

New Life: The Wretched One

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[0 : 00] And you know that he was whipped and beaten and shipwrecked and all this other kind of stuff. But I don't know if you feel like me and ever wondered what he's like, what he's really like in real life, like personally.

Would he be like a cool kid, you know? Would he be cool to hang out with? Would he talk louder than everyone else? I kind of feel like he would talk quite loudly and sort of, I am Paul!

You know, and sort of, you know, talk in questions. You're probably wondering how I am. I will tell you. You know, who knows, but he's kind of intimidating.

I've got a big fan down here. He's kind of intimidating, eh? Because he's such a legend in the sense of being such a great guy and has such a profound effect on the Christian faith.

One of the great things about this passage is it brings him down to our sort of level. When you get it, we have this little snapshot into his inner life, into what he's actually thinking about.

[1 : 06] Like his heart stuff, as opposed to the head stuff, which he's very good at. And in verse 15 he says this, For I do not understand my own actions.

And it's very sad. It's very sad in a way, isn't it? And it's sad because I agree, like. He goes on and he says, For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I have a friend of mine who I really respect. He's a great guy.

He seems to have it all together. And I'm sort of jealous of him a bit. And I remember him confiding in me one time. And saying that the only time he ever cries is about the sin in his life.

About what a screw up he is. And the stuff that no one ever sees. And I remember thinking, Wow, man, you're just like me, you know. You're just like Paul. You're just like us.

[2 : 12] We live conflicted lives. We don't live up to God's expectations. We don't even live up to our own expectations. You know, we feel a bit lame. And it is sort of depressing.

But I want this to be an encouragement to you. You know, there is a conflict in our hearts. I'm not as good as I should be.

But I want you to know this is the normal Christian experience. This is very normal. You are not unusual. And I hope you know that.

Now that is not the whole point of the verses that we read. It is part of it. But it's not the whole point. So what we'll do is we'll go back and we'll have a crack at it.

It's in two major sections. The first section is about the relationship between the law and sin. And the second section is more kind of the heart stuff. So let's have a look at these, all right?

[3 : 09] So let's have a look at verse 7. Verse 7. The very first one. What shall we say that the law is sin by no means?

Because if Paul had what he'd been previously saying, I think he was a bit worried that people would think that, you know, the law is a bad thing. Now when I say the law, when the Bible talks about the law, what it's talking about is it's talking about God's commandments.

You know, his guidelines for how you should live your life. And Paul has been sort of trying to get us to understand the place of the law in our lives. And I think he is worried that we might think it's a bad thing.

And so he spends about five verses addressing that. And in the verses 7 to 12, he talks about three things. He says three things about the relationship between law, God's commandments, and sin.

Now when I say sin, what I'm talking about is our kind of inner rebellion. I know that sounds very dramatic. But that thing inside of it which says to God, don't tell me what to do.

[4 : 21] I want to do my own thing, okay? There's a relationship between these two things. And he talks about that for about five verses. So here are three things he says about that relationship,

okay?

So, the law is not bad. No, the law is not sin. But the law defines sin. If you look at the second part of verse 7, it says this.

It says this. Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet. If the law had not said, you shall not covet.

See, what he thought was normal behavior at some point in his life, he learned the law. Probably when he was 13, if he was a good Jewish lad. He learned the law. And he discovered, oh my goodness, this thing inside of him which says, I want what other people have all the time.

Oh, that's actually a sin. That's actually a bad thing. It's kind of like when I drive in America and I don't know what kind of road I'm on.

[5 : 20] In New Zealand, I'm very aware of speeds and stuff. But when I'm in America, like my wife is from the States and sometimes we visit her family in North Carolina. We might drive to the beach.

And to get to the beach, you've got to drive through all these like podunk towns, you know, and lots of stretches of road with nothing around. And sometimes I have to ask Amy, do you know what the speed limit is here?

I don't know what kind of road this is on. You know, I don't know what kind of road this is. Can I go 100? Is that okay? You know, not 100. Like 100 Ks. You know, can I go 100 Ks?

Is that okay? And then I see a sign that says, no, this is not the interstate. You know, this is like, you know, somebody's driveway or something. I don't know. You know, like this is, and so that sign says to me, no, what you're doing is a bit naughty.

Right? So the law does that to sin. The law defines what is right and wrong. So that's part of the relationship. But it's not the only part of the relationship.

[6 : 18] Okay? There's a second part to it. The law also condemns sin. This is sort of verses 9 to 11 here. Let's pick it up.

In 11. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. Verse 10 is actually really good as well. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

So Paul recognized not only that this sin was a sin, but it was also really bad. This is a very bad thing, Paul.

He realized that this way, this way he's heading on, this is the way of death. The third thing. Law. The law actually provokes sin. So this is kind of a really interesting one. It defines sin. It condemns sin. But in a really unusual way, it provokes sin.

[7 : 21] Verse 8. But sin, seizing opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. So we have this thing inside of us which says, God, I kind of want to do my own thing.

You know, you're cool. I'm cool. Let's just do our own thing. All right? Now, when we hear a law, when we understand God's commandments, there is something inside of it that says, no, I want to go against that.

It's like, and I think Jim talked about this a couple of weeks ago. It's like the sign that says, do not touch wet paint. You know, you kind of just, how wet is it?

Like, or freshly laid cement. Don't stand on it. You know, or like the thing that really gets me, that really stirs up my inner rebellion is the do not enter signs at airports.

What are they hiding? Like, what's there? I have these fantasies. Like, is it like where they keep the pastries or like candy or cool free stuff?

[8 : 30] Why don't they want me to go in there? How bad would it be? What if I just had a peek?

You know, that's just my inner rebellion. So knowing God's rules don't actually help us a lot to obey them.

In fact, all they do is kind of stir up a little bit of inner rebellion, I think. Now, Paul's big point, remember, is this. The law is not bad. It's actually a good thing.

But the sin, sin, our inner rebellion takes the law and kind of twists it a little bit, doesn't it? It makes things a bit worse. So, three things.

The law is not sin. It's not a bad thing. It defines sin. Condemns sin. It actually provokes sin. So the law is not bad.

The real problem is us, isn't it? It's us. Verse 13 to 25 unpack this more.

[9 : 36] And these, what are these, like 10 to 12 verses here, are profound. And heartbreaking and impacting.

Now, I have to begin with a little caveat here. There is a lot of debate about what these verses mean and who they are intended to be talking about.

So here is the essence of the debate, just so you are aware of it. And then I will tell you the right side of the debate to be on. Okay? So, some people say that these verses, it's all the stuff, you know, like I don't want to do what I'm supposed to do.

A wretched man am I, that kind of thing, right? Some people say, no, that must be Paul talking about the time before he was a Christian. And they say that because the language is so harsh. It's so full on. He says things like, I was captive to sin. And that's kind of a full on thing for a Christian to say. Wretched man that I am. That's a full on thing for a Christian to say.

[10 : 44] So, within the commentators and scholars that even we like here at St. John's, there is a huge divide. Some people say, it must be talking about before he was a Christian.

Others say, no, he's talking about his time as a Christian. His experience right now. Now, I believe that he's talking about his time as a Christian. And I say that for three reasons.

One, it's the plainest sense of the reading. Like when you read it, you sort of go, oh yeah. He's talking about what it's like to be a Christian now.

If you get really scholarly, you can sort of go the other way a little bit. The second thing is, it's written in the present tense. Up until this point, it was in the past tense.

It's written and now it's written in the present. When I say tense, I mean he's writing it like this is happening to me right now. Now, the people on the other side of the debate will say, oh, he's using present tense for rhetorical, sort of, as a rhetorical tool or something.

[11 : 46] But I don't buy it. And lastly, I say it because it just sounds like my experience of being a Christian. The things I want to do, I don't.

The things I shouldn't be doing, I do. Oh, wretched man that I am. Why can't I pull it together sometimes? Why can't I be a better husband?

Why do I get really angry with my wife sometimes over stupid, stupid things? I'm an ordained minister for goodness sake. You know, why can't I get it together?

This just sounds like what it's like to be a Christian sometimes. Excuse me. So what do we learn from these 12 passages, the second section?

I think there are four main things we learn. The first one is this. There is a conflict going on in our hearts. In all of our hearts.

[12 : 47] Verse 22. I delight in the law of God, my innermost being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Becoming a Christian doesn't make you stop doing bad things. All of a sudden. There is a daily struggle. I have a daily struggle with this stuff.

And I want you to know it is normal. It is completely normal. You are not unusual. And it's very important that you know this. And it's very important that you know you will be in Romans 7 the rest of your life.

This will be the rest of your life. Second. Second thing I get out of this. Be distressed by this.

Be distressed by this sin. A wretched man that I am, Paul says. It's normal. But don't make peace with it. Don't use it as an excuse to kind of like be crazy guy.

[13 : 56] Coming to church. Kicking old ladies. Being like, hey, this is just me, man. It's my journey, bro. Like, you know. I'm just keeping it real, you know. Like, I'm just a kicker.

It's what I do. No. No. Like, hate it. Hate it. It sucks. It stinks. It's terrible.

But, you know, it's not an excuse to kind of be lazy about this stuff. Paul's language in this, you read it. It is fighting language.

It's not surrendering language. You keep fighting sin in your life. Keep fighting it. And one of the ways you do that is the third point, I think. The third thing that jumps out at me about this passage. And that is don't hide it. Don't hide it. My point here is very simple. We are a family. And in a good family, there should be no hypocrisy.

[14 : 55] No lying. No posing. No pretending. Although I'm very aware that at St. John's, there are a lot of people who kind of live some pretty successful lives.

And have done well in lots of different areas. And St. John's is, it's a hard place for people who sense they are failures, I think.

Because some people tend to have it together, you know. However, scratch the surface a little bit, there's a lot going on in everyone's hearts.

So look at St. Paul. Take his lead. Paul. The Apostle Paul. Saint Paul. Paulus Uberalis. Just made that one up.

Paulus Uberalis, right? If Paul, one of the foremost Christian thinkers of our, of, of ever, of every time, of any time, if Paul can admit the stuff that was happening in his heart, a wretched man, if he can do that, and if he can admit it to the whole world for 2,000 years over and over again, you know, we can confide it in one or two friends.

[16:11] Who we can ask for help and prayer. My last point. This is not all there is to the Christian experience.

And this is the big point, I think. Let me, let me ask you a really important question. Where, what, what sustains you in this battle? I'm sure it is no surprise to you that you mess up, that you disappoint yourself.

What sustains you in this battle? And hopefully it's this. Hopefully it's this idea. That sin has a grip on you.

It does. It has a grip on you. But Christ has a grip on you as well. And his grip is eternal. He is not letting you go.

And no matter how bad things get for you, he will not let you go. And Paul's joy in this passage the exclamation in verse 24 and 25 is not based on his performance as a moral being, but in what he knows to be true about him and Christ.

[17:28] I'll say that again. His joy is not in his performance as a moral being, but in what he knows to be true about his relationship with Christ. And we see a hint of this earlier on the passage in verse 20.

It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. So Paul hints at this kind of shift in his heart where his identity actually lays.

The deepest part of him, the very deepest part of him wants to serve Christ. The deepest part of him wants to serve Christ. The deepest part of him belongs to Christ.

He knows he is Christ. He knows he is a child of God. He knows that he is loved. Even though he screws up, he knows he is loved. And that's the thing that defines him.

Not, oh wretched man am I. The thing that defines him that he knows Christ has him. That he is Christ's own. It raises the question, what does it look like to grow in Christ?

[18:39] What does it look like to grow as a Christian? Is it being nicer? Being more holier? Whatever that means? No. Growing in Christ is less about trying not to sin very much and more about abiding in Christ.

You should Google that at home. Google abiding in Christ. Look up those verses, abiding in Christ. it's not about getting your sin quotient down day by day. If that's your goal, it will kill you.

But growth in Christ is about our heart, our heart direction. Where we look for our ultimate hope. Where do you find your ultimate hope?

In your performance as a moral being? Or do you find it in the forgiveness of Christ? Let me finish with some math.

Unusually. In an unusual turn of events, I'm going to finish with some mathematics. If you have a fancy Bible program like Accordance, you can do very fancy biblical things.

[19:54] And one of the things you can do is you can see, you can group sentences together by the kind of sentences they are. Please stay with me here, okay?

In Romans, there are 62 imperative demands, which are things, which are like commandments saying, you need to do this, you need to do this.

There are 660 indicative statements, which are statements describing a state of being or something that is true. There are 62 imperative demands, 660 indicatives, meaning that 90% of Romans is not telling you what to do, is not telling you to be a better person.

90% of Romans is telling you something which is already the case, telling you something to believe in, telling you something to trust in, it's this, that if you come to Christ, say you're sorry, you belong to Him, you are forgiven, you are forgiven, and that all things will be made new one day, including you.

Amen. Amen.