

THE CONFESSIONS OF A MAN'S STRUGGLING SOUL

ROMANS 07:14–25

Introduction

This is a great passage of Scripture in that it portrays the struggling soul of the believer as he ploughs through life. It is a rare picture of the life of Paul, of what he sensed and learned and experienced as he struggled to please God and to become conformed to the glorious image of the Lord Jesus. It is the confession of a man's soul as he struggles through life.

- I. Confession 1: he knows that the law is spiritual (v. 14).
- II. Confession 2: he is unspiritual, carnal, a slave to sin (vv. 14-17).
- III. Confession 3: he is empty of anything good (vv. 18-20).
- IV. Confession 4: he finds two laws or forces within (vv. 21-23).
- V. Confession 5: he is a desperate, wretched man who needs a Deliverer (v. 24).
- VI. Confession 6: the Deliverer is Jesus Christ (v. 25).

I. *Romans 07:14 Law is Spiritual*

Paul's first confession is that the law is spiritual. It is spiritual in at least three senses.

1. The law was given to man by the Spirit of God (pneumatikos). The Greek word used is the very name of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of the law.
2. The law is the expression of the will and nature of God. The law is spiritual because it describes the will of God and tells man just what God is like. The rules of the law reveal both the mind and nature of God.
3. The law is spiritual because of its purposes (see *Law, Purpose*, Rom. 7:12. Also see Rom. 7:7-13.)

II. *Romans 07:14–17 Man is Carnal and Unspiritual*

The second confession of Paul is that he is unspiritual, carnal, a slave to sin. The word "unspiritual" or "carnal" (sarkinos) means to be made of flesh; to consist of flesh; to have a body of flesh and blood. It means the flesh with which a man is born, the fleshly, sinful nature one inherits from his parents when he is born.

The word unspiritual or carnal also means to be given up to the fleshly, sinful nature that is, to live a sinful nature, sensual life; to be given over to animal appetites; to be controlled by one's sinful nature (see *Carnal*, 1 Cor. 3:1-4).

Paul says that he is "sold as a slave to sin." He simply means that as a creature of the sinful nature, that is, as a man, he is...

- a slave to sin
- under sin's influence
- subject to sin
- capable of sinning
- guilty of sinning
- cannot free himself from being short of God's glory
- cannot keep from sinning — not perfectly
- cannot erase sin's presence — not completely
- cannot cast sin out of his life — not totally
- cannot get rid of sin — not permanently

Prov 5:22 *The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast.*

John 8:34 *Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."*

Acts 8:23 *"For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."*

Rom 6:13 *Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.*

2 Tim 2:26 *And that they [the carnal] will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*

2 Pet 2:19 *They promise them Freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity — for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.*

Paul makes three points about his being unspiritual, a slave to sin.

1. He says that an unspiritual or a carnal life is a helpless, unceasing struggle.
 - a. "I do not understand what I do:" the word "understand" (ginosko) means to recognize, to know, to perceive. An unspiritual man finds himself doing things, and he cannot understand why he is doing them. He fights and struggles against them, but before he knows it, he has sinned and come short. The sin was upon him before he even recognized and saw it. If he had known that the behaviour was sin, he would have never done it, but he did not recognize it as coming short of God's glory and God's will for his life.
 - b. "What I want to do I do not do." Paul says that he wanted to do right and to please God as he walked throughout life day by day. He wanted to be conformed to the image of Christ and to become all that God wanted him to be. But despite his desire and expectation, before he knew it, he found himself coming short of God's glory and will.
 - c. "What I hate, I do." Paul hated sin and hated coming short of God's glory. He struggled against failing and displeasing God; he hated everything that hurt and cut the heart of God, and he fought to erase it completely from his life. But no matter how much he hated and struggled against coming short, he still found himself failing.

Gal 5:17 *For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*

2. An unspiritual, carnal life demonstrates that human nature and knowledge are inadequate. An unspiritual, carnal man fails to live for God like he should. No matter how much he tries to please God and to be conformed to the image of Christ, he comes short.

Now note: it is the law that tells man that he comes short. The law tells him that despite all his efforts to please God, he is short and not acceptable to God. He may know the law and he may try to keep the law, but his desire to know and to seek God will not save him. His nature and knowledge are not enough; they fail. What he needs is a Saviour, One outside his own flesh who can forgive his sins and impart eternal life to him.

Note another fact: an unspiritual, carnal life proves the law is good. The word “agree” (sumphemi) means to agree, to say the same thing, to speak right along with the law, to prove and demonstrate and show that the law is right. The law proves and demonstrates that a man cannot live a perfectly righteous life. An unspiritual man proves the very same thing. He sins, finding himself doing exactly what the law says not to do and what he himself prefers not to do.

The point is this: when an unspiritual, carnal man sins, the law points out his sin. The law tells the unspiritual man the truth: he is a sinner doomed to die. Knowing this, the unspiritual man is able to seek the Lord and His forgiveness. Therefore, the unspiritual man agrees with the law; the law is very good, for it tells him that he must seek the Saviour and His forgiveness. He may not actually follow through and seek the Lord, but the law has at least fulfilled its function and shown the unspiritual man what he needs to do.

Isa 59:8 *The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.*

Jer 4:22 *“My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.”*

Jer 5:4 *I thought, “These are only the poor; they are foolish, for they do not know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God.*

Micah 4:12 *But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, he who gathers them like sheaves to the threshing floor.*

Rom 10:3 *Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

Eph 4:18 *They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.*

3. Paul's conclusion is that man has a sinful, depraved and corrupt nature. What causes him to conclude this? As a man who was a genuine believer, he did not want to sin; he actually willed not to sin. However, he found that he could not keep from sinning. He continually came short of the glory of God and failed to be consistently conformed to the image of Christ. Why?

=> Not because he failed to exercise his will.

=> Not because his mind was not focused upon Christ.

=> Not because he did not know God's will.

=> Not because he did not seek to do God's will.

=> Not because he did not call upon every faculty and power of his being.

He came short and failed because of *sin that lives and dwells in him*, because of *sin within* his sinful nature. The unspiritual, carnal man finds a principle, a law of sin *within* his sinful nature that tugs and pulls him to sin. He finds that no matter what he does, he sins...

- by living for himself before he lives for God and for others.
- by putting himself before the laws concerning God and the laws concerning man. (This refers to the ten commandments where the first laws govern our relationship to God and the last laws govern our relationship to man.)

No matter what resources and faculties man uses and no matter how diligently he tries, he is unable to control sin and to keep from sinning. Sin is *within* his sinful nature; it lives and *dwells in* him. In fact, man is corrupt and dies for this very reason. He was never made to be corruptible nor to die; he was not created with the *seed of corruption* that causes him to age and deteriorate and decay (Rom. 5:12). The *seed of corruption* was planted in his sinful nature, in his body and life when he sinned. The unspiritual, carnal life proves that man cannot keep from sinning, that man is diseased with the *seed of corruption*, the seed of a sinful and a depraved nature.

John 6:26 *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill."*

Rom 7:22-24 *For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

Rom 8:7-8 *The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*

Eph 4:17 *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*

Titus 1:15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.

III. Romans 07:18–20 Man is Void of any Good

The third confession of Paul is that he is void of any good thing. By “sinful Nature” (*sarki*) Paul means the human, depraved and corrupt nature of man. (See *Unspiritual, Carnal*, Rom. 7:14-17). Paul declares: that “nothing good” lives in him. This does not mean that he never did any good thing or work. It means that his sinful nature, his flesh...

- is unable to please the goodness of God
- is unable to be as good as it should be
- is unable to be perfectly good
- is unable to conquer the tendency and push toward sin
- is unable to be conformed to the image of Christ
- is corrupted and short of God's glory
- is contaminated and diseased by sin
- is incapable of reaching God on its own and by itself
- is aging and deteriorating, dying and decaying
- is condemned to face the judgment of God

1. Note why Paul says that his sinful nature is empty. He wills and resolves not to sin, but it is all to no avail. No matter how much he wills and resolves, he fails and comes short. Note that *he desires to do what is good*. The word “desires” means that it is constantly before his face. He is *always* willing to do good and to please God. There is no lack of will in him. It is not the weakness of will nor of his resolve that causes him to come short of God's glory and will. How does he know this?

=> Because what he wills to do, he fails to do.

=> Because the evil he tries not to do, he does.

2. Paul's conclusion is the same as that of point one. He is empty of anything good because he has a sinful, depraved and corrupt nature. He is held in spiritual bondage (see note, pt. 3, Rom. 7:14-17).

IV. Romans 07:21–23 The Law of Sin and the Law of Mind

The fourth confession of Paul is that he finds two laws or two forces *within* him. Very simply, as soon as Paul wills to do good, he is immediately confronted...

- by a law of evil (v. 21)
- by the law of sin (v. 23)

The law of sin and evil battles the law of the inner being, the inward man (v. 22), the law of his mind (v. 23).

1. The *law of evil* or the *law of sin* means that sin is a law, a rule, a force, a principle, a disposition, an urge, a tendency, a pull, a tug, a corruption, a depravity within man's nature or inner being. It is called a law...
 - because of its regularity; it rises up and rules all the time
 - because of its permanent and controlling power
 - because it is impossible to break its rule and to keep from sinning
 - because it has captivated and enslaved the nature of man (Rom. 7:14f)
 - because it is not passive but active, constantly struggling to gain the ascendancy over the law of the mind

Any man who allows the law of sin to rule in his life is a miserable and helpless victim of sin.

2. The law of the inner being, the inward man or the law of the mind means...

- the divine nature of God implanted within the believer.

2 Pet 1:4 *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

- the “new self,” or “new man” created when a believer is born again.

Eph 4:23-24 *To be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Col 3:10 *And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

- the abiding presence of Christ in the believer's life.

John 14:18, 20 *“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”*

Gal 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

- the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

John 14:16-17, 26 *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you*

and will be in you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

1 Cor 6:19-20 *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.*

- the “hidden man of the heart, of the inner self.”

1 Pet 3:4 *Instead, it [one appearance] should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.*

Very simply stated, the *law of the inner being, of the inward man* is the law, rule, disposition, urge, tendency, pull and tug of the Holy Spirit to please God and to delight in doing His will.

The confession of Paul is striking. He declares that the law of sin wars against the law of his mind and that it gains the ascendancy. The law of sin captivates and enslaves him.

V. Romans 07:24 The Spiritual Struggle

Fifth confession of Paul is that he is a desperate, wretched man who needs a Deliverer. There is a sense in which man is a walking civil war. He has the ability to see what is good, but he is unable to do it. He can see what is wrong, but he cannot keep from doing it. Paul says he was pulled in two directions, pulled so much that he was almost like two men in the same body. He knew *the right*, yet he did *the wrong*. He knew what was wrong, yet he was unable to stay away from it.

There is no believer, no matter how advanced in holiness, who cannot use the same language used by the Apostle. There is a bondage, a power of sin, within the believer's nature that he cannot totally resist. True, he may and does struggle against the power, and he desires to be free from it; but despite all his efforts, he still finds himself under its influence. This is precisely the bondage of sin, of coming short of the glory of God. Too often he finds himself distrusting God, being hard of heart, loving the world and self, being too prideful, too cold, too slothful — disapproving what he knows to be right and approving what he hates. He groans under the weight of sin, of being short of God's glory and of failing to be conformed to the image of Christ. He aches to walk in humility and gentleness and to be filled with the fruit of love, joy and peace. But day by day he finds the force of sin reasserting its power over him. He struggles and struggles against it, but he finds that he cannot find the power to free himself. The believer senses an utter helplessness and longs and desires for God to free him. He is a slave looking and longing for liberty. As one has said, this conflict between the flesh and spirit, the struggle that is waged because of the *sinful nature* “continues in us so long as we live, in some more, and in others less, according as the one or the other principle is the stronger. Yet, the whole

man is both flesh and spirit, and contends with himself until he is completely spiritual” (Martin Luther as quoted by Charles Hodge. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950, p. 236).

It is this consciousness that drives the believer to the awareness that deliverance is found only through Jesus Christ our Lord. (See Gal. 5:16-18.)

Heb 6:6 If they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Deu 25:16 For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.

Psa 5:4 You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell.

VI. Romans 07:25 Great Deliverance

The sixth confession of Paul is that the great Deliverer is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an exclamation! Paul bursts forth with praise to God, for there is a glorious deliverance from sin! But note: the deliverance does not come through...

- some man-made law
- some man-possessed power
- some man-possessed ability
- some superior quality and faculty
- some great spiritual force

1. The deliverance comes through the great Deliverer Himself, Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the Deliverer from sin; He alone can deliver from sin. He is perfectly clear about this.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Mat 9:2 Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”

Mat 26:28 “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Rom 8:2 Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

1 Tim 2:3-6 *This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time.*

Jesus Christ delivers the believer from sin in two ways.

- a. Jesus Christ justifies the believer (see *Grace vs. Law*, Rom. 6:14-15).
 - b. Jesus Christ places the believer under God's grace (see Rom. 6:14-15).
2. Paul's conclusion is that he serves the law of God with his mind, that is, with his *renewed mind*. The believer who truly *knows* that his deliverance is through Jesus Christ our Lord learns something. He learns that his *mind* is *transformed* and *renewed* by Jesus Christ; he learns that his "mind" is born again and experiences a new birth just as his "old self" does. He learns that his *old mind* becomes the *new mind* and that his "old self" becomes the "new self." (See *Mind*, Rom. 12:2)

Rom 12:2 *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

2 Cor 5:14-15 *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Eph 4:22-24 *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

1 Pet 1:13 *Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

Because of Jesus Christ, the believer takes his *new mind* and does all he can to serve the law of God. When he fails – when his flesh or sinful nature caves in to sin – he knows that it is the law or force of sin that has caused it, not the law of his *new mind*. He knows that he is still flesh as well as spirit, that he is still indwelt by two laws, two forces that struggle for allegiance; therefore, he does all he can to focus his mind upon the law of God. He simply serves God – His will and His nature (that is, His law) – trying to please God in all that he does. He dedicates himself not to come short of God's glory but to be conformed to the image of Christ. He knows that he is delivered from the law (force) of sin through Jesus Christ; therefore, the believer keeps justification and God's grace ever before his face. The believer knows that when his flesh serves the law of sin by failing, he has open access into God's presence to ask forgiveness.

Therefore, he “girds up the loins of his mind” and comes before God for forgiveness. And once receiving a fresh surge of God’s forgiveness and grace, he starts all over again. The believer begins to sense the law of God with renewed fervour, the fervour of his renewed mind.

It should be noted that most commentators see the latter part of this verse as reverting back to what Paul had been saying, as a summary statement of what the carnal man or believer experiences. However, it seems much more natural to see Paul building upon his confession of Jesus Christ as the great Deliverer from sin. After coming to know Jesus Christ as the great Deliverer, it is not reasonable for him to be reverting back to the fleshly struggle of the unspiritual, carnal man. It is much more reasonable to see the mind as the *renewed mind* of the “new self.” However, if one prefers the summary interpretation, then the meaning would be as follows.

- => The unspiritual, carnal man uses his mind, his human, fleshly reasoning to serve the law of God. He tries and tries with all his might to honour and to keep the law of God.
- => However, he is flesh and he is unspiritual; therefore, he is subject to sin. No matter how much he tries to struggle against sin, his flesh, his sinful nature gives in to the law of sin and comes short of God’s glory. ■