

Romans 7

An Analogy from Marriage (7:1-6)

The primary focus of Romans 6 is that believers in Christ have been freed from the reign or power of sin through a death: Christ's death and the believer's death to the old life through baptism. Freedom from the reign of the law is the main focus of Paul's argument in Romans 7, and, in this respect, he elaborates on his statement in 6:14: 'since you are not under law but under grace'. Paul clarifies this by appealing to the principle that the law's authority over a person lasts only during that person's lifetime. For this purpose he draws on an analogy from Jewish marriage law to illustrate liberation from the law of Moses (vv. 2-3):

A married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly 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.

As in the case of Jesus' parables, these two verses were subjected to allegorical interpretation from a relatively early period. Augustine, for example, interpreted the passage as follows: the woman is the soul, her husband is sin, the law is the law of sins, the soul dies to sin and is freed to belong to God. The basis of this interpretation is the view that the husband represents the law and that the woman represents the believer(s) set free from the law to form a new union with Christ, represented by the second husband. The difficulty with this kind of application of the analogy is that verse 4 does not speak of the death of the law (as one would expect from the reference to the death of the first husband in verses 2-3), but of the Christ-believer who has died to the law 'through the body of Christ' (that is, through his death on the cross).

This death is clearly to be understood in the light of what is said about baptism in Romans 6:2-11: baptism brings about a symbolic identification of the believers with the death and resurrection of Christ, leading to life with Christ. A modified interpretation would be that the husband does not represent the law, but the 'old self' of the believer put to death in baptism (cf. 6:6); the woman then represents the continuing self which, through the death of the old self, is brought to new life. It is, however, probably more feasible to consider the general point of the analogy

rather than seeking to press all of its details. A death has taken place which removes legal obligations; believers are freed from the law when they die with Christ and are henceforth free to belong to the risen Christ.

What, exactly, does Paul mean when he states that believers have 'died to the law' or are freed from the law (v. 4)? The language used here is unequivocal: as Christ-believers die to sin, they also die to the law. The following verse (v. 5) also makes clear that the actual effect of the law is that it arouses sinful passions rather than combating sin (Paul will explain how this happens in 7:7-11). He therefore looks back at this point to the old condition of being bound to the law, which he describes as life 'in the flesh'. This is the first occurrence in Romans of the term 'flesh' in a negative symbolic sense to denote an existence dominated by law, sin and death. And yet, in view of the positive statements about the role of the Law in Romans 8:4 ('so that the just requirement of the law be might be fulfilled in us') and 13:8-10 ('for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law'), it is difficult to draw the conclusion that, as far as Christ-believers are concerned, the law and all its content belongs totally to the past. What is removed is the authority or ruling function of the law, as is shown by Paul's use of slavery imagery in verse 6. Believers no longer live 'in the flesh' or are held captive to the law; their new freedom from captivity does, however, mean that they are called to serve under a new rule, which is the new life in the Spirit (v. 6; note the contrast between being slaves of sin and slaves of righteousness in 6:15-23). The result of this is that the Jewish Law, 'the old written code', is no longer the rule under which Christ-believers live. The new life in Christ is life in the Spirit and, as chapter 8 will make clear, they are called to walk in the Spirit.

The Law and Sin (7:7-13)

On the basis of Paul's earlier statements (5:20, 6:14) and the argument in the first section about freedom from the law, it could be falsely inferred that he defines law as belonging to the same category as sin, indeed as evil and to be identified with sin (v. 5: 'our sinful passions aroused by the law'). However, in verse 7 he clarifies his position by denying emphatically any identification between sin and law ('That the law is sin? By no means!'). Indeed, towards the end of this part of the argument in 7:7-12, Paul outlines the positive status of the law as God-given (cf. 7:22, 25; 8:7) and as an expression of God's will: 'the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good' (v. 12). In terms of the connection with sin, the purpose of

the law, according to Paul, is to make sin known. Sin, nevertheless, depicted graphically in this section as a personified power, has exploited the law using it to cause chaos in a humanity characterized by moral weakness and prone to disobedience (vv. 8-11). Therefore, against the intention of the law, this had led to death rather than life (vv. 9, 10).

How does Paul explain the relationship between the law and sin? For this he turns to the tenth commandment:

Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'.

It is particularly significant that Paul has chosen to focus on the commandment, 'You shall not covet' (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21), which is quoted in an abbreviated form without the objects that are supplied in the Hebrew text. There is evidence in Jewish tradition that covetousness was viewed as the seminal sin, the tenth commandment as the essence of the whole law (see *IV Macc.* 2:6; Philo, *De Decalog.* 142, 150, 173). It is possible that Paul is implying here that the law encourages people to sin because it is inherent in human nature to disobey that which is commanded or prohibited ('contra-suggestibility'). However, since this commandment is one of the few that deals with human attitudes rather than actions, it is likely that Paul is also concerned with the law's function of turning implicit sins into concrete acts of wrongdoing (see 5:20: 'But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied'). In other words, there was sin before the law, but it is specific commandments that bring sinfulness to the open and turn sin into transgression. This is especially true of the tenth commandment with its focus on coveting; it is only in the light of the tenth commandment that coveting is recognized as a deliberate disobeying of God's will.

It is this connection between the law and human condition that gives sin the opportunity to take action. Arguably in no other passage does Paul depict sin as such a pervasively active power. Having stated that the law can be the cause of rebellion or disobedience, Paul depicts sin as manipulating the tenth commandment as a way of arousing all kinds of covetousness (v. 8). The word rendered in the NRSV as 'opportunity' is *aphormē*, often used in a military context to denote the origin of war; sin therefore aims an attack not intended by the law.

To claim that sin, apart from the law, lies dead does not mean that sin is non-existent without law, but that it is relatively inactive (cf. I Cor. 15:56: 'the power of sin is the law'.) The effective action of sin does, nevertheless, lead to death (cf. 5:12; 6:23). A human being continues to live, but in a real sense is dead (v. 10: 'and I died'), for physical death is only the fulfilment of a sentence already passed by God. Although the true purpose of the tenth commandment is that such a person might live, its exploitation by sin leads to death. The introduction of the language of deception in verse 10 ('sin deceived') forms a close parallel to the military metaphor in verse 8 of sin finding an opportunity (base for its campaign) in the law. In short, Paul wants to avoid placing the blame on the law. The law is holy and spiritual.

What Paul says about the relationship between law, sin and death in this section is fairly clear. What is less clear is the identity of the person whose experience is being described. In other words, to whom is Paul referring when he uses the first person singular in Romans 7? Who is the 'I'? At this point comments can be limited to 7:7-13, particularly as there is a shift from the past to the present tense in 7:14-25. The use of the past tense indicates that Paul is not describing a Christ-believing experience in 7:7-13, but rather, from a Christ-believing perspective, is looking back on human condition before Christ. Nevertheless, whose perspective is being described here?

i) The view that Paul is writing about his own pre-call life (as a kind of autobiography) was defended by C.H. Dodd as part of his argument that Paul underwent gradual psychological preparation that culminated in his conversion. Paul's inner conflict, due to his failure to live the life of the 'perfect Pharisee', was given expression, according to Dodd, in Romans 7. One of the difficulties with this argument are Paul's words in verse 9: 'I was once alive apart from the law'. The suggestion that this points to Paul's youth before his *bar mitzvah* is a plausible explanation, although the actual rite stems from the medieval period.

ii) A further possibility is that the perspective is more general than autobiographical, and that Paul is making rhetorical use of 'I', without necessarily including himself. The traditional view of Paul's conversion, as set out by Dodd, has been criticized for its Western understanding of Paul, owing more to reading of Augustine and Luther than the evidence of Paul's letters, as one defeated in his attempt to observe

the Law. The view that Paul should in fact be excluded is argued primarily on the basis of his words in Philippians 3:6: 'as to righteousness under the law, blameless', where there is no indication of an earlier inner conflict but rather of pride in his Hebraic ancestry and zeal for his traditions (cf. Gal. 1:14).

iii) A development of this position is the view that the model behind Romans 7:7-13 is Adam and his disobedience in the garden of Eden, a story already introduced in Romans 5:12-21, particularly as a similar pattern is established of innocence, commandment, transgression, and death. There are certainly some striking 'Adamic' echoes in this passage. The emphasis on the tenth commandment is instructive, because covetousness is also the sin that brings about the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:17: 'but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat'). This suggests that Paul has somehow fused Adam's experience before and after the commandment with the experience of those without and with the law. Furthermore, in Jewish tradition the tenth commandment was closely connected to God's commandment to Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge, somehow anticipating the Mosaic law (Gen. 2:17, for example, is interpreted as the nucleus of the whole Law in b. Shabbat 145b-146a, Targum Neofiti on Gen. 2:15 [Adam put in the garden to 'do service according to the law and keep its commandments']; Philo *De Spec Leg* 4:18-19). This would certainly account for Paul's fusion of the two experiences into one: the giving of the law at Sinai and the giving of the commandment in Eden. Interpreting the 'I' with reference to Adam also explains the words, 'I was once alive apart from the law' (v. 9), reflecting on his situation before Gen. 2:16-17 when he was indeed 'alive', whereas the serpent, like sin, could not intervene against Adam until the commandment was given, thereby bringing about death (Gen. 2:17; 3:3, 19). Therefore, instead of saving them from death, the commandment as exploited by the serpent, was used to lead them to death. Indeed, the striking use of the verb 'to deceive' with sin as its subject is more than a coincidental echo of Gen. 3:13 LXX ('the serpent deceived me (Greek: *ēpatēsen*)', to which Paul also alludes in 2 Corinthians 11:3).

iv) The question remains whether Paul, by using the example of Adam as the condition of everyman, could therefore include himself in the 'I'. The psychological arguments have been developed further but in a different direction, for example, by Gerd Theissen who argues that while Romans 7 is not a biography of Paul, he does draw on Adam as a model (to describe in a general way the situation of a

human being under the law). For this reason Paul can include himself as a typical human being. With regard to Paul's statements about his former life, especially Philippians 3:6 (with no hint of moral tension and dilemma), Theissen argues that they reflect how Paul saw things before he became a Christ-believer, whereas in Romans 7 he writes as one who lives 'in Christ', that is from a Christ-believing perspective, looking back on his former life and recognizing that, before his conversion, he was not as blameless as he had believed at the time (it describes a state of mind of which he was not aware until he became a Christ-believer). Thus an earlier tension is now brought to consciousness in Romans 7. Thus although Paul may not be speaking directly about himself, he is not either to be excluded from the 'I', the Adamic state of everyone who lives under the law. Thus 7:7-13 look back to the old experience before becoming a Christ-believer.

The Inner Self (7:14-25)

The 'I' continues to speak in 7:14-25, but now all the verbs have changed from the past to the present tense ('I am of the flesh...I do not understand my own actions...I know that nothing good dwells within me'). What accounts for this shift? Certainly the Adamic allusions are no longer present, and Paul here speaks of a divided self who explores the human plight. This is reminiscent of Medea in *Metamorphoses* (7:20-21) by the Roman poet Ovid, who is aware of her inability to avoid moral failure and proclaims: 'I see the better, and approve; but I do the worse'. Paul reflects on the pitiful state of one who suffers inner conflict, offering a bleak picture of human sinfulness in terms of the firm grasp of sin on a human being: the 'I' is 'of the flesh', sold into slavery under sin (v. 13), made 'captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members' (v. 23). This section also reflects on what it means to be a slave under sin's power: the divided self does the very evil thing that the 'I' hates (vv. 15, 16, 19, 20). There is a conflict between will and action; the true 'I' knows what is good and yet sin-dominated flesh is driven by the compulsion to sin. Sin is therefore again depicted in this section as a personified evil power, taking up residence (v. 17) in a person ('in my members') and controlling his or her actions.

Nevertheless, the 'I' in the 'inmost' self (v. 22) who knows that 'nothing good dwells in me' (v. 18) wills to do what is right and good (vv. 20, 21) and delights in the law of God (v. 22, 25). Thus while the emphasis is on the conflict within the self in vv. 14-20, it is the conflict between the different laws or norms (the law of my mind, the law of God over and against a 'different law', 'the law of sin') that is brought into

focus in vv. 21-25 and graphic military language is used for this purpose. The inner conflict is expressed, both succinctly and climactically, in the final verse of the chapter: 'So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin' (v. 25). The fault of the law is that it is powerless to intervene. There is a plea to be released from this division, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death!" The answer comes in verse 25a: 'thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord'.

Once again, who is the 'I' whose inner turmoil is described in such graphic and dark terms? That Paul is reflecting on his own (and others') experience as Christ-believers is defended by some (C.E.B. Cranfield, James D.G. Dunn), thereby interpreting Romans 7:14-25 as a description of the conflict between spirit and flesh that continues as a part of a Christ-believing experience. The more seriously a believer lives by grace, the more aware one becomes of continuing sinfulness: the believer is the one who wills the good and hates evil (vv. 15, 16, 19, 20) and whose inner self delights in God's law (v. 22). However, Paul warns his readers/hearers about the flesh and that they are not to live in accordance with the flesh, dominated by sin and death. Although flesh, in the negative sense, is destroyed in principle in baptism, the process of destruction has still to be completed. They are to continue to die to sin (in ethical practices), for while the eschatological age has dawned in Christ, the present age has not yet disappeared.

Some of the support drawn from the text in favour of this position can be outlined as follows:

- It offers a plausible explanation of the shift from the past tense in 7:7-13 to the present tense in 7:14-25. This represents a movement from past to present condition, in which Paul and other Christ-believers continue to struggle with sin.
- The use of the phrase 'inmost self' in verse 22 to denote the 'I' can be compared with the presence of the same phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and in Ephesians 3:16 to describe the inner life of the Christ-believer.
- The main argument for interpreting 7:14-25 as a description of Christ-believing existence is the position of verse 25b. Having described the freedom that comes through Christ in verse 25a, Paul then returns to a description of the divided condition of conflict: 'So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am slave to the law of sin.' There is no textual evidence to support the claim that verse 25b is a gloss. Verse 25a is not to be interpreted as a cry of hopeless distress, for the question, 'Who can deliver...' expresses

the speaker's confidence that there is one, Christ, who can offer final deliverance from this body of death in the future. The tension in this passage therefore is between the present condition of the one who speaks and the hopefulness of this 'I' for the future.

The alternative interpretation, of course, is that Paul continues, as in Romans 7:7-13 to describe the plight of the one who lives apart from or before Christ, the one who lives under the sphere of the law. Although viable arguments are forwarded in support of the view that Paul is reflecting on the experience of Christ-believers, many of these can be shown to be less than persuasive and, above all, fail to relate the function of Romans 7 to the overall argument in chapters 5-8.

- The first counter argument to be noted is that the shift from 7:7-13 to 7:14-25 is not an obvious one, despite the movement from the past to the present tense. It can be argued, for example, that Paul, having outlined the Adamic story of life under the law now focuses on offering an existential analysis of the story in terms of the divided self. For the purpose of such reflections, the present tense could be used to denote general timeless statements applicable to all who live without deliverance from Christ.
- Furthermore, the argument that this reflects the experience of a Christ-believer fails to take into account the role of this section in relation to what Paul says before and after it. In relation to what Paul has set out in chapter 6, he has made clear that deliverance from sin is an event that takes place in baptism. How, for example, could Paul describe the condition of the believer as one who is 'sold into slavery under sin' (v. 14), having already stated in chapter 6 that believers, through baptism, have died to sin (6:7)? Is the description of the 'I' as one who is captive to the law of sin not a more fitting description of the old life? Indeed, Paul declares to believers in 6:17 that they were 'once slaves to sin', but that now 'you have been set free from sin' (6:18, 22) and 'sin will have no dominion over you' (6:14). Chapters 5 and 6 make clear that there are only two spheres or ages, the sphere of death and sin on the one hand and the sphere of life and righteousness on the other, and a human being can only belong to one of these dominions. Through the death and resurrection of Christ and the dying and rising of believers through baptism the old age is left behind in order to enter the new age. Those who were slaves of sin have now become

slaves of righteousness (6:17-20). In addition, if Romans 7 describes the life of the believer under the new age or sphere, it is striking that there is no reference to Christ or the Spirit until verse 25a, which is the solution to the plight set out in the previous verses.

- What can also be argued is that if chapter 7 describes the plight of those who live apart from Christ, in chapter 8 Paul sets out unequivocally the newness of life in the Spirit for those who are 'in Christ'. Indeed the striking contrasts between chapters 7 and 8 can be outlined as follows:

One is sold under sin (7:14)	The believer is liberated from sin and death (8:2)
Sin lives within (7:17)	The Spirit of God lives within (8:9)
Flesh and 'I' are equated (7:18)	You are no longer in the flesh (8:9)
The 'different law' wages war (7:23)	The mind of the Spirit is life and peace (8:6).

- Certainly the strongest argument in favour of a Christ-believing interpretation of 7:14-25 is the shift from the solution (deliverance through Christ) in verse 25a back to the human plight in verse 25b. What should be noted, however, is that the cry 'Wretched man' in verse 24 sounds more like a cry of utter despair (deliverance from a life ruled by sin) than a cry of anguish (deliverance from the presence of sin in the believer). Certainly the word 'wretched' is a strong term to describe the plight of one who already belongs to Christ. Also, the words actually used by Paul in verse 25 to describe the human plight are those used earlier in his argument to denote life without Christ (a slave to the law of sin). It is possible that Paul at the end of this chapter describes a state to which believers could revert (i.e. returning to the old age and sphere), but, as chapter 8 makes clear, the new life in Christ is one in which the believer is 'no longer in the flesh' (v. 9) and is freed from the law of sin (v. 2).

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