

Set Free !

*“But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written,
‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;
but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

(1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

Right at the end of his well-known chapter about resurrection – both the historic resurrection of the Lord Jesus and our own future resurrection – Paul takes two Old Testament passages and brings them together.

The second part (quoted from **Hosea 13:14**) was originally spoken in judgment over the Jewish tribe of Ephraim, because of their idolatry and rejection of the LORD God. The next line in the same passage says *“Compassion will be hidden from My sight.”* Grim and full of despair, not at all the sort of passage that you would expect Paul to quote when talking of the victory of resurrection!

But he turns it around by quoting from **Isaiah 25:8** first: *“He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken.”* Even the most desolating judgment is swallowed up by the overwhelming victory of resurrection and in fact even the words of judgment themselves are turned around to emphasise the completeness of that victory. If he had written ‘Hallelujah!’ after *“. . . where is your sting?”* It would have fitted in perfectly. (See **Revelation 7:17 & 21:4** for more of the fulfilment!)

And then Paul moves the scene, from the glorious future to the present tense! *“but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Not ‘will give’ or even ‘has given’ (though both are true!), But ‘gives’; now, in our lives as we live them today.

Why does he say *“but thanks be to God . . .”*? Because he has just written about two things that look like the very opposite of victory: death and sin!

We all know that death comes to each one of us; the promise of resurrection gives us confidence to look beyond it. But sin, says Paul, is death’s ‘sting’, the deadly wound that brings the poison of death into our human lives today. It was the same back in **Genesis 2:17** *“. . . for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”* Death is the certain result of sin. James says the same in his letter: *“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”* (**James 1:14-15**) Just a couple of words to clarify here: 1) ‘lust’ doesn’t just mean sexual desire but setting your heart on something and 2) ‘accomplished’ means ‘full-grown’ or ‘completely reached its goal’. Sin is certainly deadly.

It is worth taking a moment to consider what God means by ‘sin’. It is a word that has long religious roots and it is not much used in everyday life today. If asked, most people – if they even agreed that it had any meaning these days – would probably say that they think it means sexual immorality, as in the phrase ‘living in sin’. In fact, its meaning is much simpler. The New Testament Greek word is borrowed from archery and means ‘missing the mark’. The Old Testament Hebrew word also has its roots in ‘missing’. If we needed to translate it today, we might easily say ‘failing to meet a standard’ or just simply ‘failure’. We might not like to think that we sin, but none of us can escape the fact that we often fail!

OK, so what Paul seems to be saying is that our everyday failures are the ‘sting’ of death affecting our lives now. But then he says a surprising thing: **the power of sin is the law.**

What can he mean? That laws (and particularly, perhaps, the laws that God gave in the Old Testament) are the power of sin – ?? Surely they are good things, showing us how we need to live, what to do and what to avoid doing; how can they represent ‘the power of sin’ ?

Fortunately, Paul explains very frankly from his own painful experience in **Romans 7**. He had been raised in the Jewish sect of the Pharisees (**Acts 26:4-5**), who took every commandment of the Jewish Law very literally and very seriously, so he would have been trained in every little detail from an early age.

But listen as he tells us his experience of trying to follow the Law . . .

“What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from law sin is dead. I was once alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.” (Romans 7:7-11) He goes on in the following verses to describe the misery of wanting to follow the law but finding himself unable to do so, culminating in his cry from the heart: *“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?” (v.24)*

Have you ever felt the same way? Wanting to follow every commandment that the Lord has given us but finding that you just can’t do it? Feeling increasingly condemned by failure that is only further highlighted by a growing awareness of God’s will?

Sadly, much of what passes for Christianity is structured around rules and regulations, external standards, traditions and expectations. We are made to feel bad about ourselves because we fail to meet those standards. And not just the standards that other people have made for us; quite often we get into the most condemnation because we do not match up to the standards that we set for ourselves. The more rules we try to follow, the more we are conscious of the effects of sin in our lives.

Yes, Paul was right, the law gives power to sin. Leverage, we might say these days.

How can we find our way out of this? IS there a way out?

Yes, there is! Paul found it and passed it on to us in the early verses of **Romans 7**. The verses we have just been looking at describe what he went through before he found the answer. That is underlined by the triumphant ‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ In **v.25** and then the opening verses of **ch.8**.

In **Romans 6**, Paul writes at length about the fact that those who have put their trust in Jesus have had their lives joined to his. He says how our old life *“was crucified with Him . . . so that we would no longer be slaves to sin” (v.6)*. He refers to the graphic demonstration that we make when we are baptised, portraying our old life being ‘buried’ as we go down into the water and our re-emergence from the water as a picture of resurrection to new life. It all hinges on the fact that our Father God has placed us in his Son (**1 Corinthians 1:30**) and so, just as he died, we died with him. Just as he was raised from the dead, so too we can experience the present-day ‘resurrection’ of the new life of the Holy Spirit in us. Yes, there is a physical resurrection to come, but Paul writes about a spiritual resurrection **now**.

But what has this to do with our obvious failure to live up to all those standards, rules and expectations? How does being ‘joined to the Son’ make any difference to that?

In **Romans 7:1-3**, he uses the picture of marriage. If a man and woman are married, they are bound to each other as long as they both live but, if one dies, the other is free to marry anyone else. Then, in **v.4**, he says we are in the same position.

Before we came to Christ, we were ‘married’ to the law, obliged to try to meet all those seemingly impossible standards. But now, because we have been joined to his death so that our old life is gone, we are also dead to the law! Those external standards have no more grip on us. Instead of ‘trying to please God’ by keeping all God’s laws (and all the other ones we have made for ourselves!), Paul says clearly *“Therefore, my brothers, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, **in order that we might bear fruit for God.** For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, (‘dead to that which held us captive’ - RSV) so that we serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.” (Romans 7: 4-6)*

I love the way he (perhaps unconsciously) switches from ‘you’ to ‘we’ as he writes! What he is writing to the believers in Rome is the essence of how he lives himself. This former Pharisee, steeped in the Jewish Law from birth, declares that he has now been set free from it by being joined to the death of the Lord Jesus. He is also freed from the condemnation of repeated failure, as he writes in **Romans 8:1-2**: *“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.”*

If we read on the next few verses in **ch.8**, we shall see how (again) he enlarges on what he has just written. He contrasts two ways of living:

1) ‘according to the flesh’ – in other words, the ordinary natural way of following human desires – which includes trying to please God by subjecting ourselves to his laws. As he writes in **v.6-8**, *“For the mind that is set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”* The verses we read earlier describe Paul’s own bitter experience of exerting all his energy to follow all God’s laws but failing miserably. He knows what he is writing about!

2) ‘according to the Spirit’ – living from the life of the Holy Spirit within us. *“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” (v.11)* This is all part of being ‘in Christ’, part of our amazing inheritance in him. Not something that we need to work hard to achieve, but a gift from our Father, for us to receive from him with thanks.

Yes, we need to follow up what he has done by taking hold of it, ‘abiding’ – making our home – in Jesus and what he has done for us, as Paul writes in the next verses: *“So then, brothers, we are under obligation (literally ‘in debt’), not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (v.12-13)* The key here is ‘by the Spirit’. He is not talking about us making tremendous human efforts to discipline ourselves to conform to God’s standards – quite the opposite! As the Holy Spirit leads us, he shows us more aspects of our lives, perhaps components of our personality, that belong to the old life and so need to be consigned to death, making them dead because they are already included in the death of Jesus.

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The tendency to try to earn God’s approval by attempting to keep the law is not some new idea – far from it! It was the main problem that Paul aimed to tackle when he wrote to the churches

in Galatia in about AD 56, and one of the dangers about which he warned the church in Colossae a few years later.

In **Colossians 2:20-23**, Paul challenges what we might call 'religious behaviour' : *"If you have died with Christ to the elementary principle of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourselves to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (Which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made (or 'would-be') religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."*

Just a few verses earlier, he wrote *"When you were dead in your transgressions . . . He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."* (**Colossians 2:13-14**)

In **Galatians 3:23-4:7**, Paul paints a simple picture of the role of laws (especially the Old Testament Law) in our lives. Apparently, he wrote this letter from Ephesus, and I like to think that maybe one morning, he was up on the flat roof of the house where he was staying and could see the 'school run' taking place in the streets below him, which gave him an illustration to share in his letter to the Galatian churches.

Each wealthy man who had a son would make sure that his heir was properly trained by assigning a trusted slave to look after him. This slave would know exactly how his master wanted his son to behave and would accompany him everywhere, especially to school, where the slave would sit at the back of the class and try to ensure that the boy learned his lessons well.

A day would come, though, when the father considered that his boy was sufficiently mature and trained and so he would hold an 'adoption' ceremony – really more of a 'coming of age' –, when the son and heir would become the 'junior master' in the household and take his share of the rights and responsibilities of his father's business. The word translated 'adoption' literally means 'placing as son'.

Although he had always been the son and heir, while he had been a child he was under the rule of this slave/tutor, right up until the day that his father 'adopted' him. Now he was no longer under the slave but was a free, adult man.

That's like us, says Paul. Before we came to faith in Christ, we were under laws, rules and regulations. But now *"when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."* (**Galatians 4:4-7**)

Wow! What a picture! That's us, set free from legalism and from trying to live up to expectations and brought into the glorious freedom of the heirs of God! Another amazing part of our inheritance because our Father has joined us to his Son!

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