

THE WRETCHED MAN OF ROMANS 7

Charles D. Alexander

A Dialogue Between Eusebius, a Christian Pastor, and Theophilus, an Earnest Disciple.

This is one of Mr. Alexander's many valuable papers that were privately circulated during his ministry in Liverpool, until his death in 1991. It needs just saying that Mr. Alexander was writing 40 years ago when the Keswick theories of sanctification were more prevalent than they are now. However, they are still with us to some extent, and have developed further in other directions, notably in the Charismatic Movement. We do well to heed the scriptural wisdom delightfully unfolded in this "Divine dialogue." – Ed.

THEOPHILUS: How greatly have I looked forward to this meeting with you. I am filled with perplexity and dismay because I find my best moments are mixed with sin. I long to serve God perfectly, but I cannot. When I would do good, evil is present with me. I long for holiness, yet in my own view, I seem only to increase in unholiness, and it fills me at times with such despair. Of myself, that I am constrained to cry out in the language of Paul in Romans, Chapter 7: "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death."

EUSEBIUS: Is it not enough to be as the apostle himself was?

THEO: I am deprived even of that consolation, for I have been to convention meetings and conferences, and I have read sermons and books by the very leaders of our evangelical faith today and they all combine, with one voice, to tell me that when Paul writes "O wretched man that I am," we are to understand that he means "O wretched man that I WAS;" and when he says, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death," we should really understand him as saying, "Who HAS delivered me." They tell me I must "get out of Romans Seven into Romans Eight," whatever that may mean, for they assert that Romans Seven is not the experience of the normal Christian life; that it relates to a time in Paul's life when he lived in defeat and misery, and when the flesh, not the Spirit, had the upper hand in his life. What say you to this?

EUS: In the first place the Scriptures are silent about any such period in the life of the apostle. We know more about the life of Paul than of any other person in the New Testament, save Christ Himself, and he tells us himself that from the time he first met Christ on the Damascus road, he was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Moreover, why should Paul write in the present tense if he meant to be understood in the past tense?

THEO: That is what I cannot understand about these teachers, but I feel sure they must have some good reason for saying so. I have heard it said that three distinct periods are to be distinguished in Romans 7 and 8: first Paul's unregenerate days (7:7-13); second, his former Christian state when, though truly saved, he lived a subnormal Christian life (vv.14-25); third his present victorious state (Romans 8).

EU: That does not dispose of the difficulty of Paul's tenses. Your first period is truly described in the past tense, but why should the apostle go on to speak in the present tense when he relates his experiences in your so-called second period?

THEO: I cannot tell. But surely you would not believe it possible that Paul, an apostle, should write of himself as living in such a wretched condition as he there describes – “The good that I would I do not; the evil that I would not, that I do.”

EUS: On the contrary, that is the precise language which I should expect the apostle, as a highly spiritual man, to use.

THEO: Explain yourself, my, good Eusebius.

EUS: Most willingly, Theophilus. I make this most deliberate statement, that when Paul wrote, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” he not only was describing his life at the time of writing, but HE SOUNDED THE HIGHEST TONE OF SANCTIFIED EXPERIENCE THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN. This is not the cry of defeat, as you and many more have supposed, but the cry of the holiest of men, panting with vehement desire after the divine perfection.

THEO: You astonish me. How can such an agonised cry represent the highest attainment of the Christian in this life?

EUS: Because sanctification can only keep pace with self-revelation. In other words, it is only as we discover more and more the depths of our inward corruption, that we realise more and more, our need for holiness. The spiritual mind can be content with nothing less than the divine perfection. It will not be fobbed off with theories of “the best attainable” in this life, for its aim is nothing less than the divine life.

Therefore, to the extent that it finds itself coming short in thought, word, deed, motive, intention, and will, of the stature of divine perfection, it will groan within itself, cry out in despair of itself, and vehemently reach forth to that which it has not yet attained. The nearer it gets to the divine image, the clearer it sees its own imperfections and infirmities, and the more vehemently it cries out for full and final deliverance.

THEO: One can only conclude then, that those who reckon they have passed this stage of the Christian experience, are self-deceived, and do not have the sense of sin which they ought to have.

EUS: I greatly fear that such is the case. That which a man of lesser spiritual attainment would not be aware of, because he knows too little about himself, the more spiritual man would see as enormous wrongs, and blights, and diseases, and open, running sores. Things which might appear to be small and insignificant to the one, might be reckoned as mountainous iniquities by the other.

Hence it is that I say, this cry of Paul’s in Romans 7, so far from being the cry of a man in “fleshly bondage,” as some speak, is truly the highest tone of sanctified experience.

Think, my dear Theophilus, how few ever reach the point where they cry “O wretched man that I am.” I would that we heard more of it amongst Christian people.

THEO: It seems to me, then, that if your interpretation is to be admitted, the whole of the present day outlook, by evangelicals, would need to be drastically revised, for most people I meet appear to act on the assumption that they have passed out of Romans 7 into some region of special privilege and security.

EUS: There is no doubt in my own mind that untold harm has been done by this teaching. It has given many Christian people the idea that spirituality is attained by some act of faith, which automatically puts them on a higher plane, where, so long as they remain there, all is peace and rest and undisturbed victory. Indeed striving, struggling, conflict and warfare are regarded as inconsistent with this higher spirituality.

THEO: And is not that the case?

EUS: It is a most dangerous state of soul for anyone to think that they have done with striving and conflict. The last counsel of the Saviour to His disciples in the garden was, "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."

THEO: I have heard it put this way, that the Christian life is like the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. The crossing of the Red Sea was conversion; the journey through the wilderness was the Romans 7 experience, and the passage of the Jordan into Canaan was the entry into the Romans 8 experience, of rest and victory. We are told that no Christian should linger in the wilderness experience.

EUS: I know that these things are said, and they show the deplorable state into which Bible knowledge and Bible teaching have fallen in our day. For it is plain from the New Testament, that the wilderness journey is THE WHOLE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, and the passage of the Jordan is the entry into God's eternal rest through death. We are told in Hebrews chapter 4, that "there remaineth a rest to the people of God," and that we are to labour to enter therein, lest any of us fall after the example of unbelief shown by those who came out of Egypt with Moses. And how our friends who disagree with us love to sing "Let the fiery cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through" - a "wilderness" figure if ever there was one.

THEO: Your arguments are very convincing, but is this not something new, which you put before me? And are we not to regard new teachings as something very suspicious, if not dangerous?

EUS: You are right, Theophilus, to regard with the utmost suspicion, any teaching which has not been part of the historic deposit of truth in the Christian Church. That is why I bid you reject this "higher life" teaching which is troubling you. Our evangelical forefathers knew nothing of it, but sad to say, it has almost captured the evangelical church today, and it is my opinion that true power and spirituality will not be restored until something is done to remove this utterly false and misleading conception of the Christian life.

THEO: Is it indeed a fact that this teaching was unknown in former days?

EUS: It is only too true, and indeed, those who teach this theory of the Christian life make no secret of the fact that they regard the historic theology as being defective to the extent to which it did not "discover," or "recover," this advanced "truth."

THEO: How long has this teaching been with us?

EUS: It really took its rise in its modern form about a century ago (19th century – Ed), and like most modern religious theories, it appears to have begun in America, with a man named William Boardman, who wrote on the “Higher Life.” Before that, of course, John Wesley taught a new form of Christian perfection hitherto unheard of, but our present evangelical leaders usually reject Mr. Wesley’s advanced teaching. Mr. Wesley was much mistaken in some of his peculiar doctrines. In his soundest moments, however, his teaching was much more consistent with the historic deposit of Christian truth than many realise, for how many read Wesley’s sermons today?

THEO: It astonishes me that a man of Wesley’s training, and keen logical mind, should not have realised that his theories of sanctification were a departure from historic Christian teaching.

EUS: It was with Mr. Wesley mainly a question of terms. He believed as much in abiding sin in the believer as anyone else, and his description of the experience of what he called “Christian Perfection,” sounds suspiciously like the Seventh of Romans!

In his famous sermon on Christian Perfection Mr. Wesley says “The highest perfection which man can attain, while the soul dwells in the body, does not exclude ignorance and error and a thousand other infirmities. Now from wrong judgments, wrong words and actions will often necessarily flow This mistake in my judgment may not only occasion something wrong in my behaviour, but it may have a still deeper effect; it may occasion something wrong in my affection ... A thousand infirmities, in consequence of this, will attend my spirit, till it returns to God who gave it. And in numberless instances it comes short of doing the will of God. Hence the best of men may say from the heart,

Every moment, Lord, I need
The merit of thy death,

for innumerable violations of the Adamic as well as the angelic law.”

THEO: I am astonished. It seems to me that, as you say, with Mr. Wesley it is mainly a question of terms. What we, call sins, he calls “wrong judgments,” “mistakes,” and “infirmities.” Methinks Mr. Wesley’s Christian Perfection is, as you say, something not far removed from Romans 7 after all.

EUS. It may surprise many today to be told that not only did Mr. Wesley have room in his perfectionism for a “thousand infirmities,” and for “innumerable violations” of the law, but he also taught that sanctification was a gradual work, and begins the very moment we start the Christian life. In his sermon on the New Birth, he writes, “When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins. And thenceforward, we are gradually to ‘grow up in him, who is our head.’” It is true that he also appears to have taught another sort of sanctification, but we can only regard this as one of those strange inconsistencies into which even the greatest of men fall. As in the case of many more, Mr. Wesley’s heart spoke more truly than his head!

THEO: What does Mr. Wesley say about the importance of keeping to the old paths?

EUS: He says, in his sermon on “Sin in Believers,” “Whatever doctrine is now MUST BE WRONG; for the old religion is the only true one. No doctrine can be right, unless it is the very same which was from the beginning.”

THEO: And what is the verdict of historic religion on the subject of our talk?

EUS: It condemns with one voice, this present day teaching, so common in evangelicalism, on sanctification. Read anywhere in the writings of Augustine, Luther and the Reformers, our Puritan or Scottish Presbyterian fathers, John Bunyan, Thomas Chalmers, Robert M’Cheyne, Samuel Rutherford, or any other of the standard divines of former times - men who, under God, have left their mark on history - and you will discover that it was unknown to them that Paul in Romans 7 was to be understood in any other sense or tense than the present. Let me take one outstanding instance - John Bunyan. No one doubts that Bunyan was a man of vast knowledge and experience of the Christian life. He has dramatised that life for us in that masterpiece of English prose and divine wisdom, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* - which everyone agrees is really the story of his own spiritual life. What a record that is of how holiness grows only out of experience, and is a thing of constant defeats, conflicts, setbacks, victories, despairs, humiliations, snares and deliverances! Bunyan knew nothing of a “two-phase” Christian life.

Today, our evangelical teachers have abolished the wilderness journey as a type of the Christian life, and have incidentally proved John Bunyan to be the tinker that he always was! - with his outmoded nonsense of a Christian life made up of arduous struggling, failure and breakdown, ups and downs, and constant bitter proof of inward corruption! Instead we now hurdle into Canaan over the consecration altar! The thing is done in a moment of time - and we even forget that Canaan was anything but a type of constant victory to the army which went in with Joshua. Alas, I greatly fear that Bunyan, along with Richard Baxter, John Owen, Martin Luther, and Augustine himself, would be bundled off our convention platforms today, as men of very inferior enlightenment on the subject of what the Christian life is, and how it should be lived.

THEO: You do not believe, then, in sanctification by faith?

EUS: No more than any of these I have mentioned. For neither is sanctification by faith alone, nor yet is salvation itself. Else where should we put the doctrine of repentance?

THEO: How then are we sanctified?

E1US By faith and works - that is, the works of faith, as Paul tells us, “Faith, which worketh by love.”

THEO: What are the works of faith?

EUS: Watchings and prayings, self denial, self-examination, obedience, patience, submission, groaning, longing, penitence, self-buffeting, and self-discovery. What think you of the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27? There he tells us that the Christian life is one of running striving, and fighting - the very words which are anathema to those who hold the new theories of holiness. Moreover, he, says “*I keep under* (or ‘buffet’ - RV) my body, and bring it into subjection.” Paul evidently did not think that “victory” in the Christian life was a matter of faith alone, and of reposeful trust. He realised he had a

raging enemy within, which faith alone without works could not keep down. So he buffeted himself by fasting - and prayer, and by penitential watchings. His greatest fights were not with the wild beasts at Ephesus, but with the wild beasts of his own lusts, which ever raged within, and could be restrained only by carefulness, tears, diligent self-examination, and constant self-denial.

THEP: But, my good Eusebius, this is revolutionary! This is contrary to all I hear being, taught at the conventions and in evangelical literature today.

EUS: So much the worse for the meetings and the books you refer to. It is the doctrine of Paul, and the doctrine of the Fathers. It is the doctrine of the Reformers and of the Puritans. As for its being revolutionary, I fail to see how our evangelicalism is to be saved today unless some sort of revolution is caused in the minds and hearts of teachers and people.

THEO: Perhaps the position is not so serious as you think. May it not be that with many, as with Mr. Wesley, it is largely a question of terms, and though the theology may be defective yet the good sense and good heart of these teachers keeps them sound in their experience?

EUS: I most thankfully acknowledge that this is frequently the case. Again, there are many who would speak out, but they fear to cause a tumult, and think it best to hold their peace, and to adjust themselves to the prevailing conditions. But the situation will not much longer admit of such a policy of "let be." So many people have been persuaded by these teachings (that it is possible - if not usual - to live a "fleshly" Christian life and yet be saved in the end), that many are living in a false state of security. Others have ceased to listen well to the true voice of conscience because they love to persuade themselves that their holiness theories have done for them what the teachers have taught them, and no one likes to be disillusioned. Many in consequence, are in that state of security, in which they ignore the facts of their own experience. I say most solemnly, out of the abundance of my experience of men and women today, that many have altogether ceased to strive, to seek, to weep, to groan, to deny themselves, to take up the cross daily, because, lulled by these teachings, they believe that faith alone is enough, and they will be all right in the end. Mr. Wesley, with a truer instinct, called this "antinomianism." No man was more of an ethical teacher than Mr. Wesley, and it was this which saved so many of his followers from shipwreck. But how many ethical preachers do we have in the evangelical world today?

THEO: Is then the present teaching "antinomian"?

EUS: In all its varieties and extremes, yes. By "antinomian" we mean that idea that one can reach heaven without any particular striving against sin, without and without cross-bearing. Is it not a fact that we often hear it said, that many "take Christ as Saviour, without taking Him as Lord?" Is not that the grossest form of antinomianism? Does it not clearly imply that man can be saved yet not submitted to Christ? And is this not a case of making Christ the minister of sin? Yet our convention speakers have for years taught this, and must go on teaching it so long as they hold the theory that the man of Romans 7:14-25 is a "fleshly, defeated Christian," who does not yet know what it is to be submitted to Christ in true surrender. Once admit that conversion itself is submission to Christ; once admit that it is not possible for a man to be a Christian at all, unless he deny himself and take up the cross daily and follow Christ; once acknowledge that if a man does not forsake all that he has, and his own life also, he cannot be a disciple of Christ - once acknowledge these things, and the whole differentiation between Romans

7 and Romans 8 falls to the ground, and with it the whole scheme of holiness as taught by almost everyone of our evangelical divisions today.

THEO: I have heard it said that to be saved is one thing, and to be a disciple is another.

EUS: Then you have heard antinomianism its most unblushing and impertinent form. Flee from it.

THEO: What then is the difference in Christian experience between Romans 7 and Romans 8?

EUS: None whatever. Those who teach there is a difference, teach a complete fallacy. On what do they base their opinion?

THEO: I have heard them say that in Romans 7 there is no reference to the Holy Spirit, but Paul refers to himself in the pronouns, I, me, -My, no less than 40 times, whereas in Romans 8 the Holy Spirit is mentioned nearly 20 times.

EUS: Do you not think that a theology which is based on arithmetic is unsafe?

THEO: I had not thought of it that way.

EUS: Have you never noticed that in Romans 6, which is supposed to be a great chapter on sanctification, there is no mention of the Holy Spirit whatever?

THEO: I had not noticed that. I must admit that a theology based on the mere occurrence of words is most unsafe.

EUS: And have you not observed that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, mentioned in Chapter 7 (verse 6), and His presence and working are everywhere implied? Do we not read in verse 4 that we are united in spiritual marriage with Christ, so as to bring forth fruit unto God? Is it not the Holy Spirit who effects this spiritual union and produces this spiritual fruit? Again, Paul writes in connection with the experience which these teachers imagine relates to a "defeated" Christian life, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man." How can one so delight in righteousness and true, holiness, except by the power, working, and presence of the Holy Spirit?

THEO: I admit your point. This reliance on words and their recurrence, is completely misleading.

EUS: Have you also noted that in Romans 8, in which these teachers profess to find the "higher life," only two classes of person are mentioned - the saved and the unsaved? These classes are, those who are fleshly minded, and those who are spiritually minded (verse 6). To the one, death is attributed, and to the other, life and peace. Again in verse 9, we are told that we are either "in the flesh" or "in the Spirit." Even Mr. Wesley concedes that "in the, flesh" means the unregenerate. Where then are those Christians who are supposed to be neither the one nor the other? You see, when we come to an honest exegesis of Romans 8, we find that the chapter deals only with saved and unsaved, and how they may be detected. It has nothing whatever to do with a "higher life." The question is simply whether a man is regenerate or unregenerate.

THEO: I do not know how I can ever have failed to observe this. One has been so mesmerised by these arithmetical interpretations, that all I have done is count up words, and I have not weighed their meaning.

EUS: And I assure you, dear Theophilus, that is all this wonderful theory of “out of Romans 7 into Romans 8” is made of. In so far as anyone says that Romans 8 gives the answer to the cry, “Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” they are quite correct. But in so far as they go on to say that this deliverance is in this present life, they but make themselves ridiculous. For, in the eighth chapter, after Paul has carefully distinguished between saved and unsaved, and taught us how we may prove the fact of our own regeneration by mortification of sin (verse 13) and obedience to the Spirit (verse 14) leading to a wholesome assurance that we are the children of God (verse 16), he holds before us, to comfort and cheer and nerve and encourage us in all our trials, temptations, defeats, struggles and conflicts, that grand and glorious deliverance, still future to all of us - THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY. This is the burden of his message in Romans 8. Are we troubled by the corruptions of sin common to our bodily state? Then, says Paul, look up, and look forward to the time when, after the struggles of this present life are ended, we shall receive that final redemption, even that for which in this body we groan, namely, THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODY (verse 23). For we are saved by hope, he says.

From verse 11 onwards, the theme of Romans 8 is the resurrection of the body, and all the glory which will flow therefrom. The opening verses deal exclusively with those who shall have a part in this blessed hope. NOTHING ELSE IS TAUGHT IN ROMANS 8. When the evangelical church learns this and acts upon it, we may expect a new sense of sin in the church, and a new aspiring after the world to come. Meanwhile, the way to revival is obstructed by teaching which ministers to spiritual fancies.

Now you see the full meaning of the apostle when he cried out by reason of the sinfulness, the loss, the restriction, the vanity of this bodily state, “O wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Then he concludes, the part of the verse which is never quoted by these convention teachers and writers, “So then, with the mind I myself serve the Law of God, BUT WITH THE FLESH THE LAW OF SIN.”

THEO: I take it then, that you can offer me no further relief in my Christian problems, and that I must go on to make my daily groan, “O wretched man that I am”?

EUS: I can offer you no more than Christ offered all His disciples - blood and toil and sweat and tears; a cross on which your own self must be crucified day by day, loss and pain, trial and disappointment. Through much tribulation must you enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But with it all, if you be earnestly bent on running the race which is set before you, you will have rewards in this life - consolations, hope, peace, contentment, an ever-growing and flowering holiness, and in the world to come, you shall receive the crown of life.

THEO: There is then, no short cut to holiness?

EUS: How could there possibly be? Be content, dear Theophilus, to tread the lowly path of humility and repentance. Learn by the things you suffer. Give diligence to make your calling and election sure. You will find many compensations, and joys undreamed of before, as Christ comes to you and reveals Himself to your soul. The increasing sense of your own wretchedness through your inner corruptions,

will arise from your increasing victory over them. Gerhard Groot, the young Dutchman who laboured so fruitfully for God a century before the Reformation, wrote truthfully these words, “The farther a man knows himself to be from perfection, so much the nearer he is to it. As long as a man finds something about him to amend, he is in a good state.” Let us close on that note.

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