

## The Sway of Sin Upon the Believer

By David Harrell

Romans 7:14-25

In the sweet providence of God he has now brought us to the last section of Romans chapter seven. So will you take your Bibles and turn there? We will be examining verses 14 through 25 this morning. And I have entitled my discourse to you, “The Sway of Sin Upon the Believer.”

Let me read this text beginning in verse 14 of Romans seven.

For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! 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.<sup>1</sup>

We have before us one of the most profound and poignant passages of Scripture in all of Paul’s epistles. Here the beloved apostle reveals to us his profound humility. He becomes vulnerable allowing us to look into his heart as he addresses the issue of indwelling sin, this battle that we all understand.

There are many who argue that this section of Scripture is a testimony of an unbeliever, not that of a believer. And I will interact with that argument as I go through the text verse by verse, but I must say from the outset that I humbly disagree with that position for many reasons that I hope to make very clear.

Now, by way of context, remember, that thus far the apostle has gone to great lengths to explain that a man cannot be justified and he cannot be sanctified by keeping the law. It is only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There is no other way.

In chapter five he established the glorious truth that justification forever secures a believer. And now he closes this section with a personal testimony of the tension that is set forth in chapters six and seven.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:14-25.

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You will remember in chapter six he describes how we are free from the power of sin. But there is a tension there. We still battle against it, don't we? And in chapter seven he says that we are free from the penalty of the law, yet we are not free from its criteria of righteousness. So, again, we experience the tension. And in chapter eight he is going to also explain how we are free from eternal death, yet we long for the redemption of our body.

So in light of the tensions that are described, particularly in chapter six and the first part of chapter seven, Paul gives his personal testimony. We are going to see that he hates sin. He despises it. He loathes it. He desires to do what is good. His inner man delights in God's law, yet he deeply regrets that his fleshly body remains a prisoner of the law of sin.

As he has made clear, while sin no longer reigns, it still remains. I hope you understand that concept. It is very important. And it is this conflict between the flesh and the spirit that causes him to lament. But he does not do so without hope. He knows that because of Christ he is no longer under divine condemnation. Moreover, because of Christ, he will one day be delivered from this old body of death that will be done away with. And that is the hope that we all have, all of us who know and love Christ.

Now every believer can identify with his lament as well as his transcendent faith and hope in a certain and a glorious deliverance. My, how we all long for the day when we can experience the redemption of our body. So I trust that you will humble yourself before this text this morning, bring your life before it.

It is a text that I might say begins in the minor key. We sense the sadness, but we are going to see that it will end in the major key. It begins with a sad song of one man, a man that really speaks for us all. But as we go through it and especially as we come to chapter eight we are going to see that it ends with a magnificent oratorio of victory, one in which all of the triumphant saints can enter into a hallelujah chorus.

Now Paul had been a Christian approximately 25 years by the time that he wrote this epistle to the Romans. So he knew very well this battle of indwelling sin, the war between the spirit and the flesh. And the mercies of God upon him really motivated his commitment to present his body as a living and holy sacrifice as he will exhort us all to do in Romans 12 and verse one.

And I am repeatedly struck by Paul's humility and I want to remind you of this to begin to set the context for what he is about to say. You will remember in 1 Corinthians 15 beginning in verse nine he says:

“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:9.

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Think about it. Here is a man that was chosen by God to be an apostle, a man who was, according to 2 Corinthians 12 and verse five:

“... caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”<sup>3</sup>

That is staggering, isn't it, to think that God did that with this man. And yet he would say later on:

“On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, he went on to declare:

“ And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!”<sup>5</sup>

And in Ephesians chapter three and verse eight he says:

“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

And then, again, in 1 Timothy chapter one and verse 15, at the end of that verse he says:

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”<sup>7</sup>

I would take exception to that. I think I beat him considerably as being the foremost sinner of all.

So we can understand this man as being a humble man who recognized God's grace. So it is no surprise that he would very candidly speak about his inability to live up to his most sincere spiritual longings, that in inevitable conflict between the reborn spirit and the unredeemed flesh.

I like the way Spurgeon described the hatred of sin in a believer. He says, quote, “Men who only believe their depravity, but do not hate it are no further than the devil on the road to heaven. It is not my being corrupt that proves me a Christian, nor knowing I am corrupt, but that I hate my corruption. It is my agonizing death struggle with my corruptions that proves me to be a living child of God.”

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:4.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:5.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:8.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15.

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So as we are going to see, Paul's spirit longed to be perfectly conformed to the righteousness of God, delineated in the law. But he cycles in and out of spiritual victory and defeat because of the ongoing influence of his flesh. Again, something we can all identify with, a battle that requires us to walk by the Spirit as he says in Galatians five verse 16.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.<sup>8</sup>

Now, he is going to express this internal conflict in a series of four laments. And in each of these four laments he is going to describe three things, the problem, the effect and the cause, very simple. The problem, referring to that battle between the spirit and the flesh; the effect, meaning how that problem, this conflict manifests itself in his life; and then, finally, the cause. In other words, where the blame can be accurately laid.

So let's look at the first lament in verses 14 through 17. He begins with the problem, number one, verse 14.

“For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”<sup>9</sup>

You see, he begins by, once again, affirming what he has been arguing in the preceding verses. Remember in verse 12 he said:

“So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”<sup>10</sup>

But I am something different. I am of flesh. I am sold into bondage to sin.

Now here is where some would argue. Well, that is speaking of an unbeliever. That is not the words of a believer, because, remember in chapter six we learned that Paul tells us that we used to be slaves to sin, but we are now slaves of righteousness. So this can't be speaking of a believer.

Ah, but be careful. While that is true that does not mean that we become sinless. Obviously we continue to sin. Think of it this way. Positionally we are no longer under the tyranny of sin, but practically we still experience sin's influence in us.

Now why is that? Paul says:

“But I am of flesh.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Galatians 5:16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 7:14.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 7:12.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 7:14.

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The King James translates it:

“I am carnal.”<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting. It is in the present tense grammatically. He is speaking of what is occurring in his life presently with respect to sanctification. That has been the topic, the theme all along here. He is not speaking of when he was an unbeliever.

Now the term “flesh” is rooted in the word *sarx* (*sarx*) in the original language. And it speaks of our temporal bodies, our human constitution that comprises our sinful human nature with all of its frailties, with all of its lusts, all of its passions. Our unredeemed humanness, if you will, that will one day be done away with completely.

The great scholar Robinson described it this way, quote, “It is our unaided human nature,” end quote. He went on to say, quote, “Man, [?], that is as flesh, is man viewed in his difference and distance from God, man left to his own weakness and mortality.”

Now some would say, “Yes, but in chapter seven verse five we see that believers are no longer in the flesh. That is what it says there.”

Yes, but you must notice. Paul is not saying that he is in the flesh, but of the flesh and there is a big difference. Indeed, we are no longer enslaved by the flesh, but we certainly are continually influenced by it.

Verse 18 he says:

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”<sup>13</sup>

So at the end of verse 14 he says:

“...but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”<sup>14</sup>

Grammatically this is in the passive voice, which is very important. It indicates that Paul is carried off by this sin in his flesh, not that he has sold himself back into sin. You see, it is as though the power of the lower nature caused him to continue to feel as though he were a slave to sin, even though he wasn't, as though that flesh was constantly trying to sell him back into that bondage from which he has been freed.

Later in verse 23 he describes the, quote:

“...members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 7:18.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 7:14.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 7:23.

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Now bear in mind biblically the spirit and the flesh, the *pneuma* (pnyoo'-mah) and the *sarx* (sarx), are in constant tension throughout the New Testament. We see this over and over again. We see it in our lives. There is this war that goes on. The spirit is that immaterial part of in this context the believer that has been reborn. We have become a new creature in Christ. We have been eternally transformed and united to Christ. We are now indwelt by the Spirit of God.

John MacArthur put it this way, quote, "The Christian spirit, his inner self, has been completely and forever cleansed of sin. It is for that reason that at death he is prepared to enter God's presence in perfect holiness and purity. Because his spiritual rebirth has already occurred, his flesh, with its remaining sin—I love this—is left behind," end quote. Hallelujah. It will be left behind.

As Christians, we are very much aware of the fact that we have been made partakers of the divine nature, according to 2 Peter 1:4, "having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, we apprehend that particular reality with a whole new set of longings, don't we? As new creatures in Christ Paul tells us that the old things pass away, the new things come. Now as a believer the things that we once loved we hate. The things that we once hated, we love. We see that happening. That is evidence of genuine saving faith. Moreover, like Paul, we know the law is spiritual. It is of God. It is holy, righteous and good.

Don't we long to obey it? Of course we do. We don't read it and find ourselves chafing against it, not at all. But we also acknowledge that there is this perpetual conflict, once again, between the spirit and the flesh.

In Galatians five verse 16 we are exhorted to walk by the Spirit which literally means to surrender to the Spirit of God as he has revealed himself to us in Scripture. Live consistently with those truths. That has to be the priority of your life.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.<sup>17</sup>

So, again, there is the tension. And this is the problem that he expresses in this first lament.

Now I want to add Paul uses the term "flesh" here to speak of the believer's inability to conform to the law that he loves, not of being fleshly in the sense of living in carnality

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>17</sup> Galatians 5:16-17.

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and living in some secret sin. That is not what is going on here for him. Paul is not lamenting over the fact that somehow his conscience is accusing him over some actual sin or sins that he has committed here. He is agonizing over how his flesh, his old nature continues to have such profound influence in his life.

So there is a conflict between the new man that now reigns and the old man that still remains. We see this conflict expressed in Colossians chapter three. And he tells us what we should do about it in verse five.

He says:

“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”<sup>18</sup>

Very important here. We need to consider this, that this is what is true.

In verse eight he says:

“But now you also, put them all aside.”<sup>19</sup>

In light of this truth don't live consistently with the old man. Put all that stuff aside.

...anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.<sup>20</sup>

So we see that our new nature, acquired by our spiritual rebirth and our old corrupt and deposed human nature that exerts its destructive influence upon us, continue to be in conflict. He is not saying, by the way, that we somehow have two natures. You are either spiritually dead or you are spiritually alive. But here in chapter seven Paul is speaking about, for the most part, in very non technical terms this internal battle between that old nature that no longer reigns, but still remains, and the new nature empowered by the Holy Spirit, that reborn transformed nature.

So Paul describes his flesh, you will notice, as having been sold into the bondage of sin. It is like the ancient Israelites that had longed for Zion, but found themselves sold into the bondage of Egypt and then to Babylon and then to Rome and so forth. And likewise, as believers, we experience this tremendous burden of our flesh that tries to sell us back into the bondage of sin. And we long for the day of ultimate deliverance. And that is what Romans eight will be all about.

So that is the problem. Secondly, what is the effect?

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<sup>18</sup> Colossians 3:5.

<sup>19</sup> Colossians 3:8.

<sup>20</sup> Colossians 3:8-10.

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Verse 15. He describes it here.

“For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.”<sup>21</sup>

Now, beloved, I would submit to you that these are not the words of an unbeliever. I have never heard an unbeliever give that kind of a testimony. What a contrast here between Paul who was once a self righteous Pharisee that described himself as found blameless under the law in Philippians 3:6 prior to his conversion. That is how he saw himself. What a contrast between that and this new creation that he had become. A renewed spirit longs to be conformed to the law, to the righteousness of God. But the flesh, still infected by sin, seeks to prevent this.

I often think when I read this passage of Scripture I can see my picture in every verse. Can't you? Despite our best intentions, despite our most sincere desires, our sinful flesh constantly tries to dominate our life and sell us back into the slavery of sin. And that is the cause, number three, verses 16 and 17.

He says:

“But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.”<sup>22</sup>

You might think of it this way. He is saying, “It is not because of the law that I sin.” He says, “My sin and my sin is, if I could put it this way, my sin is not because of the law. I am not blaming it.” In fact, he has already said that without the law I would have never known the depth of my sin. I would have never seen my need for the Savior. So what is the cause?

Verse 17, the answer.

“So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.”<sup>23</sup>

Now Paul is not trying to somehow deny his responsibility here, but rather he is expressing the strong influence of his unredeemed humanness. That sin principle, that law of sin that still remains in his body.

So verse 17, again.

“So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 7:15.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 7:16.

<sup>23</sup> Romans 7:17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



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Now the term “no longer” is a very technical term that he uses. It translates the Greek adverb *ouketi* (ook-et'-ee) and it is a very precise term and it means no more ever again. This indicates that a radical, permanent change has taken place. And what is that? Well, it is that as a new creature in Christ that loves the law of God and hates his sinful flesh, Paul is saying, “It is no longer I...” In other words my, the new self that does the works of sin, but rather the principle of sin that still has its abode in my unredeemed body. That is the culprit here.

He also describes this radical, this permanent change in Galatians two and verse 20. What a marvelous text. He says:

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.”<sup>25</sup>

We must understand that to live in sin is contrary to the new nature. That is not who we are. Our new nature is now energized by the indwelling Holy Spirit and he internally works this magnificent work of grace in sanctifying us, in gradually conforming us to the image of Christ. And yet our flesh is constantly trying to do the opposite. All of its evil impulses fights against that.

The ancient rabbis talked that sin was like a visitor that lengthens his stay and finally becomes the master of the house. Some thing that, perhaps, that particular rabbinic concept may have influenced Paul’s reference here to sin which indwells me. But, for certain, Paul is here describing in very vivid terms the conflict of the two opposing principles at work within him. His new man, alive in his inner most being, loves the law of God, but his old corrupt flesh with all its lusts continues to wreak havoc though its strength has been greatly depleted.

For this reason Paul exhorted the Ephesians believers in Ephesians four at the end of verse 22. He tells them:

...lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.<sup>26</sup>

So that is the first lament with its problem, with its cause, with its... or I should say with its effect and then its cause.

Then, secondly, he cycles again to another lament in verses 18 through 20.

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<sup>25</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>26</sup> Galatians 4:22-24.

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Now before we look at this may I remind you that in his first lament he describes how he cannot seem to stop doing that which he hates? But now in his second lament he describes how he cannot seem to do that which he loves, the other side of the coin, if you will.

Notice the problem, verse 18.

He says:

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”<sup>27</sup>

Now I would hasten to add, once again, that this is hardly the words of an unbeliever. He is saying, “My old self is thoroughly corrupt.”

I like to think of it this way. Our flesh is like a moth that is constantly drawn to the flame. Our sin is constantly drawn or I should say our flesh is constantly drawn to the flame of sin. We see that all the time.

So what is the effect? In verse 18 at the end he says:

“... for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.”<sup>28</sup>

Again, hardly the attitude of an unbeliever. Here we see the inevitable antipathy for sin in the heart of a mature believer. He is not saying that he never does good, but rather that he is unable to do good, to do righteousness on a permanent basis.

Beloved, can you imagine what it would be like to have the power to perfectly and consistently carry out the deepest desires of our heart to live in the perfect will of God for his glory? Can you imagine what that would be like? Some day we will experience that, but not until this body has been done away with. This is the frustration that will be the undeniable mark of the mature believer.

I was thinking of Psalm 119 when I was meditating upon this passage. It is the longest psalm in the Psalter and there the psalmist extols the glory of God and his love for the law and the power of the law, the Word of God. Over and over again and yet the very last verse, the 176<sup>th</sup> verse he confesses his own failure in being able to obey it.

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant, For I do not forget Thy commandments.”<sup>29</sup>

So, again, we see the problem and the effect. But what is the cause? What is the cause of Paul’s frustration here over his inability to do what he loves? Verse 20 tells us.

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 7:18.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 7:18-19.

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 119:176.

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“But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.”<sup>30</sup>

See, he is repeating what he said earlier in verses 16 and 17. In other words, my renewed self is not wanting to do these things. They are contrary to my deepest longings for righteousness. So the only logical explanation is to blame the real culprit and that is sin which dwells in me.

And this fuels the third lament in verses 21 and 23. Notice the problem, first.

He says in verse 21:

“I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good.”<sup>31</sup>

“Principle” translates the Greek term *νομος* (nom'-os) and it is really could be translated a law or a rule that prescribes what a person must do, a controlling governing principle of life is really the context here.

And what is that controlling, that governing principle that rules his life? He says it is evil that is present in me the one who wishes to do good.

Here evil is personified. I like to think of this evil that is in me like a vicious guard dog that lives within me and he seems to be asleep most of the time. The only time he really gets riled is when suddenly my mind begins to have some noble thought of righteousness to act upon it. When I really feel God would have me do something or not do something all of the sudden he comes to life. He begins to growl and there is this intimidating force that tries to prevent me from carrying out my heart's desire.

Can't we all identify with this? I mean, think how it works practically. You have an opportunity to share the good news of the gospel of Christ with someone and suddenly that dog awakes and says, “Are you kidding me? Don't do that. You are going to make that person mad and he will never speak to you again.”

Or suddenly you have the impulse to get serious about the disciplines of the faith in your own life because you realize you have been lazy and lethargic. You are not really walking with Christ as you should. And, perhaps, you become convicted and say, “You know, I need to show up on Wednesday nights where I could be nourished from the Word and join in with God's people in prayer.”

No. Don't do that. Are you kidding me? You don't have time to... You know how tired you are. You have got to get up to work in the morning. You can't do that.

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<sup>30</sup> Romans 7:20.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 7:21.

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Or perhaps you are compelled to gently confront your spouse over some issue that is going on in your marriage knowing that if you don't things are going to fall apart. And as you pray about it and you get ready to do this, suddenly that dog arises and says, "No, no. Don't do that. Are you crazy? You are going to cause more trouble. You are going to be left all alone. Your spouse will attack you. God's grace is not sufficient for you. There will be no one to help you. You will be destroyed."

Or there is a conversation with friends and it lapses into vulgarity and immorality and you know you should at least leave if not say something, but, no. The flesh comes alive and says, "Oh, don't do that. They will turn on you. Do you want to lose your friends?"

You feel led to get serious about honoring the Lord with your financial stewardship. You start really giving to the Lord, giving to the church and worshipping him in that way because you know you haven't. And as soon as you get ready to pull out the check book, no, don't do that. You don't have enough money to do that. Look at all the things you owe. You don't work in a job that pays you that much. Let the other people that have more money do that.

Is that not how it goes? Do I need to give you any more examples?

Paul defines this problem, verse 21.

"I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good."<sup>32</sup>

And he gives the effect, secondly, here beginning in verse 22.

He says:

"For I joyfully concur."<sup>33</sup>

That could literally be translated, "I rejoice."

"[I rejoice] with the law of God in the inner man."<sup>34</sup>

Now I want to stop once again.

Beloved, only a believer could ever say this that I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man. You see, the bondage of sin has been broken in the inner man. He is a new creature in Christ. But let me digress here for a moment.

In Psalm chapter one and verse two we read that it is the blessed man, that man that is blessed by God that, quote, delights in the law of the Lord. Unbelievers, don't do that.

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<sup>32</sup> Romans 7:21.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 7:22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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In Psalm 19 verse seven:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul.”<sup>35</sup>

In verse nine he goes on to say:

“The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.”<sup>36</sup>

You see, these are the words and the attitude of a person that has been transformed by the power of the gospel. But an unbeliever, according to Romans 8:7 is hostile toward God.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 2:14 we read:

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”<sup>37</sup>

So that person is not going to say, “Well, I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”

No way.

Ephesians four verse 17 we read about unbeliever, that:

...walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.<sup>38</sup>

And on it goes.

So here in verses 22 and 23 we are not going to hear an unbeliever say, “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,” but this is what Paul says.

And he goes on to say:

“...but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Psalm 19:7.

<sup>36</sup> Psalm 19:9-10.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:14.

<sup>38</sup> Ephesians 4:17-19.

<sup>39</sup> Romans 7:23.

## The Sway of Sin Upon the Believer

By David Harrell

Romans 7:14-25

You see, here it is again. It is this governing law in the flesh that is at war with the law of God in the inner man.

May I remind you of what James says in James chapter four and verse one?

“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?”<sup>40</sup>

It could be translated “your passions that are at war within you.”

Isn't that what the problem is? Of course it is.

Likewise Peter said in 1 Peter two and verse 11:

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.”<sup>41</sup>

So, again, there is the battle that we all must fight.

But what is the cause of this war?

Thirdly, it is at the end of verse 23. He is saying here that this different law is:

“...making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”<sup>42</sup>

The law of sin. There is an alien power that constantly tries to make me a captive of the law of sin that is at work in my temporal body.

Notice there are three laws described in verses 22 and 23. Number one, you have the law of God. Secondly, you have got a different law in verse 23, those governing principles of the corrupted flesh. It is also called the law of sin. Think of it as our propensity to sin that arises out of our unredeemed humanness. And then there is the law of my mind, he says. That is the law of righteous reasoning, that governing principle of righteous reasoning within the transformed mind that aspires to the law of God.

So, once again, the cause of our conflict is that we continue to remain incarcerated in this unredeemed humanness, to live in the flesh. And we will not be able to escape it until we see God and become like him, 1 John 3:2.

What we long to do, we are never free to do completely without interference and without end. But remember. We are not left helpless and without hope as we have already been

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<sup>40</sup> James 4:1.

<sup>41</sup> 1 Peter 2:11.

<sup>42</sup> Romans 7:23.

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reminded, Galatians 5:16. The hope is that we can walk by the Spirit that we will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

You see, folks, we can't escape the flesh, not until glory, but we can avoid walking according to the flesh. That is the point.

We can, as 1 Peter 2:11 says:

“...abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.”<sup>43</sup>

And by the power of the Spirit that is possible, not by our own strength, but by his strength.

This leads us to the fourth lament. And I might say that this lament really is a crescendo of laments. The text doesn't tell us this, but I would imagine by now there are tears streaming down the apostle's cheeks as he writes this that end in a crescendo of a gut wrenching wail of anguish and a cry for help.

He says in verse 24:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”<sup>44</sup>

Philips translates it this way.

“Who will set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature?”

Again, hardly the words of an unbeliever.

Some commentators believe that Paul's imagery here is connected to the Etruscan King Mezentias who quote, “Tormented his living captives by tying them to decomposing corpses,” end quote.

Can you imagine such a hideous punishment?

John MacArthur says this. Quote, “It is reported that near Tarsus where Paul was born a certain ancient tribe sentenced convicted murderers to an especially gruesome execution. The corpse of a slain person was lashed tightly to the body of the murderer and remained there until the murderer himself died. In a few days, which doubtless seemed an eternity to the convicted man, the decay of the person he had slain infected and killed him. Perhaps Paul had such torture in mind when he expressed his yearning to be free from the body of this death,” end quote.

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<sup>43</sup> 1 Peter 2:11.

<sup>44</sup> Romans 7:24.

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Regardless of what inspired this thought, we know it comes from the Spirit of God and we know that certainly this kind of imagery is appropriate, that our sin is like a corpse that is strapped to us and we can't get away from it. That is why Paul would cry out:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”<sup>45</sup>

Again, we can all identify with the clutches of our own sinful flesh that seizes us and tries to sell us back yet again into the slavery of sin.

In Bunyan's great allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* he describes in one section how Christian met up with a godly man named faithful. And there is a scene where faithful describes his confrontations with temptation, a man called the old man. And here is what he had to say.

“Did you meet with any other assaults as you journeyed?” asked Christian.

“Well, when I came to the foot of the hill called Difficulty, I met a very aged man who asked me who I was and where I was going. I told him that I was a pilgrim on the way to the celestial city. Then he said, ‘You look like an honest fellow. Will you be content to live with me for the wages that I will give you?’

“I asked him his name and where he lived. He said his name was Adam the first and that he lived in the town of deceit. I then asked him what his business was and how much he would pay me to work for him. He said that his work was enjoyment and that his wages would be to inherit all that he had.

“I questioned further asking what his house was like and how many others were employed in his service. He told me that his house was full of all the delicacies the world could offer and that his servants were his own children.

“Then I asked how many children he had. He said that he had only three daughters, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. And he suggested that I should marry them if I so desired.

“I asked him how long he wanted me to live with him and he said that it would be as long as he himself lived.”

“Well,” said Christian, “What agreement did you and the old man finally come to?”

“Why at first I found myself somewhat inclined to go with him for I thought he spoke very sensibly. But when I looked at his forehead as I was speaking with him, I saw written there, ‘Put off concerning your former conduct the old man.’”

“What happened then?”

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



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“Suddenly it came burning into my mind that no what he said and how he tried to entice me, I must resist him because his intention was to see me as a slave. I told him to stop talking to me because I would not come near his house. Then he insulted me and told me that he would send someone after me to cause bitterness to my soul as I journeyed on my way.

“At that I turned away from him, but just as I turned he took hold of my flesh and gave me such a sharp jerk backwards that I thought he had pulled me apart and had part of me in his possession. This made me cry, ‘What a wretched man I am.’

“Then I went on my way up the hill,” end quote.

Oh, child of God, this is our story, isn't it? This is our story. Like Paul, don't we all long to be set free from the body of this death? How thankful we can be that these series of laments do not end with hopelessness or despair, but with joyous deliverance.

Notice in verse 25 it is as though he breaks through his mourning here and his lamenting and probably his tears and he shouts with a broken voice:

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”<sup>46</sup>

You see, we must be reminded here that our freedom, our deliverance can only be obtained through our union with the Lord Jesus Christ and by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and that is what he is going to go on to describe in chapter eight. Chapter eight is really the Christian's declaration of independence, because where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.

So Paul closes this chapter with one final summary of his previous lament. 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.”<sup>47</sup>

So, my friends, this sad song ends in a minor key. It is almost as though the orchestra and all of the voices now grow silent and we have an opportunity in this silence to reflect upon the reality of our own sinfulness to weep, to mourn, to mourn over our sin. Time to look up for our deliverer.

But then suddenly the trumpets begin to blare, the timpani begin to roll, then all of the instruments and all of the voices of all of the redeemed and probably the angelic hosts will break forth in this glorious hallelujah chorus and it is found in Romans 8:1.

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<sup>46</sup> Romans 8:25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

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There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.<sup>48</sup>

Oh, hallelujah. Praise God.

Dear Christian, may these truths cause us all to fall on our faces in praise and rejoicing of what the Lord has done for us, because in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through him who loved us.

Let's pray together.

*Spirit of God, we praise you for these eternal truths that reflect so accurately the conflict within us as well as the hope that is ours in Christ. I pray that if there is someone within the sound of my voice that knows nothing of your saving grace, that today you will bring conviction to them, that they, too, might see their sin, that they might confess it and repent of it and cry out for the mercy that you will so quickly give them that they, too, might become a new creature in Christ and experience the eventual victory that is ours because of the one who gave himself for us. I ask all of this in the precious name of Jesus our Savior and for his sake. Amen.*

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<sup>48</sup> Romans 8:1-2.