



Romans - Chapter Seven

IV Romans 5:1-8:39 - Hope as a result of righteousness by faith (continues)

Summary of Chapter Seven

In this chapter, Paul focuses his attention on the role of God's law and its relationship to sin and death.

He starts with a simple analogy of marriage, stating that a woman is bound to her husband by the law only as long as he lives. Should he die then she is free from her legal obligations to him. If she were to leave him and live with another man as his wife, while her husband still lived, she would be in breach of the law and be guilty of adultery. Paul links the analogy to a believer's baptism in Christ, where he dies with Christ and is then raised as a new creation, freed from the old laws that bound him to the old Adamic era.

Paul then poses the question 'is the law sin?' and immediately gives a resounding no to his own question. What Paul then goes on to argue is that what the law actually does is to provide a means of identifying just how sinful humankind is, and that those who profess that they try to keep the law are, in fact, under the evil impact and influence of sin because they cannot keep the law due to their sinful nature. Thus the law not just convicts them of sin, but is the vehicle by which sin manifests itself within them. That is, the power of sin uses the law as a means of highlighting sin in a person and convicting them of their guilt.

Paul then goes on to defend the law itself as being good, holy, and pure; for it is God's law. The real culprit, the villain of the piece, is sin. And it is the power of sin, not in the new man but that part which is still in the old era, the flesh, where sin can dwell and be so destructive. Paul then illustrates, through what appears to be a personal testimony, the struggle that Israel had as being righteous in trying to keep the law, and yet failing through their sinful nature of the flesh. This similarly applies to Christian believers who, although a new creation in Christ, are still drawn by their desires and lusts to those aspects of the world that are sinful.

Paul concludes with an almost pitiful description of mankind, stating that although they know what is right and want to do what is right, they still do what is wrong due to the grip that sin has over them. 'Can anyone be saved from this evil?' Paul cries out, in frustration as much as anguish. This time he answers by way of giving thanks to God through Christ Jesus.

IV.d Romans 7:1-6 - An illustration from marriage

This section is addressed to men who know the law, i.e. Christians who were Jews, God-worshippers or proselytes. The law does not and cannot bring victory over sin and death since

sin is defined, and even promoted, through the law. The law condemns us through our transgression and stirs up the corruption of sin within us, but does not have grace to offer a cure. But those who have died with Christ are set free from both the power of sin and from the law.

So far, Paul has tried to keep his exposition and explanation of the Gospel, as he interprets it, in a reasonably even and balanced way, putting forward arguments that were easy for the Roman Christians to follow. He had based most of his statements, and posed most of his questions, simply in terms of sin and death, or expressed them more fully in terms of the twin antithesis of sin and grace, death and life.

Jesus had died to and for sin; but had gloriously risen to new life; believers in Rome, and indeed throughout the world, have now come to share in that death and to experience something of that risen life, although not yet able to fully participate in Christ's resurrection. Paul explains that what they have is a triple sharing: in the past (his death), in the present (his new life), and in the future (a resurrection of their own). All of this is to live by free grace.

However, the matter was then complicated towards the end of Romans Chapter Five, when Paul reintroduced the role of the law. Paul had developed the sin/grace, death/life antithesis as far as possible without reference to the law: <<But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous>> (Romans 5:15-19), before reintroducing the law into the analysis in Romans 5:20 <<The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more>>. It is clearly not a case that Paul has neglected to refer to the law because he believed it to be irrelevant to the issues he has been expounding, but rather that he saw the law as a complicating factor which confused these issues; as shown, not least by the majority of his Jewish contemporaries, whose spiritual perception had, in his view, been blunted rather than sharpened by their dedication to the law. When the ethical consequences of faith in Jesus were posed in terms of the sharp contrasts between sin and grace, death and life, law had to be counted on the side of sin and death: <<For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!>> (Romans 6:14-15). But if the contrasts are not so mutually exclusive as the antithesis seem to imply when taken at face value, if the believer has to reckon with the ongoing reality of the eschatological tension, if sin is still a candidate for the believer's loyalty, and life has not yet conquered death in the believer, because he has yet to share fully in Jesus' resurrection, then where does the law fit into the more complex picture? Paul now prepares to wrestle with the added complexity the law poses in his arguments.

Romans Chapter Seven is not just part of a wider story of Christianity as some people read Chapters 6-8, but is about the Mosaic Law, purely and simply. Paul tries to achieve two things in this chapter. He wants to explain what the law was given to Israel for, and how, in a strange sense, it actually did the work God had set it up to do; and that it is now, in a new sense, fulfilled through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Paul will go on to explain this aspect in Chapter Eight, while at the same time explaining, over against any attempt by Jews or Jewish Christians, to suggest otherwise.

That the law itself could not give the life it promised, but instead it was bound up with work, sin and death on the negative side of the equation. This chapter forms part of Paul's overall strategy, which is to explain to the Roman Christians, many of whom had a Jewish background, or were Gentiles who had come to Judaism before Christianity, the deep level transition that has been made through the Gospel from the covenant family defined by the law to the covenant family defined in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Only if they, and we, grasp this complicated point, will the church be able to understand what God has done, and what it now means to share the Christian faith, hope and life.

Although very difficult, Chapter Seven is essential to enable us to grasp the depth of the human problem and hence the wonder of God's solution to it.

Romans 7:1-3

As in this entire chapter, law refers to the Mosaic Law given at Mount Sinai. Those who know the law (v.1) includes both Jews and Gentiles who are familiar with the OT. Verse 1 reintroduces the principle, worked out in the following verses that the law is in force only while a person is alive. In vv.2-3, Paul applies the principle to marriage.

¹ 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?

Romans 7:1

Paul now introduces a new phase of discussion indicated by the phrase do you not know? This new phase is Paul's way of dealing with the law that was so precious to Judaism. At no point does Paul ever dismiss the law as being important. What he repeatedly tries to establish for his readers, who were well versed in the law, is that the law was not part of the solution but actually part of the problem; at least in the way it was held, lent upon, misunderstood and misused by the Jews.

Paul's statement the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives uses the term that previously was translated as mastery, and Paul seeks to draw the comparisons here too: <<For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him>> (Romans 6:9). Using this description is not surprising, as the law is the third member of the dreaded group with sin and death. Paul had previously argued that, while we live, we are subject to the power of sin and death; he now adds the power of the law to this argument. Jesus died once for all, and so he is no longer subject to the power and rule of sin and death, and therefore he is no longer subject to the rule of law either. The Christian believer, however, is suspended between Jesus' death and resurrection, i.e. in the now but not yet of salvation, as previously discussed, and so, to that extent, has not yet escaped from the situation where sin and death can still have a deep hold on him. So what about the hold that the law will have over him? It has authority over a man only as long as he lives. Having had a more than satisfactory conclusion to the previous chapter: <<But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord>> (Romans 6:22-23), the water has once again become very muddy indeed!

² For 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. ³ So 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.

Romans 7:2-3

Once a Jewish woman was married there was no provision for her in the Torah to be released from her marriage vows except through death, either her's or her husband's. Committing adultery would result in the woman being stoned to death: <<The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" >> (John 8:3-5). It should be noted that the earliest manuscripts, and many other ancient witnesses, do not have John 7:53–8:11. However, the scene portrayed is accurate within the provision of the Levitical law and was contrary to God's seventh commandment: <<You shall not commit adultery>> (Exodus 20:14). A married woman who lives with another man is subject to the law regarding adultery only if her husband is still alive. Just as the death of Jesus liberates us from the mastery of sin, so too here there is a death, i.e. of the husband, that liberates the woman from the mastery of the marriage laws. This may be a bit of an awkward analogy for Paul to use but it does make its point clear.

God instituted the ordinance of marriage that he might seek a godly seed: <<For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh>> (Genesis 2:24), <<'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate">> (Mark 10:7-9), and: <<Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth>> (Malachi 2:15).

Just as the wife in marriage will bear fruit, i.e. fruit of the womb: <<God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground">> (Genesis 1:28), therefore: <<The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock – the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks>> (Deuteronomy 28:4), so too are we to be fruitful in Christ, fruitful in love and grace to all: <<For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do>> (Ephesians 2:10).

The law is in existence but since Jesus fulfilled the law in all righteousness: <<Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented>> (Matthew 3:15), the law is dead and we are free to be bound to another, i.e. we are released from our binding contract with sin, and therefore Satan, through the death of the law, or of sin at least, and free to marry Christ. On our marriage to Jesus elsewhere Paul writes: <<I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him>> (2 Corinthians 11:2), and: <<(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)>> (Ephesians 5:9).

However, we must note that, if we accept our union with Jesus, that we are contractually bound to him while he lives, which is forever. To do otherwise would be to commit adultery!

In our new marriage we are still required to serve: <<I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ>> (2 Corinthians 11:2-3), and: <<Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or

wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless>> (Ephesians 5:25-27); but our service is in perfect freedom, whereas service to sin was perfect drudgery. We must now serve in newness of spirit, by new spiritual rules, from new spiritual principals: <<in spirit and in truth>> (John 4:24b). This is one of the unfathomable mysteries of God; freedom to serve: <<to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days>> (Luke 1:74-75).

On the law and sin we read: <<The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law>> (1 Corinthians 15:56), <<Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death>> (James 1:15), and: <<You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life>> (2 Corinthians 3:3-6).

⁴ So, 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.

Romans 7:4

The principle and illustration from vv.1-3 are applied to the readers in vv.4-6. Whereas the husband dies in the illustration of vv.2-3, here believers die to the law through the death of Christ; once again, the analogy does not match perfectly, but the application is clear.

Since we died with Christ we are free from the law whether it died or not. You also died to the law would not cause offence to the Jewish recipients in the way that stating 'the law is dead' might have done.

The allusion to vv.2-3 should not be over-stressed as where the woman's status changed immediately with the death of her husband and that freed her from the laws of marriage. With the death of Christ, the believer's status, as such, does not change with the same immediacy in that similar way, for it is Christ who died and not the believer. But he, the believer, is released from the power that his former partners of sin, death and law held over him; this does not mean, however, that he will not still be influenced by them in his human weakness. Their only real change is if they truly have died to self by dying with Christ, and are indeed a new creation in Christ. Sadly, too few make that transition immediately and successfully, but if they persevere with Christ, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide them, they will gradually be changed. It requires a change of mindset on the part of the believer to allow the Holy Spirit to assume control of his life. It can happen at any stage between baptism and death, but the sooner it happens the better for all concerned, especially for the believer.

Thus, here in Romans 7:4, we have a remarkably similar situation with Romans 6:4, which states: <<We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life>>, in that the believer is still in the suspended state of the now but not yet of the kingdom, i.e. they have died and risen with Christ but cannot yet share in his resurrection. They can be recipients of Christ's risen life and power in some measure through their union with him now risen, but the harsh reality of their present state is that the rule of death is not yet fully broken, which means that sin and law still threaten, and can still exercise control over any dimension of their existence without the liberating power of Christ's death. The principle remains firm - Christ's death liberates the believer from sin and law insofar as he is one with Christ in his death, but only insofar as.

Paul then switches tense from the second person plural, with the phrases that you might belong to another, to the first person in order that we might bear fruit to God, shows this is not just theoretical or an idealised picture of the life of faith. Paul cannot distance himself from all this discussion of sharing Christ's death and experiencing his risen life; it is too much of an existential reality for him as well. To bear fruit to God can also be described as holiness: <<But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life>> (Romans 6:22). By including himself in the fruit bearing phrase, Paul is probably including that which was his in becoming an apostle for Jesus and, as a result, he saw how the lives of Gentile converts had been so remarkably changed by their coming to faith in Jesus, and then sharing in the love of God.

⁵ For 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.

Romans 7:5

Paul seems to be suggesting that the law was given to Israel, not to form a bond between them and God, but to tie them to sinful Adam. This explains v.5 and elsewhere in the chapter where Paul claims that the passions of sins were aroused 'through the law'. It is God reminding Israel they are 'in Adam', in their sinful, fallen, disobedient nature. It doesn't lift Israel out of the mess it finds itself in; it just informs them that they are in a mess and that it is a big mess.

Controlled by the sinful nature is translated in many versions as being of a corrupt nature or living in the flesh. Flesh here stands for the old 'Adam', the unregenerate former life of those who now believe. The law, contrary to the view of contemporary Judaism, see comments made on Romans 5:20, did not bring life. Instead it stimulated sin and led to death. Although sin leads to death: <<For the wages of sin is death>> (Romans 6:23a), in Christ there is life: <<but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord>> (Romans 6:23b), <<Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me>> (John 14:6), and: <<He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life>> (1 John 5:12). It is also realised in King Solomon's words: <<Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it>> (Proverbs 1:19).

Paul had previously spoken of our old self or the old man: <<For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin>> (Romans 6:6). He now describes it as being our sinful nature or in the flesh, as a characterisation of his own and of his readers' pre-conversion state or condition. Paul would hardly have intended this to be interpreted that they were no longer in the flesh, i.e. no longer having mortal bodies or being disembodied spirits. That was part of the 'not yet' of salvation, a future resurrection of our bodies to be completed when Christ returns: <<Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies>> (Romans 8:23). So in the flesh clearly has a narrower reference here. But neither could Paul be thinking simply of a moral state from which believers have wholly escaped through conversion. For he does not think of the flesh or sinful nature as falling into two clearly distinct compartmentalised meanings: physical and moral. On the contrary, it is precisely the weakness and appetites of the mortal body, i.e. the flesh, which are the occasion for sin, our sinful nature or 'being in the flesh', as he has already reminded them: <<Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness>> (Romans 6:12-13). Our sinful nature, or when we were in the flesh, therefore, must mean as we were, prior to and exclusive of, being in Christ, living dominated or characterised by the weakness and appetites of this life, exemplified not least in Paul's own people's presumption in

their election as detailed in Romans 2:17-29, as a condition or state now superseded or at least complemented by their also being in Christ. So the implicit qualification within the phrase controlled by the sinful nature would prevent the reader from thinking that Paul here envisaged, by contrast, a form of Christian existence free from the tension between the old life in the flesh and the new life in Christ. Confusion would only arise when anyone forgot that Paul was here still continuing the clear-cut contrasts of Romans Chapter Six for the sake of sharpening the moral choice when the general exhortations had to be worked out in reference to specific issues.

An important point for Paul's argument is that, now the role of the law is integrated into the description of the Roman Christian's pre-conversion state, its role as an active factor in the interaction with sin and death is given some further clarification, sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death, would have been clear to all, and Paul's earlier statements to that effect would have raised no eyebrows among an audience so familiar with the Jewish Scriptures: <<Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned>> (Romans 5:12), <<Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?>> (Romans 6:16), and: <<When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!>> (Romans 6:20-21).

Paul has already spoken of the law in the more passive role of defining sin, as showing sin to be sin, as causing it to be reckoned as sin. He had even said that the law caused the transgression, in the case of Adam as an example, to increase, by showing the words and deeds of Adamic man to be transgression, born of sin, by opening the possibility for the covenant people to rest in the law rather than trust God: <<The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more>> (Romans 5:20).

Paul does not simply suggest that the law is the source of the sinful passions. Their definition as sinful may be derived from the law, their character as sinful confirmed by the law, but that is not the same thing. Paul is not saying the law is a negative power from which the Christian believer has escaped, but it is their sinful passions through the law which produce the fruit of death. The intended inference being that the law reinforces the connection between sin and death; the law has, as it were, a greenhouse effect, forcing the growth of sin to bring forth the fruit of death. The effect of the law is to bind sin to death, to prevent sin's not leading to death, either because it is not counted as sin, or gives the illusion that a life lived in terms of the sinful passions can somehow evade the final payment of death, as in the great deception: <<"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman>> (Genesis 3:4).

⁶ But 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.

Romans 7:6

But now represents the new era of redemptive history. Christians are released from the law of Moses and now enjoy new life in the new way of the Spirit. Consequently, those who have identified themselves with Christ in his death have already begun to experience the other side of the dark doorway of death, and have already begun to share in the life which is beyond sin and death, promising the new relation with Christ apart from the old law and free from the law which condemned them to death. Through baptism a believer cuts that bond with Adam, just like a wife's legal ties to her husband are cut when he dies, as discussed in vv.2-3.

The phrase in the new way of the Spirit is sufficiently ambiguous to include the idea of a renewed human spirit. Paul probably thought of such renewal primarily as the power of God's Holy Spirit moving within and through the believer as described by the prophet: <<I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws>> (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Paul seems to have had in his mind the Christians' claim that, in their experience, the new covenant given through Jeremiah had been and was being fulfilled: <<"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more">> (Jeremiah 31:31-34), that they were experiencing the law written in the heart, and knew the Lord with an immediacy, which did not depend on the instruction of another. Something of the tremendous sense of liberation and renewal, which Paul evidently experienced through his conversion, is clearly reflected here: <<because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death>> (Romans 8:2), <<You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts>> (2 Corinthians 3:3), <<Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom>> (2 Corinthians 3:17), and: <<It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery>> (Galatians 5:1), as also the inner dynamism, which transformed and transcended anything which might be merely derived from or characterised in terms of a written scroll, however sacred: <<in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit>> (Romans 8:4), <<because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father">> (Romans 8:14-15), <<But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law>> (Galatians 5:18), and: <<For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh>> (Philippians 3:3).

IV.e Romans 7:7-25 - Struggling with sin

The claim that the Mosaic Law produced sin and death raises the question, 'Is the law itself sinful?' In this section Paul explains that the law itself is good and that the fault lies with sin. Interpreters differ as to whether the 'I' in these verses is describing:

1. Unregenerate people who try to keep the law, i.e. the nation of Israel, or
2. Believers who, despite being regenerated, find themselves still beset by sinful desires.

The second view is more widely held by many commentators and will be referred to again later.

However, my own opinion is that the first point is intended by Paul. By using the first person singular and plural in order to say something general was a common style in writings from Paul's era. Paul uses it again in Galatians 2:15-21. Paul is, however, part of the story and wants to feature with regards to his prior weakness before coming to faith as it is important to show how far he has come on the journey since accepting Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. It also shows his own recognition of being in between rising with Christ and being resurrected in Christ; the now and not yet of the kingdom aspect once again. Therefore he can boldly and truthfully proclaim: <<For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain>> (Philippians 1:21).

IV.e.i [Romans 7:7-12 - When the law arrived: Sinai looks back to the fall](#)

Paul has now re-emphasised the discontinuity of the old Adamic era in terms of the law, and has characterised the law as both belonging to the old era and as an agent involved with sin in binding man closer to death. Such a presentation inevitably poses disturbing questions about the law as Paul sees it. The tension which has lain just under the surface throughout the exposition so far, the tension with Paul's attitude to the law, most clearly visible in chapters 2-4, and most explicit in Romans 5:20, is now fully exposed and Paul at last turns to address it. For congregations largely composed of either Jews or Gentiles, who had been previously attracted to Judaism, there must have been a sense of relief and anticipation; not before time Paul was going to resolve the puzzle he had posed by his surprisingly dismissive treatment of the law.

⁷ 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."

[Romans 7:7](#)

[Is the law sin?](#) No, it is holy, just, good and perfect, for any law reflects the law-giver and the law-maker, which is, of course our Creator God and he is holy, just, good and perfect; so too his law. But the law highlights our sin in us, without which we were ignorant of sin; with it, we know we are deeply embedded and buried in sin. In Christ, we are raised to new life and new hope, apart from the law and free from the grips of sin.

[The law is spiritual and intended to be read by our own spirit:](#) <<For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart>> ([Hebrews 4:12](#)). [It forbids wickedness, heart-murder:](#) <<You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell>> ([Matthew 5:21-22](#)), [and heart-adultery:](#) <<You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart>> ([Matthew 5:27-28](#)). [It obliges us to worship God in spirit for God is spirit:](#) <<God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth>> ([John 4:24](#)), [his law is spiritual and is given to man, whose principal part is spirit.](#)

[Human laws can only restrict or punish actions and deeds but God's laws can punish the iniquity of the heart:](#) <<O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved. How long will you harbour wicked thoughts?>> ([Jeremiah 4:14](#)). [Guard your heart:](#) <<Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life>> ([Proverbs 4:23](#)), <<If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?>> ([Proverbs 24:12](#)), [and:](#) <<And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus>> ([Philippians 4:7](#)).

[For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet"](#). Initially, the reference to the Adamic era is not so clear, but the sudden transition here to the first person singular signals to the readership that, what at first might seem simply a generalisation, from Paul's personal experience, is intended also as a statement of typical experience that comes through those in Adam, especially the nation of Israel under the law of Moses. Paul asserts, as a universal truth, that sin is experienced only through the law, and in particular that the desire of covetousness is known only by virtue of the law, which forbids coveting. Moreover, what was certainly well established at the time of Paul was the view that covetousness or lust is the root of all sin: <<Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth

to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death>> (James 1:15). So Paul's readers would probably have had no difficulty in associating the commandment against the basic sin of lust, i.e. desire, covetousness, with the primeval sin of Eve and Adam.

The law defines sin and also provokes sin. Confronted by the law, sin takes on the character of rebellion, so that people enjoy transgressing commands in order to demonstrate their independence. The principle is illustrated from the tenth commandment, which prohibits coveting, as it was one of Israel's key failings: <<"You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour" >> (Exodus 20:17). Just as a mirror shows us our spots and deformities, so the law showed Israel its sin. Without the law they had no way of knowing their sin and without the knowledge of sin there can be no repentance; without repentance there can be no forgiveness; and without forgiveness there can be no salvation.

Paul does not use his example of breaking the tenth commandment to indicate that he himself was covetous, as the use of the first person is general and directed towards the Jewish nation, and he used it more to indicate that they became aware of sin dwelling in them that itself is covetous and lustful. This was only revealed to Paul in the spiritual nature of the law and thus it had remained hidden from most of the Jews. This poses a particular difficulty for 'good' people, especially pious Jews, who do not know they are under curse for their sin and will never know until they either turn to Jesus or when they come face-to-face with him on Judgement Day, by which time it will be far too late!

Paul, like many men of his day, particularly the Pharisees would have seen themselves as good men. They were in the main pious and zealous for God's law. Paul was a well-educated and intelligent man, taught at the feet of Gamaliel, who was one of the greatest teachers of the law, certainly in his own generation. Yet Paul and the other Jews all remained without the law, for they read only the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law, which is what God had intended them to do. Paul had the law in his hand and in his head but not where it mattered, i.e. in his heart.

Thus once he was alive physically without the law but once he became aware of the law spiritually then he died spiritually. This is the excellence of the law that it is a light that shines into dark recesses of the mind, it converts the soul and opens the eyes; it is: <<A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God">> (Isaiah 40:3).

⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.

Romans 7:8

But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment is a reference to original sin and all its consequences. Sin, in the form of the serpent, was lurking in the garden but was afforded no opportunity to strike until God gave the first law through his commandment: <<but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die>> (Genesis 2:17). It was precisely through this commandment, by using this very commandment, that sin was able to tempt Adam, albeit through the deception of Eve, and to produce in him the primary sin of covetousness and lust. What starts to become clear is the nature of the law in all this. The real culprit is, of course, sin as a power for evil quite distinct from the law, but taking advantage of the law, perverting the function of the law, so that the same commandment ceases to make man conscious that selfish desire is covetousness and lust, and instead provokes the very desire it was designed to warn against. Sin uses the commandment intended as a check on man's inquisitiveness actually to stimulate that inquisitiveness, to transform inquisitiveness to acquisitiveness. All this is the work of sin; the

power, which provokes man's selfish grasping in all its forms, was already active at the beginning, and still dominates those of the old Adamic era.

Produced in me now applies what happened to Adam onto Paul, Israel and indeed all mankind through imputed sin acquired by their inherited sinful nature.

For apart from law, sin is dead does not mean that the purpose of the law was to give life to sin, but that the serpent had no power over man until the giving of the first law, via a commandment by God, gave sin that opportunity. It is the unholy alliance of the law and sin, or rather the unholy manipulation of the law by sin, which characterises the intervening era and binds them firmly under the mastery of death. As it was the introduction of law which gave sin its chance to make man captive to death, so it is release from the law which ends the rule of both sin and death. When Israel received the law they went and copied Adam by immediately breaking it. In their case, they broke it again and again, and in generation after generation.

The prohibition against coveting exacerbated the desire for what was forbidden. Sin is dead means that sin was latent rather than nonexistent.

⁹ Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.

Romans 7:9

If the verse relates to Paul, he is speaking of his subjective experience. If it relates to Israel in their Adamic state, as some commentators suggest, and which makes most sense, then it refers to his relationship with God before he sinned, and the same would therefore apply to the majority of Jews. The prohibition against coveting stimulated the desire to sin, and sin in turn led to death, initially spiritual and moral death but eventually physical death for all who live.

¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Romans 7:10-11

God's commands promise eternal life if one keeps them; and yet they lead to death, since everyone violates what God ordains. This happens when sin deceives a person and uses the law as its instrument.

The very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. Were it not for the intervention of sin, the commandment would have promoted life, regulated and produced life. But since sin has intervened, the function of the commandment has been to promote death, to enforce death as a consequence of slavery to sin, of the sinful passions. The phrase may also deliberately characterise and echo what Paul regards as the typical Jewish attitude to the law: <<Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord>> (Leviticus 18:5), and: <<See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob>> (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). The point is that the

former, promotion of life, is a mistaken understanding of the law, a function of the law rendered obsolete as early as the fall of mankind. To think still of the law as actually bringing about life is to ignore the existential presence and power of sin. The irony of Israel's present position at the time Paul wrote this letter, and arguably even today, is that it's very pride in the law, as proof of their life before God, is itself a sign of God's death sentence on all such stirrings of sin.

For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment. Paul repeats his statement from v.8 but with an even clearer echo of the Genesis account. The language deliberately echoes Eve's complaint: <<The serpent deceived me, and I ate>> (Genesis 3:13d), i.e. sin seized the opportunity to deceive the primeval couple with both hands and, for some, with eternal consequences, despite God's free, gracious offer of eternal life through Christ Jesus.

¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Romans 7:12

In light of vv.7-11, Paul affirms the holiness of the law and the goodness of God's commandments. The fact that sin had made such effective use of the law by seizing the opportunity of deceiving Adam and Eve, transforming their relationship with God so drastically, does not detract from the fact that the law is holy, righteous and good as it was given by a holy, righteous and pure God; the law maker and the law giver.

From what Paul is saying, sin is apparently the force, which is essentially opposed to God's creation. It is bent on spoiling the world God made, i.e. the humans who reflect his image, and the chosen people called to be the agents of redemption; both those of the old and new covenants, for it is an evil that remains prevalent in the world, continues in opposition to God and to those who follow his Son. We must not mess with it, for it remains a deadly evil.

Even though it is clear that sin had deceived man, it would not have caught God unawares or altered his purposes for man. The law is still holy, set apart to God, acceptable to God. The commandment is still just and still defines, with all necessary clarity, the terms on which the relationship between God and man is based, and the consequence of man's disobedience. It is still good, intended to benefit man in the various dimensions of his individual and corporate existence. Whatever else can be said, it is not the law that is the cause of death but sin. Sin is an enemy to everyone; believer and unbeliever alike.

IV.e.ii Romans 7:13-25 - Looking back on life under the law

This section is one of the most devastatingly clever pieces of writing by Paul as he offers an analysis of Israel's plight that no matter what heights the nation of Israel had attained because they had the law of God, they had ended up in a much worse mess than the rest of the world, simply because they did possess it; because they tried but failed to keep it. In his discourse, Paul has exonerated the law, has exonerated Israel for their part as 'I', for there is nothing wrong with Israel desiring and trying to keep God's law. The real problem is and has always been sin. Paul cannot emphasise this strongly enough so his readers are advised to take note! God appears to have given the law, not to counter sin but to allow it to grow to its full power. In this way God would allow mankind to realise just how bad the problem of sin was, and how magnificent and necessary was his solution, which Paul reveals in these words: <<For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man>> (Romans 8:3). His original readers were required to anticipate the moment if they were to see the deepest reason, and for them to understand why Paul has written this Chapter in such a shocking way.

Sin had to be brought to its full ugliness in order that God might fully deal with it, punish it, condemn it, and finally overcome it once for all. And where does God choose to bring it to

its full potential? In Israel, the land of his chosen people, the people he raised up to be shining beacons to the rest of the world. Why did he do that? In order that, in and through the person of their representative, i.e. the Messiah, sin might be drawn into one place to be finally and completely condemned for all time.

This chapter, with all its difficult twists and turns, changes of direction and shocking allegations is shown to be one of the finest acclamations, written by Paul, about the power and achievements of the Cross.

The following summary comments refer to both this section and that which spans through to v.25, the end of the chapter.

Paul now wishes to clarify and elaborate on his summary statements that he has just declared to his readers having declared the law free from any blame for man's death. It is a lengthy, and at times, meticulous explanation that Paul continues with into the early verses of Chapter 8, but Paul wants to finally make it clear that, although the law is holy and pure, the Jews are wrong to place such reliance upon it breaking the link between sin and death, for only Jesus can do that. He also wants to make it clear that even believers are not fully free of sin and death while they remain in the state between being raised to new life with Christ and sharing in his resurrection, which will occur at his Second Coming.

If the law is not sin, is it the case that the good law is responsible for death? Paul again argues that the fault lies with sin, not with the law. Through the law, sin is revealed in all its hideousness, and the law is vindicated as good.

This section is subdivided into three discourses in: vv.13-17, vv.18-20, and vv.21-25. A long-standing debate centres on whether Paul is describing believers or unbelievers. Although good arguments are given by both sides, the most widely held view, beginning especially with Augustine and reaffirmed in the Reformation, is that Paul's primary reference is to believers. In support of this position is:

1. the shift to the present tense;
2. unbelievers do not desire so intensely to keep God's law (v.21);
3. the distinction between the 'I' and the 'flesh' (v.18);
4. the delight in God's law (v.22);
5. deliverance from the sinful body is future (v.24). We see this confirmed in: <<But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you>> (Romans 8:10-11), and: <<Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies>> (Romans 8:23);
6. the tension between good and evil in the concluding statement in v.25; and
7. the fact that Christians are already righteous in Christ, but are not yet perfected until the day of redemption.

A second position, not as widely held but supported by a number of evangelical scholars, is that Paul is referring to unbelievers. In support of this position:

1. the structure of the passage (vv.7-25) matches the life of the unregenerate previewed in v.5, whereas Romans 8:1-17 fits with the life of believers identified with v.6;
2. the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in vv.13-25, but is referred to 19 times in Romans Chapter 8;
3. to say that Christians are 'sold under sin' (v.14), and 'captive to the law of sin' (v.23),

stands in tension with Romans Chapters 6 and 8, which trumpet the freedom of believers from slavery to sin;

4. the suggestion that the present tense does not denote present time but the spiritual state of Paul when unconverted;
5. the desire to keep God's law reflects the mind-set of the pious Jew who wanted to live a moral life, as the verses emphasise, such people do not and cannot keep the law; and
6. the section's opening verse (v.13) explains how the law brought death to Paul as an unbeliever.

Advocates of both positions agree that:

1. Christians still struggle with sin throughout their whole lives: <<For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want>> (Galatians 5:17), and: <<If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness>> (1 John 1:8-9); and
2. Christians can and should grow in sanctification throughout their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them: <<because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit>> (Romans 8:2-4), <<You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ>> (Romans 8:9), and: <<For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God>> (Romans 8:13-14).

Those who hold to the first position usually see this passage as describing both Paul's own experience and the experience of Christians generally. Although Christians are free from the condemnation of the law, sin nonetheless continues to dwell within, and all genuine Christians, along with Paul, should be profoundly aware of how far they fall short of God's absolute standard of righteousness. Thus Paul cries out: <<What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?>> (v.24). The answer follows immediately: the one who has delivered Christians once for all, see Romans 4:2-25, 5:2, and 5:9, and the one who will deliver them day by day is: <<Jesus Christ our Lord!>> (v.25).

In the section that immediately follows (Romans 8:1-11), Paul shows that the means by which Christians are delivered daily from the indwelling power of sin is:

1. by walking with Christ and to: <<not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit>> (Romans 8:4b), and: <<I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth>> (3 John 4);
2. by not: <<set(ing) on what that nature desires...set on what the Spirit desires>> (Romans 8:5); and
3. by the indwelling presence of: <<the Spirit of God... who lives in you>> (Romans 8:9 and Romans 8:11).

IV.e.ii.1 Romans 7:13-17 - Conflict between grace and corruption

The conflict here is between the law of God and the law of sin. There are two cases in view:

1. To the struggles of a convicted soul but that the person remains unrepentant.
2. To the struggles of a renewed and sanctified soul still in a state of imperfection.

It is not clear to which of these two Paul is addressing his comments. It seems more likely that the second group is in view for Paul but his words could be applied to both groups.

Ever since Adam ate forbidden fruit, we have all been fond of forbidden paths; the diseased appetite is carried out most strongly towards that which is hurtful and prohibited. Without the law sin was dead, as a snake in winter, which the sunbeams of the law quicken and irritate. There are many of us who can identify with the second group. We believe that we are saved; we want to live our lives entirely over to the Lord yet seem to be drawn away from him and know in our hearts that we are not as true and pure as we ought to be. But we need to recognise we will not be perfect this side of glory. That does not, however, excuse any deliberate sin that grace may abound as previously discussed, nor should we consider such digression as being without consequence.

It is hard to see Paul's comments about the lust for sin appertaining to the sanctified soul that is supposed to walk, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. And yet the clear disgust of sin and the desire to be free from it, and to serve God, does not sit well with the unrepentant soul. Yet the bible gives many examples of the pious Jews who are convicted under the law yet would not accept the Gospel of Jesus, they would clearly fit into the first case and Paul's words would apply to them. This is the case where the law convicts but does not cleanse as we noted in Romans 6:14 <<For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace>>. The person becomes one heavily laden but God has the solution as described by Jesus in Matthew 11:28 <<Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest>>, and the law, as imposed by the Pharisaic traditions, only added to their burden. Many people who reach the position of knowing their sin, whether by the Mosaic Law or natural law, are well positioned to come to Christ, but so many decide to rest there and go no further. They are in bondage to fear and in danger of going into Hell with their eyes wide open.

In the second group, we do see this conflict quite frequently between grace and corruption. For although we died to sin, we are still in our sinful nature, drawn to sin and, if truthful, we want to be lord of our own lives, which is a major problem for so many of us. This, however, is a lack of trust and faith, and itself a sin: <<If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives>> (1 John 1:8-10), and: <<For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want>> (Galatians 5:17), seem to be the truths that Paul displays in his discourse. Compare 1 John 3:9 with the nature of the flesh that has the sinful nature: <<Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit>> (John 3:6), for the flesh is not capable of good, only the Spirit that is of God.

¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Romans 7:13

The serpent had challenged God's commands by stating to Eve: <<"You will not surely die" >> (Genesis 3:4b). But in Paul's case, he was able to see the truth through the law of his sin and therefore repent of it, which Adam never did. Sin has been dealt with but there remains the need for repentance. Although there was a law, God's command, man was deceived because he did not recognise it as law, thus Paul asks: did that which is good, then, become death to me? It did not, because it enabled him to see his errors and sinful nature and, once he had

encountered Jesus, to turn to him to rid himself of his sinful desires. Sin is shown up for what it really is, and it is shown up by the law, which is not a passive tool but an active resource to fulfil the requirements of God.

Through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. Sin is achieving its end through the law, and simply shows itself to be a power which kills and which can offer man nothing better than or beyond death. It is the law, even in being manipulated by sin and becoming a power of condemnation, even in that very transition from 'for life' to 'for death', it is the law which reveals sin's true nature as a power completely outside the realm of God's grace, opposed beyond measure to God's good will and purpose for humankind. Thus even as the power which binds sin to death and determines the consequences of man's disobedience: <<And where there is no law there is no transgression>> (Romans 4:15b), the law is fulfilling its divinely appointed purpose, it is still the measure of good and evil, it still serves man's ultimate benefit by showing what the alternative to humble faith is in all its stark reality.

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

Romans 7:14

The use of the first person plural in we know that the law is spiritual and singular in but I am unspiritual is deliberate. Although Paul used them to denote those of the Adamic era in the recent verses, or at least Adamic man, i.e. Israel as a nation under law, and this could still be in view, for the old era has yet to run its course, Paul is also using a personal plea from his own heart as a personal testimony from where he was before Jesus had encountered him on the Damascus Road. Paul's statement about the law must be linking it not to the human spirit but to the divine Spirit as he has already identified it as being holy, just and pure.

Sold as a slave to sin. The fatal flaw of the old era is not the law itself, but the interaction of sin, law and 'I' as a man of flesh. As a man devoutly observing the law, he had his sin highlighted through that very law to which he was a slave and thus becomes a slave to sin.

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

Romans 7:15

In applying the 'I' to Israel, which is always in view, as well as any personal reflections of Paul's, then we have the case here saying that the more Israel tried to abide by the laws of God, that were handed to them through Moses, the more the law cries out to them 'you have broken me'. Such is the power of sin in relation to the law. The very thing they wished to do, they could not because of their corporate, as well as individual, sinful nature. Thus, instead of Israel being better off than the rest of the world because they had the law, they were in the same, if not worse, state because of the very fact that they had the law, and were therefore charged as guilty before God as having broken the law through sin.

The explanation is quite simply that there is a split in the 'I' here between my willing and my doing. Although Paul rings the changes on the terms he uses over the next few verses, in order to give variety and not to press particular distinctions of meaning, the strength of feeling in the opening formulation should not be ignored. There are things he does which he abhors and detests, and yet it is he himself who does them. No wonder he opens his explanation with a confession of confusion or frustration: I do not understand what I do.

The point is that, so far as we can tell from Paul's own testimony, he knew no such frustration or self-deprecation in his pre-conversion days: <<If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless>>

(Philippians 3:4b-6). Paul's emotions must be stimulated from after this time, therefore this is not Paul the pious Pharisaic Jew but Paul the humble believer in Christ that is on view.

¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

Romans 7:16-17

Paul's reference to the goodness of the law reflects the main point of these verses.

Paul is not absolving himself of personal responsibility here, or indeed any other individual who sins, including each of us reading Romans today; but he is emphasising the power of sin. What Paul is careful to do is not to allow self-deprecation to become self-detestation, and neither should we, which could be so destructive for the individual.

We have in these two verses a split in the believing 'I', which match the split in the law. The willing 'I' agrees with the law and thus bears witness that it is good (v.16). 'I' accept the law's definition of God's will, and desire to do it, but still 'I' fail. The fault lies not in the law; in this it is wholly blameless and praiseworthy. But neither does the fault lie with the 'I', even in the 'I' who is sold under sin, who is no longer I myself. Rather the fault lies once again with sin; the sin living in me.

What Paul is doing with this split 'I' is showing there is an 'I' that is fully identified with Christ in his death, free from the works of law and under the obedience of faith. Yet there remains the impotent 'I', the man of flesh, not yet identified with Christ in his resurrection, and still under the dominion of the law as used by sin to consign 'me' to death. If it were not for sin, there would be no split in the 'I'.

IV.e.ii.2 Romans 7:18-20 - There is nothing good in a sinful nature

¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For 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. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

This, in many ways, is a repeat of vv.14-17. Although the law is not specifically mentioned it is implied by the use of good. There remains a willingness in the 'I' to do what is right but not the strength to see it through; our sinful nature weakens us physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. Paul describes something that has taxed and intrigued philosophers and poets from the earliest of times. Paul, no doubt would have read the works of many of these, in fact it is reported by some that he studied Greek philosophy and poetry before going to Jerusalem to study the law under Gamaliel.

Here, Paul is perhaps giving this as a personal testimony to show his recognition for his own part in this downfall, or again he could be generalising for either Jews or Christians. That nothing good lives in me shows Paul's identification with the flesh. Although he is a new man in Christ he is still in the flesh and thus drawn to the weaknesses of sin in flesh; my sinful nature.

This is Paul's sober evaluation of what it means to be part of this world with a dependence on the satisfaction of human appetites and desires, as well as its involvement with people of different views and temperaments. Paul accepted his being part of this world. He did not seek to escape it into some wilderness retreat or to cloak it by spinning some theory of salvation, which refused to acknowledge its reality, or to wallow in it by way of self-indulgence or self-justification. He simply accepted that there is this dimension of the believer's existence, which remains part of this world, a dimension where the law's good or the Gospel's grace, is constantly perverted, and of sin's continuing bridgehead or foothold

within believers themselves.

What is done in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, bears testimony to the power of God: <<I will teach you about the power of God; the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal>> (Job 27:11), <<You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples>> (Psalm 77:14), and: <<My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power>> (1 Corinthians 2:4-5), but sin, having achieved its bridgehead in humanity through the law, still sits there and still exercises its influence whether the law is in view or not. The more that any, including believers, live their lives in terms of their attachment to and dependence on this world, the more certain they can be that they are living on sin's terms, whether or not the law has made them aware of it.

IV.e.ii.3 Romans 7:21-25 - The double law and the miserable 'I'

As Paul summarises what we know as Chapter 7, some Christians may ask: 'How can such an important piece of NT scripture simply be about the pre-Calvary Jews struggling with God's laws?' There must be a much more significant meaning for it to be relevant for 21st Century Christians, if we are to believe that scripture is not time bound?' Indeed, there are many books around that go on to find more relevant meanings but it seems that the most serious scholars come to the conclusion that Paul is just talking about his nation's history up until this point.

Should we disregard it then? As Paul would probably say: 'certainly not', or 'God forbid'. What 21st Century Christians should not forget, and which Paul had brought to our attention earlier in the letter, is that we are part of the original covenant family, founded through Abraham some two millennia before Jesus came. Therefore, what has happened in the earlier generations of that family is relevant to us. It is not just an interesting point of family history either, but much more crucial to us than that. When God gave his law to Israel, it wasn't just a case of simply teaching the world a better standard of morality. God's purpose was to rescue the whole world from sin and death. In order to accomplish this aim, he not only sent his law, but also his Son and his Spirit, to do what the law wanted to do but could not achieve on its own. But Paul's point is to alert us to just how dangerous a world we live in and that God has the solution if we abide in him.

Romans 7:21-23

The meaning of the word law in these verses is the subject of debate. Some think that every use of the word refers to the Mosaic Law, but most argue that in v.21 and v.23 the term means principle. All agree that the Mosaic Law is in view in v.22. The Greek word nomos can take either meaning. This account uses the word law, which matches the NIV translation.

²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

Romans 7:21

The specific reintroduction of the law marks the transition from the previous section into this one. Paul reintroduces talk of the law, now that the impotence of man has been clearly stated and the culpability of sin. It is not the law but rather the powerlessness of the man of flesh, including Christian believers, before the continuing power of sin, i.e. evil is right there with me, which reveals the powerlessness of the law. Even with a will strengthened by the law, the flesh controlled by sin prevents the translation of the desired good into action, i.e. when I want to do good.

²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a

prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

Romans 7:22-23

I delight in God's law would most obviously be taken as a reference to the law as holy, just, good and spiritual (vv.12-14), since Paul can hardly mean that he joyfully agrees with the law as characterising the old era in contrast to grace, or that he delights in the law's role as sin's agent in bring about death. The law, thus seen in its true nature, fits with the inner being as it is God's law. Paul's readers could hardly avoid identifying the law in its true nature with the willing 'I', the 'I' that rejoices in the law from the heart but it is so frustrated as also a fleshly 'I' in the task of translating willing to doing.

The law at work in the members of my body, more fully described as the law of sin at work within my members at the end of the verse, is the law used by sin to bring about death (vv.11-13). Although it has been established that the real culprit is sin, the law can be said to characterise the old Adamic era precisely as the law of sin.

The law of my mind likewise is hardly to be distinguished from the law recognised by the willing 'I' as spiritual and good, the law of God in which the inner man delights.

The situation is characterised as one of warfare in terms of the law as used by sin. Here again, and more explicitly than in v.21, the point is precisely that the law is powerless. That is why the revelation of righteousness that marks out the new era had to be: <<apart from law>> (Romans 3:21b), for to give the law centre stage is to revert to the old era. The law, even as the law of God, is not strong enough, or at least man's use of the law is not strong enough, to defeat the power of sin. That is why it would be inappropriate to characterise the new era in terms of a new willingness to uphold the law, a fuller appreciation of its nature as spiritual, as the law of God; because that would leave the 'I' powerless. The key is something else, shortly to be expounded as a new power source, i.e. the Holy Spirit in Romans Chapter 8.

The Christian believer, because he is still a person in the flesh, has to confess defeat repeatedly, precisely because he is still a being of the flesh. The reality of the moral choice, described in these words: <<Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness>> (Romans 6:13), and again perhaps echoed here, as a real choice, where the right choice cannot be taken for granted. It is worth refreshing our memories of what Paul wrote in Romans 6:2-11 at this point, which describes the beginning of a new stage but not its completion, is thus reemphasised with a fearful solemnity, for it is a choice that so often leads to defeat; indeed when the options are analysed solely in terms of sin and the law, defeat is inevitable, for the law is not match for sin: <<By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus>> (Romans 6:2-11).

²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 7:24-25

What a wretched man I am! Here, Paul certainly cries out in anguish for himself as well as being a spokesman for the whole of mankind; this is not the stylised cry of one long personally removed from the situation but one that is constantly living within the battle of the now but not yet of the kingdom. Physical death will remove the corruption of the flesh, not before. Spiritual death and deliverance is putting off the 'old man', just as touching a dead body under the Ceremonial Law made a person unclean so a spiritual transgression leads to dead works. Both required cleansing: <<How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!>> (Hebrews 9:14). Members of the Special Forces carry a back pack equivalent to the weight to an average man. Paul seems to feel he has a similar load, carrying a dead body on his back, his sinful nature. Many of us may see Paul as a man who is blessed and worthy of our blessing but in himself he sees only wretchedness due to his sinful nature, imputed to him by being born of the first Adam.

At a loss he cries out: who will rescue me from the body of death? This is not a cry of despair however, but a cry of frustration as he knows how things could and should be in Christ; for the living presence of Jesus Christ is the answer to all the problem of sin in one's life. Hope and comfort come with these three:

1. His conscience witnesses for him in v.16 and v.22. The inward man: <<No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God>> (Romans 2:29), and: <<Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day>> (2 Corinthians 4:16), the new inner man: <<I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being>> (Ephesians 3:16), the hidden man: <<Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?>> (Job 3:23), and: <<But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened">> (1 Peter 3:14), i.e. it is about the heart not the actions.
2. It was the corruption of his nature (v.17 and v.20), not that this is an excuse for it is punishable under the law but dealt with under grace.
3. The great comfort lay in Jesus (v.25), the solution that Paul submits to. Without him, our in-built iniquity will be our total ruin.

Thanks be to God for giving us eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is always justified to give praise to God in all circumstances, but this is praise rather than an answer to the question posed by Paul. In truth, the full solution does not come until Christ returns: <<So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For

the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ>> (1 Corinthians 15:42-57).

Contrary to popular piety, which might have had a following at the time of Paul: <<Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!>> (1 Corinthians 4:8), Paul does not teach that baptism in Christ brings a complete ending of or release from the flesh, or an immediate and lasting victory over the power of sin. On the contrary, it is spiritual warfare which is the sign of life. The eschatological tension is itself a proof that identification with Christ in his death has begun; it is the risen power of Christ which has begun to combat the power of sin. Pastorally, this emphasis is of considerable importance, since in it we see Paul accepting, with all seriousness, the reality of the human condition in which believers still find themselves, even as Christians, still part of this world of flesh and mortality. On the other hand, Paul's teaching here is not intended to provide an easy excuse for persistent moral defeat; or an excuse for defeat experienced as defeat, as a wretched captivity and slavery to sin.

Paul can and does readily conceive of believers being frequently defeated (v.23), in the continuous sequence of moral choices which confront them, but he cannot conceive of believers treating such defeats as a matter of little consequence, as of their ever becoming less earnest in seeking to wage that war, to serve the law of righteousness, far less of their justifying and glorying in their subservience to sin. Again we should refresh our memories of Paul's earlier writing, in this case Romans 6:12-23 <<Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord>>. Amen.