

Free! (part 1)

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“For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which 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 wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me” (Romans 7:14-17).

Is this passage teaching us that the flesh will always “default” to sin, no matter how hard we try to avoid it? Will I always struggle with sin, as if there is a constant battle being waged between flesh and spirit? While this dualism appears to make sense, I do not believe this is what the scripture is affirming. Of course, it is only natural for us to view it this way because we see, even in the Christian life, that sin repeatedly finds its way into our activities. Like addicts, we refuse sin for a time, feel pretty good, and invariably end up fighting the same battle tomorrow. No matter how many times I refuse to commit a certain sin, the temptation never seems to go away permanently.

When Paul talks about being “of flesh”, he is not simply saying that he has a fleshly body. He is also not saying that his fleshly body’s natural tendency is to commit sin. In fact, flesh is morally neutral. Our bodies are nothing more than a collection of cells that have been given animation by God. Like Solomon so aptly describes it in Ecclesiastes 3:17-21, our flesh has no more or less moral value than the flesh of beasts and birds. It is the soul of man that will be judged as either righteous or wicked. The conflict that Paul describes in Romans 7 is not a battle between your physical body and your spirit, but between the *path* of the flesh and the *path* of the spirit. The “flesh” is the manner of living that sets itself against spiritual goals, such as obeying God and striving for eternal life in His presence. It is a habit, a lifestyle, and a frame of mind. I should add that I do not believe Paul is talking about himself in Romans 7, but speaking hypothetically of a personal struggle with sin. Paul says of himself in Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...”* Paul’s life “in the flesh” was not actually one of constant indecision and backsliding, but one of faith and fidelity to Christ.

By Nature

Ephesians 2:2 says that the sinful life is one that follows *“the course of this world”* – another way of describing the fleshly life previously mentioned by the apostle. He further clarifies this by writing, *“Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of the flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest”* (Ephesians 2:3). “Nature” does not mean “born this way”, as the context clearly explains that we were children of wrath because we followed lust, indulged in fleshly desires, and allowed our minds to run wild with sinful ideas.

To understand the conflict that we all face – and get to a point where we have overcome the sin – we need to stop deflecting responsibility onto the flesh itself. Saying that my flesh “made me do it” or that “I can’t help myself” is a lazy cop-out, and not at all what Paul meant to convey in Romans 7. He is talking about habits. Every time we sin we become more and more comfortable and familiar with the path. Eventually, we have sinned so much that it becomes second-nature, learned habit. Our flesh is so trained to accept sinful stimulation that that becomes all it craves. When we allow lust to run wild

by obeying its every impulse, our flesh no longer has a taste for the simple, pure pleasures of a godly lifestyle. To help explain this, Edwin Crozier recalls the following:

Freedom From Guilt Only?

Fortunately, we are never too far gone as long as there is breath passing between our lips. We *can* escape from the prison cell of the fleshly life of sin:

“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? 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 freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:16-18).

In our next article, we will begin with this scripture and ponder how we can be truly free from sin.