

Romans 7:7-25 – a closer look

This is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. Paul gives a fascinating vivid description of struggle and frustration. But who is he talking about?

What we can agree on

Firstly, the main point of the passage is that the law has no power over sin. Only the gospel of Christ can save us from sin. This is true whether we think the passage is talking about a non-Christian who cannot be saved by the law, or a Christian who cannot be made holy and ultimately rescued from sin through the law. Today's sermon headings work for both: the law makes sin worse (vv7-13); the law has no power over sin (vv14-20); only Christ can rescue! (vv21-25).

Secondly, the Christian life will involve a struggle against sin. That is clear in ch 6, e.g., v13: "Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God," and in 8:13: "by the Spirit ... put to death the misdeeds of the body." It is clear in Galatians 5:17: "the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want." The question is whether that's what *this* passage is talking about.

How the passage has been understood in the past

Most of the early church fathers thought Rom 7 referred to a non-Christian. Almost all the Reformers thought it referred to a Christian. Understanding it as normal Christian experience was typical of Lutheran and Reformed theology right into the twentieth century, and it is still widespread. Seventeenth century writers became worried that this view would make Christians not care about holiness. They interpreted ch 7 as a person under conviction of sin but not yet born again. The nineteenth century saw a very wide range of viewpoints. In the twentieth century the most popular view was that it described a non-Christian person under the law.

So is Paul talking about a Christian or a non-Christian? Here are some arguments for each. Look up the verses and see what you think.

Arguments that Paul is talking about a Christian

- "I" must refer to Paul, and the shift from past tense (vv7-13) to present tense (vv14-25) must mean Paul is describing his current experience as a Christian.
- Only those born again truly delight in God's law (v22), seek to obey it (vv15-20), and serve it (v25). Non-Christians do not seek for God (3:11) and cannot submit to the law of God (8:7).
- V25 does not finish on a note of victory. The second half of the verse suggests Christians will experience an ongoing struggle with sin.

Arguments that Paul is talking about a non-Christian

- 7:5-6 introduces the rest of chs 7-8: 7:5 speaks of a past life "in the flesh," which Paul unpacks in 7:7-25. 7:6 speaks of serving the new way of the Spirit, which he unpacks in ch 8.
- "I" is described as "sold as a slave to sin" (v14), whereas in 6:18 and 22 every believer has been "set free from sin." Secondly, "I" is "a prisoner of the law of sin" (v23), but the believer has been "set free from the law of sin and death" (8:2).
- Believers will certainly struggle with sin. But in 7:7-25 we see not a struggle with sin but a defeat by sin. This is a more negative view than Paul teaches elsewhere in his letters.

Conclusion

There are excellent trustworthy theologians on both sides. But to my mind the arguments for “I” being a non-Christian are stronger. It seems Paul is describing his own life as a Jew, standing with the Jewish nation. Vv7-12 describe how the law of Moses came to the Jews, making sin worse. Vv13-25 describe the Jews’ ongoing struggle under the law (hence the present tense). It cannot give them power over sin. They want to honour God’s law, but the issue is they can’t obey it. It is a wretched situation. They need Christ.

If this is right, then it means that, yes, Christians will struggle against sin in their lives (6:14, 8:13). But we shouldn’t expect it to be so severe that we cry out, “What a wretched person I am!” We are justified and loved by God. It is a joy to be a Christian (11:33-36). With the help of the Spirit we can make great progress in living for Christ.

But however we understand Romans 7, we ought not to divide over it. We can all agree that the law is good but cannot save, and that Christians struggle against sin.