

Romans: The Problem of the Law, Part 5c

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EXPOSITION: Chapter 7:1-25

Before he can unpack the full cosmic purpose of the Gospel in ch. 8, Paul continues his solution to the dual problem of sin and the law. Having addressed sin in ch. 6, he now focusses on the law, although, he has already introduced its solution in 6:14, sowing the seed that we are no longer “under law but under grace”, before diverting to his antinomian defence (6:15-23). In ch. 7, he now returns to that solution in vs.1-6 to illustrate it, utilising the analogy of marriage, and provides further clarification in vs. 7-25 to again forestall any antinomian (against-law) conclusion but also show the law’s limitations. The apostle illustrates by showing that on the death of the husband a wife is released from the law concerning that marriage; she is then free to marry another. A death terminates the administration of that law. He is thus restating and illustrating the forensic implications of his previous teaching, from 6:3-10, concerning the believer’s union with Christ through baptism into his death. Under judgement of death, man’s sin penalty is paid through Christ’s vicarious death (3:21-26; Gal 3:13). So, in Christ, the believer has been declared legally dead—Christ’s death has become his or her death. What is more, through that death they exit the domain of sin and death and, then, through the resurrection enter the domain of righteousness and life (6:14). This is a forensic fact. As the “last Adam”, Christ’s death is the terminal point of the Adamic order of sin and death. The believer is, thus, freed from the law’s old administration of condemnation and free to belong to Christ. The new administration is, consequently, of the Spirit, not of the letter that condemns to death (7:6; 8:4; 2 Cor 3:6); verse 6b – “so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” – providing the one verse that casts forward to Paul’s main thrust in ch. 8. This new administration of the covenant is actualised by the power of God through the resurrection of Christ (6:4; 7:4), not as the “last Adam” but as the “second man” (1 Cor 15)—the beginning of a new order and a new humanity, the renovation of which is through the Holy Spirit from beginning to end.

This then provokes questions concerning the law (vs. 7-25); the law that was meant for life has instead produced death (7:7, 10; 10:5; Lev 18:5). How can that be? So, Paul not only provides an apology (defence) for the ethical authority of the law as binding, which he began in 3:31; 6:1 and 6:15 – it is holy, righteous, and good (v. 12) – but also shows therefore that its sin-exposing and sin-enlivening effect is due solely to sin (vs. 8, 13-14; 3:20; 4:15; 5:13, 20). In other words, the morally binding authority of the law of God is not under question. Hence, it is not nullified by sin nor superseded by grace. Contra to Moo (p. 415, 416), Paul does assert the “binding authority” of the law, as we have previously argued exegetically (3:5-8, 21, 31). We are dead to the law because Christ has paid its penalty in death. Besides, what is the sense of a law that is non-binding?—if it is not, how can it be a law? It is then merely a suggestion, one option among others. It seems to be lost on some that they are the ten “commandments” not the ten “suggestions”. Law by its very nature stipulates and sanctions certain behaviours. To argue, therefore, that the law continues in some sense, as Moo does, but is not binding is a *non sequitur*—it is nonsensical. Moreover, to remove the binding authority of the law is to render the Gospel itself nonsensical; if the law is no longer forensically potent, neither is Christ’s death. The law of God is necessary to Christ’s propitiation of sin; otherwise he has died in vain. To be a “justifier” he must first be “just” (3:26), that is to say, in the act of justifying – declaring the believer as just – he must be demonstrating God’s justice: death for sin (1:18; 2:8-9, 12-16; 3:19-26; 6:23; Gen 2:17; Dt 4:1; 8:1; Ex 28:43; 30:20, 21). Additionally, to establish the law’s comprehensively binding authority, of all the commandments, Paul focusses on the tenth, “You shall not covet” (vs. 7-8); the one commandment that goes to the source of sin—man’s heart. This is redolent of Jesus’ words, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Mt 15:19). God’s holy and righteous law is totalising in nature and, hence, binding on all human motives and actions.

The Identity of the “Wretched Man” of Verse 24

Verses 5 and 6 seed what is to unfold in the rest of the chapter, from vs. 7-25:

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 in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

They provide the two categories that Paul is about to consider: the person who was “in the flesh” (v. 5) and the person that is now “in the new way of the Spirit” (v. 6). We divide the passage of vs. 7-25 into two sections: vs. 7-14, where Paul’s first-person account is not only biographical but also representative of the pre-Christian – the person “in the flesh” – in the process of spiritual awakening, characterised by the past tense; and vs. 15-25, where, again biographical, he is now representative of the Christian – the person “in the Spirit” – in the process of sanctification, characterised by the present tense. The chapter thus represents the journey of one person with one nature from pre-Christian conviction through to Christian growth and victory over sin, from being preregenerate to regenerate. Though it must be kept in mind that the overriding purpose of the chapter is to defend the law of God and explain its limitations. The question posed in 7:13 (and earlier in 7:7) launches the apostle’s defence of the law extending to the end of the chapter: “Did that which is good [the law], 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... .” Therefore, the whole point of the experiences described by the apostle are illustrative of the law’s impotence to set anyone free from sin, whether Christian or not. It neither justifies the non-Christian nor sanctifies the Christian. Although, Paul does advocate the law as *the way* of sanctification, but not *the power* of sanctification. He “upholds” the law as the ethical component of the covenant (3:31).

Nevertheless, much ink has been spilled over the identity of the person (or persons) in this passage (vs. 7-25). The Greek Fathers generally held that the person was unregenerate and distinct from the one of 8:1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, from the Reformed tradition but not representative of it in this regard, on the other hand, argues that he is not so much unregenerate as preregenerate, albeit under the strong conviction of the Holy Spirit (pp. 229-57). However, Augustine, whose view dominated in the West, including the Reformers, held that the person of vs. 7-13 was preregenerate and that of vs. 14-25 regenerate, although Calvin held that the transition begins at v. 15, with which we concur (Calvin, pp. 146, 148; Murray, pp. 256-257; for various views on the identity of the “wretched man”, see Cranfield, pp. 344-346; also, see Moo, pp. 424-431, under the heads 1] Biographical, 2] Adam, 3] Israel, 4] Existential; see also p. 442ff, focussing on vs. 14-25; Moo’s choice of Israel, admittedly combined with the autobiographical, is not convincing in view of Paul’s progressive argument, moving from the particularity of the Jews to the universality of Jew *and* Gentile in Adam and, hence, in Christ, and even when he does return to the issue of Israel in chs. 9-11 it is to fully work out in history that universality in the harvest of the world through the Gospel in the present aeon).

While the diversity of views behoves us to be provisional in our position, the arguments for the Augustinian view are persuasive. Flowing from the epistle’s epicentre in the Adam-Christ antithesis of 5:12-21 and his case for the universality of the law, inclusive of the Gentiles (see my comments [2:14-15, 17-22](#); [3:19](#)), the man of 7:7-14 is clearly the one of v. 5 and 8:8 who is “in the flesh” (i.e. in Adam, whether Jew or Gentile) and “cannot please God”, and whose “sinful passions” are “aroused by the law” and is thus in v. 14 “of the flesh, sold under sin”; however, he is not so hostile toward God that he is not unaware of, nor unperturbed by the law of God, he is thus under the conviction of the Holy Spirit in the process of conversion and is not so much unregenerate as *preregenerate*. Whereas the man of vs.15-25, is the man of v. 6 who is “released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit” and is “not in the flesh” (8:9) and possesses the *desire* but not yet the *ability* to obey, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (v. 15) , and so, “serve[s] the law of God with [his] mind, but with [his] flesh...serve[s] the law of sin (v. 25). This is, therefore, consonant with the *regenerate* person in contradistinction to the unregenerate as delineated by Paul: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (8:7-8). The unregenerate are “hostile to God” and have no desire to obey his law. Nonetheless, it is a regenerate person in the *process* of matching *desire* to *ability*, but not in despair, as he bursts forth with thanks to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 25), launching him into ch. 8 with the declaration of God’s answer to his dilemma: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (v. 1-2). It is the believer’s juridical and forensic standing before God “in Christ Jesus” through grace by faith. Not only does it remit their penalty and forgive their sin, but it also declares them eternally righteous before the court of heaven (3:21-26). The dissonance between *desire* and *ability* in the experience of the Christian is victoriously resolved in their solidarity with Christ in his death and resurrection and all that that has accomplished—their simultaneous extraction from the domain of sin and death and relocation to the domain of righteousness and life. As they “reckon” upon this (6:11), they will find they are, in fact, free (6:12-19) and able to “put off the old man” (6:6; Eph 4:22), the whole corporate order of Adam, that “body of death” (v. 24) from which he is so desperate to be delivered (see my comments above, [Exegetical Confusion of Romans 6:6](#), for the “body of death”). With the surety of their position and standing in Christ, despite momentary failure, they can press on, growing into the very character of Christ. But not only is this positional – “in Christ” – but it is also experiential: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (8:2). They now have the power through the “Spirit of life” – the Holy Spirit – to translate their *desire* to obey God into the *ability* to do so. Flowing from

5:12-21, Paul is driving home to his audience that they are no longer positionally “in the flesh but in the Spirit” (8:9) and now their experience can follow suit in victory over sin (6:12-14; 8:1-11).

Additionally, while victory over sin is necessarily personal and individual it is equally corporate. As argued earlier, based on the corporate orders of Adam and Christ (5:12-21), victory over sin is outworked in a new society, first in the society of the redeemed and, second, in the larger society as the leaven of the Kingdom of God infiltrates and gains dominion over the kingdom of darkness. As Paul teaches the Ephesian church, the corporate maturing of God’s people toward the full stature of Christ (4:13-16) occurs through the renewal of their thinking in antithesis to that of the surrounding culture (4:17-24), playing out in ethical social relationships as they “put off the old man” so as to “put on the new man created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:25-32). Why is the antithesis between Adamic thinking (the “old man”) and Christian thinking (the “new man”) so crucial? Because the Greeks thought of sin in terms of metaphysics, in the inherent evil of matter, whereas, the biblical revelation thinks of sin in terms of ethics, in the breaking of the covenant. Therefore, sin is the breaking of God’s law as the ethical component of the covenant. Rather than law abstracted from God as an impersonal natural law it is, in fact, a personal law revealed by God to every individual, inscribed not only on their hearts but also in Scripture, as the ethical requirement of a personal relationship through covenant.

7:1-6—Released from Under the Law, Joined to Christ

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?*—In opening this paragraph, Paul is picking up, not from 6:23 but 6:14, having parenthetically dealt with possible antinomian (against-law) conclusions; he now returns to the problem of the law, explaining what it means to be no longer “under the law”. He addresses those “who know the law”; this law (*nomos*) is not merely the general principle of law that he is about to utilise as his illustration but rather the law of God; which was not only communicated to Adam and, hence, written on man’s heart but also delivered more completely to Moses (see my comments [2:14-15](#); [5:12-14](#)). The Gentile’s are thus accountable to God’s law (see my comments [2:14-15](#), 17-22; [3:19](#)). Moreover, the church of Rome, already existing within the apostle’s sphere of influence (see [Introduction](#)), would be well-taught in the Scriptures. Many of the Gentile converts would also have been synagogue proselytes prior to conversion and steeped in the law (Acts 2:10). Referring to the general principle of law, Paul illustrates the believer’s relationship to the law of God as severed by death. **2** *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. 3* *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.*—Verses 2-3 provide the illustration of the law concerning marriage; when the husband dies, the wife is released from that law.

4 *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. 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 in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*—Verses 4-6 provide the application of the illustration concerning the law of marriage; however, it cannot be followed to the details, for example, if the husband is equated with the law nowhere does Paul, either in Romans (vs. 4, 6) or Galatians (2:19), ever refer to the death of the law but rather the believer’s death to the law. In no sense is the law dead; it lives on, still carrying moral and binding authority (3:31; Mt 5:17-19). Instead, we have died to the condemnation of the law through Christ’s death; his death satisfies the law’s penalty of death for sin (3:21-26; 8:3; Gal 3:13). Death, as in marriage (vs. 2-3), releases one from the administration of that law. However, v. 4 not only cites our death, through Christ, to the law but also cites his resurrection from the dead, and our union with him, so that “we may bear fruit for God”; this is the second part of the sin-law equation: law resulting in sin, produces death (v. 5) but is reversed and, indeed, trumped by the resurrection (v. 4; 6:5) so that “we serve in the new way of the Spirit” (v. 6), casting forward to 8:2—“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” In all this Paul acknowledges the inability of the law to enable its observance, rather, when we were “in the flesh” it aroused our sinful passions (v. 5, 8-11, 13, 18f; Heb 7:18; 10:1 ff; Acts 13:39). To be “in the flesh”, in the Pauline sense, is to be “in Adam” (5:12-21; 8:8-9); it is man governed by the domain of sin, carrying an ethical sense rather than ontological, it is not a reference to man’s physical being. The body is not inherently evil. “But now”, in v. 6, announces the contrast of our present reality: that through death we are discharged from the law, inferring also that we are no longer “in the flesh”, which results in serving through the newness of the Spirit (see 2 Cor 3:6). The contrast of the “oldness of the letter” and the “newness of the Spirit” should not be read as the *literal sense* versus the *spiritual sense* of scripture; this is to wrest the text from its context, it rather refers to the new life of the Holy Spirit that is available in Christ. And as such, alludes to the change in the administration of the covenant from law to Gospel, from shadow to substance, as in

the case of circumcision: “a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (2:29).

7:7-25—Life Under the Law

a) 7-14—The Pre-Christian Under the Law

7 *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.”*—If therefore we have been released from the law (vs. 1-6; 6:14), is there something inherently wrong with it, is it evil? Paul responds with his characteristic, *Absolutely not!* To the contrary, he defends the law: without it he would not have known sin—the law is sin-exposing and sin-defining (3:20; see above, *The Problem of the Law*). As discussed above, he then appeals to the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet”, to establish the binding authority of the law, not to mention its spirituality as it probes the hidden recesses of the heart (see v. 14). **8** *But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.* Furthermore, the law also has a sin-enlivening effect, it provokes sin into the open. The tenth commandment serves as a catch-all commandment, comprehensively addressing all sins from thought and motive to actual behaviour. **9** *I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.* Additionally, the law is not only sin-enlivening but also sin-condemning, sentencing the sinner to death. The introduction of the law intensifies sin and its consequence in death, both temporal and eternal death. Man’s mortality is a constant witness to his sin. “When the commandment came” was not only the case for Adam and Moses historically, as covenant mediators, but also Paul and each of us experientially, in our first apprehension of the law and, especially, in its conviction of our sin under the influence of the Holy Spirit, resulting in the knowledge of our sentence to death. This also includes the law of God that is written on the hearts of all men, even those who do not have the inscripturated law of Moses, their consciences bearing witness and their conflicted thoughts either accusing or excusing them (2:15); every person receives the knowledge of God through both creation and conscience so clearly that they are without excuse (1:19-20). Flowing from the watershed passage of 5:12-21 it is evident that Paul has Adam in mind and, hence, the universality of the law, which he has established back in chs. 2-3. Furthermore, both the doctrines of the unity of God and the immutability of God infer that the same moral nature that revealed God’s law to Adam will be the same that is revealed, albeit more fully, to Moses, despite Moo’s claim to the contrary (*op. cit.*, p. 429). Even Jewish tradition recognised that God’s law was given to Adam (*ibid*, n. 14). Adam and his progeny live in an inescapable revelatory atmosphere, they know God and his righteous requirements through both the book of nature and the book of Scripture. **10** *The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.* **11** *For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.* But in condemning the sinner to death, the law is thwarted by sin from serving its original life-giving purpose (v. 10), as a charter for living (10:5; Lev 18:5; Lk 20:8; Gal 3:12; see my comments on the dominion role of the law: [2:13](#); [3:2, 20](#); [5:1–8:39 De-Creation & Re-Creation: Paradise Restored](#); [ch. 6 - The Problem of Sin - Law & Culture](#)). Murray confirms this:

The reference is to the original purpose of the law. The purpose of law in man’s original state was not to give occasion to sin but to direct and regulate man’s life in the path of righteousness and, therefore, to guard and promote life. (*op cit.*, p.252)

Notwithstanding the law’s postlapsarian role in the conviction of sin and condemnation to death, the Gospel now restores it to its original purpose—to not only provide the believer with “the path of righteousness” but also mankind in general; it is the wisdom of God for the affairs of mankind, for the governance of the world and for the nations. To argue such discontinuity from the Moses administration of the covenant to the Jesus administration that the law is now an anomaly is to argue that God’s original creation purpose was wrong or at best inferior; not to mention arguing against the unity of God. This Marcion and antinomian position is inevitably gnostic and dualistic—it is anti-creation and anti-covenant. A position that Paul is at pains to refute, as the next verses testify. **12** *So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*—The problem is sin, not the law, it is “holy and righteous and good”. Murray elucidates:

As holy, just and good it reflects the character of God and is the transcript of his perfection. It bears the imprint of its author. ... As “holy” the commandment reflects the transcendence and purity of God and demands of us the correspondent consecration and purity; as “righteous” it reflects the equity of God and exacts of us in its demand and sanction nothing but that which is equitable; as “good” it promotes man’s highest well-being and thus expresses the goodness of God. (*op. cit.*, p. 253)

13 *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.* **14** *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*—And so, the Gospel is Paul’s answer to the law, it stands despite its sin-enlivening effect; as we will see in ch. 8, the righteous demand of the law is now fulfilled in us through the power of the Gospel (v. 4). What the law could not do, the Gospel now can; it regenerates the heart, enabling the believer to obey God. Hence, it is law *and* Gospel working together in harmony; the law defining and condemning and the Gospel justifying and sanctifying. The cry of the Psalmist – “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” – can now be realised even more effectually under the administration of the Spirit than under the letter (8:1-11). Although, countering every gnostic tendency that views the law of God governing man’s affairs on earth as “unspiritual”, as mundane (Latin, *mundus*, world), the apostle declares to the contrary, that, in fact, “the law is spiritual [*pneumatikos*]”, that is, of the Holy Spirit; the commandments are “spiritual words” taught by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:13) and, as such, breathed out by the breath of God (2 Tim 3:16). Hence, by inference, the law of God, dealing with the minutiae of everyday life, declares that the mundane is, in fact, sacred, that the world of matter is inherently “good” (Gen 1:31). The Gospel is not an escape from this world but rather a mandate to subdue it.

With Calvin we have chosen to include v. 14 as the concluding verse of the paragraph, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” “For”, *gar* in Greek, is a conjunction which serves as a particle of affirmation and conclusion, denoting ‘therefore’, referring to either what immediately precedes or even the entire preceding argument, providing the reason or cause. Hence, the question posed at the beginning of the paragraph in v. 7 – “What then shall we say? That the law is sin?” – concludes in v. 14 with the real culprit—not the law, for it is spiritual, but me, for I am of the flesh, sold under sin. The law is exonerated, death is the result of my own sin. “Of the flesh” refers back to v. 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” – and according to Calvin denotes “all that men bring from the womb” and “is the designation applied to men at birth and for as long as they retain their natural character, because they are corrupt, and have no reputation for anything, nor do they desire anything, but what is gross and earthly.” (*op. cit.*, p. 147). To be “in the flesh” is to be “in Adam” (v. 5; 8:8-9), to be in the inherited fallenness of the human condition and, hence, devoid of the Spirit. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn 3:6). Likewise he says, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). So, in Paul’s word, “the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh”; and furthermore, I am “sold under sin”. I am, therefore, the problem, enslaved to sin and in need of the regenerating and renovating work of the Spirit. Although, as 1 Corinthians 1:3 shows, “of the flesh [*sarkinos*]” can also refer to Christians who, while positionally “in Christ”, are acting carnally, as if they are still “in the flesh”, that is, unregenerate and “sold under sin”. Which the apostle now begins to explicate.

b) 15-25—The Christian Under Grace

15 *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*—When “for”, the Greek word *gar*, is used two or more times, as in vs. 14 and 15, some scholars argue that the first occurrence is argumentative and the second is explicative (Thayer). If this is the case, v. 15 begins to explicate what the apostle has just concluded in v. 14 and thus launches the next paragraph. This means that if this paragraph explicates the experience of the regenerate, as we argue, it is the same human nature as vs. 7-14 that has now been regenerated and is in the process of gradual renewal; the believer must still battle sin, but now, as we shall discover, he or she has the power to overcome sin, despite initial failure. Unlike the unregenerate person whose mind is hostile toward God and his law (1:21, 28; 8:7; Eph 4:17; Col 2:18; 1 Tim 6:5) and do not seek after God (3:11), the apostle, now has a mind yielded to God (vs. 22, 25) and possesses the *desire* to obey but not yet the *ability* (v. 18); this will only come through the crucible of testing and even failure, “do[ing] the very thing I hate” and thus coming to the realisation “that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (v. 18), “that sin dwells within me” (vs. 17, 20, 23). In other words, the apostle is now explicating the conclusion of the last paragraph, “that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (v. 14); as a regenerate person “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” (vs. 22-23). Human nature, though regenerated and set in the right direction, is fallen and in need of renovation. Even as a believer, apart from “reckoning” upon the grace of God in Christ and its forensic certainty (6:11), he remains “sold under sin”, still enslaved to its power. Despite the law being “good” and “spiritual” neither it nor the believer possess any innate power to deliver from the dominion of sin. Nothing “of the flesh”, of his own self-determination or self-reliance, will suffice. He is hence, in the face of failure, driven to the exclamation of v. 24: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” “Wretched”, in the Greek *talaiporos*, meaning to bear, to undergo tests, toils and trouble, shows us that the apostle has exhausted his strength in striving to obey God. And the ensuing cry of “Who will deliver me?” is then rhetorical; in other

words, “I’ve run out of my own resource, if not me, *Who?*” He has come to realise that autonomous man cannot serve God. No amount of self-determination and self-reliance is sufficient. Why is this?—Because human autonomy is antithetical to divine sovereignty; it is man denying his creatureliness as he usurps the role of the Creator God, even in his attempt to serve God. Man cannot serve God on his own terms—God’s will can only be done God’s way. Jesus explained this in the Parable of the Vine and the Branches (Jn 15:1-11). He is the true vine, the Father the vinedresser, and we the branches. As the true vine Jesus shows himself as the new Israel of God, the vine in Scripture representing Israel in her rebellious autonomy (Ps 80:8-13; 19:10; Is 5:1; Jer 2:21; Ezk 15:2; Hos 10:1). He explains that, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Productivity comes through our union with Christ, as we abide in him and his word in us; and this is revealed through our obedience to his commandments: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” (Jn 15:10); “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” (1 Jn 3:24). Jesus modelled this relationship to the Father as the “second man”, perfecting the new humanity: “So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise’” (Jn 5:19); “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30). To be fruit-bearing is to lay aside one’s autonomy. In relying upon Christ’s death, as our death to the law, we are set free from it as a means of autonomous righteousness, of self-justification (9:30-32; 10:3). And, hence, we are also free from its penalty: we are not under law but under grace (6:14).

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.

Romans 7:4–5

So, in becoming truly man the Son laid aside the prerogatives of deity, humbling himself in obedience to the Father, thus rectifying Adam’s “trespass” (see my comments [5:20-21](#)). Unlike Adam, he refused to trespass upon the Father’s rights as the true Creator God, as the ultimate reference point of the universe, and so, restored the Creator-creature distinction. In this way our union with Christ – we in him and he in us – as taught in chs. 6 and 7 becomes the source of our fruitfulness for God.

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. **17** So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. **18** For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. **19** For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. **20** Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. **21** So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. **22** For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, **23** 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. **24** Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** 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 7: The Key to Cultural Dominion

Therefore, the “wretched man” of Romans 7 is autonomous man coming to terms with the sovereign God. It is the newly regenerate person learning the ways of God, that he cannot serve God on his own terms, nor in his own strength. And this is done by “reckoning” upon the grace of God in Christ (6:11; 3:20-24). Pre-empting ch. 9, it is exemplified in Jacob, his name meaning “deceiver” or “supplanter”, who was to learn that neither his scheme to deceive Isaac nor to placate Esau was needful, that only as the angel of God subdued him, wrestling him at the river Jabbok and touching his hip or thigh, breaking his autonomous strength, that his name and, hence, his character was changed from Jacob (supplanter) to Israel (dominion with God). And so, having been broken by God, he names the place Peniel (the face of God), exclaiming, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered” (Gen 32:30). Likewise, the “wretched man” has been wrestled by God to the point of exhaustion, crying out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”, only to come to his own Peniel, suddenly seeing the face of God in “Jesus Christ our *Lord*” to whom he now give thanks (v. 25). He has come to the acknowledgement of Christ as “Lord”, the ultimate reference point of the universe, that he cannot live the Christian life autonomously, doing the will of God his own way and in his own strength. Because man refused to acknowledge God and give thanks to him (1:21, 28), through his own claim to ultimacy, he became futile in his thinking, and was consigned by God to a debased mind (1:18-28).

As a result, his thinking must be renewed (12:2; Eph 4:23); he must relearn God's categories of thought rooted in the Creator-creature distinction. This demands that he step down from his posture as a would-be god and give thanks, in humility of mind and heart, to the Creator and Sustainer of all things. This trust and reliance on God plays out by abiding in Jesus, in his sovereign grace (3:20-24), his "once-for-all" work of victory over sin and death (6:10), and hence deliverance from the "body of death" (v. 24)—the corporate order of Adam (see commentary [6:6](#)). This order's entire direction and thinking emanates from the original "trespass" of Adam, his trespass upon God's ultimacy by presiding over God's communication and presuming the authority and neutrality to judge what is true (5:15, 16, 17, 18, 20; Gen 2-3). This, in my estimation, is where we have erred: being so focussed on sin as *concupiscence* (strong desire), we have ignored sin as *lawlessness* (trespass). The latter exposes the underlying principle of sin at its source. This is the point of Romans 7, falling in the section of Romans that deals, not with *sins* (3:21–5:11), but with *sin* (5:12–8:39); the former addressing its penalty and the latter its power. While the fruit of the tree was a "delight to the eyes" (*sins*), more significantly, it was "to be desired to make one wise" (*sin*), echoing the serpent's lie that "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5-6).

The man of Romans 7 must, therefore, take the wisdom-writer's words to heart, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding" (Prov 3:5). He must recognise his creatureliness—his finitude and dependence on the Creator. This, and this alone, will give him dominion under God, first over his own rebellion and lawlessness and then over each covenantal sphere of the family, the church, and the nation (see *Cultural Mandate* and *Law and Culture* under [Chapter 6, The Problem of Sin](#)). And like Israel, meaning "dominion with God", the enemies of God will be driven out of the land "little-by-little" until it is possessed (Ex 23:30; Dt 7:22). This gradualism was so that the land, lying vacant, would not be overrun by wild animals. The godless were left in the land, as temporary caretakers, to cultivate the fields until the people of God were ready to steward their entire inheritance. Israel had to cultivate a field at a time, growing in their capacity as husbandmen, possessing the land progressively. This has both personal and corporate application: for personal sanctification and cultural dominion. Like the "Promised Land" (Ex 3:17; 12:25; 32:13; Dt 6:3), victory over sin is "promised" and must be "reckoned" upon (6:11); it is a done deal because God in Christ has acted and spoken; we have been delivered out of Egypt – the dominion of sin – and all we need, to enter the land and progressively possess it, is "the obedience of faith" based on God's promise (1:5; 16:26; Dt 7:17-22). Nevertheless, the sobering lesson is that Israel, for lack of obedience and because of unbelief, failed and was consigned to the wilderness (Num 14). And then travelling in circles for forty years under the discipline of God an entire generation perished before they could enter. Tragically the corporate church, likewise, is consigned to the wilderness of Romans 7, going in circles under God's discipline until it learns the lesson. Trapped in a spiritual 'Groundhog Day'! No wonder this strategic chapter is so contended and confused in the mind of the church. Like Israel, we have been given "a spirit of stupor" by God (11:8), withholding the inheritance, until we break and return to him, laying aside our autonomy. Until then the church is consigned to cultural impotence (for the Cultural Mandate see my comments on [2:17-24](#); [3:19-20](#); 3:26; [5:1-11](#); [ch. 6-The Law of God, the Adam Belief-System, and Protestant Confusion; Paul's Real Gospel Manifesto](#)). Romans 7 is thus the place of God's dealings. We must remember that he deals with us as sons "that we may share his holiness" (Heb 12:10):

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline ... then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Hebrews 12:5–8

Romans 7 is the crucible of his dealings in preparation for possessing the land. It provides the legitimacy of our sonship and our preparedness for the inheritance, it is the training for kingdom rulership (Heb 12:11, 18-28). But here is the warning—there are two opposite responses when under God's disciplines: 1) we regard them "lightly", or, 2) we become "weary". With the first we are cavalier and unaffected and with the second overly sensitive and discouraged—either way the lesson is not learned.

Accurately locating Romans 7 on God's battle-plan for re-taking the world, is crucial: *out* of Egypt (ch. 6), *through* the Wilderness (ch. 7), and *into* the Land (ch. 8). If I am right, learning its lesson is the prerequisite for inheriting the Land, that is, the harvest of the world and cultural dominion, for entering chs, 8, 9, 10 and 11. See [ch. 4, The Problem of Gospel Myopia](#) and my comments on 4:13 to show the "Land" as signifying the "world" as our inheritance. Chapter 7 is therefore crucially strategic for God's world purpose. While it can be considered the "normal" Christian experience, it is merely a stopover in

God's itinerary for the corporate church—it is *not* its destiny. It is not “normal” if ch.7 is positioned as the peak Christian experience—in other words, “This is as good as it gets.” As subnormal as it was for Israel to perish in the wilderness, so too the church (Heb 3-4). Herein lies both a warning and a key for the interpreter of Romans 7.

Getting Israel out of Egypt (ch. 6), though, was one thing, but getting Egypt out of Israel was another (ch. 7). Recalibrating the heart and the mind to the ways of God is the lesson: “He made known *his ways* to Moses, *his acts* to the people of Israel” (Ps 103:7). Like Israel, we are enamoured with the “acts of God” – his power, the sensational – but not with his “ways”. Jacob, enamoured with the birthright would stop at nothing to get it, even coming out at birth clutching Esau's heel (Gen 25). Getting God's gifts man's way is a delusion. This is why Paul says that sin through the commandment “deceived” him (v. 11). The commandment “promised” life but through sin produced death. As a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5), Paul knew that the commandments, as the ethical component of the covenant, would bring covenant favour and dominion (see my comments [3:8](#), [19-20](#); [5:20](#); and also [ch. 6](#) under *Law & Culture* for continuity of the law; see [Intro](#) to 2:1–4:25 for the covenant schemata of Romans, and also my comments on [3:2](#)). But seeking to acquire the promised inheritance apart from “the obedience of faith” (1:5; 16:26), by human works, is sin and invites divine resistance. What applied for justification in 5:21–4:25 also applies for sanctification in 6:1–8:1—they are both obtained through reliance on what God has done in Christ, that is, by faith. Whether *imputed* or *imparted* righteousness, they are by faith. Paul, like Israel, had not sought the righteousness of God's law by faith (9:30-31), but rather, “seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness” (10:3). Hence, Jacob's encounter at Jabbok and Israel's long history of divine displeasure. When Israel, though, heard of God's displeasure and their consignment to forty years of wilderness wanderings responded, “We *ourselves* will go up and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us”—“they thought it easy to go up” (Dt 1:41). Even though the Lord forbade it, they still went up “presumptuously”, only for the Amorites to defeat them and chase them like bees back to Kadesh and into their wilderness wanderings (Dt 1:41-46; Num 14:39-45). Despite being delivered from Egypt, they were still programmed in the mindset of autonomous man. Likewise, the church: if we treat lightly the discipline of God, attempting to presumptuously take dominion in the culture without processing the lesson of Romans 7, we too will be defeated ignominiously. In fact, much of the church's public disgrace, failure, and loss of cultural traction is not only because of the liberal elements of the church but also because of the conservative elements seeking to take dominion presumptuously.

There is an antithesis between God-centred Christianity and man-centred Christianity. Christian theism's thesis is that the Creator-Redeemer God has acted in history, revealing himself in the person of Jesus Christ as sovereign, commanding man's allegiance. Autonomous man's anti-thesis claims that, instead, he is god and the ultimate arbiter of reality. Consequently, man-centred “Christianity” is a *non sequitur*—it does not follow on the basis of the Christian revelation. ‘Man-centred’ and ‘Christianity’ are a contradiction of terms, and yet, on the whole it is the version of Christianity that we have offered the world—a form of baptised Humanism. When the church promotes a man-centred gospel, it empowers man's autonomy; it massages his sense of *self* and is unable to confront sin. If it does, at best it focusses on *sins* but not on the underlying principle of *sin*; that is to say, on its source as the original trespass upon God's sovereignty. Consequently, Christians perversely use the things of God – his gifts and his law – for independence from God, for *self*-realisation. This is why Paul declares: “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh [e.g., his own law-keeping in v. 5 and his status as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” in v. 6]—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh ...” (Phil 3:3-4). Rather than their chief end focussed in the worship of God, in their reliance on God's sovereign grace and obedience to him in the totality of life, it is instead focussed in God empowering them to live the good life. The result: God is domesticated, man is divinised; he is now the sovereign and God the servant.

Not only are the culture wars of the larger culture rooted in this antithesis but also those that are currently in the church. It is not merely a clash of liberal and conservative but rather one of sovereignty—between human and divine. This demands a conversion of heart, mind and will—an about face in the church on the issue of ultimacy, if any light is to shine into the world. Only true covenant obedience, in humility of heart and mind in complete reliance on the Lord, will attract the covenant favour of God and the inheritance of the world (4:13; chs. 9-11; Ps 2:8). It is the Father's good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom (Lk 12:32); it is neither grasped or wrestled from God nor forced upon the world, it is *received* (Heb 12:28). When the corporate church finally learns the lesson of Romans 7 the Father's imprimatur will supernaturally draw the nations. And this will be contrary to natural expectations; the nations will *flow upto* the mountain of the Lord, demanding to be taught his ways, for the law of the Lord will go out from Zion (Is 2:2-4). We will not need to ‘stiff-arm’ the world into the Kingdom. As we shall discover in ch. 9, the lesson of Jacob's life and for every covenant person, Jew or Gentile, including Paul, “...it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy (9:16 NKJV). God's grace is sovereign. From beginning to end, salvation is *of* the Lord!

Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 are next on God's itinerary—Re-Creation and Paradise Restored!

[Part 5: Introduction—De-Creation & Re-Creation: *Paradise Restored*](#)

[Part 5a: Chapter 5:1-21—The Hope of Glory](#)

[Part 5b: Chapter 6:1-23—The Problem of Sin](#)

Part 5c: Chapter 7:1-25—The Problem of the Law

Part 5d: Chapter 8:1-39—Re-Creation by the Spirit: *Paradise Restored*

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