

This Body Of Death

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Many people consider Romans 7 to be among the most critical chapters of the New Testament. In it, the apostle Paul clarifies that God's law should be our primary resource for gaining insight into the manner of our Christian walk, and how our Father grants us discernment through our calling that exposes sin.

Paul's writings also illuminate how dominating sin can be, requiring life-long struggles to overcome its destructive effects. Even though we become new creatures "in Christ," we still must always contend with our carnal nature that currently coexists disagreeably within each of us (Romans 8:7).

Therefore, we direct our warfare toward our carnality—our human nature, our flesh. Over a lifetime, corrupted and dysfunctional habits in opposition to God have become engrained into our respective characters, separating each of us from God and wreaking havoc in our personal lives (Isaiah 59).

In Romans 7:15-19, Paul's emotional words capture a depressing description of the trouble that sin causes:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.

For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

A Gruesome Metaphor

Then, in verse 24, Paul utters a question that is the focus of this article: "O wretched man that I am! *Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" (emphasis ours throughout). *The Amplified Bible* paraphrases this question: "Who will release and deliver me from [the *shackles* of] this body of death?" It is this metaphor alluding to our shackled condition that we will study further, hopefully gaining deeper insight into the ravages of sin.

Certain ancient Roman authorities were infamous for their sadistic manner, particularly when dealing with criminals. Most people are familiar with the gruesome and inhumane practice of crucifixion, but many consider another method of punishment even more shocking and appalling—one meted out by Roman tyrants most frequently upon murderers: They shackled the convicted killer to the dead body of his victim.

We gain some insight into this heinous practice from the poet Virgil, who described it in his *The Aeneid, Book 8*, starting on line 485:

The living and the dead at his command
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,
Till, chok'd with stench, in loath'd embraces tied,
The ling'ring wretches pin'd away and died.

Shackled to his victim, eye-to-eye, hand-to-hand, waist-to-waist, and foot-to-foot, the murderer—still very much alive—was forced to live out the remainder of his life directly bearing the weight and the putrefying stench of the dead body. In time, of course, the rotting flesh of the corpse would become rife with disease, infecting the killer and leading to a most horrible and grisly end.

Such vile disciplinary measures typically became well-known in the Roman provinces by design, all the better to keep a foreign populace in check. As not only a Roman citizen from a prominent family but also classically educated, the apostle Paul was likely aware of this, as well as most other Roman laws, customs, practices, and traditions. Indeed, he wrote several of his epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) while incarcerated by the same government. He had faced Roman punishment on several occasions (see, for instance, II Corinthians 11:23-28).

It may very well be that Paul recognized the value of the metaphor this deplorable punishment depicted: a man being shackled to and destroyed by the cumbersome weight and the horrific nature of his sins. Such a metaphor is an effective tool, warning us never to underestimate the power, the weight, the gravity, and the sordid nature of sin that Satan will use against us (Genesis 3:13; I Corinthians 7:5; II Corinthians 2:11; I Peter 5:8).

Surrounded by Sin

Consider also that we are surrounded by and constantly in touch with sin throughout our physical lives (Genesis 19:4; Isaiah 1:4-6; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10-18). Just as the dead body eventually infects and destroys the healthy body to which it is attached, so also does sin infect each of us if not overcome. Death is not immediate but instead slow and painful. Direct punishment from God is not typically swift either (Ecclesiastes 8:11), but an unrepentant life of sin slowly poisons us, separating us from God, our only dependable protection (Isaiah 59:2).

Most, if not all, Christians lack the understanding of the depth of hatred God has for sin. In Isaiah 55:8, God tells us that His ways and thoughts are not at all like ours, and then He declares in verse 9, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Amos 5:21 displays God’s refusal to “savor” the sinful way the Israelites were keeping His holy days, with the implication that these sins were an offense to His sense of smell. “I hate, I despise your feast days,” He declares. The Israelites were spiritually dead, and their sins repulsed God, for He is holy, clean, and pure. He cannot and will not come into contact with sin.

Unclean and Defiled

Have you ever touched a dead animal? What was your response? The very thought of having to touch a dead animal, be it a squirrel, a mouse, or even a common, well-cared-for domesticated pet, is revolting to most people. Many of us will quickly steer our car around the body of a dead animal lying on the road ahead of us to avoid even making contact with it with our tires! Why? Because we consider it repugnant and nauseating. Think for a moment about the revulsion we would feel if a small, dead cat were bound to us for only a few minutes, much less a few weeks!

Closely related is the teaching that appears in Numbers 19:11-13:

He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him.

Because of this instruction, to an Israelite, a dead body was extremely tainted and profane, requiring both the passage of time and two separate washing rituals before the defiled individual could be declared purified. Without this detailed purification process, a defiled person would be completely cut off from Israel—and thus cut off from God, so great was the potential danger of profaning the Tabernacle of the Lord.

As difficult as it may be to consider the repugnancy of rotting flesh, a potent metaphor for our sinful nature is called for to warn us of the dangers of relaxing our standards within the context of our relationship with God, the purest of all beings. Since we are always surrounded and bombarded by sin, it is only too easy for us to let our guard down and to forget how our transgressions cause our Creator to regard us as unfit to be in His divine presence.

Complacent and Oblivious

Consider the heavy smoker or the lazy homeowner who fails to maintain his pet's litter box. After long-term exposure to the foul-smelling tobacco smoke, the typical smoker becomes oblivious to the odor fouling his home, his car, and his clothing. After long-term exposure to the excessive bodily waste of his cute, furry companion, a complacent pet lover becomes used to the malodorous assault on his senses. In time, the offensive smells seem to disappear from their nostrils altogether.

Such is the manner of our sins if we are not willing to heed the strong warnings from someone wise like the apostle Paul. Without constant contact with God, we risk becoming used to—and even comfortable with—our defiled manner, and sadly, used to the separation from God. At this point, we are in grave danger. The author of Hebrews, most likely the apostle Paul, writes, “[H]ow shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation . . . ?” (Hebrews 2:3; see Joshua 23:11-16; Deuteronomy 4:9). Later, he adds, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12; see II Samuel 12:10; Isaiah 59:2). Hence the need for such an intense and disturbing reproach.

The story of King David and Bathsheba comes to mind as a great and tragic example of the potential dangers of our spiritual complacency (II Samuel 11—12). David was a righteous man—a man after

God's own heart—and deeply loved by God (I Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22; Psalm 17:8). He was not prone to practice sin, but he grew complacent—perhaps too self-assured—and committed a great transgression against Uriah, indeed, a sin against God (II Samuel 12:9). Moreover, he remained unaware of the stench of his offense until Nathan the prophet pointed it out (II Samuel 12:7). Psalm 51 reflects his shame and frustration upon recognizing his defiled state.

Righteous Sensitivity

The closer a person draws to God, the more opportunities he has to grow in righteousness (Isaiah 55: 3, 6). The more righteous he becomes, the greater appreciation he has for God's law and the more sensitive he will become to his stench and corruption. Paul's words in Romans 7, written about twenty years into his conversion, reflect his own growing sensitivity to sin, leading to his famous utterance: "O wretched man that I am!"

However, we can easily be overwhelmed by the revelation of our tainted condition. We may feel shame and self-disgust and tend to withdraw from our fellowship within the Body of Christ, drifting away from our only hope—our only solution—God. We are readily discouraged, and if we are not careful, such discouragement often leads to even more sin, further drifting, and a vicious circle that can take us down quickly. We will always struggle with our carnal nature, but just as Paul found encouragement in his relationship with Christ, we, too, can turn to our divine Brother. In Him, there is always hope (Romans 7:25)!

Because of our carnality and our deceitfully wicked heart (Jeremiah 17:9), we will always struggle to see our sins as God does, but that is our goal. With God's help, a lot of patience, and persistent effort, we can learn to become more righteous. With daily prayer and Bible study, we can discover how to become more holy. With hard work within the fellowship of the Body of Christ, we can understand what it means to become pure as God is pure. While we must learn to respect and fear the corrupting power of sin, we can become more aware of, intimate with, and faithful to the superior power that God grants His children to overcome its corrupting effects (Romans 6:5-6).

We do not need to remain weighed down by the dead body of our sinful, carnal nature. We must, instead, call upon the faith that our Creator provides each of us and learn to trust in His promises. He will be faithful!

If we remain faithful, enduring to the end, God, through Jesus Christ, will completely renew us and cleanse the stench of our sinful ways, releasing us from "this body of death." Then, God willing, we can become a sweet savor in His nostrils.

Finally, the author of Hebrews provides us with the perfect summation and conclusion in Hebrews 12: 1-2:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares [and shackles] us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.