

CAN CHRISTIANS BE MISERABLE?

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter
Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines
Ministries

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Let's Begin

The French author Voltaire incisively once wrote, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him." While we may rest assured Voltaire's skeptical philosophy posed no threat to Biblical truth, a similar description of Romans 7 could be offered: if Paul had not written Romans 7, it would be necessary to write it ourselves. The truth is, Romans 7 corresponds perfectly to the sometimes excruciating difficulties of the Christian life.

Paul gave us in Romans 6 an ideal portrayal of the Christian life the way it is meant to be lived. In chapter 7, however, Paul follows with the way things are. If a new believer is not taught properly about our rugged spiritual journey, he or she inevitably heads toward a steep embankment, the fall of which will be great.

To bring believers into contact with the real world, three images may be discerned from Romans 7. As we begin our study, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Image of Marriage: A Spiritual Person (vv. 1-6)**
- II. The Image of Monster: A Natural Person (vv. 7-13)**
- III. The Image of Misery: A Carnal Person (vv. 14-25)**

I. The Image of Marriage: A Spiritual Person (vv. 1-6)

Paul is sharing his personal experience in chapter 7. From the contents of this chapter flow his inner struggles and intense wrestling with the will of God. His flesh battled fiercely against his spirit and his spirit against his flesh. It caused him to finally exclaim, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (v. 24). Let's don't get ahead of ourselves! First, we must observe Paul's journey at the beginning of the chapter. It begins with the figure of a marriage:

"Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man" (vv. 1-3).

Paul opens with a question revealing the general principle that upon death, the law has no more claim on us (v. 1). Suppose as a state trooper was pursuing a drunken driver out of control, a tragic accident takes place and the drunken driver is killed. What then? Well, as far as legalities go, nothing. Death cancelled his would-be appearance in court. Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated John F. Kennedy but, so far as the law is concerned, he was never judged.

Paul teases this image further by suggesting our unhappy marriage to law and our new marriage to Jesus. At first, the marriage image sounds strange to our ears. However, as the text unfolds, we discover marriage as a beautiful image of our intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

First, let us note how we are dominated (vv. 2-3). Paul describes our unhappy marriage to the law, the dominating force in our lives prior to Christ. Existing here is a blatant incompatibility. In this marriage picture, our husband is the law. The Ten Commandments were given to us and for our good. There is, however, a fundamental difficulty with the law: the law offers no power to assist in our obedience. In fact, we cannot keep the law; we inevitably fail to live up to its demands.

Reflection Connection

What comes to mind when you think of the church as the bride of Christ? Explain.



In addition, while the demands of the law are certain, its demands cannot make us good. In other words, the law absolutely cannot save you or me. Recall the apostle's words we studied some weeks back: "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (3:20). Nor can the law sanctify me. The law has only the power to convict me of guilt, not cleanse me from guilt. Hence, the law cannot make me holy.

The horrible dilemma we are in is, we are "bound" by the law all our life. Death is the only liberator from law.

Second, let us note how we are delivered (vv. 4-6). Paul writes, "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God" (v. 4). The illustration of law's dominion over us is now applied. The interesting thing is, Paul gives it an unexpected twist: the husband does not die, the wife does! The law, in fact, cannot die (cp. Matt. 5:18). But we can die to the law. Hear the Apostle, "ye also are become dead to the law." When Christ died, we died to the law. The law has no more claim against us.

The law, in fact, cannot die. But we can die to the law.

Contrarily, but happily, when Christ arose, we arose with Him! Now, we are married to another—Jesus.

As we mentioned earlier, the marriage picture may seem at first to be an odd image to reflect our relationship with God. But as we dig deeper we see marriage to be the perfect image to reflect our salvation in Christ. The Father takes our hand and places it in the hand of the Lord Jesus, a forever union inseparable for all eternity.

Paul does not leave this image until he speaks of the old, life of "flesh." He writes, "For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death" (v. 5). In essence, Paul is saying all the law does is arouse sin in us; or, in his words, the "motions of sins." Whatever the law says, our "flesh" says the opposite. Law demonstrates all of us are rebels to the core.

Thus, Paul contrasts our domination by the law to deliverance from the law: "But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (v. 6). Law no longer is a burden but a delight. The law no longer condemns; instead, we are set free from law's shackles.

II. The Image of Monster: A Natural Person (vv. 7-13)

Paul now switches images and with the image switch, begins referring to one's life before salvation. Carefully consider the Apostle's words, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking



occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died" (vv. 7-9).

First, we are exposed to the inwardness of sin. Whatever can be said of the inadequacy of the law to bring us to Christ, the law could not be considered sinful. To the contrary, were it not for the law, we would not

know sin, sin as an inside problem. Most of the ten commandments which God gave could be kept in outward performance. For instance, the overwhelming majority of men can go throughout their entire lives without murdering another human being.

On the other hand, contrasting the tenth commandment—"thou shalt not covet"—with murder, we gain a new perspective altogether. Why? Because covetousness is an inward reality, not an outward performance. Covetousness includes wrong desires, wrong attitudes, and wrong thoughts. For Paul, this was a heart-wrenching moment. He awakened one day to his depraved condition, realizing sin was in his heart before action was on his hands.

He refers to his experience as "sin taking occasion," which was a military term expressing the base of operation. Our heart is sin's headquarters.

Thus, the law works on our heart. The moment the law says "don't" our sinful heart says "do," or, in Paul's words, "sin revived." And the effect is not pretty: "I died" (v. 9). He thought he was a good person. What he came to realize was, he was a spiritual corpse. No person can be saved who does not first come to the conclusion that he or she is lost; that is, dead in trespasses and sin.

Next, we are exposed to the deceptiveness of sin (vv. 10-11). The monster in our heart does not want to be exposed. The Apostle Paul explicitly noted, "sin... deceived me" (v. 11). Whether through power or pleasure, sin deceives us. Furthermore, we naively think we are able to get by with it.

Finally, we are exposed to the wickedness of sin (vv. 12-13). Paul clearly proclaims the law is holy, just, and good (v. 12). The law is like an X-ray, revealing a problem inside which cannot be seen from the outside. Hence, the law is not the problem; what the law reveals is the problem.

In fact, the law is so penetrating, it exposes sin, making it "exceedingly sinful" (v. 13). The term translated "exceedingly" means "beyond measure." Sin is more ugly and grotesque than we ever realized.

III. The Image of Misery: A Carnal Person (vv. 14-25)

Paul moves on to the third and final image concerning the carnal person, "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin" (v. 14). The present section is one of the most personal Paul reveals about himself. Also, note the verbs are in the present tense in the Greek, demonstrating he is referring to his present condition, not his unsaved past. In other words, Paul is sharing with us his struggle to live the Christian life, a struggle summarized from three standpoints.

Our heart is sin's headquarters.

Reflection Connection

Do you think Christians live as if sin begins in the heart rather than in the act? Why or why not? How do we deal with sin in our heart? Explain.



First, there is the standpoint of the conflict (vv. 14-21). The battle believers face is described, “For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good” (vv. 15-16). Believers who try to do good, cannot. Paul attempts to remain sin-free. He fails. Why? As he stated, he is “carnal, sold under sin” (v. 14). The meaning here is clear: the believer is dominated by the old nature, yielded to the flesh, not the Spirit. Paul’s self-behavior baffled him.

In addition, Paul reckons as to the reason for failure “sin dwells in me” (v. 17). Understand: he is making no excuse for sin, and certainly not expressing that he is unaccountable for his behavior. Instead, Paul is merely confessing sin as an unwelcome guest in his home but unable to kick it out! He has the desire to perform the good (v. 18). Nevertheless, he lacks the power to do good.

Second, there is the standpoint of the captivity (vv. 22-24). At work in him, Paul finds two laws, “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (vv. 22-23). Clearly, the law of God and the mind on the one hand wars against the law of sin on the other. The result is inner misery, an intense spiritual struggle.

Paul delighted in the law of the inward man (v. 22; cp. 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16). His new nature loved to do right. However, “warring” was a reality not only for Paul, but for us. The moment we admit our right desire, the law of sin goes on the offensive. Indeed, Paul refers to the attack as an attempt to bring him into “captivity” to sin (v. 23). Paul states his ultimate expression of inward struggle in vivid terms, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (v. 24). The apostle is exhausted. His only hope, as is ours, rests with a Divine rescue from above.

Third, there is the standpoint of the conquest (v. 25). He knows there exists hope, but hope is neither within him nor within the sphere of any power the law may contain. Instead hope is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (v. 25). In the heat of the struggle, Paul looked every place but the right place for victory. He looked to the law, but the law condemned him. He looked to his heart, but his heart failed him. Only in Jesus Christ is salvation—sanctification—found (cp. 1 Cor. 1:30).

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Reflection Connection

Do you find yourself experiencing an intense spiritual battle within? Explain. How do you manage to get through it? Is there more defeat or more victory?



Golden Greek Nugget

The Apostle makes a statement concerning sin, suggesting sin “deceived” him (v. 11). Here Paul makes sin personified as if sin had a mind and will all its own. The term translated “deceived” means to utterly and completely “make one lose his way”. Sin gets us off course, so that finding our way back on course and, consequently, pleasing God remains impossible.

Wrap Up

The Christian life is a good life, a great life, a grand life. But the Christian life is not an easy life. We have struggles within and without. The harder we try to live it, the less we succeed. Jesus Christ is the only One Who can save me. And, as we learn from Paul, He is the only One Who can deliver me, securing for me victory over the law of sin and death.

