

THE MAN OF ROMANS 7:7-25

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## THE MAN OF ROMANS 7:7-25

Great debates have been waged over the man of Romans 7. Is Paul writing about himself as a Christian and his ongoing struggle after being saved; or is he describing his former life as an unsaved man and the impossibility of an unregenerate man living a good life? It is the position of this paper that the passage expresses both identities, in chronological order. The progression from one identity to the other is exemplified in Paul's own life as he moved from an unregenerate state to a regenerated one.

### **Summary of Typical Arguments that the Man of Romans 7 is a Believer**

In brief, the points often made in support of this man being a believer are 1) the usages of the present tense throughout the passage; 2) verses 16, 19, 22 indicate a strong desire to do good, such a strong desire would not be present in an unbeliever; 3) verses 18 and 20 distinguish between "I" and "the flesh" and "sin"; 4) verses 24-25 speak of deliverance through Jesus Christ and the serving of the law of God; and 5) the familiarity of the struggle to do right in the life of the believing reader.

### **Summary of Typical Arguments that the Man of Romans 7 is an Unbeliever**

In contrast, the points often made in support of this man being an unbeliever are 1) the stated "dead" condition of the person in verse 9; 2) believers are not "carnal, sold under sin" as the person of verse 14 is; 3) it is not true of a believer that in them nothing good dwells, verse 18, or that they do not know how to perform good; 4) verses 24-25 speak of the future

deliverance of the unbeliever when they finally come to salvation; and 5) other passages, such as chapters 6 and 8, seem to speak of the believer being freed from the struggle of sinning.

### **Detailed Arguments that both Identities Are Exhibited in the Passage**

The points above can be reconciled with each other if one recognizes that Paul is first presenting his former life as an unsaved person in verses 7-16, then comparing and contrasting that with his present life as a believer in verses 17-25. The whole section is an expansion of verses 5-6, wherein the unsaved condition is described first in verse 5 followed by a description of the saved condition in verse 6. There is a transitional “but now” between the two verses.

*<sup>5</sup> For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. <sup>6</sup> But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.<sup>1</sup>*

This progression is developed in more detail in the verses which follow, with verses 7-16 paralleling verse 5, and verses 17-25 paralleling verse 6. As with verses 5 and 6, the pivot point between the sections is the “but now”, and this occurs at the start of verse 17.

### **Paul’s Life as an Unbeliever**

The passage in question begins at Romans 7:7. Paul is answering a question he anticipates will come in response to his assertion in verse 5 that the passions of sin were aroused by the law. Notice how he answers the question in the first person.

*<sup>7</sup> What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."<sup>8</sup> But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.<sup>9</sup> I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.*

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture unless otherwise noted cited from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982)

He uses his own life experience to demonstrate the relationship between law, desire, and sin. That Paul is talking about his past in verses 7-11 is clear by his use of verbs in past tenses (mostly aorist indicatives, with one pluperfect which is customary with οἶδα to indicate a simple past<sup>2</sup>). At what point in Paul's life was he "alive once without the law"? As a Jew, he was born and reared under the law, so this could not be referring to a time before the law, for example, as some say<sup>3</sup>, in the Garden of Eden. No, Paul is making reference to his own upbringing, recounting the time before he came of age and was responsible to keep the law. As a young child, Paul certainly would have been aware of the Jewish laws but it was not until he reached a certain age that he was held legally responsible (probably at the end of his twelfth year when he became *bar mitzvah*, "son of the commandment"<sup>4, 5</sup>). Also, Romans 3:20 says, "by the law is the knowledge of sin"; and Romans 5:13 tells us that "sin is not imputed when there is no law".

As he grew up he came face to face with the tenth commandment, "you shall not covet". Sin, opportunistically using the law, produced in Paul the desire to disobey the law. When this happened, sin "revived" and Paul died. "Revived" is the compound verb ἀναζάω, with the prefix ἀνά (again) and the verb ζάω (to live). Here it means that it comes to life again in yet another person. Incidentally, while not referring to the Garden of Eden directly, this situation in Paul's life parallels Adam's experience; and just as with Adam, sin brings death.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan Publishing House and Galaxie Software, 1999), 586.

<sup>3</sup> Such as Augustine and Bengel, according to Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Kregel Publications, 1977), 276.

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ro 7:9.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 380.

<sup>10</sup> *And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. <sup>11</sup> For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. <sup>12</sup> Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.*

Sin killed Paul through the commandment. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

The state of an unbeliever before they are saved is “dead in trespasses” (Eph 2:5). This is not a saved person here. Paul goes on describing his unsaved, under-law self,

<sup>13</sup> *Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. <sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.*

Verse 14 and the verses that follow become a real battleground because Paul uses the present tense. Paul switches to the present tense for dramatic emphasis. The use of the present tense in this way is called an historical present, or dramatic present.<sup>6,7</sup> To describe himself in the past as a current representation of the unsaved person, he uses the present tense. This makes it seem like he is talking about his current state, which would be as a saved person. However, verse 14 is very strong evidence that it that Paul is not describing his saved identity. A saved person is bought with a price (1Cor 6:20; 7:23). A saved person is not bound to sin, as a slave would be (Rom 6:7, 18). An unsaved person, on the other hand, fits the description of verse 14 perfectly and fits the previous context of person who had been killed by sin and is currently “dead in trespasses.” Paul even uses the intensive "ἐγὼ...εἶμι (egw...eimi)" in verse for "I am carnal". That is *who* he was.

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<sup>6</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (George H. Doran Company, 1923), 866-868.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace argues against these being historical presents in favor of the gnomic present (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 531-532 (esp. fn 52)). However, the gnomic present would not undermine and may even provide support for the position of this paper: that Paul is using his former life as a categorical representation of an unsaved person, showing his transition into life as a saved person, then contrasting the struggle (which is in many ways the same) by distinguishing his saved identity from that of his unsaved identity. The historical present is a dramatic way of personally identifying his unsaved self, whereas the gnomic present would make it more of a figurative and universal identity, whereby he was the representative example. More research on these possibilities is warranted.

Notice in the next verse that Paul says he is producing (κατεργάζομαι, katergazomai) something, “<sup>15</sup> *For what I am doing, I do not understand.*”

Earlier he said that sin was producing (κατεργάζομαι, katergazomai) the covetousness/lust and the death (verse 8, “ἡ ἀμαρτία...κατειργάσατο” and verse 13, “ἡ ἀμαρτία...κατεργαζομένη”). Here he says he is producing it. What is the "it" that he is producing? "It" is what he does not want to do.

*<sup>15</sup> For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. <sup>16</sup> If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.*

In verse 8 sin was producing lust and in verse 13 sin is producing death and here Paul is producing what he does not want to do. Sin and Paul together work out the evil, and there really is no difference between them. The unsaved person has no choice but to sin. Paul's only identity at this point in the passage is the flesh. He and flesh are one. Romans 8:6-8 was true of him at that time.

*<sup>6</sup> For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. <sup>8</sup> So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

One of the arguments against these verses referring to Paul in his unsaved state is that unbelievers do not desire to do good – or more specifically they do not struggle with such a strong desire to do good instead of bad. Yet, verses 15 and 16 are explanatory for a person “carnal, sold under sin”. Furthermore, consider these statements from men who were (presumably) unsaved:

*My reason this, my passion that, insists. I see the right, and I approve it too; Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vii.

*What is it that draws us in one direction while striving to go in another; And impels us towards that which we wish to avoid?*<sup>9</sup>

*For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of all victories, whereas to be vanquished by himself is the basest and most shameful of all things. For such expressions show that there is a war in each of us against ourselves.*<sup>10</sup>

*I have evidently two souls, . . . for if I had only one it would not be at the same time good and bad; nor would it desire at the same time both honorable and dishonorable works, nor would it at the same time both wish and not wish to do the same things. But it is evident that there are two souls; and that when the good one is in power, the honorable things are practiced; but when the bad, the dishonorable things are attempted.*<sup>11</sup>

There is one thing that these philosophers all missed. As unsaved men they were incapable of righteous good, no matter how hard they tried, just like Rom 3:10-12 says.

*<sup>10</sup> As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. <sup>12</sup> They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.'*

These men were powerless to do good. As with all men, the struggle of even attempting good is presented by the law. The law shows our sin, and hence the struggle.

### Paul's Life as a Believer

Now, there is a change! Paul says,

*<sup>17</sup> But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.*

Paul is seeing that presently, in his saved state, there is a difference. Before, he and sin were united. Now, he distinguishes between himself and his flesh. He has a new identity.

The "now" (νυν, nuni) in verse 17 is not logical, but temporal, an adverb of time. This is reinforced by the "no longer" (οὐκέτι, ouketi) in the same verse, and in verse 20. Understanding this temporal change in Paul's description of himself is key (it also lends credence

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<sup>9</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, 52

<sup>10</sup> Crawford Tait Ramage, *Great Thoughts from Classic Authors*, (John B. Alden, 1891), 403

<sup>11</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, vi, 1, 41

to the present tense verbs in vv 13-16 being historical/dramatic presents). He also now categorically separates himself from his flesh.

*<sup>18</sup> For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.*

Again, an unbeliever has no need to distinguish "that is, in my flesh", but a believer does. Paul is drawing the distinction between himself (his true self) and his flesh (his former self was one and the same with his flesh, but now the flesh is not his identity).

Verse 19 is remarkably similar to verse 15, and probably causes many to understand the passage in its entirety to be talking about only one person (either unsaved Paul or saved Paul).

*<sup>19</sup> For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.*

It appears the same struggle is still with him. However, there is a critical disclaimer:

*<sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer (οὐκέτι, ouketi) I who do (κατεργάζομαι, katergazomai) it, but sin that dwells in me.*

This is almost word for word the struggle of the unbeliever. Except now it is not he himself producing it. Previously, the "it" was produced both by sin and by Paul; now, Paul distinguishes. This is not an excuse or a license to sin (Paul addressed that false conclusion in Romans 6), but simply an observation about the reality of sin still being present in the flesh of the believer.

Now for Paul's conclusion:

*<sup>21</sup> I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. <sup>23</sup> 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.*

It has been argued that since this "law", or principle, is true for the unbeliever Paul could still be referring to his unsaved self. This is possible, as the earlier quotes from four

unsaved men illustrate. The key is in understanding the inner man. It is the free-will being that is our self. It is your soul-spirit, the real you. This man may want to do good but it is powerless to do good unless strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:8, 9). Although it might be argued the inner man of an unsaved person delights in the law of God, there is substantial doubt about where the delight truly lies, and scripture leaves no doubt that he will never succeed in pleasing God.

Some believe the next verse, 24, to be talking about Paul's conversion. This interpretation would not harm this author's interpretation of the rest of the passage. However, interpreting this verse as the redemption of Paul's body at the rapture is more consistent with the chronology of the passage being from Paul's birth to death and rapture.

*<sup>24</sup> O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

It is also worth noting that the deliverance here is from his "body of death", which is the redemption promised the believer. We are stuck with this body until we die or the rapture comes. But think how great the day when,

*<sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."*

*<sup>55</sup> "O Death, where is your sting?*

*O Hades, where is your victory?"*

*<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:52–57)*

## Conclusion

Romans 7 has elements of both the unbeliever's and the believer's struggle. It is a progressive development of a concept of identity exemplified in Paul's own life experience, chronologically from birth to death and rapture. This concept-by-way-of-example is sandwiched right between Romans 6 and Romans 8. In Romans 6 our identity in Christ is presented technically and Romans 8 it is reiterated with encouragement. This concept is a practical application of the doctrinal groundwork Paul laid in Romans 1-5 – do not live in bondage to the sin from which you have been freed. To succeed in the Christian life, we must have clarity on our identity now, and how it differs from our identity prior to salvation.

## Practical Application

For Paul's final conclusion, and as a segue into chapter 8, here is verse 25b.

*“So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”*

This is why we must

*<sup>16</sup> Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.*

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