

THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE TRAGEDY OF THE INNER LIFE

TEXT: **“For to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good, I find not”**
(Romans 7:18).

THAT is the tragedy of the inner life; the breakdown of the human will before the Christian ethic; the torment of an unattained ideal.

The defeat of a languid desire is nothing; but to throw the whole power of the will on the side of something which God commands, and then to find the will break down, that, for an earnest soul, is tragic beyond words.

It is a very common mistake to suppose that we could be holy if we only wanted to. We think our difficulty lies in bringing the will to act on the side of what God requires, and that if we really put forth sufficient willpower we should enter upon a spiritual life. But here is a man who makes the amazing discovery that the spiritual life is something above the reach of his will at its highest stretch.

He cannot grasp spirituality and bring it down into his life by willing to do it. And this was the experience, let us remember, of one of the strongest wills that ever was lodged in a human character. The Apostle Paul was not a weakling; he was endowed with immense willpower. When he was a mere

RELIGIONIST AND NOT A CHRISTIAN

he was not a lax nor a languid one. He saw that the great enemy of the traditionalism in which he had been reared was this new thing, Christianity; and his imperious will forced him into the very front of the fight against Christianity; made of him “the tiger of the Sanhedrim.”

Nothing deterred him—no weeping of women, no plaint of age, or youth; he put Christian men and women in prison, and when the question was one of stoning them to death he gave his vote against them. No, Paul was never a half-and-half man.

There was in him not merely a fullness of intellectual vigor and life that compelled him to take sides, but there was in him a force of will that enabled him to accomplish his desires.

But here was a seemingly simple thing that he was not able to do; but now he has before him an ideal which is unattainable by the power of his resolution. **“To will is present with me,”** he says, **“but how to perform that which is good, I find not.”** He cannot will himself into spirituality.

WHAT IS “GOOD”?

That is the case before us. But we shall never understand what Paul means unless we stop for a moment to consider his little word **“good.”**

What is this good that Paul cannot do by willing to do it? We may exclude some things at once. He is not speaking here of morality, of honesty, of kindness, of chastity, of faithfulness in the relations in which man stands to man, as husband, as parent, as friend. These things lie completely within the power of the will. Every one of us has known men wholly apart from Christian power and Christian influence who were all of these things. Every community has upright, truthful, honest, kindly, courageous, helpful, clean, high-living men who are not Christians. The Apostle Paul is not speaking of those good qualities at all; all those things he had done all his life; his will had proved effective in that sphere.

And neither is he thinking, by this word good, of common religiousness, church-membership, church-going, saying prayers, reading the Bible, giving money; all these things he had done all his life by willpower. He was the foremost religionist of his time, by a conscientious use of his will.

Well, then, what does he mean by speaking of the good which he wills but cannot attain?

He means such things as this: **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** And this: **“I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ, liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”**

That is what he is thinking about—the

REPRODUCTION OF CHRIST BEFORE MEN

—of being Christlike. That is what he calls **“good.”** Did Paul mean, then, that he was defeated in a will to be Christlike—not as good as Christ, but good like Christ in measure? Yes.

He had before his mind, to illustrate it further, perhaps, the beatific character.

He had read the Sermon on the Mount, and we may be very sure that he put it into its right place, dispensationally, but he was not willing for one moment to say that because he was in grace and in the church, and not in the kingdom and not under law, that therefore he was justified in living on a lower level than the kingdom life—rather he would say, “a higher demand is laid upon me.”

And while there was not in his mind all this negative and inferior morality, there was in his mind the spiritual morality which forms the Christian standard. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit,”** he would say, and then I can imagine that he would beat upon his breast and say, “Oh, proud Paul! Oh, Paul, when will you ever be poor in spirit?” And then, perhaps, in the earlier stages of his experience he would say, “I will be poor in spirit.”

“Blessed are the meek.”

“Oh,” he would say afterward, “I am the chief of sinners. When I read that word meek, I dare not lift my eyes to him—I cannot.”

Did you, my hearer, every try to be meek? If you did, did you succeed? It is open to anyone to act meekly, to go around with a kind of

URIAH HEEP ‘UMBLENESS

but that only makes a hateful Pharisee of you; that is not being meek. And if there is anything that Jesus Christ hates, it is Phariseeism; that is the one thing He cannot do anything with. The only word he had for the Pharisee of his day was, **“Woe unto you.”**

He had no messages for them; there was nothing in his gospel for a Pharisee. No, Paul is not going back to Phariseeism.

And, deeper than that there was in Paul’s heart, when he talked about being **“good,”** the imperious demand which his new nature and the urge of the new life made upon him that he should have victory over self in all the forms in which self manifests itself.

Now in the face of a standard as exalted as the Christlike life there is

A GRAVE DANGER

That danger must have been present to Paul, and I have no doubt he had to resist it and to cry mightily to God about it; the danger, I mean, of saying or thinking that the Christ standard is too high; that it was put there, not to attain to, but as an ideal toward which we are to aspire. We are to consent to it that it is good, but for flesh to expect to attain to it is another thing.

Well, here was a man who was minded to live that kind of a life, somehow, and never let himself go till he did.

There is a saying, you know, that if you aim your arrow at the moon you won’t hit the moon, but you will shoot higher than if you aimed your arrow at a barn.

Well, Paul never let himself down by any poor sophistry like that. You and I do, my friends.

Now I want to pass on to

A VERY PRACTICAL QUESTION

What does Paul mean by saying, **“To will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good, I find not”**?

I have heard all my Christian life the statement that Christians are not to live in the seventh of Romans. Well, I would to God that nine out of ten of them got into the seventh of Romans. The man in the seventh of Romans is not a listless dweller in spiritual things; he is a man whose heart is breaking and whose being is in agony because his life is not like Christ's!

The man in the seventh of Romans is a man who was all red with the blood of the Son of God. He knew that he was wrestling with something that was awful and real, and he was bound to have the solution for this problem if God has one for him. I ask, what does this man need who wills and resolves to do good, and then finds himself defeated?

Does he need more ethics? A higher standard? Why, the poor man knows more good now than he is doing; and just there is the weakness of mere ethical preaching. It continually says to the poor sinner, “Be good,” but never tells him how to be good. And the pulpit today is largely engaged with telling people to “be good” and not telling them how.

We come to him with the Ten Commandments and say, “Why, Paul, I do not know what is the matter with you; you seem beside yourself with all this talk about not being able to be good. Here are the Commandments.” And he says, **“But I know them; I have known them from my youth up, and I delight in them after the inner man, but I cannot keep even them.”** No, law can not help him. Law says, **“Thou shalt,”** and **“Thou shalt not,”** but it adds nothing to the force and power of man; nothing whatever. Well, what does he need?

NOT ETHICS, BUT DYNAMICS

The man needs superhuman power to enable him to realize in his life a superhuman spirituality. Now, when any one says, as an objection to Christianity, that the ethical demand of Christianity is too high for human nature, he has just begun to find out the truth; a truth that about eight out of every ten Christians never do find out. It is too high for human nature. It is meant to be too high for human nature. It is put where no hand of man can ever touch it; where no unassisted human capacity can ever reach it. And if that were all, the gospel would be to the saint, whatever it may be to the sinner, a message of despair. But that is not all.

Along with this superhuman demand, superhuman power is offered. And Paul laid hold upon it. He did not stay in the seventh of Romans, for when the will is aroused to its utmost power and yet cannot do a thing, then the man has reached the end of himself.

AT PEACE AND VICTORIOUS

When we pass from the seventh to the eighth of Romans we find the wretched man of the seventh of Romans at peace and victorious; what is now his testimony? **“The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.”**

Not a new resolution, nor a new habit, nor a deeper hold on himself, nor more prayer. Do you think that a man in the agony of the seventh of Romans does not pray? Why, the Apostle Paul, when he was there, prayed, you may be sure, day and night on his face before God. Not more prayer, nor more anything that you and I can do, nor that Paul could do, but something that God can do.

THERE IS THE REMEDY

That is what Paul means: not more from within, but something from without put within. And almost while he is saying, **“Oh, wretched man that I am,”** out of the very agony of spiritual defeat, he lifts up his face in triumphant testimony for he has found the secret, and he says, **“The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death”** (Romans 8:2).

So this man can write afterward, **“For me to live is Christ”**; write it to Philippians who knew him more intimately than you know me. **“The life which now I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God”** he could say to those Galatians who had seen him under trial and testing, ***“Not by my efforts, nor by my resolutions, nor by my vows, but by the power, the authority, the law, of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.”***

Defeated along the line of the will, he is victorious by the power of the Spirit within him; the superhuman standard achieved by superhuman power. Paul laid hold upon that power, and so we have the triumphant eighth chapter of Romans, which may be the experience of every child of God—a life of continual victory, peace and power.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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