

Assurance in Struggle

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[0 : 00] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God in my inner being. But I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

[1 : 08] Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Well, good morning everyone. We're going to turn to God's word now from Romans chapter 7, verse 14 following. Well, let's jump in at the deep end.

And I want to put a question to you, a confronting question this morning. So, if a video of your past week as a Christian was sort of up on the screen behind me, what would we all see?

So, as you reflect on that, how often, for instance, did you betray the faithful love and commitment of your heavenly Father by promoting your own sovereignty over his?

How many times did you, in a sense, make mockery of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to deal with your sins by choosing to walk back into the very sin that Jesus died for to deal with?

[2 : 38] How often did that happen? How often did you ignore the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit to express the mind of Christ in favour of expressing your own mind and your own wisdom?

And here we are this morning, churching, loving to sing, pray, fellowship together, loving to be taught by God's word as brothers and sisters in Christ.

But perhaps already, your focus and interest has gone back to social media on your telephone. Or, you're already planning your coming week.

You've already left the building, in a sense, and are planning your coming week. Or even just wishing you were somewhere else, having come here. Now, I can't answer for you.

You can only answer for yourself. But I tell you, for me, only a brief reflection on these sorts of things fills me with grief and threatens to overwhelm me.

[3 : 52] Like so many Christians, I am so thankful for the wonderful privileges and benefits of being united with Christ, being a Christian. But against that, the awfulness of my failures, daily, hourly, weekly, monthly, yearly, the awfulness of my failures attacks my assurance or confidence in salvation.

I even surprise myself at times at how disobedient to God I am. the same Lord who has given me so much, who wants such good things for me.

How can that be? I ask myself. Why do I get it so wrong given that I want so much to get it right by pleasing Christ?

Why is there such a gap so often in my life? And then how am I to think about that sort of daily failure? Can I be a Christian and be assured of salvation given I am so much like this?

And this isn't just a one-off I'm talking about. This is a regular pattern I'm seeing in my life. Day after day after day.

[5 : 30] People say the only certainties in life are death and taxes. It's the old Jerry, isn't it? Now we know that. We know that life is fragile.

We know the insecurity of life and ourselves in life. But brothers and sisters in Christ this morning, when it comes to assurance of salvation, it's my delight to be able to tell you this morning that the Lord wants every believer here this morning to be absolutely sure we are accepted by him. That we are safe and secure in the Lord Jesus. In spite of our failures. tension, struggle, failure, as we'll see from this passage, is the ordinary, everyday experience of each of us as believers. In fact, I'll go so far to say it's actually the mark of the true believer to be struggling against sin. and this is the truth we're going to see in Romans 7 and 8 and a truth I hope we'll just soak in, lay back like that warm bath and just soak in the truths of chapter 7 and 8 and find the comfort that God intends us to find and have through them.

We begin this morning by looking at the foundation and the context of assurance in your sermon notes in the back of the bulletin if you're a visitor there's some sermon notes there I put those back to front I didn't realise last night they were back to front but the foundation and then the context that's the way it should be and the foundation is the foundation of assurance is understanding your position or status in Christ.

[7 : 26] Let me tell you brothers and sisters that in Christ you are both new and free and those two things are absolutely crucial to understanding and having assurance but to understand the argument in 14 through to 25 that Beck read to us we need to grasp the argument that leads up to it what goes before so in chapter 4 of Romans very quick run through Romans chapter 1 to 4 Paul establishes what you once were before you encountered Jesus and without touching down on lots of verses Paul's argument is this that you like every other person stood guilty before God because you failed to honour or respond to God as he deserves and as a direct consequence not only are you standing guilty before God but you're standing under the wrath of God and facing his condemnation because the holy God takes himself very seriously in Romans chapter 3 verse 23 we read that God's righteous judgment is hanging over every person it's inescapable and when we think of the wrath of God then it's not only inescapable it's actually unimaginable to be positioned under the wrath of God and friends it's unbearable to think that the wrath of God would be unleashed on us nothing you could do according to

Romans chapter 3 verse 23 nothing you can do would address your guilt and make you acceptable to God you were done for but Paul goes on because what you are now in Christ could not be more different could not be more of a contrast to what you once were before Christ and the gospel is that in an amazing display of love God moved towards you even while you were desperately trying to hide from him we're told in Romans chapter 3 and 4 that the death and resurrection of Jesus effected what we call a great exchange Jesus took upon himself the wrath and penalty due to your sin and in exchange gave you his righteousness and his life and all of this we're told was the grace of

God's free and totally was grace that is God's free and totally undeserved gift a gift which every believer experiences the death and resurrection of Christ is not just a historical event it is that historical fact but it's also something that every believer experiences the results of the benefits of and they're absolutely life-changing results as Paul spells them out in Romans chapter 5 and 6 Romans chapter 5 verse 1 therefore since we have been justified that is since we have through the work of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ since we have now been made acceptable to God and are counted as righteous before God because of Christ's work for us we have peace with God being in Christ means peace with God that is totally forgiven by God totally accepted by God totally restored to full relationship with him totally able to enjoy

God without fear of wrath Romans chapter 6 verse 4 being in Christ means being united to him and that union is the picture of a marriage union is such a real intimate way that we're united with Christ with the presence of the Holy Spirit actually coming into us that it's not too much to say we're totally redefined we're totally reoriented we have a new status a new position before God not pushed off to the distance and under God's wrath but brought into the family as a full member as a child a beloved one totally new identity totally new status before God and my friends with the Spirit working with totally new attitudes and desires created by the

Spirit's renewing power within us what's the flow and effect of all this wonderful benefit of Christ's death well it means this it means that we are new people we want now to live in service of our Saviour and King you want to live your new life in Christ with the same passion and commitment to serving God as you once exhibited in the pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction apart from God Romans 7 verse 6 being in Christ means being freed from the law and that means being freed from

trying to earn God's acceptance based on your own performance based on your own religious efforts and actions why are we freed from that because

[13 : 34] Jesus has done everything for us in that respect there's nothing left for us to do all we have to do is accept what he has done on our behalf and trust him in that so we're freed from that frenetic lifestyle of just trying to be good enough to win God's acceptance and the result of that freedom is so immense or the expression of that freedom is so immense that we're now just free to get on with the business of expressing our new life as it is defined by relationship with Jesus and powered by the Holy Spirit working within us but what you're yet to be amazing as all that is what you're yet to be is even more amazing than anything

I've said so far Romans 6 23 the best is yet to come and what is that best well the word used there is glory eternal life now in Christ we have relationship acceptance what is yet to come is glory where we'll actually be with Jesus and perfectly be like Jesus finally freed from every remnant and every tussle with sin then we'll experience the full extent of renewal when every bit of remaining sin will finally be removed so you're not what you once were as a Christian sitting here this morning and thank the Lord for that I don't mean that personally about you but we can say that generally that didn't come out very right did it you're not what you once were you're not yet what you will finally be in heaven but in the meanwhile this is what

Paul says do not underestimate the power of remaining or indwelling sin in your life now here's how it works for us as Christians who was the villain of the peace as it were in our lives before we became Christians answer our old distorted sinful rebellious nature dominated us controlled us defined us even who's the villain of the peace now as Christians well in a very real sense it's still our indwelling sinful nature it's a real and present danger for each of us as Christians and Paul's encouragement here then in these verses I think is put it like this don't underestimate the strength of your enemy even as you're enjoying who you are in

Christ in Romans chapter 7 verse 17 to 13 Paul describes how indwelling sin or remaining sin works in us with such ease he starts off the section by saying well look here's the irony God's commands are good by virtue of being God's commands they've got to be good for one thing Paul says the goodness of God's commands is they actually expose our sin but says Paul the irony is our old rebellious distorted sinful nature can actually take God's command and twist them and manipulate them to bad effect in us that's what he's arguing he said something good can be actually used for bad effect in us as Christians and then he goes on to illustrate that so he says our sinful nature is opportunistic and what he means by that is it's never a spectator it's never on holiday it just waits for an unguarded moment and suddenly it rises up within us and it tricks us into doing something that we know jolly well is useless and without profit to us perhaps it's tricking us into going back to the tired old pathway to happiness and satisfaction that we had tried for years in our lives before we became

Christians and suddenly it appears appealing again where did that come from our old sinful nature is just opportunistic waiting to rise up and trick us our old sinful nature Paul says here actually provokes us to do the wrong thing we know this experience we might not recognize the language here but we know the experience you were praying you were praying and concentrating and enjoying the Lord in prayer and then suddenly you realize that somewhere along the line your focus has actually been shifted from God onto yourself how did that happen how did I move so far and not even realize it was happening your focus has now become your desire to build your own kingdom when you started off with a desire to see God's kingdom built all in the one prayer verse 10 our sinful nature says Paul even uses good things to ruin us now again we know the experience of that don't we so for instance we so often find that struggle we don't actually reject

[19 : 55] God's grace because we see the benefit of it far too much but what happens is that we at the same time remain convinced that our own religious actions and efforts in addition to God's grace will somehow or other make us more acceptable to God and make us feel better because we're contributing to our salvation see how our old sinful nature has just taken something good and made it so bad don't get rid of grace that's really important so we keep grace God says seek for obedience and we seek for obedience but we think it helps make us more acceptable to God the examples are endless and we know the pain of this experience don't we every single day we know the pain of this experience so with that understanding of the foundation the foundation is who we are in

Christ that's what we have to keep coming back to now we can step into the context of assurance and the context of assurance my friends is the struggle to live an undivided life for Christ a few years ago there was a documentary on TV I know most of you won't have watched it therefore because it's a documentary but it is I would recommend it instead of some of the other anyway a few years ago there was a documentary on TV called Struggle Street somebody remember it right okay so what it did was feature the voices and stories of people living in public housing areas in suburbs in western Sydney it was a very sad thing really created a lot of controversy but it was very sad because what it did was on the one hand expressing their hopes and aspirations just like the rest of them had their hopes and aspirations of a good life but their hopes and aspirations were constantly being thwarted by their context of unemployment and crime and substance abuse and the more you watched the more the gap opened up

Struggle Street well Paul says in these verses here chapter 7 verse 14 onwards welcome to Struggle Street the normal experience of Christians as our hopes and aspirations of serving and obeying Jesus are constantly thwarted by that opportunistic trick deceitful sinful nature that remains within us our aspirations of being true to who we are in Christ our aspirations of being intentional in choosing righteousness over sin our aspirations to demonstrate the mind of Christ in our everyday life these things are constantly being ambushed or if you like run off the road by opportunism of our indwelling nature the remnants of our old rebellious sinful nature or remaining sin will always try to get the upper hand in us on says

Paul therefore we must struggle to keep the mind of Christ now I want you to understand that Paul's focus here in these verses is not on how many times he gets it right as opposed to how many times he gets it wrong that's not his issue at all he's not a bean counter what he's interested in and what he's trying to establish here is what he calls a law or a principle verse 21 he describes the principle so I find it to be a law now what he means by that is not the law of God it's not the ten commandments it's just a principle is what the word means here I find it to be a principle that when I want to do right evil lies close at hand the principle is that Paul recognizes two realities simultaneously in his life as a Christian two combatants if you will which are who are at war within him on the one hand is what he calls his mind and the idea here is his renewed mind in Christ what he calls here his innermost being verse 22 his new desires the new desires of his heart for obedience and worship of God verse 18

Paul is really clear that it's his new mind his new desires which define him and which he wants to operate on and express what we heard in Philippians was the mind of Christ Paul has no illusions as to where he wants to be and how he wants to be but on the other hand he says here's the principle what he calls the law of his members that is his flesh in a different verse 18 and 25 the body of death verse 24 that is those are all descriptions of the old distorted sinful self remnants of that and they're in battle and four times in these verses Paul affirms his hopes and aspirations for obedience and faithfulness and pairs it each time with a very honest recognition of another reality pushing him to be quite the opposite of what he wants to be when I want to do right evil lies close at hand and

[26 : 28] I find it pushing me to do the very opposite of that thing I want to do the very thing I know defines me and there's the struggle he ends up doing that which he hates and which he knows makes a mockery of the gospel my friends if we're going to get the foundation and context of assurance right as we move into Romans 8 over the next few weeks we need to start by acknowledging that the struggle is real and endless and painful as repeatedly we find ourselves choosing to act contrary to who we know we are in Christ but in that struggle we're not alone remember actions are not always evidence of inclination actions are not always evidence of inclination

Paul admits to confusion and frustration he can sense it as he writes here he knows failure and expresses a strong sense of disappointment in himself he knows that all too often unguarded moments have allowed his old distorted sinful nature to get the upper hand in a particular decision or a particular situation or a particular circumstance but he also knows that his struggle and his failures do not define him that his actions at those points do not reflect his inclinations he knows he is defined by newness of Christ and the new inclination of his heart is to love and serve Jesus and to act in accordance with who he is in Jesus so my friends with Paul we need to learn to talk to ourselves in the struggle we need to say these sorts of things is it possible that while

I'm locked in struggle I'm actually engaged in the wrong struggle that is I'm still struggling to be good enough or to win acceptance before God well if that's where your struggle is then you need to say to yourself hey I need to remember as a Christian as one united with Christ I'm already completely accepted and loved and free I don't have to struggle for acceptance that would be a wrong struggle I need to struggle to express that newness life in my actions or perhaps you say to yourself well am I thinking that because I'm locked in struggle and the struggle is so painful and so unrelenting that perhaps I'm not really a mature believer at all well I need to tell myself then that as long as I live in this world I am new in

Christ but I'm not finally and perfectly free from sin so struggle in the meanwhile is actually a confirmation of my renewed mind and confirmation of the spirit's life within me because before I became a Christian there was no struggle there was nothing he struggled with I just enjoyed life as it was or perhaps you say to yourself well I'm a Christian and I'm actually a bit guilty a bit uncomfortable here because I know nothing of the struggle he's talking about this morning what struggle I consider myself a Christian but yeah I get that bit but what struggle well perhaps you're not thinking about sin probably perhaps you're only thinking about struggling against what we might call the big sins or the unrespectable sins adultery stealing and murdering murder and because you haven't done those things because you're not guilty of those things when there's nothing to struggle over perhaps you're not saying the need to struggle as a believer in how you use your time in how you use your money perhaps you're not struggling with the notion of maintaining purity in your thought life well because nobody sees that that's not really important and struggling perhaps to be like

Jesus if you're a parent or if you're a child or if you're a husband or if you're a wife or struggling to be like Jesus with your workmates or on the soccer field or wherever you find yourself or struggling to demonstrate the love and commitment to church and fellow believers that Christ wants me to have see sometimes we can find ourselves not struggling because we've so limited the parameters for struggle that we just we just talk ourselves out of it we need to be talking to ourselves and in the midst of struggle we need to be able to say with Paul I really do delight in the direction of God's word in my life I hate what I just did because it is so contrary to who I am in Christ with God's grace and enabling I will struggle to do it differently next time and friends most of all remember you're never alone in your struggle verse 24 and verse 25 so beautiful

[32 : 45] Paul expresses frustration I don't think it's despair it's certainly frustration but I don't think it's despair the way it's all put together here wretched man that I am I don't think it's a it's a mission of defeat at all it's a it's an expression of need not defeat wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death who will deliver me from this struggle thanks be to God through the Lord Jesus Christ you're never alone in the struggle with Paul express the cry of need and indeed the cry of confidence the tension and struggle will continue until Christ returns or we leave this world to go to be with him but in the meanwhile as we heard from Philippians in the last series he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion he will bring you through the struggle he will keep you safe in the struggle in the face of this endless struggle you can be confident that the Holy Spirit will hold you secure you can be confident of your acceptance and relationship with God in spite of your failures in the struggle why can you be confident because of the work of

Christ for you and in you in the past and into the future my friends don't despair in the struggle don't give up struggling don't think you can avoid the struggle but most of all be real in the struggle ask for the help of your brothers and sisters desire the help of your brothers and sisters look to the Lord with confidence and joy and hopefulness remember the mark of the Christian is not perfection this side of heaven but the struggle to express who we are in Christ let's pray Lord I know only too well the temptation just to give up the struggle it's all too hard

Lord even the thought that goes with that easier to walk away from from the Lord Jesus Christ than to continue this endless struggle Lord keep us from that I pray help us to talk to ourselves help us to bring us back to a clear and sure focus on you as the ground of our acceptance and the sureness of our completion in Jesus name I pray Amen