

VICTORY OVER SIN – Romans 7:7-25 (Part-ten of a sixteen-part study)

In Romans 7:7-13, the apostle Paul continues his discourse on the impact that God's Law can have upon an individual. In this portion of the chapter, he also uses the past tense and provides us with a personal testimony of how the Law of God convicted him of his sin. It certainly seems as if he is speaking of his pre-salvation experience in being drawn to faith in Jesus Christ. We must always remember that Paul, prior to his conversion, was the self-righteous Pharisee Saul, who considered himself to be blameless in his efforts at keeping the Law of God (Philippians 3:6). But when the Holy Spirit began to break through that self-righteous crust which had developed in him as a Pharisee, his interaction with the Law of God revealed that he was in bondage to the sin of covetousness (Romans 7:7-8). This self-awareness of personal sinfulness devastated Paul; and became a key factor in his final surrender to Jesus as Savior and Lord (Romans 7:8-11).

Paul's personal testimony continues throughout the remainder of the chapter in vv14-25, with one significant change. He begins using the present tense in describing his interaction with the Law of God. His increasing level of frustration becomes obvious, as he is thoroughly confounded by the presence of sin in his life, in spite of his best efforts at attaining victory over it. This begs the question which has produced so much interpretive confusion and controversy. Yet, no matter how many plausible interpretations have been imposed upon this passage, the apostle's use of the present tense is undeniable. So, if he is describing a past frustration which is no longer prevalent within his Christian life, why not use the past tense in order to indicate that?

For me, Paul's use of the present tense throughout Romans 7:14-25, becomes the dominant factor in determining a proper understanding of his intent. Is it actually possible that he is describing his current spiritual condition as a Christian, in recording this epistle for the church at Rome? Yes! I believe it is what he is seeking to communicate to all of us. In other words, walking in victory over sin will always include a measure of frustration with encountering the ongoing presence of sin. It is also his very candid admission that he hasn't yet reached a state of sinless perfection during the course of his earthly life, and never will. We can't relegate Paul's frustration to the fact that he was probably a type A perfectionist, who was being too hard on himself. The truth of the matter is that he was deeply devoted to his Savior and was constantly striving to become everything that God wanted him to be. And it frustrated him to no end that he always seemed to fall short. But his frustration didn't stop him from seeking to grow spiritually in this process known as progressive sanctification. This is why Paul follows up his admission to being a self-righteous Pharisee in Philippians 3:4-6, with an utter rejection of such a lifestyle in vv7-11, and a total commitment to becoming everything he knew God wanted him to be in vv12-14 –

“Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

From personal experience, Paul came to believe that there is nothing more offensive to God than man-made self-righteousness. Thus, his utter rejection of it in Philippians 3:7-11. He wasn't about to allow the self-righteous attitude which existed in him as a Pharisee, and the smug complacency which it can generate, to ever develop in him again as a follower of Christ. So, why is it so difficult to believe that the spiritually mature and victorious apostle who wrote Philippians 3:10-14, was also spiritually mature and victorious when writing of his personal frustration in Romans 7:14-25?