

Romans 7: Who Is Wretched?

There has been considerable discussion over the years concerning Paul's seemingly self-deprecating remarks in Romans 7 (especially 7:7–24). He appears to call himself a “wretched man” (7:24), and he says, “I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (7:15, 18). He even says that he is “sold into slavery under sin” (7:14), which seems to contradict what he said earlier about Christians being set free from slavery to sin (6:16–22).

Many readers take these verses as a classic expression of the dilemma faced by those who desire to be holy but struggle unsuccessfully with temptation. Paul testifies to the ultimate futility of human attempts at godliness; even the best efforts of the most morally conscientious will fail. Thus, all people, including Paul, must depend upon God's grace and mercy.

Other readers think that Paul is employing a rhetorical device in this section of the letter to describe what life is like apart from Christ. Paul does not speak with his own voice as a Christian in 7:7–24 but rather adopts the voice of one under the law who has not been made right with God by faith or endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. His use of the first person indicates that he can identify with this wretched state, for it is from such that he has been delivered (7:24–25).

The debate on this question continues, and different church traditions have appealed to their interpretation of Romans 7 to support different understandings of the Christian life: is it a life of struggle with sin or of triumph over sin?