

g. After reiterating his primary implication, Paul proceeded to draw from it his summary contextual conclusion. That conclusion is that, despite his understanding of, agreement with, and desire to conform to the righteousness of the Law, Paul found that evil resided in him in such a way that it exercised unchallenged dominion over him (7:21, cf. also 7:25b). This truth he referred to as a *law* (“principle” in the NAS), which provides important insight into how Paul viewed the dichotomy he was addressing. Given his contextual emphasis upon the Law of Moses, some have interpreted this use of the word “law” as referring to it. However, Paul’s language and syntax support a different understanding.

- First of all, the noun *law* is the direct object of the verb rendered “I find.” That Paul would discover this “law” through his personal experience as a man sold into bondage to sin argues against the conclusion that he was speaking of the Mosaic Law.
- Second, Paul explains this “law” with the use of an appositional object clause. That is, he provides an object clause that serves to identify the law he was speaking of (note the rendering of the NASB, KJV, ASV, NIV, etc.). His statement is properly rendered as follows: *Therefore, with respect to myself – the one who desires to do good - I find the law that evil is present in (with) me.* By defining this “law” in terms of indwelling evil, Paul made it clear that he was not referring to the Law of Moses – or any other legal code for that matter – (cf. 7:12-13, 16).

Paul was using the term *law* in the sense of a principle or reality that is demonstrably true at all times and in every circumstance. For instance, gravitation is designated as a law for the reason that it always applies to the interaction between two physical bodies that possess mass. In a similar way, the principle of sin’s indwelling tyranny is true for every fallen human being, whatever the disposition and understanding of his mind and regardless of his possession of and agreement with a formal righteousness code (law). The fact that a person desires to do good is irrelevant to evil’s presence and dominion over him. Thus the indwelling presence of dominating evil is properly characterized as a *law*.

It is also noteworthy that evil in this context does not refer to any specific wicked motives or actions, but simply to that inward principle that prevents men from living out in practice what they desire to do. The evil that Paul remarked was present in him is the “law of sin” that enslaved him; it is the incapacity to do the good that one wishes to do. This is important, for it establishes the truth that every human being outside of Christ is characterized and ultimately determined by a principle of evil. The contention that all people are evil is flatly denounced by many, but when evil is defined as Paul does here, its universality is undeniable.

h. Consistent with Paul’s pattern in this context, verses 7:22-23 serve to explain his conclusion in 7:21. He has repeatedly insisted upon a dichotomy between what he desired and what he actually did, and that dichotomy is emphasized again here.

1) Verse 22 addresses the positive side of the dichotomy: “*I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.*” This statement as well is a focal point for the argument that Paul’s perspective in this passage was that of a Christian addressing his inner conflict with remaining sin. Two particular aspects of it are raised in support of this position:

- The first is that an unregenerate person is incapable of “joyfully concurring” with the law of God. He may acknowledge and agree with the righteousness of divine law, but he cannot be said to *delight* in it. In this respect, two observations need to be made. The first is that this verb and its cognates appear nowhere else in the New Testament, so that the sense in which Paul used it must be determined entirely from this context. And from the context it is evident that, by “joyful concurrence,” Paul was referring to a hearty agreement with the goodness and holiness of the Law, and so also the sincere desire to conform to it.

The second observation proceeds out of the first, namely that such happy approval did indeed characterize Paul in his existence under the Law. Moreover, he will later affirm that the nation of Israel was marked by a *zeal* for God (10:1-2), which given the covenantal context of Israel’s relationship with God, clearly indicates a zeal for God’s law (the Israelite covenant).

- The second aspect is Paul’s reference to the *inner man* as the seat of this concurrence. Literally his statement is that he concurred with the law of God *according to the inner man*. It is argued that such language cannot refer to the unsaved man, for such a person is “dead in sins and trespasses” and is characterized by a hostile mind that does not receive the things of God (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Colossians 1:21-22). Furthermore, Paul will go on in chapter eight to contrast the regenerate mind “set on the Spirit” and the unregenerate mind “set on the flesh” (8:5-8).

Nevertheless, the contextual emphasis in 7:14-25 is upon the dichotomy between the flesh/members that are sold into bondage to sin and the self/mind that agrees with and seeks to conform to the righteousness of law. It is the latter – the inward *mind* in distinction from the outward *members* – that is the obvious contextual referent for the “inner man” of 7:22. This inner man is the aspect of Paul’s being that was enslaved by sin contrary to its will and thereby rendered powerless to do what it desired. *Again, it is crucial to understand that Paul spoke in terms of this dichotomy within his person in order to accurately convey to his readers the fact that sin operated within him as an enslaving power contrary to his own desires and convictions.*

- 2) In turn, verse 23 addresses the negative side of the dichotomy: whereas the inner man eagerly concurs with God’s law, Paul saw “*a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.*”

The primary interpretive difficulty of this statement is Paul’s use of the noun *law* three times in it. As was the case in 7:21, many commentators have concluded that all three are references to the Law of Moses since this is the way Paul uses the term in the larger context. However, the following observations argue conclusively against this meaning:

- The first is that Paul here indicates two different “laws,” one associated with his mind and one with his members. Acknowledging this distinction, some have argued that Paul was simply noting that the *same* law – namely, the Law of Moses – had two differing *effects* on Paul. On the one hand it produced agreement and desire for conformity; on the other, it provoked sin and disobedience (cf. 7:7-11).

- This form of difference is insupportable, however. For Paul noted that these distinct “laws” are in conflict with each other: the law in Paul’s members was “waging war” against the law of his mind. Nowhere (either in this context or elsewhere) does Paul argue that the Law of Moses wars against itself within a man. Even more, throughout the passage it is the self (“ego”), as it stands in agreement with the Law, that is in conflict with indwelling sin. In itself, the Law is not said to be in direct conflict with either self or sin. Rather, Paul’s repeated insistence is that sin used the Law to destroy him and put him to death. Sin’s tyrannizing warfare is directed against the “ego,” and this is precisely Paul’s point in the present verse.

With this understanding it is evident that Paul was using the noun *law* in this verse in the same way he did in 7:21. The “law” in his members refers to the principle of indwelling sin by which he was brought into subjugation, whereas the “law” of his mind refers to the principle of his inward concurrence with the righteousness of the Law.

It is these two defining “principles” that stood locked in mortal conflict within him. At the same time, Paul notably presents this warfare as being *one-sided*, and that in two respects. The first is that the conflict was *initiated* by the law of indwelling sin in Paul’s members and directed against the law of his mind, and not vice-versa. But secondly, this warfare had a decidedly one-sided *outcome*, namely that the aggressor achieved a complete victory: the law in Paul’s members (i.e., the “law of sin”) triumphed in its assault against him, with the result that it succeeded in making Paul (the “ego”) its *prisoner*.

It was observed that the entire context of 7:15-25 presupposes and serves to explain and develop Paul's fundamental contention that he was *sold into bondage to sin* (7:14). For this reason, the principle of enslavement dominates the passage, with Paul repeatedly insisting that he was constrained to serve sin against his will. So also here he declared that the law of sin in his members, by waging a successful campaign of warfare against him, had accomplished its goal, namely his conquest and complete subjugation as sin's captive.

As much as this language is effective in communicating to readers today, it was profoundly communicative to the saints at Rome. For at the time Paul was writing his epistle Rome's population consisted predominantly of slaves. By far the most common form of labor, not only in Rome but throughout the Roman Empire, was slave labor. Everyone's life was touched in some way or another by the realities of slavery. At the same time, Rome acquired these slaves through military conquest. The spoils of victory included the "human capital" of the nations Rome defeated in battle. Thus, when Paul spoke of himself being sold into slavery to sin as a result of being defeated by it in a campaign of warfare, the Romans knew exactly what he was talking about.

- i. And just as was the case with those peoples whom Rome conquered and took captive to its own service, so also Paul's subjugation to the victorious "law of sin" within him was absolute and without possibility of release. It left him defeated, wretched, and hopeless: "*Who will set me free from the body of this death?*" (7:24). By this cry of hopeless destitution Paul brought the context to the pinnacle he had so methodically been building toward. He had been sold into the forced servitude of a powerful enemy over whom he could not prevail, and his predicament left him with no option but to look for an outside deliverer who would be able to overthrow his subjugator and set him free.

The only allies that had been available to Paul were his own concurring, willing "ego" and the good and righteous Law. Yet, despite the rectitude of these two resources, they had proven to be utterly impotent and Paul was left defeated and sold into inescapable, wretched bondage. If he was to be delivered, another resource was needed; Paul needed an ally who was not helpless in the presence of sin's power and influence. It is that Deliverer to whom Paul immediately turned his attention: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (7:25a).

In the face of sin's onslaught and the solemn obligation of personal righteousness, human beings naturally constrain themselves to the only two resources they know: *self* and *law*. And it is precisely because this is the universal experience of all people in every generation that Paul so carefully established the truth that both are utterly useless against sin.

- Whatever may be the understanding, agreement, and aspirations of the hearts and minds of men, they are powerless to do that which they desire. The willingness may be present in them, but the doing of the good is not.

- Furthermore, looking to law (in whatever form) does not help this predicament, but only acts to exacerbate it. Rather than fighting against sin, Paul was adamant that law is always employed by sin as its instrument of conquest. Not only does the presence of commandment provoke *disobedience*, and thereby aid sin's cause (7:7-8), sin uses law to *deceive* men (7:9-11). It does so by leading them to believe that conformity to rules constitutes fulfillment of God's demand for righteousness. In that way sin (which is nothing more than the ascendancy and primacy of *self*) cultivates their innate sense of self-righteousness. Sin uses law to convince men of their own righteousness, and in that way it kills them.

Paul, the quintessential Pharisee, had been subject to the same deception. He had put all of his hope and confidence in the exercise of his own capacities toward those things the Law revealed to him and demanded of him. *Like the nation of Israel and the world of men at large, he was persuaded that self and law are the appointed and adequate remedies to sin.* Were it not for the illuminating and transforming power of the Spirit, he would have perished in that deception. What had not previously been evident to him – for he had been “blameless” in his external conformity to the Law – he now, with the mind of Christ, discerned clearly. The righteousness and life he thought were to be found in obedience to the Law were actually eluding him, but he would not come to recognize that fact until his blind eyes were opened as the result of his encounter with the Deliverer on the road to Damascus. Like his Israelite brethren, Paul had believed that he was “*a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and truth*” (2:17-20). But the one who was convinced that he “saw” was stricken with blindness to show him his actual condition, in order that his eyes should be truly opened as the Holy Spirit brought him into the light of the truth that is found only in Christ Jesus (Acts 9:1-20; cf. also Isaiah 59:1-60:3; Luke 1:67-79; John 1:1-13, 8:12-28, 9:1-41; 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6; etc.).

- j. Having answered his own question by his doxology of thanksgiving, Paul closed out this context by a final reiteration of his core argument (7:25b). Perhaps more than any other single consideration, verse 7:25 is said to prove the contention that Paul was addressing in this passage the Christian's battle with indwelling sin. For it is argued that, immediately after declaring his liberation by God in Christ, Paul affirms that he now serves the law of God with his mind, but with his flesh he yet serves the law of sin. Whatever may be reasoned from the preceding verses, it is said that this final statement renders conclusive the fact that the Christian – who openly proclaims his gratitude to God for what He has done in Christ – nevertheless continues to serve sin as one who is still “fleshly.” Hence Charles Hodge: “*Paul served the law of God, in so far as he assented to the law that it is good, as he delighted in it, and strove to be conformed to it. He served the law of sin, that is, sin considered as a law or inward power, so far as, in despite of all his efforts, he was still under its influence, and was thereby hindered from living in that constant fellowship with God...that he earnestly desired.*”

It is doubtless true that the Christian does find himself on occasion doing what he hates and failing to do what he concurs with and desires to do. Sometimes it has been charged that those who disagree with the interpretation held by Hodge and others do so because they believe in some form of Christian perfectionism. Such a charge is baseless. The question that must be answered is not whether a Christian still battles indwelling sin, but whether this is the topic Paul was addressing in this context. *More pointedly, the crucial question is whether Paul's description in this passage can be accurately ascribed to the Christian and his interaction with sin.*

- Can the textual arguments for this position be reasonably explained in such a way that they lend support to the alternate interpretation embraced in this study, or do they prohibit it? The truth is that every argument used to support the “Christian life” perspective equally supports the other view.
- On the other hand, can Paul’s language of bondage/slavery/imprisonment in relation to sin be legitimately applied to the Christian? This question becomes even more important when his previous instruction is introduced into consideration. Simply stated, is it possible that Paul would so explicitly establish the truth that the Christian has been freed from sin’s mastery (cf. 6:1-2, 5-7, 11, 14, 17-18, 20-22), only to then insist that the Christian life is defined by sin’s absolute dominion over him? How could Paul insist that the Romans reckon themselves dead to sin’s dominion and so challenge them to live accordingly (6:12-13, 17-22), only to then explain to them that their bondage to sin as Christians insures that they are incapable of doing what they desire and strive to do? *Why would Paul exhort them to believe and practice what is clearly untrue and impossible?*

And so, while verse 7:25 can be understood temporally, as presenting a time-ordered sequence, it need not be viewed in this way. It is best regarded as Paul interjecting the answer to his question in 7:24, with the last clause of 7:25 then reengaging and summarizing his contextual argument. In fact, such “interruptions” are characteristic of Paul’s style. He commonly interjects clarifying or explanatory content into the flow of his argumentation, and sometimes that “diversion” is so substantial that it actually redirects his discussion down a slightly different path (cf. 5:12-14, 8:12-14, 10:8-9; also 2 Corinthians 11:21-23, 12:1-4; Galatians 1:18-21, 2:6-10; Ephesians 2:11-12, 3:1-10; etc.).

In this instance, the abject despair to which Paul’s argumentation had brought him – *who will set me free from the body of this death?* – virtually demanded his immediate response in presenting the remedy he had come to know: *thanks be to God through Jesus Christ*. Self and law had proven powerless against sin’s dominion, yet these were the only resources within Paul’s personal grasp. But the hopeless subjugation in which they had left him was not ultimate; *God’s victorious grace in Christ had prevailed to deliver him where self-resolve and law were utterly impotent*. Though Paul served the law of God with his mind, this inward concurrence only brought despair. For in its warfare against him sin had taken him captive and made him its slave to serve its “law.”