

Romans 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 7 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? For 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.

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.

Likewise, 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.

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. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means. Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, You shall not covet.

[1 : 13] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law.

But when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.

So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means. It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.

[2 : 23] For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Now, if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Romans chapter 7, especially the second half, is one of the most debated passages in all of Paul's letters. In particular, the identity of the eye has been a matter upon which litres of ink have been spilled.

[3 : 27] Romans chapter 7 verse 1, in many translations, might seem to be starting a new argument, independent of what came before. However, it refers back to what preceded it. It is still dealing with the issue of the dominion that we come under.

Paul presents the Romans with a framework within which they can better understand what he is talking about. However, Paul's marriage framework needs to be treated attentively, as it is less straightforward than we might initially expect it to be.

It has a few unexpected twists and turns. There is a husband, a wife, and a law holding them together. The husband dies, freeing the wife from the law of marriage binding them together, and enabling her to marry another, and enjoy a fruitful union with him.

In verse 4, the husband of the previous verse, however, seems to be you. The term you here seems to be doing double duty. It is both the party that dies, and the party that marries another. How can this be? The answer, it seems to me, lies in statements in the preceding chapter, such as that in verse 6. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

[4 : 38] The dead husband is the old self and the body of sin. The husband dies as we are crucified with Christ. The law bound us to the body of sin in some way, but it does so no longer.

Now we belong to Christ, our new husband. The husband in both cases is a form of humanity. The old, fallen, and sinful humanity in Adam is the first husband, while Christ, the second man and the last Adam, is the new husband.

We are the wife in both cases, but we are also identified as the dead husband at various points in the preceding chapter. Paul makes a similar claim in Galatians chapter 2 verse 20. Here, as in Romans 7, the I has a number of different senses.

In some sense, I have died, and in some other sense, I have been released to live a new life, as my I is now associated with Christ.

The result of this deliverance is that we become fruitful for God in this new marriage. We formerly lived in the flesh. For Paul, this term flesh refers to humanity in Adam, humanity that is mortal, rebellious, frail, and fallen.

[5 : 55] The realm of the flesh is also the realm of sin and death's operations. Within this realm, the sinful passions are operative. They are paradoxically incited by the law itself.

The operations of our sinful passions in our members was the bearing of fruit for death. However, now we have been released from bondage to our old husband, to the old man, a bondage that was secured by the law.

We are still servants, but we now serve in the new way of the spirit, rather than the old way of the written code. Implicitly, Paul might be saying that the law binds us to two different masters.

It initially binds us to the master of sin, and then once we've been liberated by Christ, it binds us to Christ himself. We might also think here of the reality of the new covenant, where the law is written upon the heart by the spirit.

Paul speaks in a similar way in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, where the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. Paul's argument to this point raises a difficult question though.

[6 : 57] Is the law to blame in this whole situation? The law bound us to the old husband, to the old self, maintaining us under the dominion of sin and death. Indeed, according to verse 5, the law itself incited the sinful passions.

Paul immediately rejects the suggestion though. The law for Paul is vindicated. It is not to blame for the situation. However, it was the law that truly acquainted him with sin, and enabled sin to come to a fuller expression within his life.

If it hadn't been for the 10th commandment, Paul's acquaintance with the sin of covetousness would have been quite limited. However, as the law brought covetousness to Paul's true acquaintance, sin grew to a much higher, more visible, and self-conscious level of activity and expression than ever would have done apart from the law.

Apart from the law, sin is fairly dormant. It's present, but it's not really growing, developing, or gaining power and dominance. However, when the law arrives, that which was a slumbering and shadowy presence awakes as a dominating monster.

The law which was given at Sinai changed the expression of sin. One might also compare this to the situation in pagan societies prior to the advent of Christian faith. In such societies, sin is operative in some sense.

[8 : 15] However, it is also as if it was slumbering. Then, when the light of truth comes, suddenly sin is awakened and it starts to display its true power. One might consider, as an illustration, the way that few ancient societies had great qualms about cruel structures of dominance.

Racism, for instance, has clearly always been present in the world in various forms and in all societies. However, Christian truth, in a more particular way, exposed and brought to light the sins of racism for what they were.

It woke up the dragon of racism in the process. While racism is clearly present in other cultures, few cultures feel as terrorised by its power as ours do.

As the light of the gospel woke up and acquainted us with the reality of this sin, it has put us in a position where we feel far more in bondage to it, subject to its power and unable to get free from it. And this is also operative on individual levels. As Paul gives the example of covetousness, the person who knows that it is wrong to covet on account of the law will have a very different relationship to lust than the person who is oblivious to it.

[9 : 22] Covetousness and lust are clearly present in us all, but when the law reveals the sinfulness of lust, lust takes on a much greater power over us. While others continue in blithe ignorance of its sinfulness, we might find ourselves desperately struggling in vain to free ourselves from its tightening clutches in our lives.

The purpose of the law is to present the terms of life in fellowship with God. Its intent is to give life. But here we see that its effects are completely different.

It ends up quite against its intended purpose, to bring death. The law, however, for Paul is holy and just and good. Nevertheless, its coming on the scene leads to our greater subjection to death.

Is this the law's own fault? No, rather it's the fault of sin, which is exploiting the opportunity provided to it by the law, which awakens it from its dormant state.

The use of the first person singular in Romans 7 verses 7 to 25 has aroused many different theories. Historically, debates have generally centred around the question of whether an unregenerate or regenerate person is in view in the passage.

[10 : 33] Many have argued that Paul is speaking autobiographically. The helpfulness of this question, however, has been questioned by much recent scholarship. Of particular significance is the work of people like Stanley Stowers, who argue that Paul is employing a rhetorical device, speech in character, or according to some, that the eye is a sort of generic eye.

A number of suggestions for the identity of the speaker have been put forward. Some argue that it's Adam, others Eve, Gentiles who try to live by the law, or Israel. It seems to me that some association between the eye and Israel more generally offers some more promising ways of resolving the problems.

However, the exact way that the eye and Israel are associated can be a matter of debate. Perhaps Paul is presenting himself as a sort of archetypal Israelite who stands in some way for the nation as a whole.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this approach is the manner in which it does justice to the contradictory character of the eye. It's in the flesh and sold under sin, yet it delights in the law of God.

On this reading, the great transition that underlies Paul's argument is not primarily one from unbelief to belief, but one from the old age of the flesh to the new age of the spirit.

[11 : 47] In using the eye in this way, Paul can also associate and identify himself with Israel and not describe her plight as if it were some alien concern. The change of tense within this section has also played a significant role in determining the identity of the speaker.

I believe that change is best understood as a movement from consideration of what happened when the law was first given to consideration of the ongoing experience of Israel under the law. Verses 7 to 25 unpack verse 5 of the chapter. The past tense of verse 5 temporarily situates verses 7 to 25 until verse 1 of chapter 8 picks up the thread of verse 6 of chapter 7 again.

Paul's claim that the law is spiritual in verse 14 is one that he seems to share with his readers. He begins his defence of the law by drawing attention to the imbalance between the law and the eye. It's an imbalance that exists between spirit and flesh. The law is of the spirit, but he is of the flesh. The flesh-spirit contrast exists between the old humanity in Adam and the new humanity in Christ.

[12 : 59] And Paul places the law very clearly on the positive side of this polarity, whereas the eye is placed with the Adam in the negative side. It is the eye that is fleshly, unable to render the sort of spiritual service that the law calls for.

Paul's language here, sold as a slave under sin, seems to rule out that this is a reference to the Christian. Paul has already claimed that Christians are not in the flesh in verse 5, and the

description of the eye as sold under sin would seem to contradict many of the earlier statements in chapter 6.

Verse 15 helps to explain this. Paul's point here is that the problem does not lie so much at the level of intention or even instruction in the law, but in the operation of sin that prevents the eye from doing the good thing that it wants to do.

In verse 16, the eye drops any charges that might be levelled against the law. The law is neither evil nor the cause of my death. The eye readily acknowledges the goodness of the law and intends that very good itself, but it lacks the power to actually perform it.

In verse 17, we see that there is another shadowy actor in the drama, sin. It is sin that frustrates the good intentions of the eye. The claim being made is not that human beings are not responsible for their actions, but that the eye has been overcome by sin.

[14 : 25] It's almost like a demonic possession. In verses 18 to 20, Paul rephrases what he said in verses 14 and 15 in language that's coloured by what he has said in the verses between.

Underlying Paul's point here is the claim that, as N.T. Wright puts it, what indwells someone is what gives them power to perform that which otherwise they would want to do but remain incapable of.

That which is good, the law, in verse 17, has no dwelling in the eye due to the mismatch that exists between the spiritual law and the fleshly nature of the eye.

The law is like good food given to a sick person. It cannot heal the person but it just causes them to throw up. Verse 19 is largely a repetition of the second half of verse 15.

The difference is that, as Douglas Moo puts it, the good that is willed and the evil that is done are made explicit. Paul underlines his point in verse 20. His concern seems to be to exonerate both the law and the eye.

[15 : 25] Verses 21 to 25 serve to sum up what has been discovered about the state of the eye and the law. The law here, it seems to me, refers to the Jewish Torah. Questions about the Torah have been central to the entire discussion of the chapter to this point and it would be highly confusing if Paul were to use the word law in a different sense here.

Faced with the choice between good and evil presented by the law, the eye finds itself drawn to the evil rather than to the good. Paul then goes on to unpack this.

We see a split occurring within the eye. On the one hand, the eye delights in the law of God according to its inner man. On the other hand, it encounters rebellion against this law in its members.

The split between the members and the inner man should not be regarded as a sort of natural anthropological dualism. as some split within the human person that just exists on account of nature.

Rather, it is an unnatural split brought about by the operations of sin. I don't think it's inappropriate to recognise in this some of our own struggles with sin in our lives where it can feel as if we're split in two, we're fighting against ourselves.

[16 : 34] There is some force within us that we are battling against. The split within the eye most probably looks back to the start of the chapter where we saw that the word you was made to do double duty.

In the story of Israel, you can see this delight in the law of God. We can see it in the Psalms and elsewhere. However, while there is this delight in the law of God and this desire to perform it, on the other hand, sin is whipped up and sin and rebellion are excited by the law.

In addition to the split in the eye, the law also splits into two. So on the one hand, you have the law of God and on the other, you have, in the words of Wright, its shadowy doppelganger, the law of sin.

On the one hand, the law is the good, God-given law. On the other hand, the law is that which binds us to death and has become the base of operations for sin. The law of sin has already been identified in verses 1-4 of the chapter and in verse 20 of chapter 5.

The law of God is that which is increasingly coming into focus in Paul's argument. The vindication of the law of God over against the law of sin will finally be made explicit in verses 2-3 of chapter 8.

[17 : 42] It has been Paul's purpose in this chapter to show that the law taken over by sin had paradoxically been part of God's intention in giving it, to prepare for dealing with sin in the flesh of Jesus, and yet that the ultimate purpose of the law, the giving of life, will also be achieved through the work of Christ and the Spirit.

He concludes this section with a great cry of despair. The state of the eye is summed up. The law is not at fault, nor ultimately is the eye itself. However, the eye is unable to escape from the death grip that the law grants to sin.

The more that the eye struggles, the more that it is overpowered. The source of the problem is identified as the body of this death, the state of being flesh and fleshly, and being bound up in the solidarity of sin.

The paradigmatic Israelite eye is unable to attain the spiritual law and its promise of life. Rather, it finds itself bound in death with no idea of where deliverance might come from.

Paul concludes his analysis with an anticipation of the answer to the plight of the eye to humanity and Adam bound by the law. His exclamation of thanksgiving looks back to verse 21 of chapter 5 and forward to verse 3 of chapter 8.

[18 : 58] Paul proceeds to sum up the argument of the chapter, expressing the split that has occurred in the eye and also the bifurcation of the Torah. He describes the breach that has been caused in the eye on account of sin.

The mind has become alienated from the actions of the members of the body. The mind longs to fulfil the law but it finds itself incapable of doing so, given the power of sin and the death of the fleshly body.

Now that the plight of the old man faced with the law has been diagnosed, Paul is able to move on to the next chapter to reveal the remedy and to demonstrate the manner in which the intention of the law to give life and the intention of the eye to gain life can both finally be realised.

A question to consider. The split of the eye in the concluding half of this chapter and the split of the law should remind us of the marriage framework with which Paul began the chapter.

That framework too involved a split, a split between the eye that has to die and the eye that is freed to be married to another and also a split in the law, a split between the law that binds me to sin and death and the law that is the new way of the spirit.

[20 : 10] How can reading the second half of the chapter in light of the first few verses help us better to understand both?