

Holy Spirit (Reading)

by Watchman Nee

The sermon explores the problem of Romans 7, where Christians struggle to please God, and the solution of deliverance from the law through Christ's resurrection life.

Duration: 28:48

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Struggle"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher explores the concept of being in the flesh and the inability of man to please God in his carnal state. The sermon draws from Romans 7, highlighting the transition from verse 3 to verse 4, where it is revealed that it is the woman who dies, symbolizing freedom from the law. The preacher emphasizes that while the law remains, it loses its claim upon those who have died with Christ. The sermon also delves into the struggle of a believer who, after consecrating themselves to God, finds difficulty in consistently obeying His will and questions their own experience.

Transcript

We come now to Romans 7, a chapter which many have felt to be almost superfluous. Perhaps indeed it would be so if Christians really saw that the old creation has been ruled out by the cross of Christ, and an entirely new creation brought in by his resurrection. If we have come to the point where we really know that, and reckon on that, and present ourselves on the basis of that, then perhaps we have no need of Romans 7. Others have felt that the chapter is in the wrong place.

They would have put it between the 5th and 6th chapters. After chapter 6, all is so perfect, so straightforward, and then comes breakdown, and the cry, O wretched man that I am! Would anything be more of an anticlimax? And so some have argued that Paul is speaking here of his unregenerate experience. Well, we must admit that some of what he describes here is not a Christian experience, but nonetheless many Christians do experience it.

What then is the teaching of this chapter? Romans 7 has a new lesson to teach us. It is found in the discovery that I am in the flesh, that I am carnal, and that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. This goes beyond the question of sin, for it relates also to the matter of pleasing God.

We are dealing not here with sin in its forms, but with man in his carnal state. The latter includes the former, but it takes us a stage further, for it leads to the discovery that in this realm too, we are totally impotent, and that they that are in the flesh cannot please God. How then is this discovery made? It is

made with the help of the law.

Now let us retrace our steps for a minute, and attempt to describe what is probably the experience of many. Many a Christian is truly saved, and yet bound by sin. It is not that he is necessarily living under the power of sin all the time, but that there are certain particular sins hampering him continually, so that he commits them over and over again.

One day he hears the full gospel message, that the Lord Jesus not only died to cleanse away our sins, but that when he died, he included us sinners in his death, so that not only were our sins dealt with, but we ourselves were dealt with too. The man's eyes are opened, and he knows he has been crucified with Christ. Two things follow that revelation.

In the first place, he reckons that he has died and risen with the Lord. And in the second place, recognizing the Lord's claim upon him, he presents himself to God as alive from the dead, and he sees that he has no more right over himself. This is the commencement of a beautiful Christian life, full of praise to the Lord.

But then he begins to reason as follows. I have died with Christ, and am raised with him, and I have given myself over to him forever. Now I must do something for him, since he has done so much for me.

I want to please him and to do his will. So after the step of consecration, he seeks to discover the will of God, and sets out to obey him. Then he makes a strange discovery.

He thought he could do the will of God, and he thought he loved it, but gradually he finds he does not always like it. At times he even finds a distinct reluctance to do it, and often when he tries to do it, he finds he cannot. Then he begins to question his experience.

He asks himself, did I really know? Yes. Did I really reckon? Yes. Did I really give myself to him? Yes.

Have I taken back my consecration? No. Then whatever is the matter now? The more this man tries to do the will of God, the more he fails. Ultimately he comes to the conclusion that he never really loved God's will at all, so he prays for the desire and the power to do it.

He confesses his disobedience, and promises never to disobey again. But he has barely got up from his knees before he has fallen once more. Before he reaches the point of victory, he is conscious of defeat.

Then he says to himself, perhaps my last decision wasn't definite enough. This time I'll be absolutely definite. So he brings all his willpower to bear on the situation, only to find greater defeat than ever awaiting him the next time a choice has to be made.

Then at last he echoes the words of Paul, For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. For to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not. For the good which I would, I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I practice.

Many Christians are suddenly launched into the experience of Romans 7, and they do not know why. They fancy Romans 6 is quite enough. Having grasped that, they think there can be no more question of failure, and then to their utmost surprise, they suddenly find themselves in Romans 7. What is the explanation? First, let us be quite clear that the death with Christ described in Romans 6 is fully adequate to cover all our need.

It is the explanation of that death, with all that follows from it, that is incomplete in chapter 6. We are as yet still in ignorance of the truth set forth in chapter 7. Romans 7 is given to us to explain and make real the statement in Romans 6.14 that sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under law, but under grace. The trouble is that we do not yet know deliverance from law. What then is the meaning of law? Grace means that God does something for me.

Law means that I do something for God. God has certain holy and righteous demands which he places upon me. That is law.

Now if law means that God requires something of me for their fulfilment, then deliverance from law means that he no longer requires that from me, but himself provides it. Law implies that God requires me to do something for him. Deliverance from law implies that he exempts me from doing it, and that in grace he does it himself.

I, where I is the carnal man of chapter 7 verse 14, need do nothing for God. That is deliverance from law. The trouble in Romans 7 is that man in the flesh tried to do something for God.

As soon as you try to please God in that way, then you place yourself under law, and the experience of Romans 7 begins to be yours. God knows who I am. He knows that from head to foot I am full of sin.

He knows that I am weakness incarnate, that I can do nothing. The trouble is that I do not know it. I admit that all men are sinners, and that therefore I am a sinner, but I imagine that I am not such a hopeless sinner as some.

God must bring us all to the place where we see that we are utterly weak and helpless. While we say so, we do not wholly believe it, and God has to do something to convince us of the fact. Had it not been for the law, we should never have known how weak we are.

Paul had reached that point. He makes this clear when he says in Romans 7 verse 7, I had not known sin except through the law, for I had not known coveting except the law had said thou shalt not covet. Whatever might be his experience with the rest of the law, it was the tenth commandment which literally translated is, thou shalt not desire, that found him out.

There his total failure and incapacity stared him in the face. The more we try to keep the law, the more our weaknesses manifest, and the deeper we get into Romans 7, until it is clearly demonstrated to us that we are hopelessly weak. God knew it all along, but we did not, and so God had to bring us through painful experiences to a recognition of the fact.

We need to have our weakness proved to us beyond dispute. That is why God gave us the law. So we can say reverently that God never gave us the law to keep, he gave us the law to break.

He well knew that we could not keep it. We are so bad that he asks no favor and makes no demands. Never has any man succeeded in making himself acceptable to God by means of the law.

Nowhere in the New Testament are men of faith told that they are to keep the law. But it does say that the law was given so that there should be transgression. The law came in that the trespass might abound.

The law was given to make us lawbreakers. No doubt I am a sinner in Adam. Howbeit I had not known sin except through the law, for apart from the law, sin is death.

But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. The law is that which exposes our true nature. Alas, we are so conceited and think ourselves so strong that God has to give us something to test us and to prove how weak we are.

At last we see it and confess, I am a sinner through and through, and I can of myself do nothing whatever to please God. No, the law was not given in the expectation that we would keep it. It was given in the full knowledge that we would break it, and when we have broken it so completely that we are convinced of our utter need, then the law has served its purpose.

It has been our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that he himself may fulfill it in us. In Romans 6 we saw how God delivered us from sin. In Romans 7 we see how he delivers us from the law.

In chapter 6 we were shown the way of deliverance from sin in the picture of the master and his slave. In chapter 7 we are shown the way of deliverance from the law in the picture of two husbands and a wife. The relation between sin and the sinner is that of master to slave.

The relation between the law and the sinner is that of husband to wife. Notice first that in the picture in Romans 7, 1-4, by which Paul illustrates our deliverance from the law, there is only one woman while there are two husbands. The woman is in a very difficult position, for she can only be the wife of one of the two, and unfortunately she is married to the less desirable one.

Let us make no mistake, the man to whom she is married is a good man. But the trouble lies here, that the husband and wife are totally unsuited to one another. He is a most particular man, accurate to a degree.

She on the other hand is decidedly easy going. With him all is definite and precise, with her all is vague and haphazard. He wants everything just so, while she accepts things as they come.

How could there be happiness in such a home? And then that husband is so exacting, he is always making demands on his wife, and yet one cannot find fault with him. For as a husband he has a right to expect something of her. And besides, all his demands are perfectly legitimate.

There is nothing wrong with the man, and nothing wrong with his demands. The trouble is that he has the wrong kind of wife to carry them out. The two cannot get on at all.

Theirs are utterly incompatible natures. Thus the poor woman is in great distress. She is fully aware that she often makes mistakes, but living with such a husband seems as though everything she says and does is wrong.

What hope is there for her? If only she were married to that other man, all would be well. He is no less exacting than her husband, but he also helps much. She would then marry him, but her husband is still alive.

What can she do? She is bound by law to the husband, and unless he dies, she cannot legitimately marry that other man. This picture is not drawn by me, but by the Apostle Paul. The first husband is the law, the second husband is Christ, and you are the woman.

The law requires much, but offers no help in the carrying out of its requirements. The Lord Jesus requires just as much, yea more. But what he requires from us, he himself carries out in us.

The law makes demands and leaves us helpless to fulfill them. Christ makes demands, but he himself fulfills in us the very demands he makes. Little wonder that the woman desires to be freed from the first husband, that she may marry that other man.

But her only hope of release is through the death of her first husband, and he holds on to life most tenaciously. Indeed, there is not the least prospect of his passing away. Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished.

The law is going to continue for all eternity. If the law then will never pass away, then how can I ever be united to Christ? How can I marry a second husband, if my first husband simply refuses to die? There is one way out. If he will not die, I can die.

And if I die, the marriage relationship is dissolved. And that is exactly God's way of deliverance from the law. The most important point to note in this section of Romans 7 is the transition from verse 3 to verse 4. Verses 1 to 3 show that the husband should die, but in verse 4 we see that in fact it is the woman who dies.

The law does not pass away, but I pass away, and by death I am freed from the law. Let us realize clearly that the law can never pass away. God's righteous demands remain forever.

And if I live, I must meet those demands. But if I die, the law has lost its claim upon me. It cannot follow me beyond the grave.

Exactly the same principle operates in our deliverance from the law as in our deliverance from sin. When I have died, my old master's sin still continues to live, but his power over his slave extends as far as the grave and no further. He could ask me to do 101 things when I was alive, but when I am dead he calls on me in vain.

I am forever freed from his tyranny. So it is with regard to the law. While a woman lives, she is bound to a husband, but with her death the marriage bond is dissolved, and she is discharged from the law of a husband.

The law may still make demands, but for me its power to enforce them is ended. Now, the vital question arises, how do I die? And the preciousness of our Lord's work comes in just here. Ye also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ.

When Christ died, his body was broken, and since God placed me in him, I have been broken too. When he was crucified, I was crucified with him. God's purpose in uniting us to Christ was not merely negative.

It was gloriously positive that ye should be joined to another. Death has dissolved the old marriage relationship so that the woman, driven to despair by the constant demands of a former husband, who never lifted a little finger to help her carry them out, is now set free to marry the other man. Who, with every demand he makes, becomes in her the power for its fulfillment.

What is the issue of this new union? That we might bring forth fruit unto God. By the body of Christ, that foolish, sinful woman has died. But being united to him in death, she is united to him in resurrection also.

And in the power of resurrection life, she brings forth fruit unto God. The risen life of the Lord in her empowers her for all the demands God's holiness makes upon her. The law of God is not annulled.

It is perfectly fulfilled, for the risen Lord now lives out his life in her. And his life is always well-pleasing to the Father. What happens when a woman marries? She no longer bears her own name, but that of a husband.

And she shares not his name only, but his possessions too. So it is when we are joined to Christ, when we belong to him, all that is his becomes ours. With his infinite resources at our disposal, we are well able to meet all his demands.

Now that we have settled the doctrinal side of the question, we must come down to practical issues, staying a little longer with the negative aspect. What does it mean in everyday life to be delivered from the law? It means that from henceforth, I am going to do nothing whatever for God. I am never again going to try to please him.

What a doctrine you explain, what awful heresy, you can't possibly mean that. But remember, if I try to please God in the flesh, then immediately I place myself under the law. I broke the law.

The law pronounced the death sentence. The sentence was executed. And now by death, I, the carnal I, have been set free from all its claims.

There is still a law of God. And now there is in fact a new commandment that is infinitely more exacting than the old. But praise God, its demands are being met.

For it is Christ who now fulfills them. It is Christ who works in me what is well pleasing to God. I came to fulfill the law, were his words.

Thus Paul, from the ground of resurrection, can say work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which workers in you, both to will and to work, for his good pleasure. It is God that worketh in you.

Deliverance from law does not mean that we are free from doing the will of God. Certainly does not mean that we are going to be lawless, very much the reverse. What it does mean however, is that we are free from doing that will as of ourselves.

Being fully persuaded that we cannot do it, we cease trying to please God from the ground of the old man. Having at last reached the point of utter despair in ourselves, so that we cease even to try, we put our trust in the Lord to manifest his resurrection life in us. The sooner we too give up trying the better.

For if we monopolize the task, then there is no room for the Holy Spirit. But if we say I'll not do it, I'll trust thee to do it for me. Then we shall find that a power stronger than ourselves is carrying us through.

We see the law and we think that we must meet its demands. But we need to remember that though the law in itself is all right, it will be all wrong if it is applied to the wrong person. The wretched man of Romans 7 tried to meet the demands of God's law himself, and that was the cause of his trouble.

The repeated use of the little word I in this chapter gives the clue to the failure. The good which I would, I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I practice. There was a fundamental misconception in this man's mind.

He thought God was asking him to keep the law, so of course he was trying to keep it. But God was requiring no such thing of him. What was the result? Far from doing what pleased God, he found himself

doing what displeased him.

In his very efforts to do the will of God, he did exactly the opposite of what he knew to be his will. Have you discovered the truth of that in your life? It's no good merely to discover it in Romans 6 and 7. Have you discovered that you carry the encumbrance of a lifeless body in regard to God's will? You have no difficulty in speaking about worldly matters, but when you try to speak for the Lord, you are tongue-tied. When you try to pray, you feel sleepy.

When you try to do something for the Lord, you feel unwell. You can do anything but that which is related to God's will. There's something in this body that does not harmonise with the will of God.

At last, he discovers there is no use in his making up his mind anymore, and he cries out in desperation, a wretched man that I am. Like a man who suddenly awakes to find himself in a burning building, his cry is now for help, for he has come to the point where he despairs of himself. Have you despaired of yourself? Or do you hope that if you read and pray more you will be a better Christian? Bible reading and prayer are not wrong, and God forbid that we should suggest that they are, but it is wrong to trust even in them for victory.

Our help is in him who is the object of that reading and prayer. Our trust must be in Christ alone. Happily the wretched man does not merely deplore his wretchedness.

He asks a fine question, namely, who shall deliver me? Who? Hitherto he has looked for some thing. Now his hope is in a person. Hitherto he has looked within for a solution to his problem.

Now he looks beyond himself for a saviour. He no longer puts forth self-effort. All his expectation is now in another.

At the time when the epistle to the Romans was written, a murderer was punished in a peculiar and terrible manner. The dead body of the one murdered was tied to the living body of the murderer, head to head, hand to hand, foot to foot, and the living one was bound to the dead till death. The murderer could go where he pleased, wherever he went he had to carry the corpse of that murdered man with him.

Could punishment be more appalling? Yet this is the illustration Paul now uses. It is as though he were bound to a dead body and unable to get free. Wherever he goes he is hampered by this terrible burden.

At last he can bear it no longer and cries, O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me? And then, in a flash of illumination, his cry of despair changes to a song of praise. He has found the answer to his question. I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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