

Wretched

Romans 7¹

Of Journeys and Their Destinations.

As we move from Romans chapter 6 into chapter 7, I want to do something a little different. This morning, I want to read through the entire chapter that we will be addressing, if the Lord is willing, over the next several weeks, and then take time this morning to focus on the last couple of verses.

I want to do this, because there is some debate these days, even among preachers and commentators for whom I have nothing but respect (Martyn Lloyd-Jones among them), about Paul's perspective, especially in the latter verses of this chapter, and this is something that we need to get right, or it completely changes the force of what the apostle said, not only in chapter 7, but even in 6, and perhaps especially in chapter 8.

Think of it like this...imagine for a moment that you are just setting out for a journey by car. You think you're heading for Saskatoon, and since you're feeling a little drowsy anyway, and someone else is driving, you nod off. But when you awaken, and look out the window, you realize that not only are you driving through the mountains, there is even a sign indicating that you are in Rogers Pass. Now, remember, you thought you were headed for Saskatoon, and in that light, the route is incomprehensible. You don't get to Saskatoon by driving west over the mountains.

In order to make sense of the route, even at the midpoint of the journey, you need to know the destination. The same is true, I believe, of this somewhat difficult passage in the book of Romans, so, let's take time this morning to read carefully through Romans chapter 7. If the Lord is willing, we will hopefully be able to establish the destination that the apostle was aiming for, and then, when we return in the coming weeks to the journey, it will be easier to understand the route.

Reading then from the book of Romans, chapter 7, verses 1 – 24. Once again, Paul began (or continued) this “catechism” with a question. Verse 1:

Till Death Do Us Part.

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? Romans 7:1 (ESV)

Now, in this case, the answer was given by way of an illustration in verses 2 and 3 (and remember, we will address this in more detail in weeks to come). He wrote

²For 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.

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

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. Romans 7:2–3 (ESV)

We need to remember, of course, that while the illustration given is true—this *is* the law of the Lord—it is not an analogy (more about that next time), and it is also **not** the point. Paul did not write these words to teach us about marriage and divorce. That was not his aim here. Rather, he went on in verse 4 to say:

⁴ **LIKEWISE**, my brothers, **you also have died** to the law *through* the body of Christ, so that you may belong... Romans 7:4 (ESV)

(that you may be joined; that you may be married)

...to another, *to him who has been raised from the dead*... Romans 7:4 (ESV)

(that is, “to Jesus”)

...in order that we may bear fruit for God. Romans 7:4 (ESV)

And note once again the expected outcome. This is the contrast between the deeds of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, as we saw last Lord’s Day. We have been saved so that we can bear fruit to God, in contrast to verse 5.

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. Romans 7:5–6 (ESV)

Of course, as we have seen several times already, this has implications for those who want to take it in the wrong way, and it leads, yet again, to another question. Verse 7

The Law is Holy.

⁷ **WHAT** then shall we say? That the law is sin? Romans 7:7a (ESV)

And again,

...By no means! Romans 7:7a (ESV)

“May it never be!” “Absolutely, unequivocally not!” The law of God was not, is not, and can never be sin. “Yet,” wrote the apostle Paul,

...if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. Romans 7:7b (ESV)

Very specifically,

For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”
⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. Romans 7:8 (ESV)

Now, this is very similar to what the Apostle wrote in Romans 5, verse 13.

¹³ ...for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Romans 5:13 ESV

We’ll have to consider this in more detail when we get to it, but for today, we need to understand that this is not letting people who haven’t heard—people who don’t know the law of God—off the hook. Paul went on in Romans 5, verse 14:

¹⁴ Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. Romans 5:14 NASB2

The fact that “apart from the law, sin lies dead,” does not in any way change the reality that just as “all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law,” even so, “all who have sinned without the Law **will also perish without the Law.**”³ When Paul wrote in Romans 7, verse 9,

⁹ I was once alive apart from the law... Romans 7:9a (ESV)

he meant that he was alive, not in the sense of having spiritual life, but rather in his own estimation at the time.

...but when the commandment came... Romans 7:9b (ESV)

(that is, when he became aware of the commandment),

...sin came alive and I died. Romans 7:9a (ESV)

In fact,

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. Romans 7:10–12a (ESV)

So, is the law sin? May it never be! In fact,

¹² ...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Romans 7:12 (ESV)

And having established that the problem was not with the law—the law is not sin, but holy, righteous, and good—another question.

The Sinfulness of Sin.

¹³ **Did** that which is good, then, bring death to me? Romans 7:13a (ESV)

² *New American Standard Bible*, electronic edition. (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1986).

³ Cf. Romans 2:12.

The answer, of course, is the same.

By no means! Romans 7:13a (ESV)

It was not the law, which is holy, righteous, and good that produced death.

It was sin, producing death in me *through* what is good... Romans 7:13b (ESV)

And why?

...in order that sin **might be shown to be sin**, and through the commandment **might become sinful beyond measure.** Romans 7:13b (ESV)

This, as we will see, was the purpose of the law.

²³ ...before faith came... Galatians 3:23a ESV

Paul wrote in Galatians 3, verses 23 and 24:

...we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian... Galatians 3:23–24 ESV

(our tutor; our schoolmaster)

...until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. Galatians 3:24b ESV

The Spirit and the Flesh.

But here's the thing. Here's the reason why some have questioned what Paul was saying in the balance of the chapter. In verses 1 – 13, he was speaking in the past tense; he was speaking about who he was before he was in Christ, but beginning in verse 14, he wrote in the present tense.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, **sold under sin.** Romans 7:13b (ESV)

And those last three words, “sold under sin,” are at the heart of the problem. Some (and we will look at this in more detail when we get back to this point), are inclined to argue that back in chapter 6, verse 22, Paul wrote:

²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. Romans 6:22 ESV

At first glance, it seems compelling. In the past several weeks I have made this point myself, noting on more than one occasion that even our Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that because we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, he

He has fully paid for all [our] sins with his precious blood, **and has set [us] free from the tyranny of the devil.**⁴

⁴ Christian Reformed Church, “The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1”, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* ed. CRCNA (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 13.

The question is, how can this idea that we have been set free from the tyranny of the devil be consistent with Romans 7, verses 14 and 15.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. 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.

Romans 7:14–15 (ESV)

Furthermore, Paul went on:

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.** Romans 7:16–18 (ESV)

And there's the answer in a single verse—five simple words. How can one who has been set free from the tyranny of the devil still have this sometimes intense, and ongoing struggle with sin to the extent that he would do the very thing that he hates? How could this be a description of Paul, that great Apostle to the gentiles. And here's his answer. Verse 18:

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me... Romans 7:18 (ESV)

but don't miss those next 5 words!

¹⁸ ...I know that nothing good dwells in me, **that is, in my flesh.** Romans 7:18 (ESV)

Now, just for a moment, remove the intervening verses and set that next to verse 22. In 18 we read,

¹⁸ ...I know that nothing good dwells in me, **that is, in my flesh.** Romans 7:18 (ESV)

but in verse 22:

²² **FOR** I delight in the law of God, **in my inner being...** Romans 7:22 (ESV)

That is, "I delight in the law of God," not "in my flesh" where nothing good dwells, as in verse 18, but "in my inner being". So, it is not the inner being of the Christian that is sold under sin. That cannot be true. In the inner being we have been set free from sin. The problem, as one pastor put it, is that we live between two resurrections.⁵ In Christ—in the Spirit—we have already been "raised to walk in newness of life" as Paul said in chapter 6, but in this life we

²³ ...who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies** Romans 8:23 ESV

—the resurrection of our bodies; the final sanctification that comes

⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then...

(and only then)

⁵ Jordan, James. n.d. *Romans: A 10-Part Series* (audio book), Canonplus/Com. Canon Press. Accessed November 9, 2024. <https://canonplus.com/tabs/none/audiobooks/3904>.

...shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ¹ 1 Corinthians 15:54 ESV

Who Will Deliver Us?

It is in this interim, between our two resurrections that we see this "fundamental contradiction of the Christian life, described in verses 15 – 23:

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. 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. Romans 7:15–23 ESV

And here's the end of this journey. Here's the destination. All of this struggle elicits from the apostle Paul the heart-wrenching cry of verse 24.

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Romans 7:24 (ESV)

This is the end that we have to keep in mind if we would understand our journey through Romans 7 in the next weeks. This is the cry that the text is meant to elicit from us as surely as writing it did from the apostle Paul. We are meant to come to this place where we understand that we have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them (at least, not by our own strength), and, concerning the flesh, are still inclined toward all evil.⁶

This was true of the apostle, and it's true of us—all of us. When someone points a finger at you or me and says, "You're a sinner; you have sinned," absolutely the only thing that we can do is say, "Yup, that's true. I surely am." This is, in fact, the *only* possible response for a Christian. For

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8 ESV

And,

¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:10 ESV

So, when the accuser of the brothers comes to us, even in the guise of an angel of light, we may well cry out

⁶ Cf. CRCNA, "The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 38.

²⁴ O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Romans 7:24 NKJV

There is, of course, an answer. We've been considering it since we began Romans chapter 6, but the Heidelberg summarizes it this way, "How are you (how are we) right with God?" And please stand, and say it with me.

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments, and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil,

nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,

as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.

All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.⁷

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:25 ESV

⁷ CRCNA, "The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 38.