**Paul's Letter to the Romans:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Chapter 7**

***The War Within Us***

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prooted from serene, polite Memphis, high school in suburban Chicago was my intro to living near a 24/7 hostile environment. Back in the '50s I was rocked by the blood and gore saturating Chicago's local news. I was in sports with kids from the inner city where life's courtesies were as rare as Geraldo's haircuts -- an in-your-face world like Jagger's "Street Fighting Man:"

"… the time is right for fighting in the street, boy. Hey! Said my name is called disturbance. I'll shout and scream, I'll kill the king..."

Rage is now pandemic. Author Ward Churchill calls for a "New Progressive Violence," contending that pacifism is sick, non-violence ineffective, that destruction, bangin' cops and "extreme measures" are needed to "abolish capitalism and expand the welfare state."

But, you say, Ward's just a wild-eyed anarchist, and humanity is basically civil. Really? Well, a guy who surely had his act together wrote Romans, but he says "not so," giving us all hope.

***An Eternal Message to the Eternal City***

As God's first envoy to the Gentiles, Paul, a Jew, writes to Christ's followers in the world's chief city in the winter of AD 57-58.

The fallout of Christ's life, death and resurrection thirty years earlier had blanketed the Roman world. People were transfixed by this God-come-to-earth, by His great love for all of us, His paying for every man's sin on the cross, and by God's forgiving us as a gift, received not by working for it, but merely by believing it by faith.

These Roman believers had only the Old Testament. So Paul wrote to explain this new way of being set right with -- and at peace with God, that it's not a reward for keeping Moses' Law, and not for sale.

***Romans chs. 1-6 in the Rear View Mirror***

In chs. 1-3 Paul says all mankind is sinful and condemned under God's judgment. God, who *is* love, *hates* sin. To satisfy His justice, He sent His Son Jesus from heaven to Palestine to take the death rap for *all* of us (Romans 3:24). Now God offers us forgiveness and right standing before Him, with our sin debt fully paid.

Chs. 2 and 3 say God's given each of us the moral technology to tell right from wrong, to know there must be a Creator (Romans 2:15).

Ch. 4 spotlights Jewish icons Abraham and David who were accepted by God based on their *faith*, not their *works* (Romans 4:3-6).

Ch. 5 states that Adam's sin ensures that every human has a "sinful nature" (Romans 5:12). Yet Christ died for all, and God is eager to confer on us the same standing in His sight that His Son Jesus has, making us His child, not by birth, but by adoption (Romans 5:1,8; John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 5:17)! Accepting God's free ticket to spend eternity with Him, we're forever forgiven, perfect in *God's* sight, due to His lavish, inexhaustible, good favor, or grace (Romans 5:9).

Ch. 6 shows the believer no longer under the Damocles sword of sin's penalty, but now plugged in to Christ, the Source of *all* life (Colossians 2:20, 3:3; Galatians 2:20). God's grace sets Christ's followers free *from* sin, and free not *to* sin. **Let's backtrack a bit to get a running start by reading Romans 6:15-23 (p. 840).**

Set against 5 and 6, ch. 7 seems starkly out of place. Here's the apostle Paul, miraculously yanked by God from his personal jihad against Christ's followers, promoted to God's clean-up hitter. But now this spiritual giant 'fesses up to being "*wretched*" -- meaning "bearing a callous" from self-efforts to live a godly, sinless life.

Americans want *everything now* That's why MacDonald's opened in 1955…and Swanson's rolled out the first frozen TV dinner in '52. Even Paul wanted microwave spiritual maturity … but getting it is no slam-dunk. **Let's read Romans 7:1-25 (p. 840).**

***Out From Under the Law***

***Romans 7:1-6***

In ch. 6 Paul compares one's relationship to sin and to Christ as being a "slave" to one or the other. In appealing to his readers who are well aware of the law, be it Moses' or Rome's, he now uses the marriage metaphor, referring to civil law. He says when your spouse dies, you're legally released, and free to remarry.

The point: once believers *were* ruled by our old, self-centered sin nature, inherited from Adam. But when Christ died, taking our sins to His grave, we were released from Adam to, by faith, make Christ the center of our life (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Moses' Law, given by God to the Jews 1,500 years earlier, was also the only portal through which Gentiles had been able to approach God (Romans 2:14). Under the Law one's relationship to God was conditional for it demands, "You *must* be *perfect*!" Unbelievers ("controlled by the sinful nature") and believers ("released from the Law") are powerless to fully obey the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:28). Who even *knows* 'em! Their black-and-whiteness rankles us.

In God's eyes the unbeliever can not produce *good* fruit (Titus 3:5). We're talkin' "*perfect* good*"* -- the kind seen only twice on earth -- at Creation, and in Christ (Genesis 1:31). God's deal is that the only fruitful life is *the life of Christ in us* (John 15:5)! Only He can help us overcome the downward drag of our sinful nature, empowering us to love and forgive, to be patient, kind, etc. (Galatians 5:22, 23).

***Sin, Up Close and Personal***

***Romans 7:7-8***

Paul now describes his (and every honest believer's) battle with *deliverance* from sin, not *pardon* from it. It's not about *committing* sins, but about our "sin nature" which dogs us 'til we get to heaven.

Having talked about being made *dead* to the Law, Paul's readers might ask, "Then isn't the Law itself sin?" Well, are speeding tickets the one who screwed up just because we were speeding?

God's Law serves three purposes: (1) it defines right and wrong. (2) When the Law tells us that something, like coveting, is a sin, we naturally want to do it (Romans 5:20). That response in us proves that we still have a sin nature to deal with. And (3) the Law exposes the *cause* of our wrongdoing: it's *not* the Law; nor the Holy Spirit in us; it's our old sin nature. Here's the evidence: we do what we *don't* really want to do, and *don't* do what we really *want* to. Every believer who gets real knows that this civil war is raging inside.

***Wearing Our Dirty Laundry***

***Romans 7:9-13***

As a self-righteous Pharisee and enemy of Christ, Saul (as Paul was known then) prided himself on keeping the Law (Mark 7:3, 4). Deluded by his religious zeal, seeking to please God, he set out to slaughter Christ's followers. He was religious, sincere, but wrong.

The Law is good then, exposing our sin and underlining our need for the Holy Spirit to help us live as we *want* to and *should*.

Having dealt with the Law's purpose for unbelievers, Paul now turns to the believer's ongoing battle with that filthy sin nature of ours that wants to steal our joy, and divert our attention away from what God says is true of us. Christ will be Himself *in us*, and what He is, let's face it, is perfectly acceptable to His Father!

***Getting My "Wanter" and My "Doer" In Sync***

***Romans 7:14-20***

Why do believers still struggle with sin? It's because we need supernatural help to live a godly life. We read good, hopeful, encouraging stuff in the Bible. We pray, maybe even hear some great, inspiring sermons. We resolve to do better, but try as we might, we still sin. Paul says as long as we're in this earthsuit, sin'll be nippin' at our heels. It's like wearing your new NIKEs in the barnyard. Gunk is gonna stick. And stink. So we need God's Holy Spirit to help us live God's way.

Paul is baffled and bummed about his tug o' war. But this is *good* since we must face our do-it-yourself inability before we'll let God's Spirit control our thoughts and deeds (Zechariah 4:6).

*How* to live a Christ-centered life is no secret. Paul gave us the three keys in ch. 6: (1) Know what God did for *you* and *to* your sin nature when Christ died and rose again. (2) Keep focusing on that as your life's power source. (3) Rely on God's Holy Spirit within you to help you do and think what you *know* is right. Living this way is sometimes called "walking in the Spirit" (Matthew 14:28-30).

Along this "walk" we stumble over things like our reluctance to call our sin sin. Instead of "lying," we say we "exaggerate." Instead of "lusting," we're "appreciating God's creation."

Hard as we try to *be* spiritual, we continue to screw up. So we question our faith. "Gee, am I really a Christian? This can't be how true believers operate."

Paul says as long as we're in these mortal bodies, our *old* sin nature will always have a home in us. We can't make it "good" any more than our *new* nature can be made "sinful!" Face it, we're two persons in one! Per ch. 6, we're "dead to sin" but "alive to Christ."

What a mess -- our *new* self can't make our *old* self clean. We love God and in our new, Holy Spirit-powered minds we *want* to do right, but our sin nature won't vacate the premises. Whassup with that?

***Living the Christian Life Ain't Difficult;***

***It's Impossible!***

***Romans 7:21-25***

Believers must understand that this war with our old self will never end as long as we're on this earth. If we don't stop beating ourselves up for failing, we're in for tons of guilt and depression. If you fight alone, you lose. That leads to feeling "wretched." That word describes being bone-tired after hard labor. Is there no way out, no relief, no escaping the ravages of sin in my life?

Here's Paul's model: (1) Admit you just don't understand (Romans 7:15). (2) Admit and expect failure, but don't quit (Romans 7:19). (3) Admit you're unable to live the Christian life without God's help (Romans 7:18, 24).

Paul's key to victorious Christian living is not finding some "guru from God," not the right church, not cleaning up your act. No, it's simply…..*in Christ*. When believers get to heaven, God will give us new bodies -- disease-free, aging-free, sin-free heaven-suits.

We'll be freed from our "body of death" *then*. But what about handling life's challenges *now*? Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the closing verses of ch. 7 in THE MESSAGE:

"I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. "

The solution for Paul, and for us, is in the first two verses of ch. 8:

"With the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud (of guilt). A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death."

***How Can I Get Summa Dat?***

In ch. 7 Paul has covered the waterfront of life -- from living outside of Christ, lost in sin, bound ultimately for a tortured eternity of living apart from God, in a place the Bible calls hell -- to the daily war believers wage practicing "Do It Yourself Christianity." Neither way of life works. The only solution is to walk in the Spirit, relying on God alone to help you to learn and live *His* way. That's Job One for the Holy Spirit, and it won't work if we try to muscle in.

Are you ready to hand God the wheel so that He can give you power over sin your life both now and for eternity? Then just tell Him ….

"God, I admit I'm a sinner. I believe You're the only true God, and that You love me, even in my sinful state. Right now I draw upon all the faith that You can give me to agree that Your Son Jesus Christ died to pay for all my sins, and that by His act of sacrifice You have forgiven me for now and forever. I humbly and gratefully accept Your undeserved gift of love. I'm ready to start living Your way. Thank You, Father. And thank You, Jesus. Amen."

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