

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

|                |                           |  |                   |
|----------------|---------------------------|--|-------------------|
| <b>Series:</b> | <b>Scripture Memory</b>   |  | Pastor/Teacher    |
| <b>Number:</b> | <b>90</b>                 |  | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| <b>Text:</b>   | <b>Romans 7:24-25</b>     |  |                   |
| <b>Date:</b>   | <b>May 1, 2022 (a.m.)</b> |  |                   |

### THE CHRISTIAN'S CONDITION: THE AGONY OF INTERNAL CONFLICT AND THE JOY OF RESOLUTION

We live in a culture where happiness is considered the greatest good. Ed Welch has recently written, "Ask those living in Western culture what they desire and you will begin to hear *happiness*. Look through the senior pictures in a high school yearbook and the frequent ambition is *I want to be happy*. Even Aristotle's *Ethics* suggests that happiness is the greatest good . . . the point is that we live in a culture that idolizes happiness, and if we idolize happiness, it will always elude us."<sup>1</sup> How *happy* are you? How do you define *happiness*? Perhaps we should begin by asking what *kind* of happiness are we seeking? Happiness comes in various ways. There is the kind that we experience as a momentary feeling, the kind that comes and goes. We can be happy one moment and unhappy the next (ask any devoted sports fan!). Is there such a thing as a *state* of happiness, *i.e.*, a happiness that is a lasting disposition, one that is characterized by the absence of misery or sadness? How would we achieve this? Can we? Like the Spanish explorer Ponce De Leon seeking the elusive Fountain of Youth, *this* prize eludes our grasp, but we keep trying anyway. If we reword our initial question from, "How happy are you?" to "How *are* you happy?" we can better answer these series of questions. After all what makes a person happy will depend, to a large degree, on the individual person. Take the example of two first century historical figures, the Roman Emperor Caligula, and the Apostle Paul. Caligula was a reprobate who found happiness by indulging himself in as much debauchery as possible. The Apostle Paul sought happiness in God's pleasure. Caligula reveled in sin. The Apostle loathed it. The presence of indwelling sin brought misery, not happiness. The noted NT scholar F. F. Bruce has captured this in his rendition of Romans 7:24, "Unhappy man that I am!"<sup>2</sup> The word Bruce rendered *unhappy* is *talaiporos*. Most translations (NIV, ESV, NASB) have *wretched*. This is a very strong word. It is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT (The Septuagint) of the *misery* or *distress* that will come with the judgment of God (cf. Isa. 47:11; Jer. 6:7, 15:8, 20:8, 51:56; Amos 5:9; Mic. 2:4; Joel 1:15; Zeph.1:15; comp. with James 5:1 and Rev. 3:17). Grammatically, it is the nominative of address, for the vocative. The word designates the same weary and burdened feeling that is expressed by *pepramenos* (lit. to be sold under sin) in verse 14 and is delineated in verses 15-23. But it does not, as Shedd points out, in this place, denote hopelessness or despair, as is shown by verse 25. The conflict is long and severe, so that the believer is *weary and heavy-laden*. With Isaiah, he cries: "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips." (Isa. 6:5) With David, he exclaims; "Mine iniquities are gone over mine head; my wounds stink and are corrupt; thine arrows stick fast in me; there is no rest in my bones, because of my sin." (Ps. 38:2-5) But neither Isaiah, nor David, nor St. Paul despaired of ultimate victory over indwelling corruption.<sup>3</sup> Cranfield adds, "The farther men advance in the Christian life, and the more mature their discipleship, the clearer becomes their perception of the heights to which God calls them, and the more painfully sharp their consciousness of the distance between what they ought, and want, to be, and what they are. The assertion that this cry could only come from an unconverted heart, and that the apostle must be expressing not what he feels as he writes but the vividly remembered experience of the unconverted man, is, we believe, totally untrue. To make it is to indicate -- with all respect be it said -- that one has not yet considered how absolute

are the claims of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The man, whose cry this is, is one who, knowing himself to be righteous by faith, desires from the depths of his being to respond to the claims which the gospel makes upon him (cf. v. 22). It is the very clarity of his understanding of the gospel and the very sincerity of his love to God, which makes his pain at this continuing sinfulness so sharp. But, be it noted, v. 24, while it is a cry of real and deep anguish, is not at all a cry of despair.”<sup>4</sup> 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 and its cause. He sets forth the matter “as a philosophy, in terms of *laws* or *principles* at work in his situation.”<sup>5</sup>

The late S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., one of my esteemed seminary professors, told us, “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.”<sup>6</sup> The Apostle 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 7. 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 18, “but how to perform that which is good I find not.”<sup>7</sup>

- I. ***THE CHRISTIAN AND THE REALITY OF INDWELLING 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 debated since the days of Augustine. In a study such as this, it is, of course, impossible to look at the question in detail.<sup>8</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 standard view that Paul is writing of a saved man. For example, this is the view of Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Beza, Owen, Delitzsch, Hodge, Shedd, Kuyper, Bavinck, Bruce, and Cranfield. In fact, the vast majority of Reformed commentators take this position. But there are dissenting voices, which I will interact with as we go through this passage. I am convinced, however, that the standard interpretation is the correct one. Here are the reasons why:

- A. 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.
- B. In the second place, I should like to remind objectors to this view that the burden of proof rests with the opposing viewpoint in the light of two things when combined: (1) his use of the 1<sup>st</sup> person; (2) his use of the present tense in this section. When 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>9</sup> The emphatic pronouns *autos ego* leave no doubt that Paul is speaking for himself. Yet his rhetorical technique throughout the chapter has been to tell his story in this highly personalized way as a teaching device. Let the Jewish Christian readers agree that what was true of him would be true also of them if they were to go back to Law. Law cannot rescue from Sin and death.<sup>10</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.
- C. 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 8:7?). He delights in the Law of God (v. 22). He looks for deliverance to Christ alone (v. 25). This future aspect is properly accented by Boice, who wrote, "If the deliverance of the first part of verse 25 were in the past (or even in the present), it would be a strange regression to conclude the chapter with a reiteration of the struggle Paul is describing. He should have gotten beyond that by the victory that is ours *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. However, if the first part of that verse is referring to the future, as I have suggested, the summation makes sense. For Paul is saying that, although he is assured of a final victory over sin, he nevertheless knows that he must continue to fight a vigorous battle against sin daily until he dies. He has been saved from sin. He is being saved from sin. He will yet be saved from sin. But until the day of final deliverance it is his continuing responsibility to fight on."<sup>11</sup> In other words, Paul is very confident that Christ will rescue from *this body of death* that is under the rule of Sin. Indeed, Christ alone is the rescuer, *not* Law. But, and this is most important, it is an *eventual* rescue, not an immediate rescue. It is the rescue that faith and hope look forward to. But it will *not* occur in this life ahead of Christ's return.<sup>12</sup>
- D. The fourth 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 on his own experiences. What we have is no abstract argument, but the personal struggle of an agonizing soul. "The deliverance God has accomplished in Christ becomes manifest only where the full reality of sin and guilt are also manifest, and vice versa. Freedom from the law is present only where the law arrives at its divine purpose of effecting our acknowledgment of guilt. Paul's final statement on the matter in Romans 7, which has seemed to many interpreters to be strangely anticlimactic, in reality summarizes his main point: *So then, I myself with my mind serve the law of God, but with my flesh the law of sin* (verse 25b). This final confession is no retreat. Just the opposite: in manifesting the reality of sin and the nature of redemption it exposes the battle in which believers are engaged. Anything less is self-deception."<sup>13</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** This is one of the most Christ-centered passages in the Bible. The Reformation's emphasis on *Solus Christus* is manifestly affirmed by the Apostle Paul, not purely as an abstract theological formulation, but as a personal declaration. Thomas Goodwin, the great Puritan divine, long ago summed it up this way, "And as it is a looking unto Christ, so it is a looking with a confinement to him alone. This is clear out of the text (Isa. 45:21, 22): *I am a Saviour, saith he, and there is none besides me; therefore, so look unto me, as to confine yourselves to me alone. The soul of man would seek an hundred ways, when it is humbled for sin, to relieve itself; but now to have all these holes that a man would run unto stopped, and to be confined alone unto one, when God hath wrought this in the heart too, there is a great step and proceeding on in the work of faith. As in taking of God to be a man's God, he takes him so to be his chiefest good, as he is divorced from all things else, with a confinement of all his expectations of happiness only from him – Whom have I in heaven but thee? Saith David, Ps. 73:25 – so in taking Jesus Christ to be our Saviour, as Paul resolved to know nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified, so the heart resolveth too, when it goes about to believe in earnest, and it is stopped up from all ways of relief else. When Paul (that I may make the comparison) was surrounded with his lusts, in Rom. 7:21 saith he, Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me? When he spake that speech, he was a man that looked round about him, and saw no help, and so he cries out, Who shall deliver me? At last he spies out Jesus Christ: I thank God, through Jesus Christ my Lord, saith he. And so doth the soul; as in sanctification, so in justification, it looks about it, sees help in nothing, and betakes itself alone unto the Lord Jesus."*<sup>14</sup>

*Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum* – these are the well-known words of the great medieval theologian Anselm. In answer to the question: Why did God have to become a man and die to make atonement – why can't God simply forgive sin without an atonement? Your problem, said Anselm, is that you "have not yet considered what a heavy weight sin is."<sup>15</sup> The Apostle Paul did have a deep sense of the *sinfulness of sin* – only the Christian, who through the regenerating work of the Spirit, can know this. As the late James Boice declared, "All Christians find themselves wanting to do what is right (because of the life of Christ within) but of not being able to do what they would like to do (because of the continuing presence of indwelling sin). In fact, it is even worse than that. For, as we mature in the Christian life, growing closer to Jesus Christ, and thus wanting to be more like Him and please Him more, the struggle actually grows stronger rather than weaker. Those who struggle most vigorously against sin are not immature Christians but mature ones. The hardest battles are waged by God's saints . . . That is what Paul comes to at the very end of Romans 7. After he has reached the absolute low point, asking, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" he answers with what Charles Hodge calls *a strong and sudden emotion of gratitude*: Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (v. 25). That is, although the apostle was not able to find even the smallest ground for a hope of victory within himself, even at his weakest point the end is not grim because as a Christian he knows that God is for him. God has assured every believer victory through the work of Christ."<sup>16</sup> Finally, heed the words of Francis Schaeffer: "We need the power of Christ for our lives, whether for justification or for sanctification, and it is only possible to have this power through Jesus Christ, and the agency by which we acquire this power is the indwelling Holy Spirit. There shouldn't be a chapter break after 7:25, for the thought flows right on. As we come to chapter 8, we'll find that we are introduced in a flaming way to the agency of the Holy Spirit, who is the point of contact between us and the power of the resurrected Christ."<sup>17</sup>

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Welch, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness* (Vantage Point 2004), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Letters of Paul: An Expanded Paraphrase* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1974), p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1975), p. 366.

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to The Romans* (Eerdmans, 1963), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> The substance of my outline is taken from Dr. Johnson's lectures on Romans, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, in his helpful analysis of this passage, sees *three* main points in the Apostle's arguments: "(1) The effect of the law is to give men knowledge of sin – not merely of the abstract notion of sin, but of sin as a concrete, dynamic reality within themselves, a spirit of rebellion against God, and of disobedience to His commandments (vss. 7, 13, cf. 3:20). (2) The way in which the law gives this knowledge is by declaring God's prohibitions and commands, for these first goad sin into active rebellion and then make men aware of the specific transgressions and shortcomings of motive and deed into which sin has led them (vss. 8, 19, 23). (3) The law gives no ability to anyone to perform the good which it prescribes, nor can it deliver from the power of sin (vss. 9-11, 22-24). In making these points, Paul speaks throughout in the first person singular, and his teaching takes the form of personal reminiscence and self-analysis." Cf. his Appendix, The "Wretched Man" in Romans 7 in *Keep In Step With The Spirit* (Revell, 1984), p. 263-264.

<sup>8</sup> C. E. Cranfield surveys the interpretations in his *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 340-47.

<sup>9</sup> C. Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> P. Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Christian Focus, 2003), p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary II* (Baker, 1992), p. 777.

<sup>12</sup> This is where so many Christians, especially those in Charismatic circles, get carried away in insisting on *total* and *complete* deliverance from sin (perfectionism) and sickness (healing) in this life. The rise of the prosperity Gospel (Health and Wealth) makes outrageous claims that it is *always* God's will that Christians live in material abundance and complete physical health. The dangers involved here are very serious, notes the words of Peter Masters, the pastor of Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, "the great dangers, then, of this miraculous healing teachings are, first, that it discredits the person of Christ because of the very obvious failures, when we claim to serve a Savior Who never fails. Secondly, it undermines the Word, because it elevates a new form of *revelation* – so-called words of knowledge or prophecy. Thirdly, it deceives Christians and breeds a race of gullible believers, taken in by virtually anything. Fourthly, it increases the agony of suffering, being so often distressing, and even disastrous. Fifthly, it removes Christian comfort. And finally, it all too often diminishes Christian testimony." Cf. his *The Healing Epidemic* (Wakeman, 1988), p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> M. Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (IVP, 2000), p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> *The Works of Thomas Goodwin VIII* (rpt. Tanski, 1996), p. 306.

<sup>15</sup> *Cur Deus Homo*, The Ancient & Modern Library of Theological Literature (Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1895), Book I, ch. XXI.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary II* (Baker, 1992), p. 772.

<sup>17</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ: The Truths of Romans 1-8* (Crossway, 1998), p. 186.