

## **OUR FIRST RESURRECTION – PART ONE: THE PLOT THICKENS**

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One of the rallying cries of the Reformation was *sola Scriptura*. Each generation must reclaim the interpretation of the Scriptures afresh for its own day. Even as the Lord became incarnate at a particular point in time and space, so likewise his Word to us is enfleshed in time and space. The individual books of the Bible must be read on their own terms and within their own immediate contexts as ancient documents from a different culture. We need to reclaim the proper interpretation of God’s Word in context, and that task always begins within the most immediate setting within the biblical book itself. Later on in this hour, we will have an opportunity to do just that when we apply ourselves to Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. But alas, that is to get ahead of ourselves.

I was assigned by the conference organizers with a definite, very specific topic that included very specific texts. The “Emmaus Conference” is named after Jesus’ appearance in his resurrected body on the road to Emmaus to two of his disciples. So, it is fitting that the topic for my three hours with you is about the resurrection, in this case specifically, “Our First Resurrection.” Now you may have noticed the “first” in that title. “Our First Resurrection” presupposes that there is at least a “second” resurrection. You may also have noticed the possessive pronoun “our.” So the “first resurrection” is something that pertains to each of us and is to be followed by our “second resurrection.” So the question is: where in the Scriptures do we hear of “our first resurrection?”

A quick question: Do all of you like to read books? How do you read your books? Do you start at the beginning and read to the very end? My guess is that many of us

would probably do that. I find that I don't have as much time to read these days as I used to. I don't get many opportunities to read books outside of my professional work, and when I do, I rarely have time to start at the beginning and read to the very end. Just never enough time. Quite often, I find myself browsing cover descriptions of the book or scanning the pages. My favorite way to tackle a book when short on time, as usual, is to start at the very end and work backwards. Admittedly, the results can sometimes be kind of strange. You already know the punchline before you hear the rest of the joke. You already know where the book is heading. I like that, though, since it tells me whether I should read the rest of the book. But there are some book endings that can seem a real riddle. If you haven't read what comes before, it's not always clear in a particular instance what exactly the ending is supposed to be answering.

For those of you traditionalists out there who like to start your books at the very beginning, my apologies. You're probably right to do that. Please bear with me. I have chosen to begin our talk at the very end. And just like with many other end-first beginnings, we have some real mysteries to deal with here. Only one New Testament text speaks of a "first resurrection," and it's in the Book of Revelation. So I was not surprised that the conference organizers specified Revelation 20 as one of the texts they wanted me to address for our topic.

## I. Our "First Resurrection"

### A. Revelation 20

To set the stage and the context, we need to go back in time and imagine the Judaism of Jesus's day and the first Christians'. Although there were a variety of views in

Judaism about what would happen after people died, especially the faithful—whether they stayed dead or rose again—many Jews, especially those of the Pharisaic and apocalyptic variety, believed in a physical resurrection of the dead. They were convinced that a day would come when the dead would rise. The first Christians shared with these Jews the hope, the conviction that there would definitely be a physical resurrection. Although there were a variety of beliefs in what is called Second Temple Judaism about what would happen after death, the Christians, for their part, were absolutely *convinced* that there would be a bodily resurrection because, after all, Christ himself had risen from the dead. But that’s precisely where the plot thickens. From a Jewish perspective, as were the first Christians, something very strange happened. Christ rose from the dead, ... but only Christ. Wasn’t it supposed to happen all at once? God would at some point raise his people, just like the dry bones in Ezekiel brought together to reconstitute a people. The funny thing is that Christ rose from the dead, but the rest of the dead did not rise with him, at least not yet. The resurrection got started with a single individual, but then it abruptly stopped as soon as it seemed to have begun. Christ’s resurrection appears to have ended up getting divided off from the resurrection of the rest of us. Now as if that were not strange enough, the Book of Revelation—itself a very strange book—takes all this a step further. The resurrection of humanity, which comes after Christ’s, is *itself* taking place in two stages. Revelation chapter 20 is unique in the New Testament in that it speaks of a *first* resurrection of people:

Revelation 20:4-6: [4] “Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or

its image on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. [5] (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. [6] Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests with God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.”<sup>1</sup>

The passage then continues that after the thousand years, Satan is released from his prison for a final battle before being thrown into the lake of fire forever. In verses 11 to 15:

[11] “Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. [13] And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; [15] and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Did you catch something strange here? If there is a “first resurrection,” why is it that we never hear of a “second resurrection” when presumably all people, great and small, are raised from the dead to face the judgment. We read of a “second death” but never of a “second resurrection.” It’s a curiosity to which we’ll have to return in a moment. Why no

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<sup>1</sup>NRSV, unless otherwise specified

mention of a second resurrection? Maybe John assumed we would recognize in the verses we have before us the description of a second resurrection. If so, he did not make that assumption clear or explicit in the chapter. Perhaps the best way to tackle the mysteries of this chapter is to take a step back and ask what it is that John is labeling the “first resurrection” back in verses 4-6. The Book of Revelation is not an easily tamed animal. In these sequences of visions, not all is as clear as we would like. But then again, visions are not always meant to be perfectly obvious or clear. This is a genre of images and metaphors.

Indeed, despite confident assertions to the contrary from almost every quarter, Revelation 20 is a very difficult passage for everyone involved... everyone! Take, for instance, the “premillennialists” who like to talk about the rapture that will take place before the Great Tribulation and Jesus’ thousand year reign on earth. Many of you have heard of the best-selling *Left Behind* series, right?<sup>2</sup> The authors believe that the first resurrection here is referring to the resurrection of all the believers in Christ during the “rapture” that takes place just before a dark seven-year period of tribulation and then the earthly, thousand-year reign of Christ. So the resurrected, risen saints get to enjoy Christ’s thousand-year earthly reign, and then, after all that, the rest of the dead will be raised to face their judgment. But does this Revelation passage really teach the resurrection of all of the dead believers in Christ before his thousand-year reign? If only it were so clear or obvious. If you look carefully, you’ll notice that John does not have in mind *all* of the righteous believers in Christ. In fact, he may not even have in mind all the martyred. If we limit ourselves to what John actually says in these verses, he clearly

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<sup>2</sup>By Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins

specifies those who have been beheaded for their witness. *They* are the ones who experience the “first resurrection.”

Although in a different context from a bit earlier, John in Revelation 6:9 had referred to “those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given.” Perhaps John has in mind by the “beheaded” those who were martyred in general as he had earlier in 6:9. Whether referring specifically to those who had been beheaded or to martyrs in general, clearly the group at issue here does not exhaust all those who have died as believers in Christ. Later in the chapter in verses 11-15 others will be raised, and in that group that is raised from the dead later, some will have their names in the book of life while others will not. In other words, more believers in Christ will be raised later *after* the first resurrection. So the “first resurrection” here in vv. 4-6 is not a resurrection of all believers but refers only to the beheaded martyrs. Much ink has been spilt by commentators trying to support their personal schemes of end-times theology who have to try to find ways around the surface meaning of this text.

Now we have been talking about the difficulties that *Left Behind* premillennialists have with this passage. Lest we attempt to remove the splinter from our neighbors’ eyes, perhaps we should address the log in our own eyes. Lutherans have historically been in the “amillennial” camp. In the amillennial scheme, we are not looking forward to some *future* millennial reign of Christ on earth from the city of Jerusalem. No, we amillennialists would contend that the thousand year reign of Christ on earth began when Jesus decisively defeated Satan on the cross. This focus on Jesus’ decisive victory at the cross is surely the emphasis of Scripture and is on the right track. Jesus is the victorious Lamb throughout the Book of Revelation, and we will be compelled to come back to that

point later on. For the amillennial interpreter, the thousand years, a conspicuous number—ten times ten times ten—refers to a complete period of time before the judgment as Christ rules on this earth in the lives of his saints. That means that we as believers in Christ are right now, already ruling with Christ on this earth. Whereas the premillennialists place the victorious reign of Jesus Christ in the future, amillennialists see this binding and casting of Satan into the pit as a reference to what took place at the cross of Christ. I love Mel Gibson’s picture of the unhooded Satan in despair at the moment of Christ’s death. The victorious reign is taking place *now*. The New Testament treats the resurrection of Christ as the proof of a glorious and decisive victory that took place two thousand years ago.

But what are we amillennialists to do with the notion of a “first resurrection” in Revelation 20:4-6? Lutheran exegete Siegbert Becker, in his popular *Revelation* commentary, adopted the standard amillennial view that the first resurrection is a “*spiritual*” resurrection.<sup>3</sup> Christians have been raised from spiritual death to life thanks to Christ. He points to passages such as John 5:25-29 and Romans 6:1-11 as parallels. That’s interesting. Those were exactly the two other passages that were assigned to me for these lectures. So we are starting to get a handle on what the conference organizers were envisioning. They were thinking in rather standard amillennial terms of a spiritual resurrection of believers in which we now reign with Christ. So it’s really “*our*” first resurrection, a resurrection that we already now possess and we’re already enjoying. If only it were so simple....

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<sup>3</sup>Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 311-12.

I think we're going to have to admit that Revelation is a very difficult animal to tame. Not only do the premillennialists stumble over these verses, so also do we amillennialists. The problem is that the word "resurrection" in the Greek (ἀνάστασις) always refers to a bodily resurrection unless there are really good reasons in the context to think otherwise. That sort of context otherwise is precisely what is lacking in Revelation 20. John is referring here to the beheaded martyrs who were punished for their witness to Jesus Christ. In the context of literal martyrdom and death, "resurrection" has its most frequent and normal meaning. Those martyred prove the real victors as they are raised back to life again. Consider the encouragement of Daniel 12:1-3 as the author looks forward to the day when the martyred Jews will be brought back to life again. They may have been violently murdered, but they will prove in the end the victors when God vindicates them. The same is going to happen to the beheaded martyrs for the sake of Christ. They may kill believers in the Lord, but God guarantees that his own will rise from the grave victorious. Even more, Revelation 20 establishes a clear sequence: first, the martyrs give their witness of faith in Jesus Christ. Then they are beheaded for that witness. After being beheaded, these martyred believers enjoy the "first resurrection." That resurrection vindicates them in their witness even as Jesus' resurrection vindicated him in his saving work on the cross. So in this context, resurrection should be just that, a bodily rising from the dead in which God vindicates those who died for their witness.

Admittedly, we amillennialists—and I include myself in that group—we really want to have that "first resurrection" refer to a "spiritual" resurrection. It's just not working out the way we would like. Perhaps we can get around John's use of the word "resurrection" in that phrase "first resurrection" by going back to Revelation 20:4 where

John talks about the martyrs' "coming to life again" (ἐζήσαν). Does the verb that John uses there prove that he is thinking in terms of the soul coming back to life again but not the body? Is he talking about spiritual life? Unfortunately, the verb does not really offer any such proof. In Revelation 2:8, Jesus' resurrection is described as his "coming to life again." So the verb "coming to life" can just as well refer to a bodily resurrection. The fact is, the martyred are vindicated when they are resurrected in their bodies and put to work in Christ's reign over the earth. It is very difficult to escape the ordinary meaning of "resurrection" in Revelation 20.

So we need to be very clear about what this text is saying. If the "first resurrection" refers to our coming to faith which takes place during our lives, why is it that in Revelation the first resurrection takes place after getting martyred for one's faithful witness? The beheaded martyrs who subsequently enjoy the "first resurrection" were believers in Christ *before* they were martyred. These were people who paid the ultimate price for their witness as believers before their "first resurrection." The "first resurrection" does not in this context refer to being brought to faith in Christ. This Revelation passage does not yield its mysteries very easily.

Must this passage remain a mystery? Perhaps. One attractive proposal advanced by the Anglican bishop and biblical scholar N. T. Wright, along with a few others, takes the participants in the "first resurrection" as those bodily raised and now present in the new Jerusalem, yes, the very Jerusalem that will later on descend from the heavens to the earth. These martyrs serve as a sort of "advance guard," just like the risen Lord Jesus, for the rest of those who will be raised at the Last Day. Indeed, one might even consider the beheaded martyrs a firstfruit, that is, a sign and guarantee of the bodily resurrection of the

rest of us. They are an honored, privileged lot who serve as a sign of God's faithful promises for the rest of the believers in Christ.<sup>4</sup> Those like the beheaded apostle Paul, my personal favorite, or the beheaded disciple James are reigning in life from the new Jerusalem with Christ himself at their head. Indeed, several early Christian authors pointed to the martyrs as a special group already enjoying the bodily resurrection in heaven.<sup>5</sup> I make no claim here to have tamed what may be untamable. The early Christians offer us a hypothesis for further investigation down the road. My point is that the concept of "first resurrection" as a spiritual resurrection of believers in Christ is, in all likelihood, foreign to this passage.

#### B. John 5:24-26

Now the conference organizers juxtaposed for me Revelation 20 with John 5:24-25 and the first verses of Romans 6. So do these passages offer support for what we might call a "first resurrection," even if Revelation 20 does not? Perhaps these two passages provide firmer grounds for a spiritual resurrection in which we now live as believers? The first of the two passages, John 5:24-26, reads:

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will

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<sup>4</sup>N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, 3; Minneapolis: Minn.: Fortress, 2003), 470-76.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Hermas, Sim. 9.28.5-6; 3.1.9; 3.2.1; *Epistle of the Apostles* 15 Coptic; *Epistle of Vienne and Lyons* V.1.5, 23-24, 27, 29, 36, 42; V.2.3, 7; VI.1.16; *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (Nartzalus). For discussion, see Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 95-96, 137, 140-41, 206-7.

hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”

The language that John uses here is the verb “live” (ζῶω). As we keep on reading in John chapter 5, notice that the apostle will reserve the noun “resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) for what takes place later, after we have died. In the very next verses, John 5:27-29:

[27] ... and he has given him [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. [28] Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice [29] and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

So John distinguishes the passing from death to life that takes place with our coming to faith *from* the resurrection that takes place at the Last Day. Just like in the Book of Revelation, John reserves “resurrection” language for the bodily rising from the grave. John does, however, make the point that the resurrection to come at the Last Day is already impacting the present in the sense that people’s belief or unbelief in Jesus serves as a sign of their future fate. In other words, the spiritual life that we believers now enjoy in Christ will continue beyond the grave through the resurrection. As believers pass from death to life in faith, that new life will never die. The body may go to the grave, but it will rise again when it hears the voice of the Lord. So John distinguishes the “resurrection” which remains in the future from the benefits of eternal “life” that begin already in the present. To cast a quick sideways glance as further support, in John 6:54 those who eat Christ’s flesh and drink his blood have (present tense) eternal life and Christ will (future tense) raise them up on the last day. The flesh and blood of Christ

bring about in the present a life eternal that guarantees for us a future resurrection. John 5, then, is consistent with Revelation 20 in the sense that “our first resurrection” is actually our *only* resurrection, and that resurrection is still to come when our bodies rise from the grave.

### C. Romans 6:1-5

We have limited ourselves up to this point to the literature left behind by the apostle John. I can't help but ask: what does *Paul* say in the first verses of Romans 6?

That passage reads:

[1] What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism unites the believer to Christ, and, as a result, we share in Christ's death. In sharing in Christ's death we “died to sin,” as verse 2 puts it. So if Jesus died, and we share in that death, did he not also rise again? So does that mean that we have already risen with Christ as well? Actually, no. Paul is clear that our sharing in Christ's resurrection is still to come. He uses the future tense in verse 5: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we *will* certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” One way for sophisticated biblical types to navigate around this future tense is to

say that it is a logical future rather than an actual future. For instance, consider the sentence “If you have locked the door, we *will be* safe.” If the door is locked, you are *already* safe. The future is logical and not temporal. But a logical future is not likely in this context. Paul is very consistent in his language throughout Romans. In Romans 2:7 Paul is clear that the gift bestowed *at the final judgment* is “life eternal”: “To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he *will give* eternal life.” In Romans 8:10-11 Paul again contrasts the present death of our bodies with our future life: “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead *will give* life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” Again, notice the future tense: “will give life.” So in Romans 8:23, a paragraph later: “we *wait* for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” The redemption of our bodies is still to come. So Romans 6 is consistent with John 5 and with Revelation 20. Paul is very clear that the resurrection of our bodies is still to come. We are not yet participating in the resurrection. And this tends to be the rule for how Paul thinks about the resurrection—it’s still in the future for us. Any notion of a present enjoyment of the resurrection, whether bodily, spiritual, or metaphorical by faith, is contrary to Paul’s thinking in his Letters to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, the Philippians, or Philemon.

Even as we began our talk today at the very end, the Book of Revelation, and found ourselves scratching our heads, we leave John 5:24-28 and Romans 6 still scratching our heads. The assigned texts simply do not teach the notion that Christians who enjoy spiritual life in Christ are somehow already participating in the bodily

resurrection, whether literally or metaphorically. That is still to come at the end of time. So is the notion of a spiritual or metaphorical resurrection of our bodies in this life completely and utterly absent in the New Testament? Does the New Testament *ever* teach a metaphorical resurrection of the believer? Fortunately for the purposes of our conference (and our conference organizers), it does.

## II. Our “First Resurrection” in Colossians and Ephesians

Pauline specialists regularly point to his Letter to the Ephesians and to his Letter to the Colossians for the otherwise unusual notion that Christians are enjoying the future resurrection even now. In fact, the textbooks on the apostle Paul regularly claim that he could not have written these letters because they differ from his undisputed letters in making this very claim. The notion that the Christian is enjoying the future resurrection even now that we see in Colossians and Ephesians stands at odds with the rest of Paul’s letters. Is this proof, then, that Paul did not write Colossians and Ephesians? At least that is the rather frequent claim people make when they attribute these letters to the apostle’s first followers. I have no intention of addressing the authorship of Colossians or Ephesians as such in the short time we have together. Personally, I find the evidence in favor of Pauline authorship much more persuasive. For our purposes right now, I want to limit myself to that apparent tension between the present resurrection of the believer in these two letters and the future resurrection in Paul’s other letters. I really think that these two letters offer us a more viable starting point for the key concepts, if not the exact terminology, of “Our First Resurrection.”

To review for a second: in Romans 6, we were [already] buried with Christ in baptism and we *will* be raised even as Christ has been. In Colossians 2:12-13, on the other hand, Paul goes further: he adds that we were *already raised* in faith and *made alive* with Christ, using what is called the aorist verb tense in Greek for events that have already happened in the past: “When you were buried with him in baptism, you *were* also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God *made* you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses.” Paul then explains in Colossians 3:1-3: “So if you *have been* raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, [3] for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [4] When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” Paul speaks in these passages in a metaphorical sense of the Christian’s present “resurrection” although, even here, this resurrection is still “hidden with Christ in God.” Our appearing with him in glory is still expressed in the future tense. Paul therefore admonishes believers to think about heavenly realities rather than earthly realities. So in Colossians 2 and 3 we do have a resurrection that is hidden with the Messiah that anticipates the fullness that is still to come.

Likewise in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, the Christian’s future resurrection is already enjoyed in the present. In Ephesians 2:4-7:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us [5] even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly

places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

In this text we are not only made alive but also raised up and seated in the heavenly places. And this heavenly status means that we have work to do in the present. So in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Paul then relates in the following verses how the gentiles have been included in God’s salvation thereby forming in Christ a new humanity (2:11-22).

#### A. Colossians as Paul’s Earlier Letter

We have good reason to interpret this passage in Ephesians alongside the Colossians passages. Paul appears to be drawing from his Letter to the Colossians even as he writes Ephesians. If you ever read both letters side by side, you will quickly notice how several passages in both letters appear to be very closely parallel:

Colossians	Ephesians
1:1-2	1:1-2
1:17-19	1:22-23
2:19	4:16
3:16	5:19-20
3:18-4:1	5:21-6:9
4:7-8	6:21-22

In fact, one third of Colossians’ content is there in the Letter to the Ephesians. Half of the Ephesians sentences show at least some borrowing from Colossians. Perhaps I have

prejudged the matter of which letter came first. Which letter was it that formed the basis, or template, for the other? Arguably, Ephesians seems to be dependent on Colossians as the earlier letter and not vice versa. The meaning of Colossians 3:25's "there is no partiality" gets clarified by Ephesians 6:9's "there is no partiality *with him*," that is, with the Lord in heaven. It looks like Ephesians may have been clarifying Colossians at this point. To give you another example, Colossians 2:19 has some rather awkward language: "not holding fast to the head, from whom [is] the whole body" (οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἔξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα). Ephesians 4:15-16 seems to be a later clarification of Colossians 2:19: "the head is Christ, from whom [is] the whole body" (ἡ κεφαλὴ, Χριστός, ἔξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα). More likely an author would clean up awkward language when they drew on a prior rather than deliberately introduce awkwardness, especially into what was already clear. I find it almost the rule that when I draw on my earlier work my subsequent work is clearer and better worded than my original. That seems to be the case here as well. It looks like Paul drew on Colossians while writing Ephesians. In any case, whichever is the direction of the dependence, Paul seems to have written the two letters in close proximity of each other. So I don't think that we should be surprised that they both share the metaphorical concept of the Christian's resurrection.

So why do these letters have what appears to be otherwise novel in Paul? Why did Paul introduce in these letters a *present* resurrection? My suggestion is that we look for that answer in Colossians, since it was probably the source for Ephesians. What was it that led Paul in Colossians to take the further step of speaking of the resurrection life as a present reality for the believer? In answering that question, a quick caveat is in order: Sometimes people overlook the fact that Paul was not writing a textbook on doctrinal

theology. He was writing *letters* to individual churches, and his correspondence was addressing concrete issues in those local churches. Like listening to one end of a telephone conversation, or, dare I say, a cell phone conversation, there is much that we will never know about those churches and the situations involved, but we can at least collect what information we have and see if it sheds light on why Paul wrote his letter as he did. Is there a coherent picture that forms as to what the circumstances were that forced Paul to write what he did? Perhaps there is a good rationale behind the present enjoyment of the resurrection in Colossians.

#### B. A Concrete Situation at Colossae: The False “Philosophy”

According to Colossians 2:1 Paul has not visited Colossae nor had he founded this congregation: they have not seen him “face to face.” The church there had been founded, according to 1:7-8 and 4:12-13, by a guy named Epaphras who has been teaching them. Also, it turns out in 4:9 that Onesimus, whose master was Philemon, lived in Colossae. You may recall that Paul had written a letter to Philemon with respect to Onesimus. Now the Christians in Colossae were of largely gentile or non-Jewish origin. In 1:21 they were once “estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” That gentile identification is explicit in 1:27—Paul calls them gentiles—and Colossians 2:13 refers to how they had been dead in their trespasses and in the uncircumcision of their flesh. So the Colossians were gentiles and not Jews.

Things had initially gone well after their church was founded. According to 1:4-6, their faith had prospered. In 2:5, the morale and firmness” of their faith was a cause for rejoicing. But in 1:7-8 and 4:12-13 we learn that Epaphras has brought news to Paul,

news of a threat to the church's faith. A troublesome new teaching had entered the congregation. According to 2:8, false teachers were now present in the congregation and had brought with them a "philosophy" that many of the Colossians felt was compatible with their Christian faith. Although the precise identity of the false teachers is not entirely clear, certain aspects of their "philosophy" are. We can reconstruct a lot of the elements of their teaching as we read Paul's letter.

The Colossian "philosophy" was concerned with, according to 2:8, cosmic powers or the "elemental spirits of the universe." Rather than being material elements like earth, air, fire and water, these "elemental spirits" were divine beings who, it was thought, exercised control over the world and, as such, were worthy of special veneration. The "worship of angels" in 2:18 was probably linked to the veneration of the "elemental spirits" in 2:8 or even to the "principalities and powers" that Paul mentions in 2:15. Apparently, one's relationship with these cosmic powers was supposed to bring about the experience of God's "fullness." Thanks to these supernatural powers, the believer could experience the presence of God even more fully. The possessors of this divine fullness, in 2:18, claimed "visions" of divine things. They even became proud of their insights. Colossians 2:18 describes the false teachers at Colossae as "puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking." So from these verses we learn that the false teachers had claimed visions to experience God's power and the supernatural more fully.

This false philosophy was also ascetic, that is, it was world-denying. It involved "self-abasement," as 2:18 put it. In 2:16, the false teachers judged people on the basis of "food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath." New moon? Sabbath? While the Colossian Christians were themselves gentiles, the false teachers

were clearly Jewish. They brought with them a Jewish liturgical calendar and Jewish dietary practices. They were teaching the Colossian believers to shun the world. They said, according to 2:21: “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.” Paul describes this in 2:23 as self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body.” They saw circumcision in 2:11 as a means of stripping “off the body of the flesh.” Circumcision would therefore provide the means of overcoming the flesh of this world. Paul says in response in 2:23 that these rituals are actually “of no value in checking over-indulgence.” As proof, in 3:5-7, he points to their own problems with sinful overindulgence. The Jewish philosophy was not helping them deal with sin, and he responds that these regulations were not helping provide any real ethical guidance either.

To summarize: the message of Jesus Christ was getting subordinated to a Jewish religious system which emphasized certain rules about diet and the observance of special days, along with an emphasis on visions and angels. That emphasis in Colossians 2:18 on visions and the worship of angels fits an apocalyptic form of Second Temple Judaism that was rather common in the first century and before.<sup>6</sup>

In the centuries before Christ there was this large body of Jewish literature that had sprung up in the genre of an apocalypse. Basically, the gist of this genre is that an angelic figure would show up on behalf of God and whisk the human seer away on a journey through the various levels of heaven above or through the various epochs of time: past, present, and future. These visions were often rather overwhelming and incredible to the merely human visionary, and so the seer would often fall to the ground in the

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<sup>6</sup>On the non-existence at this point of Gnosticism, see especially Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (trans. Carol Harrison; New York: Harper & Row, 1990), and Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

mistaken impression that the angel who had taken them on the journey must be God.<sup>7</sup> Could that explain the reference to the veneration of the angels in Colossians 2:18? In this Second Temple apocalyptic literature, the angels would keep records of people's deeds, whether good or evil. Perhaps that explains the Colossians' emphasis on proper ethical living toward the end of the book. The Colossian opponents seem to have viewed the Mosaic Law as the first step toward a higher spirituality. The false teachers were apparently encouraging a rigorous observance of Moses' Law in order to combat the flesh and thereby prepare the Colossians to receive those angelic visions *themselves*. Or perhaps the Jewish teachers encouraged Law-observance in view of the judgment scenes that they had witnessed in their visions. We see just such a judgment scene at stake in Colossians 2:14 with its reference to "the record that stood against us with its legal demands." The elements of the Colossian "philosophy" conform well with an apocalyptic form of Second Temple Judaism. So, the question becomes, how then does Paul respond to these teachings?

### C. The Response to the False Teaching and the Letter's Theology

With all this emphasis on angels and supernatural realities, Paul responds by presenting himself as a powerful figure whose ministry is worldwide in scope. According to 1:23 and 1:25 he ministers with "divine" credentials "to every creature under heaven." In 1:5-8 and 1:24-29 he is the apostle to the nations and is of world-wide renown. And yet this powerful Paul of world-wide renown is attending to this tiny, little church in a tiny, little city in the remote Lycus River valley of Asia Minor. For all their concern with

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<sup>7</sup>For a helpful starting point, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2d ed.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

heavenly mysteries and angelic figures, Paul presents himself as a figure they had better heed if they have any sense. And Paul is quite clear in 2:22 that they are being exposed to anything but a divine or angelic message. On the contrary, they are being taught merely “human commands and teachings.” In 2:8 they are being taught “philosophy and empty deceit.”

All this emphasis from the false teachers on Moses’ Law and on angelic visions has taken the focus away from the vital importance of Jesus Christ’s saving work. Paul emphasizes in response that we must hold fast to Christ. Whereas these Jewish teachers venerated the “elemental spirits” and angels, Paul subordinates those angels and powers to a sort of cosmic Christ who stands over the universe and therefore stands over those angels and powers. So a proper understanding of Christ is essential in getting our faith right. In 1:20 Jesus is the crucified one. We must never lose sight of that saving work. In 2:12 he is the one who rose from the dead, a resurrection that vindicates God’s Messiah. In 3:1 he is even reigning in heaven at God’s right hand. And, in 3:4, he will come again in glory. This Christ exercises a world-wide, cosmic dominion over all principalities and powers. For that matter, in 1:16 all things were created through him and for him, whether visible or invisible. What this means is that the angelic beings mistakenly worshiped by the Colossian teachers were themselves created by Christ. According to 1:17 the entire universe is being held together in and by Christ. Everything would fall apart without his involvement. Jesus, and no other, is Lord over the “elements” or cosmic forces that the Colossians are mistakenly venerating. In 3:1 he rules the earth from above, from God’s right hand. In 1:19 and 2:9 the fullness of the Deity dwells in Christ bodily. Jesus is God incarnate! In Christ, according to 2:3, reside “treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And

then in 2:11, Christ's circumcision is "made without hands." All this, mind you, is in Christ, and Christ alone. So in 2:15 Christ disarms and subjugates the celestial powers worshiped by the Colossians. Through Christ's reconciliation, the whole cosmos is brought back into a divine order. The Colossians' focus has simply gone astray from their Lord and Creator.

Now, interwoven with this picture of Christ ruling over the entire universe as its Creator and Lord, is the image of a universal church with Christ as its head. The worldwide church corresponds to Paul's cosmic Christ. Christ stands as head over his church, and so, in 2:19, the Colossians must hold fast to Christ as their head. In 2:14 the powers that had been arrayed against believers have, in Christ, been "disarmed" and rendered impotent. In the end, these powers cannot really do harm. And according to 2:11-13, it is baptism that takes the Christian into this powerful, new reality in the ruling Christ. The baptism which the Colossians had received is vastly superior to circumcision since baptism was not done by human hands and it incorporates one into a union with the powerful, reigning Christ. In other words, the Colossians already possess a status of infinitely greater value than what their teachers were promoting.

Entering into a oneness and identity with Christ through baptism has profound implications in the lives of believers. First of all, Paul emphasizes that the Colossians have no need of the Jewish observances since they are *already* the people of God through Christ. They do not need to be circumcised or join Israel to experience the status of being God's own. Baptism not only unites the believer with God's people in Christ, it also offers genuine power for a new and changed life. The Jewish teachers had been warning of God's judgment in 2:13-15 and, in view of that judgment, giving the Colossians rules

for how to live (2:23). One can just imagine the heavenly court scenes with the accusing angel and Moses' Law as the standard of judgment. Where the Jewish teachers had been pointing to Moses' Law with circumcision and purity rules (2:16, 21), Paul says in response in 2:20-22—you want to do that?—you might just as well return to your former lives as gentiles. Those laws deal with things destined to perish and not with eternal matters (2:22). In 2:17 the Mosaic Law was only a shadow of the things to come. The cross, in 2:14 “erased the record that stood against us with its legal demand.” Christ has brought full forgiveness as our sins are nailed to the cross (2:13-14; cf. 1:14, 20, 22).

So Paul deliberately emphasizes everything that the Colossians already now possess by using the past tense. He wants to reassure them that all their spiritual needs have been fully satisfied thanks to Christ. In 1:13 they have *already* been rescued from the authority of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. In 1:14 they have *already* been redeemed and granted forgiveness of sins. In 1:22 they have *already* been reconciled to God. In 2:14 Christ has *already* forgiven their transgressions. He has nailed all those nasty accusations of the Law to the cross. According to 2:15, Christ has *already* triumphed over all the accusing forces and has deprived them of their power and authority. And as we narrow in on Paul's resurrection language, in 2:12 the Colossians have *already* died and been raised with Christ. Paul is emphasizing the powerful new realities in which the Colossians already share in Christ. And if the Colossians are *already* seated with Christ in the heavens at God's right hand, according to 3:1, why would they search elsewhere for access to the heavenly realms? Why would they fear God's heavenly tribunal of judgment? The greatest source of power in this life is already theirs! So Paul deliberately speaks of the resurrection from the dead as if it has

already happened for the Colossians in order to assure them of the power and forgiveness that they already possess in Christ. The Colossians are *already* co-reigning with the victorious Christ. *You* are already co-reigning with the victorious Christ. For Paul there are no “have-not” Christians. There are no powerless Christians in this world. Those who have been baptized into Christ already possess the powers of the age to come. Too often in our lives our eyes drift elsewhere seeking something we, ironically, already have.

And Paul is convinced that the lives of Christian people will concretely manifest the difference that Christ makes, to the point of putting to shame the Law of Moses. Whereas the Jewish teachers contributed to people’s being “puffed up” in 2:18, Paul admonishes instead that they “put on love” for the sake of unity and teach each other “in all wisdom” (see 3:14, 16). Where the Jewish teachers espoused such world-denying rules as “Do not handle” and “Do not touch,” Paul affirms our relationships in this world: In 3:18-4:1: “Husbands, love your wives .... Children, obey your parents... Fathers, do not provoke your children....” We are to obey the chain of authority here on earth “for you also have a master in heaven.” Indeed, for by living in this way in the world we demonstrate the heavenly realities already at work in our midst.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the specific, concrete situation at Colossae dictated a new emphasis in Paul’s teaching for their church.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish teachers there had espoused apocalyptic visions and the veneration of angels and Moses’ Law as a means of preparing

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<sup>8</sup>David Scaer’s response to this paper mistakenly concluded from my presentation that Paul does affirm throughout his letters a “first resurrection” of the believer. I argued, rather, that the philosophy at Colossae dictated the shift in emphasis. Paul in his undisputed letters clearly reserves the resurrection for the future. The content of Paul’s letters is shaped, in part, by the particular situations he is addressing. The situations behind, say, Romans or Galatians are very different from the situation behind Colossians.

for God's judgment. Where the teachers had boasted of heavenly angels and visions, Paul presents *true* heavenly power in Jesus Christ, and in a resurrection whose otherworldly power we already enjoy in this life. So our question at this point is whether Romans or Paul's other undisputed letters are at odds with the metaphorical concept of resurrection that we find here in Colossians or in Ephesians? I am hoping that as we continue, you will soon gain a sense from Paul of the tremendous, genuine otherworldly and post-resurrection power that is erupting into our present. The power of the age to come is overwhelmingly present already now, more so than most Lutherans usually recognize. In view of the tremendous power available to us in our daily Christian lives, I am delighted for the opportunity to speak to you about the resurrection power at work in our lives. Paul is an apocalyptic thinker who views Christians as a people caught up in the transition of the ages from this world to the age to come. In our next hour, we will turn our attention to a similar struggle against those advocating a false power from Moses' Law in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. I hope that you will soon come to see why I would rather call our three talks together "Living in Victory"!

**“OUR FIRST RESURRECTION” – PART TWO:  
RESURRECTION POWER IN GALATIANS**

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To recap for you briefly our last hour: as is the case with the rest of the New Testament, the apostle Paul does not have much to say about the notion of a “first resurrection,” with the exception of Colossians and Ephesians. So are Colossians and Ephesians developing a concept that is at odds with what Paul has to say elsewhere in his letters? In this next hour I hope to demonstrate that Colossians and Ephesians were developing for their particular situational contexts the basic concepts that were already present in Paul’s other letters. The notion of a “first resurrection” assumes that the anticipated end of all things is already invading our world in the present and that we are already sharing, at least in part, in the powers of the age to come.

The notion that the world to come is already invading the present is part and parcel of Paul’s apocalyptic worldview. “Apocalyptic” is one of those million-dollar theological terms. Amaze all your friends and family. In the 1970’s scholars put their heads together to work out a formal definition of the apocalyptic genre of literature. This was a genre of literature that was popular among Second Temple Jews in Paul’s day as well as in the centuries before. In this literature an angelic guide would suddenly show up and take the human seer on a journey of the various levels of heaven or on a tour of the various successive epochs of time. Now Paul, mind you, is not writing an apocalypse. In our Bibles, the Books of Daniel and Revelation would fall into that genre. Those two books are what are called temporal apocalypses as Daniel and John, respectively, witness how time will unfold in the future. Paul is writing letters but, at the same time, he shares

in that apocalyptic worldview. Even as the authors of apocalypses believed in a hidden world full of angels and demons, Paul too believes in realities that we cannot see populated by angels and demons, by God and the devil. He shares a belief in the various levels of heaven and an age that is still to come.<sup>9</sup> In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, for instance, he writes: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” The apostle writes of the third level of heaven, a realm where matters were heard that cannot be shared. Even as a heavenly reality with its various levels stands beyond the earthly, Paul also affirms an era still to come. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

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<sup>9</sup>Much of what follows is extensively based on the comments in an appendix on Paul’s apocalyptic world view in my forthcoming Concordia Commentary on Galatians. See also Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*. For that matter, this lecture as a whole draws on my prior publications on Galatians, particularly *Paul and the Jews* (Peabody, Mass. Hendrickson, 2003).

The Lord could come at any moment, like a thief in the night as Paul puts it a few verses later (1 Thess 5:2). Since this world is soon passing away, Paul instructs the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 to live as though the time is short:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

With Christ's imminent return we will see the dawning of the fullness of the age to come. But even if we die before Christ's return, Paul assures us as believers of a resurrected body and new life in that day. In 1 Corinthians 15:

For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ... Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1 Cor 15:22-24, 51-53).

Prior to the full arrival of the world to come, Paul explains that Christians find themselves caught up in the struggle between this present world and that dawning new age. We live caught within the overlap of the ages as one world gives way to a

new one. Even the creation groans in travail while eagerly awaiting the consummation of the coming age, as Paul puts it in Romans 8 (vv. 19-23). We find ourselves anticipating the resurrection and redemption of our bodies that is still to come.

Now Paul's apocalyptic worldview entails a very practical application that often gets missed. Many Christians live their lives as if physical death marked the end of this age. As we grow older, we may become apprehensive of what we think is an impending pivotal moment that seems to be getting ever closer, the moment when our bodies will die. We imagine ourselves dead, and we wonder what it will be like as our souls wait for the world to come. From Paul's point of view, the great transition from death to life has *already* taken place. Physical death is nothing more than a mere transition from the new life that we already enjoy to still more new life. The invasion of this world by the living, resurrected Christ and his powerful Spirit along with the new creation prove that physical death is hardly the decisive event that many of us thought it to be. The Christian is *already* participating in the new creation, which will be fully realized when Christ returns. For the Christian, death is a mere going to sleep one last time and nothing more. When we arise from that slumber, we will enjoy the *fullness* of our new life.

I cannot think of a better place to turn for the remainder of this hour than to Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Paul does not use the term "first resurrection" in this letter. For that matter, he does not say much about the resurrection at all. Do you sense that the plot is thickening? Paul does, however, refer to Jesus' resurrection once, in a single verse within the letter. But it is a very important verse since it is the very first verse of the letter and it sets the stage for what follows. Paul opens with his introduction: "Paul, an apostle

not from men, nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” [my translation]. Paul refers to God as the Father who raised Christ from the dead.

The first Christians described something very strange happening. Jesus rose from the dead. As we discussed in our last hour, many of the Jews in Paul’s day looked forward to a future resurrection of *all* the dead. They never considered the possibility that it would come in stages. A Jewish person would naturally ask, “What about the rest of the dead?” But for the Christians, the very fact that Jesus rose from the dead proved that others would be rising from the dead after him. That is exactly what Paul will claim in Romans 6, a passage we will turn to in our final hour. But the point for Paul in his Letter to the Galatians is that when God raised Jesus from the dead, a powerful new age had dawned. Paul’s apocalyptic worldview is on display no less in Galatians than it is in any of his other letters. So a few verses later in Galatians 1:4, Christ suffered death for our sins, as you might expect, but even more—it was to rescue us from the present evil age! Jesus is saving us *from* one age and its reality. At the end of the letter, Paul writes in Galatians 6:14-15: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation [is everything]” [my translation]. Paul envisions two different *worlds*. Christ’s cross brings an end to one world even as it opens the door to a “new creation.” A powerful new reality, a new world is opening up for the believer in Christ.

Now the minute we start speaking of a “world,” if we were an ancient Greek, we would think of that world’s fundamental constituting elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

For the ancients, those elements always came in pairs: earth and air, and fire and water. Or if you grouped them a little differently earth and water, and fire and air. However you group them, they always come in pairs that are in opposition to each other. In terms of rarity with density, air is the opposite of earth and fire the opposite of water. In terms of the heat involved, air is the opposite of fire. In terms of moisture, water is the opposite of earth. In fact, for that matter, Paul even uses the phrase “elements of the world” in his Letter to the Galatians. It is the exact phrase he uses in Galatians 4:3, and in an abbreviated form again in 4:9.

Some translations obscure the phrase by mistakenly translating it “elemental spirits” or “elemental principles.” The translation “elemental principles” is hardly likely. Paul never presents Moses’ Law, one of the elements, as an instrument of education in first principles; no, the Law is a voice of cursing. In Galatians 3:10 Paul says that God’s curse comes upon anyone who does not do all that the Law requires. Paul then speaks of the Law in Galatians 3:25 in terms of a harsh, restraining, enslaving pedagogue. A pedagogue was a slave who restrained a child during the child’s youth. The pedagogue would take the child to and from school but was never the child’s teacher. When Paul includes the Law as one of the elements of the cosmos in Galatians 4:3-5, he is not thinking of an educational process or a process of maturation from basic principles to the more advanced. Rather, he is thinking of a decisive liberation by God’s Son from the enslaving forces of this world! Back in Galatians 3:1 Paul says that the Galatians have been blinded and bewitched! Powerful forces are asserting themselves over the Galatians. Indeed, by Galatians 4:8-9 Paul returns to the language of “elements” (στοιχεῖα) and this time it is in the context of enslaving beings which by nature are not really gods.

“Elemental principles”—as if some sort of educational process were in view—is a terrible mistranslation.

The way the word “elements” is used in 4:8-9 for enslaving beings that by nature are not really gods has led others to translate the term “elements” as “elemental spirits,” but that too is a terrible mistranslation, especially since it draws on a meaning of the word “elements” or “stoicheia” that will not be in use for arguably another two hundred years. Usually when people talk about the meaning of the word “elements” (στοιχεῖα), they treat the word in isolation from the full phrase in which it occurs: the “elements of the *cosmos*” (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). That *phrase* was used as a virtual technical term in Paul’s day for the basic elements that constituted the universe: earth, air, fire, and water.<sup>10</sup> It is never used in any other way. But alas, Paul is not talking in a literal sense about earth, air, fire, and water. What are the elements that make up the world that *Paul* has in mind? If we back up a mere four or five verses to Galatians 3:28, we learn that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female. *Here* are the opposing elements that represent the present evil age that is passing away. The enslaving Law of Moses had divided the world into Jews and Greeks, into slaves who could not fully observe the commands of Moses from the free who could, and the males who could observe God’s Law fully from the women who could not, or at least at a certain point during the month. The Law of Moses had divided the world into fundamental opposites. Paul wants to show how in the new world dawning in Christ, those opposites will be done away with replaced by a new oneness, a new unity in Christ.

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<sup>10</sup>Wis 7:17; 19:18; 2 Pet 3:10, 12; 4 Macc. 12:13; Philo *Op. Mund.* 131; *Rer. Div. Her.* 197; *Vit. Cont.* 3; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.183-84; Josephus, *J.W.* 1.377; 6.47; Philo, *Heres* 134; Wis 7:17; 19:18; 4 Macc 12:13; 2 Pet 3:10, 12; see the equivalent expression *stoicheia tes physeos* in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 986b and Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 2.251; *Aet.* 107

The opposing pairs of Galatians 3:28 therefore prepare us for Paul's discussion of the "elements of the cosmos" in 4:3. Paul goes on in 4:4: "When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" [my translation]. Some people completely misunderstand that phrase "the fullness of time." They talk about how in Paul's day there was a common government, a common language of commerce, freedom of commercial shipping, a newly-built system of roads. Some even talk about how people were losing faith in the gods of old. Actually, they were not. Even in Paul's Letter to the Galatians he alludes to the worship of Cybele, the Mother goddess of the mountain, who was so popular in Galatia. With thirty-six breasts, she was seen as a mother giving birth to her children. And it was at Cybele's Temple that you would find the laws of the people kept in storage (e.g., in Athens). Notice in Galatians 4:21-31 that Paul talks about Mt. Sinai as a *mountain* in Arabia with two *mothers* giving birth to their children. And even as Cybele's male devotees emasculated themselves to show their loyalty to her, Paul draws on some dark, inside humor to suggest in 5:13 that the rival teachers go emasculate themselves. It was an inside joke. Paul is equating and parodying circumcision as the sort of mutilation that so repulsed the Galatians with respect to the Cybele cult. There were clearly other gods that were popular in Paul's day. So to return to our question, what *does* Paul mean by "the fullness of time"? This is not about the conditions in the Roman Empire of that day. Again, Paul is continuing to speak in the apocalyptic categories of a world at its proper, designated time passing away with its constituting elements to be replaced by a new world. Paul then continues from verse 4 through verse 7: "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, <sup>5</sup>in order that he might redeem those under the Law, and in order that we might receive the adoption as

sons” [my translation]. Paul speaks of Jesus as the Father’s Son who came into this world by being born of a woman and born under the Law. This is the inauguration of a new age, the moment that God invaded it with his very own Son. In fact, a little earlier in the letter Paul talks in 1:16 about how God chose to reveal “his Son” to Paul. In truth, there really is only one true Son of God. Now this poses a serious problem for Paul in this context.

Back in Galatians 3:6-7 Paul explains how Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of his faith. He then goes on to mention those who believe even as Abraham believed. His language is actually rather emphatic. To translate somewhat literally, he stresses “the people of faith, *these*” (οὗτοι) are the children of Abraham.” Paul raises this category of the children of Abraham without any sort of introduction, as if the phrase would have already been familiar to the Galatians. And then, with that stress, with that emphasis, it is almost as if he denying a contrary point of view as to how one becomes a child of Abraham. Did his critics at Galatia raise the matter of becoming Abraham’s children? Paul treats the notion as already familiar to his audience. His rivals were arguing that one must be circumcised as Abraham was to enjoy the covenant promises as his sons and heirs. Is not that precisely what is required according to Genesis 17 when God instituted the covenant? God promised that Abraham would be the father of many “nations” (Gen 17:4), and that circumcision would signify an “everlasting covenant” (17:7). No, Paul responds, one does not have to observe Moses’ Law or be circumcised to be Abraham’s son.

Paul in Galatians 3:15-18 returns to this question—who are, or better “who *is*,” Abraham’s true “Seed,” his true child and heir. He explains in verse 17 that *Jesus* is Abraham’s one and only “Seed.” The promises to Abraham were specifically to this one,

single Seed. Jesus is the only Son of God at this point in the letter, and he is the only true Seed of Abraham and sole heir to the Abrahamic promises. So that creates a problem at this stage in Paul's unfolding logic. Paul stresses how God revealed his Son to him, the only true Son of God (1:16; cf. 2:20). If Jesus is the only true heir of the Abrahamic promises, and if Jesus is God's proper Son, how are the Galatians to become God's children? We need some sort of mechanism, an instrument to convey sonship from Christ to his followers. The real question is: what does Paul consider that instrument to be?

The next part of his logic is regularly overlooked by those of us who are Lutherans. As we reclaim the Reformation in the midst of a new day, we tend to stress Jesus' saving death that took place "for us." We think of our justification before God as he declares us righteous by faith. And often we stress forensic categories in our preaching and teaching to the point that we overlook the participatory categories that Paul often uses to equal or even greater extent. We need as Lutherans to recover a rather central aspect of Paul's thinking, a category that, if central to Paul, needs to be central in our thinking as well. Paul resolves the problem he sets out for himself in Galatians 3:15-18 in Galatians 3:26-29. In 3:26, for instance, faith places the believer literally "in Christ." Likewise baptism in verse 27 is to be "baptized *into* Christ." This preposition in Galatians 3:27 must be taken in all seriousness, as the pronoun in the very next verse shows: in verse 28 "for all of you are *one* (masculine) [*person*] *in* Christ Jesus." We have a new corporate identity in Christ and he in us. In fact, did not Paul say just that in Galatians 2:19-20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Notice, we have forensic categories at the end of

2:20: Christ who gave himself “for me.” And yet the forensic categories get subsumed into a larger participatory schema in which we are crucified “with Christ.” “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” What Paul is doing at the end of Galatians 3 is explaining how exactly this took place. The fact is, baptism and faith unite the believer to Christ. We are all, as believers, now one person in Christ. We have a new identity. We really should consider ourselves the embodiment of Christ to the world around us. Paul certainly thought in those terms. That is why he admonished the Galatians in 4:12 to “become as I am.” Paul is no egotist. The point is that, as they imitate Paul, as they become like he is, they are really becoming like the one *in* Paul. They are becoming like Christ. To follow Paul is to follow Christ himself. At the very end of that paragraph Paul laments that Christ must be formed afresh *within* the straying Galatians in 4:19.

This notion of our “oneness in Christ” is, I am contending here, the unifying idea behind Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Consider the first two chapters for a moment where Paul offers an extended autobiography. Some people think that Paul must be defending his apostleship. Actually, Paul only mentions his apostleship in a handful of instances in these chapters, but the word “gospel” is all over chapters 1 and 2. Paul is not defending his apostleship. He is defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and particularly that Gospel power as it has been embodied and at work in his own life. Many people have noted how Paul contrasts in chapter 1 his life as a persecutor with the miracle of his faith in Christ by the end of the chapter. Paul is relaying his personal story as an example of the gospel of Christ in action at work in his life. But this also means that to depart from Paul’s preaching and teaching is to depart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul had become “one” with Christ and now embodies his Lord. He embodies the gospel message in his ministry. He bears the “marks” of suffering like his Lord in Galatians 6:17.

And this is where Christ’s Spirit plays a crucial role. According to Galatians 4:6 it is because (ὅτι) of already being God’s sons that he grants the Spirit of his Son. So in Galatians 4:6 our sonship seems to precede the gift of the Spirit which seems to come later. And yet in Galatians 4:29 the Christian is “born according to the Spirit.” The Spirit gives birth to the Christian there. Likewise in Galatians 3:3 we “began” with the Spirit. The Spirit, in these latter two instances, precedes sonship. So does the Spirit come first or after becoming God’s Son? The answer is “yes.” We have misstated the question. This was never a temporal relationship. The blessings of sonship and the reception of the Spirit are simultaneous. They are inseparable. At the very moment that baptism and faith incorporate the believer “into” Christ, his death “for us” avails to us personally, and his Spirit becomes our own, even as it was the Spirit that created this new reality in the first place.

Now we are finally ready to solve the problem of the one true heir of God’s promises to Abraham, the one Son of God. Since we now are “in Christ” and his Spirit is “in” us, we share with the sole heir as fellow heirs (3:29). We therefore enjoy the rights of inheritance to which Paul turns in 4:1-7. The mechanism by which we enjoy sonship is our unity and our participation in Christ. Our identities now share in his identity. At the moment we are one with Christ by faith and baptism, what Jesus did *for* us is appropriated individually and we enjoy his Spirit. The forensic categories are subsumed

into this larger participatory scheme that, in speaking of a changed *identity*, paves the way for Paul's teachings regarding the Christian life in chapters 5 and 6. Perhaps we can rediscover and reappropriate those central participatory categories in Paul, categories that have at times been overlooked in the Lutheran emphasis on forensic justification. And yet forensic justification and corporate, participatory categories are compatible and complementary for Paul. Our people need to *identify themselves differently*. We share with Christ in the powers of the age to come. This is a very potent, power-charged reality that has tremendous implications for our day-to-day lives and struggles.

Christ's Spirit, who entered our lives, brought a new pair of opposites into our world. Now the Spirit is warring against the flesh. Paul spoke of two different worlds: the present evil age and the new creation inaugurated in Christ and his Spirit. When the Spirit invaded our lives by baptism and to create faith, the pairs of opposites of an old age fell by the wayside. In its place are a new pair of warring opposites. Paul speaks of two Jerusalems in Galatians 4:21-31 as a new pair of opposites: the one below and the one above. One child is born in slavery and the other in freedom. One is in the flesh; the other is in the Spirit. The child born according to the flesh is persecuting the child born according to the Spirit. The new world dawning in Christ is actively waging a war against the present evil age. As members of this new creation, we are battling the flesh of the present evil age from the point of view of a decisive *victory* in the resurrected Christ!

My contention is that we always battle sin from the point of view of a decisive victory in Christ with the superior power of the Holy Spirit. And this is crucial to the debate Paul was having with his Jewish Christian rivals at Galatia. They had been pressing for the Galatian gentiles to be circumcised and to adopt Moses' Law. Apparently

Paul had told them about their salvation in Christ but, from the point of view of his adversaries, he had not given them a lot of concrete direction about how they were supposed to live their lives. The Galatians had left the structure of their pagan religious pasts behind. They had left behind sacrifices and celebrations. They had left behind rules and rituals. So what did they have to replace the structure that been provided by their pagan lifestyles? Moses' Law, the Jews felt, offered both a standard for behavior and structure for their lives. How many of our people today crave that same kind of structure as they go to the Christian bookstores for ACME how-to guides to the Christian life? How should Christians handle their finances? How should Christians raise their children? How should Christians behave in the workplace or at home with their spouses? But even better than the local Christian bookstore or a merely human tradition, Paul's rivals were offering God's own Law as the ultimate standard for behavior. The rivals had combined the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ with the concrete direction provided by Moses' Law. The Law would offer the Galatians a comprehensive, new way of life to replace what they had left behind. The first step in this new way of life was for the Galatians to get circumcised.

Paul never really attacks that demand for circumcision until Galatians 5:2-12. This is actually the first time in the letter that Paul mentions the Galatians were considering circumcision. Circumcision would be their decisive step to come under the Law. That means that Galatians 5:2-12 must be a crucial moment in the letter. In fact, if you were listening to the letter being read to the original audience, you might even have gotten a sense of déjà vu. Paul's tone and content would sound familiar to you from the very beginning of the letter in 1:6-9:

- 1) First of all, he talks pretty severely in Galatians 5:10 about how the rival teachers will pay the penalty for their false teaching. Then in verse 12 he tells them to go emasculate themselves. Does not that severe tone remind us of the beginning of the letter in 1:8-9 back when he was calling down God's curse on any who would teach otherwise?
- 2) Second, in 5:8 he warns the Galatians against a persuasion that does not come from the one *who called them*, even as in Galatians 1:6 he laments how they are turning away from the one who called them—the same phrasing.
- 3) Third, in 5:4 the Galatians are falling away from God's grace in Christ even as they are falling away in 1:6.
- 4) Finally, in Galatians 5:3 he repeats himself from 5:2 even as he repeats his curse in 1:8-9.

These parallels do not prove that 5:2-12 is the climax of the letter, but they do draw our attention to this paragraph. Paul is beginning to make some crucial claims. At the same time, Galatians 5:2-12 also parallels the conclusion of the letter in 6:12-17. To outline some of those connections:

- 1) First, according to 5:3 a person must do the entire Law even as in 6:13 Paul critiques the rival teachers for not keeping the entire Law.
- 2) Second, Paul says that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” matters in 5:6; he will do so again in 6:15.
- 3) Finally, Paul points out in 5:11 that he is being *persecuted* for teaching against circumcision, even as the rivals push circumcision to *avoid* persecution in 6:12.

My point is that 5:2-12 is the beginning of a crucial section of the letter and that the links between 5:2-12 and 6:12-17 draw particular attention to all the material that is in between

(5:13-6:10). These paragraphs, 5:2-12 and 6:12-17, are an *inclusio*; they enclose the intervening material. So really have to ask: what is going on in 5:13-6:10, that enclosed material? What we have in this middle section is Paul's own approach to the Christian life. He has deliberately sandwiched his own admonitions within two paragraphs that deny the value of circumcision. In other words, what Paul has to say about the power of the Spirit is in deliberate contrast to what the rival teachers were saying about circumcision. Paul is answering the question where true power to fight the flesh is to be found. Does cutting off the flesh of the foreskin, with Moses' Law, also cut away the power of the flesh? Or is the flesh defeated by something else, or better, by *someone* else? In Galatians 5:13-6:10 Paul will make clear that the real power against the flesh is not in circumcision or in the Law of Moses but in the Spirit of Christ.

In Galatians 5:16-18 Paul writes:

[16] *But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not satisfy the desire of the flesh.*

[17] *For the flesh desires [what is] contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another in order that you do not do what you want.*

[18] *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law* (my translation).

This is a crucial moment in the letter. To work through these three verses, in Galatians 5:16 Paul begins with the words "but I say." He uses that expression at various points in the letter just before making important points (e.g., Gal 3:17, 4:1, or 5:2). The NRSV translates the literal "but I say" in each of these verses as "My point is this." The translators recognized that the phrase signals an important affirmation about to come. In this particular instance, Galatians 5:16 offers a crucial alternative to the danger Paul just

identified in 5:15 where the congregations might bite and devour each other. The fact is, a life that is no longer under Moses' Law will not lead to just *any* sort of behavior. On the contrary, instead of "walking according to the statutes of the Law" as the Old Testament regularly puts it (Exod 16:4; Lev 18:4; Jer 44:23; Ezek 5:6-7), we will walk by *the Spirit*. The Spirit will empower the genuine love that Paul just spoke of in 5:14 as "fulfilling" Moses' Law. Indeed, walking by the Spirit is the only means Paul gives for fulfilling the Law's admonition to love. The Spirit counters the desire of the flesh in a way that the Law never could.

This letter is filled with the power of God's Spirit. Back in Galatians 3:3 and 3:14 Paul reminded the Galatians how they had begun their Christian existence with the Spirit. Later in 4:6 he tells them that they had become God's sons by virtue of the Spirit. Paul envisions in 4:21-31 children born "according to the Spirit." The Galatians may have begun in the Spirit in 3:3 but now they are in danger of completing what they began with the flesh. No, Paul says, they must continue in the same way as they began: The children of the Spirit must walk by or live by the Spirit, as Paul puts it in 5:16! In 5:18, they are "being led by the Spirit." In 5:25 Paul speaks of "living by the Spirit" and "keeping in step with the Spirit." The Spirit impels *action*, movement forward. And as we do, 5:16 is clear: we will "by no means" satisfy the desire of the flesh. That phrase "desire of the flesh" is striking—it is in the singular. It is as if "desire" is the central, defining characteristic of an almost personified flesh. We could translate it as "the desiring flesh." The flesh is an active, powerful force and it is just going after us. And yet, as we walk by the Spirit, we will "by no means" satisfy its desire. Paul uses an emphatic double

negative construction in the Greek that is the most definite form of negation possible (BDF §365).

He continues in verse 17: “*For the flesh desires [what is] contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another in order that you do not do what you want.*” In Martin Luther’s 1535 Galatians commentary (AE 27:75), when Luther gets to this verse, Galatians 5:17, he begins to draw heavily on Romans 7 for his interpretation. Romans 7 provides Luther the justification he needs for a particular interpretation of this opposition of the flesh and the Spirit. By way of quick reminder, Paul describes in Romans 7 a miserable individual who cannot do the good that he knows and wants to do. In Romans 7:18 and 19, Paul writes: [18] “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I *cannot* do it. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Luther in his Galatians commentary concluded from those verses: “The flesh prevents us [Spirit-endowed Christians] from keeping the commandments of God, from loving our neighbors as ourselves, and especially from loving God with all our hearts, etc.” Did you catch the gist of that? The flesh actually *prevents* us from keeping God’s commands. Now in other paragraphs of his commentary, Luther says that the Christian is, on other occasions, victorious over the flesh, but he still grants that the flesh often acts to “prevent us” from loving God and our neighbors as we should. In other words, a conflict is taking place with very mixed results. Luther sees that fundamental opposition at work in Galatians 5:17 as the flesh and the Spirit stand at odds with each other. Sometimes the Spirit foils the flesh, but there are times when the flesh foils the Spirit. As Luther vacillates between the victory in Christ and his Spirit on the one hand and the foiling action of the flesh on

the other, it certainly sounds like the flesh and the Spirit are equal combatants in this conflict, at least from the point of view of ordinary day-to-day existence.

And this has tremendously practical implications: I had a friend at seminary who, like many of our people, struggled with sin in his life. His experience had regularly been one of defeat at the hands of sin. So he found himself, like many of us, relating to the miserable wretch in Romans 7 who wants to do what is good but cannot seem to do it. He found his desire to do what is right regularly prevented or hindered by the flesh in his life. Longstanding Lutheran interpretations of Romans 7, as well as his own personal experience, cemented in his mind the belief that Romans 7 describes a Christian failing in the struggle against sin. My friend found comfort that others, even Martin Luther, struggled with sin and regularly failed. He found comfort that the apostle Paul in Romans 7 could describe himself as failing in the struggle against sin. My friend would often despair at his inability to ward off the power of the flesh. Now there are others who may not despair like that but would rather throw up their hands in the air and just say “oh well.” They begin to acquiesce to the presence of sin in their lives. They begin to live with the sin. They become comfortable with it. They begin to shrug it off. They may seek solace in Christ’s forgiveness at the cross, but alas, the sin in their lives remains unchallenged, unchanged. There are many of our people who live their lives as if they have given up. They live in defeat. Or if not in defeat, they live as if Christ’s Spirit and the flesh were equal combatants that had wearily reached some sort of stalemate in their lives.

So what if it were true that the flesh quite frequently wins the day in the struggle against the Spirit? What, then, I ask, would distinguish the power of Christ’s Spirit from

the Law of Moses? How would the Spirit be any better? Why should the Galatians heed Paul's approach to the Christian life if they were destined on a regular basis to fail? No, Paul is offering the Galatians the only real power against the flesh, and it is a decisive power. The apostle does not envision defeat. He does not envision some sort of parity or stalemate. We Lutherans are going to have to reclaim the truth of Scripture that we battle the flesh from the point of view of Christ's decisive victory and with the genuine power of His Spirit. We need not live our lives as if the Spirit and the flesh were equal combatants in the struggle. Most people when they are reading this passage overlook the very important fact that Galatians 5:17 provides support for verse 16 for why walking by the Spirit will *by no means* satisfy the desire of the flesh. The Spirit is doing battle against the flesh and is opposing the flesh. How would Paul's positive affirmation of the Spirit's decisive power in verse 16 be supported if he envisioned parity or defeat in verse 17? Paul does not envision the flesh frustrating the Spirit or some sort of stalemate. Paul does not envision helplessness or frustration on the part of the Christian. The opposition of the Spirit of the flesh means that the desire of the flesh is foiled.

Now some might disagree with me on the basis of the phrase "what you want" at the end of verse 17. Let me explain. What if "what you want" refers to positive, God-pleasing intentions that the flesh prevents? The phrase would parallel similar wording in Romans 7:15 ("what I want" [ὃ θέλω]) which talks about righteous, positive desires that the flesh prevents from being realized. Would not that support Luther's understanding that the flesh sometimes foils the Spirit? But where else in Galatians do you ever find this notion that the flesh can successfully hinder the operation of the Spirit? Again, Galatians 5:17 is serving as grammatical support for 5:16, but it is hard to imagine how the

successful action of the flesh against the Spirit could serve as a reason *why* a person walking by the Spirit will by no means satisfy the desire of the flesh. Paul would be undermining his own case for a Spirit-empowered existence. Why would the path of Christ and his Spirit be any better than Moses' Law? Others have contended that Paul is referring in this verse to an "immature" Christian who is not adequately empowered. The problem is that Paul never otherwise hints that Christian power comes in two or more stages. He never distinguishes to the Galatians between an immature form of Christianity and a mature one. In Galatians 4:6 all who believe in Jesus Christ enjoy his Spirit. The full rights of sons are *already* ours.

A second possibility, then, is that "what you want" refers to *both* God-pleasing desires *and* sinful, fleshly intentions. The flesh desires contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires contrary to the flesh, with the result that you do not do what you want (whether according to the flesh or according to the Spirit). After all, were not both the Spirit and the flesh the subjects of the preceding, parallel clauses? This approach suggests a parity or a stalemate in the battle between the flesh and the Spirit, but if that is the case, again, how would this verse serve as support for verse 16 that the Spirit-empowered person will *by no means* satisfy the desire of the flesh? Sometimes they, in fact, *would*, but at other times, they would not. The Spirit would hardly be an effective counter against the flesh (5:22-23). But Paul never entertains a stalemate in the battle against the flesh. The Spirit will indeed bear its fruit in verses 22-23. In Galatians 5:24 those in Christ "*crucified*" the flesh. Paul uses the aorist, past tense for the flesh's crucifixion, and we should take that past tense in all seriousness. The flesh is crucified. It really is dead to us.

So perhaps “what you want” refers to the flesh’s evil desires which the Spirit prevents. The Spirit keeps the Christian from following through on “what you want” according to the flesh. Well, that interpretation rightfully recognizes the Spirit’s positive empowerment in this context. The problem is that there seems to be a parallelism in the first part of verse 17 that this approach ignores. Paul began the verse by saying that the Spirit opposes the flesh and the flesh opposes the Spirit. They oppose “*each other*.” Why should “what you want” be limited only to fleshly desires?

Let me suggest a more likely approach. Paul is making in this verse a parenthetical remark. He writes: “For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit [open parenthesis] (and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other) [close parenthesis] to prevent you from doing what you want.” Paul’s basic sentence is: “what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit to prevent you from doing what you want [that is, in accordance with the Spirit].” To go back over that, you could put brackets or parentheses just before the words “and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh” and you should put brackets or parentheses after the words “for these are opposed to each other.” All that material is a parenthesis. “What you want” would refer to positive, God-pleasing intentions in Galatians 5:17 even as is the case in Romans 7:15. Nevertheless, the flesh desires to foil those God-pleasing intentions. Paul, for his part, can barely conceive of the flesh’s opposition of Spirit-prompted desires without immediately qualifying in a parenthesis that, no, the flesh’s actions are countered by the overwhelming power of the Spirit to which the Christian has immediate access. Christians have a power available to them that is not accessible through Moses’ Law; the

Spirit neutralizes the flesh's attack.<sup>11</sup> Paul's exhortations in this chapter assume what is *genuinely possible* for the Spirit-empowered Christian. The Spirit makes a reality in the Christian's life the victory won by Jesus on the cross. A new age has dawned with Christ's Spirit that brings with it a decisive victory in which the Christian individual and the Christian community now share. Individuals stand either on the side of the Spirit *or* on the side of the flesh. The two sides are utterly incompatible. Paul never even dreams of the flesh's stymieing the Spirit.

He continues in verse 18: "*But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.*" The connective (δέ) that begins 5:18 may be a simple connective, in which case Paul is continuing his positive emphasis on the Spirit's power. But what if the Greek connection (de) signals a contrast? If that were the case, then verse 18 would be responding to the basic sentence from verse 17 that the flesh's desire opposes the Spirit. Again, if we took out the parenthetical qualification, we would have a statement that focused on the flesh's attempt to stymie the Spirit. But Paul is saying in verse 18 that that attempt has clearly failed. With verse 18's first-class conditional sentence in the Greek, Paul explains as a matter of fact that if the Galatians are led by the Spirit they are not under the Law. Christians have escaped bondage "under" (ὑπό) the enslaving forces of the present evil age.

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<sup>11</sup>Paul is capable of lengthy parentheses and difficult ellipses (e.g., Gal 2:1-10 in the Greek). On this approach to Galatians 5, see Das, *Paul and the Jews*. John M. G. Barclay (*Obeying the Truth*) took a different approach in contending that the flesh-Spirit battle means that the Christians will not do just *whatever* he or she wants. Barclay too understood this immediate context to be claiming that the Spirit prevents the flesh from expressing itself. Barclay did not see Paul envisioning parity or defeat at the hands of the flesh. One is hard-pressed to find *any* modern commentator advocating a Spirit-flesh parity or a fleshly victory in these verses.

Now the return in 5:18 to the Law is somewhat surprising. Was not the previous verse talking about the flesh? Why did Paul switch to the Law after just talking about the flesh? Galatians 5:18 is simply a reminder that Paul's ultimate concern is not so much with the flesh as with the Galatians' consideration of a Law-observant lifestyle. He is reminding the congregations that to adopt observance of the Law is to fall back "under" slavery to its commands. The Spirit will suffice for guidance. There is a dative of agency in 5:18 (and also in 5:25): we walk "by the Spirit." The Spirit's leading in 5:18 will enable the walking of verse 16. That means that in the Galatians' "Law-less" existence they will not do just "whatever they want" (5:17). The Law is simply ineffective and proves to be an ally of the flesh in the present evil age as people are unable to live according to its demands. Only the Spirit can break that unholy alliance between the Law and the flesh.

To cast our net a little wider, according to Galatians 5:24, Christians, like Christ, crucified the flesh with its evil desires. In 5:14 they love their neighbors even as Christ loved them back in 2:20. They produce the fruit of Christ's Spirit in 5:22-23 (see also 4:6), a fruit that leads to self-sacrifice rather than the selfish, divisive "works of the flesh." The Spirit creates a genuinely different person on the model of Christ himself!

Many preachers mistakenly spend far too much time instilling in their congregations a false sense of identity as "sinners." I hear the label "poor sinner" applied all the time! Some of this emphasis may be a misapplication of the popular phrase *simul justus et peccator*, or in modern parlance, both saint and sinner. Even as gospel predominates over law, so also justified (*justus*) saint and sinner are not equal for the Christian. A Christian's *identity* is not as a "sinner" but as a "saint" whose sins have been

forgiven and who is now one with Christ. We participate in the potent realities of a new age. We struggle mightily against sin while we await the redemption of our bodies, but our identity is not bound up with sin. That is not who we are in Christ. That is one of the potential problems with our older liturgies where we confess our sins at the beginning of the service and may even identify ourselves as poor miserable sinners. We do sin—it is a real struggle—but we should never identify ourselves with sin. We identify ourselves with Christ. To instill a sense of identity among God’s people as “sinners” sadly, tragically abandons the decisive victory of Christ’s powerful work that not only took place on the cross but also takes place in the lives of his followers.

So how *do* we struggle against sin? First, we soberly recognize that as those who are in Christ, we will not be characterized by the works of the flesh. In Galatians 5:19-21: Paul lists “sexual immorality, impurity, indecency, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, rage, selfishness, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and such things as these, concerning which I am telling you in advance, just as I said before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” [my translation] Those who recognize in these works their identity will recognize that in continuing on such a path, they will by no means inherit the kingdom of God. It is a pretty potent negative in the Greek. By no means! Never, ever! On the contrary, believers are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control” [my translation]. Notice that unlike the divisive and plural works of the flesh, it is a single “fruit” of the Spirit. The Spirit’s fruit does not come piecemeal. We are either producing this fruit or we are not. There is no middle ground here. The Spirit creates this fruit by always directing the believer’s eyes

back to Christ crucified. Paul says as much in Galatians 3:1-3. The Galatians have received the Spirit by the hearing of faith. That faith clings to the portrayal of Christ crucified. That is how the Galatians began their Christian walk and that is how they must complete it, by the Spirit's creation of faith that has as its focus Christ crucified.

The empowering Spirit always directs the believer's eyes back to the victory in Christ. In this focus on Christ alone, the fellow crucified experiences Christ and his Spirit in action. What the Spirit began (3:3) now continues. A tremendous power is at work in the Christian. So that means that if we seek victory in the struggles against sin in our lives, we must cultivate a focus on Christ crucified. Sure, we do frequently fall prey to sin, but we must never dwell on those lapses. We do not dwell on sin or the flesh. That would distract our eyes, which must be at all times on the victory in Christ and his cross. Those who struggle with their sins must be careful that they do not dwell on the sin. Brooding on sin becomes a perverted sort of reveling that can be its own form of idolatry. We reclaim at every moment the victory that is in Christ's cross. It is a matter of focus. Luther was right during his sermons to point to the cross.

We also recognize, with Paul, that our eyes must constantly be attuned to the voice of Scripture. The same Scripture that promised the gospel beforehand to Abraham in Galatians 3:6, the gospel message in which Abraham trusted, is the same Scripture that we possess today. Paul considers the Scripture a living, breathing extension of God's voice in our world. These are what testify to Christ's saving work and seek to draw our eyes to the cross. So we recognize that in the battle against sin, each one of us needs to be actively studying and meditating on the Bible on a daily basis. We begin each day in God's Word and in prayerful reflection on who we are thanks to Christ and his Spirit.

Paul returns to the Spirit's power at key points in his letter to the Galatians. For many Lutherans the power of the Spirit remains untapped. We often surrender the Spirit to charismatics or Pentecostals, and yet by virtue of our baptisms in water—yes water baptism—in water tremendous power is readily available to us. And so we avail ourselves of and rejoice in God's power in our lives. The Spirit will no longer be the forgotten Person of the Trinity.

Finally, when we recognize our identity as “one” in Christ, we understand that we are not individuals struggling with sin alone before God. We never stand *alone* before God. Galatians 3:28-29 says that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, but you *plural* are all one in Christ. I'm a Texas boy: Paul's Greek is literally ya'll are one in Christ. That means we are one in Christ together. So Paul closes his letter to the Galatians with admonitions in 6:1-10 that alternate from verse to verse between individual accountability and corporate responsibility. We are responsible for ourselves but we are also in this struggle *together*. We need to rely on each other's help in the struggle against sin. We need to make it a point to form a close-knit, active, and loving community of fellow believers looking out for each other. The Spirit binds us together into a unity as though we are all one single person in Christ.

And so we “walk” by the Spirit together as we move closer with every passing step toward the final end of all things when the resurrection life fully reveals itself at the Last Day. We Christians live in victory! The kingdom come has already invaded this world and our lives with the Spirit. As an apocalyptic thinker, Paul could opt to take it to the next level in Colossians and Ephesians in response to false claims of power that we are already, in a sense, risen from the dead.

**“OUR FIRST RESURRECTION” – PART THREE:  
RESURRECTION POWER IN ROMANS 5-8  
AND A RETURN TO THE END OF ALL THINGS**

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Have any of you heard those rumors going around about the end of the world coming in 2012? I keep hearing that 2012 is supposed to be the big year. Didn't they make a movie a little while ago with 2012 as the end of it all just around the corner? How many movies like to use the word “apocalypse” for some dramatic end-of-world flourish: “Apocalypse Now,” “Apocalypto.” People love to speculate on when the world will come to an end. And yet, for Christians, that apocalyptic end-times perspective is already a genuine reality. We saw in our last hour together that Paul is an apocalyptic thinker who holds that a new age, a new world has already erupted into the present and has brought with itself powerful new realities in Christ and his Spirit. This perspective is not unique to Galatians. Paul has much to say about the power we possess in Christ and his Spirit in his other letters too. For this final hour I would like to sample around in Paul's Letter to the Romans, and I would like to get a running start with chapter 5.<sup>12</sup>

Paul shifts gears in chapter 5 from the justification language that had dominated his discussion in Romans 1-4 as he turns to large-scale participatory categories. What do I mean by that? In Romans 5:12-21 Paul writes about how all humanity has been caught up in one man's sin and stands under the shadow of Adam. Thanks to the entry of sin into the world, in 5:14 “death exercised dominion” ever since the time of Adam. Like a powerful, ruling agent, death stands over the cosmos. But, thankfully, Paul also speaks of

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<sup>12</sup>This lecture draws at points extensively from chapter 5 of my *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). The book includes detailed discussion and documentation that is, for convenience, not included here.

an even more powerful, ruling agent, the grace that comes in the one man Jesus Christ. Paul writes in verse 17: “If because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, how much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion through the one man, Jesus Christ.” Even as all humanity is caught up in the trespass of Adam, how much more will humanity benefit from the grace that comes in the one man, Jesus Christ. Humanity is summed up under its two heads, Adam and Christ. Paul really does have a cosmic perspective on all humanity in these pages. He then closes chapter 5 in verse 20 by introducing three superhuman entities that will dominate the next couple chapters: the Law, sin, and grace. He writes: “But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Paul describes sin and grace as exercising their dominion, their rule. The Law, sin, and grace are *powers* that rule over the cosmos.

Paul then begins to explore the various relationships between these three powerful agents. The first relationship he explores is that between sin and grace. So in Romans 6:1: “Shall we go on *sinning* that *grace* may abound?” Paul’s answer is an emphatic: “By no means!” Paul turns to the Law and grace in Romans 6:15: Should we sin since we are not under the *Law* but under *grace*? Once again, Paul is emphatic: “By no means!” He turns in Romans 7:7 to the final pairing, the Law and sin, when he asks “Is the *Law* *sin*”? Many people overlook that these three questions serve as topic sentences for the sections that immediately follow. So the question “Is the Law sin?” in Romans 7:7 is exactly what

Paul sets out to answer in the remainder of the chapter. We will come back to that observation in a moment, and it is an important one. But before we get to Romans 7, let us go back to that first of the three questions in Romans 6:1. Remember, Paul had asked whether we should go on sinning that grace may abound? After the strong denial, “by no means,” Paul posits water baptism! “How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Paul’s point here is that baptism united us with Jesus Christ. We were made participants in his death on the cross. We saw something similar in Galatians 3:28 where Paul described water baptism as making us one with Christ.<sup>13</sup> Here in Romans, Paul talks about being united with Christ once again. He says that as fellow participants in Christ’s death, we have confidence that we will surely participate in his resurrection. In verse 5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we *will* certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” We are now “in Christ” and he is “in” us. So we share in his victory over death and sin. But that also means that we have a new identity. We are not the same person that we were before. Since we share in Christ’s victory over sin and death, of course we will *not* go on living in sin. Jesus’ death inaugurated a new world, even as baptism made that new world a reality for us personally. We share in Christ and his gracious power to fight the sin in our lives. We live in the victory and hope of Christ’s

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<sup>13</sup>On water baptism, see the new second edition of *Baptized Into God’s Family* (Milwaukee: WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991, 2008). The second edition includes substantial new material not available in the first edition.

resurrection. And in this current war of the worlds, we always battle sin from that decisive perspective of victory!

Now enjoying victory in Christ does not mean that there is not still an intense struggle going on against sin. The difference is that we are battling sin from the vantage point of a new identity and with decisive power in our lives. So after explaining the new identity we have by virtue of our baptism in Christ, Paul issues a series of commands or imperatives that are each firmly linked to indicative statements about who we are. In many ways, these indicative and imperative sentences—if you’ll forgive the grammar lingo—reflect the already and the not yet of this in-between time. We are already sharing in the powers of the age to come, and yet we do not enjoy that new age in its fullness. That fullness is still to come with our future resurrection and the final vanquishing of the old order. Paul is always very conscious of what time it is. Since we *are* a new people, *let us live* as a new people. A new identity should always express itself in changed lives. In Romans 6:11: “Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” That is our status: we are alive in Christ Jesus. But then in verse 12 follows the imperative: “Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies.” The entire chapter goes back and forth between expressions of a new identity and the consequent admonitions to a changed life.

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul describes a rescue that has already taken place. The Law holds people in bondage to the point of death. A woman is bound by the Law to her husband as long as the husband lives, but when the husband dies the wife is released from the bonds that legally tie her to her husband. Paul reminds us of the fact that death is the only possible release from one’s marital vows. Likewise, the only way we can experience

freedom from the Law is for a death to take place. In sharing in Christ's death, we enjoy freedom from that which once held us hostage. We are now free to serve another. Paul maintains that positive perspective in Romans 8 with his description of the Spirit at work in believers. So in Romans 8:11: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." In verse 13: "By the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body." With Christ's Spirit, we live in victory.

Now you may recall a problem for this positive emphasis that I raised in the last hour that we never really answered. You may recall that Martin Luther had drawn on Romans 7 in his interpretation of Galatians 5 when he claimed that the flesh could stymie the work of the Spirit. Does Romans 7 contradict that sense of empowerment we saw not only in Galatians but also in Romans 5-8? If we really are living in victory, what do we do with Romans 7:7-25? Does not that passage describe the Christian in his or her struggle against sin? And is not that Christian frustrated and even *failing* in the struggle? At least that is what we have been traditionally taught. Romans 7:15 reads: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Then in verses 18-19: "I can will what is right, but I *cannot* do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Wow! The "I" in these verses struggles and ultimately fails to do what he knows is good. His actions do not correspond to his intentions. Lutherans have always followed Martin Luther in seeing in this paragraph a reference to Christian existence, and maybe that is the case. Although nothing in our doctrine depends on any particular reading of Romans 7, I would nevertheless like to challenge the traditional way we Lutherans have looked at those

verses, and there are tremendous practical implications.<sup>14</sup> It really is an important matter of emphasis at stake here. Paul has not for a moment departed from the sense he maintains throughout his letters of the positive, genuine empowerment we have received in Christ and his Spirit.

Again, we saw that Paul was outlining these chapters with the relationships between the almost personified forces of sin, the Law, and death as entities that “exercise dominion” or hold people captive (e.g., 6:12-22; 7:6). Romans 7:7 therefore serves as the topic sentence for what follows. “Is the Law sin?” Paul is not making any sort of statement about his own life. He is not talking about his own pre-Christian or Christian experience. No, he is asking a very specific question: Is the Law sin? He just described sin in Romans 6 as an almost demonic entity, and in the first six verses of Romans 7, he has just said a lot of the same things about the Law: The Law rules over people, holds them captive, and enslaves them just like Sin did back in chapter 6. The “I” comes across like an enslaved person captive to the powers of the old age. That is precisely why Paul explains in Romans 7:6 that a person must be delivered from captivity “under the old written code” by death, even as baptism, by uniting us to Christ’s death, frees the individual from Sin back in chapter 6. The enslaving Law sounds a lot like sin, and so Paul is forced to ask in Romans 7:7: Is the Law sin? He responds in verses 7-12 that the Law is not sinful, but Sin simply used the Law for its own purpose. The Law proved to be powerless against sin and ended up unwittingly becoming Sin’s instrument. The

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<sup>14</sup>I find noteworthy that Professor Cortright, in his response, could not identify any exegetical shortcomings in what follows and conceded that he can see no area where the *doctrine* of the Confessions is compromised. What has been challenged, rather, is a longstanding, customary reading of Romans 7 in Lutheran circles. (Professor Scaer had not read this lecture at the time of his response.)

language, once again, sounds almost demonic, as if Sin is a power exercising its will over people and even over the Law. As a result, the Law, unfortunately, leaves its adherents captive. Keep that dark, enslaving power of sin working through the Law in mind as we turn to a key verse, Romans 7:14. Most people never ask *why* the “I” of this chapter seems to be incapable of doing the good that he or she wants to do. The fact is, the “I” of Romans 7 is *enslaved* and *held in captivity* under the powers of sin and the Law. Let me be quite frank, this is hardly Christian existence. I know of no way to “Christianize” the existence described in this verse.

Romans 7:14 is a crucial verse in this section, and I think it can serve as sort of a baseline from which we will want to compare the surrounding chapters of Romans. In Romans 7:14: “For we know that the Law is spiritual: but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.” Keep this verse in mind for the next few minutes. Did you notice how Paul describes the “I” as “sold into slavery” under sin? The Christian of Romans 6 and 8 is consistently described as “freed” from slavery under sin and the Law. Not once are we sold into slavery under sin. Paul has been pretty emphatic, actually, to say otherwise. Notice how the baptized believer in Romans 6:2 has “died to sin.” We have *died* to sin! Then in Romans 6:6-7: The “old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might *no longer* be enslaved to sin! For whoever has died is freed from sin.” You can just hear it: “Freeeeeeeeedom!” In Romans 6:14: “Sin will have *no dominion* over you.” Do you get the impression that Paul is repeating himself? In Romans 6:18-19: “You, having been *set free* from sin, *have become* slaves of righteousness. For just as you once—*formerly*—presented your members as slaves to impurity...., so *now* present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.”

In Romans 6:20: “When you were—*formerly*—slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.” Paul is sounding awfully repetitious. He could not be more emphatic. In Romans 6:22: “You have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” In Romans 7:1-6 the Mosaic Law may, like sin, enslave, but in verse 6: “Now we are *discharged* from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves *not* under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” The contrast between Romans 7:14 and what comes before could not be any clearer. Romans 7:14 describes an “I” sold into slavery under sin, but Romans 6 and the first part of chapter 7 emphasize over and over again that Christians are freed from slavery under sin. Romans 8 follows suit with Romans 6. Consider 8:2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has *set you free* from the law of sin and death.” Past tense: “set free.” The Christian is therefore decidedly *not* sold into slavery under sin as the “I” of 7:14 is. The Christian is *not* as 7:23 puts it: “captive to the law of sin.” Romans 7:7-25 is simply not describing Christian existence.

When Paul says in Romans 7:14 that we were “under” the power of sin, you have to realize that the apostle never describes believers in Christ as “under” (ὑπό) the forces of the old era or under the “present evil age.” You are either “under” the power of sin or you are “under” the power of grace in Christ Jesus. They are mutually exclusive alternatives. To take a sideways glance at Galatians, in Gal 3:10 those who rely on the works of the Law are “under (ὑπό) a curse.” That sort of existence characterizes an age that is now over. So in Gal 3:23: “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law (ὑπὸ νόμου) until faith would be revealed.” With Christ’s arrival in Gal 3:25, the Galatians are no longer “subject to a disciplinarian.” In Gal 4:21 Paul chastises those who “desire to be subject to the law.” They are not under the Law, but

they want to be. On the contrary, according to Gal 5:18, “if you are led by the Spirit, you are *not* subject to the law.” In Galatians 5:1 Paul is emphatic: “For freedom Christ set us free.” We see the same deliverance from the forces of the old age in Romans 6:14-15: “You are *not* under law but under grace.” Romans 7:14, on the other hand, for its part, describes the “I” as “under sin.” Nowhere else does Paul ever grant that Christians are “under sin.”

Finally, notice how Romans 7:14 describes the “I” as “fleshly.” The first part of the verse reads: “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh.” Paul contrasts the Law which is “spiritual” (πνευματικός) with the “I” who is “fleshly.” But that is the exact opposite of how Romans 8:9 describes the Christian. Take a look. In Romans 8:9: “But you are *not* in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” The presence of the Spirit defines Christian existence, and yet the Spirit nowhere figures in the struggle of the “I” against sin in 7:7-25. The Spirit is all over chapter 8, and yet Paul makes it a point that not one of those references to the Spirit is in 7:7-25.

The apostle is creating a conscious, deliberate contrast between these sections of the letter, and he sets this contrast up just before in Romans 7:5-6, and there we *do* have a reference to the Spirit that paves the way. He writes in those verses: “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death, but now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” Paul contrasts what we were before with what we are now, and that before and after corresponds to what we see in Romans 7:7-25 and Romans 8:1-17. To go back to

Romans 7:5, it begins with the phrase “While we were living in the flesh.” Now doesn’t that sound like the fleshly “I” of Romans 7:14? To read Romans 7:5 in its entirety again: “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” That is precisely what is taking place in Romans 7:7-25. On the other hand, after Romans 7:5, 7:6 continues in a new key, and I quote again: “But *now*, we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves *not* under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” Not surprisingly, the Spirit figures throughout chapter 8. And look at how Romans 8:1 begins with a “now”: “There is *now* no condemnation in Christ Jesus.” That “now” is just like what we saw in Romans 7:6 with *its* “now.” So to summarize: Romans 7:5 is introducing our former situation under the powers of the old age that will then be described in 7:7-25 even as Romans 7:6 is introducing our new situation as Christians that will be developed in Romans 8. Paul’s point here is that a new era has opened up in Christ and his Spirit. With the emphatic “now” of Romans 8:1 the Christian no longer experiences the condemnation or “death” that characterized Romans 7:7-25 (especially verses 10 and 13).

So does the decisive presence of the Spirit in Romans 8 lead to some sort of triumphalism? Is there no longer a struggle against sin? Paul issues imperatives against sinning all through Romans 6 and 8. He is clear that sin is a continuing influence on the believer. The difference is that the imperatives throughout Romans 6 are always linked to and placed beside indicative statements of our changed status in Jesus Christ. In other words, while a struggle is indeed still taking place, Paul’s commands are always grounded in that new identity in Christ. So in Romans 6:13, Paul writes: “No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness but present yourselves to

God.” And yet, as the verse continues, that imperative is grounded in our status “as those who have been brought from death to life.” The indicative of a new status grounds the imperative, even as the imperatives of Romans 6 all ultimately flow out of the status of being baptized into Christ’s death at the beginning of the chapter. In a similar fashion, we see that the imperatives of Romans 8 stand alongside expressions of the Spirit’s power. Nineteen times Paul mentions the Spirit in chapter 8. The point is that the Christian battles sin with a crucial ally. No one would deny that the Christian is caught up in the turbulent transition from the present age to the full manifestation of an age still to come. The difference is that we Christians battle sin from the point of view of that decisive victory in Christ.

That victory is precisely what we do not see in Romans 7:7-25. Again, Paul says in verse 15: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Or in verse 19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Then comes the cry in verse 25: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Over the years, commentators have frequently noticed how Paul’s wording would have sounded awfully familiar to his larger Greco-Roman world. The modern equivalent would be something like “Beam me up, Scotty!” that is a part of our popular culture, our larger world. Only in this case, it’s a first century world. One of the most popular plays from Greek antiquity was Euripides’ *Medea*. It is the story of a woman whose desire for revenge against her husband leads her, against her better judgment, to murder her own children. As she contemplates the gruesome deed she is about to commit, she laments: “I am being overcome by evils. I know that what I am about to do is evil but passion [wrath] is stronger than my reasoned reflection and this is

the cause of the worst evils for humans” (*Med.* 1077-80). Medea cannot stop herself and, tragically, goes through with the terrible deed. The *Medea* tragedy was so popular in antiquity that Seneca, Paul’s contemporary, wrote his own version of the story in which the central character cries out “What, wretched woman, have I done?” Passionate anger overpowers her will. Still another near contemporary of Paul, Epictetus, as he was reflecting on *Medea*, introduced her to his readers as saying: “I want something, and it does not happen; and what creature is more wretched than I?” Likewise Plutarch, yet another near contemporary of Paul, quoted Euripides: “Wretched I am, this evil comes to men from God, when one knows the good but does it not.” One knows the good but does it not. Medea’s dialogue was frequently quoted in letters and in public orations. The Latin writer Ovid (*Met.* 7.17-21), for instance, refers to Medea and says: “Come, thrust from your maiden breast these flames that you feel, if you can, unhappy girl [*infelix*]. Ah, if I could, I should be more myself [*sanitor*]. But some strange power draws me on against my will. Desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse” (Miller, LCL). Medea’s cry “Oh wretch that I am” became a commonplace among tragedians and comedians. Euripides’ tragedies even became prime fodder for the anthologies of quotations used in the instruction of schoolboys in rhetoric (Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.67-69; Dio Chrysostom, *Dic. exercit.* [*Or.* 18] 6-7). My point here is that this very popular tragedy of *Medea* offers the most direct parallels to Romans 7:14-25 in the language of misery and wretchedness that the “I” expresses and in this notion of powerful otherworldly forces that compel an individual to act contrary to his or her own will.

You have to understand that the first century Greeks and Romans in Paul's world were utterly obsessed with the mastery of the passions, and there were different approaches to the problem. Medea was an uneducated barbarian woman. The Greeks and Romans tended to view education and greater knowledge as the best means of combating the sort of passions that overcame her. But whereas the ancient Stoics—Luke mentions them in the Book of Acts—urged people to act according to reason, the Platonists responded that, hey, it's not so easy; a genuine battle is taking place within the human soul. The physician and philosopher Galen pointed to that very struggle as he commented on Medea. He noted that irrational passions simply overcame her rational reason. Galen felt that education in Greek philosophy would strengthen a person's rational abilities in restraining those dangerous passions. Epictetus, for his part, ascribed the inner impulses to divine, otherworldly forces struggling against each other: "And, indeed, when a man out of passionate love is under the compulsion to do something contrary to his opinion, all the time seeing the better thing but lacking the strength to follow, one might be all the more inclined to regard him as deserving pity, because he is in the grip of something violent, and, in a manner of speaking, divine." Does not that sound a little like the personified, enslaving power of Sin at work in Romans 7?

Jewish authors in the first century could not help but follow suit in talking about mastery of the passions. It was in the air. Take a look sometime at 4 Maccabees in the apocrypha. In chapter 1 verse 31 the author celebrates "self-control" through reason as the means by which you gain "dominance over the desires." Of course, 4 Maccabees is a Jewish document, and so it goes the understandable step further to positing the Law of Moses as the ultimate solution to mastering your passions. If you want real power to

control your unruly desires, you will find it Moses' Law! The Law of Moses, the Jews boasted, would empower a true and rightful reason. But were the Jews right that the Law of Moses really could control sinful desires and passions? That is precisely why Paul illustrates in the experience of the "I" in Romans 7 why Moses' Law, far from providing any real power, just *enhances* sin's influence. And as for someone like Epictetus who thought the solution to self-mastery was through greater self-knowledge, for Paul, the problem has nothing to do with ignorance. It is simply a sheer inability to do the good that one wills. Paul is far more pessimistic about human ability to do the good than the Jews or pagans of his world. Even though Paul draws on the language of the Greco-Roman tragedians, the "I" in Romans 7 is an even more lamentable, desperate figure. The Jewish Law proves to be of no help against the power of sin. The only solution to the power of sin is in Jesus Christ (v. 25).

Now, you may have noticed, we did leave out Romans 7:7-11. So we should back up for a second and take a look at that paragraph. Some scholars have theorized that Paul is alluding in Romans 7:7-11 to the Israelites at Mount Sinai at the giving of the Law. After all, the Israelites before Mt. Sinai were living indeed "apart from the Law," as verse 9 puts it. At Mt. Sinai the Law entered into their lives. But then, "when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." In other words, the Law at Mt. Sinai made the situation of sin even worse for the Israelites. Paul actually prepared for this line of thinking back in Romans 5:13 when he explained that with exposure to the Law of Moses, sins are no longer sins but are now charged as "trespasses." They're *doubly* egregious. Take another look at Rom 7:9 and that key phrase "I was living *apart from* the Law." That would never apply to a single Jew who lived in the world after Mt. Sinai,

because from that point on, every newborn Jewish child enjoyed a relationship with Moses' Law from Day One. And this is crucial: Paul is not talking about himself as a Jew. He would be talking about Jews many centuries before in the wilderness generation. Once the Law was given, any child born into Israel was automatically born into a relationship with Moses' Law. The boys were circumcised on the eighth day. When were they ever "apart from the Law," as Paul puts it? Now, keep in mind, it would be a different matter for the gentile Godfearer. When Paul opens his Letter to the Romans back in chapter 1 (vv. 5 and 13), he is very clear that the Romans are themselves gentiles.<sup>15</sup> But they were also gentiles who had had some exposure to the Jewish synagogues and had gained along the way an appreciation for the Jewish Scriptures. That is why Paul quotes the Scriptures all through his Letter to the Romans. Many of these gentiles had walked into the synagogue looking for power to deal with the sinful passions in their lives. Word had it the Jews had an angle on it. Although these gentiles were formerly people living "apart from the Law," as Paul puts it in verse 9, the Law of Moses that they discovered in the synagogues ... well, it only made matters worse.

Other scholars think that Romans 7:7-12 alludes to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. To go back to verse 9 again, Adam and Eve were living apart from the Law, but when the commandment came, sin came to life. The commandment not to touch the fruit on the tree would have been something along the lines of the Tenth Commandment: thou shalt not *desire*. That's how Greeks and Romans heard this word in their obsession with self-mastery. So Eve experienced "desire" in the Garden even as desire dominates

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<sup>15</sup>This is the main thesis argued throughout my *Solving the Romans Debate*, but see also my forthcoming article in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, "Praise the Lord, All You Gentiles': The Encoded Audience of Romans 15:7-13" as well as "The Gentile Encoded Audience of Romans: The Church Outside the Synagogue," in *Reading Romans* (ed. Jerry Sumney; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, forthcoming in 2011).

Romans 7:7-8. Satan “deceived” Eve, just as Sin deceives in verse 11. If we find ourselves convinced by these potential allusions to the Garden of Eden, then the allusion would once again make perfect sense if Paul were thinking in terms of gentile Godfearers. These gentiles would represent all humanity descended from Adam and Eve. Paul would be describing the experience of all the children of Adam and Eve at the point when they encounter Moses’ Law, the Garden of Eden Part Two and beyond. The Law at Mt. Sinai only leads to failure.

Now there are other tell-tale signs that Paul is describing gentile experience with the Jewish Law here. The individual in these verses has been a slave to passions and desires. That is exactly how the Jews liked to describe gentiles (see the *Letter of Aristeas* 152). Even Paul himself wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5: “Each one of you [must] know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” Notice also that Paul directly addresses his readers in the second person as “brothers and sisters” in Romans 7:1 and then describes their experience with the Law in 7:1-6. The last time Paul addressed the audience as brothers and sisters, he was including them as gentiles back in Romans 1:13. For that matter, Paul just described his readers in 6:19 as “unclean” and “Law-less” gentiles. Finally, the commandment Paul cites in these verses, again, is the Tenth Commandment. Is it mere coincidence that the last time he mentioned the Ten Commandments was in the context of the Jewish teacher of gentiles—yes, of gentiles (!)—in Romans 2:21-22? Again, Paul quotes the very commandment that was the obsession of the gentile world: “Thou shalt not desire.” To summarize: Paul is describing an experience many of his readers in Rome would have recognized, a God-fearer seeking control over their passions and desires in

the Roman synagogues through Moses' Law. And yet that Law does not solve the problem of their sin. It only makes matters worse. Paul places all this in the first person singular as he hopes to draw his readers into recognizing their own former plight when they encountered the Law.

So what is it that might keep people from seeing in Romans 7 a description of gentile experience upon encountering Moses' Law? People usually get fixated on the first person pronouns throughout the chapter. Paul keeps talking in terms of "I." So people assume that this must be autobiographical. Paul must be talking about himself. Several factors get overlooked when people just assume the "I" is Paul. First, people never consider that Paul is trying to draw his readers into the story. He is trying to prove his point about the Law by drawing on their own experiences as gentiles in the synagogues. Thus the "I." Paul wants his Roman readers to see *themselves* in the "I." He wants them to recognize this as quote "my" experience! And they will hopefully be forced to rethink their relationship to Moses' Law. They will not find life there! Second, people overlook that in tragic literature, like Euripides' *Medea*, the main character always talks in first person pronouns. The people in Paul's day were used to hearing that first person struggle in the tragedies. Medea struggles with what "I" should do before crying out "Oh wretched woman." Again, these plays were very popular in Paul's day, and when Paul begins to describe a person struggling to do the good and concludes with "wretched man that I am," all this would have been readily accessible to his audiences on a very popular level. Finally on this matter, even from antiquity, people were already recognizing what Paul was doing in Romans 7:7-25. He was adopting a figure of speech. Students who were of sufficient means to go to school would learn how to write speeches. They would

practice different types of exercises that would prepare them for later in their public life. Their textbooks were called “progymnasmata” and contained within rhetorical exercises. One of the standard exercises for schoolboys throughout the Greco-Roman world was the speech-in-character or “prosopopoiia.” All the extant handbooks of rhetoric—whether by Aelius Theon in the first century not that long after Paul, Hermogenes in the second century, Aphthonius, Nicolaus the Sophist, and John of Sardis—they all describe *prosopopoiia* or “speech-in-character.” (It’s called *ethopoiia* in the later rhetorical tradition. Amaze all your friends and family with the fancy jargon.) Basically, you practiced writing a speech that fit the particular character involved. Homer was the favorite example. There were no paragraph breaks or punctuation in Homer to tell you where one character finished speaking and another started. You would simply know by the change in the style of speech. Works employing *prosopopoiia* were popular in Rome in Paul’s day. For instance, Ovid’s *Heroides* consisted of imaginary letters by legendary women. So schoolboys would practice writing speeches that fit the background of the character involved. You see the same thing in Luke-Acts. Paul’s speech to the gentiles on Mars’ Hill in Athens in Acts 17 is different from the speeches he would give to the Jews.

When you came across a suddenly different perspective—that served as the prime signal of a change in the character speaking. Nilus of Ancyra and Origen both recognized Romans 7:7-25 as an instance of “speech-in-character.” To quote Nilus: “God forbid! The divine apostle does not say concerning himself that, ‘I see another law in my members taking me captive through sin.’ Rather these things are uttered by a person [ἐκ προσώπου] representing those who are troubled by fleshly passions [σαρκικῶν παθῶν]” (*Ep.* 1.152 [*PG* 79:145-46]). Nilus also wrote:

It is easy to grasp that the apostle is employing characterization [ἠθοποιία] when a voice says, ‘But I was once living without the law.’ And truly there is never any time when a person has respite without the law of Moses; for from a young age he was closely brought up in the law by Gamaliel. Moreover, the person [τὸ πρόσωπον] is to be understood as belonging to those who have lived outside the law of Moses” (*Ep.* 1.153 [*PG* 79:145-46]).

For Nilus, the “I” must be someone who was “outside” the Law of Moses and subsequently came under it. The “I” must be a gentile Godfearer.

Another objection people have to the “I” being a non-Christian is that the “I” wills to do what it knows to be good. So how would that be possible for a non-Christian? Surely the unregenerate mind must be hostile to God. The “I” of Romans 7:22 recognizes and delights in the goodness of God’s Law but the fleshly mind of 8:5-8 is hostile to God. It is easy to conclude, then, that the “I” of Romans 7:22 must be regenerate because of the apparent contrast with 8:5-8. But what gets completely overlooked in all this is that the “I” who delights in God’s Law in Romans 7:7-25 is not at all inconsistent with how Paul described unbelievers. Some non-Christians, as Paul readily concedes, are actually *zealous* for God’s Law. In Romans 9:31-32 Israel strives for the righteousness that is based on the Law. In 10:2-3: “I can testify that they have a zeal for God” and are “seeking to establish their own [righteousness].” When Paul adds “They have not submitted to God’s righteousness” in 10:3, the failure to submit recalls the mind set on the flesh back in 8:7: “It does not submit to God’s law—indeed, it cannot.” In other words, a mind set on the flesh (8:7) can still be a Jew with great zeal for God’s Law. Or to go to a different passage that makes the same point, in Romans 2:17-20 the “Jew”

knows, relies on, and boasts in the Law of God. Paul never disagrees with the Jew's claim to "know [God's] will" and to be "instructed in the law." He criticizes this Jew specifically for not producing works consistent with that knowledge (2:17-29). Then Paul says that the gentile who is a Jew inwardly and who has received the circumcision of the heart will by his or her actions put to shame the outward Jew (2:25-29). The gentile who has been inwardly renewed and transformed—obviously the Christian—will simply produce the works that the Jew who relies on and boasts in the Law lacks. Inner, spiritual transformation always expresses itself in God-pleasing action. Disobedience is Paul's criterion for indicating the absence of regeneration. After all, the Christian enjoys the powers of the age to come at work in his or her life that help create genuine works that are consistent with that confession. The "I" of Romans 7, on the other hand, knows God's will but does not produce works consistent with that knowledge. So in Galatians 1:14 Paul describes himself before his encounter with Christ as having been "zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." Or in Philippians 3:6: "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." *Blameless!* A genuine zeal for God's Law may therefore characterize the unregenerate Jew even though that individual's striving for righteousness does not achieve the desired result—indeed it cannot. Zealous Jews have misunderstood the Law's ultimate goal or end in Christ (10:1-4). And so Paul could count all his righteousness apart from Christ in Philippians 3 to be mere rubbish that went nowhere. Zeal for God's Law does not overcome the need for the mind and the will to be renewed for there to be genuine right conduct. That comes decisively in Christ and his Spirit, as Romans 8 explains. And so we as Christians genuinely struggle against sin and, thanks to God's power in our lives, we do have our victories.

So what should we conclude from this lengthy excursion into Romans 7: first of all, no one is denying that a vicious struggle is taking place between the Spirit and the flesh in this world. No one would deny that the Christian life is characterized by a tremendous struggle against sin. That is precisely why Paul must keep on admonishing the Christian in chapters 6 and 8 against sin. The difference if we read Romans 7 in this new way is that we would recognize that the helpless and powerless “I” is not describing a Christian. It is the individual who has placed himself or herself under Moses’ Law. Paul is simply answering whether the Law is sin. If we place ourselves under Moses’ Law, we will find ourselves in a helpless and awful position since the Law is powerless for fighting sin. Once we recognize that Paul is not describing a Christian in Romans 7, and once our preaching and teaching stops making reference to this paragraph in relation to our believing hearers, then we will be in a position to admonish our hearers just as Paul admonished his. We will be reminding them that they are in the midst of a genuine struggle against sin. The difference, though, is that we are not battling sin from a point of view of parity or stalemate. We are battling from the point of view of the decisive victory that has come in Christ and his Spirit. They will *not* find their source of power in Moses’ Law. No, our people must begin to see their *identity* as something new that is bound up with Christ.

So what about when we suffer defeat in our day-to-day struggles. Paul does not assume that we will be sinless prior to the redemption of our bodies. Again, this is not some sort of triumphalism, as if we can be fully free from sin as long as the present evil age is seeking to renew its power over us. But the point is that that is not where we place our focus. Paul wants us to keep reminding ourselves that our focus always needs to be

on the victory in the crucified Christ. We keep our eyes constantly on Christ, in whom we find ourselves united by baptism, and in that focus, in that connection to Christ and his Spirit, we will have all the power we need to do battle against the flesh. It is all about focus, focus, focus—the focus of faith!

The Scriptures admonish us to draw on the spiritual power that is available to us. And the nuts and bolts of all this should sound awfully familiar. Like Galatians, we will treasure our baptisms as the moment of our empowerment. And like Galatians, Romans keeps returning to the Scriptures as the living, empowering voice of God, and so we too will keep turning to the power source on a daily basis in our devotional lives. Like Galatians, the Spirit keeps directing our eyes back to the cross. By the end of Romans, like Galatians, Paul explains that Christians will always prioritize their time with other members of the family of faith. We must live our lives in a community of like-minded believers who encourage us, correct us, and prod us along in our walks of faith. How many of us—as Paul was doing—admonish our fellow believers to draw on God’s power in their lives? We need to keep reminding each other that, as Christians, we have a new identity as living sacrifices. We need to keep hearing Paul’s indicatives and imperatives, and, as we admonish, we will keep building each other *up*, not down. As those who have been baptized, we are now “in Christ.” That is who we and our fellow believers are. We enjoy the power of Christ’s Spirit. We will no longer point to the defeat of Romans 7 as what characterizes our lives. *It does not.* We live in victory.

And with that note of victory, enough of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. We are now ready to return to the very end of all things with which we began. We are ready to return to the Book of Revelation. The apostle John offers the very same victorious perspective

that Paul did. The victory in which believers share began at the cross of Jesus Christ. John's Gospel set the stage. Whereas Mark's Jesus emphasizes three times that he must suffer and die (Mark 8:31-32; 9:31; 10:33-34), John in his Gospel prefers to emphasize the sheer power that was asserting itself on the cross. As Jesus told his mother in John 2, his "hour" was not yet come. Jesus says three times in John's Gospel that he will be "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). Jesus is in control. In John 10:17-18 Jesus is very clear that no one can take his life from him. He lays it down of *his own* accord. In John 14:30, Satan has no power over Jesus. The soldiers who come to arrest Jesus find themselves in the dust of the earth (18:6). Jesus tells Pilate that he has no authority either except what's been given to him (19:10-11). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it nor did it overcome it! (Prologue). Jesus' death on the cross is an incredibly power-charged moment in which he decisively defeated the powers of this world and of the darkness. As Jesus said in John 12:31: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world [Satan] will be driven out." In fact, even Jesus' earthly ministry took place from the point of view of victorious power. As Jesus puts it in John 16:33: "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" Note the past tense. John's Gospel is Jesus' victory tour. This emphasis in the Gospel on Jesus' victorious rule is the exact same emphasis we see in John's Book of Revelation!

When you look at the various views on the end of the world in the Book of Revelation, they fall into four basic categories: the dispensational premillennial view—what you have in the *Left Behind* series. Then there is the historic premillennial view. There is also the postmillennial view that is popular among many of the Reformed. And

then you have the historic view of the church, the amillennial view. We Lutherans fall into that amillennial perspective. All these positions have “millennial” in the title. They are all interpretations about where the “millennium,” the thousand years that Revelation 20 speaks about, fits into the ongoing story of humanity. What all these views have in common, with the sole exception of our own amillennial view, is that the thousand year reign of Christ on earth is a period in time that will take place in the future. Did you catch that? Jesus is *not yet* reigning on the earth. But that is precisely where the amillennial perspective uniquely parts ways. When Revelation 20 talks about a thousand years in which Christ reigns on earth, we Lutherans as amillennialists believe that that figurative period of time—hardly a literal thousand years like those other views say—that period of Christ’s rule began when Jesus died on the cross and continues until Christ returns again. Jesus reigns! But isn’t that the perspective of the whole Book of Revelation? Is not Jesus the victorious Lamb? Revelation does not call him the Lion of Judah throughout, although there is brief mention of the Lion in Revelation 5:5: “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered.” And with that we leave the image of a Lion behind in favor of the Lamb. It is a sacrificial image. We imagine its slaughter. Indeed, in the very next verse, in Revelation 5:6: “Then I saw a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” What John emphasizes is the *reign* of Jesus as the Lamb (14:1; 17:14; 19:7; 22:3). His death was a triumphant sacrifice. In Revelation 17:3 “They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are the called and chosen and faithful.” And we ourselves as those who belong to the Lamb share in his sacrificial conquest. We share in his victory. And how do we do so? Not by guns or by violence or by tribulation forces

like you read in those popular books out there. The sword of the Lamb always comes from his mouth! (2:16; 19:15) And it is the same for us as well. In Revelation 12:11: “They have conquered ... by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.” Like the conquering Lamb, we as his followers win our victories by proclaiming God’s Word even to the point of death, just like the one we serve. We take up our crosses and follow the Lord in victory even to our deaths.

We often wonder about our testimony. We sometimes wonder if the Word we share is taking root. We may even question whether our witness to God’s Word is making any difference in the world. If we could step back for a second and view our world from a cosmic perspective, from the perspective of the Apocalypse, that larger view would put our occasional doubts into perspective. We would see the reign of the Lamb that even now stands over the world, and we would see ourselves as key players in that reign. We reign as victorious saints and with genuine power that our world cannot see. As Lutherans we need never grovel in apparent defeat or in our sins. We revel in the truth of victory. The victory of Jesus Christ on the cross two thousand years ago is a victory at work in our lives by the power of the Spirit. Each and every day in our spiritual struggles, may we draw upon that source of power that is ours by virtue of our baptisms. With the apostle Paul in his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, this is “our first resurrection.” Or with Revelation 11:15: “The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (cf. Revelation 1:5).

And so we return to the end of all things.