

Romans 7:1-17

I had heard for years that Romans 7 describes the defeated Christian. One day, I realized it does the opposite. In fact, I found that it reveals the source of the conflict within every New Testament believer and, at the same time, maps out the path to victory.

When I read Romans 7 as a new believer, I became more aware of my own struggles. I wasn't mature enough to understand the source of those struggles. I thought if I could feed the old self (Adamic nature, old man, dead spirit, sinful nature) enough truth and whip him into line, the battle would subside. I did not yet comprehend that my old self had been crucified and made extinct. I soon learned, nonetheless, that the intensity of the battle did not decrease as my Biblical knowledge increased. In fact, I found that the battle intensified as I matured in my walk with Christ. It was then that I discovered a life-changing truth. I learned that my struggle is with the power of sin and not with my old self (Adamic nature). This insight brought new hope and, with it, a greater desire to live life by Christ's life within me. In other words, I was free to explore what it means to live life by the life of Another, the life of my Savior.

Our understanding of spiritual warfare will be enhanced through our study of Romans 7. Don't be surprised if the intensity of the battle increases as we examine this chapter. Satan will do everything within his power to prevent us from seeing this truth, so pray for wisdom before continuing.

Released from Law through Death

Paul first addresses the means by which we are released from the Law, and he uses the marriage relationship to prove his point (Romans 7:1-4):

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God. (Romans 7:1-4)

In marriage, death of one of the partners automatically frees the surviving partner to remarry. Paul's point is that in our lost state we were joined (in a sense, married) to the Law. Because the Law will live forever (1Peter 1:25), our release could be achieved only through the avenue of our own death. Our death (the death and eradication of the old self) occurred on the cross (Romans 7:4; Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:6) through our being placed in Christ subsequent to our repenting and believing while depraved (review what was addressed in Romans 6:1-6 if necessary). Thus, we are free to be "joined to" Christ, for the old self is dead and gone. Otherwise, our betrothal to Christ would be an impossibility! Should the old self remain alive, living alongside the new self, the old self

would be married to the Law at the same time that the new self is betrothed to Christ. Spiritual adultery would result, creating an irreconcilable situation. Yet many New Testament believers view themselves as dual natured, possessing both the old and new self.

As a result of being “*joined to another,*” we can “*bear fruit for God*” through living by the life of “*another,*” the “*another*” being Jesus Himself (Romans 7:4), Who is “*God*” (Hebrews 1:8). Can you imagine any better news!

Paul continues in Romans 7:5 by stating:

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

(Romans 7:5)

This passage tells that “*...while we were in the flesh [in our lost condition], the sinful passions [affections]...were aroused by the Law....*” These “*passions...were aroused*” because the power of sin increases in intensity when exposed to “*the Law.*” Consequently, the more we worked at keeping the Law, the more we broke it. We were constantly bearing “*fruit for death,*” that is, producing the fruit of an unbeliever. Don’t misunderstand. Paul is not teaching that the depraved are incapable of recognizing their sin and exercising personal repentance and faith, for Adam realized he was “*naked*” after eating of the forbidden fruit and dying a spiritual death (Genesis 2:16-17; Genesis 3:7).

More good news is on the horizon in Romans 7:6:

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (Romans 7:6)

This verse confirms that “*...we have been released from the Law...*” through our death with Christ. (Remember: The Law is for the lost, not the saved, according to 1 Timothy 1:9-10). This teaching is in total agreement with Romans 6:6, which verifies “*...that our old self was crucified with Him....*” The death and eradication of the “*old self*” frees us to “*...serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter*” of “*the Law*” (Romans 7:6). Yes, we are free to allow the “*Spirit*” of God to provide victory over anything that comes our way. What freedom!

We should take courage from Romans 7:7, for as Paul was accused of teaching error we will be accused of the same:

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.” (Romans 7:7)

Paul’s enemies struggled with his theology, making statements such as, “If what you are teaching is true, the Law must be sin.” Paul disagreed by responding with, “*May it never be!*” He then said had it not been for “*the Law*” he “*would not have known about*

coveting.” “*Coveting*” is a sin that can be hidden from the unbeliever, but not from the Law. Thus, Paul writes:

But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. (Romans 7:8)

Had the Law not been present to expose Paul’s sin, he would have continued in his self-righteousness, never seeing his need for a Savior. The power of “*sin*” increases in intensity when exposed to the Law.

Romans 7:9 must be studied based on the full counsel of God’s Word or misunderstanding will result:

And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; (Romans 7:9)

This passage is one of many in God’s Word where the context of a portion of the verse is obtained from the input from subsequent verses—not from preceding truth. This same principle also applies elsewhere in Romans 7.

The first phrase of verse 9, “*And I was once alive apart from the Law,*” does not communicate that a time existed when Paul was not exposed to the Law. Paul, a Jew, was taught the Law from the womb! The apostle is communicating that a portion of his life was spent viewing the Law incorrectly—as will be verified by the remainder of the verse shortly. In fact, prior to submitting to Christ, he perceived himself as keeping the Law perfectly:

...If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (Philippians 3:4-6, emphasis added)

According to the last half of Romans 7:9, a day came when Paul perceived the Law from a proper vantage point—as the vehicle used of God to expose man’s sin. Thus, Paul wrote, “*but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died.*” When “*the commandment came*” (Romans 7:9), Paul finally viewed the Law appropriately—as a “*tutor to lead*” him “*to Christ, that*” he might “*be justified by faith*” (Galatians 3:24):

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24)

Paul follows in Romans 7:10-11 by writing:

and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. (Romans 7:10-11)

The “*commandment*” (Law), which Paul originally perceived as imparting “*life*” through obeying its requirements, resulted in “*death*” by convicting him of sin. In fact, the power of “*sin*” “*killed*” him through intensifying its strength by means of the Law. Paul states this same truth in different terminology in Galatians 2:19:

“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God.”
(Galatians 2:19)

As a result of the work of the Law, which gave rise to an increase in the power of sin’s intensity, Paul saw himself as a sinner, repented of his sin, and accepted Christ as Savior. Hence, God gave the Law so man might recognize his sinful and depraved state through his increased involvement with sin. What a wise God we serve!

“The Law is holy” (Romans 7:12); it serves the purpose for which it was given:

So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Romans 7:12)

The Law makes “*sin...utterly sinful*” (Romans 7:13), doing its job and doing it well:

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (Romans 7:13)

The Battle Between the New Testament Believer and the Power of Sin

Romans 7:14-16 speaks of the battle that occurs inside every New Testament believer. This battle also raged within Paul, so he describes his frustration during the early years of his walk with Christ. Note his use of the word “*Law*”:

For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. (Romans 7:14-16)

Paul was inundated (saturated) with Law from birth. In fact, prior to salvation he viewed himself as a keeper of the Law:

...as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.
(Philippians 3:6)

Having studied under Gamaliel, an influential teacher of the Law in Jerusalem (Acts 5:34-40; 22:3), Paul would have been very familiar with the Law (Acts 26:4-5). Thus, prior to salvation, Paul perceived himself as “*blameless*” (Philippians 3:6) in regard to the Law—as fulfilling the righteousness required by the Law in every way. Can you

imagine the difficulty he faced while attempting to abandon Law and live under grace subsequent to believing? The width of the habit patterns in his brain relating to the Law must have been enormous! As you and I can attest, habits of thought of this magnitude aren't shed overnight. Coupling this truth with the events of his early years as a believer, could it be that Paul struggled (for a season at least) with the fact that the Law can't assist a believer in righteous living? I think he did, and Scripture seems to agree.

After Paul's conversion, several years transpired before he embarked on his first missionary journey. He had much to learn concerning grace. In fact, after his dialogue with Jesus in Acts 9, he traveled to Damascus (Acts 9:8), journeyed to Arabia (Galatians 1:17), and returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). At least *"three years"* passed during this series of events (Galatians 1:18). He then spent *"fifteen days"* with Peter (Cephas) in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18) and finally moved to *"the regions of Syria and Cilicia"* (Galatians 1:21)—Tarsus, his hometown, was located in this region. Not until Acts 11:25-26 did Barnabas bring him from Tarsus to Antioch. After a short trip to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25), they embarked on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3).

Several years passed after Paul's conversion before he was properly equipped for service. I am convinced verses 14-17 of Romans 7 describe what he learned during those years of sitting alone with the Lord. In fact, I conclude that he viewed himself as possessing two natures during the early stages of his walk with Christ. I also conclude (bases on Romans 7:14-16) that he erroneously attempted to whip the old man (sinful nature) into line (a nature which he later discovered had been eradicated) by hooking it to the Law. One day, however, he came to the realization that the old self (sinful nature) had been jettisoned when he repented and believed. Thus, he discovered that the evil thoughts that penetrated his mind as a church saint were not generated by the old self (sinful nature). Rather, they could be traced to the power of sin living in his body. What a profound discovery!

Certainly, the power of sin comes against all church saints. We want to do good but at times find ourselves doing evil. Once we identify the avenue through which the power of sin launches its attack, we are well on our way to victory.

Paul, in verse 17, describes a major turning point in his earlier walk with Christ.

"So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me."
(Romans 7:17).

For correct interpretation, we must properly define the term *"it"* in Romans 7:17. *"It"* points to the evil thoughts generated by the power of sin living in the New Testament believer's body—a truth verified by the context of the remaining verses of Romans 7, especially verses 21 and 23 (addressed shortly). Thus, Paul taught that the sinful thoughts entering his mind were not generated by the old self (Adamic nature) but were the work of the power of sin living in his physical body. Until this time, Paul struggled with the idea that the old self (sinful nature) was alive, producing the evil thoughts that bombarded his thinking. He discovered that the old self is dead and gone in a New Testament believer, never to be reckoned with again. This eradication means that the battle raging inside us is between the power of sin and the new self, not between the old

self and the new self. How can a battle exist between the old self and the new self when the old self no longer exists?

So long as we allow the power of sin to trick us into believing that the old self is still alive, it can convince us that we are generating the evil thoughts that bombard our minds. Only through understanding that the old self has been eradicated and that the sinful thoughts are generated by the power of sin living in our body can we take authority over the power of sin (through the power of the Holy Spirit) and live abundantly. Understanding this truth radically changed Paul's experience as a New Testament believer. My prayer is that it will do the same for us. A quick review of the circle diagrams might be helpful at this time.

An initial reading of Romans 7:17 suggests that Paul is teaching that he (the new self) did not commit sin, which cannot be true, for 1John 1:8 states:

“If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1John 1:8)

Paul is not advocating that he no longer sinned, but that the power of sin is the initiator and source of the evil thoughts that penetrate the New Testament believer's mind. Hence, Paul was not teaching sinless perfection. Therefore, the “*it*” of Romans 7:17 points to the evil thoughts generated by the power of sin (living in our body) as it attempts to convince us that the sin nature is still alive (read verses 21 and 23 for verification). These conclusions agree with the truth addressed in Romans 7:18-19.