



The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 27, 2014

Pastor Daniel Naumann

Romans 7:15-25a

REST FOR THE WAR

OF THE SINNER/SAINT



Isn't Paul a fascinating story? Here was a man whose life defines the term "conversion". Talk about a 180 degree turn! You know his story and his background. Paul was a persecutor of Christians. He stood by in approval of Stephen's stoning. He gained permission to march on to Damascus to drag Christians off and imprison them. Paul was an unbeliever, tried and true. Then the resurrected Christ appeared to him on the road up to Damascus and everything changed.

Listen again to Paul tell his own story at the end of the book of Acts (26:9ff). *"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."* Could it get much worse than Paul? He says he was "obsessed" with persecuting Christians—persecuting believers. He certainly would have claimed no place with them. Paul was an unbeliever. That's all there was to it. Paul wasn't struggling against sin because there was no believer, no new man, to struggle against sin in him.

But of course, all of that changed. Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus. And Christ told Paul, *"I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive*

*forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."* Paul was changed on that road. There God called him from unbelief to faith, from spiritual death to spiritual life. A change took place in Paul. Before Paul was converted there was no struggle against sin in him, but now his sins were forgiven and a new man rose to live in Paul, a believer. And it was that believer whom God called to proclaim sins forgiven in Christ to the ends of the earth...and that's exactly what he did.

You know this story well. You know that Paul was once a persecutor and that he was then converted in a miraculous way. You know about Paul's sinful past. But the words which Paul wrote in Romans 7 were written long after his conversion, long after his coming to faith, long after the new man was created in him. This struggle that Paul talks about wasn't a struggle before he was brought to faith. The struggle Paul talks about in our text is the struggle that the believer has with his sinful nature. It's this struggle—this war (as Paul calls it)—that gives us the name *sinner/saints*. You see, after this change of conversion took place in Paul you would expect him to live a really good life, wouldn't you? Paul expected that out of himself, that he would live a good life to say thank you to God. But what he saw was not what he expected. He saw a struggle to do what he wanted to do. This struggle was against the sinful nature.

*"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."* There's the struggle. This is a struggle against sin that Paul hadn't experienced as an unbeliever. But ever since he came to faith, ever since he became a believer, he became more and more aware of the sins he was committing against God. And no matter how much he struggled against that sinful nature, he just couldn't live perfectly. *"And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good."* The law is good, as Paul says, because the main purpose of the law is to show us our sin. It's to make us aware that we have not—that we cannot—live perfectly before

God. And the fact was, Paul kept finding that out even after he came to faith. Even in his sanctified life Paul couldn't rely on himself to live perfectly. He needed someone else to help him against his sinful nature.

*"As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."* Even after Paul became a believer, even after Paul drowned that sinful nature in his baptism and became a new creation, he found out that, as Martin Luther once put it, that sinful nature can swim and he keeps coming back to wage war against the new man, against the new creation, against the believer living inside.

*"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* This is the struggle, the war, of the *sinner/saint*. And even Paul, the greatest missionary who ever lived, found this war waged within himself until the day he died. Do you find this struggle, this war in yourself? We all have those pet sins—those sins of habit—that we fall into over and over again. Despite our best intentions we struggle against sin and we fall, we still fall even as believers. I see it in my own life. When I want to get into God's Word in personal devotion, I skip it and go right to e-mail in the morning. Sometimes I win that struggle, but too often I lose it. When I want to tell others about my Savior, I'm tempted to clam up and not speak. Sometimes I win that struggle, but too often I lose it. When I want to be happy and encouraging to those around me and be a blessing to others, I'm tempted to get grouchy and crabby and be discouraging instead of helpful. Sometimes I win that struggle, but too often I lose it.

The entire life of a believer this side of heaven is a war against the sinful nature. It's a war with many battles. And even though Christ has already won this war by his death on the cross, and even though it's won by God at our baptisms, it's a war with battles that I continue to lose. It's a war that makes me cry out with Paul, *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"*

As Paul said, thanks be to God for giving us the answer to that question. *"Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* When I find myself struggling against the sinful nature, where do I look for help? I flee

to Christ, and there I find rest from this struggle. When I find myself trying to rely on me in my sanctified life, trying to say, *"I need to try harder—I need to love others more—I need to share Jesus more—!...!...!"*, that's when I need to lose myself in Christ and find rest because I just can't do it. Jesus already did it for me. That's the beauty of the Gospel. That's the rest that we need. It's the rest from the struggle against sin, the rest from the struggle against the sinful nature. In Christ I find the perfection that God demands. Even my sanctified life is made perfect in Christ. And this perfection is what I hold before my God. What better rest can I have than the rest found in my Savior?

This is the beauty of the Gospel, it's a Gospel that sets us free. It's a Gospel that destroys the threat of the law to condemn us to hell. It's a Gospel that gives us the rest that can only be found in Christ Jesus. It's a Gospel that shows us a loving God ready to accept us with open arms because of what Christ has done for us. This is the end of Romans 7, and the beginning of Romans 8, one of the most beautiful chapters in all of Scripture. It's a chapter that screams from beginning to end, "I can't do it, but Christ did it for me, and that proves that God loves me." Romans 8:1 begins the tone, *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* There is no greater rest that we could ever find anywhere in the world than what we find when we look solely to Jesus. There we find sins forgiven. There we find the promise God made at our baptisms to claim us as his own. There we find a loving God ready to welcome us home to heaven where there will never be a war or a struggle against sin again. This is the rest found in Christ.

You know Paul's story. You know it because you've read it in Scripture. But the truth is, you know it because you've lived the same struggle, the same war, against sin that he has. You live it every day of your life. So find the rest that Paul points to. The rest for the *sinner/saint*, the rest for your soul, the rest found only in Jesus. Amen.

COME TO ME  
all you who are  
WEARY AND BURDENED  
and I will  
GIVE YOU REST