

# THE SINFUL MAN OF ROMANS 7: THE PLIGHT OF THE FLESHLY/SELF-RELIANT BELIEVER<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The book of Romans gives a panoramic view of the gospel message that Paul preached (cf. Rom 1:16-17). Paul establishes the sinful state of humanity and God's gracious provision of salvation through Christ. Paul probes the mystery of God's elective programs and provides instructions concerning the application of the gospel to specific life-situations facing his recipients. While the broad theme and basic flow of the book is clear, the book does contain a number of interpretive challenges.

One of the more difficult and controversial passages within the book of Romans is chapter 7. In particular, the most perplexing issue in the chapter is the identity of the conflicted individual in Romans 7:13-25. In these verses Paul describes a situation where an individual desires to do that which is good but finds himself unable to do so because of the presence of sin. Is Paul speaking about himself? Is Paul describing a believer or an unbeliever? How do the descriptions given here correlate with other Pauline concepts and theological conclusions? These questions are among the ones that confront the interpreter of Romans 7.

The goal of this essay is to consider the identity of the sinful, or conflicted, person of Romans 7. This will be accomplished by briefly considering the flow of Romans 7:13-25, by discussing the major categories of views on the identity of the sinful man in Romans 7, by

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<sup>1</sup> In honor of Dr. Myron J. Houghton: I always appreciated Dr. Myron's stress on developing theological views based on sound biblical exegesis. I trust that this article will embody the ideal of thoughtful biblical exposition and irenic theological discussion that Dr. Myron advocated.

summarizing some arguments in favor of a preferred identification of the conflicted individual of Romans 7, and finally, by drawing out some practical implications of this passage.

### **A Brief Overview of Romans 7:13-25**

In order to gain some context for the identification of the conflicted individual in Romans 7:13-25, we need to briefly survey the flow of the passage and its immediate context. In the book of Romans, Paul has established the complete sinfulness of all humanity (Rom 1:18–3:20), and then he discusses the solution to this problem, which is the justification of the believer through Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21–5:21). Paul next turns his attention to the believer’s current status in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The believer is no longer in bondage to sin (6:1-14), and he or she has become slaves of righteousness. Not only is the believer free from bondage to sin, he or she is also completely free from the law (7:1-6).<sup>3</sup> The law is good, but it only exposes human sinfulness (7:7-12). This sets the stage for Paul’s discussion of the conflicted individual.

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<sup>2</sup> This section of Romans (i.e., chapters 6 and 7) is often interpreted as referring to sanctification. While I am favorable to this approach, one must not let this bias one’s interpretation of Romans 7:13-24. See the criticism of this approach in Jay Street, “Romans 7: An Old Covenant Struggle Seen Through New Covenant Eyes,” *MSJ* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 283–85. The point is that, just because Romans 6 is discussing sanctification, this does not automatically mean that Romans 7:13-25 is as well.

<sup>3</sup> Myron Houghton, *Law & Grace* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 2011), esp. chs. 5–6.

### *The Transition (7:13)*

Making a transition within his discussion,<sup>4</sup> Paul asks another rhetorical question,<sup>5</sup> which he quickly denounces. Paul asks, “Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?”<sup>6</sup> (7:13, ESV<sup>7</sup>). In other words, was it the law that brought death? “By no means!” (v. 13).<sup>8</sup> Rather, indwelling sin was the culprit. Through the commandment the exceedingly<sup>9</sup> sinful nature of sin was revealed (v. 13). Sin was the cause of death, not the law.

### *The Problem (Romans 7:14)*

Romans 7:14 then lays the foundation for the subsequent discussion by identifying the basic problem that the conflicted individual faces. The issue is, if the law is good (cf. 7:7-12), then what is the source of sin? The problem was not with the law, but with carnality, that is, with the flesh or indwelling sin.

Describing this conflict in terms of a present reality,<sup>10</sup> Paul explains<sup>11</sup> the state of the conflicted individual in strong terms: “I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (7:14). In describing the

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<sup>4</sup> Verse 13 is generally regarded as transitional. Many interpreters take verse 13 as the end of Paul’s discussion which began in verse 7. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 150; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, BST (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 205. However, it seems better to take this verse as an introduction to a new phase in his discussion. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (London; New York: Clark, 2004), 1:354; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Leicester, England: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 289; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 370; Frank Thielman, *Romans*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 347. Using rhetorical questions seems to move Paul’s discussion along previously in Romans, and while v. 13 does summarize themes from 7:7-12, it also moves the discussion forward, setting the stage for 7:14-25.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout chapter 6 and 7 of Romans, Paul uses rhetorical questions to move his discussion along by introducing a potential incorrect conclusion based on his previous teaching (6:1, 15; 7:1, 7, 13). Cf., Thielman, *Romans*, 348–49.

<sup>6</sup> Paul uses the first-person singular consistently through 7:7-25. Thielman, *Romans*, 349. The identity of this “I” is a significant interpretive question and can influence one’s view on the conflicted individual of vv. 13-25. For discussion on the identity of the “I” in Romans 7-25 see Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:344–47; Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., 356–63. The face value conclusion is that this section is intended to be autobiographical. However, in 1929 Werner Georg Kümmel suggested Paul is using a rhetorical “I” in this passage, and since then his view has garnered influential support. For a thorough critique of the rhetorical “I” view see Will N. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian*

conflicted individual as “of the flesh” Paul is saying that he or she is living according to fleshly, or carnal, principles. That is, he or she is conforming to the impulses dictated by the realm of the flesh.<sup>12</sup>

Paul further describes this individual as “sold under sin.”<sup>13</sup> This may refer to the effects of the fall upon the individual. As such, because of the fall, the lingering effects of sin are the basis for the struggle that the conflicted individual faces. The fall predisposes the individual to operate in the realm of fleshly impulses. Because of this sinful predisposition, the individual described here faces an inner conflict, desiring to do what is right but capitulating to sinful desires.

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*Identity: A Study of the “I” in Its Literary Context*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). It seems best to take this section as autobiographical, with the understanding that Paul is intending to use himself as a representative for humanity at large; that is, Paul is describing in his terms of his own experience a situation that is faced by humanity at large. Cf. Bruce, *Romans*, 148; Osborne, *Romans*, 174; Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., 362; Thielman, *Romans*, 349.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations will be from the ESV.

<sup>8</sup> The ESV “By no means!” translates the Greek *μη γένοιτο*. This strong denial is used by Paul throughout Romans (3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13). It has been translated “By no means!” (ESV, NIV, NRSV), “Absolutely not!” (CSB), “Certainly not” (NKJV), and, perhaps most literally, “May it never be!” (NASB). The memorable KJV, “God forbid,” is a surprisingly colloquial translation.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase “beyond measure” translates the Greek *ὑπερβολή*, which describes a “state of exceeding to an extraordinary degree a point on a scale of extent.” *BDAG*, 1032. In the New Testament, the term can be used in both positive and negative ways.

<sup>10</sup> Commentators note that Paul uses the present tense throughout this section until he uses the future tense in 7:24. The use of the present tense is a contributing factor in the identification of the conflicted individual. While the present tense can be used in a variety of ways (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 516–39), and it is not always bound by time, it seems natural that Paul’s instruction here has some temporal significance. See the assessment in Grant R. Osborne, “The Flesh Without the Spirit: Romans 7 and Christian Experience,” in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 79–81.

<sup>11</sup> Paul uses the connector *γάρ* (“for”) through this passage as he heaps explanation upon explanation.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek adjective *σάρκινος* and the related form *σαρκικός* are interchangeable in the New Testament use. See *BDAG*, 914. Both are used in the sense of pertaining to the “physical realm” and then by extension acting in a way that is merely human. *BDAG*, 914. It is significant that Paul does use the term *σάρκινος* to describe the believers in Corinth (1 Cor 3:1; NA<sup>28</sup> reading) as well as the term *σαρκικός* (1 Cor 3:3).

<sup>13</sup> The construction here is a perfect, passive participle: “having been sold.” The Greek verb *πιδράσκω* can be translated “sell” and can be used of any transfer of property. *BDAG*, 814. While the term can be used of selling a slave (*BDAG* 815; cf. Matt 18:25), this meaning is an application of the term and is not endemic to the term itself. Thus, renderings such as “sold as a slave” to sin (NIV) or “sold into slavery” under sin (NRSV), which are vivid, may read too much into Paul’s use of the term here.

### *The Struggle (Romans 7:15-23)*

Paul then describes more specifically the struggle that the conflicted individual faces. Paul's description can be divided into three movements (vv. 15-17, 18-20, and 21-23).<sup>14</sup> Each of these sections basically describes the same situation and concludes that the problem is indwelling sin.

The first movement begins with the conflicted individual's dilemma. He admits, "I do not understand my own actions" (v. 15). He is perplexed because he found himself unable to do good as he desired. What he desired<sup>15</sup> to do, he did not do, but what he hated,<sup>16</sup> he did (v. 15). This situation gives evidence that the law is good (v. 16), just as Paul argued earlier in the chapter (7:7-12). In the end, the law was not the source of the conflict but indwelling sin. Because of this dilemma, the conflicted individual concludes that "it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (v. 17). In this statement, Paul is not trying to excuse sin or evade responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Rather, he is trying to pinpoint the source of the conflict, which is indwelling sin.

The second movement of this section begins with the acknowledgement that the individual in his own flesh<sup>18</sup> is not inherently good (v. 18). Paul then renews the description of

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, see Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004), 182. Others suggest dividing the passage differently. For example, Stott (*Romans*, 210) divides the passage into two parts 14-20 and 21-25.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek θέλω ("desire"; "want") is used throughout this passage to indicate the conflicted individual's wish, or desire, to do good. *BDAG*, 447.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek μισέω is capable of a spectrum of meanings, ranging from to "detest" to "disfavor." *BDAG*, 652–53. Because of the intensity of this context, the stronger meaning is likely intended here.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Thielman, *Romans*, 358–59.

<sup>18</sup> The noun "flesh" (σάρξ), which is related to the adjective "of the flesh" or "carnal" in verse 14, can be used in several ways in the New Testament and by the Apostle Paul himself. *BDAG*, 914–16; cf. Eduard Schweizer, Friedrich Baumgärtel, and Rudolf Meyer, "Σάρξ, Σαρκικός, Σάρκινος," in *TDNT*, 7:98–151. It can be used of material flesh but is also used in a negative sense of the realm of the fleshly desires. The flesh in this negative sense is opposed to the things of God, and this is the sense in which Paul is using the term in the context of Romans 7.

the conflicted individual's dilemma. He has a desire to do good but lacked the "ability to carry it out" (v. 18). The conflicted individual again expresses his desire to do good coupled with his frustration that he found himself doing that which was evil instead (v. 19).<sup>19</sup> Once again, the root cause of this conflict is identified as indwelling sin (v. 20). It was not the conflicted individual's desire to do wrong, but indwelling sin compelled him.

The third movement of this section covers much the same territory that has been discussed in the previous two movements. The individual found a principle<sup>20</sup> that when he desired to do good, evil was "close at hand" (7:21). The conflicted individual even delighted<sup>21</sup> in the law of God (v. 22). However, this delight was opposed by a principle within the individual, which warred against the inner desire of the individual and took him as a captive<sup>22</sup> under the law of sin. Although, not as clearly stated at the end of this movement, the problem once again is indwelling sin that opposes good and imposes its will upon the individual.

#### *A Lament (Romans 7:24)*

Having described the struggle that the conflicted individual faces, this individual erupts in a lament expressing his horror over his sinfulness: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v. 24). The sin of the conflicted individual grieved him

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<sup>19</sup> Verse 19 uses the same terms that are found in verse 15 but in a different order. Thielman, *Romans*, 357. It is doubtful that any difference in meaning is intended. Rather, the repetition highlights the repeated frustration of the individual.

<sup>20</sup> Paul uses the term "law" (νόμος), but he is not referring to the Mosaic law here. Rather, he is using the term in the sense of general principle that the conflicted individual found to be true. Accordingly, some translations, like NASB and CSB, translate the term as "principle." In so doing, Paul is paving the way for a play on the meaning of "law" in the subsequent verses.

<sup>21</sup> This is the only time this verb (συνήδομαι) is used in the New Testament. The work indicates "joy" in association with God's law. *BDAG*, 971.

<sup>22</sup> *BDAG*, 31–32.

deeply. He describes himself as “miserable,” “wretched,” or “distressed.”<sup>23</sup> This shows the depth of frustration that the conflicted individual felt because of the compulsion to sin.

The conflicted individual then bursts forth with a question that amounts to a cry for help. The conflicted individual seeks for deliverance, or rescue, from “this body of death.”<sup>24</sup> While many commentators explain this as an image, it seems that the conflicted individual is seeking deliverance from the fleshly desires and indwelling sin that are part of human experience in a fallen world.

### *The Victory (Romans 7:25a)*

Despite the miserable condition of the conflicted individual, hope exists. The resounding thanks in verse 25 stands in stark contrast to the despair expressed in the previous verse. Verse 25 is as triumphant as verse 24 is dismal. Here gratitude is expressed, for the victory over sin comes through the Lord Jesus Christ (7:25a). This is a hopeful prospect shared by all true believers.

Significantly, the source of victory lies outside the individual himself.<sup>25</sup> Paul does not envision deliverance from the struggle with sin by self-effort or sheer will power. Instead, victory comes only through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> *BDAG*, 988. This word is used to describe the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:17.

<sup>24</sup> Thielman (*Romans*, 363) favors rendering this phrase as “the body of this death.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Thielman, *Romans*, 363.

### *A Summary (Romans 7:25b)*

The passage closes with a concluding summary of the situation that the conflicted individual faces and highlights the nature of the conflict.<sup>26</sup> The conflicted individual faces divided allegiances (7:25b). The conflicted individual declares, “I myself<sup>27</sup> serve the law of God with my mind,” but on the other hand, “with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” On one hand, he desired to obey God, but on the other hand the flesh was compelling him to sin.

### **Basic Views on the Conflicted Person of Romans 7**

The identity of the conflicted individual of Romans 7:13-25 is not an issue that is easily resolved. The descriptions that Paul uses in Romans 7 cause “conflict” for the interpreter as various descriptions must be reconciled with Pauline concepts taught elsewhere.

The proposals on the identity of the conflicted individual fall within three broad categories: (1) the conflicted individual is a believer, (2) the conflicted individual is an unbeliever, and (3) the conflicted individual is an unidentified individual struggling under the law.<sup>28</sup> While these broad categories are a helpful starting point, some categories (e.g., the

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<sup>26</sup> In a radical suggestion, C. H. Dodd (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, MNTC [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932]), 104, 114–16) proposes a reordering of the text because he feels that the exclamation of victory is such a drastic interruption of the flow of the passage. This is completely without textual basis and is an unnecessary emendation.

<sup>27</sup> The “I myself” is an emphatic construction. Bruce, *Romans*, 156.

<sup>28</sup> Especially helpful is the compendium of views in Stephen J. Chester, Grant R. Osborne, Mark A. Seifrid, and Chad Brand, *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2011). Also, see the series of articles published on The Gospel Coalition website: John Piper, “Romans 7 Does Describe Your Christian Experience,” January 16, 2016, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/romans-7-does-describe-your-christian-experience/>; Thomas Schreiner, “Romans 7 Does Not Describe Your Christian Experience,” January 13, 2016, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/romans-7-does-not-describe-your-christian-experience/>; Ben Bailie, “Lloyd-Jones: Believer or Unbeliever Is Not the Point of Romans 7,” January 27, 2016, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lloyd-jones-believer-or-unbeliever-is-not-point-of-romans-7/>; Will Timmins, “What’s Really Going on in Romans 7,” July 2, 2018, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/romans-7-apostle-paul-confession/>.



believer view) have given rise to numerous sub-views.<sup>29</sup> Our purpose here is to briefly describe selected views and to provide some assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these views.

### *The Conflicted Person Is a Believer*

The first class of views maintains that Paul is describing the conflict that is felt by a regenerate individual. This view looks at the struggle of the conflicted individual and correlates this with the experience of someone who is saved and is struggling with sin.

This class of views has several positives in its favor.<sup>30</sup> First of all, it is evident from the Scriptures (e.g., Gal 5:17) and from personal experience that believers face temptation and sometimes succumb to sin. Also, the passage uses first-person pronouns from 7:7 onwards, which seems most naturally to be autobiographical, referring to the apostle's experience. Coupled with the fact that the present tense is used from verse 14 onward, it seems that Paul is describing a present struggle that he himself faces.

The biggest challenge (which many interpreters consider its fatal flaw) is the very pessimistic view of the Christian life that is portrayed in the passage. This is to say, the fact that the conflicted individual is defeated by sin, seems to be at odds with the victorious portrayal of the believer, especially in Romans 6 (where the "old self was crucified"; 6:6) and Romans 8 (where the believer has been set free "from the law of sin and death"; 8:2).

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<sup>29</sup> For a broad survey of views on the sinful man of Romans 7 see Stephen Voorwinde, "Romans 7—A History of Interpretation," *VR* 83 (2018): 74–94. See also the overviews in the commentary literature. As with any classification of views, neat and clean distinctions are sometimes elusive. For helpful discussions of the various factors involved in the debate see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 469–71; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Leicester, England: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 284–88; Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., 377–91.

<sup>30</sup> For a helpful, concise summary see Nicholas T. Batzig, "John Piper's 10 Reasons Why Romans 7:14-25 Is about the Christian's Experience," April 6, 2014, accessed July 18, 2019, <http://feedingonchrist.com/john-pipers-10-reasons-romans-714-25-christians-experience/>.

This challenging situation is further exacerbated when one considers direct statements made by the Apostle Paul, which cause tension with his descriptions in this passage. For instance, Paul declares that believers are to “no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6; cf. 6:16) and are slaves of righteousness (6:17), while the conflicted individual is “sold under sin” (7:14). Also, Paul describes believers as “not in the flesh” (Rom 8:9), while the conflicted individual is “of the flesh,” or “carnal” (7:14).

Within this view, several variations are possible. These views have various ways of explaining the challenges that face the identification of the conflicted individual as a believer. Many advocates of this view correlate the conflicted situation with the normative struggle within the mature believer.<sup>31</sup> That is, as the believer grows and becomes more cognizant of sin and sensitive to it, he or she more fully grasps the depths of their own sinfulness (cf. 7:24). In this view, the victory/defeat tension is basically a matter of perspective. While the believer is victorious in Christ, as the believer matures, he or she more fully recognizes the influence of indwelling sin upon their behavior.

Accepting the conclusion that Romans 7 describes a believer, Will Timmins proposes that the conflict relates to a capacity within the believer.<sup>32</sup> As such, the conflict is not necessarily normative (as expressed in the views above), but it describes the natural struggle that one has

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<sup>31</sup> This view is clearly articulated by John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 379–80. This view is espoused by a vast number of scholars. See Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:341–47; David S. Dockery, “Romans 7:14–25: Pauline Tension in the Christian Life” *GTJ* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1981): 239–57; James D. G. Dunn, “Romans 7, 14–25 in the Theology of Paul,” *TZ* 31, no. 5 (September–October 1975): 257–73; idem, *Romans 1–8*, WBC, vol. 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988); Morris, *Romans*, 284–88; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 166–68; J. I. Packer, “The ‘Wretched Man’ Revisited: Another Look at Romans 7:14–25,” *SE* 2, no. 1 (1964): 621–27. Dunn (*Romans 1–8*, 396) specifically describes this individual as a believer in “eschatological tension.” From a historical perspective, this view was advocated by both Augustine (“A Treatise against Two Letters of the Pelagians,” in *NPNF<sup>1</sup>*, 5:382–85, esp. 384) and John Calvin (*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 259–66, esp. 262–63).

<sup>32</sup> Timmins. *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 205–10; idem, “What’s Really Going on in Romans 7.”

with indwelling sin. This sinful desire is present within the believer until death and creates the tension that the conflicted individual feels between their ontological identity and their anthropological condition.<sup>33</sup>

Other expressions of the class views that Paul is describing a believer limit the description to a certain class of believers. Some would say that the conflicted individual is an immature Christian struggling against sin in their own strength.<sup>34</sup> Others identify the conflicted individual as a believer before a point of surrender or dedication; that is, the passage describes a defeated or “carnal” Christian before a point of surrender to the Spirit.<sup>35</sup> Another expression of this view suggests that the conflicted individual is a Christian (regardless of his or her level of spiritual maturity) that is not living under the control of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> The common element in these views is that they explain the victory/defeat tension by limiting it to a less-than-ideal category or state of Christian experience. How compelling these explanations are relates somewhat to one’s overall theology of sanctification.<sup>37</sup>

Some interpreters view the instructions related to believers, in particular, believers in relationship to the law. Ronald Y. K. Fung identifies the individual as a Christian who is trying

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<sup>33</sup> Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 205.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, *Romans*, 150–57.

<sup>35</sup> Representing a Keswick view, see Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1961), 107.

<sup>36</sup> Osborne, “The Flesh Without the Spirit,” 46–48.

<sup>37</sup> Sanctification is the making holy of the believer or the “ongoing transformation” of the believer “into greater Christlikeness.” Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 187–88. While sanctification can be understood in positional (which takes place at the point of salvation), progressive (which is an ongoing, life-long process), and ultimate (which occurs when the believer is glorified in the presence of Christ) aspects, the ongoing, progressive aspect is the relevant sense in this discussion. For various views on sanctification see Donald Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) and Melvin E. Dieter, et al., *Five Views on Sanctification*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). For an accessible comparison of major views see Andy Naselli, “Models of Sanctification,” accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/models-of-sanctification/>. Within the dispensational tradition, several views on sanctification have been advocated, so it is problematic to speak of “the” dispensational view on sanctification. See Jonathan R. Pratt, “Dispensational Sanctification: A Misnomer,” *DBTJ* 7 (Fall 2020): 95–108.

to keep the law through his own efforts rather than through the Spirit's enablement (e.g., a nomistic Christian).<sup>38</sup> John R. W. Stott describes the conflicted individual as a regenerate Old Testament Israelite struggling to keep the law without the benefit of the indwelling Spirit.<sup>39</sup> Jay Street interprets the conflicted individual as an Old Covenant believer as opposed to a New Covenant believer.<sup>40</sup> These narrow explanations related to Israelite experience have not gained widespread endorsement.

### *The Conflicted Person Is an Unbeliever*

The next major class of views sees the conflicted person in Romans 7 as an unbeliever. From this perspective, the struggle describes a person who is bound by sin and desires to be free from that bondage, but, because they are not a believer, they lack the ability to successfully overcome sin.<sup>41</sup>

Those who take the conflicted individual to be an unbeliever often take the autobiographical description to refer to Paul's pre-Christian efforts to keep the law, or at least a fair representation of this struggle that is commonly experienced.<sup>42</sup> Collin Kruse comes to a

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, "The Impotence of the Law: Toward a Fresh Understanding of Romans 7:14-25," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 34-48.

<sup>39</sup> Stott, *Romans*, 208, 210.

<sup>40</sup> Street, "Romans 7: An Old Covenant Struggle Seen Through New Covenant Eyes," 277-302.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen J. Chester, "The Retrospective View of Romans 7: Paul's Past in Present Perspective" in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 57-103.

<sup>42</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 471; Schreiner, "Romans 7 Does Not Describe Your Christian Experience"; idem, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 390. In the second edition of his commentary (*Romans*, 2nd ed., 387), Schreiner notes his view expressed in the first edition of his commentary, but he mitigates away from that view, commending Timmon's (*Romans 7 and Christian Identity*) explanation of the passage.

similar conclusion; however, he interprets the “I” as rhetorically depicting the experience of unbelieving Jews struggling under the law.<sup>43</sup>

The greatest benefit of this category of views is that the struggle with sin is removed from the life of the believer. From this perspective, Romans 7 does not need to be reconciled with the victorious description of the believer’s experience described in Romans 6 and 8.

However, with this view several difficulties arise. Perhaps the most serious of these difficulties is explaining how the unbeliever desires good and seeks the things of God. This seems to be completely contrary to the portrait of sinful humanity painted in Romans 1–3, in which sinful humanity is hostile toward God and rejects His truth. Other difficulties include justifying the change to the present tense if Paul is describing a pre-conversion experience and describing the summary of the conflicted individual’s state (v. 25b) after acknowledging Christ as the source of deliverance (v. 25a).

### *The Conflicted Person Is an Undefined Person*

The next class of views tries to take a different approach to Romans 7. Advocates of this category of views insist that Paul’s point is not to answer the question as to the spiritual condition of the individual. As such, they hesitate to identify the conflicted individual as either unregenerate or regenerate. Often those who follow this approach identify the conflicted individual as one who is attempting to attain righteousness through keeping the law but finds it

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<sup>43</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 305.

an impossible task.<sup>44</sup> Others stress that this is a person under conviction but hesitate to specifically identify the conflicted individual as either unregenerate or regenerate.<sup>45</sup>

Some who represent this general class of views tie their interpretation to the conclusion that Paul is using a rhetorical “I” throughout the passage. Thus, Richard Longenecker views the passage as a “rhetorical soliloquy” that describes neither Paul’s pre-conversion or post-conversion experience but “all people who attempt to live their lives by their own natural abilities and acquired resources, apart from God.”<sup>46</sup>

This class of views seeks to downplay the spiritual condition of the conflicted individual in Romans 7. While interpreters may feel that this diffuses some of the tension the passage causes, these views tend to result in other strained exegetical dilemmas. Furthermore, these views merely delay dealing with the inevitable question: “Is this an experience that Christians today can experience or not?”

### *Points of Balance Concerning the Views*

Before moving on, a few general thoughts are appropriate to help establish a balanced perspective on the debate surrounding Romans 7. While the identity of the individual in Romans 7 is a significant issue, proper deference should be displayed.

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<sup>44</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans 7: The Voice of the Law, the Cry of Lament, and the Shout of Thanksgiving,” in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder, 111–65 (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 111–65; idem, “The Subject of Rom 7:14-25,” *NovT* 34, no. 4 (October 1992): 313–33. See also the interesting discussion in Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 531–32.

<sup>45</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7.1-8.4—The Law: Its Functions and Limits* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 255–57. Cf. Bailie, “Lloyd-Jones: Believer or Unbeliever Is Not the Point of Romans 7.”

<sup>46</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 673.

To begin with, one should acknowledge that all the views have strengths and weaknesses. This is often the case concerning most debatable theological and exegetical discussions. Certainly, this is the case with regard to Romans 7 where several views have valid points,<sup>47</sup> and reasonable cases can be made for different views. It should also be acknowledged that all views have difficulties. None of the views is completely free from criticism. In fact, as is typically the case, the “difficult points” for one view are often the “strong points” supporting another view. This does not mean that the situation is hopeless or that the interpreter should give up seeking the identity of the conflicted individual of Romans 7. However, it is to acknowledge that the evidence must be carefully weighed, and one should realize that different interpreters may weigh the evidence differently.

Another point of balance is to realize that the identity of the conflicted individual of Romans 7 is not a matter of orthodoxy. Some issues are foundational to the Christian faith,<sup>48</sup> but one’s interpretation of Romans 7 is not one of those issues. Good, orthodox scholars have held very different views on Romans 7. The point here is that one’s view on Romans 7 is not in itself a litmus test for orthodoxy. Consequently, due respect should be displayed for different conclusions.

Finally, the interpreter should realize that the interpretation of Romans 7 is not necessarily tied to any theological system. This may seem surprising, but interpreters who hold to different interpretations of Romans 7 may stand within a shared confessional tradition. In

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<sup>47</sup> Sometimes the differences reflect different emphases and the relative weight attributed to the various lines of evidence. This certainly seems to be the case concerning Romans 7 where the different views reflect a strong degree of continuity on many interpretive issues.

<sup>48</sup> On the historic fundamentals of the faith that arose of the Fundamentalist-Modernists controversies see Ken Rathbun, “What Are the Fundamental Doctrines of the Faith?,” *Frontline* 29, no. 3 (May-June 2019): 6–7, 34. Other core beliefs of orthodox Protestantism include the Reformation *solus* and belief in the Trinity.

particular, interpreters of a Reformed persuasion are represented among all three major categories of views on Romans 7 as outlined above. Thus, care should be exercised to not tie a specific view on Romans 7 to a specific theological tradition (e.g., Reformed, Dispensational, etc.).

Furthermore, despite holding differing views on Romans 7, interpreters can actually advocate surprisingly similar views of the Christian life. For instance, even if one interprets Romans 7 as referring to the experience of an unbeliever, this does not mean that he or she denies the reality of conflict in the Christian life. One can deny that Romans 7 refers to the experience of a believer but affirm the validity of the concept that believers struggle with sin on the basis of other passages like Galatian 5:16-26.<sup>49</sup> So, while Romans 7 is a contributing piece to one's biblical theology of sanctification, it is only one contributing element among various exegetical and theological factors.

### **An Explanation and Defense of the Fleshly, Self-Reliant Believer View**

The task that lies before us now is to reconcile the various streams of data into a coherent view. The view that I will advocate here is that Romans 7 refers to a fleshly, self-reliant believer.<sup>50</sup> In explaining and defending this view, we will first review the strongest arguments in favor of the conclusion that Romans 7 describes a believer, and then we can discuss what kind of

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<sup>49</sup> E.g., Chester, "The Retrospective View of Romans 7," 99; Schreiner, "Romans 7 Does Not Describe Your Christian Experience."

<sup>50</sup> In relationship to the views surveyed above, I find myself in general affinity with the conclusions of Osborne with strong appreciation with Timmin's explanation of the flesh as a capacity but not an overall characteristic of the believer.



a believer is in view, which will also answer some of the objections to the view that the passage describes a believer.

### *Does Romans 7 Describe the Experience of a Believer?*

While no view on Romans 7 is without its difficulties, the conclusion that the conflicted individual is a believer rests on several strong arguments. These arguments will be reviewed here, and then the specific nature of this believer will be discussed.

#### **1. Paul's Use of the First-Person Singular and the Present Tense**

The *prima facie* reading of the text certainly favors the view that Paul is describing a believer and that he is describing his own Christian experience. In Romans 7:14-25, Paul uses both the first-person, singular pronoun (which he switched to in 7:7) and the present tense to describe the experience of the conflicted individual.

Through the bulk of Romans Paul has used second-person, plural and first-person, plural word forms, but in Romans 7:7-25, Paul switches to first-person, singular ("I"). This seems to be an intentional change. Although some have taken the "I" to be merely rhetorical, this conclusion is problematic and lacks convincing contextual support.<sup>51</sup> It seems better to conclude that Paul is describing a conflict that he had experienced himself. While this conflict is not unique to the apostle, he transfers the discussion to himself to create solidarity with the one struggling to achieve victory over sin.

Furthermore, the change in verb tense in Romans 7 seems to be intentional. In Romans 7:1-13, Paul uses past tense verbs to describe the condition of the "I." However, a

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<sup>51</sup> For a critique of the rhetorical "I," again see Timmins. *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*.

noticeable shift take place beginning in verse 14, when Paul transitions to the present tense.

While it is true that the Greek tense is not rigidly time bound, the concept of time should not be completely jettisoned either.<sup>52</sup> This is especially true in contrast to the consistent use of the past tense that Paul has been using.

Thus, the use of first-person forms and the present tense seem to favor the view that Paul is speaking about a situation that is at least a possible experience for a genuine Christian and even for a mature believer like himself.

## **2. Sin's Presence in the Life of the Believer and the Conflict That It Brings**

Conflict with sin is a reality in the life of a genuine believer.<sup>53</sup> Paul affirms this in passages like Galatians 5:17: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal 5:17).<sup>54</sup> In this passage, Paul uses strong language to describe the conflict that the believer faces with sin.

So then, the fact that believers do struggle with sin at least opens the door for the possibility that Romans 7 is discussing the experience of a genuine believer. While the power of sin is broken, the believer will struggle with temptations, and can at times give into the flesh. When the flesh is victorious, it will naturally cause grief to a sensitive believer (cf. Rom 7:24).

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<sup>52</sup> See again Osborne, “The Flesh Without the Spirit,” 79–81; cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 531.

<sup>53</sup> Few interpreters would deny the complete presence of sin within the Christian life of the believer. Even within the Wesleyan tradition, the concept of entire sanctification is often carefully nuanced to avoid confusion with absolute sinlessness. Dieter, Melvin E., “The Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, Melvin E. Dieter, et al., Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 41–42.

<sup>54</sup> Although it is a common term, so its use is not conclusive, the same word for “want” (θέλω) that is used in Gal 5:17 is used repeatedly in Romans 7 (vv. 16, 18, 19, 20, 21).

### 3. The Individual's Love for Good and Hatred of Sin

Another important and weighty factor in favor of the view that Romans 7:14-25 is discussing the experience of a believer is the very tension that the individual is experiencing. Specifically, the conflicted individual desires to do good (7:15, 19, 21), he hates that which is wrong (vv. 15, 16, 19), and “delights” in God’s law (v. 22). This desire to pursue the things of God and hatred of sin is inconsistent with Paul’s descriptions of unbelievers elsewhere, especially in the book of Romans.

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul condemns the heathen for their suppression of God’s truth (1:18) and perversion of that which is good (1:26-27). Moral individuals are condemned because they “despise<sup>55</sup> the riches of His kindness, restraint, and patience” (Rom 2:4, CSB). In their pride, the Jews had broken the law and dishonored (v. 23) and blasphemed God (v. 24). Paul’s conclusion is that all are completely guilty (3:9-20). In none of these descriptions does Paul portray the unbeliever as conflicted by sin. Furthermore, the sentiments found in Romans 7 do not correspond with descriptions of Paul’s own pre-conversion experience (cf. Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6; 1 Tim 1:13).

While the conflicted individual of Romans 7 is overwhelmed by sin, he does not indulge and bask in it like the unsaved individuals of Romans 1–3. The unsaved individuals of Romans 1–3 are defiantly hostile to the things of God. While they may not be as bad as they could be, they have no love for the things of God on moral grounds.<sup>56</sup> Based on Paul’s descriptions of the unbeliever’s hostility toward God and the lack of evidence of any personal,

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<sup>55</sup> The ESV “presume on” is a possible translation, but the stronger translation, “despise,” which is reflected in several versions (NKJV, CSB, NRSV), fits the flow of the context better. The NIV reads “show contempt for.”

<sup>56</sup> In theological terms, this reflects the concept of total depravity. See Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 212. Paul exposes the utter sinfulness of all humanity in Romans 1–3.

pre-conversion desire to overcome sin, it seems doubtful that Paul could apply the turmoil of the conflicted individual in Romans 7 to an unbeliever.

#### **4. Christ's Victory Experienced by the Individual**

In the first part of Romans 7:25, Paul identifies the source of victory over the conflicted individual's dilemma: "Jesus Christ our Lord." This is acknowledged by the majority of interpreters. However, if Paul is describing an unbeliever, why does he return to the internal conflict in the second half of the verse?

It seems more likely that Paul is summarizing his current state and, by extension, the state of all believers. The conflict has been rehearsed in Romans 7:15-23, the believer should acknowledge their own sinfulness (v. 24), and look to Christ for deliverance (v. 25a). While Christ gives victory and provides resources for victory over sin, the conflict remains (v. 25b).

#### *What Kind of Believer Is Described in Romans 7?*

Taken together, I believe that the points listed above give good support for the conclusion that the conflicted individual of Romans 7:13-25 is a believer. However, it is important to identify what kind of a believer is being discussed in these verses. Is this normative? Is this a state which one outgrows? Is this potentially the experience of every believer?

#### **1. The Conflicted Individual Is Fleshly**

One of the challenges of identifying the conflicted individual of Romans 7 with believers is explaining the "fleshly" nature of the individual being described. The conflicted individual declares: "I am of the flesh, sold under sin" (Rom 7:14).

On one hand, Romans 8 teaches "to set the mind on the flesh is death" (v. 6), "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (v. 7), and believers are "not in the flesh but in the

Spirit” (v. 9). However, on the other hand, Paul does use the term “fleshly” to describe the believers in Corinth (1 Cor 3:1, 3).<sup>57</sup>

The resolution to this dilemma is probably in a matter of extent. While believers are not “in the flesh,” they can at times act in a way that is “fleshly.” That is, believers are not dominated by the flesh (since the bondage to sin is broken, Rom 6:6) but they can act (inconsistent with their position) according to the fleshly values. This, in fact, fits well with the tension that is displayed in Romans 7. The believer knows what is right, but indwelling sin (vv. 17, 20, 23) lures him or her to do wrong. Believers have the capacity to be strongly influenced by indwelling sin.

Some teachers limit “carnality” to a specific class of immature or non-dedicated believers.<sup>58</sup> While 1 Corinthians 3 does speak of believers as “fleshly/carnal,” nothing in the text would suggest that this is a specific state that precedes the work of sanctification in the life of the believer. Rather, these believers were acting according to worldly values irrespective of their level of spiritual maturity. In Romans, all believers have been freed from the enslavement of sin

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<sup>57</sup> While some manuscripts use σαρκικός at 1 Cor 3:1, the NA<sup>28</sup> uses σάρκινος. The word σαρκικός is used in 1 Cor 3:3. In Rom 7:14 the NA<sup>28</sup> reads σάρκινος but some manuscripts use σαρκικός. By the time of the New Testament, these words appear to be interchangeable. Cf. *BDAG*, 914.

<sup>58</sup> This would be true of the Keswick view of sanctification, as well as of a Chaferian model of sanctification. For a critique of Keswick Theology see Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God?: A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010). Representing the Chaferian view, see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual: A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 15–22; cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 195–96. While it is more nuanced than Keswick views, I do not find Chafer’s distinction between carnal (non-dedicated) and spiritual (dedicated) believers separated by a one-time act of dedication to be convincing in light of biblical exegesis. That the Corinthians had experienced a measure of the Spirit’s sanctifying work is supported by several factors. Paul addressed the Corinthians as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). Spiritual gifts were abundant in the church (1 Cor 12–14), and their labor for the Lord was evident (1 Cor 15:58). Consequently, while the Corinthians could be described as “carnal,” they were not completely without the sanctifying work of the Spirit in their lives. On the problematic separation of sanctification from justification see William W. Combs, “The Disjunction between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBTJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 17–44.

(Rom 6:6) and should walk in newness of life as a result of their union with Christ (Rom 6:3).

Turning to Romans 7, Paul seems to be addressing believers who have the potential to act in a fleshly manner without qualification of their level of spiritual maturity.

However, while the believer does naturally have carnal impulses, the conflicted state in Romans 7 is not the ideal either. In other words, the conflicted individual is frustrated by indwelling sin, but this state of frustration does not have to be. It stems from personal failure to resist sin. So, mature believers may experience the dismay of the conflicted individual of Romans 7, but this should not be a normative perspective either and is certainly not commended by the Apostle Paul.

## **2. The Conflicted Individual Yields to Sin**

Although the conflicted individual does not desire to, he has succumbed to the power of indwelling sin. It appears that the individual in Romans 7 has not followed Paul's admonitions in Romans 6. The individual has yielded to sin rather than to righteousness.

Positionally in Christ, believers are free from sin; however, practically speaking, believers still struggle with sin and wrestle with it in their Christian walk.<sup>59</sup> Paul recognizes this and exhorts believers to live in light of their position.

In particular, Romans 6:11-13 gives a series of imperatives that highlight the believer's responsibility to prevent sin from taking control of their lives. The believer is not

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<sup>59</sup> In light of passages like 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, I find descriptions of sanctification that seem to leave no room for failure in one's Christian life to be imbalanced. E.g., Steven J. Lawson, *The Cost: What It Takes to Follow Jesus* (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017). While the sanctifying work of the Spirit is a reality for all genuine believers, this does not guarantee perfect adherence to God's expectations without exception. This does not excuse sinful behavior, but it is a reality streaming from indwelling sin.

completely passive in the process. Rather, believers should consider themselves dead to sin (v. 11), they should not let sin reign in their mortal bodies (v. 12), and they should not present their members as instruments of unrighteousness. Positively, believers are exhorted to present themselves to God and their “members to God as instruments for righteousness” (6:13).

Paul highlights this responsibility later in Romans 6 as well. The apostle sees that believers have a choice as to who they will obey: sin or righteousness (6:16). As believers once submitted themselves to unrighteousness, Paul exhorts them to “now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification” (6:19).

Applied to Romans 7, I suggest that the conflicted person is the believer who fails to follow the exhortations of Romans 6. That is, Romans 7 describes a believer who, while positionally is freed from sin, has voluntarily submitted to sin in his or her life. The individual’s frustration is actually a result of his or her failure to heed the admonitions to resist sin.

### **3. The Conflicted Individual Is Not Living According to the Spirit**

The conflicted individual in Romans 7:14-25 appears to not be living in harmony with the Holy Spirit. Interpreters often observe that Romans 7:14-25 does not mention the Holy Spirit, which stands in sharp contrast to His prevalence in Romans 8.<sup>60</sup> Romans 8 seems to portray the life of victory that is found when the believer walks in the Spirit, while Romans 7 describes the frustration of walking apart from Him.

While this description may be more implicit than the other descriptions, it is a consistent corollary to them. Living in a fleshly way and yielding to sin is certainly incompatible with living under the control of the Holy Spirit. The conflicted individual faces frustration and

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<sup>60</sup> E.g., Bruce, *Romans*, 157–58.

failure because he or she is unable to combat indwelling sin in his or her own strength.

Yieldedness to the Spirit is necessary to sustain lasting victory over indwelling sin.

## **Summary**

So then, what kind of individual is discussed in Romans 7? On the whole, the view that Paul is describing a Christian individual fits well with the form (first-person, present) and the descriptions of the individual's attitudes toward good and evil. It seems unwarranted to limit the descriptions to a class of immature or undedicated believers. However, to say that this is a normative tension for mature believers seems to foster an overly pessimistic view of the Christian life. I suggest that the conflicted individual is best understood as any believer who succumbs to the flesh rather than living according to the Spirit. They have failed to resist sin and to yield themselves to righteousness, resulting in frustration stemming from his or her struggle against indwelling sin.

## **An Illustration**

At this point, an illustration may be instructive. Although he lived in the Old Testament era, I believe that a meaningful illustration of a believer succumbing to temptation and experiencing the turmoil and sorrow of Romans 7 is found in the life of King David.<sup>61</sup>

In 2 Samuel 10–11 we read about David's adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah the Hittite. These were grievous sins committed by a great man of God. After

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<sup>61</sup> I am sympathetic to the view that the Holy Spirit did have some ministry in the lives of Old Testament believers, enabling them to live a sanctified life. Cf. Leon J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976). However, the Old Testament ministry of the Spirit is different than the promised baptism of the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:4-5), which is unique to church age believers. The difference seems to be insinuated in Jesus' teaching to the disciples that the Spirit of truth "dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:17).



his sin was exposed, David expressed the depths of his own sinfulness and lamented over the sin that he committed (e.g., Pss 32, 51).

I suggest that David's situation is similar to that of the conflicted individual of Romans 7. David knew what was right but found himself caving into temptation as he obeyed the flesh rather than righteousness. The problem was not that David was immature or a new believer. At this point he was established as king, having seen the greatness of God's deliverance and blessing and would have even written psalms that are a part of the Hebrew Bible. I believe the problem was that David succumbed to carnal impulses. He failed to resist temptation and to pursue righteousness. David's penitential psalms, then, express his horror over his sinfulness that is not unlike the conflict that is expressed in Romans 7. David confessed his utter sinfulness and was dismayed over his transgression. However, David also experienced the joy of forgiveness, despite his sinfulness (cf. Rom 7:25).

While most believers do not plunge into the depths of sin that David did, we can sympathize with the defeat that David experienced and the inner turmoil that it caused. We struggle with indwelling sin and are subject to disaster when we fail to rely upon divine resources.

### **Practical Implications**

Romans 7 has attracted much scholarly and academic attention. However, the passage also carries profound, practical implications. As we draw out some of these implications, I would like to first look at two universally recognized implications. These implications can be seen in the text regardless of one's specific view about the conflicted individual of Romans 7. Then four implications related to the interpretation that the conflicted individual is a fleshly/self-reliant believer will be discussed.

### *Universally Recognized Implications*

Whatever view one holds concerning the conflicted person in Romans 7, at least two implications can be generally acknowledged. These universally recognized implications are at least a starting place for the application of Romans 7.

First, Romans 7 clearly teaches us that sin is terrible. Whether Romans 7 is discussing pre-Christian experience, Christian experience, or an undefined experience, sin is clearly seen to be at the root of the problem (7:14, 17, 20, 23). Sin is deceptive (7:11), perverse (7:8, 13), dominating (7:23), and leads to complete ruin (7:24). Sin is completely contrary to the things of God (7:14, 25) and draws people away from God's good standards (7:15-23). Sin is strongly and repeatedly identified as the source of the individual's conflict. Thus, however Romans 7 is interpreted, it certainly reminds us of the terribleness of sin.

Romans 7 clearly teaches that sin is terrible, but, unfortunately, even believers far too often underestimate the sinfulness of sin. We frequently fail to recognize the magnitude of our offense before a holy God. Sin demanded the death of the sinless Son of God to bring forgiveness and everlasting life for those who believe (cf. John 1:29; Rom 6:23). Believers should be humbled by the provision for salvation that has been accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, because of the terribleness of sin, believers should also resist sin on a personal level. Sin should not be minimized, and we should not flirt with temptation. Realizing that Christ brings victory over sin, the believer should live a holy life (1 Pet 1:14-16) and flee from every form of temptation (1 Cor 10:13). Romans 7 reminds us that sin is bad, and it only brings bondage and misery.

Second, Romans 7 affirms that Christ brings victory. Whether one takes this passage as referring to a believer or unbeliever, the possibility for success lies only in our union with Christ (7:25). While this point is not highly developed at this point in the book of Romans, Paul's triumphant thanks to God at this point indicates that the remedy to the conflicted situation that he has described in some detail in the preceding verses is found only in Christ.

Victory through Christ is foundational to Paul's theology and to the message of Romans in particular. Through belief in the gospel of Christ, one can have eternal salvation (cf. Rom 1:16). Furthermore, it is through Christ that the believer has the hope of glorification and the complete removal of sin (cf. Rom 8:29-30). Paul's consistent message throughout the book of Romans is that victory over sin (both positional justification and ultimate glorification) comes through our identification with Christ. Romans 7 reminds us that while the bad news about sin is really bad, the good news of victory through Christ is glorious.

### *Interpretation-Specific Implications*

Beyond the universally recognized implications, I would like to suggest at least four other practical implications that flow out of the specific view that Romans 7 describes a fleshly or self-reliant Christian. I believe these are valid implications that are drawn from the text of Romans 7 itself and relate directly to the Christian experience of the believer.

First, believers should be alert to the presence and possibility of sin. Roman 7:13-25 reminds the believer about the problem of indwelling sin (7:17, 20). The believer should never deceive themselves into thinking that sin is not a reality in his or her experience (cf. 1 John 1:7) or think that they are above temptation (cf. Jas 1:13). Rather, even mature believers should be mindful of sin's presence and the ever-present threat it poses.

Second, believers must constantly battle and resist carnal impulses. Even though the believer has ultimate victory over sin through Christ, the conflict with the flesh remains (Rom 7:25). The battle with the flesh is ongoing, and it is intense. At no point in the believer's Christian experience will he or she be free from this struggle. Even mature believers who have been active in service for the Lord can be influenced by carnal thinking and temptations.

Third, believers ought to yield themselves to God and righteousness. On the positive side, the believer can have victory through following Paul's admonitions to resist sin (Rom 6:11-14). When the believer yields to unrighteousness rather than to righteousness, defeat ensues, which prompts sorrow like that expressed in the lament of the conflicted person of Romans 7.

Fourth, believers can claim victory and hope in Christ. While indwelling sin is a reality for the believer, God has provided resources for victory over sin (cf. 1 Cor 10:13). The penalty for sin has been paid in Christ (Rom 8:1), but the indwelling Spirit aids the believer in overcoming fleshly impulses in daily life (Rom 8:12-17). While indwelling sin is powerful, the believer has even more powerful divine resources to overcome sin on a daily basis.

### **Conclusion**

The plight of the fleshly, self-reliant believer is bleak. Romans 7:13-25 describes this conflicted situation where a believer succumbs to temptation, against his or her will, because of the presence of indwelling sin. While this falls well short of God's ideal for the believer, it is a reality. The believer is free from sin, but he or she can lapse back into sinful behavior. The genuine believer finds no joy in this defeat but is frustrated with his or her own failure as described in Romans 7:15-23.

All believers, even mature ones, face this struggle with indwelling sin. Believers must continually yield to the Spirit, live in light of his or her position in Christ, and make daily

decisions to follow righteousness. While the conflict with sin remains (Rom 7:25), the believer has ultimate victory through Jesus Christ and should live in light of his or her privileged position in Christ.

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