

Chapter Sixteen

The Law is Weak Through the Flesh

There are some things that the Law cannot do. There are sincere but misinformed people who are severely shocked when we make the assertion that the Law of God is completely powerless to save a sinner or to keep a saint saved. They remind us that the Law of God is perfect and holy and just, to all of which we agree, but while the Law is perfect, it cannot produce perfection in imperfect sinners. While the Law is holy, it cannot produce holiness in the transgressor. While the Law of God is just, it cannot justify injustice and unrighteousness. These things the law cannot do, nor was it ever intended to do. Its ministry is to reveal the perfect righteousness of a holy God; righteousness is the one requirement for salvation, and this the Law could not provide. The Law may be compared to a yardstick that shows how far short we come of God's perfect standard, but the yardstick cannot correct the deficiency. Paul expresses it perfectly in Romans 8:4, *"For what the Law could not do..."*

To understand what Paul is saying we must go back once more to the preceding verses. In Romans 7, Paul admits his failure as a believer to keep the Law of God perfectly, and ceasing from his own struggle he turns it all over to the Savior. He cries out:

"O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24).

And immediately he gives the answer, *"I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord..."* (Romans 7:25).

What Paul found himself unable to do, he turns over to the One, the only One, who can help him. He candidly admits his failure and adds:

"So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin" (Romans 7:25)

With his mind he seeks to keep the Law of God. The mind is the *"will"* and Paul earnestly wants to keep the Law perfectly, but finds the flesh, the old nature, opposing him at every turn. He therefore disclaims any perfection of his own, and relies entirely upon the imputed perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He rejoices in the fact that even for his failure after he has been saved, the Lord has made provision, and that in spite of his shortcoming.

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

"No condemnation in Christ!" He does not say that this is only for those who keep the law of God perfectly, but rather that there is no condemnation even to those who have broken God's Law, and confessing it, have fled to Christ Jesus for forgiveness. And then Paul says,

“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).

Paul mentions two laws – *“the law of sin and death”* which condemned him, and *“the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”* which had removed the condemnation for sin forever. And then comes that remarkable verse:

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

When Paul says, *“For what the law could not do,”* what is he referring to? Paul was speaking of the Law inability to remove the curse and condemnation of sin. The Law was powerless to save the sinner, to justify one single transgressor, or to overlook one single sin. The Law says, *“the soul that sins, it will die;” “the wages of sin is death;”* and *“it will by no means clear the guilty.”* Notice the language of the Law – *“the wages of sin is death.”* It does not say *“wages of sins”* – but *sin* – one single sin is enough to bring down the curse of the Law. It is not the amount of sinning, but the fact of sin that brings damnation. The Law demands perfection, and one sin is enough to condemn. James says:

“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

Sin is sin! There are no *“little sins”* and *“big sins”* in the sight of God. If you think God will overlook a *little* sin and punish only *gross* sin, remember Adam and his disobedience in taking what God had forbidden. We would call the act pretty larceny, taking a forbidden fruit, but God regarded it as an act of rebellion; and His righteousness demanded the maximum penalty of death – (separation from Him). For one *little* (?) sin Moses had to die before he could enter the land of Canaan. The Law was given to reveal the real gravity of all sin, and the righteousness demands of a holy God and His condemnation of every sin. Now the Law could not justify or save those transgressors. This was not the fault of the Law, for notice how the verse continues in Romans 8:3,

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

The Law was weak *“through the flesh.”* The Law was not weak, but the flesh was weak. Let’s use an illustration: Try and visualize a woman preparing dinner and placing a roast in the oven to be removed when it was done just right. But just before it was time to turn off the heat, this woman gets a phone call with a choice bit of juicy news. This lady, who was supposed to be cooking dinner, forgot all about the roast in the oven as the phone conversation dragged on. Then suddenly she remembers the roast and quickly hangs up and finds the meat completely overcooked and ready to fall apart. She takes a fork, plunges it into the roast in an effort to lift it out, but the fork will not hold the roast. It just slips out with shreds of meat clinging to it. Again she plunges the fork into the meat, but again, *“woops”* the fork will not hold the meat. – The fork is

“weak through the flesh.” The fork is all right. It’s sterling silver, but it cannot rescue the roast, because it was weak in accomplishing this task.

The woman gets an idea. She lays aside the fork, and she took a bread spatula, slips it under the roast, and lifts it out intact, and in one piece. What the fork could not do in that it was *“weak through the flesh,”* the spatula did with ease.

Admittedly, it is a rather homely illustration, but if it conveys the meaning of Paul’s words, isn’t worth thinking about? The fork may be compared to the Law. It is perfect and flawless, but the sinful flesh of man could not be rescued from the flame by its use. The spatula, in this illustration, can be compare to the grace of God that was able to do what the Law could not do. Now we are ready for the rest of the verse:

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

The failure of the Law to justify the sinner became the occasion for God stepping in to save the poor, condemned wretch. Notice the wording:

“...God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

Notice two things about God’s provision for sinners in His Son Jesus Christ. God send His Son in the *“likeness of sinful flesh.”* Christ took on Him our humanity when He was born. At His birth, He took on Himself our human nature, but not our *sinful* human nature. Paul is careful to say in the *“likeness of sinful flesh,”* and not *“in sinful flesh.”* What an evidence of divine inspiration in guarding the sinlessness of Jesus! He became like unto us in all things (Hebrews 2:17). By His supernatural conception and virgin birth He assumed our human nature, but escaped the guilt of Adam’s sin. When the law had failed to redeem poor, lost humanity from the curse of the perfect Law of God. But His incarnation, His virgin birth in the *“likeness of sinful flesh,”* was not sufficient to obtain redemption for mankind. While He did not share Adam’s sin, nevertheless Adam’s sin must be taken care of. In order to pay for Adam’s sin, every demand of the Law must be fully met, for the Law will in no wise clear the guilty. Redemption cannot be obtained until every fragment had been paid. The righteous demands of God’s holy Law must be met, and the penalty borne. This was accomplished when Christ, who was free from all Adamic sin, took all of mankind’s sin upon Himself and paid its penalty on Calvary’s cross.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way...” (Isaiah 53:6).

This called for the judgment of God, eternal death and damnation, And then Isaiah continues with,

*...**but** the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6)

The verse begins with the all-inclusive word of condemnation, “*all have gone astray,*” and ends with the universal *all* of invitation. Now the statement makes sense, “*in the likeness of sinful flesh (the incarnation), and for sin (His death and resurrection).*”

This satisfies all the demands of the Law. It did not justify or pass over sin, but it “*condemned sin in the flesh.*” The very fact that Jesus had to take upon Him our nature and take our sins to the cross, proves the awfulness of sin, and so Paul says that the “*death of Christ*” condemned sin the flesh.

The Result

Now, the glorious result of that next verse (Romans 8:4).

“That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:4).

Fulfilled *in* us! It does not say *by* us. Our failure to do this had been proven by God’s holy Law. This the Law was unable to do! Before we were saved we were condemned, having come short of God’s righteousness; and He, seeing our lost condition, made a way by which we might be counted righteous in the eyes of the law. This is an *imputed* righteousness provided by the Lord Jesus Christ. He died to pay the penalty of the Law; then He arose to take His own righteousness and clothe the believer with it. The penalty for sin is paid and now because we are “*in Christ,*” God looks upon the believer as righteous, complete and perfect. We are justified. God accepts what Christ has done for us, and reckons it to our account, and now as He see us in Christ, we are,

“To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:6-7).