

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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Treatise on Freedom from the Law of Moses (7:1-25)

In the previous chapter we considered Paul's treatise on freedom from the power of sin. Here in this chapter he develops his fourth of the six treatises of this section of material - a treatise on freedom from the law of Moses.

To be freed from the power of sin is one thing, we all know of the evil and malignancy of sin. But why would one need to be liberated from the law of Moses, if it is indeed the law of God? Was not the law given by God? Is it not holy, perfect, and good? Psalms 19:7-11 says that it is, and here in Rom 7:7, 12 Paul seems to make this very point. Why, then, would man need to be freed from the law? The answer may be overly simple: it is because under the law all men stand condemned, "The soul that sins, it shall die" (Ezek 18:20), and all have sinned. Therefore, under the law, all mankind stands condemned.

This is how, by its very nature, law works. The law (and here we are talking about "the law of Moses") represents legislated moral and ritual behavior; a system of "codes." The law, as a body of revelation from God, is good. The problem is what people do with it. There are numerous ideologies, philosophies, and systems of moral behavior that work perfectly in theory, and would work perfectly for people, if people were perfect; but they are not, and therein is the problem.

Man's response to the Law of Moses was lawkeeping. If he was perfect, the law worked well for him. If he was not perfect, the law worked against him. The law defined human behavior as good or bad, and condemned all bad behavior. This is the way law works. If you keep ninety-nine commandments perfectly, and then break one commandment, you become a transgressor of the law, and all your obedience cannot offset the one transgression. If you are a transgressor, you stand condemned by the law.

The law became a means of condemning man rather than a means of saving him. This is what Paul is concerned that his readers see, i.e., Satan can use of the law to bring one under his power. There is a way of escaping this cycle of law, sin, and death. It is death, but the death of which Paul speaks is death to sin as an enslaving power and death to the law as the instrument of condemnation to the one who falls under the enslaving power of sin. As we will see, the same complex of ideas we saw in the previous treatise is present here as well. In conversion to Christ one dies to his existence "in Adam," wherein exists the law and the curse of death, and is transferred into another existence.

(1) Analogy from Marriage
(7:1-6)

Do you not know, brothers--for I am speaking to men who know the law--that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ²For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. ³So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. ⁴So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. ⁵For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But now, by dying to what once bound us; we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

In the beginning, at the creation of marriage, a husband and wife

were bound to one another until one of them died. God saw that it was not good that man should be alone, so he created a woman to be his mate (Gen 2:18). God created the woman, brought her to Adam (Gen 2:22), and stated that man was to leave his father and mother join himself to the woman (his wife) and the two would become one flesh (a union). Man and woman were to marry, reproduce offspring, and establish their own family (Gen 2:24). This was God's original intent for the marriage of man and woman. Man was to take a mate and live with her for the rest of their lives.

When Jesus was asked about the legitimacy of divorce, he quoted Gen 2:24 as the essential text of what God had to say on the matter. Their reply was that Moses had given them the law of divorcement (Deut 24:1-4). To this Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to put away your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not this way in the beginning " (Matt 19:1-9).

The Greek word for hardness is a Greek word *sklerokardia*, from *skeros* meaning, "hardness, obstinacy, stubbornness" and *kardia*, the word for heart. This is a word that could easily stand as a synonym for at least five of the seven deadly sins; it is pride, envy, lust, anger, and avarice, and a case could be made for gluttony (an insatiable appetite) and sloth/laziness (an attitude of apathy and irresponsibility). *Sklerokardia* is a disease of soul, and is characterized by self willed defiance to anything that tells it "no!" Because of *sklerokardia*, man has not fulfilled God's intended purpose for him in marriage. All men and women did not marry and multiply, and all men and women who did marry did not remain married to one another until death. This is, however, what the Scriptures say God intended for marriage in the beginning.

This understanding of the original intent of marriage is, no doubt, the presupposition out of which Paul is working here. Rabbinic teaching was that only in death could one be freed from the obligation of *Torah* – a Jew was under the lordship of the law till the day he died. Here Paul speaks as though his readers should know this principle, "Do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to men who know the law - that the law has dominion (Greek: lordship) over a man only as long as he lives?" (Rom 7:1). Although Moses had made provision for a man to put his wife away, this was because of the failure of such a man to fulfill God's original intent for marriage. Their practice of divorce was detestable to God, as is clear from Malachi 2:13-17. Moses was, no doubt, faced with trying to give people a way of

surviving their failure in giving them the option of divorce in such situations.

This appears to be what Paul does with the divorce issue in Corinth. His advice to those who were having marital difficulties was to do everything possible to make their marriages work, this was the first choice. If that was not possible, because of the attitude of one of the marriage partners, or other factors that could not be reversed or removed, then the second choice was divorce. Remarriage is another aspect of this issue, but Paul does not go into that here in this text. He works from the presupposition that God's original intent for marriage was that it was for as long as both partners lived.

Paul uses the release of a wife from the bonds of her marriage at the time of her husband's death as a way of discussing the release of the Jews from the binding effects of the *Torah*. The wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she is freed from her commitment to him (7:2-3). In rabbinic reasoning, this is a good argument; by Greek standards, however, the logic leaves something to be desired. But the problem is in trying to do more with the analogy than Paul is doing with it.

All Paul is concerned with here is showing that death cancels the marriage bond. It is going too far to try and determine who the wife represents, who the husband represents, what the law represents, what death represents, and where does divorce fit into this analogy. In Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning, this analogy is not valid because it is technically "unsound" (i.e., structurally correct). It would be *kosher*, however, in rabbinic reasoning in that all Paul is doing here is arguing that death breaks all bonds made in this existence, which is the principle he began with in verse 1 (i.e., "the law has authority/lordship over a man as long as he lives"). His argument is that in our conversion to Christ, our spirits die to this existence and the enslaving powers that lay hold of us in this existence.

This is precisely Paul's point in v 4. "You were put to death to the law," Paul says; then, translating the Greek very literally, he says, "into another one becoming, one having been raised out of death." With this literal translation of the Greek we have a better grasp of the idea Paul is trying to present. His words are clearly colored by the language and imagery of 6:3-5. By our baptism into Christ (the burial of our old existence in Adam), we have been transferred out of existence "in Adam" into existence "in Christ."

Also of significance here is the expression "in the flesh" found in v 5. "When we were in the flesh, the passions of sin, through the law, operated in our member to bring forth fruit unto death." adamic existence is an existence that centers in the flesh (with its passions and/or desires), Christian existence is existence which centers in the spirit. In conversion we experience spiritual renewal, new birth, or, to use Paul's terminology, we become "new creations in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17). That which has become new and is transformed is our spiritual being, our flesh is yet "of Adam" and will only be put off at the death of the body (1 Cor 15:35-57).

We are, in essence, beings with a dual existence or two different realms of existence, the present and the future. We are yet of this world because of our adamic flesh, yet we are beings of another world because of our recreated spirit. This is what is meant by resurrection "into newness of life" (Rom 6:4). "If we have been united with him in the likeness of his death," reasons Paul, "we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self/man was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Rom 6:5-6). Similar language and concepts are found in Rom 8 (as well as Gal, Eph, and Phil); we will further develop this theme and its attending motifs in our development of the treatise of Rom 8.

(2) *The Purpose of Law as Revelation from God*
(7:7-12)

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." ⁸But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. ⁹Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹²So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

The law defines sin and gives sin its power to condemn sinners. There are two major movements of thought here in these verses: (1) Paul's

discussion of whether the law is sin, and (2) his autobiographical discussion of how sin works through the law to gain control of man.

Critical to the discussion of the relationship between the law and sin is understanding what Paul means by "the law." The Old Testament Scriptures are often referred to as, "the Law" or "the Law and the Prophets;" i.e., the *Tanakh* or threefold collection of Torah (the Law), *Nebi'im* (the Prophets), and *Kethubim* (the Writings). In rabbinic theology the *Torah* consists of two parts: the *Halakhah* - the traditions (written and oral) consisting of the codes and ritual of Jewish law, and the *Haggadah* - the traditions (written and oral) consisting of the stories/history of Israel. It is the *Torah* as *Halakhah* (the codes, rules, statutes, judgments, and commandments) that Paul is concerned with here. It is through these that sin works to bring about man's estrangement from God.

"Is the law sin?" Paul asks. Earlier passages in this letter seem to suggest that Paul thinks this is the case. In 3:20 he says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." In 4:15, "because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression." In 5:13, "for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law." In 6:14 he says, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." And in 7:5, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

But it would have been impossible for Paul, schooled in Judaism as he was, to believe that any revelation from God could be sinful. In the *Mishnah* it is written, "These [the pagans] are they that have no share in the world to come: he that says . . . that the law is not from heaven" (*Sanhedrin* 10:1). How can Paul then say that the law then an instrument of sin?

Paul's explanation is as follows: It is through the law that sin takes man captive - it defines acceptable behavior and commands man to comply with it, then, at the point of violation of the commandment, it convicts him of sin and sentences him to death. It is in this process that sin (personified throughout these verses) works. As Paul says in v 8, "sin seizes its opportunity through the law." The word translated "opportunity" here literally means "point of departure," and in a military sense means a base of operations. Sin (personified) uses the Word of God as a point of departure in bringing man into captivity to its power. Paul seems to have in mind the fall

of Adam in Gen 2-3,

. . . if Paul is not actually telling this story [the story of Adam's fall - mwl] he is at least using it to bring out this point. Sin - the serpent - was in the Garden even before man, but had no opportunity of attacking the man until the command 'Thou shalt not eat of it' (Gen 2:7) had been given. It was precisely by means of this command, the prototype of all law and religion, that the serpent tempted man. (C. K. Barrett, *Romans*, p. 143)

God had told Adam that he should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in the day he ate of it he would die (Gen 2:17). Satan used this very instruction of God to bring Adam under the power of sin and the condemnation of death - sin seized its opportunity through the instruction of God (Rom 7:8). Adam's story, in Paul's thinking, is his story. "I was alive without the law" he writes, "but when the commandment came, sin came to life and I died; and the commandment, which was designed to give life, brought death: for sin, finding occasion, through the commandment beguiled me, and through it slew me" (Rom 8:9-11). This is Adam's story but Paul sees it as his own story.

***Autobiographical Example of the Role of the Law
(7:13-25)***

Did that which is good (the law), then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good (the revelation of God), so that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful. ¹⁴We know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, [as one] sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin dwelling in me. ¹⁸I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I don't do it. ¹⁹For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want to do (what I know I shouldn't do), it is no longer me working, but sin that dwells in me. ²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is there with me. ²²For in the inner man I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body,

waging war against the law of my mind taking me captive to the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴I am a miserable man! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I serve God's law, but in the flesh I serve the law of sin.

Here we pick up an autobiographical discourse that gives us significant insight into Paul. The scenario played out in Gen 2-3 is played out in the life of Paul. At verse 9, Paul describes his existence before the age of reason/accountability, "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died." In Jewish tradition this would be the period of Paul's life before becoming a "*Bar Mitzvah*" - a Son of the Covenant (i.e., an adult Jewish male who has reached age 13 and has become subject to the law of Moses).

Now amenable to the law, he becomes condemned to death by his first transgression of the law. But it wasn't the law itself that became death to him (v 13), it was his transgression of the law (i.e. "sin working through the law"). The law was designed to bring life not death. Every Jew knew this. As it is written in the *Mishnah*, "The more study of the law the more life" (*Pirke Aboth* 2:7).

Then, at verse 14, Paul introduces an interesting play on words. He sets in juxtaposition that which is spiritual over against that which is of the flesh. First it is the law that is spiritual (*pneumatikos*) set over against Paul who is of the flesh (*sarkinos*). "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am of the flesh," (7:14). Paul is here speaking of himself as an Adamic man under the law. The contrast, then, running from verses 15-23, concerns the internal conflicts of Paul, speaking as Saul of Tarsus, who is an offspring of Adam, characterized by his creatureliness [he is of the dust/clay]. His flesh (*sarx*) and the desires/lusts (*epithumia*) of the flesh are at constant war with his desire to do what his mind/reason (as informed by the law) tells him he ought to do.

Paul the Apostle or Saul of Tarsus?

This text has left many readers confused as to how Paul could be speaking of himself as one who desires to follow the dictates of the law (7:13-14), as well as speaking of himself as being controlled by the law of sin (7:17-23), and be consistent with his argument that those in Christ are not amenable to the law and are not under the reign of sin but are under the

reign of grace (Rom 5:20-21; 6:14)? Is Paul speaking of himself as one currently under the law and a man in whom sin reigns, or is he speaking representatively as Jew, as a man under the law and condemned by sin – Saul of Tarsus? One only needs to look at this man's life as "Saul of Tarsus" to see the parallel between what he is saying in these verses and his recollection of himself before the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth on the way to Damascus (cf. Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2, 13-14, 21; 22:2-5; 26:9-11; and Gal 1:13-14).

His use of the first person "I" throughout verses 17-23 is a rhetorical device; i.e., he is portraying himself as Saul of Tarsus and he is portraying himself as everyman "under the law" - man in Adam. It is adamic man who is of the flesh/of the dust/clay. It is adamic man who is sold under sin. It is adamic man who, because he is *sarkinos* (of the flesh), has such constant conflict within himself as a volitional or "decision making" being.

Adam's Story and the Story of Saul of Tarsus

There was a large body of "Adam literature" within first century Judaism which portrayed Adam as the one who, because of the weaknesses of his flesh (i.e., carnal desires and self willed defiance), brought sin and death into the world (cf. *Ben Sirach* 14:17; 24:28; *Wisdom of Solomon* 15; 1 (*Apocalypse of*) *Enoch* 69:8-11; 98:4; 2 (*Apocalypse of*) *Baruch* 17:2-3; 21:22-25; 54:19; 4 *Ezra* 3:21; 7:62-63, 116-118; the primary document is *The Life of Adam and Eve*. This portrait of Adam is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially the Hymns Scroll.

The portrait of Adam painted throughout this whole collection of "Adam literature" is obviously drawn from the Gen 1-3 story of the creation and fall of man/Adam. Throughout this body of literature Adam's story has become everyman's story, a fact that is also present in the thinking of Paul (cf. Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:45-49).

Conclusion

Of critical importance here is to see where Paul takes all of this. His movement of thought appears to build to a crescendo at v 24, "Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death [his existence in Adam]? His answer is found in the opening lines of chapter 8, which introduces us to the next treatise: "There is therefore now no

condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. The question toward which Paul is driving in all this is, "What rules you?" "God, of course," the Jew would answer. Then comes the next question, "What evidence is there of that?" All evidence to the contrary, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory intrinsic within them as beings created in the image of God.

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