

Romans 7:7-25 and Sinful Flesh

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Some of the most complicated teachings Paul would present are found in the book of Romans, and chapters 7 and 8 are some of the most complicated chapters in that book. The reason they are complicated is that Paul is trying to explain why it is that we sin.

Paul's first point is that Law is not the cause of sin. Law is good, righteous and wholesome. It is like a light to a dark room; it reveals the clutter, but does not cause it. The problem is that law reveals sin, and Paul tells us that the Law (of Moses) was designed to make sin especially sinful, by creating ideas such as clean and unclean, etc.

Sin is a result of our serving our flesh. Our flesh is the term to describe our physical nature (Scriptures describe man as having a soul, a body and a spirit, 1 Thes. 5:23). In 1 Corinthians 2:12-3:3 Paul uses other terms to describe the flesh: Natural, carnal, unspiritual, worldly. He tells us that men are motivated either by the Spirit (meaning, the mind of God, as revealed in the Scriptures) or by the flesh. When men are moved by the flesh, they are brutes (2 Peter 2:12, Jude 10).

Why does the flesh cause us to sin? Can we stop it? James 1:13-15 tells us that sin is the result of desires left uncontrolled. If such is the case, then it must be concluded that we can control the flesh. The desires of the flesh are sinful because they are not guided by the spirit, i.e. divinely revealed knowledge (Scriptures).

Is the flesh sinful, and therefore is anyone who is in the flesh a sinner? The idea presented by Paul is that flesh, when uncontrolled, seeks sin. A person who walks in the flesh (by their own mind) will walk in sin, and be controlled by sin (a slave to sin). But flesh was designed to be reined in by a spiritual mind. The flesh is not necessarily sinful, and the great proof of this is Christ Himself.

Jesus Christ came in sinful flesh: *"For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh"* (Romans 8:3). But He was NOT a sinner, as best stated in Hebrews 4:15 and 7:26. Jesus in the flesh was without sin, and was undefiled. Therefore, He is the proof that being the flesh does not mean we must walk by it.

There are three false doctrines that confuse these ideas: Original Sin (that we inherit the guilt of the sins of Adam and Eve); Total Depravity (that our nature is so corrupt that we cannot choose to do what is right); Sinful Nature (that it is a human's nature to sin). None of these doctrines are found either by name or in description in the Bible. Instead, we are told that we cannot inherit the guilt of another person's sins (Ezekiel 18), that even unrighteous people can choose to do what is right (Josiah, Cornelius, etc), and that our nature is divine, not sinful (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, Ecclesiastes 7:29). Sinful flesh does NOT support these ideas, as our flesh is only a part of our nature (remember, we are not animals!) and the flesh can be controlled by the spirit.