



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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### *What is the “Old Man”?*

#### Romans 6:6

**T**HIS ISSUE OF TOTT BEGINS OUR FOURTH year in this ministry. It is has truly been a joy to write and distribute this work. We have had many encouraging comments, questions, and support from readers and words fail in expressing our thankfulness and gratitude. We pray it will continue to be a blessing to many. We would love to hear from you.



To begin this fourth year, we turn to a “tough text” that is without question one of the most important verses in Scripture concerning sanctification and Christian living: **Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.** Sadly, however, this verse is also one of the most misunderstood and most often misinterpreted verses of Scripture.

#### *Understanding the Issue*

Again, this verse (and it’s context, of course) is the very foundation for living a holy life. Why? Because it serves to remind us every day that we are no longer this **old man**, that he is gone. It reveals that the **old man** was crucified (past tense in the Greek) and has been destroyed. But what exactly *is* the **old man**? *That* is the issue. And until that is understood, the doctrine of sanctification itself cannot be understood.

This verse has been a battleground for centuries. The question has been not whether we become holy in Christ—all agree there—rather *how* this holiness is brought about.

One theory of sanctification has been dubbed the *Eradication Theory*. Ever since the esteemed John Wesley formulated it, this doctrine has been widely believed and taught. The teaching is that “entire sanctification,” that is, sinlessness, the complete purging of “inbred sin,” “the old nature,” “the flesh,” comes through a “second blessing.” Through a process of continually purging sin and the **old man**, the Christian, *by his efforts*, finally reaches the goal of sinlessness. This teaching is based, oddly enough, on Romans 6:6, that having yielded everything to Christ, we by faith identify ourselves with Him in His death and believe that our “old nature” is “crucified with Him” and therefore “destroyed.” Since we “reckon” ourselves “dead indeed unto sin” (v. 11), we will actually experience the eradication of sin. But as we’ll see, this teaching is based on a very basic misreading of the text.

A second view of sanctification is the *Counteraction Theory*. Simply stated, this teaches that sanctification comes not by *eradicating* our inherited sin-bias, but by *counteracting* it, working against it, suppressing it; by our daily efforts of “dying to self” and “crucifying the old man,” we suppress the “old nature.” This comes, it is taught, by an inward “joint crucifixion with Christ” that counteracts the “old nature,” “renders it inoperative,” for the time being, but which can be reactivated at any moment. We must then crucify ourselves again to render the “old nature inoperative” again. Like the Eradication Theory, however, this too is based on a fundamental misreading of Romans 6:6 and its context.

What is so strange about both these views is that they are based on the idea that Romans 6:6 refers to some-

thing in the present, something that happens in our own experience; in other words, it is something that we do in our efforts, something that comes as result of our own struggling against sin. *But that is the exact opposite of what the text SAYS.*

This leads us to consider first what the old man is *not*, and then what it *is*.

### ***What the “Old Man” is Not***

Now, I want to say the following as clearly and as singularly biblically as I possibly can. My reason for that little introductory statement is because the term **old man** has been sorely misunderstood, so much so, in fact, that it is often called by another completely different name that is not once used in Scripture.

Terminology is essential on any issue. Some teachers, however, seem to disagree with that truth when it comes to this issue and just dismiss it by saying, “Well, we are just arguing semantics. Why make a big deal of terms?” We submit, however, that words matter very much when Truth is at stake. One of the passions of my life and ministry is that *words matter*; they make a difference in doctrine. How many false doctrines, and even entire cults, have been created because of the lack of precision?

One such term that has been around for many years in the teaching concerning sanctification and holiness is the term “old nature,” as in the expression, “The Christian has two natures, the *old* nature and the *new* nature.” But that is an extremely unfortunate statement. To make matters worse, there are some organizations that make this a matter of fellowship, inexplicably insisting that anyone who denies the “two natures” is virtually anathema.

That attitude has greatly puzzled me for several years, because the clear fact of the matter is that to be accurate in our terminology—and if words matter we must be accurate—we must recognize that *Scripture simply does not SAY we have two NATURES*. The common teaching is that we have two *natures* that are warring against one another. But we repeat, and are compelled to insist, that *Scripture does not say that*. Yes, we most certainly do have a war going on (Rom. 7), and we will examine that later, but *to be precise*, the Bible does not say that this war is between two *natures*.

In fact, Scripture doesn’t even use the word “nature” either in our text or in another important text on this issue: “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the **old man**, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). In both cases, we find the Greek *palaios* (**old**), which means “old in the sense of worn out, decrepit, useless,” and then *anthropos*, which means **man**, not a mere “part” of a man, such as a “nature” or “self,” but the whole man, every aspect of him.

There is absolutely no argument to be made, therefore, that **old man** refers to anything except something

old in the person that is now gone, not a supposed “nature” that cannot be controlled. This, then, leads us to consider what the **old man** really is.

### ***What the “Old Man” Is***

Let us examine four major points on Romans 6:6.

*First*, Romans 6 is located in what can be called the “judicial section” of the Epistle, not the “experiential.” In other words, just as Ephesians, for example, is divided into *doctrine* (1–3) and *practice* (4–6) Romans has a similar structure. While chapters 1–8 are *judicial* (i.e., *doctrinal*), as they show how God saves the sinner, and chapters 9–11 are unique to Romans as they are *national*, explaining how the Gospel relates to Israel, chapters 12–16 are *experiential* (practical), as they demonstrate how the Gospel bears on our practical conduct. *Romans 6, therefore, deals with what GOD alone has accomplished JUDICIALLY, not what WE do EXPERIENTIALLY.*

*Second*, and this is the key to the whole issue, *all the verb tenses in Romans 6 are past tenses*, either the aorist or the perfect. In other words, every verb tense that refers to our identification with Christ in His death refers to that identification being *completed in the past*. Romans 6:6, therefore, does not say that our “old man *is being crucified*” or that our “old nature *must be crucified*,” rather it says that our “old man *was crucified*” way back when Christ died and that it was *completed* then and there. It does *not* say (as some teachers insist) that we must each morning get up and “crucify ourselves again to sin.” Rather it inarguably says that by *God’s judicial act*, not by our experiential effort, the **old man** was **crucified** and therefore **destroyed**.

*Third*, this brings us to the precise meaning of the term **old man**. If this doesn’t mean “old nature” or “inbred sin” that we must either eradicate or suppress—and it does *not* mean either one of those—what does it mean? The **old man** can refer to one thing and one thing only: *all that we were in Adam*, that is, all the guilt, penalty, power, and dominion of sin that was in Adam.

Now, we immediately want to ask, “But I *do* still sin—why?” We’ll deal with that in a moment. The point that *must* be understood first is that *sin is not the rule of life like it was before*. We are not dominated by sin as we once were. The **old man**, the person we were before salvation is gone because of what Christ accomplished on Calvary. We are not sinless, but we are *no longer dominated and controlled by sin*. While sin used to rule, it is now Christ Who rules.

To make this practical, how often have we all used the excuse, “Well, I just can’t help it; I’m a Christian, but because of my old nature, I just can’t help but sin?” Such an attitude is defeatist and actually justifies our sin. The fact is, as we’ll see, we most certainly can “help it”

because we are no longer dominated by sin. Sin is no longer the *rule*, it is the *exception*.

Paul then continues, **that the body of sin might be destroyed. Destroyed** is *katargeō*, “to render inactive, put out of use, cancel, bring to nothing, do away with.”<sup>1</sup> Because it is in a past tense, like all the verbs in the passage, it declares that **the body of sin** (a synonym for **old man**) has been nullified, put out of use, done away with completely in the past. It was through the cross that God put the **old man** out of action. That **body of sin** no longer hangs on us as like an anchor to sink us into the ocean of sin; God has removed it and freed us from sin’s dominion.

As J. Sidlow Baxter masterfully summarizes, here is the *positional* meaning of Romans 6:6 according to the language of the text:

- OUR OLD MAN—all that we were in position and relation to Adam, with all our culpability and condemnation.
- WAS CRUCIFIED WITH HIM—was judged and executed in the once-for-all death of Christ.
- THAT THE BODY OF SIN—the whole Adam humanity as guilty before God.
- MIGHT BE DESTROYED—completely done away in the judicial reckoning of God.
- THAT WE SHOULD NO LONGER BE IN BONDAGE TO SIN—that is, no longer in *legal* bondage through *judicial* guilt.<sup>2</sup>

With that *positional* truth firmly established, how does this work in *practice*? That leads us to our final point.

*Fourth*, we now consider the role of what is called “the flesh.” This answers the question, “If I was crucified with Christ in the past, and the **old man** is dead, and **the body of sin** has been put out of action, why do I still sin?” Paul knew this question would arise, so right after he writes Romans 6, he writes Romans 7, where he laments over “the flesh.” Even though the **old man** is gone, even though sin doesn’t rule and dominate, “the flesh” remains.

Some insist here, “It’s the same thing to say ‘the flesh’ and ‘the old nature.’” But to that we ask in response, how can these be the same when they are different words? We must be precise. We still sin not because of the “old nature”—*a term that immediately implies something inbred that we can’t control*—but because the new spiritual man is still in the physical body and must still contend with the infirmities of “the flesh.”

The Greek for “flesh” is *sarx*, which occurs 96 times in Paul’s Epistles (including five in Hebrews). It refers to the physical body 37 times (e.g., Rom. 2:28), to humanity or that which is human 25 times (e.g., 3:20), and to *inherent evil in the human nature* 27 times (e.g., 7:5). Romans 7:5, in fact, clearly defines this third use of

“flesh”: “For when we were [Greek imperfect tense, “were and continue to be”] in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.” “Motions” is an Old English term for “impulses,” which is the idea in the Greek *pathēma*, from *pathos* (English, “pathology”), “which describes the emotions of the soul, i.e., human feelings, and impulses which a man does not produce within himself but finds already present, and by which he can be carried away.” In Classical Greek, “it acquired a predominately negative meaning, that of passion.”<sup>3</sup> We can, indeed, be carried away by our passions. In short, “*the flesh*” is *the animal and selfish inclinations, the self-centered perversity and propensity inherent and co-existing in our humanity*.

How often do we think that Satan is our greatest enemy? While in the spiritual realm, he is certainly the ultimate foe, our greatest enemy in our personal experience is ourselves, our flesh. As Martin Luther wrote, “I dread my own heart more than the pope and all his cardinals, for within me is the greater pope, even self.”

So, it’s not that we have “two natures” or “two minds.” We are not spiritual schizophrenics. We are not beings with a split personality or bipolar disorder, where one nature or personality is trying to suppress the other. Rather we have two “states of mind,” the *spirit* and the *flesh*. We are now “partakers of the *divine* nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Pet. 1:4; emphasis added). The *divine* nature is present because the Holy Spirit regenerated our dead spirit, now making it alive and empowering it by His continuous indwelling. But at the same time, while our “spirit indeed is willing . . . the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). This explains why the words “pride,” “proud,” and “self” are *never* used in a positive way in Scripture. Pride is of the flesh, and it is the flesh, our passions, our impulses, that are our problem.

Recognizing this distinction enables us to understand the truth of the text by expanding the translation of Romans 7:15–25. Meditate on the willingness of the *spirit* (the *divine* nature) but the weakness of the *flesh*:

For that which I [*the flesh*] do, I [*the spirit*] allow not: for what I [*the spirit*] would, that [I] [*the flesh*] [do] not; but what I [*the spirit*] hate, that do I [*the flesh*].

If then I [*the flesh*] do that which I [*the spirit*] would not, I [*the spirit*] consent unto the law that it is good.

Now then it is no more I [*the one undivided personality*] that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me [the one me, not “us”]. For I [*the spirit*] know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) [*the flesh*] dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me [*the spirit*]; but how to perform that which is good I [*the spirit*] find not. . . .

For I [*the spirit*] delight in the law of God after the inward man [*the spirit*]: But I [*the spirit*] see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind [*the spirit*], and bringing me [the one me, not “us”] into captivity to the law of sin which is in my [*not “our”*] members. O wretched man that I [*the flesh*] am! who shall deliver me [*the total me*] from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself [*the total me*] serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.<sup>4</sup>

So within the one “total me” there is *the spirit* and *the flesh*. The question that now arises is, “How does *the spirit* rule? How do we deal with those passions and impulses that remain? How do we deal with this flesh?” Indeed, if Paul had stopped with Romans 7, we would have cause for deep depression. But Paul did not stop there. He goes on in Romans 8 to reveal the wondrous truth that the indwelling Holy Spirit provides the victory over the flesh. *In fact, “the flesh” is never mentioned in chapter 8 without the Holy Spirit also being mentioned* (vs. 1, 3–4, 5, 8–9, 12–13).

We have, therefore, been freed from sin in two ways: freed from the **old man** *positionally* by the past action of Christ (Rom. 6) and then *practically* (experientially) from “the flesh” by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 7–8). Ponder this:

*We do not have the inability to sin, but we do have the ability not to sin.*

Did you get it? Have we reached sinless perfection? Have we reached the point where we no longer sin? Certainly not. But we still have the ability not to sin; we can still claim the victory over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. No longer can we say, “I just couldn’t help it. It’s

just part of my nature. It’s just who I am.” Yes, we *can* “help it” because of the Holy Spirit. Even though our passions and impulses are strong, we can claim the victory, something that is impossible to claim when we insist that sin is still part of our *nature*. We are now “partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Pet. 1:4).

As I Corinthians 10:13 then declares: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” God promises that temptation to sin will never overwhelm us, that even our passions and impulses do not control us.

How often do we try to run and hide from the sins that defeat us, or worse, try to excuse them? Each one is the wrong approach. We can and must face our passions and impulses. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can say, “I’m not afraid of you. I’m not going to run away from you. I claim God’s power in my life to deliver me from myself. I’m *not* the **old man**, so I’m not going to *act* like the **old man**.”

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> In my humble opinion, Baxter’s trilogy on the Christian doctrine of sanctification is unequalled: *A New Call To Holiness, His Deeper Work In Us*, and *Our High Calling* (Zondervan).

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Vol. 3, p. 719.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Baxter, *His Deeper Work in Us* (p. 136).

## A Note of Thanks

**We again thank everyone who has supported this ministry in various ways in the past three years. Words cannot express the encouragement that such support is to this effort. Accordingly, we would love to hear from you. Comments, questions, or even prayer requests are welcome. May God richly bless each of you, our beloved readers.**

**IN THE NEXT ISSUE:** “Apologetics and the Gospel (1 Peter 3:15).” How does this verse apply to modern apologetic ministry? What should our approach be in dealing with unbelievers? How exactly do we get people to believe the Gospel?

# *Truth*

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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