



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 7: 14-25

Romans

“The War Within”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are in Romans Chapter 7, where Paul is explaining the function of the Law; what the Law does, and what the Law does not do. The Law exposes sin, and the Law, he said, did that for him. What he has said about the Law, it does not want to be misunderstood as implying that Law is evil, or the source of evil. The Law is good, and the good function of the Law is it exposes our sinful condition and our need of a Savior. And it did that for Paul, and he explains that in the first half of the chapter, where the Law put him to death.

Well, he continues with that explanation of the Law in the verses that follow. The second half of the chapter – verses 14-25 – which are passage of some difficulty in interpretation. And so we’re going to, in our study of it, spend some time on that interpretation and the justification of it. So Verse 14, Paul writes, “For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin, which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I’m doing the very thing I do not want, I am not longer the one doing it, but sin, which dwells in me.”

“I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do praise you as the God of all mercy, and the God of salvation. We cannot save ourselves; Paul has made that very plain in the book of Romans up to this point in our text, in our studies, and we will see that to the end of the book. We cannot save ourselves, the Law cannot save us; no human effort can remove our sin and make us righteous in your sight. Only you could that, and you’ve done that in your Son. And we who have believed in Christ rejoice in that, and give you thanks. And we gather together this morning to be nourished in this truth, and to be built up in the faith, that we might not only praise you with our lips, but praise you with our lives, praise you with the way we think, the way we conduct ourselves.

And so, Father, we are thankful for this hour, this time when we can come together and worship you, and sing praise to you. And we can join together in reading the text of Scripture as we have done, and then spend time considering its meaning and its application to us. And so, Lord, as we do that, we pray that you would bless us. This is how we are built up in the faith, this is how we are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, this is how we are strengthened in the inner man. It is our spiritual food; it’s our nourishment, and we pray that you would bless us. Because ultimately, Father, that blessing does come from you; it doesn’t come from us.

We are responsible to study, we are responsible to place ourselves under the teaching ministry of the Word of God, we are responsible to focus our minds on your truth. But the opening up of our mind to receive that truth – the discernment and the understanding that we have, to understand and apply things to our lives – that ultimately comes from you, Father. It comes from the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who dwells within every believer’s heart, and we pray that that ministry would go unhindered, and we would be built up and conformed to Christ’s image. May this be a profitable time for us, a time of worship, a time of blessing and joy.

And Father, we pray not only for ourselves spiritually, but materially as well. We live in difficult days. We live in times that are hard, economically, financially, and there are people out of work, people in this assembly who are lacking employment. We pray for

them, and pray that you would provide employment, open doors of opportunity. We pray for those who are sick, and those who are discouraged, pray that you would give healing, that you would give encouragement, that you would bless them in the ways in which only you know are best. If it's physical healing, Lord we pray for that. But certainly we know that it's your will that they be encouraged in whatever circumstance of life we are in.

We know, Father, from what we will study later in Chapter 8, that everything that touches us – all things – work together for our good, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose; what a blessed truth that is. Father, may those who are in difficulty understand that, and believe that, and rest in that. Father, we pray for our nation; we pray that you bless it. We live in trying times; in the past few weeks, we have been reminded of the kind of world we live in. You give so much peace and prosperity – at least in this part of the world – that we tend to think that this is the way things are normally. And then a great tragedy occurs – a horrific event – and then we see what the world is really like, and what would be the norm, were it not for your sovereign grace – your providential, general grace – that keeps life so orderly.

Father, we do not live in a peaceful, pleasant world. We live in a hostile environment. Help your people to understand that, and may this time of difficulty in our nation be an occasion for others to be awakened to what life is like, and to the peril and the brevity of life, and may many come a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Awaken your church to become active in that way, in presenting the gospel, through word and deed. And we pray for our government – those men and women whom you have placed in authority over us – that you would give them special wisdom, that they would know best to protect this nation, to govern this nation, and to establish justice in this world. And we pray for that.

So Father, we look to you for all these things; we pray your blessings upon us. Bless us now in this hour; we pray for your blessings this evening when we gather again to worship our Lord and remember His death for us, and His first coming, and remember that He's coming again. We look forward to that day, Father, when He returns with His reward. May we live for that. And now, Father, bless us as we sing our final hymn; prepare our hearts for our time of study and worship together. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] In his classic novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Remarque gave a grim account of the First World War through the lives of some 19-year-old students who volunteered for the German army. Looking back on it, the leading character said, “No

one had the vaguest idea what we were in for. Some of them,” he said, “were beside themselves with joy.” Well the excitement was soon replaced with the reality of life in the trenches, with the mud, the rats, the heavy bombardments and combat in no man’s land. “War is hell,” as Sherman said, and a soldier needs to know that, so his resolve to fight doesn’t collapse with the first casualties.

That’s true of the Christian life as well. What is initially entered with great excitement and joy, can soon be replaced by deep disappointment and confusion, when the struggle gets hard. And we are in a hard struggle. When we entered into a relationship with Christ, we entered into war with sin. In fact, some have experienced more soul trials after their conversion than before, when they had no sense of their lost condition. So we need to know the nature of this spiritual war; we need to know the enemy we face, where we are weak, and we need to know where our strength lies, or we will experience great disappointment and setback.

That is Paul’s subject in Romans 7. He was a veteran of the conflict, and he describes his agonizing struggle from his own experience as one who had been in the trenches. It’s not a war that is easily won. It is a life-long struggle, and for the most part a private struggle, where the battlefield is our heart. But it is a war in which we are assured of victory. Romans 7 has been called one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, but its fame comes mainly in the second half of the chapter – our passage, verses 14-25 – and its fame is not due only to the struggle that’s described, but to the differences in its interpretation. Is Paul describing his Christian life, or his pre-Christian life? Is his statement in Verse 14, “Sold into bondage to sin”, a description of Paul as a regenerate man, or as an unregenerate man? Is Paul even describing himself?

These are the questions of debate, and they have been for centuries. Augustine, for example, originally followed the view of a lot of the early Church fathers that these verses described Paul as unregenerate person. Later, after further study and reflection, particularly during the debates that he had with Pelagius, he changed his view, and came to believe that Paul was describing his experience as a Christian. And Calvinists have generally taken that position. Calvin and Luther did, as well as others, such as Charles Hodge, and William G.T. Shedd, and modern commentators John Murray and Charles Cranfield.

Arminians have usually followed the interpretation that Paul is describing his struggles with the Law and with sin, before he was saved. Arminius, in fact, devoted a great deal of attention to this text. He wrote a commentary on it of over 200 pages, arguing

and defending that view, that Paul is describing his unconverted condition. The principle reason for taking that position – that Romans 7 is about an unsaved man – is that Paul could never say the things he says if he were saved. He calls himself a “slave to sin” in Verse 14, while back in Chapter 6, verses 17-18, he says that we have been freed from sin. In Verse 18 of Chapter 7 he writes “nothing good dwells in me.” That doesn’t seem to fit the description of a believer.

And so many have taken these verses to be a description of a non-believer which describes the struggle that he goes through with sin and with the Law, and seeking to conform to the Law, and that struggle is not resolved until Verse 25, when he declares “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” A more modern variation of that view is that Paul is not so much describing his own experience as an unregenerate man under the Law, as that of the Jewish people under the Law. So, when Paul speaks in the first person, when he uses the word “I”, he’s not really speaking personally; he’s not speaking so much of his own experience, but speaking representatively, or speaking rhetorically and putting himself in the shoes of the Jewish people, and the pious Jews who lived under the Law and struggled under it.

Now the obvious objection to that is that it is not the natural way to read the text. Why should we suspect that Paul is not really speaking of himself, but of Israel, when he says “I”? I think it would’ve been very difficult for the Roman readers to pick up this letter, when they first received it, and come to that understanding, and assume that Paul wasn’t really speaking of himself, but speaking of others.

Sinclair Ferguson, who has written a very good book on the Holy Spirit – in fact, it’s entitled *The Holy Spirit* – comments on that idea that Paul is speaking representatively – he’s putting himself in the shoes of others and speaking as them – and he writes, “Paul would then be describing an “I” that has no real existence.” And Paul certainly gives us every indication of describing his own experience, his personal experience in this passage, particularly in Verse 25, where he writes, “Wretched man than I am!” If those are not Paul’s own words of Paul’s own experience, then they are, as one writer put it, “impossibly theatrical”.

I think Paul is clearly speaking of himself, and he is describing an experience that is typical of us all, though not as unbelievers, but as believers. And so briefly I want to give the reasons why I believe that to be so, and then we will consider the struggle that is common to all Christians.

First, the language supports the interpretation that Paul is speaking as a Christian. Paul is struggling against sin, he recognizes his inability to live obediently, to please God, and he hates his failure to do it. That doesn't fit the description of an unregenerate man. You may remember Paul's autobiographical sketch in Philippians 3. He speaks of his life as a Pharisee – as a Jew – and the kind of life that he lived. And you'll remember that in Verse 6, he tells the Philippians of the attitude that he had at that time, as a Pharisee, as a man who sought to keep the Law and his relationship to it, and he said of himself that as to the Law, he was found blameless. So as we look back on Paul's previous experience – his life before conversion – there's no indication of a great struggle. There's no indication in Philippians 3 of any crisis in his life, like we read of in the second half of this chapter.

Secondly, here in verses 16 and 22, Paul states that he delights in the Law; he calls it good. That is not true of an unregenerate man. The non-Christian is against God's law. In Chapter 8, in Verse 7, Paul states that the unconverted mind is “hostile toward God, and does not subject itself to the law of God.” But here, in the second half of Romans 7, Paul says, “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”

Thirdly, the change in tense follows the view that Paul is a regenerate man, and this may be strongest argument. In the first half of the chapter, Paul describes his pre-Christian life, and everything is written in the past tense. In Verse 9, for example, he wrote, “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died.” This is past tense. In the second half, his description is the present tense. “I am doing the very thing I hate,” – Verse 15. Verse 21: “I find then the principle that evil is present in me.”

How do we account for that abrupt change in the tense of the verbs, if Paul is still describing his past life as an unregenerate man? It only obscures the meaning unnecessarily; there's no need to change tenses if he's still describing his life in his pre-converted condition. The change to the present tense naturally suggests that Paul has moved from explaining his pre-Christian life, to his present Christian experience at the time he was writing the letter.

And fourthly and finally, that fits the flow of the argument. Paul has moved from the subject of justification in chapters 3, 4 and 5, to the subject of sanctification in chapters 6, 7 and 8. Returning to the subject of justification, which he has thoroughly covered, makes no sense; it breaks the flow of the argument, and it's completely unnecessary. So I take Paul's meaning here, in verses 14-25, to be in regard to his Christian life, and the

struggle that he faced, and that we all face, as he sought – and we seek – to live a holy life of obedience.

What Paul says here is not the whole story on the Christian life; we shouldn't think that it is. It is a great struggle, but that's only part of it. There are defeats in the Christian life, every day; we stumble along the way. But it is only defeat, and it's not only stumbling; there's also victory and there's also progress. We are continually progressing and being conformed to the image of Christ. And so remember that Chapter 7 goes on to Chapter 8, the great chapter of victory. “We have died to sin,” as Paul explains in Chapter 6, it is not the controlling force of our lives. But we have not yet been saved from the presence of sin; we still fight it and we still experience frustration.

What Christian, at some time, has not said, in his or her heart, “Oh, wretched man that I am”? Leon Morris in his commentary wrote, “It is worth bearing in mind that the great saints through the ages do not commonly say, ‘How good I am.’ Rather, they are apt to bewail their sinfulness: ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man’”. And we find that throughout the Bible, with the great saints, **at** the Word of God. Job, after his trials – when he had sought to understand why he had been afflicted, and justified himself with his friends – when the Lord finally spoke to him, and explained, to some degree, what had happened, Job confesses, “I retract and repent in dust and ashes.” Those are the words of a godly man.

David, throughout the Psalms, confesses his failures and his sins. Isaiah, when he saw the vision of the Lord, in Isaiah 6, said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips.” The description that Paul gives here in Chapter 7 is a description that's very similar to that. There was a tension in his life between who he was in Christ, and what remained in him of Adam. And a lot of Adam remained in Paul, as he does in all of us. And so there's a struggle in the Christian life between the flesh and the spirit; between the sin that's in us, and the Law. It's what Paul describes in Galatians 5: 17: “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

We have the flesh; there is sin within us, and yet, by God's grace, we have the Holy Spirit within us, and the Holy Spirit and sin wage war with one another. The Spirit and the flesh. And yet, as we come to our text, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only once in Romans 7 – that's in Verse 6 – it's not even in the struggle that is described in the verses that we look at this morning. This chapter is all about law. Paul is explaining the relationship of the

Law to sin. The Law is not bad; the Law is good; it exposes sin. In fact, it provokes sin within the person that tries to keep it, in order to make the presence of sin in that individual known, and its guilt – the guilt of sin – realized.

But the Law – while it is good, and while it functions well in that regard, and was given for that purpose – the Law is no remedy for sin. It cannot remove the guilt of sin by justifying the sinner, and it cannot remove the stain of sin by sanctifying the believer. The Law cannot remove the penalty of sin, the Law cannot break the power of sin. But it does still expose the sin that remains in the believer, and it shows sin’s rebelliousness, and shows its strength. And it is too strong for the Christian. We cannot keep the Law, unaided, by our own human nature. Our best attempts cannot produce righteousness. Our best attempts at pleasing God end in failure. Only the Holy Spirit can do that; only He can produce obedience and a life that’s pleasing to God.

And Paul describes what happens when a person tries to live according to law, according to God’s principles, in his own strength or her own strength. And the result of that is defeat. Christian life is warfare, and the enemy in Romans 7 is sin within. Paul wants us to see that; Paul wants us to see sin’s strength and our weakness apart from the Holy Spirit. And so he repeats his description of the conflict three times. He gives the description of this struggle that we have first in verses 14-17, and then again in much the same way, he describes it in verses 18-20, and then thirdly in verses 21-24, he again gives a description of this struggle we are in. It’s not until Verse 25, at the end of the chapter, that he gives the solution.

He begins by acknowledging his weakness in the conflict. In contrast to the Law, which is spiritual, he is unspiritual: “I am of flesh,” he says; enslaved to a power that he rejects, a power that he hates. Now that’s surprising, coming from an Apostle; we don’t expect an Apostle to say, “I am of flesh.” But as F. F. Bruce states, “There is something in man – even regenerate man – which objects to God and seeks to be independent of Him. That’s true of all of us. Even believers in Jesus Christ have that bit of rebellion within them, because that something that does that, that something in us is sin, which Paul says in Verse 17, “dwells in me”. The Law is good, but the Law is weak. It can expose sin, it can define sin, but it cannot remove sin. It cannot make us obedient.

So our efforts, apart from the Spirit’s power, are met with failure. That is the struggle, and Paul describes in in Verse 15. It is perplexing: “I do not understand what I am doing,” he says, and it is frustrating. He delights in righteousness, he wants to do it, but

he does the opposite: “I am doing the very thing I hate.” That’s the terrible conflict that the Christian has. But because we do struggle, we see our true self. It is in the fact that we struggle, that we can see who we really are. That’s what Paul says of himself, in verses 16-17. He agrees with the Law – “it is good,” he says – and he hates sin. So the real Paul is not the man who sins, but the man who loves righteousness. The culprit here is sin, and Paul distinguishes himself from it in Verse 17, where he says, “No longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.”

So once again, as Paul has done previously in the chapter, he personifies sin; he describes sin like an individual, like a person. Back in verses 8 and 9 of Chapter 7, he presented sin as a hostile agent, as an enemy that struck him, struck at him. And here he describes it as an unwanted guest; someone has described sin as a squatter living within. Robert Leighton, who was the archbishop of Glasgow a number of centuries ago, describes sin as “no longer the uncontrolled master of the house, but still in the house as an unruly servant or slave who vexes and annoys the Christian.”

Sin does that. It’s in us; it’s very active in us. It’s completely out of our character to act according to sin, but it is there, and it is vexing, and it is unruly within the life of the believer. It doesn’t control the believer – it’s been dethroned, it’s been defeated – but it’s still present and active. And Paul confirms that in Verse 18, where he explains his condition further. He writes, “Nothing good dwells in me.” Now, he qualifies that statement; he says, “in my flesh.” As a Christian, he was a new creature, that’s good. And he did obey, and that’s good. And the Holy Spirit dwelt within him, and of course that’s good. But his flesh – what remained of the old life – is not good, and it is a very significant part of his life; it’s a very significant part of the lives of each one of us.

We are like a prisoner who has been freed; the prison door is open; the chains that bound him have been broken. But heavy fragments of those chains still remain on his wrists and on his ankles, so that he drags them along as he seeks to go forward and leave the cell and make progress. And so his movement is slowed by those chains that remain. And the flesh does that to us, “For,” Paul says, “the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.” Now, Paul is not disavowing any responsibility for the sin he commits. It is his flesh, he says – it’s not someone else’s flesh; it’s his flesh – and the sin that frustrates his will and his desire is the sin that dwells in him. So it’s a part of him.

At the end of the chapter, Verse 25, Paul identifies himself as the agent who both serves God and serves sin. So Paul is not seeking to remove himself from any

responsibility for the sin he commits; he doesn't. But sin is completely inconsistent with the man that Paul is in Christ. That person is the one who wills to do good. But the reality is, he can never completely do that. Now isn't that your experience? As you read through this text, don't you see yourself in that? You desire, as a child of God, to please God, and you want to be obedient, but you continually find yourself not doing that. You continually find yourself frustrated. Well, that was Paul's experience. Paul discovered that about himself, and as he examines his life, he concludes that there's nothing good in him.

That's how pervasive and extensive sin is. It is so deeply entrenched in him, that it has affected everything. Even the good that he does is unsatisfactory, because it's tainted with sin. An old Anglican – Bishop Beveridge – put the problem plainly: “I cannot pray,” he said, “but I sin. I cannot hear or give an alms or receive the Sacrament, but I sin. My repentance needs to be repented of. My tears want washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again with the blood of the Redeemer.” The best we do is not the best, not perfect. It's tainted. And the more mature we become, the more clearly we see that, and we see how weak and unprofitable we really are, and we confess, “Nothing good dwells in me.” That is, “Nothing good dwells in my flesh, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us.”

Paul restates all of this in verses 19-20. He practices the very evil that he hates, “But,” he says, “I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.” So the picture that he gives here of the Christian is of a Christian as a divided person. Luther likened our condition to a horse and its rider. They are both one – they ride together – but sometimes the horse doesn't trot exactly as the rider wishes. If I had been Luther's companion, he would've been describing me, if he ever saw me on a horse. I've only mounted a horse a very few times in my life, and it's always proved to be a very frustrating experience. The horse does what it wants; it doesn't do what I want. And usually I need someone to come along and give me some help – grab the reins or something – and lead it out of the stream of water or wherever it wants to stay, because it won't listen to me.

And that's very much like our spiritual experience; we need the Holy Spirit to tame the flesh, to bring it under control, because we are divided, and of ourselves, our strength is weak. We are not able to govern ourselves, and to control ourselves. Verses 21-24, Paul explains this division in terms of two laws within us: the law of God and the law of sin. We should best understand that expression “law” in regard to sin as not some code of ethics

or some written law, like the law of Moses, but as a principle; a principle of sin that functions like a law, with the regularity and the fixedness of a law.

So sin works in that way, and Paul says that these two laws – or these two principles – are at war with each other. The law of God is in the inner man, in his inner being; his true self. And it operates in his mind, which has been renewed, has been regenerated. And as a new man, as a regenerated person, in his mind he approves of the law of God. He longs to keep the law of God; he rejoices in the law of God. The law – or the principle – of sin in his members is a description of the law that works in the members of his body. Now the body isn't described as sinful; Paul didn't believe that the body was sinful; he doesn't believe that material things are sinful, as the Greeks did. Paul's not saying that. But the body is influenced by sin, so that its members are affected by sin: the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet, they are influenced and directed by sin, and made instruments of evil.

Paul fights against that with the law of his mind, but the law in his members is too strong, he says. And it makes him a prisoner; it gains control, and he ends up doing the very thing that he hates, the very thing that he does not want to do. Paul expresses his frustration; in fact, he expresses the frustration of the Christian in Verse 24, when he cries out, “Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death?” That's not the cry of an unbeliever. The unbeliever is characterized by self-righteousness; the unbeliever is content with his or her condition and unbelief; they don't see any problem. They believe they're right with God, just as Paul did as a Pharisee, when he said, “Before the Law, I am blameless.”

No, this is the cry of a believer. Charles Spurgeon understood that from a very early age. He was saved at, I believe, the age of 15, in a small, primitive Methodist church in London. The great Calvinist was led to Christ by a simple Arminian. And naturally, Spurgeon was drawn back to that place on the next Sunday. But during the week, in between, he had what he called “many experiments, and tumbled down a great many times.” So when he came to church that second Sunday, he was glad to see that the preacher had taken as his text “Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” “I thought, ‘Yes, I know all about that; that is my case.’”

But when the preacher got into the pulpit and said that Paul was not a Christian when he wrote those words, or those were not words about his Christian life, Spurgeon said that he never went there again. “Though I was only seven days old in divine things, I knew better than that. I knew that no man but a Christian ever could or would cry out against sin

with that bitter wail.” It’s not the cry of an unbeliever, and I don’t think this the expression of a modern mind, either, with its concern for a good self-image, reinforced by a positive mental attitude. This is the reaction of a mature Christian to his sinful failures, which are real and painful.

Now, there is nothing wrong, I might add, with a good self-image, with being comfortable with who God made us to be, and with the gifts that He gave us. He has given all of us great blessings, great gifts. We should be very pleased with the people that God made us, and the new creatures that we are in Christ. We should be positive people, we should be confident, we should be joyful people; that’s the fruit of the Spirit. I don’t think that a deep sense of inferiority is virtuous; I don’t think Christians should be morose, melancholy people, continually flagellating themselves.

But that’s not what Paul is doing here. He is giving voice to the response of a mature Christian; he’s giving his own response to sin. And only a person who understands the depth of sin, the gravity of sin, how serious it really is, will give such a cry as this, “Wretched man that I am!” That’s the cry of a sensitive conscience. It sorrows over sin. It is deeply disturbed by defeat. And very often that’s lacking among us.

I remember many years ago – 30 years ago or more – Dr. Johnson used an expression that stuck in my mind. He described the modern, Bible-believing Church as “easy-going evangelicalism.” And that’s the way it is, so much of the time, with so many of us: easy-going; a very casual kind of relationship with the Lord God; a very casual attitude toward sin, and the seriousness of it. Well, that was not the case with Paul. The fight was real, he had joined the fight, and it was serious business to him. But it was not a fight that he could win in his own strength; Paul knew that. Even with his new nature and armed with the law of God, he could not triumph over sin. And so he cries out, “Who will set me free from the body of this death?” From this physical body, which is made an instrument of sin, and its deadly practices. Who will deliver me?

That’s a cry of anguish, but not a cry of despair, because immediately he answers his own question with confidence: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Who will deliver me? Who will deliver us? Christ will set us free. He will deliver this body in the resurrection to come, so that it will be glorified, it will be perfect, it will be controlled absolutely by righteousness, all the time, for all eternity. That is our future hope, and the assurance of final victory that we have.

We will be delivered; that’s our hope. And we will be delivered not only from the penalty of sin, and delivered not only from the power of sin, we will be delivered from the very presence of sin. That is our future, and hope is toward the future. And so we look forward to the future with great confidence. In the meantime, we live in the present, and we continue the struggle. And so Paul concludes by summarizing the spiritual conflict: “So then,” he writes, “I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other with my flesh the law of sin.” But he does that with great hope.

And that hope instills confidence and determination in the war within. Because he knows that he has been promised final victory: “We shall prevail.” And the confidence of ultimate victory should give us the incentive to fight on, and continue the struggle, knowing that there is great reward and great blessing in that struggle that we fight. And in fact, we do prevail in the present time, for the same reason that we will prevail in the future, and that is because of Christ. Victory comes through Him, and not through ourselves. We cannot win in this struggle against sin in our own strength; it is too strong a force.

But that was never the intent. The Christian is in Christ; we are joined to Him. He’s the vine, we are the branches, we gain our life from Him; we draw that life from Him: “Apart from me, you can do nothing,” He said. But we are apart from Him, and as we live in dependence upon Him, we experience great blessing. And Paul will go on to develop that in Chapter 8. It’s a chapter about victory, about triumph. There’s no defeat in that chapter. And he says, for example, in Chapter 8, verses 3-4, in Christ, the requirement of the Law is fulfilled. Fulfilled in us, who, he says, “do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

That’s the key: walking by the Spirit. We live a supernatural life in the heat of battle. We’re not intended to live in our own strength and by our own wits; we are intended to live – and can only live – a supernatural life. The battle that we are in is all around us. It’s going on right now, in this auditorium. It is going on within us, constantly. We are in this environment, which is hostile, spiritually, and we need to know that. We need to know that so that we will address it; we will fight it with realism and with wisdom. The danger is that we lose perspective by either becoming indifferent, by being distracted, by falling asleep spiritually, or by becoming over-confident.

Peter gives us a good illustration of both. He was very confident of his loyalty and his resolve to serve the Lord and stay with him in the coming conflict, even when the Lord warned him prophetically, the night that He was betrayed, after they left the upper room.

The Lord warned the disciples that they would all fall away; that was the prophecy of Zechariah 13: 7: the shepherd would be struck, the sheep would be scattered. Well, Peter objected to that. He confidently asserted his loyalty: “Even though all may fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” He even boasted that he was ready to die for Christ.

Now, he meant that; he was sincere in his objection and his assertion. He was greatly sincere in that, but sincerity’s not enough. Peter was a little like those boys who went off to the western front, with joy, not really knowing what they were in for. And Peter overestimated himself, and he underestimated the situation, and of course when the soldiers came and Christ was arrested, Peter not only fled with the others, he went on to deny Christ three times. But before he did that, in between this great boast of confidence and this utter abject failure, there was sleep. Peter fell asleep.

At the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked Peter, James and John to stand watch while he went off by Himself to pray. They fell asleep, the Lord found them in that condition, He admonished them. He said, “Keep watching and praying, that ye may not come into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away again, to pray, and again, they fell asleep. They didn’t sense the danger and the significance of the moment; they didn’t keep watching as Christ told them to do. They didn’t follow His instruction, and they were unprepared for the crisis when it came, and it swept them away.

Now, there’s a pattern in that for how we fight in the spiritual conflict. We can never lose focus. We can never rest from the battle. We can never sleep, spiritually. A Christian life is lived in the second half of Romans 7: “Where the willing is present in us, but the doing of the good is not.” Sin is not the master; sin has been dethroned, but it has not yet been destroyed. And so we must always be alert, standing and fully clothed in the spiritual armor that God has given, just as Paul puts in in Ephesians 6: 13: “We must be alert and watchful and diligent.”

J.I. Packer gave some helpful directions on how a Christian is to live. And he states it simply, but I think it’s helpful. First, he writes, “As a Christian who wants to do good, you observe what tasks, opportunities and responsibilities face you. Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing. Third, you go to work, with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for the help given. Ask pardon for your own failure en route, and request more help for the new task. And so it goes. We are active, we are obedient, looking to the Lord constantly for the strength and the wisdom and the help.”

That’s good advice. We’re to be diligent in the task before us. We’re to be watchful, because we are in a battle, and we’re to know we will ultimately prevail, and we can prevail in the midst in the difficulty through the strength that the spirit of God gives to those that are in Christ, God’s people.

But are you in Christ? Have you believed in Him? He’s the only Savior. You cannot be saved by your good works; you cannot save yourself. Paul has made one thing clear in the book of Romans; it is that we cannot be saved by keeping the Law. The Law was never given to save anyone; it cannot save. It can only condemn, and you stand condemned, if you are not in Jesus Christ. And you become in Him, united with Him through faith, and faith in Him. So if you’re here without Christ, look to Him, trust in Him. Those who do, those who trust in Him receive the forgiveness of sins, receive the Holy Spirit, and receive life everlasting. May God help you to do that. May God help you to see your need for Christ, turn to Him, and trust in Him, and may He help all of us who’ve done that to live in a way that’s pleasing to Him, to seek His help, and to walk by the Spirit.

Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the gift of life, the gift of the Spirit, all that we have, because all of it comes from you. We look at ourselves; if we’re honest with ourselves and if we fully understand ourselves, we must confess “Nothing good dwells in me that is in my flesh.” But much good dwells in us because of what you have put there; you’ve made us new creatures, you enable us to obey. The spirit of God dwells in us, who guides us and leads us through this world and through this great conflict. We are in Christ Jesus, by faith alone. By grace alone, through faith alone; it’s all your work of salvation. We thank you for that, Father, we praise you for it, and we ask you to bless us with a renewed desire to serve you and to walk by the Spirit and bring glory to the name of Jesus Christ. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.