

THE DUNGEON OF THE SOUL

***“O wretched man that I am!
Who shall deliver me from this body of death?”***

by Dean Taylor

Lamenting over the chains of our carnal nature and the shackles of our feeble efforts, the apostle Paul cries out in Romans 7:24, *“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?”* If Paul were to leave this cry unanswered and end his discourse here, we might be left to believe that the Christian life was forever sentenced to a life of failure. If it were not for the glorious verses which follow, we would likely assume that we were doomed to a fruitless, frustrated life as a “redeemed” soul trapped within a spiritual dungeon. But in response to that fundamental and vital question, *“who shall deliver us,”* Paul begins his magnificent reply, *“I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord...”*

Still today, desperate souls groan and travail with this familiar cry, awaiting a genuine emancipation from lives bound by the power of sin. Sadly, however, in most cases, instead of liberating the captives, the chains are made heavier and the shackles tighter by the lie that in this life there is no real freedom from the bondage of sin.

Sadder still is the fact that this enfeebling doctrine is the one most commonly taught among a broad spectrum of those who call themselves Christians today. Masses of Christians from many denominations have been led astray by this teaching and have been robbed of ever experiencing the life-changing power of Jesus Christ in their lives.

A HOPELESS CONDITION...

The scripture most frequently misquoted by countless defeated souls is that of Romans 7:15, *“For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.”* This verse is often presented as the evidence of our fatal diagnosis—the incurable disease of sin. Once incorrectly labeled, the cancer of unbelief spreads its subtle infection and sin soon finds a comfortable home under the bleak prognosis of hopelessness. Many are left to a meager existence and many more simply die as they embrace this fallacy.

There have always been those in the church who have taught against holiness and godly repentance, using grace as a cloak. The book of Jude records evidence of this ancient menace and gives us a glimpse of just how soon this problem came into the early church. *“For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness [lawlessness], and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Jude 4).

Since then, many other groups such as the Gnostics, the Dualists, and various Antinomianists have maligned the Church with pernicious heresies, sowing seeds of unbelief and denying the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Today, however, instead of being the annoying nuisance of a minority voice, this has become the predominant view in most churches. Even during the Reformation, many who were reacting against the “works oriented” doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church backlashed into many of these teachings. Consequently, carnality and worldliness quickly abounded, even among many Protestant churches.

One outrageous statement from an early prominent reformer, discussing this struggle in a letter to a fellow minister said:

“If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.”

The main force of this teaching is generally founded on the premise that the Christian has “liberty” in all things and so he is considered “free,” even if he continues to walk in sin. However, far from being a true liberation,

this defeated teaching actually brings a Christian into deeper bondage by making him comfortable in his sin. Once comfortable in sin, the defeated Christian no longer feels the need to seek Christ for deliverance by faith. Peter spoke of this false liberty when he said, *“While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage”* (2 Pet. 2:19).

A DIVINE POWER...

In the book of Romans, Paul presents us with the wonderful truth of God’s saving grace. He teaches without exception that there is nothing a man can do to earn his salvation. He teaches that none of our motives are pure enough, and none of our deeds are good enough to earn God’s favor. This teaching is succinctly presented, *“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”* (Rom. 3: 20, 28).

With such a definitive conclusion, the question that naturally comes to mind is this: “If performing the deeds of the law does not justify us before God, then after we are saved, does obedience really matter anymore?” Fortunately, Paul does not leave us to ponder this for long. If we will simply read on to the end of the chapter he answers any question which may remain with this rebuke, *“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law”* (Rom. 3:31).

Paul’s view of grace was not just divine forgiveness; it was also divine power. The whole tenor of Paul’s teaching throughout this book takes the sinner from the hopelessness of living in the flesh, to the invincibility of living in the Spirit. As far as Paul was concerned on this matter, living in Christ and still continuing to be bound to sin was out of the question. Just in case any doubt could be still lingering in our minds, Paul further clarifies in his own words, *“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein”* (Rom. 6:1-2)?

A DIVINE RESCUE...

In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul starts out by painting a very grim, yet familiar picture of our spiritual struggle, *“For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members”* (Rom 7:22). There is no doubt that we are soldiers in a war and the

carnal nature will always be at enmity with the Spirit within us. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that this chapter has been used so frequently to justify defeat. While most of the Church today teaches that this chapter is proof of our impotence, on the other hand, holiness and conservative churches have provided little help by offering conflicting testimonies of sinless perfection.

Most of the confusion over this chapter exists due to theories which try to solve Paul’s dilemma either by: (1) eradicating our sin nature or (2) strengthening our human effort to such a degree that we become super-human. However, instead of stating that our deliverance comes through either of these two avenues, Paul teaches very clearly that our deliverance comes by a *new law*—*“the law of the Spirit of life.”* *“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit”* (Rom. 8:3).

In other words, the holy requirements of the law are accomplished through us by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. *“But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you”* (Rom 8:11). But we must beware of entering into a spirit of unbelief by attempting to accomplish these works in our own strength. The way is narrow and there is a ditch on either side. Unless we look to Him by faith, believing that He will do this work in us, we labor in vain. Our works will fail and exhaust us; but His Spirit will empower and deliver us!

To illustrate: If you were shipwrecked and found yourself drowning in the ocean, you would immediately find two laws working against each other. First, you would notice the law of gravity as it threatens to draw you to the bottom of the ocean. The next law you would immediately experience would be the law of your mind or effort, as you would naturally attempt to save yourself from the effects of the law of gravity. Your mind would undoubtedly want to stay afloat, so it would relentlessly motivate your body to strive with all its might to defeat the first law, the law of gravity. Eventually, in spite of your best efforts, you would find the law of gravity winning over and would be forced to cry out, *“Who shall deliver me!”*

But just when you thought there was no hope and death seemed certain, a new law—let’s call it the “law of buoyancy”, comes to your rescue in the form of a lifeboat. You labor to enter this boat, and then, as you lay prostrate there on the deck, exhausted from your time of striving,

you look up into the captain's face and say, most meaningfully, *"Thank you for saving me!"*

This new law, the law of buoyancy, manifested its superiority in the form of the life boat and was able to make you free from the drowning effects of the law of gravity. But please note, the lifeboat did not eradicate the law of gravity; if you get out of the boat, the law of gravity is still there and it will once again threaten to draw you to your death. Rather this new law, being superior, *superseded* the law of gravity, thus giving you life.

A DIVINE LIBERTY...

As we lay on that lifeboat we are completely liberated from the power of drowning. If we stay in the boat, the law of gravity is overpowered and so we no longer need to violently kick our hands and feet to fight for life. As a result, we are delivered from our peril and we are then able to go wherever the captain desires us to go. It is in this very way that we can say with Paul that our faith *establishes the law*. In Ezekiel 36:26, it was prophesied, *"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."*

When Paul spoke of salvation to the Ephesians he taught that this salvation would allow the works and will of God to be manifested. *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them"* (Eph. 2:8).

Keswick preacher Evan Hopkins said it this way, *"Liberty is not freedom from law—that would be license. It is freedom in law. There is so-called liberty which is without law. This may be natural man's ideal of true freedom. But 'lawlessness' is, in God's judgment, the very essence of sin. There is a condition which is under law; but this is a state of bondage, the condition of the legalist. A third and blessed relation in which we may be free to the law is that of being inlawed, having it with us, written by the Spirit of God on the fleshly tables of our heart."*

Liberty is only freedom when we are unhindered from fulfilling the object of our desire. For example, if we were locked up in a dungeon bound by shackles, it really would not matter if we had been pronounced free or not. Our chains would hinder our desire for freedom. We would first need a deliverer to break the chains and open the dungeon before we could experience the freedom that

we were promised. But if our deliverance was nothing more than the issuing of a document telling us to be content in our chains and satisfied with our dungeon, then we would have more need of an anesthetic than a deliverer. If this is the case with our faith, then Carl Marx was right in his criticism of the Church, and our religion is nothing more than *"the opium of the masses."*

Christ has come *"to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised"* (Luke 4:18). Christ overpowered the stain and power of sin that was initiated by Satan. The power of the cross triumphed over the corruption of the forbidden fruit. We have been liberated so we can give glory to God and have fellowship with Him. *"For if through the offense of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many"* (Rom. 5:15).

A HOLY ENVIRONMENT...

It must be understood that a pure and holy environment is the atmosphere in which we were created to exist. In other words, it is the object of our deliverance. Paul called us to dwell in this atmosphere when he reminded us of the nature of our new birth saying, *"Put on the new man, which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness"* (Eph. 4:24, see also Col. 3:10).

As Evan Hopkins put it, *"And so in nature, we say a creature is free when it can move in its own native element. The bird is free in the air, and the fish in the water. Take either of them out of its element, and its liberty is gone. Change or modify the character of the element, and you limit or destroy the freedom of its life."* Just as the fish suffers asphyxiation on land and the bird drowns in the water, the Christian will finally die if left apart from the holiness of God.

A SANCTIFYING TRUTH...

The realization of God's desire for our holiness is a truth that is life-changing. If we do not desire a real rescue, then we will die in our own confinement. Jesus frequently taught about the Father's desire for us to live in this environment of holiness. In His most intimate hour with His disciples Jesus prayed, *"I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And*

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for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:15-19).

God uses His truth, the Word of God, as an instrument for our sanctification. By hearing the words given for our instruction, and understanding God’s law, His holy requirements, His ordinances, His teachings and His desires, we open ourselves up into a wonderful channel of sanctifying grace by allowing Christ to accomplish this work within us. *“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).*

A NEW HOPE...

Finally, I would like to reiterate that we must keep our hope hidden in Him. When we hear God calling our heart to new areas of holiness and sanctification, let us not make the mistake of trying to accomplish them in the flesh, nor should we allow a spirit of unbelief to hinder us from growing. With faith we must press on, submitting our will to Jesus and watching with joy as He accomplishes His work in us!

John Wesley, summed up this teaching with remarkable clarity in this statement:

**The sinner’s commandment: *Thou shalt not*
Becomes the saint’s promise: *Thou shalt not***

In other words, the very thing that used to bring us condemnation now brings us comfort! What used to be a sentence of death is now our blueprint for life! What used to discourage, corrupt, tempt and deceive, now implanted by God’s grace, encourages, purifies, sanctifies and instructs! Praise the Lord! From this perspective, we can look through even the strongest teachings in the Bible with excitement over the expectation that God will accomplish them through us! What a beautiful truth this is! Let us place our confidence in God, just as Paul did in these closing words to the Thessalonians, *“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it”.* ◻