

# BOB HALLMAN - THE EPIC LIFE

## What's Your Problem?

Romans 7:14-25

2000

### Introduction

Romans 7:14-15 is quite challenging and the subject of much debate. The question is this: *Is Paul talking about his life as an unbeliever, as a carnal Christian or as a struggling believer?*

Some believe that Paul is describing his life before Christ because the life he describes is in too much bondage to sin to be considered Christian.

- a. He identifies himself as “unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” – verse 14
- b. He describes himself as “not having anything good living in him.” – verse 18
- c. He describes himself as a “wretched man” – verse 24

These statements seem to contradict what Paul has already stated in Roman 6 regarding the life of a genuine believer who is:

1. Dead to sin – Romans 6:2, 11
2. Crucified with Christ and no longer enslaved to sin – Rom 6:6
3. Freed from sin – Rom 6:7, 18, 22
4. Wholeheartedly obeying the Word - Rom 6:17

Others believe that Paul is describing his life during a period of carnality

1. He seems to be describing a life that is marked by turmoil and failure.  
Certainly not the kind of life that could be called “abundant.”

Still others believe that Paul is describing his experience as a struggling believer

1. Paul is writing in the first person singular and in the present tense  
He refers to himself in the first person singular 48 times in Rom 7:7-25
2. He describes himself as one who:
  - a. Loves the Law of God and hates doing what is evil – Rom 7:15, 19, 21
  - b. Is humble before God admitting that nothing good lives in him – Rom 7:18
  - c. Acknowledges that although sin is in him in one dimension, he is also indwelt by a new nature that is responding to God – Rom 7:17, 20-22
  - d. Gives thanks to Jesus Christ and serves Him with his mind – Rom 7:25

None of these qualities describe the unbeliever. Nor do they describe the carnal Christian. In Rom chapter 1:18-32, we found that the unbeliever;

1. Hates God's truth and righteousness.
2. Suppresses God's truth, willfully rejecting the natural evidence of God.
3. He neither honors nor gives thanks to God
4. He is totally dominated by sin, arrogantly disobeying God's law and even encourages others to do the same

Only a genuine believer would know the tension and struggle that Paul describes here. He is brutally honest, completely transparent and unreservedly candid. He knows that he has passed from darkness to light and now shares in Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and eternal life. But as he grows in Christ-likeness, he also becomes more and more aware of his own sinfulness and his continued failure to rid himself of the influence of sin. It is an explanation of his attempt, in his own strength, to become what only God had to the power to make him. The conflict is real and intense. In the end, Paul acknowledges what the prophet declared in Zech 4:6, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty."

## I The Investigation Of The Crime

A. Paul describes the law as **spiritual** – Rom 7:12 [Verse 14a]

**Spiritual** = Pneumatikos = "Non-carnal, divinely supernatural, regenerate"

Once again, Paul makes the point that the Law is not the problem.

1. It is spiritual in its *nature*

Rom 7:12 "The law is holy, righteous and good."

2. It is spiritual in its *power*

Heb 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

B. Paul describes himself as **unspiritual** [Verse 14b]

**Unspiritual** = Sarkinos = "Fleshly"

To be "fleshly" is very different than to be "in the flesh". In 1 Cor 3:1-3, Paul charges the Corinthians with being carnal [or behaving in a worldly, fleshly manner] because of their envy and strife. He does not mean that they were unregenerate. They were clearly believers, but Paul identified them as still fleshly in their behavior.

1. Sold as a slave to sin [Verse 14c]

John 8:34 "Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

There are two types of slavery to sin recorded for us in the Bible:

1. A slavery where a man sells himself to sin willfully and eagerly
2. A slavery where a man inwardly wrestles with and agonizes over sin, yet finds himself carried away as its captive.

If we were honest, every one of us would have to acknowledge that our lives do fall short of God's perfect standard of righteousness and that we fall back into sin with disturbing frequency. Because of the new creation that

God has made us, we cannot be happy with our sin, because it is contrary to our new nature.

2. Enigmatic [Verse 15]

- a. He didn't understand his own **behavior**
- b. He didn't do what we wanted to do

Gal 5:17-18 "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."

- c. He did the very things he **hated**

**Hate** = Miso = "To detest"

Prov 8:13 "To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech."

Rom 12:9 "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

**Illustration: Golf**

My mind knows what to do. I know what the goal is – to get the ball in the hole. I've seen it done on TV and in person hundreds of times. But despite my best efforts, I can't seem to do what I want to do – get the ball in the hole. And the very thing I don't want to do I do – namely hitting ball everywhere except on the green.

**II The Investigation Of The Potential Suspects**

- A. The law is **good** in that it fulfilled its purpose [Verse 16]

- 1. It made Paul **conscious** of sin

Rom 3:20 "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

- 2. It made Paul accountable to God

Rom 3:19 "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God."

- B. The inner man is **good** in that it's been made new by faith [Verse 17]

- 1. Paul concluded that his continued struggle with sin was:

- a. Not the result of his new inner man

**Thomas a Kempis:**

"I desire to enjoy Thee inwardly, but I cannot take Thee. I desire to cleave to heavenly things, but fleshly things and unmortified passions depress me. I will in my mind to be above all things, but in spite of myself I am constrained to be beneath, so I, unhappy man, fight with myself and am made grievous to myself while the spirit seeketh what is beneath. Oh what I suffer within while as I think on heavenly things

in my mind; the company of fleshly things cometh against me when I pray.”

b. But the result of **sin** living in him

**Live** = Oikeo = “To occupy, reside, or dwell”

Paul is not excusing his behavior or refusing to take responsibility for his actions. Rather, he is expressing his frustration over the conflict between the desires of his inner man and the actions and attitudes of his flesh. He is a man in turmoil. His spirit delights in the law of the Lord. Yet his flesh wages war against God’s law.

As I mentioned earlier, this passage is a description of Paul’s sincere Christian life – but a life that is marked by the efforts of the flesh to accomplish what only God can do by His strength.

A believer who tries to please God in his or her own strength will consistently experience failure, disappointment and discouragement.

C. The sinful flesh is the **culprit** [Verse 18a]

1. **Nothing** good lived in Paul’s sinful flesh

The body itself is not sinful, but it is still subject to sin and is the beachhead from which sin launches its ungodly operations in the life of a believer.

#### **Application:**

This is a very hard pill to swallow. “Nothing, Lord?!” “Nothing good in me?!” We have spent the better part of our lives, even as Christians, trying to achieve what our inner man knows is noble and good – only to be repeatedly shipwrecked on the hidden reef of our flesh.

In the past, I often found myself being disappointed with myself until God showed me through a little book called, *Principles of Spiritual Growth* (Miles J. Stanford, 1982) that “to be disappointed in one's self is to have believed in one's self.” And that to “hope to be better [by means of my own self effort] is to fail to see myself in Christ alone.”

2. He couldn’t do the good he wanted to do [Verse 18b]

It’s not that he was incapable of ever doing good, but rather he was unable to consistently meet the demands of God’s law and its holy standards.

Phil 3:12-14 “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

So Paul had the desire to do good by virtue of the new nature God had placed in his heart by His Spirit. The desire to do good is the inevitable fruit of a genuine believer. But ...

3. The evil he wanted to **avoid** he kept on doing [Verse 19]

Paul repeats his statement in verses 16-17.

Ps 19:13 “Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.”

Ps 40:12 “For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me.”

**Illustration:**

If you are like me, you have made commitment after commitment, vow after vow to abstain from certain behaviors or attitudes, and to do other godly things, only to repeatedly fail. Paul was no different.

4. Again, Paul concluded that his struggle with sin was: [Verse 20]  
a. Not the result of his new inner man  
b. But the result of sin living in him

### III The Verdict

A. Paul's description of the “law” that was at work

1. When he wanted to do good, evil was right there [Verse 21]

**Law** = Not the commands of God but a continual operating principle

**Right there** = Parakeimai = “To lie near, be at hand or be present”

The Lord warned Cain when he was wrestling with jealousy over Abel's accepted sacrifice when He said, “... sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” - Gen 4:7

**Application:**

As believers, we are no longer under the power of sin and are no longer “slaves to sin”. We have been set free to make a real choice as to whom we will serve. Like Cain, we must choose to master sin, rather than be mastered by it.

2. His inner being **delighted** in God's law [Verse 22]

Every genuine believer echoes the sentiments of the Psalmist who said ...

Ps 119:47 “I delight in your commands because I love them.”

Ps 119:97 “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.”

If Paul loved the Law and desired to keep it and valued its inherent goodness, why then did he fail to obey it?

a. But he saw another law at work in his physical body [Verse 23a]

Paul makes a distinction here between his spirit and his body.

1. Waging **war** against the law of his mind

**Waging war** = Antistrateuomai = "To attack, and destroy"

Gal 5:17 "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."

2. Making him a **prisoner** of the law of sin [Verse 23b]

**Prisoner** = Aichmalotizo = To make, lead away, bring into captivity"

a. On the one hand, Paul told us in ....

Rom 6:6-7 ".... 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."

b. But then on the other hand, Paul exhorts believers to ...

Rom 6:12-14 "... not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

It is not that Paul's salvation was imperfect or incomplete in any way. From the moment he received Christ as his Savior, he was completely acceptable to God and righteous in His sight through Christ. But as long as he remained in his physical, unredeemed body, he remained subject to temptation and sin.

B. Paul's cry for **deliverance**

1. "What a wretched man that I am!" [Verse 24a]

**Wretched** = Talaiporos = "Miserable"

It has been described as the "wail of anguish". It is very similar to Isaiah's cry in Isaiah 6:5 when he said, "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

### **Application: My own wretchedness and cry for deliverance**

*(Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, ministry failure, family crises)*

I've come to the conclusion that no man is capable of spiritually crucifying himself. It is an experience that requires outside intervention. And most often it presents itself to us in circumstances that we fail to recognize as being from God. It might take the form of a failed relationship or business venture. It might be an inner emptiness and meaninglessness to life. It might be a long-term illness. Whatever the

means, it invariably results in a sense of utter failure, total despair, and spiritual exhaustion. Every frantic effort to remedy the situation proves to be inadequate. Ironically, this path of death to self is rarely recognized at the time as a thing of beauty and gift of God. In fact, more often than not, it has all the earmarks of total and abject failure.

In *Principles of Spiritual Growth*, the author states that, “So many believers are simply frantic over the fact of failure in their lives, and they will go to all lengths in trying to hide it, ignore it, or rationalizing about it. And all the time they are resisting the main instrument in the Father’s hand for conforming us to the likeness of His Son. God often allows failure in our lives – even engineering it – in order to turn us completely from ourselves to Jesus Christ as the source of Life and Transformation.”

Romans 7:14-24 is Paul’s description of a man who has come face to face with his total and absolute failure to live the new life in his own strength. Despite his experience, talent, and perseverance, he has been unable overcome the persistent failure of his own flesh. As long as a person believes that he can achieve Christ-likeness through discipline and raw self-effort, he will remain stuck in Romans chapter 7; Frustrated, confused, and bewildered by the contrast between the godly desires of his heart and the fleshly behavior of his attitudes and actions.

I believe that it is God’s design for every believer to come to this point of spiritual fatigue, exhaustion, and collapse. Why?

2 Cor 1:9 “... that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

2. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” [Verse 24b]

**Rescue** = Rhoumai = “To deliver” It was used of soldiers on the battlefield who would rescue a fallen comrade and bring him to safety.

In essence Paul is asking, “Who will rescue me from this on-going battle with my old, sinful, unredeemed flesh?”

Notice that Paul doesn’t say, *What must I do?* but *Who will rescue me?*

#### **Application:**

Many people, even born again Christians, are determined to find the “how” of turning the tide in our country’s moral and ethical decline. Programs and plans are being churned out daily by the thousands across this world in an effort to stem the tide of sin. But the answer will never be found in “how”, but in “whom”.

C. Paul’s exuberant answer

1. “Thanks be to **God** through Jesus Christ our Lord!” [Verse 25a]

Paul exults in the knowledge that Jesus Christ Himself is the answer to his dilemma. And rather than being a unnecessary detour, Paul’s adventures in self-effort were essential to bring him to the conclusion that Jesus Christ alone was capable of transforming his life by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Zech 4:6 “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty.”

Ps 107:15-16 “Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.”

**Illustration:** Read *Principles of Spiritual Growth*, page 26.

Right now in this life, we find ourselves groaning inwardly at times as Paul said in Romans 8:23, as we eagerly await our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

But one fine day, not long from now ...

“... in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”  
... And he will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” 1 Cor 15:52-53 Phil 3:21

#### D. Paul’s’ conclusion

1. In his **mind** he was a slave to God’s law [Verse 25b]
2. In his sinful **flesh** he was a slave to the law of sin

It is significant to note that Paul doesn’t blame his conflict on some outside agent, but takes full responsibility for his sin.

### Conclusion

What Paul describes in Romans 7 is a universal description of every believer. Why? Because the power and influence of sin deceives us into believing that we have something to bring to the table – something of value to contribute to the process of transformation. As a result we fight the very means of our deliverance – abandonment of self-effort and total reliance on God.

The law fulfills its purpose in exposing our utter and dismal failure and drives us to the place of finally acknowledging our wretchedness. When we do, our hearts echo Paul’s – “Who will rescue me?” The answer God gave Paul almost 2000 years ago is the very answer you need today, “Jesus Christ!”

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