

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #20: IS ROMANS 7:14-24 DESCRIBING A CHRISTIAN?

By John Temples

Today's study is of a passage that, in my view, is almost universally misinterpreted: Romans 7:14-24. Here is the text:

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

The usual explanation of this passage is that it describes a Christian's ongoing, frustrating struggle with sin. Here are some typical commentary quotes:

- “Obviously [Paul] was describing his [own] conflict as a Christian with indwelling sin and its continuing efforts to control his daily life.” (Bible Knowledge Commentary)
- “In our text, Paul is describing his own personal struggle with sin.” (Bible.org)
- “This moan, 'O wretched man that I am,' expresses the normal experience of the Christian...” (A. W. Pink, quoted at <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/books/counterfeit-cross/romans-7.php>)

Is this true?

It is certainly true that living the Christian life is not always easy; and we do endure struggles, trials, and temptations. But can Romans 7:14-24 possibly be describing Paul as a Christian? Notice the force of the language he used:

- “I am carnal” (meaning sensual, fleshly, having a sinful nature)
- “Sold under sin” (“A slave to sin,” NLT; “sold into bondage to sin,” NASV)
- “What I hate, that I do” (hypocrisy and continual frustration)
- “Sin dwells in me” (continually resides)
- “I know that in me...nothing good dwells”
- “I see another law in my members...bringing me into captivity to the law of sin”
- “O wretched man that I am!” (“Wretched” means “despicable, contemptible, base, vile, depraved”)
- “I serve the law of sin” (enslavement)

Can this language--by any stretch of the imagination--be used to describe a faithful Christian, saved by the blood of Christ?

If it can:

- Then Christianity is a failure;
- We are wasting our time trying to be better people;
- We are no better off than the vilest person in the world;
- We are all living “Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde” lives.

HOW DID PAUL DESCRIBE CHRISTIANS IN OTHER PASSAGES?

For every major descriptive term Paul used in this passage, there is a countermanding rebuttal statement in his own writings, several of them in this very book. Observe:

“I am carnal” (verse 14). But read Romans 8:6--“To be carnally minded is death.” And in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for being carnal, showing that it is not a normal state for a Christian.

"I am...sold under sin" (verse 14). But in Romans 6:6, he said we are no longer slaves of sin, the body of sin having been done away with. And in Romans 8:15, he said, "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'"

"For what I am doing, I do not understand" (verse 15a). But 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

"For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (verse 15b). This can certainly be true on occasion, but Romans 6:12 affirms that we have the power "not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies."

"Sin...dwells in me" (verse 17). But Ephesians 3:17 states that Christ dwells in us through faith. And 1 Corinthians 3:16 reads, "You are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God dwells in you." Which is it? (Please understand--I am not saying that a Christian never sins; both the Bible and experience teach otherwise. But Paul speaks here of sin DWELLING in a person--taking up permanent abode. THAT cannot be said of a faithful Christian.)

"For to will is present with me [I intend to do right], but how to perform what is good I do not find" (verse 18). But Paul also said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). And Philippians 2:13--"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

"I am brought into captivity to the law of sin" (verse 23). But 2 Corinthians 10:4,5 speaks of our being able to "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (the climax of despair, verse 24). But Romans 8:2 (just a few verses away) says, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death." Can a Christian by any stretch of the imagination be called a wretch?

Well, if Paul is not talking about a Christian's sin-dominated, frustrated existence (and I don't see how he can be), what is he talking about?

It always helps in trying to understand a Bible passage to go back and see what was being said before it. Go back to Romans 7:1 and scan down through verse

14. Certain specific terms come up over and over:

- "The law" (13 times in 14 verses).
- "The commandment" (five times in 14 verses).

"The law...the law...the law." I think he's talking about the law!

And which law would that be--the law of Christ, or the law of Moses?

Here are some clues. It is the law that Christians are dead to (verse 4); the law that we have been delivered from (verse 6); and the law that contains the commandment "you shall not covet" (verse 7). "You shall not covet" is a direct quote from the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:17. So without a doubt, "the law" Paul is talking about is the law of Moses, the Old Testament. Remember, Paul's whole discourse in chapters 2-7 is directed to the Jews who were still clinging to the law of Moses, showing them that the gospel of Christ is superior to the Mosaic law and brings salvation, which the Mosaic law could not.

With all this background, we are now ready to answer the question, who is Paul describing in verses 14-24? Not a Christian; certainly not a faithful Christian trying his or her best to live up to the law of Christ.

It is my view that Paul is assuming the identity of a legalistic Jew who refuses to submit to Christ and stubbornly continues trying to be justified by the law of Moses. Much of the book of Romans up to this point has been directed at Paul's fellow Jews, pleading with them to come out from under the law and submit to Christ.

One question needs to be answered, though: if Paul is not referring to himself, or to a Christian, why does he use the first person--"I" and "me"?

One answer is that Paul always strongly identified with his Jewish brethren. You can feel his pathos in Romans 9:2-4--"I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites...."

And remember, Paul **was once** one of those stubborn Jews, clinging to the law of Moses, persecuting Christians; all the while "kicking against the pricks" because he was unable to live up to the law's standard of righteousness. He could speak in the first person **because he had been that person**.

The next chapter reinforces this explanation. Chapter 8 begins, "There is therefore NOW no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." I call your attention to the little word *now*. "Now" implies a "then"--a time before his surrender to Christ. It is a contrast between two states of existence. What comes immediately before (the Romans 7 text) must be the "then."

Here is how Burton Coffman explains it in his comments on Romans 7:14 (bold emphasis mine): "...[We] are certain that **Paul's present condition** when he wrote Romans was **absolutely not indicated by his use of first person present tense** in Rom 7:14 ff. But there is an even stronger reason for rejecting the application of this latter part of Rom 7 to the Christian and the construing of these words as a description of the Christian's inner struggle over sin. That reason is grounded in the magnificent scope and sweeping comprehension of the word 'NOW' in Rom 8:1, immediately after this passage. Paul's reverberating 'now' in that place imposes its antithesis 'then' upon this whole passage. **What Paul was speaking of here was a past condition**. He was speaking of the **fruitless struggle of noble souls under the law of Moses** who, despite their efforts, found no justification thereunder. 'THEN' is the word that flies like a banner over this part of Romans. True, it is not spoken here. but it is more than implied; it is demanded by the antithetical 'now' that opens the eighth chapter. (from Coffman's Bible Commentary, Copyright © 1971-1993 by ACU Press, Abilene Christian University. All rights reserved.)

And Adam Clarke, the distinguished Methodist scholar, said commenting on Romans 7:14--"I believe it is agreed, on all hands, that the apostle is here demonstrating the insufficiency of the law in opposition to the Gospel. That by the former is the knowledge, by the latter the cure, of sin. **Therefore, by 'I' here he cannot mean 'himself', nor any Christian believer....**It is difficult to conceive how the opinion could have crept into the church, or prevailed there, that "the apostle speaks here of his regenerate state....It requires but little knowledge of the spirit of the Gospel, and of the scope of this letter, to see that **the apostle is, here, either [im]personating a Jew under the law and without the Gospel, or showing what his own state was [prior to his becoming a Christian]."** (from Adam Clarke's Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2005, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

There is even another explanation of the use of the first person in this text: **the use of the present tense to refer to past time for dramatic effect.** Essentially, a writer or speaker "puts himself into the action" of a past event, or "assumes the identity" of an absent, different person. This rhetorical device is called *prosopopoeia*. A study of this subject would be a challenging and rewarding one (just Google *prosopopoeia*).

The benefits of a correct understanding of Romans 7:14-24 are enormous. It means we don't have to hate ourselves; we are not slaves to sin; we are a new creation. The old life as a slave of sin is gone. Yes, we do struggle with sin from time to time; but we are not filthy, helpless, vile wretches in whom sin dwells permanently. Rather, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit make their home in us, and stand ready to forgive us when we repent and confess. --John Temples