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The Paradox of the Christian Life: Paul as the Wretched Man in Romans 7:14-25

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ABSTRACT

Romans 7:14-25 is a crucial component of Paul's greater argument in Romans 6-8. This periscope exemplifies the embattled Christian life and the paradoxical experience of living as a justified sinner. A litany of commentators has asserted that Romans 7:14-25 does not depict the Christian experience but the experience of Paul before his conversion. This study summarizes the argument of Romans 6-8 and identifies the most significant evidence for a post-conversion reading of Romans 7:14-25. Using simple hermeneutical tools of interpreting the text under review, the paper opines that, the main objections to a post-conversion reading should be maintained as it is being articulated and addressed herein.

Keywords: The Epistle to the Romans; Pauline Theology; Soteriology; Pauline Anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of the "wretched man" of Romans 7:14-25 has been a matter of no small debate among New Testament (NT) scholars. The traditional Protestant perspective, which Paul was referring to his post-conversion self has been questioned *ad infinitum* because it is alleged to contradict Romans chapters 6 and 8. The most popular alternative explanation is that the passage refers to Paul's pre-conversion state. Yet Paul straightforwardly characterizes himself as he wrote the letter and thus presents the paradox of living as a justified sinner. Not only does this passage inform the argument of Romans 8, but it also has tremendous pastoral implications as well. Romans 7:14-25

resonates with the embattled Christian as he often unsuccessfully wages war on his personal sin and it is the basis for Paul's glorious exclamation in 8:1.

This essay will articulate the argument presented by Paul in Romans 6:1-8:2 and the reasons for viewing Romans 7:14-25 as indicative of Paul's post-conversion state. It will be shown that contextual evidence demonstrates a post-conversion reading and that Paul's anthropology as enunciated in the epistle is incongruous with a pre-conversion interpretation. Rather, the conflict expressed in Romans 7:14-25 must necessarily be that of the inner Christian life. Evidence from both Galatians 5:16-18 and the normative Christian experience will also be marshalled to support a post-conversion interpretation. Since the other predominant viewpoint argues that the passage is indicative of Paul's pre-conversion experience, this perspective will be utilized as the primary interlocutor throughout this study. Following these lines of evidence, the major objections raised by pre-conversion interpreters will be addressed.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT OF ROMANS 6-8:2

Christians, wrote Paul, have been united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection and are thus no longer enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:1-7). Consequently, the redeemed must think of themselves as "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). It is upon this basis that Paul instructed his readers to actively pursue personal righteousness. Those formerly held captive under the penalties of the law are now under grace and are free to pursue holiness (vv. 12-14). Slavery, however, is inescapable. One is either a slave to sin or to righteousness (vv. 15-16). Paradoxically, those who have been freed from slavery to sin are free as "slaves of God" (v. 22).

Chapter 7 begins with an analogy for the relationship between Christians and the law of God. Just as a wife is no longer bound to her late husband and is free to engage in another relationship (vv. 1-3), Christians have died in Christ and, therefore, no longer live according to the flesh while under the penalties of the law (vv. 4-5). Instead of bondage to the law, "we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code" (v. 6). Beginning in v. 5, Paul transitioned from using the second person to the first person marking his inclusion in "the new way of the Spirit."

Paul anticipated his reader's response to v. 6 and provided an apology for the holiness of God's law: "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" (v. 7). Paul reverted to his pre-conversion experience arguing that indwelling sin "seized an opportunity" at his knowledge of the law (vv. 10-11). In both vv. 8 and 11, Paul described his indwelling sin in a personified fashion, as if it were an "oppressive force" (Dunn, 1988, p. 380). working in himself. His point in vv. 1-12 is that the law is holy but is nonetheless exploited by indwelling sin. In v. 13 Paul anticipated another objection:

Did that [i.e., the law] which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Romans 7:13).

Again, sin is the malefactor. One of God's purposes in the giving of the law was to demonstrate the undeniable sinfulness of sin. It was not the law that killed Paul, but sin.

In v. 14 Paul concluded his apology for the holiness of the law: "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." That Paul is here describing his post-conversion self is determined by vv. 15-8:1. "For I do not understand my own

actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (v. 15). Here, Paul identified an internal turmoil between his desire to obey God’s holy law and his inability to consistently carry it out. In v. 16, Paul argued that his desire for obedience and simultaneous failure to obey testifies to the goodness of the law of God: “Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good” (Rom. 7:16). Even the sin of God’s elect is redeemed as it confirms the righteousness of the law.

Drawing on the personification of sin in vv. 8 and 11, Paul made a distinction between his desire for obedience and his ongoing failure to obey: “So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (v. 17). This distinction rests upon the fact of Paul’s union with Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1-8; 7:4-6). Apart from being united in Christ’s death and resurrection, Paul could not have made such a distinction. However, since Christ was punished for his sin and was resurrected for his justification (Rom. 4:25), Paul can distinguish his Spirit-wrought desire for moral righteousness and his fallen nature. Paul readily admitted that his flesh is still desirous of sin (Rom. 7:18) and that although he desires total obedience he is not able to achieve it (vv. 18-19). He wrote in v. 20: “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” That is, it is the “old man” (Rom. 6:6; cf. Eph. 4:22-24) that died with Christ (Rom. 7:4; cf. Gal. 2:20) is guilty of sin, but the new man, who is risen with Christ, desires obedience.

Following his dichotomy between the old and new, Paul discloses his personal battle as a Christian. When he desires to do what is good, evil crouches at the door (v. 21). Despite his failures, he rejoices in the law in his “inner being” (v. 22). That is, Paul envisions a willing soul and an unwilling carnal nature. This results in an ongoing battle between the old man and new; a war between Paul’s mind (v. 16) and flesh which takes him captive to sin (v. 23). He then described himself with utter honesty: “Wretched man that I am!” and asked, in light of this seemingly unwinnable battle, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”. There is substantial discussion in the literature as to whether to render τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου Rom. 7:24 “this body of death” or “the body of this death” (e.g., Calvin, 2009; Newman & Nida, 1973; Witherington, 2004). The demonstrative pronoun could be rendered either way. Because v. 25 (cf. 8:23) implies final deliverance in the resurrection, the former rendering is likely Paul’s intention. The future passive ῥύσεται (“[who] will deliver”) requires that this liberation is yet to come. Whereas Paul desires holiness, he is not able to attain it in whole. Only through Christ is liberation ultimately achieved: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25). Subsequently, Paul is content to “serve the law of God...with [his] mind” for the time being while his flesh still serves the “law of sin.”

It is upon the basis of Paul’s inner war between the old and new man that he rejoices in the forgiveness that is in Christ and eschatological hope for glorification: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (8:1-2). After disclosing his personal struggle, Paul returned to the second person in order to give the church at Rome assurance amid their similar struggle.

EVIDENCE FOR A POST-CONVERSION READING OF ROMANS 7:14-25

Having rehearsed the argument presented in Romans 6:1-8:2, a review of the most compelling evidence for a post-conversion reading is provided below.

Evidence from a Contextual Reading

The most natural way to understand the transition from aorist tense in 7:7-13 to present in 7:14-25 is to view them as indicative of a transition from Paul's former life as an unbeliever (e.g., "sin came alive and I died" at v. 9) to his life as a Christian (e.g., "I have the desire to do what is right" in v. 18). Whereas there are significant nuances regarding the relationship between grammatical tense and time (Campbell, 2015, pp. 217-220), the imperfect aspect depicted in this account is relative to Paul's then-current experience. This is why Paul can speak doxologically (v. 25) and pronounce "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). The conjunction ἄρα joined with νῦν gives the effect of "Subsequently now" and thus ties the pronouncement of 8:1 with its antecedents in 7:14-25.

The most common rebuttal to the above is to assert that Paul was using a historical present as he recounted his past experience (e.g., Greathouse & Lyons 2008, p. 214; Seifrid 1992, pp. 324-326). J. I Packer (2005, p. 345; cf. Soderlund and Wright 1999) observed:

There is nothing comparable in Paul, and the use of the historic present in the gospels to give vividness to narrative does not provide a parallel, for here the narrative part is in the aorist, and what is in the present is not narrative, but generalized explanatory comment (pp. 73-75).

Thomas Schreiner (1998, p. 387) who presented arguments for both the pre and post-conversion readings suggested that "The state of the person who is a slave to sin is communicated most effectively through present tense verbs." As Packer (2005) noted, such a reading does not have a parallel in the Pauline corpus. Furthermore, Paul does not claim he is a "slave to sin," but that he is conflicted between his desire for obedience and his failure to consistently obey (7:15). As will be shown below, the pre-conversion reading presupposes sub-biblical anthropology.

Evidence from Pauline Anthropology

The claim that Romans 7:14 refers to Paul's pre-Christian life is untenable given his description of the human constitution apart from Christ elsewhere in Romans. He wrote in 3:10-11 "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." The unbeliever does not "hate" sin and is not conflicted about his obedience to God's holy law. Instead, the unbeliever is seeking something other than God (Rom. 1:18, vv. 21, 28). In 8:5 he wrote, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." The unregenerate are not experiencing the tension between desiring full-on obedience to God and their proclivity for sin. Rather, "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (8:7). Paul does not merely say the actions of the unbeliever cannot submit to God. The prognosis is far more depraved as the unbelieving *mind* is incapable (οὐδὲδύναται) of obedience. Unlike the unregenerate mind which does not understand spiritual things and mistakes them for folly, the regenerate person desires obedience and thus experiences an inner battle between his desire for righteousness and the reality of his sin.

Evidence from Galatians 5:16-18

Galatians 5:16-18 presents similar sentiments to Romans 7:14-25 to a Christian audience. Paul told the Galatians that there are conflicting desires at play in the Christian life. The “desires of the flesh” and the “desires of the Spirit” are “antithetical” (BDAG, 2000, p. 88) to one another (v. 17) and sinful desires “keep you from doing the things you want to do” (v. 18). Just as Paul articulated in Romans 7:15, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate,” the Galatian Christians face the internal battle between a willing spirit and a fallen nature. So too, there are few differences between what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:16 and what he wrote in Romans 8:13. To both audiences, he exhorts them not to live by the flesh but to live/walk by the Spirit. Given these similarities and an undeniable Christian audience in Galatians 5:16-18, it is entirely likely that Paul’s statements in Romans 7:14-25 depict his Christian experience.

While the Galatians Christians have been set free in Christ (Gal. 5:1), the fullness of their salvation has yet to arrive. They remain as heirs in the present time (4:7) awaiting the final consummation. Subsequently, the Galatian’s salvation was already inaugurated through faith in Christ but not yet consummated via the resurrection. They are already justified (3:24, v. 26) and were presently being sanctified (5:18), but awaited glorification and the completion of their sanctification (5:5). Thus, the resurrection stands as the *telos* of the already-not-yet tension within the Christian life. Similarly, when Paul asked “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24), his ultimate response is Christ through the resurrection (Rom. 8:11; cf. Gal. 6:8). The already-not-yet tension is the same in Galatians 5:16-18, Romans 7:14-25, and in the Johannine pieces of literature.

Evidence from the Conventional Christian Experience

Paul’s description in Romans 7:14-25 certainly accords with the Christian experience. Although believers are justified in God’s sight and are positionally righteous (Rom. 4:1-8), they still remain in a world saturated with sin and in a body that possesses a natural proclivity for sin. Packer (Soderlund & Wright eds., 1999, p. 75) observed, “The Christless person’s life is lived on the treadmill of moral and spiritual failure.” One key distinction between the unconverted and converted is that the unbeliever does not view his present state as one of wretchedness. Rather, Paul described his obedience to the law prior to his conversion as “blameless” (Phil. 3:6). Like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21), the unconverted person remains in a state of rebellion and self-righteousness. Whereas the redeemed soul, having been awakened to the weight of his sin, is troubled by his inability to obey the law in light of what Christ has achieved in his stead. When Paul asked, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24), he was articulating the exasperation every believer faces in his ongoing battle with sin.

The Christian experience is as *simul iustus et peccator* (“just and sinner at the same time”). According to Ubong E. Eyo (2020), Christ’s propitiatory work has brought total pardon and the imputation of righteousness to the ungodly (Rom. 3:25; 4:5) but “the regenerate, believing, justified person still sins” (Sproul, 2010, p. 36). Paul can characterize himself as “fleshly” (Rom. 7:14) and as having a “body of death” (Rom. 7:24) “but these are not indicators of his soteriological state” (Timmins 2017, p. 155). Instead, these are the remnants of the old man that have yet to be delivered. Thus when John Wesley (1813, p. 28) claimed “To have spoken in this of himself, or any true believer, would have been foreign to the whole of his discourse; nay utterly contrary

thereto, as well as what is expressly asserted in Romans 8:2,” his comments do not bare the counterweight of genuine Christian experience as both sinner and saint. The freedom from sin Paul described in Romans 8:2 is, in its most potent state, eschatological (Dunn, 1988, p. 396). Freedom from sin for the redeemed is only partial in this life and complete in the resurrection of the dead.

COUNTERING THE OBJECTIONS TO A POST-CONVERSION READING

In his substantial commentary on Romans, Frédéric Godet (1883, p. 290; cf. Jewett, 2006, p. 472 and Greathouse & Lyons 2008 p. 223) argued that Romans 7:24 precludes a post-conversion reading:

There are two things in the form of ver. 24 which do not harmonize well with the supposition that Paul is here speaking as a representative of *regenerate* humanity. There is an indefinite pronoun τίς, *who*. A Christian may find himself in distress, but he knows at least the name of his deliverer. Then there is the future: *will deliver me*. In speaking as a Christian, Paul says viii. 2: hath made me free; for to the believer, there is a deliverance accomplished once for all, as the basis for all the particular deliverances which he may yet ask. He does not pray, therefore, like the man who utters the cry of our verse, and who evidently does not know this fundamental fact.

Godet has presupposed his own conclusion in assuming that Paul’s question in Romans 7:24 is not rhetorical and thus not a rehearsal of the exasperation he felt when grappling with his proclivity for sin. Paul was narrating his own experience when his battle with sin seemed unwinnable. The question he posed in v. 24 depicts his desperation for total redemption from sin. Channing Crisler has persuasively argued that Paul’s question in v. 24 is an expression of lament akin to that of the Psalms. He observed that “In OT lament, it is the tension between a prior promise of deliverance and subsequent suffering that elicits a cry of distress” (2020, p. 77).

Paul’s question was not an admission of unbelief anymore than the questions raised by the psalmist (e.g., Pss. 13:1; 35:17; 79:5; 85:5). When David asked “Who will bring me to the fortified city?” (Ps. 60:9; cf. 108:10), referring to his need to invade the city of his enemies, it was not as though he forgot that Yahweh was his deliverer. The concept of deliverance runs through the whole of the Old Testament and is carried to the New Testament. Alistair Hunter (2012, p. 15; cf. Colijn, 1990) noted, “When Paul thought about Christian salvation, he saw it as a word with three tenses: a past event, a present experience, and a future hope.” When referring to justification and pardon from sin by faith in Christ, Paul said: “We were saved” (Rom. 8:24) and “we have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). However, when Paul referred to the process of sanctification, he uses a present participle “being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15). When Paul refers to the eschatological fulfillment of salvation in resurrection and glorification, he refers to salvation in the future as in Romans 7:24 (cf. Rom. 13:11). Therefore, Paul can speak as a Christian of a deliverance yet to come. Colin Kruse (2012) has objected to a post-conversion reading, suggesting that:

It seems to run afoul of other telling statements Paul makes about the Christian’s experience, in particular, 6:14 (‘For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace’); 6:18 (‘You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to

righteousness’); and 8:8-9 (“Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ”) (p. 318).

Kruse’s objections neglect the already-not-yet experience of salvation. Whereas the Roman Christians have been justified (Rom. 5:1) and are no longer under the law (Rom. 7:6), they still faced the reality of the flesh and a fallen world. This is why Paul modified his statement in 6:18 by saying “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity...so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification” (6:19). Paul’s command is not to achieve the impossible, namely, faultless obedience, but to change their attitude from “slaves of impurity” to “slaves of righteousness.” This change, said Paul, leads to sanctification. One wonders how Kruse’s viewpoint wouldn’t imply sinless perfectionism at conversion. Moreover, any doctrine of progressive sanctification must account for the tension experienced in the inner Christian life between a desire to honor God and the inability to obey perfectly.

As Robert Mounce (1995, p. 167) noted, “Romans 7 does not describe the totality of Paul’s spiritual experience. In fact, it is preparatory to what follows. It sets the stage for the triumph of chapter 8.” This observation captures Paul’s rhetorical strategy: He honestly depicts his internal struggle between the spirit and the flesh in order to amplify the glorious value of Christ’s achievements for sinners in Romans 8:1. Mounce (1995) went on to describe the internal already-not-yet tension inherent in the Christian life:

It probably is true that in the lives of most earnest Christians the two conditions Paul described exist in a sort of cyclical advance. Recognition of our inability to live up to our deepest spiritual longings (chap. 7) leads us to cast ourselves upon God’s Spirit for power and victory (chap. 8) ...Sanctification is a gradual process that repeatedly takes the believer through this recurring sequence of failure through dependency upon self to triumph through the indwelling Spirit (pp. 167-168).

The argument presented in Romans 7:1-8:2 moves from the state of the unconverted to the tension between the already-and-not-yet of salvation and then to the glorious hope of the resurrection. Paul’s self-disclosure in 7:14-24 is typical of every believer’s walk: A two condition cycle as Mounce (1995) described, comprised of failed self-reliance and victorious dependence upon the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Romans 7:14-25 depicts a struggle made possible by the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. It depicts Paul’s internal tension between the old man who persists in sinful desires and the new man who seeks obedience to God. This battle results in his abiding trust in the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eschatological deliverance.

The objections raised against the traditional post-conversion reading of Romans 7:14-24 fail to account for Paul’s rhetorical strategy, including his use of lament, and the already-not-yet experience of salvation. The first and third tenses of salvation found in Paul account for his descriptions of victorious Christian living while the second account for the struggle toward sanctification. Interpreters who have argued for a pre-conversion reading never address Pauline anthropology as it relates to his self-description. Paul’s doctrine of man does not possess a category for an unbeliever who

experiences an internal conflict between desiring obedience before God and an ongoing proclivity for sin. Instead, Paul's depiction of the human condition is given over to the pursuit of sin.

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