

THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT

THE WRETCHED MAN OF ROMANS SEVEN!

Thy work is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.
Psalm 119:105

**A SERIES OF BIBLE STUDIES BY:
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In the second epistle of Peter, chapter three, and verses 14-17, the Apostle writes concerning Paul's epistles, that in them "are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest as they do the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction". This warning should be sufficient to cause teachers and would-be teachers to be very careful as to how we interpret certain passages in Paul's writings. We should bear in mind also what is written in the Epistle of James 3:1 – "My brethren, be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation", - which verse is translated in the American Revised Standard Version as follows: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness".

From the foregoing Scriptures it is evident that he who has the ministry of teacher, must be absolutely confident that what he teaches is indeed the truth, so that he, like his Master, can speak with authority (Mark 1:22), even to the extent expressed in 1 Peter 4:11,

"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God".

Such a teacher will not look for applause from his hearers, for he, being confident that he has God's message, will be impervious to either man's approval or disapproval.

Having said all this, it must be acknowledged that certain passages in Paul's letters are, as Peter states – "hard to be understood". And consequently must be approached with the greatest degree of care and concern lest we lead people astray by false teaching. Of these passages in Paul's letters, non have presented greater difficulty, nor have been subjected to more improbable interpretations that two such Scriptures found in the Epistle to the Romans, chapter seven.

THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT

The first of these passages - found in verse six of this chapter, to which we now draw the reader's attention, is one, which in its wrong interpretation has actually become a cliché with even worldly people, who are accustomed to refer to "adherence to the spirit of the thing rather than to the letter". The verse in question is translated as follows in the Revised Standard Version –

"But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve, not under the old written code, but in the new life of the spirit".

It is difficult to see how anyone could interpret this, other than that the old written code is a reference to the law – i.e. the Ten Commandments, while "the new life of the Spirit", is that into which the child of God enters at salvation. Nevertheless

it is amazing the number of believers one encounters who speak of a literal acceptance of God's requirements as distinct from merely observing the spirit of what God demands – they being quite convinced that they can legitimately dispense with adherence to the literal meaning of any of the Lord's commands, so long as they observe the spirit of what is required. Those who adhere to this interpretation of the Scriptures are not just some would-be teachers among assembly members – but, sad to relate, there are many recognized teachers who hold and adhere to this point of view, which attitude has resulted in those who stand firmly for a strict adherence to God's Word being characterized as "legalistic".

The liberal kind of approach to God's Word has been derived mainly from the aforementioned passage of Scripture i.e. from Romans 7:6, which has already been quoted. A second Scripture which has been used to bolster up this point of view is found in 2 Cor 3:6, which states that

"Our sufficiency is of God who hath also made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life".

Now it must be admitted that a casual reading of this passage might well cause one to agree with this teaching about "the letter and the spirit of the thing". However, the careful seeker after truth will read on into the next verse (verse 7) which states "If the ministration of death written and engraved in stones was glorious ... how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?" From this clear statement we can only conclude that one would have to be wilfully blind not to see that by the expression "the letter killeth" is intended "the ministration of death written and engraved in stones" which is most assuredly the law, i.e. the ten commandments, as given to Moses on the two tables of stone. This ministration of death by the law is explained by Paul in Romans 7:10–11, which states that :

"The commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me"

This then is clearly the ministration of death mentioned in the foregoing passage, which although it had its passing glory, nevertheless its glory paled into insignificance when contrasted with the glory of "the ministration of the spirit", which was the "ministration of righteousness".

Dr. Scofield in his note on "the letter and the spirit" as mentioned in Romans 2:29, Romans 7:6 and 2 Cor 3:6, has this to say – "The letter" is a Paulinism for the law, as "spirit" in these passages is his word for the relationships and powers of new life in Christ Jesus. In 2 Cor 3 a series is presented of contrast of law with "spirit", of the old covenant and the new. The contrast is not between two

methods of interpretation, literal and spiritual, but between two methods of divine dealing, one through the law, the other through the Holy Spirit. One thing that emerges and becomes certain from the foregoing is that a wrong interpretation of the terms “the letter and the spirit” can have the same disastrous effect as the traditions of the Pharisees, for which Christ accused them that they made the Word of God of non effect through their tradition (Mark 7:13) It is inconceivable that any child of God could be wilfully guilty of such a thing as making the Word of God of non effect, through adherence to a false interpretation.

THE WRETCHED MAN

Let us now proceed to examine the second of these difficult passages of Scripture in Paul’s writings and referred to by Peter as “hard to be understood” the above title of “The Wretched Man” will, no doubt, call the readers attention to the second part of Romans, chapter seven, which we now examine.

The general conception concerning the wretched man in Romans seven appears to be that this is a description of Paul very early in his Christian experience, before he came into a better understanding of how to obtain victory over sin. This thought probably arises because Paul writes from verse seven throughout the rest of the chapter in the first person as though he is actually recounting his own experience. It might well be, indeed, that he is here speaking of himself, though not of his experience as a believer, but of that time when he was still unsaved and under the law. Consequently as a self-respecting and conscientious Jew, endeavouring with all his might to keep the law, he may have had a similar experience as the wretched man.

The wretched man, however, seems different to what one would expect of Paul, who stated that of the righteousness of the law, he was blameless; while the wretched man could only cry out in despair:

“O, wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

Some translate this part of verse 24 as “Who shall deliver me from this dead body?”, and suggest that this mode of expression used here by Paul, may have been prompted by the judgement passed on murderers, by an Etruscan king, which judgement was, that the murderer was bound hand to hand and face to face with his victim, until he died a lingering ghastly death. Whether Paul had something like this in mind or not, we can’t say. However, it is certain that the wretched man in this passage, viewed with the extreme of loathing, the body of death to which he was bound.

It would seem, however, without indulging in speculation, that the answer to the problem is to be found in this same chapter, where in verse 9 – 11 we read:

“I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me and by it slew me”.

So in these verses we find that this poor wretched man is actually joined to a “body of death”. The wording of these verses unmistakably shows that the wretched man is a man under law, who, strive as he will, is held captive under the dominion and thralldom of sin. Paul presents to us this picture of a man under law as he seeks to demonstrate that the law itself is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good. (Romans 7:12)

This fact he emphasizes, even while at the same time pointing out the effects produced by the law, as sin by the law is made to appear as it actually is – “exceeding sinful”.

Such condition as that of the wretched man is never intended to be that of the child of God, for there is a clear statement to this effect in chapter six, verse fourteen, which states,

Sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law but under grace.

There is no doubt that the wretched man was completely under the dominion of sin, and therefore he can in no way be claimed to be a child of God under grace.

It will be remembered that the opening verses of chapter seven, show that the believer is no longer under the law, he being dead to the law by the body of Christ. The reference to the body of Christ, means, of course, that the moment a person believes on the Lord Jesus, he is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ according to 1 Cor 12:13, at which moment, he being in the body of Christ, becomes “a new creature,” a little baby has been born into God’s family, as we see from 2 Cor 5:17 –

“If any man be in Christ he is a new creature”.

Then, too, it was at this time that “the body of sin was destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Romans 6:6). This body of sin referred to here is that body of death mentioned by the wretched man.

The deliverance of the child of God from the law mentioned in Romans 7:4 is also emphatically expressed in Galatians 2:19-20 which reads;

I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

This statement about “living by the faith of the Son of God” means for one thing that the child of God must believe implicitly and firmly that he is dead unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:11) . This is why it is so important that the believer does not hold that the experience of the wretched man is that of a child of God, but is, as we have seen, that of a man under law, for according to Proverbs 23:7 -

“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he”

Consequently if one accepts that the wretched man is the experience of Paul as a believer, it will cause him to feel, that if this were Paul’s experience as a Christian, then he cannot be expected as an ordinary believer to be better than the great apostle!

For the child of God to walk in victory, he must do as stated in Romans 6:11, he must reckon himself to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God, so that sin cannot reign in his mortal body, causing him to obey it in the lusts thereof. The sincere believer will not look for a lurking place here, by saying that he is like the wretched man – so giving himself an excuse to continue in sin. Instead he will rejoice in the liberty of the sons of God who are not under the law but under grace, for:

“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Romans 10:4).

In conclusion, let us exercise the utmost degree of care, lest we allow ourselves to be inveigled into a careless consideration of God’s requirements regarding holiness, by accepting an erroneous and dangerous interpretation of each of these aforementioned difficult passages – interpretations which produce anything but holiness. God demands nothing less than “truth in the inward parts”. He commands:

“Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).

We must also face up to the important statement in Hebrews 12:14 which says:

“Without holiness no man shall see the Lord”.

Which statement most certainly indicates the importance of holiness as essential to our eternal welfare.

One thing is certain, which is that when we determine to walk in the way of holiness, we can be assured of an inexhaustible supply of grace for the times when the pathway seems rough and we are beset by temptations. Let us therefore determine by His grace to “perfect holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1), as we await the glorious day of Christ’s appearing, at which time we shall see Him face to face, and seeing Him we shall be like Him.