

*D.J. Reed*  
July 3, 2011

## Independence Day Weekend

*Chilson Hills Church*  
Howell, MI

### *“The Big I”*

Romans 7:15-25a

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

When I was about 8 or 9 years old, my brother and I were outside playing when we found the ultimate boy toy: a stick. Each of us had one; a switch like stick that cut through the air like a fencing sword. And as we whipped them through the air, they seemed to be calling to us: “Destroy something. Destroy something!”

At first we whacked the tree trunks in our neighborhood and then we went after the leaves that hung from their branches. We took swipes at the short grass and then we happened upon my mother’s Hosta plants.

They had tender, broad, green leaves, and they had these purple tall spires that stretched up towards the sky with purple delicate flowers. They were begging to be beaten.

We took one swipe at them, and the leaves cut like paper. We took another and another and another and another.... Until there was nothing but hosta shrapnel scattered all over the flower beds and the front yard.

My mom came out, and her jaw dropped. And before we were grounded for the rest of our third and second grade years, she asked us, “Why did you do that?”

And we didn’t have an answer. We didn’t know why we had sliced and diced my mother’s precious plants. We didn’t know why we were so fascinated with destruction and outright vandalism.

Most of us have stories like that one (and they’re not from our childhood either); stories where we do something wrong, but have no explanation for our recklessness.

It might be a cruel and demeaning name, a push, a shove, a punch. We might violate a company policy, tell a lie, or send an angry e-mail. When we consider the sins we do... sometimes we wonder,

“Where did that come from?” Who is that person who said that or did that? Paul wondered the same thing. “I do not understand my own actions,” he says, “I do not do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate.” Paul has the right desire, but he can’t make himself do the right thing. He wants to do good things, but he does bad things, evil things instead.

And Paul hates this about himself. He hates the fact that he can’t align his cravings and desires with the right action. Why can’t we do what we want to do? And why can’t we stop doing the things we want to stop.

I have a friend of mine whose 4 year-old son was crying. Crying probably isn’t the right word. His son was hysterical. And my friend said to him, “Joshua, stop crying. Stop crying!” But the boy was inconsolable. And he kept saying over and over again, “I c-c-can’t stop c-c-crying! I c-c-can’t stop c-c-crying!!” And my friend said later, “I believed him. He really couldn’t stop crying.”

He wanted to stop the tears and the wave of emotion he was feeling but he couldn’t muster up the maturity and self-control to stave off the sorrow.

We may be able to control our emotions better than this 4 year-old, but we all know what it feels like to be unable to control something that wells up inside of us. Those of us who have tried to keep ourselves from taking a peak at that forbidden website, that alluring cigarette, that bottle of vodka, or a toxic relationship – you know what I’m talking about. You may want to stop doing bad things but it’s hard to do the right thing.

And so, we end up kicking ourselves – maybe even hating ourselves - wishing we would never have done what we did. We find ourselves saying something similar to what Paul said, “Oh wretched man (or woman) that I am!”

The answer to the problem of sin in the past had always been The Law. Paul spends a great deal of time in his letter to the Romans, talking about The Law. This Law had The Ten Commandments as the foundation, but it also had numerous other commands, rules and regulations to help the Jewish people live in harmony with each other and their God.

But the problem with The Law was not that it was bad, it's just that it was limited.

Paul, put it this way, he said The Law was like a nanny, that it was there to correct us and set us on the right path, but it was limited in that it was an unattainable standard for humanity. It was the embodiment of goodness and moral purity. But the problem was that everyone was falling short of it. No one was reaching the standard, and following The Law perfectly.

TIME magazine recently had an article about the Constitution of the United States and the controversy currently surrounding it.

Some say we must find a way to interpret it and read it as the founders read it. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of our history and our values.

Others would say the founders intentionally wrote The Constitution using broad terms and that this document is elastic and flexible, that it must be interpreted differently according to the needs of each generation.

Whatever your view on The Constitution, I think we can all agree that reading any law precisely and interpreting it exactly is a tricky if not impossible task. Laws, rules, and regulations are tough to abide by.

Those of you who worked for the auto industry know will know that if there was one guiding principle that drove auto production in America: the line never stops. It's a phrase that has been around since Henry Ford was building Model T's.

This assembly line concept enforced consistency in manufacturing parts and products, and it also isolated repeatable processes (hook this up here, turn this, repeat); but what made American auto

plants so prolific, was the fact that "the line never stopped."

And this was seen as a good thing; because it forced the worker to be efficient and as a result, more cars were built.

But there was a dark side to this guiding principle. This value supported the ideal of volume and quantity over quality. Worker bonuses were based on the volume of vehicles produced. And soon, the average worker on the line struggled to keep up with the pace of the line that never stopped and as a result, quality was compromised.

They tried to address the quality issues by adding "repair bays," but keeping up with the line that never stopped, demanding co-workers and managers eventually caught up The Detroit Three. Some changes had to be made.

Paul looked at The Law as if it were an assembly line that never stopped. As a guiding principle or a structure for society or daily life, it kept driving us towards greater goodness. But Paul pointed out that we just couldn't keep up. We just couldn't measure up to the perfection of The Law.

And we struggled to keep up not because God made us bad, it was because there was something bad working inside of us. Something inside of us was keeping us from performing well, from doing good and keeping up with the rigors of the law. And that something... was sin.

We have a wood pile in our back yard and occasionally, the boys and I have looked through the wood pile for grubs, ants or potato bugs to pick up and observe. And to find some of these bugs we had to pull away the bark that still clung to these dead pieces of wood.

And we noticed that when we pulled back the bark, a labyrinth was revealed. There were these winding tracks etched into the wood underneath the bark. At first we thought they were ant tunnels, but they seemed a bit wide for an ant tunnel. It was only recently that I discovered what had made these – emerald ash borers.

The non-native species made their way over from China and are now considered the most destructive forest insect ever to invade North America, and Michigan – I've recently discovered – has been hardest hit by these buggers.

Ask Bob and Nadine Russell about how their Ash trees have been affected by these insects and they'll tell you – they don't have many live Ash trees in their backyard any more.

These bullet shaped bugs bore into the outer bark and scarf down the tissue that carries the sugars from the leaves to the rest of the tree. They lay their eggs in May and June and the larvae that hatch feed on the nutrients from tree tissue – ostensibly starving the tree.

Sin, in Paul's mind, works in a similar way. It digs inside our soul and it robs us of life. It penetrates our good intentions and kills us slowly. It kills our spirit and most importantly, it destroys our relationship with God.

Sin is a parasite that makes our bodies war against our will. And according to Paul, we are "captive" to the sin that eats away at us like an emerald ash borer feasting on the flesh of a tree.

So Paul asks the question when looking at this helpless situation: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Who will rescue me from this never ending, unforgiving assembly line? Who will rescue me from this parasite of sin that keeps me from doing good? Who will rescue me from... myself?

When it comes to the Ash Borer, U of M scientists have bred a stingless wasp native to China in their laboratories. These wasps are the sworn enemy of the Ash Borer and they hope to release 150,000 of these bad boys in eight states this summer – including Michigan.

So there's hope for our ash trees and our forests. But what about me? Who will rescue me? What is the solution for me?

How do I keep myself from thinking the thoughts I think? How do I keep myself from flying off the handle? How do I keep myself from dishonesty?

How do I keep myself from laziness? How do I keep myself from being mean, judgmental, or greedy? Is there something or someone that can rescue me from all of this?

Paul says yes there is. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Jesus is the solution. Jesus is the rescuer for the plagued, exhausted, frustrated people of the world.

And that sounds so easy, so cliché, so trite – I know it does. But we need to remember this.

Paul continues in **Romans 8:1**:

(<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>) "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In other words, you don't have to worry about the corrosive power of sin and death. You don't have to worry about keeping up with the assembly line of The Law.

"God has done what the law...could not do." God sent his own son, Jesus, "to deal with sin," so that we wouldn't have to keep up with the law and instead we could live in freedom according to the Spirit of God. We don't have to live in fear of the fact that we can't keep up or that we can't beat fear. We can live in freedom, because God has saved us from ourselves.

The other day, I said something that was quite insensitive to another church member. It was one of those things that kind of slip out and as soon as you say it, you want to grab it and put it back inside.

Well, I felt awful about it, and so I called up this church member and I said, "I need to ask your forgiveness." "For what?" he asked me. And I repeated what I had said the night before. And I said, "I hope you can forgive me for what I said." And before I could finish, he said, "You got it."

I can't tell you how freeing that was to hear someone else say that they forgave me, that I didn't have to carry around that burden of guilt anymore. His forgiveness reminded me of what Jesus did for me once and for all. Jesus liberated me from the tyranny of sin and death, and Jesus liberated me from feeling like I have to keep up with the Law.

This weekend, we celebrate Independence Day, the moment when we declared our independence as a sovereign nation and freedom from the rule of England. But I pray that you will celebrate a freedom of another kind; a freedom that is far more satisfying and far deeper than the one given to us by the Declaration of Independence.

I pray that you will declare your freedom from sin from this day forward. I pray that you will live in the freedom of knowing that you don't need to be controlled by the vices, misdemeanors and addictions of your life.

And I pray that you will also declare your freedom from the expectations and the legalism that sometimes binds us. That you will give yourself a break from the expectation to be perfect, blameless, and holy. I pray that you will confess your sin and breathe deeply as God removes the weight of your sin and says "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

You are not going to hell for what you've done. You are not worthless because of your past. You are not broken beyond repair. You are not hopeless. You are free, and Jesus loves you enough to rescue you from sin, from The Law and from, ultimately, yourself.

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"