

Released from Law – Romans 7

Back in **Romans 2 & 3**, Paul has already shown that law – whether the Old Testament Jewish Law as given to Moses, or **any** set of rules and regulations – is absolutely useless in putting us in right relationship with God. He has contrasted law with faith, and has shown that Abraham was justified before God, not by his obeying any law, but by his response of faith. His faith was **counted** (accounted, reckoned) as righteousness before God. In the same way, Paul says, we are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. So we have entered into ‘this grace in which we stand’, we have peace with God and a real hope for the future (**Romans 5:1-2**).

God’s grace has not stopped there! He has not only given us the solution to our guilt over past failures (= sins) but has also **given** us the way to avoid being entrapped by slavery to sin and failure in the present and future. Yes, this too is **a gift!** Just like we needed (and still need) to come and **take hold** of the forgiveness he has given us, so we need to take hold of what he has given us by **joining us** to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And the results? Negative and positive, in that order!

Firstly, by joining us to the death of Jesus, he has **cut us off** from slavery to sin and failure. We are ‘dead to sin’ – it no longer has any rights in our lives. The old person we once were is dead and gone, put out of action, and we need to count on that fact and **not allow** sin to rule our lives (**Romans 6:10-14**). We are no longer sin’s slaves – we don’t need to do what it says!

Positively, we now have a new source of life – resurrection life, **life that can please God** because it is the life of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ! Not just joined to his death, but joined to his resurrection life also, and able to ‘present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments (or ‘weapons’!) of righteousness to God’ (**Romans 6:13**).

Now, instead of being slaves to sin and failure, we have become ‘slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification’ (**Romans 6:17-22**). VERY different to how we used to be: the ‘wages’ of sin and failure meant death for us; now we have received the free gift of ‘life of the ages’ from our Father God through the Lord Jesus (**Romans 6:23**).

It all looks like it is sorted out, with no problems left and no questions left unanswered – so **WHY** does Paul start talking about law again in **Romans 7** ? ? ?

This is different! He is no longer talking about following (or trying to follow!) a set of rules in order to try to earn God’s forgiveness and stand justified in his sight, like he was in the earlier chapters. He has taken us through all of that and hopefully we now know that we stand accepted in God’s sight, forgiven because of the blood of the Lord Jesus and with his new, eternal, resurrection life beginning to be visible in our actual day-to-day living.

So what has law got to do with us now?

Now that we have been forgiven, escaped slavery to sin and failure, and have become ‘slaves’ of God, we naturally want to please him in every way that we can. It is all too easy to start setting up ways for ourselves (big or small) in which we think we shall be able to do what he wants us to do, and so bring pleasure to him. It sounds good and innocent enough, but there is a trap waiting for us if we follow down that route!

Trying to please God like this – to try to ‘repay’ him in some way for the love and grace with which he has flooded our lives – is just as doomed to failure as any attempts we may have

made to **earn** his approval in the first place. No, we are not trying to earn our own justification this time; we genuinely want to be pleasing to him, but the underlying principle remains the same: we are trying to do something for God. It's legalism again – and it doesn't work, as we may have already found out! Paul certainly discovered it, as we shall read as we go through this chapter . . .

First of all, Paul starts with the simple picture of a married couple who are bound to each other by the laws of marriage. He takes the example of an unfaithful wife, but of course the situation is the same either way round. If either husband or wife is unfaithful, then they have committed adultery. But if either of the marriage partners dies, then the other is free to marry another partner. Death breaks off the bonds of marriage. A simple picture and easy to understand!

OK, says Paul, you used to be 'married' to the law (especially Jews who were obliged to follow the Jewish Law), so you needed to follow it faithfully. He has already said in **Romans 3:20** (and **Galatians 2:16**) that you can't be justified by following the law but now, he says, your links to following the law have been severed by death – **your** death! Just as we have been set free from slavery to sin and failure by being joined to the death of Jesus, we have also been released from this demanding 'marriage partner' who wanted us to try to please God.

And for what purpose? *"So that you might be joined to another"* – i.e. joined to Jesus. And what is the purpose of being joined to him? *"... in order that we might bear fruit for God."* (**Romans 7:4**). Neither of these are 'might' in the sense of 'maybe it will happen, maybe it won't', but rather **in order that we would** actually be joined to Jesus and be able to 'bear fruit for God' – in other words, see the good results in our lives that **are** pleasing to him. It's exactly the result that we were looking for when we were trying our level best to do things to please him, but again **it has been given to us as a gift**. Paul is using a different picture to describe the newness of the measure of resurrection life that we can experience now!

Who would have thought that any good law (especially the Jewish Law, given by God himself!) would have such a damaging effect on us that we need to be separated from it by death? But in **1 Corinthians 15:56**, Paul writes that *"the power of sin is the law"* and in these verses (**Romans 7:5-13**) he shows us how sin somehow 'feeds' on the requirements of law to bring us into more bondage, even though we have already been forgiven and born again.

I think we need to see almost all the rest of this chapter as Paul describing the degree of despair, confusion and desperation that he – and, if we are honest, we – experience when we try to live up to standards (God-made or home-made). Having already received forgiveness and new life, we only try like this because we want our lives to be pleasing to the loving Lord who has redeemed us, but it always seems to end in failure for us, just as it did for Paul. We are in good company!

He has already described the process that **has taken place** to liberate us, back in **v.4**, and we only get into this sort of mess because we think we need to pay something back to God, almost like 'one good turn deserves another'! We have already come through death and resurrection by being joined to Jesus, we have already been 'bought with a price'. We have nothing that we can give to God – except ourselves! All we can do is follow Paul's instructions to *"present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God . . ."* We'll come to that later in **Romans 12**!

So, let's follow through what Paul writes here, always remembering that this is an ongoing picture of a mess that we don't need to get into, and which we have been given the means

to get out of if we are already in it! As Watchman Nee says in *The Normal Christian Life* : “Well, we must admit that some of what he describes here is not a *Christian* experience, but none the less many Christians do experience it.” (Even if you don’t read the whole book, this chapter 9 – *The Meaning and Value of Romans Seven* – is well worth reading on its own. Borrow a copy and read it!)

v.5 Paul reminds us what it’s like living ‘in the flesh’ – i.e. in our own natural ability. We had ‘sinful passions’ – desires that we knew were wrong – and rules just seemed to make them worse (see **v.7-11**). In our practical, physical lives, all we could produce was the wrong sort of results: ‘bearing fruit for death’ in contrast with ‘bearing fruit for God’ which he has just mentioned in **v.4**.

v.6 But now it’s different, he says. We have been (actually, ‘were’, in a point of time) released from the Law and we died to that which held us captive. And the purpose of that? So that we now serve in newness of spirit and not just following written rules. (I can almost hear his readers saying to themselves, as we may also do, ‘well, that’s how it’s supposed to work!’).

v.7 It’s almost as if Paul has heard our mutterings! He goes back to the point he raised in **v.5**, how rules of behaviour (including the Jewish Law) just seem to make things worse. Is the Law sinful? Of course not, but here is the purpose of the Law – and (from God’s point of view) of all laws: **to make us aware of our sin and failure**. He takes the example of coveting – setting your heart on things – and says that he would not have known about it without the Law telling him it was wrong. (This sounds like an example from his own experience.)

v.8-9 Once he knew that, it was as if the Law gave extra leverage to the coveting. Now that he knew it was wrong, he found that he was setting his heart on all sorts of things. He had been OK until that bit of Law came along but, when it did come, it gave new life and strength to the coveting and finished him off!

(Remember what we know about Paul’s early life. He had been a strict Pharisee, observing (or trying to observe) every last little detail of the Jewish Law, so this sort of repeated and increasing failure would have really brought him to the edge. He says ‘I died’. That’s what it felt like.)

v.10-11 Following the commandments was supposed to point the way to life! “*So you shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.*” (**Leviticus 18:5**. See also **Ezekiel 20:11, Matthew 19:17, Luke 11:28**). For Paul, they seemed to be having the opposite effect.

v.12-13 But there is nothing wrong with the Law. It is ‘*holy and righteous and good*’. So why all the trouble? These holy commandments had the effect of magnifying the sinfulness of sin, and it was the sin that really did the damage.

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A Continuing Problem ?

In **v.14**, Paul seems to change gear. What he has been describing in **v.7-13** was in the past; now he writes in the present tense. This is Paul NOW. As we read these verses to the end of the chapter, can we really believe that this is the current experience of the great apostle?

(Again, I would recommend you to read chapter 9 of Watchman Nee’s *The Normal Christian Life*. I have read it again since I started writing these notes, and he expresses it so much better than I can!)

There is a wonderfully liberating truth hiding in these verses which look so very frustrating. As we read through them (**v.14-25**), do we find ourselves (perhaps secretly) saying ‘Yes, that’s my experience as well,’ and wishing that we could find the way out in our own lives?

Paul is discovering that, however much he may want to please God by following ‘the law of God’, he keeps finding that he is simply unable to do it. His body seems to be geared towards evil, not good. His ‘flesh’ – his human nature – has absolutely **nothing good in it**. No problem with wanting to do good, but the ability to do it is just not there! (**v.18**)

When he wants to do good, he finds he just can’t! In his heart, he loves God’s will, he joyfully agrees with it (**v.22**). But can he actually DO it? Apparently not.

There seems to be a war going on! In his mind, he serves the law and will of God, but his human nature gets in the way and his body refuses to co-operate (**v.23,25**).

‘This is a wretched existence – I can’t live this way!’ he cries, ‘Who will set me free from this body of death?’ (**v.24**). Watchman Nee writes: ‘. . . it is good when anyone cries out as he did. There is nothing more musical in the ears of the Lord. This cry is the most spiritual and the most scriptural cry a man can utter . . .’ Why? Because when we get to this point of desperation, we have come to the end of the road. We now **know** that we are completely unable to do anything to please God, so we stop trying and simply cry for help. Paul has played out his own frustration and crisis, and perhaps we have gone along with him and have seen that we face exactly the same total inability to follow God’s will.

It’s a good place to reach! Perhaps we now know – a little more in practice – what Paul was writing about in **v.4**. What may have seemed like theoretical theology may now be becoming practical spiritual reality.

Law – whether Biblical or home-made – is something that we just can’t follow, however hard we try. In fact, the harder we try, the more impossible it seems to become! However long we may have been Christians, however many wonderful spiritual experiences we may have had (or not had!), we are still ‘in the same boat’, just like Paul. We can’t please God that way. It doesn’t work.

Great news, then, that we have been cut off from any obligation to follow the Law! Look at **v.4 & 6** again. We were “*made to die to the Law through the body of Christ.*” When Jesus died on the cross, not only did his blood pay the price for my sins, not only did my old life die with him there, but, at the same time, I was cut off from the Law. (Another reason to celebrate as we take the bread and wine!)

So now, instead of being ‘married’ to rules, we have been joined to the risen Lord Jesus, who lives in us by his Spirit, “*in order that we might bear fruit for God.*” . . . “*so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.*”

The Law has not gone away, but we have been cut off from needing to follow it and have been given a new quality of life inside us that **fulfills** it: “*so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*” (**Romans 8:4**).

More to explore as we read on into chapter 8 . . .

Dave Taylor January 2024

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