

Romans 7

The Battle is Engaged

Paul, in Romans 7, uses the first person singular pronoun 'I' over thirty times. Near the end of the chapter he exclaims, 'Wretched man that I am!' The term 'wretched' is translated from the Greek word 'talaiporos' which means 'suffering, afflicted, distressed, miserable'. Why does Paul make this exclamation? Let's find out.

Back to Basics: What is Sin?

Sin is doing **anything that God does not want us to do**. It is also a force to be reckoned with. In fact, it is the greatest power of our enemy, the devil and so, in effect, is the **second most powerful force in the universe**. It is so powerful that even God's holy law cannot deliver us from it. To play with it or court it or dabble in it or try to cheat it can only lead to our harm and often the harm of others. The **difficulty with sin is to recognise it for what it is**, as it is clever, deceitful and a liar which tries to convince us that all is okay when it blatantly isn't or things are so bad that there is no way out. Outside of Christ, we are fooled by it and complacently go through life heading for death and destruction without often realising it or even caring.

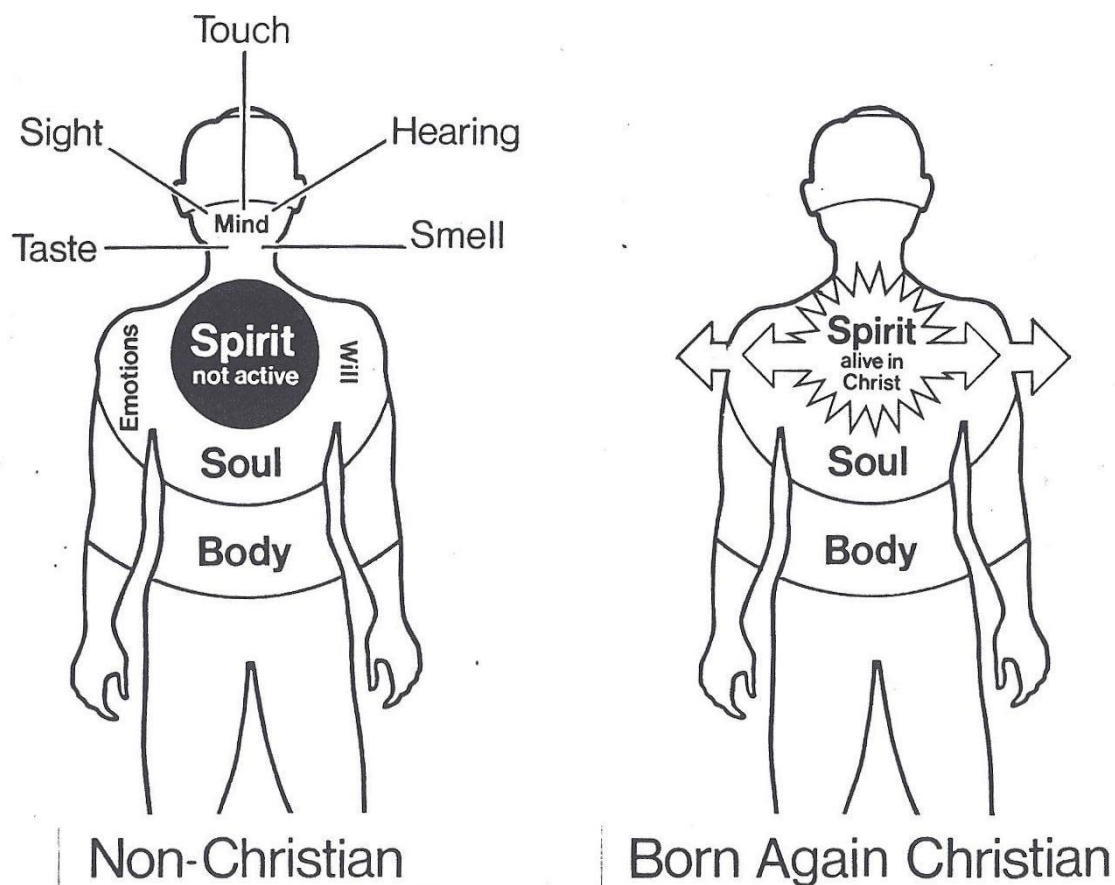
An example of how strong and deceitful sin is: So many people in the world **make up their own idea of God** based on nothing more than their imagination. They largely decide what God is like and what God wants from us, probably loosely based on what they think about religion, and then they expect God to honour that and even get upset when God does not live up to their expectations. So **they have made up the rules and expect God to respond accordingly**, instead of God, the creator of all things, making the rules and them responding accordingly, which is blatantly and obviously what is going to be the real truth. So every action in their life that is not in line with God's will is sin and they cannot see it. They think they are okay. Another example: **believing that there is no God** even though the whole of creation is shouting at us that God is alive. Sin and the god of this age have so blinded the minds of unbelievers. AND what is the consequence of sin? **"For the wages of sin is death."** (Romans 6:23a)

Back to Basics: What is the Sinful Nature (the Flesh)?

The Greek word for 'flesh' is 'sarx'. This word can mean 'literal flesh, the physical body, a human being, life in this present world and family relationships'. The NIV often brings out another meaning translating 'sarx' as 'sinful nature' which has the meaning of **'human nature that if left to its own devices would choose to sin and outside of Christ and the Spirit of God is dominated or controlled by sin'**. In Romans 7, those very helpful NIV translators are trying to help us to understand that the meaning of the word 'sarx' in this context is 'sinful nature'.

Outside of Christ, humanity is characterized by a complex web of thoughts, desires, values and actions that are in **opposition to God's intended pattern for us**. Our human perspectives, understanding, and efforts are actually hostile to the perspectives, understanding and plan of God. In fact, we are **driven towards rebellion against God** and this is all **because of our fallen, sinful, human nature**. Outside of Christ, human beings are **helplessly under the power of the sinful nature and sin**. They are energised by evil desires and guided by perceptions that blind them to God's will and His nature and are thus under the wrath of God.

(2) Back to Basics: What Happens When we are Saved or Become a Christian?



As human beings, we are made up of a **body** and a **soul**. The soul is made up of our **minds, will and emotions**. Watchman Nee said, 'Our emotion expresses how we feel, our mind tells us what we think, and our will communicates what we want.' As a non-Christian, our human spirit is **dead to God** and **either inactive**, and so unable to affect our actions, decisions and desires, or we are being **influenced by the enemy** in some form or another. In this state, **we are at the mercy of the world, the enemy, sin, and our own sinful nature**.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” (Ephesians 2:1-3)

To be **born again and become a Christian** (by asking God to forgive us for doing our own thing instead of doing His will and accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour) means that we **receive the life of God, the Holy Spirit, into our spirit.**

Jesus said, “**Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’**” (John 3:6,7)

When we are saved, our record of sin before God is completely erased and so no longer held against us; we are set free from the power of our sinful nature, so that it no longer has the right to dominate and enslave us; and we have a restored relationship with God – He sees us as righteous – all because we now have Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Christianity is not modifying our former life a little by dropping a few things and picking up a few others to make our lives better. It is not adjusting our lives slightly or brushing it up to look better. Christianity is dying to one life and being reborn into eternal life with God who loves us. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is the greatest difference possible between two human beings.

“**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**” (Galatians 5:17)

The Romans 7:1-6 – The Marriage Illustration

At the beginning of Romans 7, Paul is talking about a **marriage** between a man and a woman that is apparently **strained by her desire to be with another**. But the **law of marriage forbids her to leave her first husband** to be married to someone else; this law would label her guilty of **adultery**. However, should her marriage **partner die**, she would be **released from her obligation to the law** and can **freely marry someone else**.

This illustration has three elements: a husband, a wife and the law that regulates their behaviour. Paul does not state that the Law dies. It is still very much alive and active, fulfilling its purpose in God’s redemptive plan. It is the **believer that dies** and **with him his obligation to sin and to the Law to which he was formerly bound**.

(3) “**So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.**” (Romans 7:4-6) (Key Verses of Romans 7)

So, in Christ, we have died to the law and the domination of sin in our lives, and we belong to our Saviour – our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our new marriage partner. Our job is to work at our relationship with Him and to get to know Him better and more intimately, and to love Him more and more as our life progresses, to be completely faithful to Him, and to obey Him implicitly in all the details of our lives. If we do this, then we will bear fruit to God.

Not only is Jesus our new marriage partner, but we gain a **new way to live and serve Him** – the **way of the Spirit**. This is God living within us giving us **new desires and perspectives**. Even more, the **spiritual power unleashed in the resurrection is made available to us in the Spirit**. So, instead of living under the Law, God has provided and far better way to live, and that is to allow the **Spirit of God to live through us**.

Remember, in Christ, God does **not completely free us from our sinful, fleshly nature**, but in His death He has **paid God's price for the sins it may generate, whether past, present or future**. God is outside of time and so sees our whole life rather than just what is happening at any one moment. **God sees us as righteous (our position)**. **AND, although we still have a sinful nature (our condition), we are no longer controlled by it or bound to it**. In effect, in Christ we have died to it. He has provided a source of power that has released us from its domination and from our legal obligation to carry out the objectives of sin. Our flesh or sinful nature will always be opposed to the Holy Spirit within us, but its power over us is shattered in Christ; and, if we live according to the Spirit, it will stay shattered. **We need to give ourselves over to the Holy Spirit so that our desires and motives are shaped by Him, with His power enabling us to do what it really good – God's will**.

And this new way of the Spirit enables us to **produce fruit to God**, because we are released from doing works that could do nothing but bear fruit for death (dead works). **Instead of living for ourselves**, our new purpose in life is to bring forth fruit to God. We have **God's empowering** to do this, because we are married or belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and He provides all we need. With the Spirit of God's enabling, we can now serve and worship God effectively and become more like Jesus.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (Where the Spirit is Lord, there is liberty!) And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:17,18)

Romans 7:7-13 – Is the Law Sin?

In Romans 7:7-13, Paul is exploring his own struggle with sin and facing his moral inadequacy. The law of God is spiritual, but Paul was **'sarkikos' (characterized by the flesh or sinful nature)** and thus was trapped in sin. He realised that **nothing good lived in him**, that is, in his flesh or sinful nature. Trapped by his moral frailty, **Paul cannot live the righteous life that is revealed in God's law**, even though he acknowledges its beauty. God's law, no matter how good it is, **cannot produce life**.

So, **why did God give us His law?** God gave it to accomplish two objectives:

1. The Law **exposes our sins**. God gave His Law to confront us with our sin so that we might **see sin as God sees it** – as abhorrent, rebellious actions that alienate us from God. God did this for a reason, so that we might repent of our sin and come to Him in faith.
2. The Law **exposes our sinfulness**. The Law shows us our rebellious nature by rousing it into action, which demonstrates our inability to help ourselves and proves our need for God to come to our rescue and change our hearts.

In essence, Paul is declaring in this passage, **'I did not know that I was dying from the disease of sin until the Law revealed my terminal condition. Furthermore, the Law showed me that I loved my disease and that I would do anything to keep it. I was like a living dead man! By pointing out my problem, the Law demonstrated that I was living under a death sentence.'**

So, the Law is God's **diagnostic tool** and it is good for its intended purpose, which is to expose the disease of sin and to confront us with the **prognosis**: the disease is deadly if not treated, but it's **completely curable**. God gave the Law to humanity to **confront our unrighteousness** and to demonstrate our **need for salvation**.

"The law code had a perfectly legitimate function. Without its clear guidelines for right and wrong, moral behaviour would be mostly guesswork. Apart from the succinct, surgical command, 'You shall not covet,' I could have dressed covetousness up to look like a virtue and ruined my life with it." (Romans 7:7,8 – the Message) (4)

Paul chose the sin of **covetousness** in Romans 7:7,8 to show that the law was helpful to show what sin was, but also powerless to control sin. The reason covetousness was chosen was because it is a **sin of the heart or mind and internal**, whereas the **Jews wrongly thought** that it was **only actions** like those required by the other nine commandments that **constituted sin to God**. Before Paul really understood the 10th commandment (thou shall not covet), he thought he was a pretty good Jew who was blameless in the eyes of the law and, therefore, God. He hadn't realized just how bad a person he was in God's eyes. This realisation took all his pride and self-confidence and made him feel weak, helpless and hopeless, until He knew Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Although the law is holy and good, in Christ, we have **died to the authority of the Law** – it has **served its purpose**. We now **belong to another** – to Christ Jesus our Lord. Don't dismiss the Old Testament that teaches us about God's Law, as from it we can learn much that's important for our Christian lives and we neglect it at our peril.

Romans 7:14-23 – The Battle for our Soul

Romans 7:14-23 has **three historical views** as to what this passage of Scripture means. It could be speaking about a person before they are born again, or it could be any time after they are born again, or it could be after they are born again and before they are baptised in the Holy Spirit.

This is not a passage about a person before they have started the process of salvation, which always begins with their conviction of their sinful state before a holy God and their desire to put their relationship with God right. The person described here understands what sin is and what they should do in God, but they are just not able to do it. A person totally outside of God's convicting influence doesn't even realise that they are a sinner or doesn't care. They usually think they are alright as they are and do nothing, apart from the occasional attempts at self-improvement, to make themselves any better. The person here is not like this. They know that the Law of God is good and that it is God reaching out to humankind and they want to obey it, but they cannot because they are controlled by the sin within them and can do nothing about it in their own strength.

This passage is also not talking about a fully born again believer who, as we know, has the righteousness of Christ and who is no longer a slave to sin. This is contrary to verse 23, which suggests that we can be made a prisoner of the law of sin that works within us; and verse 20, which talks about the sin living within (which, as a Christian, Paul could easily confess and be done with); and verse 14, which states that Paul, a mature, father in God, was sold as a slave to sin, even though he taught: "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin." (Romans 6:6)

This whole chapter is essentially about a man who is trying to sanctify himself or become holy and separated unto God by following or obeying the law of God and he is trying to do this in his own strength. Paul is trying to show that the law on its own cannot justify or sanctify anyone. It is good, because it shows us what sin is and how God wants us to live; but it fails to deliver, as the power of sin and our sinful nature is just too great. Paul is speaking of himself as a man experiencing the intense conviction of sin and a man who, by the Spirit, sees the holiness of the Law and he feels utterly condemned. He is all too aware of his weakness and failure. He is trying to do right by God and keep the law in his own strength, but he cannot. He knows that he needs to change, but he does not as yet know how. Paul has lost all his own self-righteousness and own self-confidence, as he realises that God sees him as utterly sinful and unrighteous. Paul wanted to show the Jews that he wasn't dismissing the Law or saying that it was evil, but he wanted them to know what the Law could not do, because it was weak through the sinful nature.

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?..... Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24)

No wonder Paul saw himself as a wretched man. Wretched has the meaning of being exhausted after a hard fight. The fight he is describing in this passage has left him wretched. Unable to defeat his flesh by means of flesh – that is by his own ability – he cries out to God for help. What, other than death, can free him from a body that craves sin more powerfully than his mind and will crave righteousness? Who will rescue him from his misery? Of course, the answer is Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, is there a battle for our soul when we are a Christian? Absolutely! This battle is not about our position in Christ. In God's eyes, we have the righteousness of Christ and we are saved – we are going to heaven! This battle is all about our condition or more specifically the condition of our soul (our mind, emotions and will). God, by the Holy Spirit within us, is acting in our lives to infuse us with Christ's own likeness and enabling us to express Christlikeness in our daily lives. This is known as the process of sanctification. It is basically getting our act together in God. It is becoming the person that God wants us to be so that we can serve and worship Him better. It is increasingly reflecting God's glory to this needy, dying world, because there is more of Him and less of us. And it is getting better and better at doing what God wants us to do with our lives and so more and more conforming to His will in all things. It is growing the fruit of the Holy Spirit and being more able to fulfil God's will in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, on one side of the battle is the Holy Spirit of God aided by the Word of God and our union with and position in Christ. On the other side of the battle for our soul is our sinful nature or flesh aided and abetted by the enemy, the world that is ruled by him, and the power of sin. The flesh or sinful nature serves sin and the enemy, whereas the Spirit within us serves righteousness. The flesh or sinful nature is pulling us towards sin, dead works and unrighteousness, while the Spirit of God is pulling us to life in Christ, conformity to God's will and the likeness of Jesus. God doesn't wipe out our sinful nature when we become a Christian, rather He takes away its power over us and nails it to the Cross, and He gives us the power to win the battle for our soul.

(5) "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:16-25)

Sarx is translated sinful nature five times in the NIV reading of this passage. Paul here describes the sinful nature or flesh as energising and motivating us to do things that are obviously not what God want us to do. In contrast, believers are called on to 'live by the Spirit'. God Himself is the source of transformed desires that can motivate a new life. What's more, He is also the source of power for such a life. This life of being 'led by the Spirit' is not lived under God's law and it is not even possible to live it in our own strength. This is a life that is yielded to the Holy Spirit. It is a life given over to Him so that He can do whatever is needed within us so that we can

conform to the will of God. When we 'keep in step with the Spirit' of God within us, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. After all, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful nature – it is nailed to the cross with Jesus and its authority over us is totally overcome. And not only that, when we keep in step with the Spirit rather than the sinful nature or flesh, God will fill us and our actions with the fruit of the Spirit – we will become more like Jesus.

Our task is to choose to obey the Spirit of God within us while choosing not to obey our sinful nature. This involves:

- **Our will:** we need to choose to go God's way and live by faith, rather than the way of our sinful nature, the enemy and the world.
- **Our emotions** – we need to understand that these are powerful forces within us and seek build an increasingly deep relationship of love with our God that will in turn motivate us to obey God and do His will only, serve Him in the best way we can, and worship Him in all that we do for He is truly worthy.
- **Our minds** – we need to feed in less of the world's rubbish and what our sinful nature desires and more of God's truths. "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Romans 13:14). We need to rise beyond the limitations of our reason and believe God. We need to "Count (or reckon) ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:11) We need to constantly remind ourselves of this truth, and take hold of it and never let it go. It should anchor our lives in Christ and prevent sin from derailing our service for Him and our worship of Him.

Even in Christ, our sinful nature (flesh) will oppose the will of God and will succeed if we let it, even though its power over us has been negated. Sin is very patient and will wait until we are weak or we put ourselves into temptation's way before striking. It is constantly looking for chinks in our spiritual armour and it is not a gentleman who will warn us of his intentions, it will just get in, cause as much damage as possible and take control whenever it can for as long as it can. Remember though that the sinful nature and sin itself only has control over a Christian as much as we let it. The enemy would have us believe that we are powerless to resist or to take back control, but in Christ Jesus by the power of the Spirit, it is we who are in control.

Every Christian receives a new nature, one that wants nothing more than to behave as Jesus Christ behaves. Meanwhile, the flesh, the old sinful human nature, wants life to continue as it was before we were in Christ. It wants its position of power back – it wants to break free of the cross of Christ to which it is nailed and be resurrected in our lives, and, if we let it, it will try to enslave us in certain areas of our life. Does the sinful nature have power over us in Christ? Not unless we let it!

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Do we let our sinful nature influence us and so give it power over us? It is our choice. Too often, we resurrect our own sinful nature and give it free reign to do as it desires. AND it certainly will **not choose God's will and what is best for us in eternal terms.**

"We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:2). We need to live in the good of what Christ Jesus has done for us on the cross and **reckon ourselves dead to the sinful nature** or flesh and its passions and desires. **"For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."** (Colossians 3:3). We need to **live under the dominion of God's Spirit** at work within us and then we will **not even want to do what our sinful nature wants.** This is the best thing we can do for our eternal future.

"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life." (Romans 6:22)

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Titus 2:11-14)

So what happens when we make the wrong choice in this battle for our soul and we choose to do what our sinful nature or flesh wants instead of what God wants?

"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:15)

Although we are free from the dominion of sin in Christ, **if we do sin**, then in a sense, we **hand back the dominion of our lives in that area to the sin.** That is why we need to keep **short accounts with God.** If we sin, we **need to repent** of that sin and ask God for His forgiveness. And more than that, we then **need to get back into step with Him and the Holy Spirit within us by making Him Lord of all of our life yet again.** God knew we would get it wrong and He made a way for us to put it right in Christ.

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." (1 John 1:8-2:1)

Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin....(But) if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** (John 8:34,36)

Remember, **self-improvement carried out in the energy of the flesh is a vain pursuit.** You can push yourself to fatigue trying hard to be like Christ, but all you will achieve is **wretched exhaustion or destructive collapse** when you realise that you are failing. We are **not saved by grace and then sanctified by our own labours.** The work of God's grace is not finished. **Only God can sanctify a soul.** We need to yield our life

fully over to the Holy Spirit, and trust Him with everything. This is the answer to the third historical view of Romans 7:14-23. This passage isn't describing someone before baptism in the Holy Spirit. In fact, the New Testament largely assumed that Christians were baptised or totally immersed in and given over to the Holy Spirit and so this view could be placed with the born again believer view. God will change us from the inside out to be more like Jesus, if we let Him. To enable this, we need to live in step with the Holy Spirit and have our lives totally given over to Him; AND we need to be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion." (Philippians 1:6)