

Regenerate Or Unregenerate?

A Study in Romans 7:7-25

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The Ethiopian eunuch, returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, stopped his chariot in mid-desert and began reading aloud the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. Ere long Philip, the Spirit-filled man, joined him and inquired whether the reader understood what he was reading. "Of whom speaketh the prophet this?" inquired the eunuch, "of himself or of some other?"

As one turns to Romans 7:7-25 the same question suggests itself. Of whom speaks the Apostle this? A number of answers have been given:

First, that the passage depicts an awakened, half-converted man. (The Scriptures speak of being awakened but are completely silent on being half-converted.) A second interpretation holds that it portrays the common, normal Christian life. (No doubt the life depicted in Romans 7:7-25 is an all too common one but it seems scarcely the normal life of a Christian according to New Testament standards.) A third view is that it describes the inner experience of the unregenerate man, the unsuccessful strivings of his better moral nature through law-keeping. Finally, it is held to mirror the regenerate man seeking deliverance from the power of sin in himself by keeping of the law.

Of whom speaks the Apostle this? Of the unregenerate man or of the regenerate man? The present study will seek to answer this question by a careful examination of (1) the passage itself (Romans 7:7-25); (2) the immediate context of the passage; and

(3) the passage in the light of Scripture outside the immediate context.

By grouping and paraphrasing the passage the thought becomes fourfold:

- 1) Verses 7-13. "If release from Sin means release from Law, must we then identify Law with Sin? No. Law reveals the the sinfulness of Sin, and by this very revelation stirs up the dormant Sin to action. But this is not because the Law itself is evil—on the contrary it is good—but that Sin may be exposed and guilt aggravated."
- 2) Verses 14-17. "This is what takes place. I have a double self. But my better self is impotent to prevent me from doing wrong."
- 3) Verses 18-21. "It is equally impotent to make me do right."
- 4) Verses 21-25. "There is thus a constant conflict going on, from which, unaided, I can hope for no deliverance. But, God be thanked, through Christ deliverance comes."

I

It will be helpful to set forth an analysis of outstanding words and phrases in the passage. (1) 'Law' (v. 7). Speaking generally, νόμος here and through most of the context (excepting vs. 21, 23) is the moral law combined with an understanding of the Mosaic Code. The law does three things: it enlightens the sinner's conscience, brings conviction of sin, and shows

need of salvation. The law can never save, bring deliverance or provide victory. (2) 'Finding occasion', ἀφορμή (vs. 8, 11). Securing a starting point, a spring board, a base of operation. Providing excuses for doing what one wants to do. Furnishing a starting point from which to rush into acts of sin. (3) 'Exceeding sinful', καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ἁμαρτωλός, (v. 13). Sinful according to excess (lit.: to throw beyond). Hence the excesses of sin reveal its real nature. (4) 'Spiritual', πνευματικός, (v. 14). Spirit-caused. Spirit-given and hence like the Holy Spirit. (5) 'Carnal', σαρκινός, (v. 14). Mark on character; more emphatic than σαρκικός, "a creature of flesh". (6) 'Sold under Sin', πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν (v. 14). This is the perfect passive participle of πιπράσκω—made a slave under Sin. "Sin has closed the mortgage and owns its slave" (Robertson). One that has sold himself under sin, like a prisoner of war who has been sold as a slave. (7) 'Flesh', σὰρξ (v. 18). This term describes the man in his natural state, i.e., outside of grace. He identifies the self with the flesh. (8) 'Is present', παράκειμαι (v. 21). Lies to my hand, or, is within my reach. (9) 'I do not . . . I do', πράσσω . . . ποιῶ (v. 15). πράσσω—put into practice. ποιέω—commit an act. (10) 'Inward man', ἔσω ἄνθρωπον (v. 22). My real self—after the inward man of the conscience, as opposed to the outward man. Compare: law of mind, the reflective intelligence, the inward man. (11) 'In my members', ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν (v. 23). This describes the flesh, organized and active in various directions; equals the σῶμα in detail. Not *of* my members but *in* members. Sin has its lodgment there but the flesh is destined unto, and must be claimed for, other and higher purposes. (12) 'Body of this death', σῶματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου (v. 24). 'Body'—the realm in which sin reigns. 'This death'—the body as subject to sin is also under the

dominion of death. Thus it is a body doomed to die.

There are several facts emphasized by repetition in verses 7-25. First, the first personal pronoun 'I' is used 28 times. Second, the prominence of the word 'law', used 20 times. "Law and the soul are brought face to face with each other and there is nothing between them. Not until we come to verse 25 is there a single expression used which belongs to Christianity. And the use of it marks that the conflict is ended" (Sanday). Third, there is an entire absence of emphasis on the Holy Spirit who indwells the Christian believer.

Several outstanding qualifying facts are set forth, descriptive of the life of the person described in 7:7-25:

1. "Sold under Sin" (v. 14). This does not harmonize with the New Testament description of a 'born again' child of God. Compare I Corinthians 7:22, 23: "For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's *free* man: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye servants of men." Compare with II Corinthians 5:17: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

2. The inability to do anything right (vs. 15f.). Compare here with I John 5:4: "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" Where is *faith* or the recognition that Jesus is the Son of God or ability to overcome the world in the life of the one portrayed in Rom. 7:7-25?

3. Utter frustration is the experience of the man of 7:25. Notice verse 23 and 24 "in captivity under the law of sin." "Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" Compare this with Galatians

1:4: "Our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins that he might *deliver* us out of this present evil age." In verse 25 the man of 7:25 sees that deliverance through Jesus Christ our Lord. And there is no deliverance before verse 25!

4. Note the two imperatives of verse 23. "There are two imperatives (*νόμοι*) within the man: that of conscience, the other, that proceeding from the action of sin upon the body. One of these Imperatives is the moral law, 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not'; the other is the violent impulse of passion" (Sanday).

5. This benumbing sense of the utter futility and powerlessness of life cannot describe a New Testament Christian but does fit into the Apostle's life as a convicted Pharisee, driving him into "persecuting the Christians, as both a relief from his inward misery and a means of securing God's favor," which he came to realize he could not obtain by keeping or seeking to keep the law. Was not the vision on the way to Damascus an answer to his despairing cry of wretchedness? Were not the goads against which he had kicked the feelings of intense disgust with and despair regarding himself?

II

If Romans 7:7-25 depicts the experience of a regenerated person it makes the gospel as great a failure as the law in its reconstruction of human character, and it flatly contradicts the whole tenor of the New Testament relative to the nature and power of the 'born-again' child of God. The man living in the area described by Romans 7:7-25 could not, or, we trust, would not say, "Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ", (I Corinthians 11:1) as did the Apostle Paul. There are true Christians with controlled depraved tendencies (I Corinthians 3:1-3), but the person under the perfect mastery of the flesh, according to the New Testament, is a 'natural man, not having the Spirit'.

Note in this connection Jude 19 and Romans 8:9.

Daniel Steele says at this point: "In Romans 7:7-24 there is no term which implies the new birth or spirituality. In the whole context the Spirit does not appear on the field as one of the combatants. 'The inward man' is not the new man but the mind including the aesthetic sensibilities which admire the beauty of holiness while repudiating its obligation. The two parties to the contest are the moral reason antagonizing the depraved appetites and passions; the upper story of the house at war with basement on the plane of nature.

"The Greek Fathers during the first 300 years of church history unanimously interpreted this Scripture as describing a thoughtful moralist endeavoring without the grace of God to realize his highest ideal of moral purity. Augustine first followed this interpretation, then shifted to the position that it represented the regenerated in order to refute Pelagius who used a couple of verses (14, 22) for his theories. The trend of modern scholars, whether Calvinistic or Arminian, is now toward the view of the Greek Fathers".¹

Concerning the use of the present tense Sanday² notes that "the sigh of relief in verse 25 marks a dividing line between a period of conflict and a period where conflict is practically ended. This shows that the present tenses are in any case not to be taken too literally." Though Paul is writing in the present tense, he is projecting his mind back to the period before his conversion.

Another writer observes: "He [Paul] is continuing an argument to show that *under grace* a man is free from the power of sin. He has already said that the Christian has *died to sins*

¹ Daniel Steele: *Half Hours with St. Paul*, pp. 73f.

² W. Sanday: *I. C. C.: Romans*, p. 185.

and moves in the *new sphere of life*. He has compared him to a slave bought by a new master, and to a widow set free to marry again. It would stultify his whole argument if he now confessed that, at the moment of writing, he was a *miserable wretch, a prisoner to Sin's law*. He would have thought it quite abnormal that any Christian should feel so, and there is nothing in his own confessions elsewhere to lead us to suppose that, with all his sense of struggle and insecurity, he ever had such an experience as this after his conversion".³

Stevens' comment at this point is: "In Romans 7:7-25 the apostle describes a certain inner conflict of principles under the first person. It can hardly be doubted that this description refers either directly or indirectly to his own life. The description is of one who under the operation of the Old Testament law has been awakened to a sense of his sin and of his need of forgiveness and renewal . . . This narrative reflects Paul's own moral history. He has passed through this moral struggle and experienced this sense of defeat in his best aspirations. It was only the manifestation of Christ in his true character as the Saviour from overmastering sin that terminated the conflict and brought harmony and peace into his life. I believe that it is in the experience thus depicted that we are to find the point of contact between his sudden conversion and his previous career. This inner conflict, with its resulting sense of failure and sin, was, in an important sense, a preparation for his conversion, and made the revelation of Christ to him productive of a radical change in his disposition and conduct".⁴

III

We close this discussion on Romans

³ C. H. Dodd: *Moffatt N. T. Commentary*: Romans, pp. 107f.

⁴ George B. Stevens: *The Pauline Theology*, pp. 12, 13.

7:7-25 with the translation (or paraphrase) of some of the outstanding verses in the passage by W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam.

"The blame cannot attach to the Law (v. 14). For we all know that the law has its origin from the Spirit of God and derives its character from the Spirit, while I, poor mortal, am made of frail human flesh and blood, sold like any slave in the market into the servitude of sin.

"It is not the law (v. 15) and not my own deliberate self, which is the cause of evil; because my actions are executed blindly with no proper concurrence of the will. I purpose one way, I act another. I hate a thing but do it.

"So that the state of the case is this (v. 17): It is not I, my true self, who put into act what is repugnant to me, but Sin which has possession of me.

"The will indeed to do good is mine (v. 18) and I can command it, but the performance I cannot command. For the actual thing that I do is not the good that I wish to do (v. 19); but my moral agency appears in the evil that I wish to avoid. For I am a divided being (v. 22). In my innermost self, the thinking and reasoning part of me, I respond joyfully to the law of God. But then I see a different law dominating this bodily organism of mine and making me do its behests. This other law (v. 23) takes the field in arms against the law of Reason and Conscience and drags me away captive in the fetters of sin, the Power which has such a fatal grip upon my body.

"Unhappy man that I am—torn with a conflict from which there seems to be no issue! This body from which proceed so many sinful impulses; this body which makes itself the instrument of so many acts of sin, this body which is thus dragging me down to death—How shall I ever get free from it? (v. 24).

"A Deliverer has come—Jesus Mes-

siah, our Lord (v. 25). Without His intervention, left to my own unaided self, the state I have been describing may be summarized: in this two-fold capacity of mine I serve two masters: with my conscience I serve the law of God; with my bodily organism the Law of Sin".⁵

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From a purely Scriptural basis it

⁵ Sanday and Headlam: *I. C. C.*: Romans, pp. 177, 178.

is apparent what is the answer to the question: "Of whom speaketh the Apostle this?" He is speaking of an unregenerate man striving through law-keeping to satisfy God's high claims on his life, but miserably failing in the attempt and yet seeing a bright gleam of hope in Christ "who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil world, according to the will of our God and Father: To whom be glory forever and ever" (Galatians 1:4, 5).