

The Answer To Romans Chapter Seven

Foreword

While the writer of this article says this chapter
is among those "hard to be understood;"
The purpose of this article is to show
the Apostle's understanding

The 7th chapter of Romans is a favourite resort of believers in unclean flesh as the cause of sin; and it is readily admitted that this chapter is among the writings of Paul which are hard to be understood. If however it is made to supply the proof of a theory which is against the weight of Scripture, and also of Paul's own teaching in other contexts, we shall be wresting his words to our own destruction.

In seeking to understand his reasoning it is a good thing to keep in mind the teaching of Jesus Himself, in Matthew 12:35, "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things; an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things." Nothing in Paul's teaching would be a direct contradiction of our Lord's teaching, so that, when he says, "What I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I," it cannot possibly be right to imagine he intends us to understand that either he or we are cursed with a kind of physical and moral depravity which drives us to sin. Nor can it possibly be right to imagine that he was describing his own life in Christ when he says: "What I hate, that I do," for we know full well that his life after his conversion was a pattern of self-abnegation and obedience only surpassed by Jesus Himself. Whatever Paul meant, it was certainly not that as an Apostle he served the law of sin with his flesh and the law of Christ only with his mind.

Dr. Thomas recognized this and even though generally he appears to have believed implicitly in sinful flesh, he did not make the mistake which so many of his followers make, of supposing that the Apostle was describing his own experience as a man in Christ. In *Elpis Israel*, page 82, he wrote:

"In the animal man there dwelleth no good thing. The Apostle affirms this of himself, considered as an unenlightened son of the flesh."

There is a simple explanation, which enables Paul's words to be understood in harmony with Jesus' teaching, that goodness or badness is a matter of character, not of nature.

This explanation is to be found, first, in the fact that in Romans 7 Paul is speaking from the standpoint of a Jew under the Law; reasoning, as he was well able, having been in the position himself, from the point of view of one who trusted in his descent from Abraham and his observance of the letter of the Law.

It is in this connection that he says: "In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." This is not the same as saying that in his literal flesh in fact every evil thing did dwell; it means that true goodness, by enlightenment, had perforce to come from outside himself.

Secondly, it must be recognized that when Paul speaks of "the flesh" he is not usually referring to the physical body but to that state of mind or behaviour which is seen in a person

whose sole or main object in life is in the gratification of the natural desires. That this is so in the passage in question can be seen from his words: "But ye are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you." He did not mean they were not flesh and blood bodies, which would be nonsense; he meant they were not allowing themselves to be ruled by their lusts.

Again, when he says: "The good that I would I do not; but the evil that I would not, [hat I do," he is not to be understood as saying that there was in his physical make-up something which compelled him to do evil or conversely prevented him from doing good; this would be a direct contradiction of his own claim: "I can do all things through Christ;" and it would contradict the example of his own life, for he says: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." This would be the very worst advice, if the Paul we are to follow is the one who makes the despairing cry: "O wretched man that I am."

What Paul is showing is how the Mosaic Law laid down a code of right behaviour, and thus enabled a Jew to distinguish between the good which they realized they should do and the evil which equally clearly they realized they should not do; but at the same time it only served to emphasize the fact that because they were disobedient they were sinners. They were not sinners because they could not keep the Law, but because they did not.

The whole purpose of his argument in 7th Romans is to reinforce what he had already laid down in the 5th chapter, namely, the justice of God in having concluded all, both Jew and Gentile alike, under the sin of Adam on the Federal principle. The importance of this principle is that by it God regards all men as involved in the first transgression (Romans 5:19) and as having lost their right to life with Adam. His object in so regarding them is a wholly merciful one, that the one sacrifice which atoned for Adam's sin could cover all his descendants. The imputation of sin does not make our flesh physically sinful; it alienates us from God legally. Therefore Jesus' one act of obedience, when applied to the individual by faith in the symbol of baptism, can restore us to grace and favour.

That is why Paul can commence the 8th chapter with the words: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." This again is no mere figure of speech but for the true believer, a present reality to be prized above all else.

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