

Why Romans 7:14-25 Cannot Describe the Christian Life

By Daryl Wingerd

Introduction

You may or may not be aware that Romans 7:14–25 is a controversial passage of Scripture. The controversy centers around Paul’s use of the pronouns “I” and “Me,” as well as his use of the present tense in describing a serious, and seemingly futile, struggle with sin. Many interpreters insist that the use of the first person present tense proves that Paul was describing his own present experience as a Christian, which naturally leads to the conclusion that the passage describes the post–conversion experience of trying, yet habitually failing, to obey God.

Other interpreters, myself included, believe Paul was describing the pre–conversion discovery (based at least in part on his own experience) intended to teach that the Law of Moses was not able to deliver a person from sin. According to this view, the use of the present tense is a literary device, possibly designed to personalize Paul’s struggle or perhaps to prompt the reader to reflect on his or her own experience. Historically, among solid Bible scholars and theologians, the division of opinion concerning this passage is somewhat equally divided.

Almost all solid interpreters agree that Paul’s overall purpose in writing Romans 7 was to insist that the Law was “holy and righteous and good” (7:12), while at the same time explaining and defending his prior teaching that the Law served a negative role in God’s redemptive purpose. One can easily imagine an objector asking Paul, “If the Law of Moses is good, as you say it is, how is it that you can also say that ‘the Law came in so that the transgression would increase’ (5:20)? If the Law is holy and righteous, how can you say that Christians ‘are not under law but under grace’ (6:14), that the Law arouses sinful passions in those who are still “in the flesh” (7:5), and that Christians have been “released from the Law . . . so that [they] serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter’ (7:6)? These appear to be blunt degradations of the Law.”

Paul answers this protest, first by concisely stating that the Law is good (7:13), and then by demonstrating, through the use of a unique illustration (7:14–25), that the villain in this drama was not the Law of Moses, but sin which has taken control of the flesh. The Law, which is inherently good, was used by sin to bring about rebellion to God instead of righteousness. Paul goes on to explain that this twisted use of the Law exposes the extreme sinfulness of sin. Sin actually used something good and righteous and holy to bring about something bad—increased sin, and even death (7:5, 7–8, 13). The overall message of chapter 7, then, is that the Law itself, while inherently good, is not an instrument of transformation. It is unable to do what Christ and the Spirit of God have done, not because it is intrinsically flawed, but rather because it was “weak . . . through the flesh” (8:3).

Some have suggested that one could preach through Romans 7:14–25 and fully explore Paul’s intended meaning without ever dealing with the controversy. Perhaps this is true if one lives in a grammatical and textual vacuum where nothing needs to be known other than what the text states explicitly. But in real life, where Christians tend to evaluate their own experiences in relation to the biblical text being taught, questions inevitably arise: “How does Romans 7:14–25 apply to me?” “Is this passage describing the way the Christian life is supposed to look, or should I understand this to be a description of someone who has not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit?” The pastor who attempts to preach through Romans 7 without addressing these questions will likely end up answering them anyway, over Sunday lunch or over the phone later that week. In my view it is better to address them publicly.

Avoiding Unbiblical Extremes

Romans 7:14–25 can be misapplied in dangerous ways. Where the passage is understood as a description of the ordinary Christian life, professing believers who are overtaken in patterns of habitual immorality (or other serious sins), might take unwarranted comfort by thinking, “Even Paul failed habitually, like me, and we know Paul was a true Christian. Therefore my own experience, though characterized by habitual sin, is that of a true Christian.” I have personally heard the “Romans 7” excuse coming from the lips of

professing Christians who were (or should have been) facing church discipline, and there is no shortage of written works available today that naturally lead to this type of abuse. On the other hand, where the passage is seen as a description of Paul's pre-conversion discovery that the Law could not produce righteousness in those who are still "in the flesh," some may wrongly arrive at the conclusion that true Christians never have serious struggles with sin.

Both of these applications of Romans 7:14-25 are serious abuses of the passage and cannot be harmonized with the rest of the New Testament. Professing Christians who are overcome by patterns of serious sin should never be comforted in their profession of saving faith based on the belief that Romans 7:14-25 describes the ordinary Christian experience. Instead they should be warned that their profession of faith may be false, based on the clear meaning of passages like 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 and 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, James 2:14-26, and 1 John 3:7-10. On the opposite end of the spectrum, those who conclude that true Christians never struggle with sin or fail in sinful ways are also committing a serious error. Interpreters in this category should note that Paul devotes much of the space in his letters to encouraging Christians to guard themselves against the temptation to sin (e.g., Rom. 13:14; Eph. 6:10-18), to put away sinful behavior (e.g., Rom. 12:9-21; 1 Cor. 6:18; Eph. 4:17-24), and to forgive and restore one another when sins are committed (e.g., Gal. 6:1; Col. 3:12-13). Even Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:4, emphasis added).

As I have stated, I am of the opinion that the experience described in Romans 7:14-25 is the pre-conversion discovery that because of sin which dwells in the members of this person's body, he finds himself unable to do that which is good. The passage reveals the inner struggle and enlightenment of the person who has been diligently seeking God's approval in the wrong way, by trying to keep the Law, and who finally reaches the point of despair due to habitual failure. Before listing my reasons for concluding that Paul was not describing his own experience as a Christian (or the hypothetical "ordinary Christian experience"), I want to list briefly the typical arguments for this view:

Eight Arguments for the “Ordinary Christian Experience” View

1. In verses 7–13, Paul was speaking in the past tense, obviously describing his own past experience of being confronted by the demands of the Law. The sudden shift from past to present tense in verse 14 is most naturally taken as an indication that Paul is now describing his present experience as a Christian.

2. The struggle between the mind, or inner man, and the flesh, or members of the body (vv. 22–23), is not present in unbelievers. They want to do evil, not good (Rom. 1:18–32; John 3:19–20). Only believers have the genuine desire to do good, and therefore only they experience this struggle. Even though the Spirit is not mentioned in this passage, the fact that this person is experiencing a struggle between good and evil proves that the Holy Spirit is in him.

3. The apparent defeat and slavery to sin depicted in Romans 7:14–25 is consistent with the “already-but-not-yet” theme in Paul’s theology. Objectively, Christians are not enslaved to sin, as Paul repeatedly affirms in Romans 6 (vv. 6, 7, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22), but they are nevertheless told not to allow sin to reign as their master (Rom. 6:12). In one place Paul can say that the old self has been laid aside with its evil practices and the new self has been put on (Col. 3:9–10), while in another place he can exhort Christians to “lay aside the old self” and “put on the new self” (Eph. 4:22–24). In Romans 7:14–25, Paul was describing the “not yet” aspect of his theology, where Christians are described subjectively and appear to be enslaved to sin even though they are not. In Romans 6 and 8, he was describing the “already” aspect of his theology by describing Christians objectively as having been freed from sin.

4. Unbelievers do not “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (v. 22). They are “haters of God” (Rom. 1:30), “hostile toward God” (8:7; Col. 1:21), and do not submit themselves to His Law (Rom. 8:7–8).

5. The struggle depicted in Romans 7:14–25 is consistent with the war between the flesh and the Spirit described in Galatians 5:16–18. Because the struggle in Galatians involves the Spirit of God, it clearly refers to a struggle within the Christian. Therefore, because

both places describe the potential for sinful failure, both must refer to the same struggle within the Christian.

6. The person in verses 14–25 knows Jesus as his Savior (v. 25a).

7. After proclaiming that Christ is the one who will deliver him from “the body of this death” (v. 24), Paul returns to further describe the ongoing conflict. This proves that even after Christ has delivered a person from sin and death (7:25a), the pattern of sinful failure described in verses 14–23 continues (7:25b). On this same thought, the forward-looking question, “Who will set me free from the body of this death” (7:24, emphasis added) should be understood as referring to the final redemption of the body, which is yet in the future for believers. Christians remain in “the body of this death” until Christ’s return. This is affirmed by Romans 8:11 and 23.

8. The Romans 7:14–25 experience is universally familiar to believers, so much so that it is proven to be “ordinary” by that factor. All Christians struggle with sin, and all are anticipating final deliverance from “the body of this death.” This is so consistently affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament (even as close as Romans 8:11 and 23) that no one should find it unusual for Paul to describe himself that way here.

As you can see, these arguments cannot be dismissed lightly, and I will address each one individually later. Furthermore, while some may abuse this view by using the passage to comfort “so-called” Christians who are acting like unbelievers, the “ordinary Christian experience” interpretation of the passage has been taught and applied in a responsible manner by some of the most excellent teachers of our time, as well as by many noteworthy Christians throughout history. Godly people can disagree, and I have little doubt that many will continue to find the above eight arguments more compelling than the twelve opposing arguments I will present below. I only hope that the reader will carefully consider my arguments and formulate an opinion that is consistent with the rest of the New Testament—most importantly, with Romans 6 and 8.

Twelve Reasons Why Romans 7:14–25 Should Not Be Seen as a Description of the Ordinary Christian Experience

1. The text of Romans 7:1 through 8:17 reveals the contrast between two distinct realms of experience, and the “ordinary Christian experience” view of 7:14–25 blurs or nullifies this contrast. After Paul’s illustration about death dissolving the marriage bond (7:1–3), he declares the believer’s freedom from the Law in verse 4. Verses 5 and 6 then reveal a “we once were/but now are” contrast. I have found it helpful to think of these two verses as two snapshots—previews of two full-length features that are to follow. The preview in verse 5 is of the full-length feature in verses 7–25, and the preview in verse 6 is of the full-length feature in 8:1–17. The point of this contrast is to show that living under the law, with indwelling sin being the main operative influence, is a life of defeat characterized by habitual sin, while living under grace, with the indwelling Spirit of God being the main operative influence, is a life of behavioral newness characterized by righteousness. First, Romans 7:5 previews the “we once were” part:

While we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

Clearly this verse describes a pre-Christian experience. Paul could not say, “While we were in the flesh” if those to whom he was writing (i.e., believers) were still “in the flesh.” The description that flows in the rest of verse 5 about those in this condition bears striking similarities to the person whose experience is described in verses 14–25 (from this point on I will refer to him as “Fleshly Man”). In verse 5, the Law produced rebellion in non-Christians because of “the sinful passions” which “were at work in the members of our body” (v. 5). In verses 14–25, the presence of these “sinful passions” (i.e., the law of sin which dwells in the members of Fleshly Man’s body) is the very discovery Fleshly Man describes, though in much greater detail.

The point is, verse 5 clearly describes an experience that is in the past for the Christian, and verses 14–25 indicate that the same past experience is in view, even though it is described by Fleshly Man using the present tense.

Verse 6 then previews the “but now” part of the contrast, clearly indicating a shift from past experience to present reality.

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

Describing Christians' present condition, Paul assures them that they have been released from the Law. They are no longer bound to it. When we understand that the way in which Christians were formerly bound to the Law in this passage was through slavery to sin (as in 7:5), we can see that freedom from the Law corresponds with freedom from slavery to sin. This was the message of Romans 6:14 where Paul says, "For sin shall not be master over you." Why shall sin not be master over us Paul? "For [i.e., because] you are not under law but under grace." Sin is no longer the Christian's master because living according to the letter of the Law of Moses is no longer the Christian's way of life.

The "but now" way of thinking previewed in 7:6 is then expounded upon in chapter 8: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1, emphasis added). From 8:1 through 8:17, everything is about life in the Spirit, as opposed to life "in the flesh." In this passage Paul speaks repeatedly about actual, behavioral transformation through the influence of the Holy Spirit, rather than describing consistent defeat and failure because of the influence of the sinful flesh (as in Romans 7:14–25). Romans 8:1–17, then, is the full-length feature that was briefly previewed in Romans 7:6.

To summarize, Romans 7:5 describes the Christian's past experience—slavery to sin through rebellion to the Law—and the rest of Romans 7 expounds upon the experience of living under the realm of the Law. Romans 7:6 then describes the Christian's present reality—life under grace through the Spirit—and Romans 8:1–17 expounds upon the experience of living under the realm of grace, where righteous living is the norm. This seemingly obvious contrast is tremendously problematic for the "ordinary Christian experience" view of Romans 7:14–25 for the following reason: If Fleshly Man's experience is a description of the ordinary Christian life, then the experience of living under the realm of grace is identical to the experience of living under the realm of the Law. In other words, there is no contrast. But if there is no contrast between the two realms, then there is no purpose for Paul to go to such great lengths to describe one.

2. Romans 7:14 is logically and grammatically connected with verse 13, which obviously describes the experience of an unregenerate person. Paul tells us in verse 13 that sin used the Law to bring about his death (further explaining verse 9, in which he described the recognition of his sinful nature when confronted with the Law). The word “For” at the beginning of verse 14 informs the reader that Paul is explaining further how sin was able to use the Law, which was good, to bring about death. Given this connection between verses 13 and 14, along with the fact that verse 13 so clearly speaks of a pre-conversion experience, it would be incredibly awkward for Paul to suddenly switch to the description of a regenerate person and the ordinary Christian life. The switch to the first-person present-tense, then, must be explained as a literary device, perhaps designed to help the reader “personalize” the experience, rather than a chronological shift to Paul’s present experience.

3. Fleshly Man sees himself as still obligated to keep the Law of Moses, whereas Paul has already stated that Christians have been “released from the Law” (v. 6). In verse 15, Fleshly Man becomes aware of a mysterious tension within him. He wants to do something, but he finds himself doing the opposite, the very thing he hates. Verse 16 then explains what it is that Fleshly Man wants to do—he wants to keep the Law. This becomes obvious when we learn that his desire to keep the Law, along with his hatred of doing the opposite, amounts to a confession that the Law is good. Verse 16 serves the purpose of further vindicating Paul’s answer in verse 13 that the Law was good, and was not the cause of his death. This thought follows through the rest of the passage. The good that Fleshly Man wants to do (vv. 18, 19, and 21) is to keep the Law. Even later in the passage (v. 25), when he summarizes the dichotomy within him, it is expressed in terms of serving “the law of God,” and “[serving] the law of sin.”

Compare this with the fact that in chapter 6, Paul told Christians that they are “not under law but under grace” (6:14). In chapter 7 he informs Christians that they have been “made to die to the Law through the body of Christ” (7:4). Two verses later (7:6), in describing Christian experience under the realm of grace (rather than that of the Law), he writes, “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter”

(emphasis added). If Romans 7:25 is the description of tension in the ordinary Christian life—serving the law of God with one part of our being yet serving the law of sin with the other—it would seem impossible to harmonize this verse with Romans 7:6, where Christians are told that they do not serve “in oldness of the letter.”

The point is, if Paul were describing his own experience as a Christian in 7:14–25, then he was pursuing the very life of law-keeping he had just told Christians was in their past.

4. Fleshly Man describes himself as the opposite of “spiritual” (v. 14), whereas Paul typically describes Christians as being “spiritual” people. Paul writes in verse 14, “For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh.” When Fleshly Man says, “the Law is spiritual,” he is continuing Paul’s previous commendation of the Law (vv. 12–13). He is saying, once again, that it is “holy and righteous and good” because it emanates from the Spirit of God. But then he inserts a contrast, saying that he is “of flesh.” While the Law is “spiritual,” Fleshly Man is “of flesh.”

Compare this with the way Paul contrasts unbelievers and believers in 1 Corinthians 2 and 3. He first calls the unbeliever “natural” and the believer “spiritual” (2:14–15). Then, in 1 Corinthians 3:1, he rebukes the Corinthians, saying, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ” (3:1, emphasis added). By saying that they are not acting like “spiritual” people but rather like those who are “of flesh,” Paul is clearly saying that they are not acting like Christians. The way he is compelled to address them is the way he would address unbelievers. This is confirmed in verse 3 where Paul asks rhetorically, “are you not walking [i.e., acting] like mere men?” The most one should take from the added phrase in verse 3:1, “as to infants in Christ,” is that the Corinthians’ behavior was nearly indistinguishable from unbelievers. They, being supposedly mature Christians, were acting the way a newly converted person might be tempted to act until learning better behavior from mature believers and from increasing knowledge of Scripture.[1]

According to Galatians 6:1, the professing Christian who is not “spiritual” is the one who has been overtaken in a trespass. He or she is in need of being restored by people who are “spiritual.” The “spiritual” ones, then, are the ones who are living the ordinary

Christian life. The one who has been overtaken in a trespass (i.e., the one who is not spiritual), is in an intolerable and unusual condition for a Christian. If the person in Galatians 6:1 is not restored through repentance to the status of a “spiritual” person, he would be subject to church discipline. This leads to the conclusion that Fleshly Man should not be thought of as a Christian, at least not one who is experiencing the Christian life in the ordinary way.

Most importantly, being “spiritual” is the way Paul describes all Christians in Romans 8. They are defined in verse 5 as those who are “according to the Spirit” (vv. 9–11), that is, those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. In verses 13–14 they are described as those who are walking by the Spirit. In verses 13–14, in fact, the quality of “being led by the Spirit” (as opposed to living according to the flesh) is a determining factor in knowing who is a Christian. It simply cannot follow, then, that Fleshly Man, who describes himself as being “of flesh” and was clearly living according to the flesh, is Paul the Christian.

5. Fleshly Man describes himself as being “sold into bondage to sin” (Lit., “sold under sin,” v. 14). This clearly implies a condition of slavery to sin, which Paul says in Romans 6 no longer describes Christians. The word “sold” calls to mind the very slavery Paul insisted that Christians have been delivered from in Romans 6. Earlier in the letter, Paul concluded his indictment of the whole world by saying “that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” (3:9). He then proceeded to list evidence from the Old Testament that every person, whether Jew or Gentile, needs to be saved (3:10–18). Elsewhere Paul wrote, “But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). In this sentence, the phrase “shut up . . . under sin” includes every member of unredeemed humanity, while those who believe are the recipients of the promise of salvation (which involves deliverance from sin). It is inconsistent with Paul’s writing, both in Romans and Galatians, to allow that a Christian could be accurately described as being “sold [under] sin.”

It is critical to note that Fleshly Man is describing his own objective status when he says he is “sold [under] sin.” He is not commenting on the way he feels about himself based on his behavior. He describes himself as actually being a slave of sin. Compare this with

Paul's description of the actual spiritual condition of Christians in Romans 6 (all italics added):

Our old self was crucified with Him [Christ], in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. (v. 6)

For he who has died is freed from sin. (v. 7)

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. (v. 14)

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (vv. 17–18)

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. (v. 20)

But now, having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (v. 22).

Paul went to great lengths in chapter 6 to convince Christians that their objective status was no longer one of slavery to sin. He even described them as being “obedient from the heart,” and their new objective status as “slaves of righteousness” (6:17–18). Not only is it impossible for the same person to be “obedient from the heart” (6:17) and “[serving] the law of sin” (7:25) at the same time, it is also impossible for the same person to be a slave of sin and a slave of righteousness at the same time. It is true that Paul exhorts those who have been freed from sin to not allow sin to reign over them in actual practice (6:12), but this does not imply that both objective conditions (i.e., slavery and non-slavery) can exist in the same person at the same time. In fact, the very basis for the exhortation to not allow sin to reign over them (6:12) is the objective fact that sin does not reign over them (6:6–7). Paul is saying, in essence, “Because you have been freed from sin, do not go on acting like a slave.”

6. The particular sin Paul chose as an illustration of sin's use of the Law to bring about his death is a sin that Paul says elsewhere cannot characterize a true Christian. The sin Paul lists is covetousness (7:7–8).[2] He went so far as to say that “sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in [him] coveting [lit. “evil desire”] of every kind.” Since Paul proceeds almost immediately (vv. 14–25) to describe in greater detail the habitual failure of Fleshly Man in keeping the law, it would not seem unreasonable to think that he still had the law against covetousness (or evil desire) in mind. Even if this was not the particular sin Paul wanted the reader to focus on throughout chapter 7, one must at least admit that it should be allowed as one valid example of Fleshly Man's struggle.

Fleshly Man, then, is someone who is “doing [or practicing] the sin of covetousness” (certainly among other sins, v. 15). He wants very much not to covet, but finds himself unable to cease from it (v. 18). In verse 19 he says, “The good that I want [presumably, contentment], I do not do, but I practice the very evil [covetousness or evil desire] that I do not want.” His practice of covetousness (among other sins), was so consistent that it cause him to become “a prisoner to the law of sin” (v. 23). In verse 25 he is “serving . . . the law of sin” (i.e., through covetousness among other sins). Given all of these self-descriptions of Fleshly Man, it is no stretch to say that the person depicted in Romans 7:14–25 is, by definition, a covetous person.

Now consider what Paul says elsewhere about covetousness and the covetous person:

- In Romans 1:29 he lists it among the sins that characterize the godless Gentiles. Then he says to the self-righteous Jew in 2:2, “And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.” The covetous person, then, may expect condemnation, not glorification.
- In Romans 13:8–9, Paul says that the one who truly loves his neighbor is the one who has fulfilled the Law. He then lists four of the Ten Commandments, including “You shall not covet,” and says they are all summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul concludes this thought in verse 10 by saying, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment

of the law.” The point here is that if a person can be described as one who loves his neighbor (as is characteristically true of all Christians), then he or she cannot be simultaneously described as covetous. One description rules out the other.

- In 1 Corinthians 5:11–13 Paul writes, “But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (emphasis added). The point here is that the covetous person may be a “so-called” Christian, but we have no right to see him or her as a true Christian.

- In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 Paul writes, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God” (emphasis added). He then continues by saying, “Such were [note the past tense] some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” Christians may have been covetous as a matter of practice in their unregenerate past, but it cannot characterize their present reality.

- In Colossians 3 Paul describes a number of sins, including greed (using a word elsewhere translated “covetousness”) as that which amounts to idolatry. He went on to say that “it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience” (v. 6). As in Romans 2:2, the covetous person should be expecting wrath, not salvation.

Certainly a true Christian can stumble into covetousness (or “evil desire”). A true believer might even be temporarily overtaken in this trespass (as in Gal. 6:1). But the descriptions of Fleshly Man in Romans 7 are not those of a person who has stumbled or who has been temporarily overcome. They describe a person who is practicing the very evil that he does not want to do. In addition to these clear indicators that Christians are not characteristically covetous people, consider the way Paul described himself elsewhere with respect to the sin of covetousness or greed:

- In 2 Corinthians 6:3 Paul describes himself and Timothy as “giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited.” He goes on to list the various hardships they have experienced, including this statement: “. . . as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” Certainly this does not describe a pair of covetous men.

- In Philippians 4:11–12 Paul says, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.” Again, this is not a self-description of a man who has been overtaken by covetousness.

- In 1 Timothy 6:6–7 he writes, “But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we brought nothing into this world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.”

- Paul felt comfortable saying to the Corinthians, “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” Once again, Paul’s self-description does not allow for covetousness as a pattern of behavior.

These are not statements made by a man who saw himself as being “sold [under] sin,” especially not if particular reference is being made in Romans 7:14ff to the sin of covetousness (or evil desire). In fact, if Paul were honestly confessing his own habitual practice of greed, covetousness, or evil desire in Romans 7, we would have to label him as one of the greatest hypocrites in history for saying all of these other things about his contentment. Even more striking is the way Paul defended himself in 1 Corinthians 4:3–4: “But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself . . .” Certainly Paul never thought of himself as sinless, but it seems impossible to say that the same man who said of himself, “the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want,” could also say with integrity, “I am conscious of nothing against myself.” His point

was to say that no one could make a legitimate accusation of misconduct against him. In the very next chapter, in fact, Paul instructs the Corinthians to remove a person from their church if he is found to be covetous (1 Cor. 5:11). Again it is demonstrated that Fleshly Man, a person who is habitually failing in serious ways, possibly even through a pattern of covetousness, cannot be Paul the Christian.

7. Verse 18 speaks of an inability to do good that cannot describe the true Christian. In describing his struggle to do what is good (which we have already seen is to keep the Law), Fleshly Man says that “the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (v.18b). What he describes here is the discovery that no matter how hard he tries, he finds himself unable to do what God requires. The ESV translates it this way: “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out” (emphasis added). The NASB translation captures this inability as well, as long as one does not read any partial ability into the text. As Fleshly Man says, the willing is present in him (referring to his good intentions to keep the Law), but the doing of the good is not in him—at all. He is not merely saying that the doing of the good is tough to muster up. It is not present.

Compare this with Paul’s contrast in Romans 8 between those who are “in the flesh” and those who are “in the Spirit.” Paul says of the person who is “in the flesh,” “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (8:7–8, emphasis added). This clearly describes the inability to keep the Law (just as experienced by Fleshly Man in 7:14–25). From what immediately follows, however, we learn that Romans 8:7–8 does not describe the Christian. In verse 9 Paul says to believers, “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” What this tells us is that the inability to please God that characterizes the person who is “in the flesh” (vv. 7–8) does not characterize the person who is indwelt by God’s Spirit.

Also compare Fleshly Man’s discovery of his own inability with Paul’s command in Romans 6:12. “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts.” This command, among many similar commands given to Christians, is based on the objective reality that they have been set free from sin. If they had

not been set free by the death of Christ, Paul could have never given these commands (at least not with any hope of them being obeyed). But since Christians have been set free from sin, Paul can command them to live like people who have been set free, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in them. This command will never be perfectly obeyed in this life, but instances and episodes of sin in the life of a true Christian never result from the inability to do what is right. As Paul writes elsewhere, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

8. Romans 7:18, which is commonly thought to prove the presence of the Holy Spirit in the person being described, actually proves the opposite. In verse 18 Paul writes, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (18a, emphasis added). The clarification at the end of that phrase (“that is, in my flesh”) is commonly taken as proof that Paul is describing the dual nature of the Christian—still fleshly (or carnal), but also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As the reasoning goes, Paul wanted to clarify that though he knew nothing good could be found in his flesh, something very good (i.e., the Holy Spirit) was living in him.

There are two problems with this approach, both of which, I believe, are insurmountable:

First, it is critical to note how Fleshly Man knows nothing good dwells in him, as he states in 18a. He knows this (as he says in 18b) because of his inability to do the good. In other words, the fact that he cannot actually do the good he wills leads him to conclude that nothing good dwells in him. If the Holy Spirit were indeed dwelling in Fleshly Man, then he would be committing a serious error to conclude that he was unable to do what is right (as discussed above in number 7). This error would be particularly glaring if Fleshly Man were Paul the Christian, a man who was well aware of the power of the Spirit to free Christians from the law of sin and death (8:2), to cause them to walk according to the Spirit (8:4, 14), and to enable them to put to death the deeds of the body (8:13).

Second, in verse 14 Paul contrasted Fleshly Man with the Law, which is spiritual. As we discussed earlier (see number 4 above), this

contrast only works grammatically if Fleshly Man is not spiritual. If Paul's intent in verse 18 were to say that Fleshly Man is a Christian who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the contrast between the Law and Fleshly Man in verse 14 would be meaningless. It would be as if he were saying, "The Law is spiritual, and so am I (even though I do not act like it because of the influence of my flesh)." Instead he says, "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold [under] sin." The word "but" in the sentence reveals a complete contrast to the word "spiritual," and both parts of the sentence depict objective reality, not feelings, emotions, or behavior. The Law is "spiritual," and Fleshly Man is "of flesh" (the opposite of spiritual).

So what did Paul mean then by adding, "that is, in my flesh," in verse 18? It is likely that in this context he intended "my flesh" as a synonym for "the members of my body" and "my members" (as in verse 23). He was simply contrasting his good intentions (i.e., the law of his mind, as in v. 23) with the influence of sin he was learning to recognize in the members of his body (i.e., the law of sin). His insertion in verse 18 ("that is, in my flesh") seems to be for the purpose of clarifying that something good was present in his mind—his intention to keep the Law. God Himself praised the Old Testament Israelites for their good intentions to keep the Law (Deut. 5:27–28), so it should not seem strange for this intention to be described as something good in Romans 7:18. Fleshly Man was simply coming to understand that his good intentions in his mind were being overruled by the sin which dwelt in the members of his body.

9. Fleshly Man discovers the fact that evil dwells in him (v. 21), whereas Christians already know this. Part of becoming a Christian is the discovery that sin has rendered you guilty before a holy God, and that your nature is depraved and in need of renewal. Until one realizes this about himself, he would find no legitimate meaning in Jesus' words, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). Christians are people who have already come through the experience, however lengthy or brief, of conviction of sin and the recognition of their need to be saved. As long as a person is unaware of this—as long as he knows nothing of his depraved, condemned condition or his need for God's mercy and grace—he should not be considered a Christian.

Fleshly Man admits from the outset of this passage (v. 15) that he does not understand why he keeps doing the things he hates, and not doing the things he would like to do. When Christians sin, especially those who are biblically informed (as Paul certainly was), they are intensely aware of the reasons for it. The next few verses (16–20) describe Fleshly Man’s process of being awakened to the reality of sin dwelling in him and his inability to do good. Then, in verse 23, he says, “I find then the principle . . .” This is his moment of discovery, and what he says he has discovered is “the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.” Verses 22–23 go on to elaborate on his discovery, and verse 24 then records his exclamation of despair: “Wretched man that I am!” Prior to this discovery, Fleshly Man did not recognize his own wretchedness or the fact that evil resided in his members, a condition all true Christians become aware of prior to conversion.

Without the self-awareness Fleshly Man gains in this passage, what would prompt a person to come to Christ or be thankful for God’s amazing grace? The sequence in the passage of 1) Fleshly Man’s ignorance of these basic Christian realities, followed by 2) his own personal discovery of them, followed by 3) his despairing cry for deliverance, necessitates that he be understood as an unbeliever experiencing enlightenment and conviction, not as a Christian struggling with sin.

10. Christians cannot be “prisoner[s] of the law of sin” (7:23) and “free from the law of sin” (8:2) at the same time. My argument here is similar to number 5 above. In 7:23, Fleshly Man describes his battle with sin: “But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (emphasis added). Paul does not say that the result of this war is that he feels like a prisoner of the law of sin. He says (again describing his actual objective status) that he has become a prisoner of the law of sin. When he goes on to describe the Christian’s condition in 8:2, he says that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” When verse 23 is taken at face value, the person being described is a prisoner, while the person in 8:2 is not. Logic dictates, then, that these cannot be objective descriptions of the same person at the same time.

Additionally, the battle fought with sin is described in verse 23 as a losing cause. We know this because in battle, prisoners are taken by the army that wins. In this battle, the law of sin takes Fleshly Man prisoner, indicating that the law of sin is the victor. This is not strange if the other combatant in this war is Fleshly Man's good intentions (i.e., "the law of [his] mind"). The unregenerate person certainly has good intentions, but despite his best intentions to do good, he or she simply cannot do good apart from the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:7-8). If Fleshly Man is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, however, then according to the plain wording of verse 23, the law of sin has defeated the Holy Spirit and has taken Fleshly Man prisoner. This is impossible for the Christian, because, once again appealing to Romans 6, Christians are not enslaved by sin.

11. Paul concludes the passage (v. 25) by describing Fleshly Man's ongoing condition as one of trying to "serve the law of God" (7:6), but actually "[serving] the law of sin" (7:25), neither of which are compatible with his other descriptions of the Christian life. The second half of verse 25 is often said to be a summary description of the Christian life: trying to please God (i.e., serving the law of God with the mind), but habitually failing (i.e., serving the law of sin). One of the main defenses of this interpretation is the position of the sentence in the passage; it comes after Paul's exclamation, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (25a). Since this person obviously knows Jesus (or so the reasoning goes), the remainder of the verse must be his self-description of the Christian experience. This interpretation is unsatisfying for two reasons:

First, Paul's consistent description of the Christian life in chapter 8 is that of walking in the Spirit (8:4), living by the Spirit (8:13), and being led by the Spirit (8:14). Nothing is ever said to the Romans about Christians "serving the law of God" (which most interpreters agree is a reference to the Law of Moses). In fact, Paul went out of his way to say that Christians "are not under law" (6:14), that they have been "made to die to the Law" (7:4), that they have been "released from the Law" (7:6a), and that they serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter" (7:6b). Given these statements, the last of which (7:6b) expressly denies that the Christian's objective is to serve the Law of Moses, it should seem strange to hear Paul say that the ordinary Christian experience is one of "serving the law of God" (7:25). The self-description in 25b

sounds much more like a Jew or Gentile God-fearer who is trying to please God through law keeping.

Secondly, to “serve . . . the law of sin” is to be a slave of sin. Without belaboring the point again, Christians may sin, but they do not serve the law of sin because they are no longer slaves of sin. Paul told us earlier that the new objective status of all true Christians is that of being “slaves of righteousness” (6:18). That means they serve righteousness instead of serving their former master, “the law of sin.”

12. Paul assures us in Romans 8:13 that people who are living like Fleshly Man are still condemned. Interpreters who hold to the “ordinary Christian experience” view of Romans 7:14–25 usually see verse 24 as a Christian’s expression of longing for glorification. When Fleshly Man says, “Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” it is assumed that he already knows the answer (as given in v. 25a), and that he is looking forward to the day when he will enjoy “the redemption of [the] body” (as in Romans 8:23). As the argument goes, Fleshly Man is fully expecting to be received into glory when Christ returns, despite the habitual sin he describes in verses 14–23—sin which he admits is due to the influence of his sinful flesh(7:14, 18, 23, 25b).

The problem with this interpretation of verse 24 is that Paul warns people who are living according to the flesh (like Fleshly Man), saying, “if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Nearly everyone agrees that “die” and “live” in this verse are references to eternal death in hell, or eternal life in heaven. Most scholars also agree that when Paul says to such people, “you must die,” he is speaking of their certain expectation of condemnation at the final judgment. In other words, he is saying that those who are living according to the flesh have only one thing to look forward to: eternal death. Therefore it is inconsistent to admit (as it seems everyone would) that Fleshly Man is “living according to the flesh,” and yet claim (as many do) that he is rightly expecting full and final deliverance.

Responses to Arguments for the “Ordinary Christian Experience” View

The following are my responses to the eight arguments I listed earlier for the “ordinary Christian experience” view. Some of these have been at least partially addressed in the above ten points, so I will try to avoid redundancy.

1. Argument: In verses 7–13, Paul was speaking in the past tense, obviously describing his own past experience of being confronted by the demands of the Law. The sudden shift from past to present tense in verse 14 is most naturally taken as an indication that Paul is now describing his present experience as a Christian.

Response: While Paul’s use of the present tense does present a challenge, it should not be seen as a conclusive factor. The use of the present tense in describing a past event is a common literary device even today. Think of the person who tells a story like this: “So here I am, driving down this pitch-black country road with the wind howling and tornado warnings on the radio. Now a tree is falling in front of me and golf ball-sized hail is pounding on the roof of my car. I am getting really, really scared and I don’t know what to do” Despite the man’s use of present-tense language, everyone listening to (or reading) his account would automatically understand that he was not describing his present situation. In other words, it is not solely the grammatical tense employed in relating an event which is the final determiner of meaning. The factual content of the account, especially when examined in relation to other known facts about the person who is telling or writing it, is far more important.

2. Argument: The struggle between the mind, or inner man, and the flesh, or members of the body (vv. 22–23), is not present in unbelievers. They want to do evil, not good (Rom. 1:18–32; John 3:19–20). Only believers have the genuine desire to do good, and therefore only they experience this struggle. Even though the Spirit is not mentioned in this passage, the fact that this person is experiencing a struggle between good and evil proves that the Holy Spirit is in him.

Response: This argument is understandable because of certain absolute biblical statements about the evil desires of unconverted people. Yet, it does not represent the full scope of biblical instruction, nor does it conform to common experience. Would you describe your former experience as an unconverted person by

saying that there was never any struggle in your conscience between what you knew was right and in some sense wanted to do, and the sins you actually committed as a matter of practice? Most Christians would admit that there was a struggle, perhaps even an intense one at times. Paul, in fact, mentions this type of struggle taking place in the mind of the unconverted Gentile when he speaks of the conscience in Romans 2:15. He refers to “their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” (Rom. 2:15), indicating that something in their minds was at times telling them they were doing good, and at other times, evil. The Bible does refer to unconverted people loving darkness rather than light (John 3:19), not seeking after God (Rom. 3:11), not doing any good (Rom. 3:12), and being hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7), but we must understand that these are descriptions of the unregenerate mind from God’s perspective. These are not the way an unregenerate person would describe himself.

3. Argument: The apparent defeat and slavery to sin depicted in Romans 7:14–25 is consistent with the “already–but–not–yet” theme in Paul’s theology. Objectively, we are not enslaved to sin, as Paul repeatedly affirms in Romans 6 (vv. 6, 7, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22), but we are nevertheless told not to allow sin to reign as our master (Rom. 6:12). In one place Paul can say that the “old self” has been laid aside with its evil practices and the “new self” has been put on (Col. 3:9–10), while in another place he can instruct Christians to “lay aside the old self” and “put on the new self” (Eph. 4:22–24). In Romans 7:14–25, Paul was describing the “not yet” aspect of his theology, while in Romans 6 and 8, he was describing the “already” aspect of his theology.

Response: Those who argue that the difference between Romans 6 and 7 fits with the “already but not yet” theology Paul reveals elsewhere (i.e., in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 as mentioned earlier) should first of all remember that Romans 6 and 7 are both parts of the same letter, not two separate letters addressed to two separate audiences. Where Paul says to the Colossians that the old self has been laid aside (the “already” aspect of Paul’s theology of sanctification), it is the Ephesians he appears to exhort by saying that the old self needs to be laid aside (the “not yet” aspect of Paul’s theology of sanctification). Even more important is the fact that there may be no difference at all between Ephesians and Colossians in this respect. When Ephesians 4:22–24 is read in light of 4:20–21,

what Paul appears to be saying is that laying aside the old self is the way Christ is properly learned. In other words, when a person “learns Christ” accurately and genuinely (i.e., when a person becomes a Christian), he or she does so in this manner: “In reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self . . . be renewed in the spirit of your mind . . . and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:22–23). In essence, then, according to this interpretation, the passage is not an exhortation to lay aside the old self, but rather a description of the repentance that always accompanies genuine saving faith.

Even if this interpretation of Ephesians 4 is not correct and Paul was instructing the Ephesian Christians to “lay aside the old self,” it is important to note that the “old self” in Ephesians and Colossians, and “sin” in Romans 6–8, are not the same. Laying aside the old self should not be equated with being freed from sin. Laying aside the old self is the Christian’s response to being freed from sin. We know this, first of all, because laying aside the old self is always described in the active sense (i.e., you have done this or need to do this), whereas being freed from sin is always described in the passive sense (i.e., this has happened to you). When one comes to understand Paul’s theology as a whole, it becomes clear that while no Christian has fully or perfectly laid aside the old self (i.e., put away their former manner of living) or put on the new self (i.e., perfected their new manner of living), every Christian has been fully and completely set free from sin, as Paul makes clear in Romans 6. There is nothing subjective or progressive about attaining the condition of being freed from sin. It happens to the Christian, through the work of Christ and the indwelling Spirit, the moment a person is converted.

4. Argument: Unbelievers do not “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (v. 22). They are “haters of God” (Rom. 1:30) and “hostile toward God” (8:7; Col. 1:21).

Response: Again, one must realize that the passages mentioned as proof of this point are theological descriptions of the unregenerate mind from God’s perspective, not self-descriptions given by unregenerate people themselves. The fact is, every sincere, even though unconverted, Jew would have described himself as one who loved the Law of Moses. This self-description would also not be

consciously hypocritical—the person would sincerely believe he was telling the truth about himself. Many unbelieving Jews in Paul’s day truly felt as though they loved, respected, even cherished the Law. They were not repulsed when reading it and trying to obey it, but rather they saw it as the key to eternal life (as Jesus said of them in John 5:39). God Himself commended the Jews for their stated intent to keep the Law (Deut. 5:27–28), even though He went on to lament the fact that they would certainly not do as they intended (Deut. 6:29). Paul described the Jews as having “a zeal for God” (Rom. 10:2), and the verses that follow this statement make it plain that their zeal was an attempt to achieve righteousness through law-keeping rather than through Christ. Therefore it would not be at all inconsistent to hear a sincere though unconverted Jew say, “I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man.” The point of this statement in Romans 7:22, and of the passage as a whole, is to say, “In my mind, I sincerely approve of God’s Law and fully intend to obey it, though I find myself doing the exact opposite.”

5. Argument: The struggle depicted in Romans 7:14–25 is consistent with the war between the flesh and the Spirit described in Galatians 5:16–17. Because the struggle in Galatians involves the Spirit of God, it clearly refers to a struggle within the Christian. Therefore, because both places describe the potential for sinful failure, both must refer to the same struggle within the Christian.

Response: First of all, the fact that Paul seems to describe a similar situation in Galatians does not prove that the same situation is being described in Romans 7. His purpose in writing to the Galatians was to refute a heresy, while the letter to the Romans is a comprehensive presentation of the gospel itself (although in presenting the gospel Paul does indeed refute heresy). The two letters from Paul were written for distinctly different purposes, so no automatic parallel in application should be assumed.

Furthermore, the overall context of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, in which the heresy of “righteousness through law-keeping” rather than “righteousness through Christ alone” is being refuted, lends weight to the conclusion reached by some that Galatians 5:16ff is not describing the war between the Spirit and the flesh in the mind of a Christian. According to this interpretation, Paul was describing the choice the Galatians were facing to either follow the Spirit by following the true gospel (i.e., finding their righteousness in Christ

alone), or to follow the flesh by choosing the heresy (i.e., once again submitting to the regulations of the Law in seeking righteousness, thus proving themselves to be unbelievers, cf. 5:2–5). This view gains support from Paul’s earlier rebuke of the Galatians (3:3) in which he said, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (an obvious reference to futility of law-keeping for righteousness).

With this understood, Galatians 5:16–18, with Paul’s repeated contrasts between the Spirit and the flesh, needs to be reexamined before one assumes that it describes a Christian’s internal struggle with sin. This is especially important since in 5:18 Paul contrasts being led by the Spirit as incompatible with being under the Law. He seems to equate being under the Law with being in the flesh (or not under grace) as Paul said in Romans 6:14–15 and 7:4–6, and being delivered from the Law with having crucified the flesh (compare Galatians 5:24 with Romans 6:6). If this interpretation of Galatians 5:6–18 is correct, then Romans 7 and Galatians 5 have very much in common, but not in the way that is typically perceived. Both would be analyses of the differences between law-keeping for righteousness (which inevitably fails because it characterizes those who remain in the flesh), and life in the Spirit (which inevitably succeeds in producing practical righteousness because it characterizes those who are indwelt by the Spirit). Much more study is needed regarding this interpretation of Galatians 5:16–18, but it will suffice for now to say that Galatians 5:16–18 falls far short of proving “the ordinary Christian experience” view of Romans 7:14–25.

6. Argument: The person in verses 14–25 knows Jesus as his Savior (v. 25a).

Response: The statement in verse 25 (“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”) proves only one thing: The person writing the letter knew Jesus as his Savior at the time the letter was written. This exclamation could have easily been intended by Paul the Christian as a joyful parenthesis in the middle of recounting his pre-conversion despair. This possibility seems even more likely when one notes that in uttering this exclamation, Paul switches suddenly from the singular (“I” and “me”) to the plural—“Jesus Christ our Lord” (emphasis added). He may have made this sudden switch to the plural to indicate that he was reminding Christians that Jesus is

the answer to the dilemma Fleshly Man was experiencing prior to being converted. This statement, in other words, was Paul's Christian answer to the unconverted person's despair at having discovered that the Law was a dead end in the pursuit of true righteousness.

7. Argument: After proclaiming that Christ is the one who will deliver him from "the body of this death" (v. 24), Paul returns to further describe the ongoing conflict. This proves that even after Christ has delivered a person from sin and death (7:25a), the pattern of sinful failure described in verses 14–23 continues (7:25b). On this same thought, the forward-looking question, "Who will set me free from the body of this death" (7:24, emphasis added) should be understood as referring to the final redemption of the body, which is yet in the future for believers. Christians remain in "the body of this death" until Christ's return. This is affirmed by Romans 8:11 and 23.

Response: First of all, if the "parentheses" interpretation in my previous response is valid, then there is no need to see Paul as "returning" to anything in 25b. He simply continues where he left off before briefly inserting the Christian answer to the unconverted person's problem. Secondly, as addressed in number 11, neither of the self-descriptions given in 25b (serving the Law of God and serving the law of sin) are consistent with Paul's description of the Christian life elsewhere. The parallel between Romans 7:24–25 and 8:10–13 is extremely unlikely in my opinion, since Romans 8:1–14 is all about the way true Christians can and do behave righteously because of the Spirit who dwells in them, while Romans 7:14–25 is all about a person who cannot behave righteously despite his most diligent effort and best intentions. As for Romans 7:24 being a reference to the final redemption of the body, Paul introduces the thought of final redemption in 8:23 as something new, not as something that was previously discussed.[3] This is apparent in verse 23 when he writes, "And not only this, but we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." His point was to say that Christians, whose righteous behavior is "the first fruits of the Spirit" (as Paul had been discussing since the beginning of chapter 8), have even more to look forward to in the future: "our adoption as sons, the redemption

of our body.” Here, for the first time in chapter 8, Paul makes mention of the resurrection of the body when Christ returns.

8. Argument: The Romans 7:14–25 experience is universally familiar to believers, so much so that it is proven to be “ordinary” by that factor. All Christians struggle with sin, and all are anticipating final deliverance from “the body of this death.” This is so consistently affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament (even as close as Romans 8:11 and 23) that no one should find it unusual for Paul to describe it here.

Response: It is more accurate to say that Romans 7:14–25 contains elements that are similar to the ordinary Christian experience. All true Christians do struggle with sin, similar in some ways to Fleshly Man’s description of his own struggle. All true Christians at times lament their proneness toward sinning and may feel a sense of despair, similar in some ways to Fleshly Man’s exclamation of despair in verse 24. But no true Christian may find similarity between his own objective reality of “having been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:6, 7, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22; 8:2), and Fleshly Man’s objective reality of being “of flesh, sold into bondage to sin” (Rom. 7:14), or of being “a prisoner of the law of sin” (Rom. 7:23).

Conclusion

My intent in writing and posting this article was simply to make the fruit of my own study available to others. I hope it will promote diligent study and edifying discussion among believers, even if some arrive at (or remain convinced of) a different view. I earnestly hope that everyone who reads what I have written will apply their own understanding of Romans 7 in a responsible manner, never using the “ordinary Christian experience” view as a way to comfort habitual sinners who should be warned, and never using the “pre-conversion” view in a way that will drive true believers to despair through a false doctrine of perfectionism.

[1] Historically, a few interpreters have taken Romans 7:14–25 to be a description of the experience of an immature believer rather than the ordinary Christian experience. This interpretation may come closer to explaining the person’s growing understanding of his own condition (see number 9 below), and perhaps the frequency of his sinful failure, but it comes no closer to dealing with the fact that

Fleshly Man describes his own objective reality. He is not spiritual, he is sold under sin (see number 5 below), he is a prisoner of the law of sin (see number 10 below) than does the “ordinary Christian experience” view. These objective realities cannot be true of an immature believer any more than a mature believer.

[2] Lit, “evil desire,” as compared to another Greek word commonly translated “covetousness” in the NT. Since Paul quotes from the Ten Commandments in 7:7, we should not make any great difference between covetousness and evil desire based solely on his choice of words

[3] In my opinion, the final redemption of the body was not discussed in Romans 8:11. This verse, I believe, promises the “life” of practical righteousness that is experienced while in our mortal bodies (that is, our unredeemed bodies, bodies that are destined to die physically but are still alive) “through His Spirit who dwells in you.” I believe Paul was referring to the “logical future,” rather than the “chronological future” when he said, “He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies” (emphasis added). He was not indicating, in other words, that Christians could expect this “life” at some point in the future (referring to glorification), but that this “life” (referring to practical righteousness) inevitably follows, or accompanies, the indwelling of the Spirit. Paul used this same “logical future” device in 4:23–24 when he said, speaking of justification, “Now not for his [Abraham’s] sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also [addressing current believers], to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (emphasis added). Paul was not telling believers that they could expect to be justified at some point in the future. He was saying, “Just as Abraham was justified by faith alone, so also will we be justified by faith alone.” The one thing (justification for all believers) logically follows, or accompanies, the other (justification for Abraham the believer). So in 8:11, the “life” of righteousness logically follows the presence of the Spirit, with no necessity to see this as a reference to a future event for believers. As for the connection with the resurrection of Jesus, Paul’s meaning in 8:11 is roughly parallel with 6:4–7, where union with the resurrection of Jesus results in the practice of “walking in newness of life” (v. 4–5), the crucifixion of the old self (v.6) and freedom from sin (v. 7).

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