

# Stumbling-Blocks Removed.

by Daniel Steele

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*The seventh chapter of Romans is not a portrait of a regenerate soul, but rather a description of a convicted Jew who is struggling with sin and seeking to achieve moral purity without the aid of God's grace.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 58:1, Romans 6:6, Romans 7:25, Romans 8:2-3, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Galatians 2:20

**Topics:** "Sanctification", "Divine Grace"

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## Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, challenging the interpretation that it portrays a regenerate soul. He argues that the chapter actually depicts a convicted Jew striving for moral rectitude without divine grace, leading to continual condemnation and failure. Steele emphasizes the contrast between the inefficiency of the law and the effectiveness of the gospel in transforming human character, highlighting the need for reliance on the abounding grace of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit for true sanctification.

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## Transcript

SETTING AN ELECTRIC LIGHT IN THE SEVENTH CHAPTER OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS.

The seventh chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is still quoted by some persons as a proof that the hereditary propensity to sin, called by theologians original sin, must continue in the heart of the believer so long as he lives.

1. But, if it proves that sin, as a principle, must exist, it also demonstrates far more clearly that sinning, by repeated, willful violations of the known law of God, is the best moral state into which the abounding grace of our Lord Jesus Christ can bring the believer under the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. For habitual sins, of voluntary omission and commission, make up his everyday life. He does not do what he knows to be morally obligatory, and hateful sins he is constantly committing. Such a life must be under continual condemnation, inconsistent with justification. Hence, this chapter disproves justification more cogently than it does entire sanctification. This is our first objection to that interpretation of this chapter which makes it the portrait of a regenerate soul.

2. Our next objection to such an exegesis is that it makes the gospel as great a failure as the law in its reconstruction of human character. But this idea is flatly contradictory to the whole tenor of the New Testament. "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 as an offering for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." -- Rom. 8:3, R. V. But

what has this to do with regeneration and sanctification? The next verse assures us that the purpose of the mission of the Son is, "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us [not in Christ. as the imputationists vainly teach], who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

The contrast between the inefficiency of the law and the efficiency of the gospel is seen again in Heb. 7:19, 25, "The law made nothing perfect"; "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost [completely, Delitzsch, Westcott, and others] that come unto God by him." Still more explicitly this contrast appears in Heb. 9:9, 14, "The sacrifices could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience [of sins, Heb. 10:2] -- How much more shall the blood of Christ -- . purge your conscience from dead [sinful] works to serve the living God." We must brand that exposition as false which degrades 'the glorious ministration of the Spirit' to the low level of the "ministration of condemnation and death." -- 2 Cor. 3:7-18.

3. We cannot accept that exegesis which violates the first rule of interpretation -- the law of non-contradiction. No passage is to be explained in such a way as to make the writer contradict himself in the same document.

(1). In Rom. 6, "We are dead unto sin"; "our old man is crucified, that the body of death might be destroyed." Again, "Being made free from sin, ye become servants of righteousness"; "ye have your fruit unto holiness." In chapter 8 we read, "For the law of the Spirit of life hath made me free from the law of sin and death." It must be, therefore, that St. Paul, in chapter 7, is not portraying a regenerate man, but a convicted Jew, who, under the care of the law, sees himself a sinner. and resolves to achieve perfect rectitude in his own strength, without divine grace, and makes a series of failures so sad as to extort the wail that has been repeated through all the non-Christian ages, "O wretched man that I am!"

(2). Again, St. Paul must not in one text be so understood as to contradict the disclosures of his inner life in all other texts where he has drawn aside the veil. He nowhere else intimates that sin dwells in him. He requests prayer for himself in every epistle, for success in his ministry of the gospel, but never for the conquest of inward foes, never for the completeness of his spiritual life. He frequently testifies to deadness to sin (R. V., Am. Committee, Gal. 2:20), "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live." Gal. 6:14, "But far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified unto me, and I unto the world." 1 Thess. 2:10, "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily, and justly, and unblamably we behaved ourselves among you that believe."

How could a man living in the seventh chapter of Romans have the face to exhort the Corinthians thus (1 Cor. 11:1), "Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ."

4. Our difficulties increase. Character is never predicated from a tendency which is under control, but rather from that inner principle which habitually dominates the conduct. If St. Paul is describing himself, or personating some other regenerate person. he cannot be classified as spiritual, since he confesses. "I am carnal, sold under sin." Are we to understand that carnality is the dominant principle in the regenerate? The phrase, "sold under sin," is the strongest expression which the Holy Spirit uses in the Scriptures for the full depravity of an unsaved man. It implies willing slavery in the drudgery of sin. He had no power to redeem himself.

We can conceive of true Christians with controlled depraved tendencies (1 Cor. 3:1-3); but we have no ability to conceive how one under the perfect mastery of the flesh can be other than a "natural man, not having the Spirit." -- Jude 19, R. V. margin.

In Rom. 7:7-24 there is no term which implies the new birth, or spirituality. In the whole contest the Spirit does not appear on the field as one of the combatants. "The inward man" is not the new man, but the mind, including the aesthetical sensibilities which admire the beauty of holiness while repudiating its obligation. The two parties to the contest are the moral reason antagonizing the depraved appetites and passions, the upper story of the house at war with the basement on the plane of nature. This is entirely different from the strife of the Spirit against the flesh, in the case of the regenerate Galatians (chapter 5:17, R. V.), who had not advanced to the extinction of depravity by the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification, but were seeking perfection in the flesh, i.e., outward Jewish ordinances.

5. The best scholarship discredits this chapter as the photograph of a regenerated man. The Greek Fathers, during the first three hundred years of church history unanimously interpreted this Scripture as describing a thoughtful moralist endeavoring without the grace of God to realize his highest ideal of moral purity. Augustine at first followed this interpretation, till in his collision with Pelagius he found verses 14 and 22 quoted by his opponent to prove that the natural man can appreciate the beauty of holiness. To cut him off from these proof-texts he deviated from the traditional exegesis, and championed the new theory that this chapter is delineation of the regenerate. Calvinian annotators have quite generally followed him, with notable modern exceptions, such as Moses Stuart and Calvin E. Stowe. The trend of modern scholars, whether Calvinian or Arminian, is now toward the view of the Greek Fathers. Among these are Meyer, Julius Muller, Neander, Tholuck, Ewald, Ernesti, Lepsius, Macknight, Doddridge, A. Clarke, Turner, Whedon. Beet, and Stevens of Yale.

To our interpretation it is objected that there are two utterances which strongly imply a state of grace. The first is the 12th verse, "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good." The second is the 22nd verse, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man." It is asserted that an unregenerate man cannot form high moral ideals and contemplate them with delight. The assertion betrays an ignorance of human nature under the spell of depravity. It still has power to create splendid ideals, and revel in contemplating them. Some even account their admiration of virtue as a very good substitute for its presence. Isa. 58:1-4. Drunkards admire temperance, yet yield to the clamor of the alcoholic appetite; rakes admire purity and seek it in marriage, while they still visit "her whose house is the way to hell." The poet Thomas Moore thus describes Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence,

"[He] dreams of freedom in his slave's embrace."

Fallen humanity is a paradox. You will find it in all the pagan literatures, especially the Greek and Latin poets. We quote Ovid as a specimen --

"My reason this, my passion that persuades;

I see the right, and I approve it too;

Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue."

Says Canon Mozley, in allusion to this very chapter, "Man possesses a moral nature, and, if he has intellect enough, he can put his moral ideas into words, just as he can put metaphysical ideas; nor is his doing so any test of his moral condition. Take any careless person of corrupt habits out of the thick of his ordinary life, and ask him to state in words what is his moral creed. Has he any doubt about it? None. He immediately puts down a list of the most sublime moral truths and principles. But so far as relates to

himself, as soon as these truths are formally and properly enunciated, their whole design and purpose is fulfilled." They are not a law to him.

Some who wish to adopt our interpretation are perplexed by the last verse of the chapter. If the two sentences of the verse were interchanged they would be relieved. But, in the present order, the doctrine seems to be taught that after victory, "through Jesus Christ our Lord," there is a lapse into the old struggle. Not so. The last sentence of the chapter is an epitome of the whole struggle between the "mind," or moral reason, and the flesh, or sinful proclivity. The emphatic words are, "I myself," alone, on the plane of nature, without the aid of Christ can do no better than to render a dual service. with the mind serving the law of God, by my admiration of its excellence, but with the flesh, the law of sin, by such a surrender as carries my guilty personality with it. After this recapitulation the paeon of permanent victory resounds through the entire eighth chapter.

The exposition will be greatly illuminated by observing that 7:5 contains the thesis of 7:7-25, and 7:6 the thesis of 8.

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