‘O WRETCHED MAN THAT I AM!’ by Al Diestelkamp

These words are what we might expect from the lips of one who is lost in sin, but instead they are from the pen of a faithful Christian who recognized that his struggle with sin was an ongoing battle. This declaration was preceded by a personalized description of what he continued to face when his fleshly desires conflicted with his spiritual desires (see Rom. 7:13ff). And he admitted that the fleshly desires sometimes prevailed! (v.19).

Paul’s persecution of the church before his conversion was well known, and even though these sins were “washed away” (Ac. 22:16), he nevertheless bore the scars of these actions his whole life, as evidenced by Paul describing himself as “least of the apostles…not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15:9). This is also likely why he viewed himself as “chief” among sinners whom Jesus came to save (1 Tim. 1:15). However, his confession in the Roman letter was not about the sins of his former life but an ever-present struggle.

The apostle Paul could have easily taught the same lesson without confessing his own struggle with sin, but the fact that he spoke of his own battle makes it so much more helpful for us. We might be curious as to what fleshly desires made Paul vulnerable to sin, but he didn’t reveal this information. Perhaps it’s best, for had he told us of his specific temptations, I might be inclined to discount them as “not like what I face” and miss the whole point.

Like Paul, we struggle daily with the war between our fleshly desires and our spiritual desires. There are so many ways we are vulnerable to sinfulness—in thought, in action, and even in inaction. Some sins are more evident than other sins (1 Tim. 5:4), but every sin should make me cry out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Then say, like Paul, “I thank God—through Jesus our Lord!” (v.25).

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