

Summary of Major Views on Interpretation of Romans 7:13-23

- I. Paul is writing about the experience of a regenerate person.
 - A. Paul describes the normal Christian experience, even of mature Christians (Augustine's 2nd view, Luther, Calvin, (most of the Reformers, John Owen, W. G. T. Shedd, Charles Hodge, John Murray, Berkouwer, Packer, Stott [who specifies this person as a "regenerate, OT believer living under the law], R.C. Sproul)
 - B. Paul describes the experience of the immature Christian. This is a believer who has not yet "moved from Romans 7 into Romans 8," and is living without the Spirit. This believer should learn to appropriate the benefits of being in Christ (more popular-level view, not held often in scholarship).
 - C. Paul describes the experience of a regenerate person trying to live by keeping the law rather than living by the Spirit and then finds that he/she cannot (Ronald Y. K. Fung, who called this person a "Nomistic Christian").
- II. Paul is writing about the experience of *either* a regenerate *or* non-regenerate person, any person who desires to "do good" or "act moral" and so tries obey God's law in his own strength rather than through the power of the Holy Spirit but cannot because of "Adam in me," the sin-prone "nature" of every person (C. L. Mitton, Richard Longenecker, Anthony Hoekema [1st view, later changed, see IV], Fung [see IC], F. F. Bruce)
- III. Paul is writing about the experience of *neither* a regenerate *nor* non-regenerate person.
 - A. Paul describes the experience of a person being drawn by the Holy Spirit but not yet regenerate, so he/she is experiencing conviction of sin and desires to obey but cannot yet because he/she is not yet converted (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, C. H. Dodd [who sees Paul describing his own experience of being drawn to Christ culminating in his Damascus Road experience]).
 - B. Paul is not intending to describe believers or non-believers. His purpose is to show the inability of the law to transform human beings (Thomas Schreiner).
- IV. Paul is writing about the experience of a non-regenerate person.
 - A. Paul describes the experience of every unregenerate person.
 - B. Paul autobiographically describes his own struggle with sin as an unregenerate but pious Jew, either from the vantage point and understanding of his current regenerate status (i.e. while he was writing Romans) or from the vantage point of his unregenerate state (i.e. while he was struggling as a pre-converted Jew).

(In its various forms held by most of the early church fathers, Augustine [1st view], Wesley, Kummel, D. Davies, Althus, Bultman, Godet, James Denney, Herman Ridderbos, Anthony Hoekema [revised 2nd view], Robert Gundry, B. Martin, Theissen, Douglas Moo, Lambrecht, Fitzmeyer, Fee, Stuhlmacher, et. al.)

Reasons for Understanding Romans 7:14-25 as Referring to a Regenerate Person

1. The shift from past tense (imperfect & aorist in Greek) to present tense verbs beginning in v. 14 shows that Paul has moved from a description of his past experience in 7:7-13 to his present experience as a believer when writing Romans.
2. The unregenerate person does not, “delight in the law of God” (7:22, cf. 8:7), “hate evil” (7:15), “desire to do what is right” (7:18, cf. 3:11), or “serve the law of God” (7:25, cf. 8:7).
3. The order of phrases in 7:25 show that Paul is crying out as a saved man, thanking God for his salvation, and then returns to his summary of 7:13-25 after this proclamation.
4. 7:18 & 25 distinguishes between the “I” and the “flesh,” implying that the “I” is the part of him alive to God and desiring to do good and delighting in the law, but indwelling sin dominates his “flesh” and constantly combats the desires of the “I” (cf. Gal. 5:17). There also seems to be two “I”s at times, showing the battle between the flesh and the desires to obey, which can only happen in regenerate people.
5. The distinguishing between the “I” and the “flesh” in v. 18 seems to indicate that there was more to Paul’s “I” than to Paul’s “flesh,” namely, the Holy Spirit which enables him to engage in the battle against sin.
6. The “mind” in Paul is universally opposed to God, His will, and what is right (cf. (Rom. 1:28; Eph. 4:17; Col. 2:18; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:15), but the “mind” in Romans 7:13-25 is positive, the vehicle through which the law is served (7:25).
7. The deliverance from the sinful “body of death” is yet future (7:25; 8:10, 11, 23), so the current struggle with sin of the regenerate person is inevitable. This reflects the “already/not yet” understanding of our salvation taught throughout the Scripture: already freed, but not yet completely freed from sin.
8. Paul uses the phrase “inner being” in only 2 other passages (2 Cor. 4:16 & Eph. 3:16) and both refer to believers.
9. Paul’s description of his pre-conversion experience elsewhere (i.e. Phil. 3:5-6, Gal. 1:13-14) shows no sign of the inward conflict with his sin depicted in Rom. 7:13-25.
10. Existentially, believers can surely identify with the struggle Paul describes in 7:13-25 as being true of their own life. In fact, the more we grow in holiness the more aware we are of our sinfulness and the more alive this battle becomes.

Reasons for Understanding Romans 7:14-25 as Referring to an Unregenerate Person

1. The one who is “living in the flesh” in 7:5 is fully described in 7:7-25, while the one who serves “in the new way of the Spirit” in 7:6 is fully described in 8:1-17.
2. Overall structure of chapters 6-7: 4 questions are asked, each answered with, “by no means!” and then explained in the following verses: 6:1 (explained in 6:2-14), 6:15 (explained in 6:16-7:6), 7:7 (explained in 7:8-12), and 7:13 (explained in 7:14-25). So 7:14-25 explain how “sin produced death in (Paul)” through the law (v. 13). Or in other words, 7:14-25 (beginning with “for”) are the grounds for 7:13.
3. The entire context of chapter 7 is Paul proving that the law has no power to transform a person.
4. No mention of the Holy Spirit is made in 7:13-25, but Paul mentions the Holy Spirit 19 times in chapter 8, 15 of those times in 8:1-16.
5. The terms and descriptions Paul uses to describe the “I” of 7:13-25 are incompatible with the terms he has already used to describe a believer in the immediate context of Romans:
 - Believers were “once slaves to sin” (6:17, 20) but have been “set free from sin” (6:7, 18, 22; 8:2) BUT the “I” in 7:14-25 is “sold under sin” (7:4b).
 - Believers have had their “body of sin” “brought to nothing (6:6) but the “I” in 7:14-25 cries out to be “delivered from this body of death” (7:24).
 - Believers are “set free from the law of sin & death” (8:2), no longer “enslaved to sin” (6:6) and “sin will have no dominion over” them (6:14) because they are now “slaves of righteousness” (6:18) and “slaves of God” (6:22) BUT the “I” in 7:14-25 is “captive to the law of sin” (7:23).
 - Believers are to “consider” themselves “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” and on this basis have the ability to fight sin (6:12-14, 17-19, 22; 8:4) in order that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in (them)” (8:4) BUT the “I” in 7:14-25 has “not the ability to carry it (i.e. “what is right”) out” (7:18).
6. The “I” and the “flesh” of 7:13-25 are one unified human, not 2 separate descriptions. Both are “sold under sin,” “unable to do good/what they want,” are “wretched,” etc. Paul is not trying to separate the 2, but to join them. He is expressly saying that the “I” and the “flesh” both lack the Holy Spirit, which he will begin to assume for the regenerate person in chapter 8.
7. Paul continues using 1st century slave language in 7:13-25: the phrases “I do what I desire” & “I do not do what I desire” are the cries of freedmen & slaves respectively in 1st century manumission documents. Also, the Greek word for “sold” in 7:14 is the technical term for selling into slavery in the Septuagint. Also, the phrase “O what wretched men we are” is the commanded cry (following the taunt of their captors) for those being sold into slavery in 1st century papyri. Paul’s hearers would have fully understood these phrases in this light.
8. The contrast between 8:1ff and 7:13-25 is stark, marking out the difference between life in the Spirit (slaves to God) and life in the flesh (slaves to sin).
9. The hopelessness of 7:13-25 is not found in any other passage of Scripture depicting the Christian life of sanctification. The battle is real, yes, but not hopeless.

Objections to Reasons Supporting the Regenerate Argument

1. The present tense can be explained in other ways, such as: (1) Paul uses the present tense “I am of the flesh” to coincide with the tense of “the law is spiritual” and continues the use of the present tense for effect, or (2) 7:13-25 is an emotional passage with a rising tension, culminating in the “wretched men” cry and Paul uses the present tense to stress the reality of a person sold under sin, or (3) Paul is uniting himself to the Jews at Mt. Sinai and to every Jew who is under the law. The point is that the present tense argument alone is not strong enough to outweigh the contextual support for maintaining that the passage speaks of Paul as an unregenerate but pious Jew.
2. Devout Jews would absolutely desire to keep & obey the law and delight in it. The fact that they are in reality unable to do this because they are unregenerate does not stop them from thinking they are glorifying God through this activity (think of Paul serving God as he persecuted Christians).
3. The order of phrases in v. 25 is easily explained by the rising emotion of the passage. Paul gives his emotional thanksgiving prior to his conclusion because he can’t help himself, something which Paul is wont to do.
4. We have already talked about the unity of the “I” in 7:13-25 (see #5 in the arguments for this passage referring to an unbelieving Jew).
5. Paul’s very point in this section seems to be the opposite: There is no indwelling Holy Spirit in the “I” because there is no mention of Him anywhere.
6. I agree that Paul uses the “mind” to refer to believers in the other two uses, but not here. Paul is speaking about his pre-conversion life, so he was without conversion and without the Spirit, so the only way he could serve God was with his mind. This is the way he would have thought about it, both before and after his conversion. Since he was unregenerate, his mind was hostile to God and His ways even if he did not realize it at the time. Also, his purpose is to explain how sin used the law as a base of operations to enslave him to more sin.
7. Agreed. Salvation is already/not yet, but it does not prove the argument. Paul in other places argues for the fact that believers will struggle with sin because they are not yet fully saved, but that does not mean he must be arguing for it here.
8. I agree that “inner being” is used of believers in the other two passages, but those 2 passages do not limit the usage of the phrase to believers. The context of each section is already speaking of believers, so speaking of their “inner being” does not mean that lost people don’t also have an “inner being.” Man is made up of body and spirit/soul, so even the unregenerate are made up of both physical and spiritual.
9. Agreed, but in those passages Paul is talking about his outward actions. In this passage he is talking about his pre-converted inward struggle.
10. We must never interpret a passage of Scripture based on our own experience. The reality is this: even though I hold the view that in this passage Paul is speaking of his pre-converted life as a pious Jew, I affirm that the Christian life is a battle to fight sin, and we will fight this battle until our salvation is complete when Christ returns or he takes us home. But I affirm it from other passages, not this one. In my opinion, the context is clear that Paul cannot be speaking of the believer’s struggle with sin in Romans 7:13-25, even though I affirm that believers do in fact struggle with sin. And in those passages, the struggle is never, ever, as bleak, dark, and overwhelmingly impossible as it is represented here.

Affirmations

1. There are strong lines of argument on both sides of this debate, which is why I chose to cover the passage in this way this morning, trying to be honest with both the strengths and weaknesses of each line of defense. Those who say there are no reasons to take one view or the other (i.e. one view is unfounded while the other is unassailable) are being, in my opinion, disingenuous, arrogant, or simple-minded. It is a difficult passage and one will ultimately lean toward the view they believe has the *most* evidence.
2. I am aware of the misuse of these verses in the Wesleyan Holiness movement, the Pentecostal Holiness movement, and other charismatic theologies that teach that one can reach a state of sinless perfection in this life. The fact that some have misapplied this text does not mean we must run from the truth we find supported by the context of the passage any more than we must run from the true teaching of church discipline because some have abused the truth of that teaching in their application.
3. I am also aware that this passage of Scripture has been on the front line of disagreements between Armenian and Calvinist theologians because of the discussion of the will. Again, the misuse of this passage by some who hold to the view that Paul is speaking of himself as an unregenerate but pious Jew in Romans 7:13-25 does not necessitate taking an opposing view of this passage. I not only affirm that this passage is speaking of Paul as an unregenerate Jew but I also affirm Jonathan Edwards' treatise, "The Freedom of the Will," in which he argues no acts of the will are possible without being caused by something else (motive, pleasure, previous acts of the will, and God). No person acts in a way to please God without first being regenerated. Regeneration precedes faith.
4. I affirm, as I have already said, the truth that believers struggle with sin, and that this struggle will continue throughout our earthly life. But I affirm it from other passages, not from this one.
5. I also affirm that the popular teaching of these verses leads some, not all, of God's people to live a life that is one of defeat with regard to crucifying sin, rather one of increasing (but never perfect) victory. I have spoken to many who say things like, "Well, Paul struggled pretty hard with sin, and I'm no Apostle Paul!" in order to defend sinfulness or passivity in mortifying sin. Every other passage in the NT which teaches believers about their sanctification is positive, providing an expectation of growing in holiness and obedience, where Romans 7 give absolutely no hope because the wretched man has no ability to do what he desires.