

TUTORIAL
3.11

Brought to Despair

Bible presenter Scot Keen continues to discuss sanctification in the believer's life in Romans chapter seven. We must come to the end of ourselves and depend fully on the in-dwelling Spirit in order to live our new lives in Christ.

Introduction

In this tutorial Paul continues to discuss sanctification in chapters six through eight. Last time we dealt with the believers' relationship to sin. As believers we have been set free from the authority of sin because we are dead to sin and are alive to God. Now in Romans chapter seven Paul will deal with the believer's relation to the law and also with the believer's struggle with the flesh.

An illustration from marriage

We firstly need to realise that we have been joined to another. In Romans chapter seven Paul gives an illustration from marriage to show the believer's relation to the Law. He says, "Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man."

Paul is making the point that death ends a legally binding relationship. A wife is legally bound to her husband in marriage until he dies. But once he dies, she is free to enter a new relationship. You may ask why Paul brings this up here in Romans. The Jew had made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter nineteen. They said, "Whatever God is commanding we will do." They entered into a legally binding relationship and were bound in successive generations to that Mosaic covenant.

Now Paul is saying that believers have been set free from the Law. The Jew are probably wondering how this is possible. Paul shows them that they can be

set free through death with Christ. In the same way that believers die to sin, they also die to the Law. In chapter six Paul says sin will not be our master because we are not under Law but under grace. Now in chapter seven he shows us how that is possible.

A new relationship

Look at Romans 7:4, "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead." Obviously the only people who were bound by covenant at Sinai were the Jews; but Paul is speaking to all believers here. As a matter of principle no believer is under the Mosaic Law. All believers have died to the Law and are joined to Another (to Him who was raised from the dead). They are joined to the person of Christ. Why are we joined to Christ? So we can bear fruit for God. Some theologians call the statements *dead to sin*, *alive unto God*, *dead to the law* positional truths. They are things that are true of us regardless of whether we know that they are true or not. They are simply true because we are connected with Christ.

It is fascinating that these positional truths are always intended to have practical results. Go back to chapter six. We died to sin so that we could walk in newness of life. In chapter seven we found that we died to the Law and we were joined to Another so that that we could bear fruit for God. So God desires practical results in our life and these positional truths are the foundation for that.

We died to the law to be joined to Another so that we could bear fruit for God. The implication is that fruitfulness could not come under the law of paradigm. It comes by being joined to Another. Colossians touches on this. Look at Colossians 2:20, "You died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world. Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch." Paul says, "These are the commandments and teaching of men and they have the appearance of wisdom and religion and abasement; but they are of no value against the flesh." Paul is saying that simply having a set of rules does not make a believer fruitful. Fruitfulness comes by being joined to Another.

We'll talk more on this in Romans chapter eight; but for now I will mention that the idea of being fruitful is not subjugated to the book of Romans. Galatians chapter five, for example, describes the fruit of the Spirit. Philippians chapter one refers to the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ. And here in Romans seven we are told that we are to bear fruit for God. All this requires us to be connected with Jesus. As believers we can be fruitful only because we are connected to the Lord Jesus as He is the source of our fruitfulness. It will be the Spirit of God who produces fruit in us as we walk by faith.

Paul says, "You were joined to another in order that you might bear fruit for God." Paul gives an illustration from marriage to make the point that death ends a legally binding relationship, which in turn enables us to enter a new relationship. Paul says, "But now we have been released from the law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the spirit and not in oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6).

Paul contrasts the law and grace here. Paul says, "We serve not in the oldness of the letter; but, in the newness of the spirit." Sometimes when we talk about law and grace, people think we are talking about God's disposition. They think God used to be stern and legalistic and now He is gracious. Law and grace deal with systems by which God governed people at various times in history. God governed Israel under the paradigm of the Mosaic Law. God governs believers in this age under this paradigm called grace. Under grace, man has a responsibility to not let sin reign. He has a responsibility to walk in newness of life. One of the major differences now is that under grace believers have the in-dwelling spirit, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Death under the law

Let me contrast Law and grace to help Romans become clearer. "Under law man is told to do this and live," (Leviticus 18). Under grace, we are alive, now walk in newness of life. Under Law, the Law demands duty and then offers blessing. Look at Deuteronomy chapter twenty-eight, "If you do this I will bless you." Under grace, we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ. The Law speaks of human performance. It tells us what to do but it does not enable us to get there.

John Bunyan used to say, "Run John run, the law demands; but, gives me neither feet nor hands." The Law told people what to do, but there was no in-dwelling Spirit to enable them to get there. Grace speaks of God's enablement because God tells us what to do. There are lots of commands and exhortations in the New Testament; but they are carried out with the knowledge of and independence upon the in-dwelling Spirit to enable us to get there.

Let's go back to John Bunyan's quote, "Run John run, the law demands; but, gives me neither feet nor hands. A grander noose God's grace does bring, he bids me fly and he gives me wings." God's grace enables the believer to do that which God commands the believer to do.

C.A. Coates on the law

Author C.A. Coates says, "I cannot imagine anything more calculated to fill an honest soul with despair than the New Testament if you leave Christ out." He goes on to say that many believers treat the New Testament as the superior Law of Moses. If we are honest, God raises the expectations in the New Testament to a whole new level. Jesus says we are not just to love, but to love

as He has loved us. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church! The expectations are infinitely higher. In fact, what God commands us in the New Testament is so unobtainable that it can only be obtained by means of the in-dwelling Spirit.

So C.A. Coates makes the point that if we try to live the Christian life apart from the Holy Spirit, we are essentially placing ourselves under the Law with no divine enablement. Under grace God tells the believer what to do and also makes provision for that accomplishment.

Legal system versus grace system

Lewis Perry Chaufer has been known to say, "Any aspect of life or conduct undertaken in dependence of the flesh, is to that extent purely legal in character." He is just making the point that the Christian life cannot be lived by the power of the flesh. It has to be lived through the enablement of the Spirit of God. The question is not whether or not God wants us to live a godly life, that is clear enough. The question is, "How does God want us to get there?" The answer? "Not in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the spirit." It is God's enablement.

A friend told me once that God's moral absolutes never change; but the way He governs those absolutes have changed. That is why we find so many things from the Law repeated in the New Testament. God's moral absolutes have not changed; but the way He governs those have changed and now He governs with the provision of the Spirit of God who is at work in our lives. This is critical for us to understand as we live the Christian life.

A struggle with the flesh

Let's tackle the believer's struggle with the flesh now. This is another important theme in Romans. Now some people look at Romans 7: 14-25 and conclude that Paul is not a believer here. They say that Paul is alluding to a time in his life when he was not a believer and the struggles he experienced then. I don't agree. I think Paul was describing an experience he had as a believer in this passage. He is just referring to a time before he came to understand God's provision of the in-dwelling Spirit to live the Christian life. After all, we are talking about sanctification here and Paul wants to encourage believers in their growth in the Lord. It would not be encouraging to say that yes, I struggled too, but I wasn't a believer. That would not encourage anybody. Paul shows us his struggle that lasted until he came to understand the Spirit's enablement to live the Christian life. He uses that to encourage his audience to also trust God as they struggle in the Christian life.

Brought to despair

In Roman 7:14 Paul says, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” Paul is talking about being brought to a place of despair. He says, “I am sold into bondage to sin.” Some people argue that Paul must not have been a believer here because otherwise how could Paul say he say that he is sold into bondage to sin? I think Paul is simply saying that there is a part of him, the flesh, that is irrevocably committed to sin. It is called the flesh. It is not getting better and it is not going away. Paul recognises that the problem is not the Law. There is something in us that bristles against the Law of God. Paul speaks about the confusing experience he had as a believer struggling with sin and how he came to clarity. We can also be encouraged as we have probably faced that same confusion and now God’s word gives us clarity as well.

So we have Paul's experience. Now, here's a quote by William R., “If you claim that the wretched man of Romans seven is an unregenerate man, under conviction of sin, the complete reply is this that the man of Romans seven is crying for deliverance not from sins, guilt or punishment but from its power. Not from forgiveness of sins, but help against in-dwelling sin. This man is exercised not about the day of judgement, but about a condition of bondage of which he hates.”

In Romans 7:14-25, Paul is not asking who will set him free from the penalty of sin, he is asking who will set him free from the power of sin. This is a believer struggling to live the Christian life. You and I can learn from his experience that first of all, there is a conflict of desires. Look in Romans 7:15, “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate”. And then again in verse nineteen, “For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.” And further along in verse twenty-one, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.”

There is a conflict of desires here. You have felt the same thing, no doubt. On one hand we have these new desires because God has given us the divine nature and the in-dwelling Spirit; but on the flip side, we still have the flesh. Sin is still in believers and it desires to reign. So we have a frustrating conflict of desires. Look at verse fifteen again, “What I'm doing I do not understand.”

I will never forget, after becoming a believer, the day that I was plagued with an awareness that even though my sins were forgiven, I was still wretched on the inside. I remember struggling so much. Was there something wrong with me? Why did I still want to sin? When would it go away? That is exactly what Paul is talking about, “I do not understand. I am not practising what I would like to do; but I am doing the very thing that I hate.”

Many of us of experience trying to do good, failing and then getting discouraged. Yet we get this renewed vigour and we try harder. We fail again and get frustrated again. We come to a point of despair and we have a choice to either throw ourselves on God and trust Him for deliverance or to become discouraged and throw in the towel.

As a fairly new believer, I remember praying that God would take away my desire to sin. I won't go into details because it is too personal, but I would pray about this every day, day after day after day after day. I remember one morning I was praying that same prayer and I literally I just stood up and said, "Forget it, it's never going to go away. The desire to sin is never going to go away." I was so discouraged. Why bother even trying? That is how believers sometimes feel. Even as painful as that is, it is actually an important part of our growth. Paul came to realise that sin was present in him, someone one who wanted to do good and it was not going to go away. The desire to sin was going to go away.

Paul identifies the problem, and the source of the problem is sin. He says in verse seventeen, "So now no longer am I the one doing it; but, sin that dwells in me." Paul is not avoiding responsibility, he is simply recognising that the problem is in-dwelling sin and it is not getting any get better. The source of the problem is sin.

It is interesting that Paul recognises that sin is in him, but at the same that it does not define him. He is a new creature in Christ. Yes, sin is in him, the one who wants to do good. See the distinction there, God does not define him by his sin, although it is still resident in him.

There is nothing good about our flesh. Look at verse eighteen, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." Our flesh cannot be fixed. Coming to accept that the desire to sin is not going away is a part of our growth. Sanctification is not the desire to sin going away. The flesh is not getting any better.

Look with me at verse twenty-one, "I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good." Paul accepted the fact that sin is was in him and it was not getting any get better or going away, not until he gets a new body. Peace comes not because our flesh is going away; but because we realise that, although it is not going away, it does not define or rule us.

Paul has the desire to do good but that in and of itself is not enough. Look at verse eighteen again, "Willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not." When we are created new in Christ, we have a new set of desires and we have the in-dwelling Spirit. If you are like me as a new believer, you may have also determined that you have a desire to serve God and do the right thing so therefore you will do it. But you come to find that the desire is not enough.

“Willing is present, but how to perform that which is good, I do not find”
(Romans 7:18).

What does this mean then? We have to live by faith. God has left us dependent upon Him to do the good that we want to do. The desire is present, but that desire is not enough to carry the good out. We have to depend on the in-dwelling Spirit to live this out.

A cry for deliverance

So believers are brought to an end of themselves in Romans seven. Look at Romans 7:24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” There is nothing more painful than this experience. Many of you believers can identify with this. You have been there. Maybe you are there now. It is a painful, but it is also necessary because throughout this process God teaches us that we are entirely dependent upon Him. “Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death?”

Dennis McCallum in his book *Walking in Victory* says, “Although we now realise we cannot save ourselves by good works, we may secretly believe that we are able to follow God in our own strength. Even if we say yes, I know I'm unable to change myself, God may detect a lingering confidence in self and he will smoke out this confidence by allowing us to tangle with his law, just as Paul does in Roman seven.”

In other words, God allows us to try to do what He says to do. At times we try to do that apart from trusting in the Spirit to enable us. And God uses that to teach us that regardless of desire, we still need the in-dwelling Spirit's enablement to carry it out. Of course He is already resident in us but still we need to trust in Him day by day to carry out the things He wants us to do. When Paul says, “Who will deliver me?” he recognises that the Law cannot deliver him. The Law furthered his bondage. Paul recognised that self-determination could not deliver him because in the flesh dwells no good thing. He recognised that even a new nature could not deliver him, because although willing was present, how to perform that which was good he could not find.

As William R. says in his commentary on Romans, “Only the deliverer can deliver.” In fact, he says it this way, “Sinners don't get saved until they trust the saviour and saints don't get delivered until they trust the deliverer.” We have to trust God through His in-dwelling Spirit to enable us to walk in this newness of life.

A resolution

The resolution comes after the believer has gone through the agonising process of being brought to the end of himself and finally realises his need.

That is how we escape this wheel of disappointment and frustration. We realise that it has to be God working through us.

Paul says in Romans 7:25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Through our death with him (Romans six) and through His life in us (Romans seven) is newness of life. The Spirit of God (Romans eight) living in the believer enables us to walk in this newness of life. That is what Paul teaches in Romans chapter seven.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Brought to Despair

1. By looking at your Bible; what is Paul proving through his illustration about a woman and her husband’s death, etc.?
2. Why were we made to die to the law?
3. What is the result of “being joined to Another?”
4. What are some differences between Law and Grace? How does that relate to living the Christian life?
5. What are some reasons to believe that Paul was a believer during the experience he describes in 7:14-25?
6. What all did Paul learn during this process?
7. When Paul said that deliverance was “through Jesus Christ”, what did he mean?



ACTIVITIES

Brought to Despair

Scenario: A friend comes to you for advice, and in the midst of the conversation you sense that they are at the point of despair. They want to do good, but find themselves powerless to do so. They say “I am so let down with myself. I am struggling with things I struggled with 15 years ago. I thought that I had grown, but I find myself tempted in the same areas. I made a vow to get up at 5:00 a.m. and pray about this every morning. I am trying to make myself do better, but nothing is changing. What is my problem?” How would you encourage them from Romans 7? Problem could be pornography, eating disorder, anger, etc.