

Paul, in talking about our relationship to the law, speaks of himself as being captive by his sins. The wages of these sins, he says, is death. (Rom 6:23) A sort of climax occurs in ch 7:24, as he is writing this book, when he cries, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Paul, of course, knows the answer, but this thought of despair is something that is real to many people. They think that there is a balance between good works, and bad; and if you can only do more good than bad, you will be above some 'minimum' you need to be saved. Or, they believe that they can delete an evil deed from the books if they go out and do something good. But this kind of attitude always leads eventually to despair, as in the phrase uttered by Paul.

The same attitude is uttered by the people of Israel in Ezekiel 33:10, "Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"' And the answer given by God through Ezekiel is the best answer that I have found in the Bible. Reading vss 11-12, "Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' "Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, 'The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys, and the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it. The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.'" It is clear to me that God is saying that there is no ledger where good works can counteract the bad. There is no escape from the accounting of those deeds at judgment. But God does not look at a ledger to see your score. He determines if you have turned from evil and are following him. He simply wants us to love him, follow him, and imitate him the best we can. Paul resolves his question in Romans 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." Paul puts it in God's hands, not in our own. And he says that it is our attitude that counts, because we are weak and do sin. So we should not be in despair about our sin: As we find in 1 Jn 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." In contrast to despair, our lives should be filled with joy.