

09-28-14

Series: The Anatomy of a Church

# The Anatomy of a Church (32)

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

[Acts 20:28](#)

(Continuation from 09/21/14)

## PERSONAL HOLINESS

### STRUGGLE AND CONFESSION: THE BELIEVER IS TO BE FREE FROM THE LAW, [Romans 7:1-25](#)

#### The Final Lament

[Romans 7:24-25 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

<sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

Paul's final lament is even more intense than the others. He cries out in utter anguish and frustration, "**Wretched man that I am!**" Because this person describes himself in such negative terms, many commentators believe he could not be speaking as a Christian, much less as an apostle. If Paul was speaking of himself, they argue, he must have been speaking about his preconversion condition.

But the Scottish commentator **Robert Haldane** wisely observed that men perceive themselves to be sinners in direct proportion as they have previously discovered the holiness of God and His law. In one of his penitential psalms, David expressed his great anguish of soul for not being all that he knew the Lord wanted him to be: "**O LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath, And chasten me not in Your burning anger. For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, And Your hand has pressed down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; There is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me**" ([Psalm 38:1-4](#)).

Another psalmist expressed distress over his sin in words that only a person who knows and loves God could pray: "**Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications. If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope**" ([Psalm 130:1-5](#)).

09-28-14

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Paul next asks a question to which he well knows the answer: **Who will set me free from the body of this death?** He again makes clear that the cause of his frustration and torment is **the body of this death**. It is only a believer's **body** that remains subject to sin and **death**.

*Rhuomai* (set... free) has the basic idea of rescuing from danger and was used of a soldier's going to a wounded comrade on the battlefield and carrying him to safety. Paul longed for the day when he would be rescued from the last vestige of his old, sinful, unredeemed flesh.

It is reported that near Tarsus, where Paul was born ([Acts 22:3](#)), a certain ancient tribe sentenced convicted murderers to an especially gruesome execution. The corpse of the slain person was lashed tightly to the body of the murderer and remained there until the murderer himself died. In a few days, which doubtless seemed an eternity to the convicted man, the decay of the person he had slain infected and killed him. Perhaps Paul had such torture in mind when he expressed his yearning to be freed from **the body of this death**.

Without hesitation, the apostle testifies to the certainty of his eventual rescue and gives thanks to his Lord even before he is set free: **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!** he exults. Later in the epistle he further testifies, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us"** ([Romans 8:18](#)). Frustrating and painful as a believer's present struggle with sin may be, that temporary earthly predicament is nothing compared with the eternal glory that awaits him in heaven.

Because Christians have a taste of God's righteousness and glory while they are still on earth, their longing for heaven is all the more acute: **"And not only this, but also we ourselves,"** Paul says, **"having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body"** ([Romans 8:23](#); cf. [2 Corinthians 5:4](#)). On that great day even our corruptible bodies will be redeemed and made incorruptible. **"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,"** Paul assures us, **"the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality... The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"** ([1 Corinthians 15:52-53, 56-57](#)).

Paul's primary emphasis in the present passage, however, is not on the believer's eventual deliverance from sin's presence but on the conflict with sin that torments every spiritually sensitive child of God. He therefore ends by summarizing the two sides of that struggle: **So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin** ([Romans 7:25](#)).

In the poem *Maud* (x. 5), one of Tennyson's characters yearns, **"Ah for a new man to arise in me, that the man I am may cease to be!"** The Christian can say that a new man has already arisen in him, but he also must confess that the sinful part, his old man, has not yet ceased to be.