

Romans 7 Revisited

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A Watershed Interpretation

The definition of a watershed is a special imaginary line on the top of a mountain where water flows to one destination on one side of the line and a totally different destination on the other side. An example would be the Rocky Mountain Divide. Water on the east side flows into the great Mississippi Valley and out to the Gulf of Mexico. On the other side it flows into one of the many rivers on the west coast, e.g. the Colorado River or the Columbia River and winds up in the Pacific Ocean. The destination of each drop of water is determined by which side of the watershed line it begins.

The interpretation of Romans 7:14-24 is a watershed issue. If you have the conventional understanding of that passage you may use it to argue against the truth that it is possible for the true Christian to live a holy and obedient life. Understood as presented in this chapter, however, you will see how the issues presented mesh perfectly with the truths of Scripture. The difference in understanding could mean salvation on the one hand or damnation on the other.

Paul's reflections on his life in the 7th chapter of Romans are almost totally misunderstood in 20th-century Christendom. I've never heard the passage in verses 14-24 interpreted as I am going to suggest to you, but I think you will find that taking the passage in context, not only its immediate context, but the context of all of Paul's writings, there is no other interpretation possible.

You may remember from *What the Bible Says About A Saving Faith* that I believe all Scripture fits together wonderfully without tension. When this passage is interpreted without tension it makes sense and confirms the other teachings of Paul.

Finally, remember Peter's warning about Paul's writings: "Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:15-16). I suggest this is one of those distorted passages.

Use of Present Tense

The reason this passage is hard to understand is the tense of the verbs Paul uses, making it sound in the present tense, as if it were applicable to him at the time he wrote it. After we look at it more closely, I'm sure you'll see that unusual use of verbs is Paul's writing style and a common Hebrew way of thinking and speaking. In the Preface to *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, the translator tells us of two principles to understand about Hebrew writers:

I. That the Hebrews were in the habit of using the past tense to express the *certainty* of an action taking place, even though the action might not really be performed for some time. And

II. That the Hebrews, in referring to events which might be either past or future were accustomed to act on the principle of transferring themselves mentally to the period and place of the events themselves, and were not content with coldly viewing them as those of a bygone or still coming time; hence the very frequent use of the present tense (emphasis added).

This is exactly what Paul did. He placed himself as though in the present tense. Since that is not the western way of speaking and writing, it has caused much confusion in the understanding of this passage.

The Scripture

With those caveats behind us, the passage follows:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For *what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do*. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For *I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it*

out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:14-24).

The italicized portions above have been quoted to me innumerable times as evidence that it is not possible to be obedient, pure, and holy in the eyes of God. After all, I am told *ad nauseam*, the Apostle Paul could not do what he wanted to do but instead did what he hated to do. He kept on doing evil (Romans 7:19) so how can I possibly be obedient?

We'll look at this passage in many different ways in order to see it fully in context. Only then can it be properly understood.

Paul as a Model

Reading carefully that passage, it appears that Paul's spiritual state is pathetic. He calls it wretched (Romans 7:24)! He seems spiritually tormented. He describes himself as needing rescuing. Is his spiritual condition something he would recommend others emulate? A loving, caring person wouldn't recommend that to his worst enemy.

Paul tells others something quite different about himself throughout the New Testament. Paul says he has a clear conscience (2 Timothy 1:3), has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7). He said, "Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God (2 Corinthians 1:12). We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one (2 Corinthians 7:2). Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you (1 Thessalonians 2:9. See also 2 Corinthians 11:22-29).

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly (1 Corinthians 4:11-13). I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12).

Then he exhorts his readers, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me -- put it into practice (Philippians 4:9). I plead with you, brothers, become like me (Galatians 4:12). I urge you to imitate me (1 Corinthians 4:16). What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching (2 Timothy 1:13). Join with others in following my example, brothers" (Philippians 3:17). Paul spoke specifically about being a model for them:

"For you yourselves know how *you ought to follow our example*. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but *in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow*" (2 Thesalonians 3:7-9).

Paul urged, "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God -- even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33). He continued, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul said his way of life in Christ Jesus agrees with what he taught everywhere in every church (1 Corinthians 4:17).

Would Paul exhort others to follow his example if his example were "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing." Absolutely not! Paul urged his readers to live a life worthy of the calling they received (Ephesians 4:1. See also 2 Timothy 2:2).

What a hypocrite Paul must have been. He exhorted righteous living on the part of his followers but continued to do evil. Is that right? Of course not. Paul lived out his faith, suffering for the faith, modeling the faith. He asked his followers to do what he said and as he did.

Did Paul continue to do evil as the passage states? Just the opposite. He wrote the Thessalonica believers, "You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:10-12).

Paul willingly held himself up to be a model for the churches. He told Timothy, "You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings--what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured" (2 Timothy 3:10-11. See also 2:10).

It should seem obvious by now that the passage quoted above describes Paul -- then known as Saul -- prior to coming to faith in the Lord Christ Jesus. Now let's examine the passage in context to see if there is further evidence of that.

Died to Sin

A chapter earlier Paul discussed the true believer's relationship to sin: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:2). For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:6-7). In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18).

The passage states just the opposite of Paul: "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin"(Romans 7:14). For what I do is not the good I want to do;

no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing (Romans 7:19). Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (Romans 7:20). So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me (Romans 7:21).

We know that the person Paul describes does not have a saving faith because Paul states that he keeps on doing evil (Romans 7:19). The Apostle John taught, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him" (1 John 3:6. See also 1 John 5:18). Paul said he keeps on doing evil (Romans 7:19). We have a choice. We can determine that this passage describes Paul (really Saul) before he became a believer or, if Paul the Apostle is described, that he did not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Likely no one would choose the latter alternative; that leaves the likelihood that the passage describes pre-Christ Saul.

Slave to Sin

Paul taught the believers, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should *no longer be slaves to sin* -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:6-7). Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Romans 13:24).

In our passage Paul says precisely the opposite: "I am unspiritual, *sold as a slave to sin*" (Romans 7:14). For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing (Romans 7:18).

In the passage, Paul describes himself as unspiritual, yet most of us would consider Paul the Apostle extraordinarily spiritual. Paul states he is sold as a slave to sin, yet he has just taught the Romans that our old self was crucified with Christ and should no longer be a slave to sin. Is Paul the Apostle an exception who is a slave to sin while other believers are freed from the control of sin? To the rest of us who are believers, Paul says, "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18). Is Paul the only one who is not set free? Of course not! The only rational understanding is that the passage is written of a pre-Christ Saul.

Freed from Sin

Paul told us unequivocally, "We have died to sin (Romans 6:2). We were buried with Christ through baptism into death (Romans 6:6). Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with (Romans 6:6). Anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7).

Again we ask, has the Paul in the passage been freed from sin? Just the opposite. He describes his condition: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do (Romans 7:15). As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me (Romans 7:17). For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing (Romans 7:19). Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Romans 7:20).

Could Paul say that sin is living in him or that he keeps on doing evil after becoming an Apostle of Christ? He has just taught that believers are freed from sin, having been crucified with Christ and buried with him through baptism into death, and that anyone who has died has been freed from sin. No, such a description could only be made of a pre-Christ Saul, one who sincerely wanted to obey God (as a Pharisee) but who lacked the power of the Holy Spirit and did not have a saving faith in Christ Jesus as his Lord.

A Prisoner of Sin

In the passage Paul states, "I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and *making me a prisoner of the law of sin* at work within my members" (Romans 7:23).

Can true believers be prisoners of the law of sin? Paul the Apostle said of himself, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life *set me free from the law of sin* and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

These are direct opposites. In the passage he said he found himself a prisoner of the law of sin. The Apostle Paul states that the law of the Spirit of life set him free from the law of sin. Paul didn't have it both ways at the same time. Yes, he was a prisoner of the law of sin as pre-Christ Saul (as we all are before coming to a saving faith in Christ Jesus as our Lord), but Paul was freed from the law of sin by the law of the Spirit after coming to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (as are all true believers).

Controlled by the Sinful Nature

In the passage Paul states that in his sinful nature he is a slave to the law of sin (Romans 7:25). Then he admits that he is controlled by his sinful nature: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out (Romans 7:18). I do not understand what I do (Romans 7:15). For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do (Romans 7:19). For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing (Romans 7:19)."

Is this the description of a true Christian? Not at all! It describes someone controlled by the sinful nature. Paul taught, "You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9).

Did Paul the Apostle have the Spirit of God living in him? He surely did. Then he could not have been controlled by the sinful nature as a Christian, but only as pre-Christ Saul.

"Me" Refers to the Sinful Nature

In the passage, Paul equates himself, his person, with his sinful nature. He said, "I know that nothing good lives in *me*, that is, in *my sinful nature*" (Romans 7:18). At the time in his life the passage refers to, Paul was referring to himself as having a sinful nature and admitting that (at that time) nothing good lived in him.

That agrees with what Paul wrote to Titus: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another" (Titus 3:3).

This is very different to Paul's teachings to Christians. See again the section above "Paul as a Model." Note the differences Paul taught: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (Romans 8:5).

Paul assured Titus that the new life in Christ was through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

The opposites are obvious, aren't they? When you consider it now, how did this passage ever get misinterpreted when there are so many ways to prove its true meaning?

A Wretched Man!

At the end of the passage Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man am I!" (Romans 7:24).

Is the true Christian a wretched person? Just the opposite! Paul told the Romans the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:6). He told the Galatians: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:22-24). He told the Philippians, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12).

Which man was Paul the Apostle? A wretched man? Or a contented man, filled with love, joy, peace, and patience, who had crucified his sinful nature? He was not a wretched man. He was filled with the fruit (and gifts) of the Spirit. The wretched man was pre-Christ Saul.

Conclusion

This exercise was done so that you will never again argue that it is permissible for a true Christian to live in disobedience (or that no one can obey) on the basis that even the Apostle Paul could not (or did not) obey. Obedience is an essential element of a saving faith. We know there is no salvation without a saving faith.
