**The Inward Conflict: Who Is Described? (1)**

***(Examining Romans 7:7-25)***

*by Harry Osborne*

To say that this passage has been the occasion for much debate is an understatement. The fact that it is a difficult passage, regardless of the interpretation defended, is a truth to which all serious students would readily agree. In this brief series, we cannot *raise* all of the questions posed about the context, much less take the space required to ***answer*** all of those questions. We will, however, try to lay a foundation needed to properly understand the main points. For a more detailed study, Whiteside's commentary on Romans gives an excellent examination of this text.

The apostle Paul began the epistle to the Romans by affirming that the Gospel is God's power to save those who respond in faith to that message. He then shows that all are in need of that salvation because all have sinned beginning with the Gentiles and then concentrating on the Jews (Rom. 1:18 - 2:20). The next two chapters emphasize the themes of faith and grace as they relate to the justification of the sinner through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This point is also made with special emphasis to the Jews. Up to that point in the book, the writer stresses the need for, and nature of God's action in salvation.

With the beginning of chapter 6, the apostle spends three chapters mainly concentrating on the proper response from man to God's grace in salvation. Paul affirms that "we" (Christians) cannot say that we may sin even more since God's grace takes care of sin. Instead, we must see our baptism as a death to or separation from sin that we might live in "newness of life" (Rom. 6:1-11). He views that point of obedience from the heart as the time we were freed from the dominion or mastery of sin and brought under the control of the Lordship of Christ, being made servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:12-23). Those figures of “death” and “dominion” continue to reappear throughout this section of the book.

In the seventh chapter, those figures are pulled together in the first six verses as the writer uses them to picture the freedom "we" have from the old law as analogous to the wife released from the dominion of her husband upon his death. Paul shows the need for that change in dominion by noting "our" condition under the law. He notes, "*For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were through the law, wrought in our members to bring forth fruit unto death"* (Rom. 7:5, ASV). Paul is not saying that the old law created the sinful passions of man, for sinful passion predated that law. The law, rather, was the means by which the one living under dominion of the "flesh" identified his passions as sinful because the law so defined them as sinful. Such a person also learned through the law that the fruit of his sinful passions when acted upon *("wrought in our members")* was *"the fruit of death."* Obviously, the main audience the writer addresses with this point is those of a Jewish background.

This line of reasoning was sure to raise a question in the mind of the reader. It is that question which initiates the context of this study. Paul answers, more fully explaining that the law was not sinful, nor was it the originator of sinful conduct. The law merely defined sin and made its nature clear to those it addressed. The identity of the law under consideration is made certain when the writer says, "*Howbeit, I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet"* (Rom. 7:7, ASV). "The law" being considered obviously included the ten commandments for it is only in the two times those commandments are given that we find the phrase quoted by Paul, *"Thou shalt not covet"* (see Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). Through that commandment, Paul as a child raised under the Mosaic Law first learned that coveting was sinful. That understanding came solely from the old law. Though men today may learn not to covet through the Gospel, such was not available to Paul when he learned the nature of coveting. In dealing with the context, let us remember that Paul introduces the teaching which follows by using himself as an example of those under the old law who discovered their sin by means of that law. Up to this point, he has tailored his teaching to those of a Jewish background.

It may also be noted that from this point forward in the context, the sin of which the writer speaks is that practiced by one who knows that his actions constitute sin. Thus, those who seek to use this passage to illustrate the Christian's battle with sins of ignorance pervert the context. As we will see, this passage does not have primary application to the Christian's struggle with sin much less his battle with sins of ignorance. It deals with the dilemma faced by the sinner who came to understand his sinfulness by the old law and found himself unable to escape sin's dominion over him apart from the deliverance found in *"Jesus Christ our Lord."*

The problem was not with any inherent evil in the law. Paul affirms that *"the law* ***IS*** *holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good"* (Rom. 7:12, ASV). This use of the present tense gives us our first clue about how Paul uses the present tense in this context. Though the apostle writes this at a time after that law had been done away, he further portrays that law as presently working *"death"* in him *"through the commandment"* (Rom. 7:13). How could that be ***literally*** true at the **present time** since Paul could only be condemned as a violator of the law he was presently under - the Gospel. He clearly speaks of a ***past time* in the present tense** just as the Hebrew writer does in saying what Jeremiah *"saith"* (present tense) even though Jeremiah had spoken the words quoted in the past (Heb. 8:8-13).

The pattern of the context would lead us to the conclusion that Paul is also using the present tense to describe a past state when he says, *"I am carnal, sold under sin"* (v. 14) and later exclaim, *"Wretched man that I am!"* (v. 24). Not only would the consistency of context suggest this conclusion, but so would other passages which plainly state the manner of Paul's life. In speaking of his present conduct as a Christian, Paul says, *"Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and righteously and unblameably we behaved ourselves toward you that believe"* (1 Thess. 2:10, ASV). Which was it? Was Paul **presently** carnal, sold under sin and wretched or was he **presently** holy, righteous and unblameable? It cannot be both ways at the same time, but it could have been both ways if the two passages speak of different points in his life.

Some have suggested that any casual reader of this context would automatically think that Paul was speaking of his present struggle with sin in verses 14 to 25 and that only those seeking to make an argument against Calvinism would view it otherwise. Such reasoning assumes what is to be proven. It also rests on the assumption that it is to be a “casual reader” rather than a diligent student of the word (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). We will look more at this point in the next bulletin, but let us remember that the careful reader of the context will see that Paul has consistently spoken of a past time in the present tense and should reasonably expect that he is doing the same in these verses. It is not a reaction to Calvinism that leads one to conclude the apostle is speaking of his condition in sin under the old law in this passage. Rather, it is a reaction to studying the context.