

GOD'S DECISIVE ACT — "CONDEMNED SIN IN THE FLESH" (ROM. 8:1-4) — #2

By Walton Weaver

In this part of Romans 8:3 we have come upon God's remedy for the very thing the law proved unable to do. We will find the answer to the meaning of this expression by answering the question, what was the law unable to do, and why could it not do it? The answer lies in the problem Paul has been discussing in the previous chapter. In the Greek text the expression "it was weak through the flesh" is immediately preceded by the words *en hoi*, which mean "in that," or "in which," and, as E. H. Gifford says, "It points to that *in which* the inability of the law consists, namely in its being overpowered by the opposition of '*the flesh*' (vii.14-18)."

This is the reason why the law could not accomplish its work, and why God acted so decisively in the sending of his Son and robbed sin of its dominion in the flesh. By sending Christ into the world, He has delivered us from the power which sin had up to that point exerted "through the flesh." Had it not been for this decisive act on His part, it could not be said that we are no longer overpowered by the opposition of 'the flesh. But now the power of sin through the flesh has been broken because through God's decisive act this usurper and tyrant has been "condemned . . . in the flesh."

Someone may say, "But 'the flesh' in this statement is Christ's flesh." Are you sure? If it means Christ's flesh, why did Paul not say "His flesh" instead of using the definite article with the word flesh? Is it not best to give the same meaning to these terms at this place that Paul has given to them in his previous discussion, and in the succeeding verses, since he does not say "His flesh"? I believe Paul speaks of flesh in general, not Christ's flesh, in this expression. Sin working through our flesh is the very thing Paul has been dealing with in the whole line of his discussion, and a thing the law could not overpower. God condemned sin in our flesh by *expiating* sin, but we would also add, as the context would demand, by this very act He also has removed the power of sin in the flesh. As James Denney suggests,

We cannot . . . set the end against the means; the Apostle's doctrine is that the power of sin cannot be broken *except by expiating it*, and that is the very thing he teaches here . . . God's condemnation of sin is expressed in His sending His Son in our nature, and in such a connection with sin that He died for it — i.e., took its condemnation upon Himself. Christ's death exhibits God's condemnation of sin in the flesh. [In the flesh] is to be construed with [condemned]: the flesh — that in which sin had reigned — was also that in which God's condemnation of sin was executed.

Does Paul have in mind Christ's sinless life in this passage? I am not convinced that he does. This subject is often brought into discussions of this part of the verse. I tend to agree with Denney again on this point:

It is sometimes interpreted as if Christ were the subject: 'Christ by His sinless life in our nature condemned sin in that nature,' i.e., showed that it was not inevitable, and in so doing gave us hope; and this sense of 'condemned' is supported by reference to Mt. xii.41f. But the true argument (especially according to the analogy of that passage) would rather be, 'Christ by His sinless life in our nature condemned our sinful lives, and left us inexcusable and without hope.' The truth is, we get on a wrong track if we ignore the force of [concerning sin], or fail to see that God, not Christ, is the subject of [condemned] . . . Paul does not mean that by His sinless life in our nature Christ had broken the power of sin at one point for the human race; he means that in the death of His own Son, who had come in our nature to make atonement for sin, God had pronounced the doom of sin, and brought its claims and its authority over man to an end. This is the only interpretation which does not introduce elements quite alien to the Apostle's mode of thought.

It is definitely a misuse of Paul's statement here to infer that because Christ lived a sinless life (a subject that is not even for certain in this passage) all the rest of us have the ability to do the same! Nor is there any proof that "condemned sin in the flesh" means that "Christ's life convicts man as fully culpable," as one brother worded it. I agree with Sandy and Headlam that

the parallel passage, vi.6-11, shows that this summary condemnation of Sin takes place in the Death of Christ, and not in His Life; so that [condemned] cannot be adequately explained either by the proof which Christ's Incarnation gave that human nature *might* be sinless, or by the contrast of His sinlessness with man's sin.

Paul has had a good bit to say about the place of Christ's death and my life in relation to sin, both as an alien sinner and as a Christian, up to this point in the book of Romans, but he has not, and there is no proof that he does this here in this verse, attempted to show that His "life convicts man as fully culpable," as some have interpreted it. The point has been that our identification with Christ's *death* is God's answer to the sin problem.

This is true of initial justification, as well as of the continuance of justification, or practical Christian living. For the Christian, victory over sin is through identification with Christ's death, i.e., we have died to sin by being baptized into Christ's death, and into our own death to sin (Rom. 6:1-11). Christ Himself "died to sin" (Rom. 6:10). Not of course in the same sense that we die to sin, for He had no sin. He died to sin in that "by . . . [His] death . . . upon the Cross, a death endured in His human nature, He once and forever broke off all contact with Sin, which could only touch Him through that nature" (Sandy and Headlam). We have "died to sin" because "One died for all, then all died; and He died for

all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

Death to sin (or the flesh, for that matter, since this is the most common way of speaking of the medium through which sin works) is through crucifixion, and this death is a death with Christ. Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Following our death to sin we are identified with Christ's resurrected life (not His perfect life on earth), knowing that we shall live with Him (Rom. 5:10). For this reason we are no longer to serve sin, but are to walk in newness of life. We were saved from God's wrath by Christ's death, and we shall be saved by His life from the dead (Rom. 5:6-9); we now live unto Him who died for us and rose again (2 Cor. 5:15). This is not to give Christ's perfect life an unimportant place in God's plan of redemption, it is simply to remind us that we were not condemned because of Christ's perfect life, and neither are we made blameworthy for that reason now. We are culpable because of the sins of our own choosing. Sin is a transgression of the law (1 Jno. 3:4).

It is true that sin in the flesh is an unnatural and usurping tyrant. I agree with the statement that "*sin has no inherent claim to the body*. God prepared neither Jesus nor us a body which compels sin." Jesus' perfect life is a demonstration of this truth. But this does not say that Jesus "condemned" sin *by his perfect life*. There is both a penal condemnation of sin and a condemnation of the power of sin in Christ's *death*, but there is no indication in Scripture that either of these was meant to be accomplished by His sinless life. Sin was overpowered or destroyed in the same way death, and him who has the power of death, the devil, was destroyed---"through death" (Heb. 2:14). Death having been destroyed He now gives "release to those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:15). It was in His *death* that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us . . ." (Gal. 3:13), and it is in our being united with Him in His *death* that we continue in that state of justification (Rom. 6:3-8). God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21), and it is because we are "in Christ Jesus" (united with Him in His *death* to sin, Rom. 6:10) that sin has been condemned in the flesh, and the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us (Rom. 8:3-4).

The Requirement of The Law Fulfilled in Us

In the sending of His own Son God accomplished in us what the law demanded, but had in fact been unable to produce. The law demanded complete, willing obedience, but it had failed to produce this because of the weakness of the flesh. Since none had been able to meet the requirement of the law, and all alike stood condemned, and were under God's wrath because of sin, something had to be done. So God did what He had planned to do all along; He sent His Son, and by His death on the cross He condemned sin by taking our sins upon Himself, and in the very same act dealt a death blow to the very power that had held men

captive and in bondage. In His death He condemned sin "in the flesh," the very medium where it had worked so successfully to bring man under condemnation.

This death was the death of "the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18). He "bore our sins in His own body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, by His wounds you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). This is how Paul completes the thought in Romans 8:3 as he moves on into verse four: "in order that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." The first words in this verse, "in order that," show that this statement is to be understood as the reason God had for sending His Son and condemning sin in the flesh.

But what does "requirement of the law" (NASB) mean? The KJV has "righteousness of the law," and there has been much discussion on the meaning of this term here. The term "requirement" represents one view. If this is what Paul means by the word "righteousness" the meaning would be that the "righteous demands of the law" be fulfilled in us, or that the right conduct corresponding to the law's demand be fulfilled in us. This would be equal to the righteousness which satisfies the law's demand. Of course, none of us has done this because of the weakness of the flesh, as Paul has demonstrated in chapter seven. And for the same reason, none of us ever will accomplish what the law demands. But God has provided a way by which this very thing may be done *in* us. R. L. Whiteside summarizes this point in the following statement:

under the law, the righteousness of the law could be fulfilled only by perfect obedience. In such obedience there would have been no sin — God would have had nothing against one who so lived. Now, it is the mission of the gospel to take sinners and make them righteous. When a person's sins are forgiven he is freed from all guilt, and is then as righteous as if he had never sinned. There is then no guilt attached to him — God has nothing against him. And so the thing that the law required, but could not accomplish, is fulfilled in those who obey the gospel. . . The gospel, in freeing us from sin and making us righteous, accomplished in us exactly what the law was unable to accomplish, but what it would have accomplished in us had there been no transgression of it.

This part of verse four, according to Whiteside, is speaking of justification. The point made in this quote is a valid and important point. But I am not sure that when Paul speaks of justification he thinks of it in a vacuum. There is a continuance in justification, and sometimes Paul weaves the two so closely together that we would do an injustice to him to attempt to minutely dissect them. Is not what we find here equally true of continuance in justification, and does not Paul include this in his statement? The second half of verse four says, "who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit" (our versions give

a capital letter for "spirit," but the Holy Spirit does not seem to be meant here; the opposite of "flesh" is "spirit"). This is a statement of fact. No "if" is attached to it — we do not walk according to the flesh. By Christ's expiating work on the cross not only has provision for forgiveness been introduced, but the power of sin over the flesh has been broken. There is a new regulating principle now, a new life-principle, "a newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Now we walk in that "newness," we do not "walk after the flesh" — sin has been condemned in the flesh!

We are not enabled by this new life-principle to live totally free of sin, but of course under the system of grace where forgiveness is available, such as that which Christ has brought, sinless perfection is no longer a requirement. That would be necessary only where one attempted to attain a righteousness of his own. This was not the meaning of verse two, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." But those who are "in Christ Jesus," who are united with Him in His death, who are rooted and grounded in Him, and continue to abide (settle down, take permanent residence) in Him — these people "do not walk according to the flesh." The requirement of the law (full and willing obedience, even though not perfect obedience) is fulfilled in them; they walk according to the spirit, or keep their mind set on doing those things that are in their spiritual interest.

Because of Christ's death, and our identification with Him in that death, sin no longer overpowers us through the flesh, yet we are not altogether free from its power. Lard defined "law of sin and death" in verse two as "whatever law we may happen to be living under," and said "it becomes the law of sin so soon as it is broken, and by that act." He said it "can not be the law of sin, which is in our members . . . vii.23; for, from that law, we have never been freed, at least not wholly; nor shall we be to death." I dissent with him on his view that the "law of sin and death" is any law we happen to live under, but I can appreciate his understanding that we never have been, nor shall we ever be, *wholly* freed from the power of sin in our members. Paul, I think, is saying that we have been freed from sin's *control*; sin is no longer the usurper and tyrant it once was in our lives.