

## Appendix 19: Sanctification will include both victories and defeats.

The Bible teaches that God is in the process of sanctifying (setting apart) Christians. They are being sanctified. (See Hebrews 2:11 & 10:14.) He is making them holy. Their lives are increasingly characterized by righteous attitudes and behavior. Though the Bible teaches this, some people (claiming to be Christians), have suggested that it is possible for a Christian to reach a state of “sinless perfection.” If that were possible, God’s sanctifying process would be complete in such a person. But this just does not happen as any sincere Christian will testify.

This appendix was written to demonstrate that in the sanctification process, some battles are won quickly and completely while others may drag on and be reoccurring. We take encouragement from every victory because we observed the mighty power of God unleashed in our lives. Our hope of glory increases because we sense that Christ is truly at work within us. (See **Philippians 2:12-13**.)<sup>1</sup> When we experience victory, it is as if we are living in the reality of **Romans 6:3-6**.<sup>2</sup>

The battle history is different for each Christian. It is quite common for new Christians to experience deliverances from sins that held them in bondage as unbelievers. Often, there is a major contrast between their life before and their new life as a **Christian**.<sup>3</sup> For some Christians, the contrast is not as pronounced but there are still changes that they can identify in their attitudes and behaviors. But what are we to conclude when our spiritual life is not characterized by victory?

Any veteran Christian who is being honest will admit that he has experienced many spiritual defeats as a Christian. This experience can be somewhat confusing because it contradicts the gospel realities portrayed in passages like Romans 6:3-6. This is even more difficult to bear when we repeatedly experience defeat with one particular sinful attitude or behavior.

Perhaps in the early stages, a Christian experienced some major deliverances from drug addiction, pornography addiction, and lying. Along the way, he also noticed that God was working through him to produce spiritual fruit in other people. Like all Christians, he experienced closeness with God and help from Him when faced with trials. Yet, he notices also that sometimes, he becomes impatient with people. He knows that he has no right to be impatient with people because God owns him and has the right to orchestrate trials. He has no right to get angry with anyone because he no longer owns himself. He was bought with the blood of Jesus. He knows all these things and increasingly wants to be a more patient, kind, humble man. So, he continues to ask God to grant him deliverance from his sinful attitudes.

In the meantime, he repeatedly experiences the misery of defeat described by Paul in **Romans 7:14-23**.<sup>4</sup> If this experience drags on long enough, a Christian can get confused and even wonder if he is really “in Christ” because his experience contradicts the victory described in Romans 6:3-6.

From Paul’s instructions in Romans 6 and Romans 8, we know that Paul believes that we can indeed live victoriously in Christ. But if we are honest, we must also acknowledge that we have experienced the agony of defeat that Paul described in Romans 7:14-20.

I suggest that the defeat described by Paul in Romans 7:14-23 is a very common experience that results every time a Christian attempts to gain mastery over sin in his own power. The reason it is so common is because we naturally lean upon our own power (flesh) even when we are attempting something that cannot be accomplished except by the Spirit. It is comforting to know that both Paul and Peter experienced this agony in their **defeats**.<sup>5</sup> We are not alone.

While agonizing defeat is common to all Christians, we must never give up and assume that victorious progress cannot be obtained. We must never let go of the gospel promise that in Christ, we can indeed experience victories and progress in our sanctification. Let me refer to the obvious analogy of Israel in Canaan. There was a great initial conquering of the land but enemies lingered in the land throughout their existence. They were instructed about this and told that they must continue to battle these foes and subdue them so that they do not eventually take back ownership of the land. Likewise, enemies will always remain in our lives

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<sup>1</sup> “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13 NKJV).

<sup>2</sup> “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, even so we should also walk in newness of life. For if we have become united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of the resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified that the body of sin might be abolished, that we might no longer serve sin” (Romans 6:3-6).

<sup>3</sup> There is a striking resemblance between the immediate victories experienced by new Christians and the initial conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites under Joshua. This is not coincidental.

<sup>4</sup> “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, sold under sin. For that which I am performing I do not know. For the thing I want to do, I do not practice. But the thing I hate to do, I do. Now if I do the thing I do not want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh), dwells no good. For the desire is present in me but to perform the good I do not find. For the good I want to perform, I don’t do. But the evil thing I don’t want to do, I do. However, if I do the thing I don’t want to do, it is no longer I accomplishing it, but sin which dwells in me. Therefore, I recognize the principle, that evil is present with me, (the one who wants to do good). For I delight in the law of God in the inner man But I see another principle in my members, warring against the law of my mind and which leads me into captivity by the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:14-23)..

<sup>5</sup> The Apostle Paul was a very spiritual man. But we know that he dwelt in a sinful body like the rest of us. We know that Peter was also a spiritual man. Yet, we know also (from the gospels and Galatians 2:11-12) that as a believer, he experienced what Paul described in Romans 7:14-20. It is naïve to think that as a Christian, Paul never experienced what he described in those verses

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and we must never stop battling against them. (There is no such thing as “sinless perfection” so we know that there will always be battles to fight.)

I am sure that you would rather never experience defeat. You may have become discouraged at times wondering why you are not more proficient at walking according to the Spirit. After all, if we walk in the Spirit, we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (See Galatians 5:16.) The main purpose of this appendix is to assure you that all of God’s people experience defeat and it is never pleasant.

Though it is unpleasant, I want to point out that there is a great upside to experiencing what Paul described in Romans 7:14-20. This experience makes any Christian utterly miserable. But God uses this experience to teach Christians to live in the new way according to the Spirit. We would love it if God would simply wave a magic wand over us and make us more proficient at living according to the Spirit. But He has chosen to use our failures to create desperation in us. Eventually, we cry out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death!” Through our many defeats, we will more likely learn the following important lessons:

- Sin produces death always (v.13).
- The law is spiritual but I am fleshly and unable to gain mastery over sin (v.14).
- Anything good I attempt to do in my own power, I cannot accomplish (v. 15).
- Instead, the evil I don’t want to do is what I end up doing (v.15).
- It is no longer me, the new man, who is doing this. It is the sin that dwells in this mortal body (v.17).
- Nothing good whatsoever dwells within this sinful flesh (v.18).
- The desire to do good is present in me, the new man (v.18).
- But I do not possess within myself the power to accomplish the good (v.19).
- The new me delights in God’s law and truly desires to do good (v21).
- There is and always will be a war going on within me over this (v22).
- In myself, I possess no way of securing victory in this battle. I need Jesus to do this! (v23-24).
- So, please help me Jesus!!!! (We get more serious in our praying.)

God uses this experience to humble us. (And God knows we need this.) But He also is creating in us a craving for our final deliverance from this body of death and our future resurrection and glorification. What we must do in the meantime, is continue hating this experience and cry out for a greater measure of His Spirit so that we experience it less and less. As we do, God will be glorified by doing miraculous things in and through us (while at the same time forming in us Christ-likeness).

Lastly, we must remember that in Christ, we are no longer obligated to serve the flesh. Therefore, we must never cease warring against the flesh. We will never arrive at sinless perfection. But by the Spirit, we can continue to put to death the misdeeds of the body. More and more of the enemy can be defeated so that we become more and more Christlike. “*If by the Spirit, you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you shall live!*” (Romans 8:13). But we will never have patience, love and humility in the same measure as Christ so there will always be a need to, (by the Spirit), put to death the sins of impatience, unloving attitudes and pride. When we experience defeat by these enemies, we will be miserable but we must get back up and engage again in the battle because God will use all of our victories and defeats in the process of making us more Christlike. The final outcome is eternal life.

### Addendum

Someone might ask, “*If Christians experience defeat described in Romans 7:14-23, how are their lives any more righteous than the lives of other religious people?*”

The Bible does not teach that Christians can live in a state of sinless perfection. But it does teach that because of the gospel, Christians are no longer under condemnation. (Muslim and Hindu people remain under condemnation.) Because Christians are no longer under condemnation (due to Christ’s work on the cross), they are no longer hopeless like everyone else. They have the sure gospel promise of glorification if they believe and continue to believe into Christ. (Neither Muslims, Hindus or any other religious person has such a promise from God.) Because of the gospel promise of glorification, Christians are motivated to serve God simply out of love and gratefulness. Knowing that glory awaits, they increasingly desire to live righteous lives that please God. Though they have often experienced the defeat depicted in Romans 7:14-23, they have also experienced God at work in them to increasingly produce truly righteous attitudes and behavior. So, though sinful attitudes and behaviors occur in the Christian, they are slowly diminishing while righteous attitudes and behaviors increase.

The mere religious person (such as a Muslim or Hindu person) has absolutely zero works or attitudes that God counts as righteous. Their attempts at righteous living are not done by faith but by “works of law” as a means to earn favor with God. Nobody will be justified on the basis of works of law. (See Romans 3:20.)

Though the Christian has his defeats (which God does not count as righteous), he also has his victories that God brought about through the gospel. In addition, all his sins are remitted because of the righteous work of Christ. The only thing accumulating in the account of the true Christian are works of faith that God counts as righteous.

The mere religious person, because of his condemnation, cannot be motivated in the same fashion. Because condemnation remains, attaining righteous standing with God is impossible. Since his flesh is not able to submit to God’s **laws**,<sup>6</sup> he cannot

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<sup>6</sup> “*The fleshly mind is hostile toward God for it is not subject to the law of God, for indeed, it is not able*” (Romans 8:7).

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accomplish the righteousness he wishes. If he sincerely attempts it, the best he could hope for is the experience that Paul describes in Romans 7:14-23. But because he really has no sure hope, he gives up on the idea of gaining true mastery over sin as God demands. So, he settles for an outward **righteousness**.<sup>7</sup> In his mind, if he is more righteous than other people, he is probably doing okay. And if others esteem him to be a spiritual, righteous man because of his righteous appearance, he gains a false security that God is pleased with him. He is no different than the Pharisee of Jesus' day.

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<sup>7</sup> Though he experiences defeat, he does not agonize over it in the same way that Paul describes in Romans 7:14-23. Only true Christians agonize over defeat like this.