

The Lament of a non-Christian

A study of Romans 7:4-25

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INTRODUCTION

More times than I can count, I have heard people refer to Romans 7 in regards to the struggle within the Christian. In fact, I have even written devotionals on the Christian struggle based on Romans 7:4-25. It was my goal to encourage and motivate Christians in their temptations and struggles through Paul's message. However, after a deeper study of Rom 7:4-25, I have come to learn that this passage is not about the battle within a Christian. The apostle Paul is talking about the battle within a non-Christian or a potential Christian. This struggle is between the flesh and the person's desire to obey God.

THE CHRISTIAN STRUGGLE

Before Romans 7 is addressed, let's look at the Christian struggle. For the Christian struggle does exist, but this struggle is between the flesh and the Holy Spirit.

Gal 6:1-2. "Brothers, if someone is **caught in any wrongdoing**, you who are spiritual should restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so you also won't be tempted. Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Paul is talking about a Christian committing wrong and another Christian restoring him. Paul is speaking to the Galatians who are Christians. Also, Paul had said that the church should not judge outsiders. (1Cor 5:12-13)

Heb 12:4. "In **struggling against sin**, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

Heb 12:8. "But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

If we didn't struggle with sin, there would be no need for God to discipline us. But since ALL Christians receive discipline from God, this means that all of us struggle with sin.

Jam 3:2. "We all **stumble in many ways**. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man who is also able to control his whole body."

Jam 1:14-15. "Each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by **his own evil desires**. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death."

James tells us where the Christian struggle begins. It doesn't come from things we cannot control. It comes from WITHIN ourselves, that is, our flesh.

1Pet 2:11. "Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and temporary residents to abstain from fleshly desires that **war against you**."

1John 2:1. "My little children, I am writing you these things so that **you may not sin**. But **if anyone does sin**, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the Righteous One." (Sin is still possible for a Christian.)

James says we stumble in many ways. John agrees but also gives the solution: Jesus Christ. John writes about Jesus Christ so that we may not stumble in sin.

You may be asking, "Why admit that Christians struggle when the goal of this study is showing that Rom 7 is not about the Christian struggle?" The Scriptures make a clear distinction between the Christian struggle and the non-Christian struggle. **The difference is the Holy Spirit**. In the following verse, Paul shows us which two things are struggling against each other within the Christian.

Gal 5:17. "For the **flesh** desires what is against the **Spirit**, and the **Spirit** desires what is against the **flesh**; these are **opposed to each other**, so that you don't do what you want."

Our flesh is warring against the Holy Spirit. The desires of our flesh and the fruit of the Spirit are opposed to each other. We will see that this struggle is very different from the struggle Paul speaks of in Rom 7.

THE CHRISTIAN STRUGGLE IS ALWAYS IMPROVING

It is often said that if we not are growing in our faith and becoming more like Christ, then we are being weakened in our faith and becoming less like Christ. In other words, **a Christian cannot be stagnant**. This is true for the Christian struggle. Christians will find that the Christian struggle gets much easier as their faith grows and the more they become like Christ. This section shows that we are called to become more righteous all the time, and there is a big problem with our faith if our faith and obedience have remained the same.

1Cor 3:2-3. "I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, because you were not yet ready for it. In fact, you are still not ready, because you are still fleshly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like unbelievers?"

The Corinthians struggled with sins more than other Christians because they were still babies in Christ. We mature over time as God disciplines us and we put our fleshly desires to death.

Eph 4:22-24. "You took off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires; you are **being renewed in the spirit of your minds**; you put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth."

Putting away our former life with its fleshly desires is a constant part of Christian faith. It will allow the Spirit to renew our minds and allow us to become formed according to God's nature.

Col 3:5-10. "Therefore, **put to death what belongs to your worldly nature**: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God's wrath comes on the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. But now **you must also put away** all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. You are **being renewed** in knowledge according to the image of your Creator."

Paul shows the importance of putting away our fleshly desires and actions. He lists many of them and explains their just punishments.

2Pet 1:5-11. "For this very reason, make every effort to **supplement** your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For **if these qualities are yours and are increasing**, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The person who lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten the cleansing from his past sins. Therefore, brothers, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things you will **never stumble**. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly supplied to you."

Peter says that when all these wonderful qualities of God are increasing in us, we will be fruitful and not useless. If these things are not increasing in our lives, this shows that we are blind and have forgotten about God's forgiveness.

Rom 6:12. "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires."

Again, we are to grow to be more like Christ, and we do that by not allowing sin to overpower us.

ROMANS 7 **Spiritual Death**

Paul said that when he learned about the law, sin brought him spiritual death.

Rom 7:9-10. "Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me."

Paul is talking about death. Is he talking about physical death? No, he is talking about spiritual death. Paul says that "he died" and it "resulted in death" for him. Does this sound like a Christian speaking?

Rom 7:11-13. "For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Therefore, did what is good cause my death? Absolutely not! On the contrary, sin, in order to be recognized as sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that through the commandment, sin might become sinful beyond measure."

Paul speaks more about what sin has done to him. Do these phrases sound like a Christian or a non-Christian: "sin... killed me," "cause my death," and "sin...was producing death in me"?

Slave to Sin

Not only is Paul talking about being spiritually dead, but he is talking about being a slave to the sin within him.

Rom 7:14. "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am made out of flesh, **sold into sin's power.**"

Would you describe a Christian as someone who is sold into sin's power?

Rom 7:18. "For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but **there is no ability to do it.**"

Paul says he wants to do good, but he doesn't have the ability to do good! Does this sound like a Christian?

Cannot Help But Do Evil

These are the verses that many Christians tend to quote and apply to the sin in their life.

Rom 7:15-17. "For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. So now I am no longer the one doing it, but it is sin living in me."

Rom 7:19-21. "For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but it is the sin that lives in me. So I discover this principle: When I want to do what is good, evil is with me."

If these verses are about a Christian, then a Christian cannot but commit sin. A Christian does not have the ability to stay away from sin. A Christian will sin because sin is in their flesh. A Christian is not responsible for their sin if they want to do what is right. **In short: A Christian is guaranteed to sin.** This is how many Christians today apply these verses. If Paul is talking about a Christian in Romans 7, then this would be true--a Christian is guaranteed to sin.

Struggle Between Mind and Body

As Paul sums up his thoughts about this chapter, he describes who is fighting this struggle.

Rom 7:22-23. "For in my inner self I joyfully agree with God's law. But I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body."

Paul describes this struggle as being between his body, or his flesh, and his inner self, or the law of his mind. The battle is against the sin in his flesh, which is sold into sin's power, and his mind, which wants to do God's will. What is missing from this battle? Why would Paul battle his flesh with the **law of his mind**? Shouldn't he battle his flesh with the **Holy Spirit** of God? Why in all of Romans chapter 7 has Paul **not mentioned the Spirit** even once? Paul has not mentioned the Spirit because, in the struggle he is describing, he does not have the Holy Spirit inside him!

Rescued from the Flesh

Rom 7:24. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this dying body? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh, to the law of sin."

If Romans 7 is about a Christian, why does Paul need to be rescued from his flesh? If he was a Christian, shouldn't he have already crucified his flesh? In this verse, **Paul transitions from a life without God to a life with God!**

ROMANS 7 AND THE PRE-NICENE CHRISTIANS

Before we take a look at Romans 8 and contrast it with Romans 7, I want to take the time to look at a couple of the early Christian writings about Romans 7. The Pre-Nicene Christians were Christian writers who lived between AD 75 and 325. Reading the writings of those who experienced the same culture, language, empire, and figures of

speech as Jesus Himself should be very valuable to us today. Two of these writers addressed this passage. Did they think Paul was talking about a Christian or a non-Christian?

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was an overseer in Lyons, France in AD 180. Prior to this quote, he talked about how man cannot save himself; man requires the work of God. Irenaeus shows that Paul's illustration in Romans 7 is about someone who has not become a Christian. He says...

On this account, there, the Lord Himself, who is Emmanuel from the Virgin, is the sign of our salvation, since it was the Lord Himself who saved them, because **they could not be saved by their own instrumentality**; and, therefore, when Paul set forth **human infirmity**, he says: "For I know that there dwelleth in my flesh no good thing [Rom 7:18]," showing that the "good thing" of **our salvation is not from us**, but from God. And again: "Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death [Rom 7:24]?" Then he **introduces** the Deliverer, "The grace of Jesus Christ our Lord."

-Irenaeus. ANF, Vol 1, p450.

Methodius

Methodius was an overseer in modern-day Mysia in Asia Minor in AD 290. He wrote a lot about Romans 7.

Paul is Describing a Lost State

Methodius says that life seems grand before a person finds out that their life is sinful. He says...

"I was alive without the law once [Rom 7:9]," refers to the life which was lived in paradise before the law... being altogether ignorant of its assaults.

-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p370

Methodius took Rom 7:9 and compared this situation to the Fall of Man when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit.

About Rom 7:14, Methodius says that Paul is describing himself under Satan's power. He says...

"I am sold [Rom 7:14]" **to the devil, fallen under sin**. Hence **evil, as though besieging me, cleaves to me and dwells in me**, justice giving me up to be **sold to the Evil One**, in consequence of having violated the law.

-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p371

About Rom 7:18, Methodius says that Paul is still talking about someone who is not in Christ, sold into Satan's power. He says...

"For I know that in me--that is, in my flesh--dwelleth no good thing." And this is rightly said. For remember how it has been already shown that, **from the time when man went astray and disobeyed the law**, thence sin, receiving its birth from his disobedience, dwelt in him. For thus a commotion was stirred up, and we were filled with agitations and foreign imaginations, **being emptied of the divine inspiration and filled with carnal desire, which the cunning serpent infused into us**.

-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p372

With the war going on between Paul's inner man (who has the law) and Satan (who has the flesh), **Paul will need a deliverer** from this. Methodius says that it is Jesus who rescues Paul from this war. He says...

And he [Paul] immediately adds, **clearly showing from what kind of death he desired to be delivered, and who he was who delivered him**, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ [7:25].... If he said that this body was death..., he would not afterwards mention Christ as delivering him from so great an evil."

-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p373

Many Christians today say that Paul is wanting to be rescued from the death of his flesh (physical death). However, Methodius says that Paul is not being delivered from physical death, but he is being delivered from the death that comes from war that wages between his flesh (sin) and God's law (the desire to do good).

Holy Spirit Not Mentioned

Methodius seems to notice that the war going on in chapter 7 is **not between the Holy Spirit and our temptations**. It is between Satan and the desire to follow the law. Even in Methodius' writings regarding Romans 7, he never mentions the involvement of the Holy Spirit--just as Paul did not mention it. He says...

For there are two kinds of thoughts in us; the one which arises from the lust which lies in the body, which, as I said, came from the craft of the Evil Spirit; the other from the law, which is in accordance with the commandment, which we had implanted in us as a natural law, stirring up our thoughts to good, when we delight in the law of God according to our mind, for this is the inner man.

-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p372

ROMANS 8

There is no disagreement: Romans 8 is about a Christian. Look at the following chart and notice the stark differences between chapter 7 and 8. I refer to the person in Romans 8 as a Christian and the person in Romans 7 as "the old Paul."

Romans 8	Romans 7	Differences
1 "Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus"	10-11 " I died . The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me . For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me ."	A Christian has no condemnation in Christ Jesus. The old Paul has spiritual death.
2 "The Spirit's law of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."	14,23 "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am made out of flesh, sold into sin's power taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body."	Christ Jesus has set us free from sin. The old Paul is sold into sin's power and a prisoner in his own body.
3 "What the law could not do since it was limited by the flesh, God did. He condemned sin in the flesh by sending His own Son in flesh like ours under sin's domain, and as a sin offering."	18 "When the commandment came, sin sprang to life ."	God condemned sin in the flesh. Sin is alive and well in the old Paul.
6 "For the mind-set of the flesh is death , but the mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace."	10-11 " I died . The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me . For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me ."	Those who think fleshly are dead. The old Paul is dead.
7 "For the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law, for it is unable to do so ."	18 "For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh . For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it ."	Those who live according to their flesh cannot submit to God. The old Paul has no ability to do good.
8 "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God ."	18 "For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it ."	Those who live according to the flesh cannot please God. The old Paul has no ability to do good.
9 "You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God lives in you . But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him ."		Christians must have the Spirit in them. Romans 7 never mentions the Spirit living in the old Paul.

Romans 8	Romans 7	Differences
10 "Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin , but the Spirit is life because of righteousness."	24 "Who will rescue me from this dying body ?"	Christians' body is dead because of sin. The old Paul needs rescue from his dead body.
12 "So then, brothers, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh."	15,19,21 "I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate . For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do . When I want to do what is good, evil is with me ."	Christians are not forced to live according to the flesh. The old Paul cannot help but do evil.
13 "If you live according to the flesh , you are going to die . But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body , you will live."	10-11 " I died . The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me . For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me ." 18,23-24 "There is no ability to do it . I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this dying body?"	Those who live according to the flesh will die. The old Paul has death. Christians put to death the deeds of the body through the Spirit. The old Paul is not able to put his evil to death because he has no ability.

It is clear when contrasting chapters 7 and 8 that they are describing a person at two very, very different spiritual points.

THE CHRISTIAN IS NEVER GUARANTEED TO FAIL THEIR STRUGGLE

For those who believe that Romans 7 is describing a Christian, their conclusion is that **a Christian is guaranteed to sin**. This is in direct contradiction to many other Scriptures, most of them also recorded by Paul. Here are some Scriptures that plainly teach that sin is never a guarantee for the Christian.

Stumbling Is Not Guaranteed

Jude 24. "Now to Him who is **able to protect you from stumbling** and to make you stand in the presence of His glory."

James says we stumble in many ways. But is this a guarantee? No, because God is able to protect you from stumbling! Are we relying on God's power?

1John 2:10. "The one who loves his brother remains in the light, and there is **no cause for stumbling** in him."

If you have love--especially for your brothers--there will be nothing that can cause you to stumble. John says that it is possible (if we have God's love) for a Christian to keep from stumbling.

The Apostles Guarantee that a Christian Can Cease from Sin

Rom 6:22. "Since you **have been liberated from sin** and have become enslaved to God, you have your fruit, which results in sanctification--and the end is eternal life!"

Gal 5:16. "I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."

Paul gives us a promise, a new guarantee. If we walk by God's spirit, then we **will not** sin!

Gal 5:24-25. "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, we must also follow the Spirit."

Are Christians subject to their fleshly desires? Paul says that those who belong to Christ **have already** crucified their flesh! If a Christian couldn't help but sin, why would Paul give the command that we must follow the Spirit? Paul gives this command because he expects all Christians to crucify their flesh so that there is no reason for them to sin.

2Pet 1:10. "Therefore, brothers, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things **you will never stumble.**"

1John 3:9. " Everyone who has been born of God **does not sin**, because His seed remains in him; **he is not able to sin**, because he has been born of God."

Can these two Scriptures from Peter and John be more clear that it is possible that a Christian can cease from sin?

Methodius Again

Methodius saw the difference between Romans 7 and Romans 8. He also recognized that it is possible for Christians to never sin. He says...

...that sin being condemned, to its destruction, so that **it should never bear fruit in the flesh...**
-Methodius. ANF, Vol 6, p373

God's Power Greater than Our Flesh

1Cor 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. God is faithful, and He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape so that you are able to bear it."

In light of this verse, there is not a single Christian who can say that their sin was unavoidable. Paul says that ALL sin is avoidable! One **cannot** believe that Romans 7 is about a Christian and believe Paul's words in this verse. This verse teaches that a Christian is not guaranteed to sin, but a Christian **chooses** to sin. No Christian is destined to sin. Paul says that **the Christian is always able to overcome sin!**

1John 4:4. "The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Christians can always overcome sin because God's power (the Holy Spirit within us) is greater than both Satan and our own flesh.

So many Christians today, when they sin, blame their flesh as if they couldn't help it. Do you do this? All sin is the fault of the Christian and the desires that arise within him. For every temptation, God has given a way of escape. So when we sin, it is our fault (and not our flesh's fault) for not walking according to God's Spirit. **We cannot make the excuse that our flesh forced us to sin.**

Tertullian

Tertullian was an overseer in Carthage and wrote in the years AD 197-213. Even at this early date, he wrote about those who wanted to blame their flesh as the reason for their sin. He says...

We read that "the flesh is weak [Matt 26:41]" and, hence, we soothe ourselves in some cases. Yet, we read, too, that "the spirit is strong [Matt 26:41]."... Why, then, do we (being overly prone to excuse ourselves) put forward the weak part of us? Why do we not look at the strong? **Why should not the earthly yield to the heavenly?**
-Tertullian. ANF, Vol 4, p41

Do we put more weight on the weakness of our flesh than we do on the power of God's Spirit which is inside us?

OTHER SCRIPTURES THAT SUMMARIZE ROMANS 7 AND 8

Rom 3:19-22. "Now we know that whatever the law says speaks to those who are subject to the law, so that every mouth may be shut and the whole world may become subject to God's judgment. For no one will be justified in His

sight by the works of the law, because **the knowledge of sin comes through the law**. But now, **apart from the law, God's righteousness has been revealed**--attested by the Law and the Prophets--that is, God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe."

Rom 5:17. "Since by the one man's trespass, **death reigned through that one man**, how much more will those who receive the overflow of **grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ**."

Rom 6:1-2, 6-7, 14. "What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! **How can we who died to sin still live in it?** For we know that our **old self was crucified** with Him in order that **sin's dominion over the body may be abolished**, so that we may **no longer be enslaved to sin**, since **a person who has died is freed from sin's claims**. For **sin will not rule over you**, because you are not under law but under grace."

Gal 3:19-26. "Why then was the law given? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come. The law was put into effect through angels by means of a mediator. Now a mediator is not for just one person, but God is one. Is the law therefore contrary to God's promises? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that was able to give life, then righteousness would certainly be by the law. But the **Scripture has imprisoned everything under sin's power**, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. **Before this faith came, we were confined under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith was revealed**. The law, then, was our guardian until Christ, so that we could be **justified by faith**. But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."

Gal 4:3-5. "In the same way we also, **when we were children, were in slavery under the elemental forces of the world**. When the time came to completion, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, **to redeem those under the law**."

Gal 5:16-18, 24-25. "I say then, walk **by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh**. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; **these are opposed to each other**, so that you don't do what you want. **But if you are led by the Spirit**, you are not under the law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus **have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires**. Since we live by the Spirit, we must also **follow the Spirit**."

CONCLUSION

In Romans 7, Paul describes battling sin, temptation, and the Evil One **with his own mind**--without God. For those who are in this state and sold into sin's power, he says there is no ability for anyone to overcome their sin.

In Romans 8 and elsewhere, Paul describes battling sin, temptation, and the Evil One **with the Spirit of God**. For those who are in this state have crucified their flesh, and there is always a way for them to overcome their sin.

Dear reader, feel free to preach and teach on the Christian struggle based on Scriptures such as Gal 5:16-18, 5:24-25, Heb 12:4, and 1Pet 2:11. However, **do not use Romans 7 to describe the Christian struggle**. Romans 7 describes a person's struggle who does not have the Holy Spirit. It is the struggle that causes the non-Christian to lament.

Application

Do you feel like your struggles with temptations and sins is too much for you? Are you failing the struggle over and over again without any evidence of improvement? When you sin, do you feel like you had no choice in it? If these things describe you, it might be that you do not have God's Holy Spirit inside you. Don't fall prey to the same sins in your life. Seek God's unlimited power that can abide within you.