

Prayer

Almighty God, our strength and protection, stay close, we pray;
Give us courage to face each day, knowing that You are with us.
Make us aware of Your protection when we feel most vulnerable,
Lead us in paths of truthfulness and honesty, whatever happens,
And may we never wander away from what is morally right and true
This is our prayer of faith, for we trust in You, Almighty God. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Read through a psalm (e.g. Psalms 1,8,10,23,24,100,117) and use it as a prompt for your prayers of confession and praise

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your local hospital.** *Pray about the way that healthcare is provided in your country*
- *Pray about the current economic recession and plans in your country to deal with this*
- *Give thanks for those who bless you with their love*

Meditation

The presence of the Lord is God's gift to His own,
He can change each facet of life for the better.

The blessing of fellowship is an infinite treasure,
When all God's people help each other in love.

Daily life and work are transformed for the better,
When we know that our Saviour stands beside us.

Our leisure is never wasted, but always enjoyed;
When we allow the Spirit to bless and restore us.

Time spent with loved ones becomes more precious,
When true love is blessed by His power and grace.

And the tragedies and trials of life are transformed,
When our Lord leads out of hell back to heaven.

May we never neglect or forget these blessings,
For it's never too late with the Lord; He is there.

Bible passage - Romans 7:14-25

¹⁴ Now we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the natural world, sold into slavery on account of sin.

¹⁵ I don't understand what I do; because I don't do what I intend, but I do what I most dislike!

¹⁶ If I therefore do what I don't intend, I agree that the law is good, ¹⁷ and in this case it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my natural self, so I may have the intention to do what is good, but I cannot do it.

¹⁹ For I don't do the good I intend, but the evil I don't intend is what I end up doing! ²⁰ Now if I do what I don't intend, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I now find this law at work; when I intend to do what is good, evil is close at hand. ²² For I take delight in the law of God deeply within my being, ²³ but in every part of my body I see another law, which is at war with the law of my mind, and this makes me a captive to the law

of sin which is in all the parts of my body. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! For in truth, I myself serve the law of God in my mind even though my body serves the law of sin.

Bible Study

Review

This is surely one of the most unexpected passages of Scripture! Romans 7 is difficult enough, but this text arrives like a sudden eruption, as Paul seemingly lets go of all discipline, and for a brief moment, reveals his inner soul! Superficially, this passage appears to do little more than express Paul's personal inadequacy. The man who has taught us about salvation from sin, admits that he has not yet been freed from sin's grip! An uncommitted reader may well ask whether the Gospel really works, for what is the point of it if sin still rules our bodies? This is a serious matter, and it requires our careful attention.

To begin with, we should remember yesterday's study, in particular, the fact that Paul has already begun to write in a personal manner, different from his normal writing style. From personal experience, he describes how sin is exposed by God's Law, saying, '*sin took the opportunity given by the commandment to deceive me and used it to put me to death*' (7:11). We concluded that Paul was either writing personally because of his own guilt at past sins, or writing generally, to identify with everyone's experience of sin. Something similar is now true for our reading today. However, I reckon that Paul both confesses his own sense of sin and guilt (we will look at this later in 'going deeper'), but he also makes the general point that sin persists within the lives of those who have been saved.

At the beginning of the passage, Paul acknowledges this problem of persisting sin, and puts it personally by saying; '*I am sold into slavery on account of sin*'. It goes without saying that having just proclaimed victory over sin through Jesus (3:21-26) and peace with God (5:1,2), Paul needs to clarify what he means. He begins by explaining the dilemma we all face, which is that although we do not want to sin, we find that our actions do not reflect our sinless intent, and things go wrong (7:15-20)! So, where has this sin come from if it is not intended? Paul's answer is that '*sin dwells in me*' (7:17), and as he writes, the picture clears, and Paul's general message is that while we still live, none of us can escape the evil that remains within the '*sinful nature*'. He says of himself; '*nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my sinful nature*' (7:18).

From verse 21 to 24, Paul explains further that he loves God's law and seeks to obey it as much as possible, and this godly intent is fixed deeply within him, indeed, within his '*mind*' (7:22,23). But he cannot escape sinfulness, which he says is found within the different '*parts of my body*' (7:23). Evidently then, the problem is with the earthly body, and he exclaims dramatically (7:24), '*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*' This is of course, not a request for salvation, but a call for God to release Paul from the limitations of earthly life. Of course, his problem is not unique, and it is our problem too. Paul's cry reflects the angst felt by all Christians who long for their salvation to be completed, and know that as long as life endures, sin remains the enemy. This is a point made consistently by Paul throughout chapter 7.

In the very last sentence, Paul continues with a shout of praise to God. He is the One who does indeed save from sin, '*through Jesus Christ our Lord!*' (7:25). Paul then reaffirms his intent to serve God with his mind, which is the part of his body free to focus on godly things, even though his '*body serves the law of sin*'.

This unique passage of Scripture can catch us by surprise, and we must be careful not to misunderstand it. For all who have been saved and have a relationship with God, sin persists within this life, and there are no easy answers to it. It can only be dealt with if we know what it is, and our intent is at all times to deal with it. This, of course, is only one small part of what Paul says about sin in Romans.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Translations issues
- Paul, the person
- Why is Paul not able to do what he wants to do?

Going Deeper

In order to study this passage in more depth, I suggest that you read it again! It is easy to become confused by what Paul says, but our study will show that what Paul said was relatively straightforward. The problem comes in understanding some of the details of what he says, and putting his conclusion into action.

Translation issues

Before we start to discuss the passage, I must explain one issue to do with the translation of the passage. You will notice that in other translations of the Bible, it is difficult to read the passage because of a proliferation of the word 'do'. For example, verse 15 which reads like this in the NIV; '*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*' (7:15). The problem arises because two Greek words combine to make the English rather difficult; one word '*thelō*' means 'want to do' and another, '*katergazō*', means 'to do' in the sense of accomplishing something. However, I have translated the Greek word '*thelō*' as 'intend' (which is the same as 'want to do' something). This makes for an easier translation; '*I don't understand what I do; because I don't do what I intend, but I do what I most dislike!*' and I hope you will find this and the rest of the passage much easier to understand than most Bible versions!

Paul, the person

The beginning of our passage, verse 14, follows on directly from the previous verse 13, in which Paul concludes a personal confession that sin was 'working death' in him having been exposed by the law, which was right to do its job of revealing sin. It was the conclusion of Paul's argument that law was not the enemy of the grace of God in the Gospel it was sin. In the course of making this point, Paul was evidently making allusions to his own personal experience, probably of his own past sins of murdering Christians whilst still a zealous rabbi (see yesterday's study). I suggested this after several facts of the passage led to this conclusion, and I believe that Paul's own feelings of guilt at what he had done was something that never entirely left him. If you find it strange that I suggest a great leader such as Paul should experience such inner turmoil, then please remember that all people, however great, are subject to the reality of the lives they have lived. Luther struggled with his own personal inadequacies; Wesley failed in his relationships with women on more than one occasion, and many a biography of a great man or woman of God has revealed the flaws as well as the greatness that were ultimately used by God for His glory. Paul's famous confession of inability to do what he wanted simply stands alongside these frailties.

Many people who have looked at this passage think that Paul was being 'rhetorical', by which they mean that he was not speaking of himself personally but using a personal form of address to strengthen his point. Others believe that Paul was describing his state before he repented of his sin, perhaps the agonies he went through after the 'Damascus Road' experience (Acts 9:1f.) as he came to terms with his past and what God called him to be (Acts 9:19-31). Surely, they say, an apostle such as Paul could not have suffered from such shambolic guilt! However, I see no reason to avoid the plain meaning of the text, which is that Paul was personally conscious of the power of sin in his life, which disrupted what his spirit felt he should do.

Why is Paul not able to do what he wants to do?

The way Paul describes the turmoil within him is interesting because we might expect him to talk of it as a battle between 'the spirit' and 'the body' (sometimes translated 'the flesh'). However, Paul avoids any reference to 'the spirit' in the passage; either his own spirit or the Holy Spirit. Instead he talks about a battle that takes place between his 'will' and his 'body'. On the one hand you will read of what Paul 'intends' to do but is not able (7:15,16,19), and on the other hand, sin which 'dwells' in his body (7:17,20,23) and prevents him from achieving what he wants. The whole passage swings to and fro between these two aspects of Paul as a human being, and he concludes that evil and sin are 'close at hand' (7:21) even though he takes personal delight in the 'law of God' (7:22). He also observes that although his mind is firmly fixed upon what is good, sin works through his body to prevent him from doing what he believes to be right (7:23).

When put like this, it is hardly a revolutionary thought for a Christian of any age, and is typical of what we experience of sin even to this day. Which one of us has not had the experience of intending to do good on some occasion, but when the time came, it has not turned out well because we were late, or some unconscious mannerism of ours offended someone, or any number of things happened which unexpectedly turned what was good into a disaster. So we experience just the same thing that Paul describes, for sin 'takes the opportunity' of the frailties of this world to create havoc out of our best intentions. Paul certainly became very 'wordy' about the whole thing, but we cannot make more of what he says than this.

Really, Paul is describing the persistent power of sin that lingers in the temporary world before the glory of the second coming, when the victory of Christ is made complete with the final 'death' of all sin (Rev 21:8). In so doing, he, the great apostle Paul, has been prepared to expose his own human weaknesses purely in the service of God, and in order to argue with force that sin is still a real problem for all the Lord's people, just as it was for him personally. Sin is the real 'enemy' of the Gospel.

This strong theme also becomes clear at the end of the passage where Paul says the much maligned words 'what a wretched man I am' to describe the human frailties from which he cannot escape whilst still alive, and

calls for salvation; 'who will rescue me from this body of death' (7:24. Many commentators over the centuries have mocked these words of Paul as being the worst kind of 'rhetoric', but they are no more than a rare insight into the real human being who was the apostle Paul). He then gives thanks to God using a standard phrase which summarises the Gospel 'through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (7:25). The very last sentence of the passage summarises Paul's testimony. Whilst because of the salvation of God through Jesus Christ, he serves God with every faculty of his being within his power; yet sin still has a foothold in his life, and for Paul, it is through his body. It would be unwise for us to suggest that we all have an identical struggle to Paul, for sin will find its foothold in each of us in different ways, but we all have the battle in one way or another, for as long as we live.

Application

It is worth noting where we have arrived in the letter of Paul, for the beginning of chapter 8 (the next study in our series) launches us into a quite different theme, that of the glorious consequences of the Gospel in the life of the believer. This great chapter depends on all that has gone before, and is based on everything Paul has already explained about the nature of sin, God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus, and the consequences of faith. In recent chapters we have read some fascinating illustrations of salvation, including the example of baptism, and all these have helped us understand the meaning of what God has done for us in more depth. Nevertheless, while we still live, we all face the ever present problem of sin, and at the very least, this passage warns us that we must be on our guard. Sin is still alive and well in the world in these days before Christ comes again, and it is the task of the church and every Christian believer to fight it 'through Jesus Christ our Lord' (7:25), and to do so vigorously.

Throughout my ministry I have been amazed at the number of Christians I have met, who have told me either that sin is not a problem for people today or that it does not really matter because Christ has cancelled it. I have also come across those who insist that it is not necessary to explain sin when proclaiming the Gospel! I find such opinions difficult. It is as if the enemy has persuaded even God's own people that nothing is wrong with life today providing that everyone loves others and no one is hurt. Some do not believe in evil, and woe betides anyone who suggests otherwise! All this sounds comfortable, as far as 'religion' is concerned, but it is NOT the Gospel.

Preachers of a past age told people they would go to hell if they did not make their peace with God. Their example has been caricatured and in seminars on Missiology is sometimes presented as an example of 'bad practice'. Though I do not think it would be helpful to evangelise today by telling people that the 'wages of sin is death', we do need to explain why sin exists in the world and what it does. We have no message to call people to faith in Christ if we do not explain that sin cuts us off from God, and sin is rooted in all human life, indeed, within all of us while we are alive. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is this. Non-Christians have no answer to sin and evil except to fight it with their own strength if it arises, and this has little to do with their generalisations about God or their anticipation of the afterlife (if they believe in it). Christians know that sin separates people from God, and that in Christ, this barrier can be overcome; they also know that although sin is still rampant in the world, they fight it actively within their own lives and within the world with the help of God's Spirit.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what it means for us to say that we are 'sold into slavery' today. How can we say this if we know that we have been saved by the Gospel?
2. What circumstances have you experienced in which you feel similarly to Paul?
3. How can we explain sin and therefore the need for the Gospel message, in a world of affluence with little knowledge of sin?

Personal comments by author

It is always difficult to write about the subject of sin, and this is especially true of this passage, partly because Paul gives no answer to the problem he raises, except the hope that salvation will indeed enable the Christian to overcome sin and be raised to life in Christ. The more I have talked with Christians and non-Christians, the more I have found that people are confused about sin. Most do not feel they really know what it is or how to define it, and many do not understand what the Gospel says about it, or how to deal with sin in the course of Christian life. There is a dire need for more teaching about sin amongst God's people.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider carefully how sin affects your own life. Read through this passage and see if it speaks to you about your own feelings. Let the Holy Spirit guide you in expressing your own feelings about sin to the Lord, and seeking His answers.*
 - *Pray for God's people the church, and ask the Lord to bless it with understanding and a renewed desire to study God's Word, so that sin may be understood and overcome where possible, and Christ proclaimed by God's people in word and deed.*
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Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, give peace to all who call upon Your Name. Strengthen the hearts of those who feel that their efforts are not appreciated; melt the hearts of those who hold their heads so high they forget the Lord's authority. In this way, bring Your Kingdom among us with power. Thank You Lord, AMEN
