

# **BELIEVERS BIBLE BULLETIN**

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## **ROMANS**

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Lesson 23

Romans 7:13-25

### **The Struggle**

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#### **Introduction**

Many formulas have been devised by man for human salvation. Some have contended for human sincerity as the secret of acceptance with God. Surely, it is said, if one does the best he can, then will not God accept him? But, speaking of that people who have been among the most sincerely religious of all peoples, Paul wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:1-2).

Others have traced human salvation to the observance of religious ceremonies, but Jesus spoke a word against that hope in Matthew 15:8-9, "This people draweth near unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." He was citing the prophet Isaiah's condemnation of the generation of Israelites in his day, who spent their time in the celebration of the ceremonies of the Law of Moses, but in whose hearts there was no true trust in Jehovah. Jesus reaffirmed the sentiment in his day.

It is common among many moderns to affirm that salvation is the product of good works, but the Bible speaks unequivocally against such a hope. Again it is Paul who writes on the point with great clarity, saying, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Nothing could be plainer in saying that good works do not save.

In fact, all hopes built upon religion, religious works, or good works in general, are destroyed by the advice given to the well-known ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus. To him Jesus said, "Ye must be born again" (cf. John 3:3, 7). The word may be frayed by the misuse of our generation, but the necessity of the new birth rules out all hopes of self-salvation. The secret of life is found in the birth from above (that is the probable meaning of the word rendered "again" in the King James' Version's "born again").

All these formulas are based upon self-righteousness, or pagan legalism, and all discount our standing before God in sin, as well as the saving ministry of the cross of Jesus Christ. We are under sin, and we need to have something done for us. That is what Jesus Christ alone has done (cf. Acts 4:12; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Not only are there many human formulas for salvation, there are also many for sanctification. There are purveyors of sanctification by taboos, sanctification by such positively good things as witnessing, Bible study, and prayer done in our own strength. What results is a form of Christian legalism, a pride of righteousness done in the power of the flesh. It, too, discounts our state before God and the work of the Holy Spirit within us. The Apostle Paul makes it very plain that, even after our birth from above, we are in ourselves unable to overcome indwelling sin. We need something done in us (cf. Rom. 8:2), or the continual working of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Just as a man cannot save himself, so a Christian cannot sanctify himself.

We believers cannot of ourselves live the Christian life. We cannot of ourselves keep any law of God due to indwelling sin. That, in essence, is the point of the apostle in Romans 7:13-25.

He had argued in the preceding context that the believer had died with respect to sin and the Law of Moses. Then in answer to the expected question, "Is, then, the Law sinful?," he had replied, "No, the Law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (cf. Rom. 7:7, 12). That answer, however, raised another question. It is this, "Is, then, that which is holy and good the ultimate source of death for me?" No, Paul will point out, it is not the Law that is the cause of the believer's death. The Law is the instrumentality of sin (cf. 7:7, 8, 11). It is indwelling sin that is the culprit. And this is the point that he expounds in detail in the last section of Romans seven. Even though possessed of the Law of Moses, the believer is impotent to deal with the enemy, inherited, inherent corruption (original sin in the narrow sense). The problem that he deals with is alluded to in the words of verse eighteen, "but how to perform that which is good I find not."

### **THE BELIEVER A BONDSLAVE TO SIN**

As we turn to a consideration of Romans 7:13-25 there are several questions that come to mind. The first is this: Is Paul writing of the regenerate man or of the unregenerate man? The point has been much discussed, and seriously discussed, since the days of Augustine. In a study such as this, it is, of course impossible to look at the question in detail.<sup>1</sup> As one peruses the arguments pro and con, it becomes obvious that much can be said for the opinion that Paul is writing of an unregenerate man under the Law. For this view one may see some of the commentaries, and also some of the other works on the point. On the other hand, the more influential of the orthodox commentators, particularly of Calvinistic and Lutheran bent, have contended for the view that Paul is writing of a saved man. For example, this is the view of Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Beza

Chemnitz, Gerhard, Owen, Delitzsch, Philippi, Hodge, Shedd, Kuyper, Bavinck, Bruce, and Cranfield. That is my own view, and I would like to support it by a few simple arguments. Much more could be said, but these are sufficient to show that the position likely is the true one.

In the first place, the general flow of the epistle's argument supports the view. While it is true that not every passage after the completion of the theme of condemnation refers to the believer (cf. 8:5-8), it is true that we have logically come through the doctrine of sin and justification into the doctrine of sanctification. The section, then, would belong to a believer's experience. It might also be pointed out that, since the apostle has already demonstrated that a man cannot be justified by the Law, it would be totally unnecessary to demonstrate that he cannot live by, or keep, the Law. The passage then would become a useless exercise, it would seem, or a truism.

In the second place, I should like to remind objectors to my view that the burden of proof rests with the opposing viewpoint in the light of two things when combined: (1) his use of the 1st person; (2) his use of the present tense in this section. When an author speaks of I myself and uses the present tense, one must begin with the assumption that he is expressing his feelings at the time of writing.<sup>2</sup> This is the more important when one remembers that he uses this language uniformly throughout the passage. Further, it is even more important when the contrast with vv. 7-12 is noted. There the apostle uses the past tense almost exclusively, while in vv. 13-25 he uses largely the present. We are led irresistibly to the conclusion that in the preceding section we have historical facts, while in the following section we have present experiences.<sup>3</sup>

And, third, it is difficult to imagine an unsaved man diagnosing his case so perfectly, or affirming such things of an unsaved person. He has a clear view of himself (vv. 18, 24). He has a noble view of the Law (vv. 16, 19). In three ways he is a saint. He hates sin (vv. 15-16; can this

agree with 3:7?). He delights in the Law of God (v. 22). He looks for deliverance to Christ alone (v. 25). John Stott comments, "Now let me repeat that anyone who acknowledges the spirituality of God's law and his own natural carnality is a Christian of some maturity."<sup>4</sup>

F. F. Bruce writes, "In this section Paul continues to speak in the first person singular, but he leaves the past tense and uses the present. Not only so, but there is an inward tension here which was absent from verses 7-13. There, sin assaulted him by stealth and struck him down; here, he puts up an agonizing resistance, even if he cannot beat down the enemy. There, he described what happened to him when he lived in 'this present age'; here, 'the age to come' has already arrived, although the old age has not yet passed away. He is a man living simultaneously on two planes, eagerly longing to live a life in keeping with the higher plane, but sadly aware of the strength of indwelling sin that keeps on pulling him down to the lower plane."<sup>5</sup>

Another question that has arisen is this: Is Paul drawing upon his own experiences, or is he using himself as representative of one in the throes of this spiritual condition? In answer to this one may say that it is not a question of an either/or, but of a both/and. He is using himself as an example based upon his own experiences. What we have is no abstract argument, but the personal struggle of an agonizing soul.

It has also been asked whether this is necessary Christian experience. I am inclined to think that it is necessary Christian experience, that is, that struggle characterizes us as long as we are in the flesh. On the other hand, it is not complete Christian experience. There are occasions of glorious victory in the believer's life, although complete victory awaits the future (cf. 8:1-11).

What we have, then, in Romans 7:13-25 is the picture of a believer seeking to keep the Law (cf. 7:22; 8:4) with the resources of the Law and his new life alone (cf. 8:3). Sixteen times we find ego used (Greek for I) , thirty times the "I" is found in the AV, while the Holy Spirit is

not used at all in the section, that is, 7:13-25. The Law is mentioned in chapter seven twenty times, but only four times in chapter eight (nomos itself five times). In chapter eight there are at least twenty references to the Holy Spirit. These things, I believe, are the key to the section.

Now, when one turns to the verses of the section, it becomes clear that there are three cycles in the argument of 7:13-25 (cf. vv. 13-17, 18-20, 21-25). One can see this by the recurring refrain in the -last verses of the first two sections and the synonymous idea in the third. Each of the sections reveals the unhappy condition of the one who is a bondsman to indwelling sin in his members. In each cycle a pattern appears. First, there is an acknowledgement of his condition (cf. vv. 14, 18, 21). Second, each cycle continues with a description of the conflict (cf. vv. 15-16; 19, 22-23). Finally, each section ends with a summary of the believer's condition and a fixing of the cause of it all,—indwelling sin (cf. vv. 17, 20, 25). The last section is, no doubt, an advance on the preceding, for in it Paul gives not only a description of the conflict but also its cause. He sets forth the matter "as a philosophy, in terms of 'laws' or principles at work in his situation."<sup>6</sup>

In the first cycle the apostle shows that, apart from the Spirit's power, he is a slave to indwelling sin. While the Law is spiritual, he is carnal, sold under sin. The figure of the apostle is a vivid one. Gifford comments, "A slave that has been sold is more wretched than a home-born slave; and man is said to have been sold, because he had not been a slave from the beginning (Bengel). Slavery to sin is not the rightful condition of our nature."<sup>7</sup> cf. 1 Sam. 23:7. The believer is not master in his own house! Cranfield comments, "The more seriously a Christian strives to live from grace and to submit to the discipline of the gospel, the more sensitive he becomes to the fact of his continuing sinfulness, the fact that even his very best acts and activities are disfigured by the egotism which is still powerful within him--and no less evil because it is often more subtly disguised than formerly."<sup>8</sup>

Incidentally, there is no question in Paul's mind that, while the believer is unable of himself to win the battle, he is nevertheless responsible for his failure. Inability is consistent with responsibility (Semi-Pelagians, please not).

The apostle does not speak of two "I's" in the section. There is only one ego, but the one person has two sides to his being. The "I" is used comprehensively, referring to the person as actuated both by the new man, or the man within (cf. v. 22), and the evil flesh, or old nature. And the "I" is used circumscribedly, or limitedly, referring to the new principle of life, or the new man, minus the elements of the old man (cf. vv. 17, 20). This latter sense is also found in the term "the inward man" (cf. v. 22; cf. vv. 23, 25). Thus, there is one person, but he has both a mind (a property of the new man) and flesh (here the old nature). Shedd's comments here are quite good.<sup>9</sup> And he is responsible for all that is found in his total personality.

### **THE BELIEVER IMPOTENT FOR THE GOOD**

In the second cycle (vv. 18020) the apostle's emphasis passes from the positive side of things to the negative and inner side of things. We are impotent to produce righteousness. The "for" introduces the amplifying explanation and confirmation of verses 14-17. Paul, it is plain, sees himself as a divided person. The "in me" is the comprehensive person, but he limits the statement to "my flesh" by the restrictive "that is," what he says is that the flesh is utterly corrupt; it can do nothing for God. There is, however, a part of him, he says, of which this cannot be said. In effect, the believer is a divided person, and the lesson is one that every follower of the Lord Jesus must learn.

### **THE BELIEVER ALWAYS IN A LOSING CONFLICT**

In the final cycle of the apostle's reasoning he points out that the enemy within is stronger than his renewed self. The new life alone is not sufficient for overcoming in the struggle for victory.

The "another law" which always wins the battle against the law of his mind and brings him into captivity is the "law" of indwelling sin (cf. vv. 21, 25). The believer, thus, is always in a losing conflict. The present tenses of verse twenty-three vividly portray the habitual struggle that always ends, it seems, in defeat.

And, finally, there comes the agonizing cry of verse twenty-four, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The body is the body looked at as that in which the death of indwelling sin is located. Paul is now at the end of self, the only time God can come in and deliver the believer. No longer is he looking within; it is "who shall deliver me?" It was Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote,

"Oh! that a man would arise in me  
That the man I am may cease to be."

That is the cry of the concerned Christian, cognizant of his weakness in himself and longing for deliverance from the thralldom of indwelling sin.

In the final verse of the section the apostle breaks forth with a cry of victory, "I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord." There **IS** such a man! Trust in Him is the answer to the longing for deliverance. He says here what he will say in an expanded way in the next chapter (cf. 8:1-11). The victory is found in the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit and in His final deliverance at the resurrection.

The last sentence of the chapter is a concluding statement in which he summarizes the major point of the preceding section. The believer's struggle is that between the mind (he avoids the term spirit, although the mind is closely related to the spirit, because there might be a tendency to refer that to the new nature of the believer in conjunction with the Holy Spirit. That is what he wishes to avoid. In chapter eight we do not have the mind at all) and the flesh. These two entities

within the believer struggle for control so long as the believer is in the flesh and until the resurrection of the body.

### **Conclusion**

The apostle has made plain the inability of the flesh in the believer to give victory, even though the believer now possesses a new principle of life in the new nature. God must do something for us, if we are to be saved from the penalty of sin, and He must do something in us, if we are to have deliverance in this life. And He must do something for us and in us at the resurrection, if we are to have ultimate deliverance from sin and its consequences. That He has done, is doing, and will yet do, the Scriptures say. It all adds up to the sufficiency of Jesus Christ and His saving work for our inability, whether that of the unconverted man (cf. 8:8) or of the converted man (cf. 7:24). We do thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This sufficiency is received only when our inabilities are acknowledged. When we give up. He takes up. May the Lord give us the desire to please Him in a holy life and the will to give Him the reins of our hearts that He may produce His overcoming life in and through us by the Spirit!

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Cranfield for a discussion of some of the various opinions on the the passage that have been offered (I, 340-47).

<sup>2</sup>Hodge, p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>Godet, II, 32.

<sup>4</sup>Stott, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, pp. 150-51.

<sup>6</sup>Stott, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup>Gifford, p. 140.

<sup>8</sup>Cranfield, I, 358.

<sup>9</sup>Shedd, pp. 91-93.