

# Frequently Asked Questions

- **How does the teaching of this book relate to the idea of “sinless perfection”?**

According to the Bible, “there is no man who does not sin.”<sup>1</sup> “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.”<sup>2</sup> “For we *all* stumble in *many* ways.”<sup>3</sup> In keeping with this reality, the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to pray *daily*, “Forgive us our sins.”<sup>4</sup>

We can understand immediately why this is so, just by considering *one* of the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength.”<sup>5</sup> Which of us could say that we have ever loved God for even one hour as He deserves to be loved? In order to do this, we would have to love Him *just as perfectly as Christ Himself does*. But none of us has ever done this, not even when we were *praying* or *worshipping!* Even our prayers and praises fall immeasurably short of the perfect faith, love, fervency, and devotion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Another way of saying this is that even our prayers and praises are *sinful*, to the degree that they “miss the mark” of the total perfection of Christ. For this reason, it is only “through Jesus Christ” and His atoning death on our behalf that our prayers and other “spiritual sacrifices” are “acceptable to God.”<sup>6</sup> We cannot even “thank God” except “through Jesus Christ!”<sup>7</sup> According to the Bible, even unwitting sins are still *sins*<sup>8</sup> and must be paid for by the blood of atonement.

Every Christian who has been rightly instructed by the Word and Spirit of God feels something of how terribly he daily misses the mark of loving God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He could easily spend all his time exploring and reviewing the ways that he has failed God during the course of a single day. *This is not, however, the focus of the Bible itself.* We find, instead, an emphasis

<sup>1</sup> 2 Chronicles 6:36 <sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20 <sup>3</sup> James 3:2 <sup>4</sup> Luke 11:4 <sup>5</sup> Mark 12:30

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 2:5 <sup>7</sup> Romans 1:8 <sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:3-4; Leviticus 5:17-19;

Numbers 15:22-25; Psalm 19:12-14

in the Bible on the wonderful and mighty work of grace that God has done in His children. For example, the Lord Jesus speaks of Nathanael as “an Israelite indeed, in whom is *no guile*”!<sup>1</sup> He speaks of the Christian as one who has “*an honest and good heart*”<sup>2</sup> and refers to him as a “*good man*,” who “out of *the good treasure of his heart* brings forth *what is good*.”<sup>3</sup> He speaks of the disciples, in spite of all their failings, as those “who have *stood by Him* in His trials”<sup>4</sup> and “have *kept God’s word*”!<sup>5</sup>

Paul, likewise, when recounting the story of Abraham, passes over Abraham’s stumblings and characterizes him as a man who “did not waver in unbelief.”<sup>6</sup> He is “convinced” that the Roman believers are “*full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able* also to admonish one another.”<sup>7</sup> He describes all Christians as “*holy and beloved*”<sup>8</sup> and says that they “*have crucified the flesh* with its passions and desires.”<sup>9</sup> Examples like these could be multiplied.

Every Christian should follow this emphasis of the Bible. Realizing how far short he daily falls of perfection, the Christian should, nevertheless, fix his heart and mind on the wonderful things that God has done for him in Christ. This is the attitude of faith. In ourselves, we are “nothing”<sup>10</sup> and “can do nothing,”<sup>11</sup> but in Christ, we “can do all things”!<sup>12</sup> The opposing mindset, by contrast, has been well illustrated by a fellow pastor:

Imagine visitors arriving at a man’s home. When they begin to comment on the many changes and improvements that have taken place in his house, he hangs his head in shame and says, “Oh, but there’s something I need to show you.” He then goes to the kitchen and drags out the garbage can. (Every house has one!) He and his guests then spend the evening examining in detail the contents of the garbage can, groaning over the vileness and repulsiveness of each item. They do this while sitting in a newly remodeled living room, but they are so engrossed in their task that they are completely unaware of their surroundings!

<sup>1</sup> John 1:47   <sup>2</sup> Luke 8:15   <sup>3</sup> Luke 6:45   <sup>4</sup> Luke 22:28   <sup>5</sup> John 17:6

<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:20   <sup>7</sup> Romans 15:14   <sup>8</sup> Colossians 3:12   <sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:24

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 6:3   <sup>11</sup> John 15:5   <sup>12</sup> Philippians 4:13

This is not a *Biblical* approach to the Christian life! Christians do, indeed, “stumble in many ways,” but according to the Bible, God *delights* in His children and their faltering expressions of love to Him. He “exults” and “rejoices” over them with “shouts of joy”!<sup>1</sup> He sees them as His beautiful “bride,”<sup>2</sup> and their offerings and lives are a “fragrant aroma”<sup>3</sup> to Him.

• **What is the difference between constantly falling short of the perfection of Christ and constantly being defeated by known sin?**

To say that Christians constantly fall short of the perfection of Christ, is quite a different thing than to say that Christians *have to be defeated by known sin*. It is just such *obvious* and *known* sin that John has in mind in 1 John 2:1, when he says, “My little children, I am writing these things to you *that you may not sin*. And *if* anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” By using the word “if,” John makes it clear that Christians *do not* have to knowingly yield to sin. Paul has the same thing in mind when he exhorts us not to “let sin reign in our mortal bodies that we should obey its lusts.” *Christians do not have to let sin reign in their mortal bodies!* When confronted with obvious sin, the believer has the ability “by the Spirit” to “put to death the deeds of the body.”<sup>4</sup> As he walks in the Spirit, he *will not* fulfill the lusts of the flesh.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Paul declares with certainty that sin *shall not* be master over any Christian, for he is not under law, but under grace.<sup>6</sup> Christ “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from *every* lawless deed and *purify* for Himself a people *for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.*”<sup>7</sup>

No Christian is perfect in this lifetime—far from it! But every Christian has the power in Christ to break with known sin and to live a life of “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zephaniah 3:17   <sup>2</sup> Song of Solomon 4:1f; Ephesians 5:25   <sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:18;  
2 Corinthians 2:14-16   <sup>4</sup> Romans 8:13   <sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:16   <sup>6</sup> Romans 6:14  
<sup>7</sup> Titus 2:14   <sup>8</sup> Romans 14:17

- **Some people say that Romans 7:14-25 simply portrays the Christian’s ongoing battle with sin—that the Christian life is basically a life of victory, but that Christians are deeply grieved by those failings and shortcomings that still remain in their lives. How would you respond to this view?**

I am in general agreement with such people regarding the nature of the Christian life. The Christian life *is* basically a life of victory, and Christians *are* deeply grieved by those failings and shortcomings that still remain in their lives! Not everyone who takes Romans 7:14-25 as referring to the Christian has a “wretched man” or “defeatist” view of the Christian life, and we should not assume that they do. My difference with such people is basically a difference over the interpretation (and possible abuse) of one passage of Scripture, not necessarily a difference over the nature of the Christian life itself.

It is a matter of fact, however, that *multitudes* of people *do* abuse Romans 7 and turn to it for “comfort” when they are miserable and defeated by sin: “After all, even the Apostle Paul couldn’t get victory, so why should I expect anything different?” Even those who believe that the Christian life is basically a life of triumph are subtly tempted with the thought that “this one sin” may be the one that they, *like Paul*, will never be able to overcome.

In light of this abuse of Romans 7, I would emphasize once more that the theme of Romans 7 is *not* “indwelling sin in the believer,” but “the goodness of the law in spite of its effects upon those who are in the flesh.” Romans 7 has to do with the fact that the Law, though “spiritual” and “good,” was “weak through the flesh.”<sup>1</sup> It portrays in detail the reality that “while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted (in light of the answer given previously regarding “sinless perfection”) that in Romans 7:14-25 Paul is clearly speaking, *not* of the holiest Christian’s continual failure to measure up to the perfection of Christ, as some have supposed, but of *conscious defeat by known sin*. This is evident from the fact that the man portrayed in these verses consciously wills to do good,

<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:3    <sup>2</sup> Romans 7:5

but instead “practices” what he *knows* to be “evil,”<sup>1</sup> “doing the very thing he hates.”<sup>2</sup> This defeat by known sin is described as consistent, not occasional, and *nothing* is said of any ability this man might have through the power of the Holy Spirit to mortify sin. By contrast, we as Christians can daily praise God that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and of death”!<sup>3</sup> We have been “released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”<sup>4</sup>

- **What about Galatians 5:17? Isn’t it saying the same thing as Romans 7?**

Galatians 5:17 (“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”) is not an assurance of *defeat*, but an assurance of *victory*. Paul begins in v.16 with the promise that if we “walk by the Spirit,” we “will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” He then explains in v.17 why this is so: The Holy Spirit, whose character is in direct contradiction to the flesh, sets Himself against it and opposes it, *effectually preventing us from living selfishly or following the dictates of the flesh*. After contrasting the “deeds of the flesh” with the “fruit of the Spirit” in v.19-23, Paul then assures us once again in v.24 that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

A quotation from commentator Albert Barnes may be helpful at this point:

There is no reason for interpreting this, moreover, as seems always to be the case, of the overpowering tendency in the mind to evil, as if it taught that the Christian was desirous of doing good, but *could not*, on account of his indwelling corruption. So far as the language of Paul or the fact is concerned, it may be understood of just the opposite, and may mean, that such are the restraints and influences of

<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:19 <sup>2</sup> Romans 7:15 <sup>3</sup> Romans 8:2 <sup>4</sup> Romans 7:6

the Holy Spirit on the heart, that the Christian *does not* the evil which he otherwise would...

He (Paul) is exhorting them (Galatians 5:16) to walk in the Spirit, and assures them that thus they would not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. To encourage them to this, he reminds them that there were contrary principles in their minds, the influences of the Spirit of God, and a carnal and downward tendency of the flesh. These are contrary one to the other; and such are, in fact, the influences of the Spirit on the mind, that the Christian does not do the things which he otherwise would.<sup>1</sup>

- **Aren't you being overly literal in your understanding of the various passages that describe regeneration?**

It is obvious that when the Bible speaks, for example, of “God’s seed”<sup>2</sup> remaining in us and of our having become “partakers of the divine nature,”<sup>3</sup> these terms are not to be understood in any carnal sense. Nor do they imply any diminishing of the absolute gulf between the infinite Creator and His finite creation. Nevertheless, we must constantly bear in mind that *the Holy Spirit deliberately chose these terms* precisely because they do accurately convey to us the truth about invisible reality. We dare not, in the name of theological sophistication, “explain away” such terms to the point that they are emptied of any real meaning. The Christian *really is* “born of God.” He *really is* a “new creation” with a “new heart,” “alive from the dead” and “seated in the heavenly places”!

- **If the Christian is a new man and the body itself is not sinful, where does sin in the believer come from?**

The Bible does not give us a detailed description of the psychology of man or of the workings of human personality. Rather, it gives us a *functional or practical description*. This description leaves many metaphysical questions unanswered, but it is more than sufficient to give us a firm foundation for living the Christian life.

<sup>1</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, Galatians 5:17

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:9 <sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 1:4

The basic facts are clear:

1. The *deepest* and *ultimate* truth about the Christian is that he is a new man. This is his *essential identity*. The new man represents who he “really” *is* at the present time and who he *will be* a thousand years from now.

2. The new man is not the *only* truth about the Christian. There is *one aspect of his personality* that has not yet been redeemed—his “mortal body.” According to the Bible, the Christian’s continuing struggle with sin arises from this fact. Sin still tries to reign in his mortal body.<sup>1</sup>

This unredeemed mortal body, viewed as the place where sin still tries to reign, is referred to in the Bible as “the flesh.” Scripture speaks repeatedly of the “members” of the body (hands, feet, eyes, etc.) as the place where sin asserts itself.<sup>2</sup> The Bible even refers to sins as “deeds of the body”!<sup>3</sup> We know that when a Christian sins, it is not his body alone that sins, but the Christian himself as a total person. Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that once the body has been redeemed, sin will no longer be a problem for the believer.<sup>4</sup>

*The flesh is one aspect of the Christian’s total personality, but it is not the ultimate truth about him.* It does not represent who he really is or what he really loves. The “deeds of the body” grieve him and fly in the face of all that is most precious to him.

3. *The Christian does not need to be defeated by the flesh.* As his mind is “renewed”<sup>5</sup> by believing the facts concerning who he really is, and as he learns to “walk in the Spirit,” he will be enabled more and more to “put to death the deeds of the body.”

• **What is the practical difference between the teaching that a Christian has two natures and the teaching that the Christian is a new man having the flesh to contend with?**

The basic difference is one of *identity*: *Who am I really? What is the ultimate truth about me?* If, in the deepest core of my being,

<sup>1</sup> Romans 6:12-13    <sup>2</sup> Romans 6:13, 19; 7:5, 23; Colossians 3:5; James 3:6; 4:1

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:13    <sup>4</sup> Romans 8:23    <sup>5</sup> Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23

evil is still an expression of who I *really am* and what I *really love*, then sanctification becomes a process of trying to *deny reality* and become someone other than who I really am.

If, on the other hand, I am a new man still having the flesh to contend with, every time I say “no” to sin, I am saying “yes” to who I really am and what I really love. Sanctification is then a process of *embracing reality*, of *believing what is true* and of *becoming in practice* more and more the person who I truly am.<sup>1</sup>

• **When Jesus says in Mark 7:21-22 that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness,” is He speaking of Christians as well as non-Christians?**

Since the Lord is referring here to *definite acts* which “proceed out” (v.20) of men and defile them, including literal “fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,” and “deeds of coveting and wickedness,” it is clear that He is describing lost humanity in general, not Christians.

Christians, by contrast, are referred to by the Lord as those with “*an honest and good heart.*”<sup>2</sup> According to Jesus, the Christian is a “good man who out of his good treasure brings forth what is good.”

“Either make *the tree good, and its fruit good*; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills *the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.*”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3:9-10   <sup>2</sup> Luke 8:15   <sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:33-35

- **What about Matthew 7:11? In what sense are Christians “evil”?**

When Jesus says to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34 (quoted above), “You brood of vipers, how can *you, being evil*, speak what is good?” it is clear that He is using the word “evil” to refer to the non-Christian—“the evil man” who out of his “evil treasure brings forth what is evil”—in contrast with the Christian, “the good man” who “out of his good treasure brings forth what is good.”

In Matthew 7:11, on the other hand, Jesus is teaching His disciples about prayer. It is obvious, therefore, that when He says to them, “If *you* then, *being evil*, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him,” He is *not* saying that they are “evil men” in the same sense that the unconverted Pharisees are. Nevertheless, *in comparison with “their Father who is in heaven,”* they are indeed “evil.” As we saw earlier in this appendix, even true Christians fall immeasurably short of God’s perfect goodness. When compared to Him, “*No one is good except God alone.*”<sup>1</sup>

- **Don’t Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-28 refer to Israel, not the church?**

Many prophecies in the Old Testament regarding a renewed or restored “Israel” are seen in the New Testament to have their *ultimate* fulfillment in the church. The “new covenant” is one of them. God says in Jeremiah 31 that He will make a new covenant “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that this promise is fulfilled, not in the physical “house of Israel and house of Judah” as such, but in the church.<sup>2</sup> Every *Christian*, whether Jew or Gentile, is a partaker of the New Covenant.<sup>3</sup> Any future mercies of God to the Jews will result in their being grafted into the church alongside believing Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

Ezekiel 36 is likewise spoken in the context of several “new covenant” promises. For example, Ezekiel 34:23-25 speaks of the

<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:18    <sup>2</sup> Hebrews 8    <sup>3</sup> Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25

<sup>4</sup> Romans 11:11-24

coming of the Messiah and the “covenant of peace” that God will then make with His people, and Ezekiel 37:24-28 speaks of this “covenant of peace” as “an everlasting covenant.” (See Hebrews 13:20.)

Far from viewing the Old Testament promises to Israel as not applying to the church, Paul tells the Gentile believers at Ephesus that though they once were “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers to the covenants of promise*,” they have now been made partakers (along with believing Jews) of *those very promises*, having been “brought near by the blood of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> *Both Jew and Gentile* have been made into “one new man”—the church. “For He Himself is our peace, *who made both groups into one*, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall...that in Himself He might *make the two into one new man*, thus establishing peace, and might *reconcile them both in one body to God* through the cross...” Paul goes so far as to say that the Gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens, but...are fellow citizens with the saints [Jewish believers], and are of God’s household.”

This view of the Old Testament promises is also put forth by Peter, who speaks of *the church*, not Israel, as the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament desire<sup>2</sup> for a “holy nation”: “But you are *a chosen race*, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; *for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God*; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:11-22    <sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:5-6    <sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:9-10