

Notes on Romans 7

Romans 1-8 @ CNL

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The Structure of Rom 7

- 7:1-6** Paul had said in 6:14, we are “no longer under law but under grace.” Now he explains why: a death has occurred that frees us from any longer being “under the law.”
- 7:7-12** Is the law sinful? No, the law puts the spotlight on sin.
- 7:13-25** Well, if the law is good, does it bring me death? No, sin is what worked death in me through the good commandment — that’s what makes sin so utterly awful. Who can rescue me from the tug-of-war between my “inner man” who delights in God’s law and this “alien law” I find in me that goes a different direction? Thanks be to God through Jesus! Herein lies the set up to ch. 8, where Paul celebrates:
1. the work of Christ on the Cross, bringing us from under the curse of the law
 2. the Holy Spirit in our hearts, bringing us from under the powerlessness of the law, and
 3. the love of the Father in securing our destiny and the power God to bring us to his promise of glory.

7:1-8:17 (or so)

Paul says he writes to those who “know the law” — he probably means Torah, the Jewish Law. He writes of implications he thinks should be clear (“Or do you not know...?”) of what he has just said about us “not being under law but under grace” (6:14b) and about “God’s gift bringing eternal life in Christ” (6:23).

It seems to me, if readers are tracking with his “from exodus/baptism to promised land/glory” trek, they’ve got to be asking: “But didn’t the giving of the Law after the exodus and before the promised land complicate things? And doesn’t the abiding presence of the law between baptism and glory complicate things in the new covenant situation?”

Paul has actually been setting things up so he can — in ch. 7 and continuing into ch. 8 — talk about the dynamic between “an obedience of faith” (whereby law is positively

fulfilled through faith in Christ) and the law's "increasing the trespass" (whereby the law makes sinners' situation worse) — how does his gospel "establish the law" in its double-edged sense (3:31)? Chap. 7 is about the latter, and chap. 8 is about the former.

How do we read, then, the Old Testament in such a way as to find there a blessing and not a curse? We have to read it in view of its promise of: a) Christ's provision for our sin (8:3), and b) the Holy Spirit's coming to enable us to "walk" (8:4). This is all a part of what it is for "the one justified by faith" ... "to live."

7:1-6

The tricky thing is that the pronoun "you" (referring, of course, to believers) in vv. 1-7 occurs in two senses — in one sense we're masculine, we're the "man" who dies in order to be released from an old union to sin and death (because of our solidarity with Adam) ... this "old man" (see Rom 6:6) died with Christ. In another sense, we're feminine, we're the woman who survives a husband's death and is now free to belong to another, to Christ, so as to "bear fruit" to him.

Here's the point: The baptized Christian, in Paul's understanding, is no longer "in Adam" (the point of vv. 1-3 and v. 4a) but "in Christ" (the point of v. 4b). Our union with Christ in his death has taken us out of the sphere of Adam where sin and death reigned over us ... the law kept us in that union ("wedding"). In what sense did we die?

6:2, we died to sin

6:3, we were baptized into Christ's death

6:4, we were buried with him into death

6:5, we were united to the likeness of his death

6:6, the "old man" was co-crucified with Christ

6:8, we died with Christ

6:11, we are urged to reckon ourselves to be dead to sin

We used to be husbands united by the law to sin — but through Christ's body (7:4), we died — so that marriage is dead. Christ's death has silenced the law's threats, so the law doesn't "govern" us any longer — we're not "under" its sentence of death any longer.

Now, instead, Paul thinks of us as the bride of Christ (see 2Co 11:2; Eph 5:22-32). This points us back to the image of "fruitbearing" in 6:21-22, only now we see that we're talking about *childbearing*. And that invites reflection on the difference between a metaphor of management/ownership/slavery (the last half of ch. 6) and a metaphor of marriage/intimacy/companionship (7:1-6).

This thought rather transfigures the whole question of whether to sin or not, of whether to obey or not — it's about pleasuring our Bridegroom rather than pleasing our Boss!

7:5-6

These verses are reminiscent of 2Co 3:6: “God has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” What has happened in the gospel is that the covenant has been made new — under the old covenant, the law given between the exodus and the promised land did not bring blessing because it could not give the life that it demanded (its sacrifices could only temporarily mask sin; and God’s “Shekinah”-Glory traveled with Israel, but was not a personally indwelling, heart-transforming presence). Under the new covenant (accessible to circumcised and uncircumcised alike — remember 2:28-29!), we have to be able to see how in this period between baptism and glorification, the law blesses — it blesses us because: a) its curses have been broken in Christ’s death for us, securing our forgiveness and securing our access to the Father (8:3), and b) now God’s life-giving, transforming presence abides *in* us, not just *alongside* us (8:4).

7:7-12

In the first place, law is not evil — it is good. As Paul had said back in 5:20-21, God introduced law (the Torah) into the human equation so he could bring sin to full clarity and draw it, eventually, into concentrated expression in Jesus-hanging-on-the-cross — precisely to crush it. Paul amplifies here in 7:7-12 the first part of the law’s function: the good news of the law’s bringing to “my” consciousness the awfulness and the subtlety of sin.

7:13-25

“OK, if the law isn’t bad, it sure is on the side of death — after all, Paul, didn’t you say in 2Co 3:6, that ‘the letter kills?’” Replies Paul, “Thanks for the opportunity to clarify: the death isn’t in the law — the death’s in *me*! Why does it take God-hanging-on-a-tree? Why wasn’t it enough to have God’s glory cloud merely *among* us and *around* us and *alongside* us instead of *in* us? Why won’t we know “full adoption” until Christ returns? Because there’s a fundamental warp to who we are — that’s what the law shows us. But, thanks be to God, the law doesn’t have the final say!”

“So what’s?” of 7:7-25:

For Gentile believers:

1. a lesson on how to read ourselves into Israel’s story
2. an angle of vision on how the OT should reveal to us how deep the heart problem (see Rom 1) was and is — a truth for which nothing in our pagan backgrounds could have prepared them
3. an appreciation for the sensitivity of conscience that our Jewish Christian brothers and sisters would have toward their, and, well, maybe especially *our* sinfulness

4. a compassion for rather than arrogance towards nonchristian Jews who don't "get it" about the tensions within the OT meta-narrative that can only be resolved in Christ

For Jewish believers:

1. a more circumspect view of ourselves — we must see that "the Law" that we are so quick to invoke against Christians of pagan background (i.e., those who've come to ascendancy in the Roman churches in our absence) should make us a broken and not a prideful people — as "elder brothers" in the faith, maybe we should be a bit more patient
2. a profoundly tender heart toward our nonchristian countymen: "Dear God, how touched we are be with the plight of our kinfolk (our fellow Jews) who know only the first exodus and not the second — how united we are with Paul (see 9:1-5) in our affections for our lost kin."