

IN RESPONSE - ALTHOUGH SIN REMAINS....

by Dennis Prutow

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Professor John Murray makes a tremendous point regarding the Christian life in his wonderful little book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

There must be a constant and increasing appreciation that though sin still remains it does not have the mastery. There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin.... It is one thing for sin to live in us; it is quite another for us to live in sin. It is one thing for the enemy to occupy the capital; it is another for the defeated hosts to harass the garrisons of the kingdom. It is of paramount concern for the Christian and for the interests of his sanctification that he should know that sin does not have the dominion over him, that the forces of redeeming, regenerative, and sanctifying grace have been brought to bear upon him in that which is central in his moral and spiritual being, that he is the habitation of God through the Spirit, and that Christ has been formed in him.... This is equivalent to saying that he must reckon himself to be dead indeed to sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ his Lord.¹

We need to grasp two significant points. First, because *sin remains*, the Christian life is a real battle and struggle. Second, because *sin no longer reigns*, we are on the winning side.

Sin remains and we are engaged in a bitter battle with this enemy of the soul. The Christian life is a fight and struggle. One of the primary criticisms of the position I take on Romans 7:14-25 is that I must not think the battle with sin persists. Not so. Sin remains. Paul uses athletics to describe the Christian struggle with sin.

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as

not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

The games are the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics, held every three years in Corinth. Those competing in the games strive for mastery. The word in the original language stands behind our word *agonize*. This is an agonizing toward the goal of victory.

Self-control plays a part. Those who work to gain the victory in running, jumping, throwing, wrestling, boxing, and in a variety of team sports exercise self-control. The discipline of training is rigorous. Those who discipline themselves to become champions train long hours, eat and sleep on schedule and have precious little time for anything else.

The Christian life is similar. Disciples learn discipline in the school of Christ. As Paul exhorts, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). The word discipline here stands behind our word *gymnastics*. Gymnasts live in the gymnasium. They practice exercises and routines hour after hour in order to perfect two or three minute routines for competition. Sprinters devote years of training to participate in Olympic races lasting less than ten seconds.

Paul says the Christian life is like this. It is like a marathon which strains every element of your physical, mental and spiritual being. It is like a fifteen round heavyweight boxing match for the ultimate title, the victor's crown of life.

Paul describes the agony. "I discipline my body and make it my slave." The American Standard Version of 1901 says, "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage." The picture is from boxing. Literally Paul says, *I give myself a black eye*. I treat myself severely. Why? I am so rigid with myself to bring this sinful flesh of mine into subjection. "I discipline my body and make it my slave." Paul

refuses to be bound and enslaved by bodily desires, lusts and passions.²

As an aside, but an important one, notice this is quite the opposite of what Paul says in Romans 7:23. "I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members." The point in Romans 7:23 is the realization Paul is bound and captive to sin. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul refuses to be bound by sin.

In 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul exercises extreme measures to bring his body into slavery to the law of God. The struggle is intense. Much discipline is required. Few Christians exercise the effort and discipline Paul describes. C. S. Lewis makes an interesting observation along this line. "Only those who try to resist a temptation know how strong it is."³ It is only when you push through a temptation all the way that you really see its strength, your strength and the strength of the grace of God. This is Paul's point.

Why all the struggle? Why all the training and discipline? Paul gives two reasons. On the positive side, there is an imperishable crown awaiting those who fight the good fight of faith. The rewards are great. If we struggle for earthly rewards, why not the heavenly?

On the negative side, Paul does not want to be disqualified from the race and fail in the end. He does not want to face final rejection and fail to gain the reward. In the end He wants to be able to say,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

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² Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 140.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), p. 124.

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 145-146.

IN RESPONSE - SIN NO LONGER REIGNS

by Dennis Prutow

Regarding Christians, John Murray asserts, “[T]hough sin still remains it does not have the mastery.”¹ Because *sin remains*, struggle and combat with sin continues in the Christian life. Because *sin no longer reigns*, the process of sanctification is possible. In the last lesson we looked at the struggle. Now we look at the overthrow of the reign of sin. Here is Paul’s argument in Romans 6:5-7

For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.

In view of the Christian’s union with Christ, we may affirm beyond doubt that the old man is crucified. The Christian is untied to Christ *in His death*.

“Our old self” is the old self or ego, the unregenerate man in his entirety in contrast with the new man as the regenerate man in his entirety. It is a mistake to think of the believer as both the old man and the new man or as having in him both the old man and the new man, the later in view of regeneration and the former because of remaining corruption. That this is not Paul’s concept is made apparent here by the fact that the “old man” is represented as having been crucified with Christ and the tense indicates a once-for-all definitive act after the pattern of Christ. The “old man” can no more be regarded as in the process of being crucified than Christ in his sphere could be thus regarded.²

The old self is the sinful self with its propensity toward sin (Genesis 6:5), its disposition opposed to God (Romans 8:5), and its inveterate hostility toward God (Romans 8:7). In the Christian, the old

man is dead, crucified with Christ. Why is this so important to grasp?

Let’s talk about the meaning of “the body of sin.” “The expression, ‘the body of sin’ would mean the body as conditioned and controlled by sin, the sinful body.”³ This would be the body habituated by sin. This would include addiction on both the physical and psychological levels. Addiction and habituation involve both.

What is the point? If the sinful disposition, the old man, is crucified, dead, the rule and reign of sin is broken. Rehabilitation is possible. The situation for the believer is as Murray describes.

The body that is his now is one conditioned and controlled by what has come to be the ruling principle of the believer in his totality, namely “obedience unto righteousness” (vs 16). In this verse [Romans 6:6] the destruction of the body of sin is stated to be the purpose of the crucifixion of the old man....⁴

So the old man, the sinful disposition, is done away in order to make obedience to righteousness possible. Thus the body of sin may be progressively removed. Our union with Christ accomplishes this two-fold work for the specific reason given at the end of verse 6, “so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” Slavery to sin is broken by union with Christ.

The definitive cleavage with sin, which is the fundamental premise of this chapter, is here defined in terms of deliverance from bondservice to sin which characterized the pre-Christian state.⁵

Paul then gives the fundamental reason for the radical change brought about by union with Christ. “For he who has died is freed from sin” (Romans 6:7). What is this freedom? It is not that sin no longer resides in the believer. The freedom to which Paul refers is freedom from the rule and reign of sin. *Although sin remains, it no longer reigns*. The freedom is a freedom from the ruling power of sin. With regard to verse 7, Murray says,

“[T]he context deals with deliverance from the power of sin....” Verse 7 itself speaks of “[t]he decisive breach with the reigning power of sin.”⁶

Because the ruling power of sin has been broken in the believer, sanctification, real change is possible in the believer. Believers can leave behind bad habits and form new good habits.

Again, as an aside, the problem to which Paul comes and which he explains, by way of personal testimony, in Romans 7:14 and 23 is quite the opposite.

I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.... I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

The Christian has a new freedom. The rule and reign of sin is broken. Change is feasible. Rehabilitation may come hard but it really is possible. You can follow the exhortation of Paul in Romans 6:19

Just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.

While ruled by sin you presented your hands, feet, eyes, ears, mouth and mind to lawless deeds. Practice makes perfect. You were very practiced. Sinful habits produced further sin and lawlessness.

In the same way, since the rule of sin is broken, since the old man is crucified, rehabilitate that body of sin. Do so by practicing righteousness. Use your hands, feet, eyes, ears, mouth and mind to do the things God desires. By God’s grace, when you practice righteousness, and form new habits which glorify God, the result is sanctification.

Is breaking sinful habits and forming godly habits tough? Absolutely! Will you fail at times? Undoubtedly! Is progressive change possible? Yes! Why? *Although sin remains, it no longer reigns*.

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¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 145.

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 219-220.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

IN RESPONSE - PAUL'S CONVERSION, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

Scripture devotes more space to the conversion of the apostle Paul than any other subject outside of the passion of Christ. For this reason alone, Paul's conversion to faith merits study. The space Scripture gives to the conversion of Paul also suggests this conversion is a pattern to which we should look in understanding the conversion experience in general.

When we speak of Paul's conversion, we look at the Damascus road experience. He was converted on that road, we say without hesitation. I suggest actual conversion took place three days later. The conversion came through the instrumentality of a disciple, Ananias, who spoke to Paul. Let's examine all this.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

Paul is an unbelieving murderer. As a Pharisee, he knows the Bible quite well. He says of his life and training, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today" (Acts 22:3). Paul also knows many of the facts about Christ including the story of the resurrection. He rejects it all and desires to eradicate the Christian sect. He travels to Damascus under the auspices of the high priest.

I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities (Acts 26:9-11).

Of this point in his life Paul says, "I was once alive apart from the Law (Romans 7:9). Paul was jealous for his relig-

ion and was alive to Judaism as few other Pharisees were. He was convinced he was doing God a favor by killing Christians. Paul was free to furiously torture those opposed to him.

And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus (Acts 9:3-8).

The drama of this scene cannot be overstated. Christ reveals Himself to Paul. There is no doubt Paul hears an articulate voice, the voice of Christ. It is likely the others heard only a sound. Acts 22:9 says, "And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me." Paul and his company fell to the ground. The Authorized Version adds that Paul was "trembling and astonished" (Acts 9:6). What does the voice say? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4).

Paul cries out for an explanation. "Who are You, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). The answer is startling. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). It is Jesus. It is the One whom the Christians say is alive though crucified. Paul had spurned the doctrines, hated the perpetrators of them, and despised the Christ they represented. Now Paul hears the very voice of Jesus. Is He actually alive as his followers proclaim? This question suddenly pierces Paul's heart and soul.

Christ fires gospel arrows into the hearts of His enemies. Surely Paul is an enemy of King Jesus. Surely Paul feels the pierce of the arrows coming from the bow of Christ. "Your arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under You; Your arrows

are in the heart of the King's enemies" (Psalm 45:5).

Light like that of a hundred suns blinds Paul. He cannot see. All is darkness. All Paul understood as truth is now brought into question and doubt. The man who was convinced He was on the path to heaven based on his own righteousness is now blind. Was he always wrong although convinced he was right? This is a frightening prospect. Nothing, absolutely nothing is left.

Shaken and blind, Paul is led off to Damascus. He began the journey as a self confident, proud, Pharisee on a mission for God. He completes his journey as a devastated humiliated blind man. Hear again Paul's own words in Romans 7:9. "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died."

And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight" (Acts 9:9-11).

What did Paul do during those three days? "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.... [H]e is praying." You can well imagine Paul fasting and praying. He was not celebrating his victory over the sect of the Christians and their leader. To the contrary, meeting the person he believed dead, Paul agonized.

I cannot help but think there was the greatest of turmoil and anguish of soul. Paul thought he had it all put together. He thought he was certainly on the path to heaven. Now he realizes he is all wrong. He realizes he is not on the path to heaven but that he is doomed. The road he is on leads to hell.

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IN RESPONSE - PAUL'S CONVERSION, PART TWO

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How could Paul be so blind? How could he be so mistaken? Paul must have agonized over this. Did he think of Psalm 45 which speaks of the coming of the Messiah and of that Messiah slaying His enemies? Did he contemplate Psalm 110:1-3 which also speaks of Messiah? Was Jesus the Messiah of God? Was He exercising His rule from heaven? For three days Paul was on his face before God in prayer wrestling with Scripture.

For three days Paul sought the face of God concerning all his past life and this encounter with the living Christ. For three days Paul agonized over his sins. Christ lived. Paul was a murderer, a violator of God's commandments. Paul thought, beyond doubt, he was righteous. Now the truth came crashing home. He was not righteous. He was a sinner. He was a dead man. "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died" (Romans 7:9).

The commandment that came home to Paul was the Tenth Commandment. "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7). The word translated *covet* is the word *lust*. You shall not lust! Paul was full of lust for his own program. He coveted the eradication of Christianity. He would do everything in his power to achieve that goal. Now he sees his sin. "When the commandment came" in the power of the Holy Spirit, convicting Paul of sin and righteousness and judgment, Paul was devastated. "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died" (Romans 7:9). The three days of blindness were three days of spiritual darkness. These were three days in which Paul had to reevaluate his life in total. If Jesus was alive, He was the Christ of God and Paul was the chief of sinners. Enter Ananias. Acts 9:10-19.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at

the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." . . . So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.

Ananias reiterated the commission Christ had for Paul. See Acts 22:14-15. Then he made this astounding statement, "And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16). Here was the need of the moment. The very Christ whom Paul had despised was the One upon whom he had to call to receive forgiveness and imputed righteousness. Why do you delay, Paul?

We hear the echo of those wonderful words later penned by the apostle in Romans 10:13, "Whoever will call upon the Name of the Lord will be saved." Paul knew those words spoken by the prophet Joel so well. Now he knew Jesus Christ was that Lord. He realized "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Paul called on the Lord Jesus. Paul was also baptized. He became a vital part of the body of Christ, the very body he determined to eradicate. This was his conversion. It came after Christ smote him, after three days of turmoil and darkness, after hearing wonderful words from Ananias, "Brother Saul, receive your sight!" (Acts 22:13). At that moment everything made sense. Why do you delay, Paul? He waited no longer. He called upon Christ.

In the three days of darkness preceding his conversion, Paul was under deep conviction by the Spirit. George Whitefield gives this description of Paul's trial.

[W]ho can tell what horrors of conscience, what convulsions of soul, what deep and pungent convictions of sin he underwent during these three long days? It was this that took away his appetite, (for who can eat or drink when under a sense of the wrath of God for sin?) and, being to be greatly employed hereafter, he must be greatly humbled now; therefore the Lord leaves him three days groaning under the spirit of bondage, and buffeted, no doubt, with fiery darts of the devil, that, being tempted like unto his brethren, he might be able hereafter, to succor those that were tempted. Had Saul applied to any of the blind guides of the Jewish church under these circumstances; they would have said he was mad, or going beside himself; as many carnal teachers and blind Pharisees now deal with, and so more and more, distress poor souls laboring under awakening convictions of their damnable state.... [By comparison] it seems, that before these three days, Saul never prayed in his life: and why? Because before these three days, he never felt himself a condemned creature; he was alive in his own opinion, because without a knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the law; he felt not a want of, and therefore, before now, cried not after Jesus, and consequently, though he might have said, or made a prayer, as many Pharisees do in these days, he never uttered a prayer; but now behold! he prayed indeed....¹

If this is the conversion of Paul, does he describe his three days of darkness, does he give us any of the details? Yes he does. Paul delineates his struggle, his recognition of bondage and helplessness and his final cry for deliverance in Romans 7:14-25. Read all of Romans 7 with this interpretation in view.

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¹ George Whitefield, "Saul's Conversion," *George Whitefield's Sermons* (New Ipswich, NH: Pietan Publications, 1991), vol. 1, pp. 176-178.