

## “WE’VE ONLY JUST BEGUN”

Studies in Romans – 10 (b)

Romans 7:14-25 (p. 1095)

Two weeks ago I said that this candid piece of autobiography we find in chapter 7 divides itself between Paul’s life before becoming a Christian (verses 1-13) and his life as a follower of Christ (verses 14-25). There are two key clues in the text that suggest this is the case. For one thing, in the first half (especially verses 7-13) the verbs are almost all past tense. He talks of things that have happened and are done with. But in verses 14-25 the verbs are all present tense. He describes current issues with which he is dealing as he writes.

The second clue is the way in which he describes his situation. In verses 7-13 Paul talks of how sin sprang to life through the law and, as he says in verse 11, “*sin... put me to death.*” But in verses 14-25 we find Paul not only very much alive, but now actively engaged in a fierce ongoing intimate battle with sin. In his life before Christ (Volume One of his life story) he was dead in the water. But now, alive in Christ (with the opening of Volume Two) we find him fighting sin tooth and nail, and there doesn’t seem to be any end in sight.

I come back to this point because there are at least three differing interpretations among Christians of this last half of Chapter 7. Some see verses 14-25 as Paul’s description of himself before he became a Christian. Others see Paul’s use of the first-person narrative here as a kind of literary device to describe the Christian who hasn’t yet matured spiritually. The third major way of looking at these verses is to see them as a piece of current autobiography from the life of a spiritually mature Christian named Paul. I think the third one is the more correct interpretation. But I want to spend some time today looking at all three interpretations. And then we’ll close with a few summary observations on the text itself.

**1.** The first option we’re faced with is the idea that the internal conflict Paul talks of in verses 14-25 should be understood as *Paul’s description of his life before he became a Christian*. Now, a number of articulate people have held this opinion. And they argue basically from their own subjective experience. For example, the nineteenth century expositor, Joseph Beet, made his case this way: “*There are thousands who with deep gratitude acknowledge that, while (this passage) describe their past, it by no means describes their present state. Day by day they are ‘more than conquerors’ through him that loved them. And... it is to themselves an absolute proof that these words do not refer to Paul’s state when he*

wrote the Epistle. For they are quite sure that what they enjoy the great Apostle enjoyed in still higher degree.”

In other words, if I, an ordinary Christian, no longer have to struggle with sin in my life because Christ has set me free from sin, I certainly couldn't expect an extraordinary Christian like Paul to have to struggle with it. That just doesn't make any sense to me. Therefore, the only logical explanation of verses 14-25 is that Paul was talking about struggles he had with sin in his pre-Christian life. This interpretation, however, simply doesn't square with the fact that Paul's verbs here are all in the present tense. He's clearly writing about current issues in his Christian life. Obviously this view has serious problems and, as a result, has been largely rejected.

2. There's a second and rather popular way of looking at this passage; and that is to interpret it as *a literary exposé of the Christian who has not yet matured spiritually*. According to this view, Paul uses this first-person account of a battle within to describe the sort of Christian who's been saved but not yet sanctified – that is, someone who has “accepted Christ” but who has not yet received “the fullness of the Holy Spirit.” This second-option bunch argues that this passage should not be taken literally – as though Paul were talking about his own current situation. Instead, we should read it as a kind of parable, a picture of the Christian who began his life in Christ, but who, sadly, never matured spiritually.

There are, however, some problems with this way of reading Romans chapter 7. Perhaps the most significant feature of this view is that it is based on the assumption that you can pigeonhole virtually every person on earth into one of three categories. Either you are a “sinner” or you are a “carnal Christian” or you are a “Spirit-filled Christian.” I'm sorry, those are your only options. So, let me ask you this: Just where do you fit in this scheme? Do you know without a doubt which one you are? Well, you had better figure it out.

According to this view, either you are a “sinner” (and you are therefore disqualified to begin with – so you might as well give up hope, because you don't stand a chance anyway). But if you're not a “sinner,” then you must be a Christian. Ah, but what kind of Christian are you? Are you a “Spirit-filled Christian” or only a “carnal Christian?” Are you living “in the Spirit” or “in the flesh?” People who think in these terms will tell you that Romans 7:14-25 is the classic description of the “carnal Christian” – that is, a man or woman who may in fact be “in Christ” but who, unfortunately, is still living “in the flesh.”

I had an interesting experience with this point of view as a college student. One night after Earl Palmer, our university pastor and my mentor, had spoken to several hundred of us at University Church in Seattle, a young man in the college group came up to him and I overheard him say, “*You know, Earl, you could be very effective if you were only Spirit-filled.*”

Those who know Earl Palmer know that he is seldom at a loss for words; but this fellow stopped him cold for a moment. If you know Earl, you also know that his sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the depth of his faith, his love for the Lord, and his profound reverence for God's Word are all above reproach. If there is such a category as "Spirit-filled Christians" I have no doubt Earl Palmer would qualify.

Yet this well-intentioned young man had the audacity to say that, because Palmer didn't meet his criteria for what it means to be "Spirit-filled," his ministry was therefore doomed to mediocrity – that is at least until he got his act together, got sanctified, and stopped being a merely "carnal Christian."

I've thought about that conversation many times and speculated on how it might have gone. I could imagine this young man going on to say to Palmer, "*You know Romans 7:14-25?*" (To which Earl would probably reply, "Yes.") The fellow could then say, "*Well, there's your problem! You're a carnal Christian. That passage describes you.*" I suspect Palmer might have replied, "*I agree, that passage describes me perfectly. And thank you – you've put me in excellent company.*"

3. The reason I think Palmer might have responded that way is because there's a third way of reading those verses. Rather than reading them as Paul's description of his pre-Christian life, or as a literary device to describe the carnal Christian who hasn't yet gotten his act together spiritually, verses 14-25 could also be understood as a piece of ***current autobiography from the life of a Spirit-filled Christian named Paul*** who is struggling with the reality of sin in his Spirit-filled life.

Incidentally, that is the way Earl Palmer sees it – as well John Calvin and Martin Luther and John R. W. Stott and a host of others in the Reformed theological tradition. In his commentary on this passage in Romans 7, Calvin wrote: "*...we must observe that this conflict, of which the Apostle speaks, does not exist in man before he is renewed by the Spirit of God ... For regeneration only begins in this life; the relics of the flesh which remain, always follow their own corrupt propensities, and thus carry on a contest against the Spirit.*"

Luther came to the same conclusion. He wrote: "*Notice that the saints at the same time as they are righteous are also sinners... they're like sick men under the care of a physician; they are sick in fact but healthy in hope and in the fact that they are beginning to be healthy... they are people for whom the worst possible thing is the presumption that they are healthy, because they suffer a worse relapse.*" John Stott repeats this theme. He writes: "*To speak quite plainly, some of us are not leading holy lives for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves.*" (i.e., "I'm too good to be a sinner!")

Read again Paul's description of the battle going on inside himself in verses 14-20. Speaking as a Christian of (I hope) a modest level of maturity, I can read

those words and say, *“He’s singing my song. That’s the story of my life as a Christian.”* Like Paul, I know very well how good the law is. In fact I can delight in the law and long to keep it. But despite the fact that I’ve given my heart to Jesus and opened my life to the Spirit’s control (and therefore some might even call me a Spirit-filled Christian) it is still a running battle for me. I still do things I really don’t want to do, and refuse what I know to be God’s good will for me.

Then read verses 21-24. Paul says the same thing in philosophical terms. He talks of principles (laws) in his body and in his mind that pull him back and forth. John Stott writes: *“This unremitting battle in every Christian’s experience leads us repeatedly to utter two apparently contradictory cries: ‘What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me...?’ and ‘Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ The first is a cry of despair, the second a cry of triumph. But both are the cries of a mature believer.”*

Do you mean to say that when I’m 45 years old I’ll still be saying, *“I don’t understand myself?”* That when I’m 65 I’ll still be saying, *“Lord, forgive me, I did it again?”* That when I’m 85 I’ll still be saying, *“When will I ever learn?”* *God, thank you for doing for me what I can’t seem to do for myself!”* Is that what you’re telling me? And Paul says, *“Bingo! You got it! You never outgrow your need for grace. Never! No matter how sanctified you become.”*

John Stott goes on to write: *“I do not myself believe that the Christian ever, in this life, passes for good and all out of the one cry into the other... No. He is always crying for deliverance, and he is always exulting in his Deliverer.”* Martin Luther said the same thing. He said: *“No, we are not well. None of us is. But, ‘thanks be to God’ we’re getting better.”*

That’s why Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

From Paul’s point of view, this interior battle with sin goes on as long as we’re alive. Notice that Paul ends this chapter on sanctification, not with the words, *“Thanks be to God!” – The End!* No, he ends the chapter with this summary statement: *“So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”*

Now, given the fact that according to Paul being a Christian is a lifelong battle, and that, even if I wanted to, I couldn’t escape the battle and remain a Christian, the question is this: How do I stay in the fight until it is finally won? The marvelous answer to that question comes in Chapter 8 where Paul introduces us to his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. But that’s our lesson for next time. So your assignment for this week is to study Romans 8:1-27. αμεν