

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Seven

THE PERSON OF ROMANS SEVEN

In considering what it means for a believer to have been crucified with Christ, we are looking at how we are to regard ourselves in relation to the sin we have been delivered from. We have seen that, once we have been forgiven and cleansed and delivered from the guilt of our sin by the saving grace of God in Christ, sin does not then disappear from our radar screen. On the contrary, we then become aware of our sin—with loathing, dismay and shame (see Ezek. 36:31–32)—in a way that we never could before. The grace given and the faith assigned by God bring us to a sober estimate of ourselves and what we are capable of (see Rom. 12:3), as ‘a people humble and lowly’ who now seek refuge in God alone (Zeph. 3:12).

This goes against much triumphalist Christian teaching today with regard to victorious Christian living. While that teaching seeks to reassure and encourage believers in the reality of their forgiveness and the power of the Spirit for full and authentic living, it may leave them disturbed and unprotected in the face of the common experience of ongoing and indwelling sin in the lives of believers.

The experience of ongoing and indwelling sin in the lives of believers may be made light of, as something of minor significance compared with the greatness of our salvation and forgiveness. It may be accommodated, or somehow excused, as something inevitable that we need to be able to ride with, without too much discomfort. It may bear upon some as an unrelieved constant dull ache, with consequent dampening and disabling effects. It may drive some to despair. It may be denied altogether, as by those who consider that they are now capable of living in sinless perfection. No consideration of this experience, however, can bypass what Paul the apostle tells us in Romans 7.

Questions for Reflection

- *In what ways has the question of ongoing and indwelling sin in the life of believers been raised for us?*
- *In what ways have we sought to address it?*

SIN AND THE LAW OF GOD

Paul is speaking in Romans 7 to people who know the law of God (see Rom. 7:1). Some take it from this that he is addressing only Jews, even non-Christian Jews.¹ The whole letter is

¹ William Dumbrell sees it as addressing the situation faced by Jews who continue to believe and practice as such after the event of the cross of Christ, which has replaced the Mosaic covenant with the New Covenant. Thus he says: ‘Christian experience is not being referred to in Romans 7:13–25’. He refers it instead to ‘Non-Christian Jewish experience’, and says:

addressed to those in Rome ‘who are called to belong to Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 1:6–7), and it is evident that this included both Jews and Gentiles.² The law of Moses was widely known and practiced in such settings.³

Some of the statements already made by Paul regarding the law of God may have raised concerns among some of his hearers:

For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20).

For the law brings wrath (Rom. 4:15).

But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied (Rom. 5:20).

To these we could add:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse (Gal. 3:10).

Such statements could cause some to wonder whether Paul was writing off the law of God as something evil. Paul sets out in Romans 7 to reassure them on that score and to set the record straight. In doing so, he also says some of the most profound words ever written about the human condition.

First Paul uses an illustration from marriage to make the point that a state of being bound by the law can come to an end when a death occurs:

Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person’s lifetime? Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress (Rom. 7:1–3).

Paul now applies this to any who may have been trusting a special relationship they thought they had to the law of God, by saying that in the death of Christ they have been released from that to belong to Christ himself in his risen life:

In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom. 7:4–6).

In saying this, Paul has again made statements that appear to place the law of God in a bad light—particularly: ‘our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death’, and speaking of the law as ‘that which held us captive’. These statements are going to need further elucidation, which he will give. They also raise again the question as to whether or not the law of God is evil, which he now sets out to answer. To do so, he draws upon his own personal experience of the relationship of the law to sin:

‘Romans 7 most plausibly refers to some ongoing Jewish experience viewed by Paul from a Christian perspective’ (William J. Dumbrell, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, 2005, p. 79).

² See the greetings in Rom. 16:1–16 and, for example, the issues addressed in chapters 1–3.

³ The letter to the Galatians, another ‘Gentile’ church, gives ample evidence of this.

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:7–12).

This leaves the reader in no doubt as to Paul’s understanding of the unsullied goodness of the law of God. It is sin in the human heart, which Paul has documented fully in Romans 1:18–3:20, which perversely uses the law as ‘a fulcrum by which sin can lever the sinner’⁴ into multiple outward acts of sin, as the sinner now openly defies the explicit commandment that gives outward expression to the very nature of God that the sinner has already inwardly despised.⁵ This too will receive further elucidation by Paul.

Meanwhile, Paul secures his conclusion, and shows that this action of exposing and bringing sin out into the open in proliferating practice is a victory of the good law of God:

Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Rom. 7:13).

This parallels what Paul designates as the action of the wrath of God against sin in Romans 1:18–32, where God gives sinners over to the sin that is in their hearts, as it comes out relentlessly in every vile practice. Geoffrey Bingham comments:

... the law itself was not wrong. It was sin using the law that was wrong, but then the irony of it was that sin, by pressing too hard, exposed itself for what it was—sin! It over-reached itself, and was shown up in all its evil practice. To use Paul’s words, it was shown as ‘sinful beyond measure’. Well, this was a victory of the law.⁶

Question for Reflection

- *What has been our experience of sin being exposed, aroused or awakened by the action of the law of God?*

PAUL AND THE LAW OF GOD

We note that Paul here is talking about his own experience, though it is likely that, in giving these words a wider application, he is speaking of himself as typical of every sinner.⁷

⁴ Geoffrey Bingham, *An Introduction to the Epistle to the Romans*, unpublished, n.d., ch. 7, p. 4.

⁵ What do we see through a ‘No Shooting’ sign? Bullet holes! The promulgation of the prohibition brings out into blatant action against it the inner rebellion.

⁶ Bingham, *Romans*, ch. 7, p. 5.

⁷ ‘Paul can use “I” when he is referring to people in general. Thus he writes to the Corinthians, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love . . .” (1 Cor. 13:1), where it is impossible to hold that he means the words to apply to himself only. He is referring to something that is true of everybody, but he makes it more vivid by applying the words to himself’ (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 277). Certainly Rom. 7:7–13 fit well with the account of the man and woman in Gen. 2–4; but that is, as Paul has said in Rom. 5:12, the story of us all, and so of each one of us. Sanday and Headlam posit: ‘It is not a literal photograph of any one stage in the Apostle’s career, but it is a constructive picture drawn by him in bold lines from elements supplied to him by self-introspection’. William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, p. 186.

Verses 7–13 are in the past tense. What time is Paul referring to? When was it that ‘sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness’? It would appear that here ‘Paul is referring to his preconversion experience’.⁸ When was Paul ‘alive apart from the law’? Some question whether, as a person ‘circumcised on the eighth day . . . a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee’ (Phil. 3:5), Paul would ever have said of himself that he was at any time ‘apart from the law’? Some refer this to the so-called ‘innocence’ of childhood, before consciousness of the law takes hold,⁹ or to ‘the life of the natural man, the happy pagan, the person who lives cheerfully with no reference to law and with an untroubled conscience’.¹⁰ Paul may be using the word ‘alive’ here in an ironical sense: certainly there was a time when he considered that he was, ‘as to righteousness under the law, blameless’ (Phil. 3:6). But this was when his confidence was in his own flesh, before he looked to Christ alone to be justified (see Phil. 3:3–9).

What about: ‘when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me’ (Rom. 7:9–11)? What time in Paul’s experience might this be referring to? Moffat translates: ‘the command came home to me’.¹¹ Paul’s language here is reminiscent of Galatians 2:19: ‘For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God’. This he identified as the time when he knew himself to have been ‘crucified with Christ’. It would appear that the full import of the holy law of God, and the deathly nature of his own sin and its rightful condemnation, all came to Paul in the same moment, when he was confronted with Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah, ‘the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20).

Alexander Whyte (1836–1921), a Scottish preacher in Edinburgh, put it tellingly:

Putting his whole life before his conversion into his own so vivid and so powerful words, Paul tells us that he was at one time ‘alive without the law’. He was what he calls alive as long as the holy law of God remained wholly outside of his inward life. But when the law of God, in all its intense spirituality, really penetrated into Paul’s mind, and heart, and conscience, and imagination, then he died—died, he means, to all his previous self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-complacency, self-importance, and to all peace with God and with himself. To all that Paul was henceforth as good as a dead man. When the holy law of God really entered Paul’s conscience and demanded of him that on pain of death and hell he must not covet what any other man possesses, nor envy any other man, nor hate any other man, nor have any ill-will at any other man, nor think, nor speak, nor do against any other man what he would not like to have thought or spoken or done against himself—that so holy, so spiritual, and so heart-searching law of God he found to be absolutely death and hell to him. You all understand that, I am sure. At any rate, as many of you as have come through that same heart-searching and heart-breaking experience; and especially as many of you as are passing more and more through that same heart-searching and heart-breaking experience every day you live.¹²

Question for Reflection

- *What is it of the revelation of Christ, crucified for us and raised to life and lordship, that brings through to us, as nothing else can, the full import of the holy law of God?*

⁸ Morris, *Romans*, p. 277.

⁹ Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 180.

¹⁰ Morris, *Romans*, p. 281.

¹¹ Morris, *Romans*, p. 281. See further below.

¹² Sermon: ‘So Then’, by Alexander Whyte, *The Spiritual Life: The Teaching of Thomas Goodwin as Received and Reissued*, pp. 109–120; as reproduced on <<http://www.geocities.com/athens/olympus/4199/sothen.htm>>, accessed 27 Feb. 2007.

THE INNER CONFLICT

In Romans 7:14–25, Paul changes from the past tense to the present. If verses 7–13 refer to the time up to and including his conversion, what time is he now referring to here?

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Rom. 7:14–25).

If Paul is speaking about himself—and the strength of the language here indicates that he is referring to something profoundly personal rather than just general—is he talking about the time before or after he was converted? It is a measure of the significance of this passage that this question has been much disputed. Leon Morris summarises:

In the early church most people thought that Paul was here referring to the unregenerate state. Augustine held this at first, but more mature reflection caused him to affirm that what Paul said was true of the regenerate, too. This view came to be widely accepted, and throughout the Middle Ages most exegetes saw the passage this way. There was a variety of opinion at the Reformation, with thinkers like Erasmus favouring the reference to the unregenerate and Luther, Calvin, and others seeing Paul as speaking of the regenerate. Subsequently Arminians and Pietists have tended to take the passage of the unregenerate, while those in the Calvinist tradition have argued that the regenerate are in mind. In recent times Kümmel, Bultmann, and Althaus are cited as leading holders of the view that sees the unregenerate in the passage, with Nygren and Cranfield stoutly contending for the regenerate. It cannot be said that there is anything like a consensus.

With such a long-lasting and sometimes bitter division, it is clear that the problem is a difficult one. Strong arguments are brought forward for both points of view. It is important to approach the subject bearing this in mind and with a sympathetic understanding of those who view things differently.¹³

It is understandable why people would want to take this passage as referring to Paul's preconversion experience. Paul says: 'I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin' (Rom. 7:14). Sin is depicted as still being stronger than he is in himself, and as that which holds him captive and enslaved (see Rom. 7:23, 25). This appears to be very different from what Paul has already said of those who 'have been united with Christ in his death' (Rom. 6:5), so that 'we might no longer be enslaved to sin . . . For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:6, 14). Paul later goes on to say: 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death' (Rom. 8:2). We do note, however, that those in this condition still need to be reminded: 'you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you' (Rom. 8:9), and need to be exhorted: 'do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions' (Rom. 6:12). It would appear that, for those who are in Christ, the practice of righteousness is by no means automatic, and sin is still capable of exercising dominion. Paul exhorts us on the understanding that we are now able to make right choices in this regard:

¹³ Morris, *Romans*, pp. 284–5.

No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:13).

Some may say: ‘Is not the Christian life one of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17), rather than inner conflict?’ Certainly, ‘since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God’ (Rom. 5:1–2). This, however, does not exempt us from inner conflict and contradiction—it may indeed exacerbate it: ‘we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies’ (Rom. 8:23). The phrase ‘the redemption of our bodies’ here is a reference to the resurrection from the dead on the last day. In Romans 8:10–11, Paul speaks of those for whom ‘Christ is in you’, for whom ‘the Spirit is life because of righteousness’, but for whom ‘the body is dead because of sin’. For them, ‘he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you’—that is, on the day of resurrection (compare Rom. 6:5–8). Is that when we will be rescued from ‘this body of death’ (Rom. 7:24)?

Some note that neither Jesus Christ nor the Spirit is mentioned in the body of this passage. They take it from this that the passage is referring to a time when neither is present in the life of the person, but that, with the coming of deliverance through Jesus Christ (Rom. 7:25), and with the coming of the Spirit (Rom. 8:2), this has now changed (note the ‘now’ in Rom. 8:1—though it is not ‘but now’, but ‘therefore now’), and the former situation no longer applies. The reiteration of the situation in the second part of verse 25, after the mention of Jesus Christ, is an embarrassment to this point of view—one translation even resorts, without any textual warrant, to placing this second half of verse 25 before verse 24!¹⁴ Paul has already spoken, back in verse 6, of being ‘in the new life of the Spirit’, and it could be that he is continuing to speak of that state in the present tense from verse 14.

Some ask: ‘Could one who has already been rescued by Christ cry out: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24)’? The answer depends on the expected timing of the rescue that Paul is referring to: is it the deliverance that comes when we believe in Christ, or is it the deliverance that will come on the day of resurrection? Paul’s ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ (Rom. 7:25) is paralleled by a similar cry in 1 Corinthians 15:57, ‘thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’, where the reference is clearly to the resurrection from the dead on the last day. This, as we have seen, figures largely in Paul’s thinking in Romans 8, and elsewhere.

In favour of Romans 7:14–25 referring to Paul’s post-conversion experience, we need to take a number of considerations into account. Leon Morris, on the basis of an examination of the language used, concludes: ‘Paul’s language, the way he chooses to express himself, points more naturally to his present experience than to his recollection of the past’.¹⁵ It is the supposed impossibility of this referring to Paul in the present, rather than the language used, that drives the alternative interpretation.

Paul’s own accounts of his preconversion experience have no hint of any such anguished conflict as we find in Romans 7:14–25. Before his conversion he had untroubled confidence in his zeal for God and his obedience to the law: ‘I was violently persecuting the church of

¹⁴ Moffat, accepted by Dodd and others; see Morris, *Romans*, p. 297, where he comments: ‘it is hazardous to set our view of what Paul ought to have said against all the evidence’.

¹⁵ Morris, *Romans*, p. 285: ‘the string of present tenses is impressive and difficult to refer to something that lies wholly in the past. It is also pointed out that Paul uses the emphatic *ego* six times in this passage, which more naturally points to Paul as he is than to Paul as he was.’

God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors' (Gal. 1:13–14); 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless' (Phil. 3:5–6). Those who postulate a process of 'difficulties and struggles'¹⁶ leading up to the crisis of Paul's conversion do so without basis in the text.

If we want to know how Paul viewed the unbeliever, we need to look back at Romans 1:18–3:20. There we find 'God-haters' (1:30), who applaud those who practice things that God has decreed deserve death (1:32), 'those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness' (2:8), for whom 'there is no fear of God before their eyes' (3:18). The picture there is rather different from what is here in Romans 7:14–25.

Most telling is the orientation of Paul's 'mind' and 'will' and 'inmost self'. He is able to say:

I agree that the law is good (Rom. 7:16).

I can will what is right (Rom. 7:18).

the good I want . . . the evil I do not want (Rom. 7:19).

if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it (Rom. 7:20, compare 7:17).

I delight in the law of God in my inmost self (Rom. 7:22).

with my mind I am a slave to the law of God (Rom. 7:25).

This is not the mindset belonging to one of whom Paul says: 'the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot' (Rom. 8:7). Rather, it is the attitude of one to whom the promise of the new covenant has been fulfilled:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33);

to whom God has also said:

I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:33, 34).

Nevertheless, Paul's experience is of not doing the good that he wants to do, but doing the evil he now hates, under the power of sin that dwells within him, in his flesh. This is the conflict experienced by those to whom the Spirit of God has come:

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want (Gal. 5:17).

To these Paul urges: 'Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh' (Gal. 5:16).

Leon Morris concludes: 'with every respect to those who take the opposite opinion I do not see how it can be denied that what Paul says refers to the regenerate'.¹⁷ He goes on to appeal frankly to the actual experience of every believer, honestly assessed:

¹⁶ Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 187.

¹⁷ Morris, *Romans*, p. 287.

For surely this *is* the experience of the believer. No believer is completely sinless. He is still a sinner, no matter how much out of character his sin is. He feels dreadful about it. Then why does he do it? He simply does not understand (v. 15). In view of all that Christ has done for him and the resources Christ makes available for him, surely he should have resisted the temptation? He does not want to sin. He knows that. He knows that he ought not to sin. But he is weak ('in the flesh'). Because he does not want to sin he can say with Paul, 'I do what I do not want to do' (v. 16). When he reflects on that sin he is apt to say, 'nothing good lives in me' (v. 18). But he cannot deny his responsibility; his sin proceeds from what he is. He knows that he did it himself. But his regret is deep and genuine, and he cries, 'O wretched man that I am!' The sin is not the product of the regeneration; it takes place despite regeneration. There is that within the believer (the old Adam?) which leads him to sin even when he does not want to. And when he sins he cannot but see that there is a power of evil that is too strong for him; thus he is enslaved to sin (v. 14), a prisoner (v. 23). But his inability to explain how he, a regenerate and redeemed person, falls into sin does not give him license to deny either the fact of his sin or the fact of his regeneration. On the wider view this is not the whole story. Most of the time and characteristically the believer is on top, victorious over evil and at peace. But at the moment he realizes that he has sinned it *is* the whole story for the person with a sensitive conscience (cf. Ps. 38:3–5,¹⁸ and notice what the vision of the Lord did to the prophet, Isa. 6:5¹⁹). Paul is giving expression to the horror of sin committed. It matters little that the sin is occasional. This is the way the sensitive believer views it when it happens.

It is worth bearing in mind that the great saints through the ages do not commonly say, 'How good I am!' Rather, they are apt to bewail their sinfulness. 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man' (Luke 5:8) is the authentic cry not of someone who does not believe, but of someone who does.²⁰

Alexander Whyte had this to say about the expression 'sold under sin':

Then, again, 'sold under sin'—that is another terrible experience and terrible expression of the Apostle. Sold under that cruelest and hatefulest of all slave-driving masters. And then this wonderful saint and wonderful writer proceeds to open us to all his like-minded readers his own innermost experience as a slave sold under sin. Like a sold slave Paul pants to be free. But he soon finds that perfect freedom from the tyranny of his indwelling sin is absolutely impossible to him. A slave's will is free. No master, the most tyrannical, can chain up a slave's will; while all the time his hands and his feet are bound fast in fetters of iron. But no fetters were ever riveted on any slave's hands and feet that he so hated, and so cursed, and so kicked against as Paul hated, and cursed, and kicked against those fetters of indwelling sin under the cruel dominion of which he so continually agonized. Yes, great thanks be to God, Paul's will is free . . . Paul's whole will was now wholly set upon always thinking and feeling and wishing what was good, both toward God and toward all men. But with all that there were still the remains of his original sin lurking deep down in his imperfectly sanctified heart. And thus it was that his better mind and better will were so often forerun and forestalled; overrun and overrun by the uprush of the inward sinfulness that still dwelt deep down within him. In the most heart-breaking chapter that ever was written in this world the greatest writer in this world displays to us the supreme tragedy of this world—that is to say, his sanctified mind and will everlastingly warring within him against his still unrenewed heart—everlastingly warring within him till he is the wretchedest man on the face of the earth; just because in his mind and in his will he is the holiest of men.²¹

¹⁸ Ps. 38:3–5 says:

There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.
For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.
My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness.

¹⁹ 'Woe is me! I am lost.'

²⁰ Morris, *Romans*, pp. 287–8. Leon Morris is usually content to examine and set forth all the options, and let his encyclopaedic scholarship speak for itself, while expressing a cautious and considered opinion. That he should venture to speak with such personal freedom on this issue indicates the heart from which his scholarship has come.

²¹ Alexander Whyte, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 109–120.

Questions for Reflection

- *What is it that would make us concur with this assessment of indwelling sin in the believer?*
- *What is it that would make us want to deny or evade this assessment of indwelling sin in the believer?*

NOTHING GOOD DWELLS WITHIN ME

Why is it that we would want to make out that Romans 7:14–25 is not the experience of a believer in Christ?

One reason is the requirement for neat logical consistency, within the parameters of our present understanding. If Paul has already said, ‘sin will have no dominion over you’ (Rom. 6:14), and if he is going on to say, ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1), why would Paul be saying here that he is ‘sold into slavery under sin’ (Rom. 7:14)? Hence the various attempts to rearrange or give alternative explanations to the text. Handley Moule comments: ‘the subject is too deep—and too practical—for neat logical consistency’.²² Underlying this desire, however, may be the propensity of the flesh to want still to have some justification by virtue of its own works. None of us will be brought to admit readily that ‘nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh’ (Rom. 7:18), and that in ourselves we are incapable of moral achievement.

So we still want to be able to say that the situation in Romans 7:14–25 is something that we can get over and move on from. This is approached in different ways by different commentators. There is a common expectation that the gospel, rightly applied and practiced, can get us out of this dilemma in this life. For Dumbrell, the gospel is the ‘good thing’ that comes to dwell in us (to make up the lack—‘no good thing’ in v. 18), so that ‘the “I”, who is capable of better things, becomes transformed’. He claims: ‘the typical Jew has a great desire to do the law but he cannot carry through his intention because of lack of spiritual power’. The implication is that the gospel will supply this lack.²³ While Dumbrell does acknowledge that ‘for the Christian, life continues to be a struggle’, and admits that for Christians as well as Jews, ‘the flesh . . . is a continuing problem’, it would appear to be of minor significance, since ‘the Christian walks habitually according to the Spirit (8:4, 5)’.²⁴ The fact that the Christian needs to be exhorted to ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:16, RSV) perhaps indicates that this is not as habitual as we might like it to be. Sanday and Headlam foster a similar genteel optimism with regard to human nature. They consider that ‘the higher stages of the spiritual life seem to be really excluded’ from Romans 7:14–24, because ‘The sigh of relief in ver. 25 marks a dividing line between a period of conflict and a period where conflict is practically ended’.²⁵ They see the law as a stage in ‘the evolution of the Divine plan’ which ‘needed to be supplemented. And it was just this supplementing that Christianity brought.’²⁶ Such approaches imply that human beings can be saved by addition or improvement. They can underestimate the extent to which fallen human nature is ‘estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds’ (Col. 1:21), needing to be put to death before it can be made alive.

²² Handley C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, Pickering and Inglis, London, n.d. (New Edition—Second Impression), p. 194.

²³ Dumbrell, *Romans*, p. 80.

²⁴ Dumbrell, *Romans*, p. 79.

²⁵ Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 185.

²⁶ Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 188.

It could be that a right estimate of human nature as created—fallen or unfallen—is required. What inherent goodness do we have in ourselves? When Jesus was addressed as ‘Good Teacher’, Jesus responded: ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:17–18). Jesus was not saying he was bad or evil. He claimed to do ‘many good works’ (John 10:32), and questioned whether he could be convicted of sin (see John 8:46). Jesus was saying that all goodness he has is from the Father, not from himself (as in John 5:19–20; 8:28; 14:10). Is not this the true human condition—dependent on God for ‘life and breath and everything’ (Acts 17:25 RSV; compare Gen. 2:7), goodness included—both before and after the fall? Was it not our pretence at having some independent ground on which we could stand, and some moral capability of our own (‘the knowledge of good and evil’, Gen. 2:17), that got us into this deep trouble? And does not our redemption restore us and take us on into wonderful oneness with and dependence upon God in all things (as in Rev. 21:3, 6–7)? It could be that Paul, when he says, ‘nothing good dwells within me’ (Rom. 7:18), even though he is aware of indwelling sin (vv. 17, 20), is simply stating what is true of every human being, as created, as fallen, and as redeemed. All our goodness is only ever to be from our Father. Any self-reliant apartness from Him is sin and death.²⁷

Geoffrey Bingham sets it out this way:

Paul then adds what was common knowledge—the law was spiritual, but Paul was not. He was—of himself—‘carnal, sold unto sin’. This sort of talk comes hard and strange on the heels of Romans 6:12–14 where Paul is master over sin. There he was a slave to righteousness, living in holiness, and here is he ‘not spiritual’, ‘carnal’, ‘sold unto sin’. No wonder some have read him in Romans 7 as ‘unregenerate’, ‘in a spiritual wilderness’ and even ‘in a state of backsliding’. Some have even spoken of him being three years in the Arabian Desert and called this ‘a desert experience’, but Paul speaks of none of these things, nor does one think they fit this apostle who was urgent in proclamation of the gospel, in faith and in holiness of life from the day of his conversion. How then could the epithets ‘not spiritual’, ‘carnal’, ‘sold unto sin’ apply to him?

They could apply to him because they apply to us all when we look at ourselves *of ourselves*. This is seen in the last verse (v. 25) where Paul sums up what he has been saying, ‘So then, I *of myself* serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin’.²⁸ If we miss the ‘of myself’ we miss the whole point of the chapter. In order to understand this we must go back to where Paul speaks of ‘serving in the newness of the Spirit’ (v. 6). It is this principle he is trying to expound. In seeking to obey the law—not as a principle of self-justifying works righteousness, but simply to serve the law for its own good, holy and spiritual self—he discovers that *of himself* he cannot do so. Why is this? It is because no human being—no less a redeemed human being—has the innate power or capacity to do good and not to do evil, to accomplish acts of good and desist from acts of evil. Let any person ask himself or herself

²⁷ Compare the thirteenth century hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus*:

Where Thou art not, man hath nought,
Nothing good in deed or thought,
Nothing free from taint of ill.

(*Hymns Ancient and Modern*, William Clowes, London, 1924, no. 156).

Another translates, no less truly:

Where thou art not, man hath nought;
Every holy deed and thought
Comes from thy Divinity.

(*The English Hymnal*, Oxford University Press, London, 1933, number 155).

²⁸ The Greek here is the emphatic *autos ego*, translated ‘I of myself’ in RSV, but translated simply ‘I’ in NRSV. Murray, in affirming that ‘the apostle did not disavow his own personal responsibility and agency in the service of the law of sin’, points out: ‘He does not say that the mind serves the law of God and the flesh the law of sin but rather “I myself” with the mind and with the flesh’, and adds: ‘it must not be overlooked that “I myself” is the subject of “with the mind serve the law of god”, a condition that cannot obtain apart from union with Christ’ (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1968, p. 271). Whether Geoffrey Bingham’s interpretation is supported exegetically by this particular verse or not, it remains theologically true.

whether he/she has ever done one act of goodness from his or her self and desisted from doing any act of evil from some innate capacity, and the matter will be evident.

No one is 'spiritual' of one's self. 'Sold unto sin' may sound strong language but in practical fact it is true. Sin runs any person who tries to obey law *of himself*. The word 'carnal' is equally strong. Surely one who is born of the Spirit is spiritual? Yes, but not of himself. The Greek word²⁹ can mean 'human', that is, fleshly in the sense of 'only human' and that in the moral battle humanity cannot stand on its own.

... Paul sums it all up, i.e. '*Of myself* I am forced to serve sin; *of myself* I serve the law of God in will and intention, though not in accomplishment, for in my human weakness I am forced to serve sin.'

Now this may seem to be a tragic situation, but it is far from that. Paul has told us in verse 6 that he can and does 'serve in the new life of the Spirit'. Having said that he shows us that no man can serve *of himself*. It has to be 'of the Spirit', a fact which he explains powerfully in the next chapter. Far from being tragic Paul is showing us the futility of trying to accomplish good things of ourselves, or to desist from evil-doing of ourselves. In other places he tells us we can do all things through Christ and that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us—and so on. But that is another story. We should simply be grateful for what Paul tells us honestly in Romans 7 so that we will keep this in mind, understand the nature of indwelling sin and not seek to defeat sin by ourselves, nor do what is good from ourselves.³⁰

Some try to press the distinction into making 'of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin' to apply to 'Paul, taken as a sinner, viewed apart from Christ . . . just so far as I am considered apart from Christ, and just so far as, in practice, I live apart from Christ, "reverting," if just for a minute, to my self-life'³¹—as if we can waver between the two, or as if, by strength of our will, we can depend more on Christ and the Spirit. We cannot resolve the dilemma so easily. We are never 'apart from Christ' once we belong to him. That makes the dilemma even worse for us. It is a measure of the greatness of the grace of God that has come to us in the gospel that it has come right into the middle of our weak inability and wicked wilfulness, and stays with us to that last day.

The hankering after neat logical consistency and clear rational explanations often goes with the freshness and vigour of youth. Those who have lived longer lives, and have begun to come up against their own limitations, sometimes think again. We do well to note what Leon Morris says above about 'the great saints through the ages'. The fourteenth century anchoress Julian of Norwich gave classic expression to their experience and teaching:

We need to have three kinds of knowledge: the first is to know our Lord God; the second is to know ourselves, what we are through him in nature and grace; the third is to know humbly what we ourselves are where our sin and weakness are concerned.³²

We tend to want to focus on the first two, and hope that they have taken care of the third, so we do not have to give it much attention. Julian's attention to the third did not in any way depress her. She came to the conclusion:

Sin is necessary, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.³³

²⁹ The Greek word is *sarkinos*, which simply means 'made of flesh' in a neutral sense (as in 2 Cor. 3:3). A related word *sarkikos* is used of 'fleshly lusts' (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul in 1 Cor. 3:1 addresses the Corinthians as *sarkinois*, 'people of the flesh, as infants', rather than as 'spiritual people'; when this issues in 'jealousy and quarrelling' in 1 Cor. 3:3 he calls them *sarkikoi* (see Richard Chevenix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Macmillan, London, 1880, pp. 272–4). Though *sarkikos* can also be used with a neutral sense, as in Rom. 15:17 and 1 Cor. 9:11, to mean 'material' as distinct from 'spiritual' (see Murray, *Romans*, p. 259). Once again, the whole argument cannot be made to rest on a word.

³⁰ Bingham, *Romans*, ch. 7, pp. 5–7.

³¹ Moule, *Romans*, pp. 197–8; compare p. 195: 'in any strength short of the definitely sought power of the Holy Ghost'.

³² Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, Long Text 72, quoted in *Directions*, Julian Centre: Ministry in Spirituality, Mile End SA, February 2007.

³³ Julian of Norwich, *The Revelation of Divine Love*, Long Text 27.

Whyte makes reference to ‘an old Puritan saint lately gone to his rest, whose extended pilgrimage was over ninety years, and who often said that he must have been often swallowed up of despair had it not been for the seventh chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans’.³⁴

Perhaps we can be like Augustine of Hippo, who held at first that Paul in Romans 7:14–25 was referring to the unregenerate state, but on more mature reflection affirmed that what Paul said was true of the regenerate, too.³⁵

Questions for Reflection

- *In what ways have we wanted to get over and move on from the situation described in Romans 7:14–25?*
- *What has brought us to the consideration that it might still apply to us?*

THE BENEFITS OF INDWELLING SIN

John Newton (1725–1807), ‘a church of England divine’, former slave trader, and writer of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’, wrote a series of letters to a nobleman friend on what we might consider this most unlikely topic. Here is a summary passage:

Alas, how vain is man in his best estate! How much weakness and inconsistency, even in those whose hearts are right with the Lord! and what reason we have to confess that we are unworthy, unprofitable servants!

It were easy to enlarge in this way, would paper and time permit. But blessed be God, we are not under law, but under grace. And even these distressing effects of the remnants of indwelling sin are overruled for good. By these experiences the believer is weaned more from self, and taught more highly to prize and more absolutely to rely on him, who is appointed to us of God, Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption. The more vile we are in our own eyes, the more precious he will be to us; and a deep repeated sense of the evil in our hearts is necessary to preclude all boasting, and to make us willing to give the whole glory of our salvation where it is due. Again, a sense of these evils will (when hardly anything else can do it) reconcile us to the thoughts of death; yes, make us desirous to depart, that we may sin no more, since we find depravity so deep rooted in our nature, that (like the leprous house) the whole fabric must be taken down before we can be freed from its defilement. Then, and not till then, we shall be able to do the thing that we would: when we see Jesus, we shall be transformed into his image, and have done with sin and sorrow for ever.³⁶

Alexander Whyte quotes John Owen (1616–1683), ‘that most Pauline of men’:

... this inward experience of Paul is the great guarantee and the sure preservative of evangelical truth in Paul’s mind, and heart, and doctrine; just as it is in every man’s mind, and heart, and doctrine who has Paul’s spiritual experience . . . some pretend to great natural virtue, and some to great gospel perfection, but I am resolved to believe the Apostle and my own experience.³⁷

³⁴ Whyte, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 109–20.

³⁵ Geoffrey Bingham stood before us at the New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School at Victor Harbor SA in January 2007, shortly after his 88th birthday, and testified to the greatness of the grace of God by saying that Romans 7, while not contradicting Romans 6 and Romans 8, was still as true of him as it ever had been. The witness of such saints is not to be lightly dismissed.

³⁶ John Newton, *Collected Letters: Cardiphonia, or The Utterance of the Heart in the Course of a Real Correspondence*, ed. Halcyon Backhouse, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1989, Letter 4, February 1772, pp. 63–4.

³⁷ Whyte, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 109–20.

Whyte adds his own teaching:

Is not your indwelling sin teaching you lessons about itself, lessons that you could never have learned but from itself? Is not your indwelling, tyrannizing, enslaving sin teaching you lessons concerning its power and its persistence and its depth and its malignity and its absolutely unspeakable wickedness—lessons and experiences that break your heart every day you live? And anything and everything that breaks your heart every day is good—indeed, is your best good—in this present life. And that because the sacrifices of God, the every morning and the every night sacrifices of God, are a broken heart. And, then, is not this so also—that with your daily broken hearts you are putting on every day a new humility and a new patience with God and with all men and with yourselves? As, also, an ever new prayerfulness, and an ever new faith in Christ and an ever new love for the word of God and for spiritual reading and spiritual preaching? And, above all, far, far above all—Jesus Christ Himself is beginning to get His right place with you and within you. A place He would never have got but for your indwelling sin.³⁸

He concludes by quoting Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679):

When the Apostle, long after his first conversion, was in the midst of that great and famous battle chronicled in the seventh of Romans, presently upon that woeful outcry, O wretched man that I am! he falls admiring the grace of justification through Christ. Now, he says, there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ. Mark that word now: that now, after such bloody wounds and gashes, there should be no condemnation, this exceedingly exalts the grace of justification. For if ever, thought he, I was in danger of condemnation it was upon the rising and the rebelling of those my corruptions. But I find, says he, that God still pardons me, and accepts me as much as ever upon my returning to Him. Now this is a Gospel indeed.³⁹

No wonder Alexander Whyte told his congregation more than once: ‘You’ll never get out of the seventh of Romans while I’m your minister’!⁴⁰

³⁸ Whyte, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 109–20.

³⁹ Whyte, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 109–20.

⁴⁰ G. F. Barbour, *The Life of Alexander Whyte D. D.*, p. 305, quoted on website: <http://www.geocities.com/athens/olympus/4199/sothen.htm>, accessed 27 Feb. 2007.