul here is summarizing what he has been describing in this section, regarding the old and new natures of the regenerate believer. Paul himself serves the law of God with his mind, even though he is still bound by sinful flesh, *because of* Jesus Christ his Lord.

## APPLICATION

So in what way can Paul’s struggle with sin be applied to the Christian today? Obviously Paul did not include this section of scripture for nothing more than a disheartening account of his continuing failure. This text has three important principles which can be applied today: the

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<sup>19</sup> James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick. *Manners & Customs of the Bible*. Rev. ed. (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), §537.

<sup>20</sup> Mounce, *Romans*. The New American Commentary 27), S. 171.

<sup>21</sup>, Albert L. Lukaszewski. *The Lexham Syntactic Greek New Testament: Expansions and Annotations*. (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2006) S. Ro 7:25.

futility of “law keeping,” the importance of relying on the Holy Spirit, and the impartation of spiritual comfort.

### **The Futility of Law Keeping**

Paul’s answer to his inward struggle was not willpower, and neither should any believers be. Trying to keep God’s law by sheer force of will, only leads to inevitable failure and remorse. It can also lead to staunch legalism, which is seriously detrimental to the Christian life. This is not to say that believers should purposefully sin, nor does it mean that they should simply “give in.” It simply means that the answer for Christ’s follower, as Paul so eloquently described, is not in his own flesh. Instead, that hope is to be found in Christ alone; through reliance on the Holy Spirit.

### **Reliance on the Holy Spirit**

A complete and total reliance on the Holy Spirit is the solution for Christian living. Through prayer, the reading of God’s word, and fellowship with other believers, the follower of Christ builds within himself a spiritual strength not easily broken. This does not mean that the believer will never sin; scripture guarantees that he will, at times, fall to sin.<sup>22</sup> This fall will always, though, be the direct result of failing to keep his or her focus on Christ.

### **Spiritual Comfort**

Finally, there is a great deal of spiritual comfort to be found in Romans 7:7-25. When the believer struggles with his flesh, he can rest assured that he does not do so as some spiritual anomaly. If the apostle Paul himself while under direction of the Holy Spirit, was struggling with sin, the Christian should not count it strange when he undergoes daily spiritual turmoil.

Moreover, the disciple of Jesus Christ has the greatest deal of comfort, knowing that neither his day to day walk, nor his eternal destiny, is prefaced on his own ability to be obedient

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<sup>22</sup> See 1 John 1:8. Clearly the one who says he never sins is “lying.”

to the law of God. Rather than demanding subservience to His law as means of salvation and strength, a believer's security and empowerment is based upon nothing less than the finished work of Christ alone. This brings true comfort, and should inspire the Christian to shout with Paul "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

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