

1 | *evil at my elbow*

*God strengthen me to bear myself;
That heaviest weight of all to bear,
Inalienable weight of care.*

—Christina Rossetti

I Feel the Same Way Too

All I wanted to do was surprise my wife.

Since we had moved into our new house almost a year ago, the refrigerator door handle had been on the wrong side. I had put off moving it because of my clumsiness with mechanical things. But on this Thursday afternoon while my wife was at work, I was set to redeem myself and right the wrong.

I was halfway through the job. I had the refrigerator and freezer doors off and wanted to get them back on soon so nothing would spoil. I was at the pivotal step of swapping the hinges from the right side of the refrigerator to the left, when I realized that each hinge was fastened by two torx screws. Two lousy torx screws. There is only one tool in the universe that can (safely) remove a torx screw: a torx socket.

I didn't have a torx socket.

Right then my three boys decided to move their Traveling Sibling Rivalry Show into the middle of my angst. I lost it. I let them have it, though they didn't deserve it. They stared at me as if I were a monster from Alpha Centauri, while I ranted in an unknown tongue.

In mid-fit I had an out-of-body experience. I saw my contorted red face screaming at my charming boys and knew at once I was doing something evil. So I stopped and asked their forgiveness, right? Wrong. Something had control of me—it was as if an alien had invaded my body and was forcing me to do his bidding. It was long after they had fled from my wrath before I recovered my sanity and my conscience and humbled myself before them in groveling apologies.

I spent the next several days feeling like a whipped puppy. Was I really that wicked? How could I hurt my children like that? Had I done irreparable harm? Would they forgive me? Would God forgive me?

Anything like that ever happen to you?

When I read Romans 7, I am consoled that Paul felt the same way too.¹ He helps me understand my madness and gives me some juicy theological terms for it: “the law of sin” (Romans 7:23), “this body of death” (verse 24), “my sinful nature” (“my flesh” in many translations, verse 18), “sin living in me” (verse 17), just plain “sin” (verse 11), and “the law of sin and death” (8:2). Theologians like to call it “indwelling sin.”² Whatever we call it, it's an enemy of God and of our souls.³ The reason for this book is that the first step to fighting this enemy is to know it—and to know it well.

The foundation of our knowledge of the power of indwelling sin in the life of a believer is laid in Paul's own experience. He slugged his way through the fight till, at times, he was on the ropes, crying out from the edge of defeat (Romans 7:23–24). Yet when the bell rang, he stood with his foot on the neck of his enemy, and held up his hand to receive the crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:7–8).

Four Key Truths

If we want to stand in conquest over our bleeding flesh, we'll have to follow Paul into the fight. When we do, we'll find the same four truths that humbled him in battle, all expressed in one verse:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. (Romans 7:21)

1. Sin living in us is a "law." The "law" Paul refers to is the same thing he calls "sin living in me" in verses 20 and 23. This is the indwelling sin we are talking about. Why call it a *law*?

Paul uses "law" as a metaphor. He needs a way to express the power, authority, constraint, and control that sin wields in our lives, and he picks "law" with a touch of irony. He has been writing earlier in the chapter of *God's* law, which is supposed to rule our lives, yet the law of *sin* seems to win a lot of head-to-head battles. Could he have chosen a more stunning contrast to unmask sin's deadly force?

Chew on the metaphor of law for a minute. We can think of it in one way as a moral rule that directs and com-

mands us to do what it requires (“Honor your parents”) or not do what it forbids (“Do not trespass”). More than that, a law entices us to obey with offers of reward (“you will live long in the land”) and compels us to submit by threats of punishment for disobedience (“\$500 fine for trespassing”).

We can also think of law in the way we speak of “laws of nature.” Gravity, for example, is a law that bends things in its direction. It perfectly conforms us to its “commands.” Gravity is not a law as an idea or an outward precept, but a force that can make objects “obey” its “will.” In this sense every urge and inclination in us is a law. Hunger is a law, thirst, sexual drive, fear—each impels us to fulfill its demands, and each brings a force to bear on us to bow us into submission.

Indwelling sin works like this—enticing, threatening, even bullying. So Paul calls it a law to get us to see that it is powerful even in the lives of believers and that it constantly works to press us into its evil mold.

That raises the question, “In what sense has Christ defeated sin in the believer?” The answer is that he has overthrown its rule, weakened its power, and even killed its root so that it cannot bear the fruit of eternal death in a believer. Still—and this is amazing but true—sin is sin; its nature and purpose remain unchanged; its force and success still grab us by the throat.⁴

2. *We find this law inside us.* Paul had heard horror stories about sin all his life. He had seen countless bony fingers waving in his face to warn him of sin’s power. But in Romans 7:21 he moved from cozy theory into troubling experience: he *found* this law. It is one thing to sit in a group and critique

dissertations on original sin; it is something else to find yourself subdued by its strength and madness. It is one thing to listen to a lecture about AIDS—how it spreads, what it does to a body, how invincible it is; it is another thing to hear your doctor say to you, “HIV-positive—I’m sorry.”

Few people have come to terms with the law of sin. If more people had, we would hear more complaints of it in prayers, see more struggling against it, and find less of its fruit in the world. When we find this law in us, Paul’s “Who shall deliver me?” echoes down our bones.

Believers are the only people who ever find the law of sin at work in them. Unbelievers can’t feel it. The law of sin is a raging river, carrying them along; they cannot measure the force of the current, because they have surrendered themselves to it and are borne along by it. A believer, on the other hand, swims upstream—he meets sin head-on and strains under its strength.

3. *We find this law when we’re at our best.* As powerful as this law of sin is, it doesn’t rule the heart of the believer. Paul found it at work in him even while *he wanted to do good*. He didn’t stumble onto it in a time of great backsliding, or when he was indifferent about the things of God. He was aware of it even when he most wanted to serve God, when he set his mind to obey his Savior and King, when Christ ruled his heart.

Though the law of sin works from the inside and ambushes believers at their best, it isn’t their dictator. Believers march to a different Drummer: “I want to do good,” Paul says (Romans 7:21)—I want to please God, give him glory,

serve his people, honor his name. By God's grace the desire to obey him ordinarily prevails in us, even against this insidious enemy within.⁵

4. *This law never rests.* Since grace rules the believer's heart, he wants to do good. We can describe that desire in two ways. First, there is his general and constant desire to please God (verse 18). Second, there are times when the believer has a particular duty in mind that he wants to perform, such as private prayer or giving a tenth of his income to God ("When I want to do good"—verse 21). The law of sin opposes both.

The "law of sin and death" is in a constant tug of war against the believer's overall desire to please God (verses 14–25). But sin goes further: when the believer sets his jaw to even the simplest duty to God, sin fights him right at that point ("Evil is right there with me"—verse 21), making him drowsy or distracted when he would pray, or stingy and ambitious when he would tithe.

Don't you sometimes feel like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Every believer who is also a sinner (which is every believer) does. "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Galatians 5:17).

Who shall deliver me?

Wise Up

We are at the beginning of obedience to God. To understand these four truths about indwelling sin is to arm your-

self against it. In your struggle against sin, there is only one thing more important to grasp than these four facts: the free, justifying grace of God in Christ's blood. The grace of God in Christ and the law of sin are the two fountains of all your holiness and sin, joy and trouble, refreshment and sorrow. If you are to walk with God and glorify him in this world, you need to master both.

Suppose there is a kingdom that has within its wall two mighty opposing forces. The subjects of the king are at odds, always plotting and feuding against each other. If the king is not wise, his kingdom will be laid in ruins.⁶ The law of sin and the law of the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2) in us are mortal enemies. If we are not spiritually wise in managing our souls, how can we help making a wreck of ourselves?

But many people live in darkness and ignorance about their own hearts. They keep careful track of how their investments are doing on Wall Street and get frequent checkups at the doctor; they watch what they eat and work out at the gym three or four times a week to keep their bodies finely tuned. But how many people give the least thought to their souls? If it is important to watch over and care for our bodies and investments, which will soon die and rot, how much more important is it for us to guard our immortal souls?

Getting to know indwelling sin, as humiliating and discouraging as it can be, is our *wisdom*—if we have any interest at all in finding out what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:10) and avoiding everything that grieves his Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read through Romans 7:14–25. Which phrase or phrases best describe your own experience?
2. Can you think of ways the law of sin offers rewards for obeying it and threatens punishment for ignoring it? (This anticipates the next chapter.)
3. Think of a time when you “found” the law of sin in you—when it seemed to take over and bend you to its will even, as it were, against your will. Describe that time to your group, if you can.
4. What do you think is the most frustrating thing about the sin in your heart?
5. If it is true that the law of sin in you never rests, what hope do you have?
6. Read Luke 12:15 and Matthew 26:41. In light of this chapter, describe the daily diligence you need in order to heed Jesus’ warnings.
7. What do you hope to gain through studying this book? Write a prayer in the space below, asking God to make it so in your life.