
Believing the New Covenant Realities

Romans 7:1-6

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Ah, here we are in Romans 7. Here we are having learned of a decisive deliverance from the power of sin and dependent responsibility to yield to God. So, is a holy life now bounded by the law? Since the law cannot save, do we now live by law-keeping – by a principle of law? Particularly when the universal experience of Christians is that of struggle. We find ourselves in the midst of an enormous battle that should have been won in Romans 6.

It seems to me that Romans 7 is meant to do three major things:

1. It is meant to undercut reliance on law as a means of transformation. Law keeping cannot save nor can it transform us. And there are number of questions raised by that statement that Paul wrestles with here.
2. It is meant to reflect the universal struggle with sin in both unbelievers – particularly those who are self-righteous – and in believers, particularly those who function by legalism.
3. It is meant to show us the third way – that it is neither license nor legalism, but life. It is meant to bring us to Romans 8:20-25. Thus, Romans 7 is about the already-not yet reality of people in relation to sin.

In all the book of Romans, more ink has been spilled over the identification of the person in verses 7-25. Is it Adam whose experience is being closely mirrored? Is it Jews who have the Law but are largely without regeneration? Or is it, Paul? If it is Paul, then is it Paul when he was unconverted or when he was saved? The answers to these questions were as varied and numerous as I had commentaries. So, I fully expect that among the Bible students hearing these messages there will be discussion.

Without developing the merits and problems with each view, I want to propose that Paul has left it ambiguous on purpose. I do believe that it is autobiographical yet intended to be universal. He has chosen to relate his own struggle because this is precisely the struggle we face as well. Further, since Romans 7 is preparing us for and taking us into Romans 8, then I am intentionally reading some of Romans 8 back into Romans 7.

Thus, what is going on Romans 7 is simply the already-not yet tension that a Christian lives in all the time – not only relating to his eschatology, but also relating to his transformation. I have been decisively delivered from the power of sin and I will be fully and finally delivered from the presence of sin, but not yet. And that makes the struggle in Romans 7 what it is and the hope giving walk in and with the Spirit in Romans 8 what we all aim for and pursue after.

We open this chapter with Paul showing us our freedom from the Law (v.1-6)

The Law is treated as a sphere of authority and Paul unpacks how we are delivered from it. He is answering the questions that might be raised in response to Romans 6:14 where we are said to be not under law, but under grace. How is that so and what does it mean?

Its Concerned Interrogative (v.1)

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?

Its Intended Audience

Notice that Paul is addressing two groups in the church. He expects all the brothers, that is all the Christians to hear what he is saying. This is the large circle that includes us now as Gentile Christians. Inside that circle are believers who “know the Law.” These are first, Jews and then Gentiles, who were taught the Law at some point in their lives. Finally, there is a small circle of those with whom this is meant to be sarcastic. That is the “Law Men”, the Judaizers - those who are wrongly teaching the Law in the church.

Its important Principle

Paul poses a question based on an obvious principle. Law only has jurisdiction over a person when they are alive. This would have been true in both Jewish and Roman law, as it is in ours. A person who has died is beyond the reach of the law. Their death moves them out from its sphere of authority.

For the rest of the chapter, this fundamental principle is critical. Too much mishandling of Romans 7 happens because this principle and its illustration in verses 2-3 is not carried through the text.

So, remember this:

The Law is a sphere of authority. Those in the sphere of authority are under that law.

The Law is no longer binding on those who have died.

Got it?

Its Clarifying Illustration (v.2-3)

Now, Paul uses an illustration based on the laws of marriage of his day. But it does still require close attention to what Paul says.

²Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. ³Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

The Principle in Marriage

To make this clear, think about the authority of law to bind together a marriage. This is a carefully crafted illustration. Notice that the woman is freed from the binding effect of the law, not because of her own death, but because of the death

of another, her husband. A married woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she is released and is free to remarry *even if there were no divorce*.

The Implications in Marriage

While they are married and bound under the law, any living with or marrying another man is adultery. If the man is alive and they are married, the law binds them together. To live with someone else while the man is alive is adultery because the law is in force, bind the marriage.

If the man dies, she is no longer bound by the marriage. Why? Because the law is not binding on her husband who has died. More importantly for Paul's argument, since the husband has died, she is no longer bound to the marriage. She is free. She is free to marry another.

Just a note: Some have concluded from this that any remarriage is adultery unless the former spouse dies. I do not believe this is what Paul has in mind. To do that would destroy his illustration and make it nonsense. Paul has carefully chosen this illustration because it is so close to the spiritual reality.

Its Careful Implications (v.4)

From the principle and the illustration, Paul now draws implications that will become instructions.

⁴Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

The Comparison Connections

So, Paul in verse 4 makes the connections between his illustration and its implications.

Upon the death of another, the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been released from the authority sphere of the Law. The Law no longer binds us. The Law in one sense still exists. But we are no long in the sphere where it has authority. We are no longer under its jurisdiction.

How is that? Because we have died to the Law. How did we die to the Law? When we were placed into Christ. His death has become ours. His reality has become ours. When we were joined to Christ, we went through the death of the cross. Therefore, we are no longer bound to the Law nor are we bound under the Law. We are free.

The Spiritual Realities

Why is that? What is the result now? We have been freed from that which bound us to the Law and bound us to the old person we were, *so that* we might be married to another. Who are we now bound to? We are bound to Christ who has been raised from the dead.

The resurrection is important here because we are now in the realm of life. We are now bound to the One who has been raised from dead. We are in that realm of

the spirit, in Christ so that we are under a new jurisdiction. What is that jurisdiction? We saw at the end of Romans 6. We are under the jurisdiction of our new Master, the Lord Jesus. We are now bound to Him and under grace.

The Fruitful Results

This is done so that we may be united to Christ and bring forth all that union is intended to bring forth, here described as *fruit*. We are released from the authority of the Law so that we might be united to Christ. This aligns with much of the New Testament where the flesh produces works leading to death but Christ and the Spirit produces fruit as an integral part of eternal life.

This fruit is produced by life, not Law. We are joined to the resurrected Christ. We have the life of God in us through the new birth, through regeneration, through our resurrection from the dead. All we could do under Law was to do works. The works of the flesh cannot and do not produce the righteous life God requires. But having died to that old realm, and having been now joined to Christ, we are alive in the spirit and are producing the fruit God approves.

Its Conclusive Instruction (v.5-6)

Having helped us see the connections between the principle, the illustration and our reality, Paul now goes into a deeper explanation of what all this means. Do not miss, do not

⁵For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

The summary of the argument is laid out (v.5-6). Notice how each of the phrases corresponds to Romans 6 – 8.

For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.	Romans 6
But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code	Romans 7
but in the new life of the Spirit	Romans 8

Our Past as Sinners (v.5)

Notice the elements of what it meant to be a sinner. These are drawn from Romans 1-3.

The sphere in which we lived, the flesh.

All of us, all of you, were born and lived in that realm subject to its power and under the jurisdiction of law.

The impetus for most of our sin, our sinful passions.

Our lusts, cravings and desires are the powerful impetus for sinning.

The entity that provoked our passions, the Law.

Now, stop. Listen to what Paul says here. Temptations are all involved in our sinning ways. However, Paul says something shocking. The Law, which was designed to show sin and to restrain sin and to provide for the atonement of sin, actually stirred up the flesh and its passions.

The means by which we sinned, our members, our physical body.

We sin in and through our physical bodies. Our inward passions, respond to temptations and stirred by law, energize the members of our body to do sin. Doing sin is called, works.

The result of this dynamic in our life, death tainted fruit.

All of this intertwined in complex ways through every faculty of who and what we were to produce fruit headed towards death.

Our Privilege as Saints (v.6)

In contrast to all the complex mess of flesh, passions, sin, law and works, we have the utter simplicity of the Christian life.

We are released from the Law.

We are no longer under the jurisdiction of the Law.

We have died to the old.

We are no longer alive in that realm spiritually.

We are no longer captives.

We have been set free so that we are no longer held captive by all that is a part of that realm.

We serve now in a different way.

It is now a voluntary servitude to our loving Lord.

We have a new life.

We have a new inward power that animates us and thus gives us a new way of living.

We have the life of the Spirit.

Our new life is animated by the Spirit who produces through us our fruit into God.

Our release from the Law is a redemptive-historical reality that impacts us personally and individually. I get that from the language itself: "while we were" and "but now we are." Now that Christ has come, having died on the cross and having been raised from the dead, the new era of life in the Spirit has begun. The Law as an authoritative sphere came to an end at the cross. Further, we were under law while in the flesh until we were saved. Now that we have been saved, we are now under grace. Once again, there is the historical aspect (before/after the cross) and personal aspect (before/after conversion).

This perspective prepares us to expect an inaugurated and incomplete experience of its reality. The rest of Romans 7 unpacks verse 5 to show how our sinful passions, aroused by law, worked in our body so as to bring about death. What follows is designed in such a way that we will be gripped by the glorious hope set forth in Romans 8.

Reflect and Respond

Let me close by simply bringing together the scriptures we have taught and some other verses from Romans 6-8.

Romans 7:1-6 in the New Living Translation,

Now, dear brothers and sisters—you who are familiar with the law—don't you know that the law applies only while a person is living? ² For example, when a woman marries, the law binds her to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies, the laws of marriage no longer apply to her. ³ So while her husband is alive, she would be committing adultery if she married another man. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law and does not commit adultery when she remarries.

⁴ So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God. ⁵ When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death. ⁶ But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.

First, Romans 6:11-14:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

And, Romans 7:5-6:

⁵ For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

And, Romans 8:22-25

22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Not license and not Law, but life by the Spirit – begun in now but groaning in struggle and suffering until the day Jesus comes.