

BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #7

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 7: 1 ~ 8: 3

In Romans 7 Apostle Paul discusses two main topics: the limited role of the Mosaic law regarding salvation and the inward battle within a person. This is a controversial chapter in that some thinkers argue that Paul has effectively denounced the function and role of the Mosaic Law as an old regime that was necessary in the past era but is no longer effective now that Christ had come. To their eyes the law had inherent limitations and therefore, it should be laid aside now that the law of Christ has effectively taken the place of the old law. I wish to first look into the purpose why God gave the law to the people of Israel through Moses and what transpired afterwards. Then we will discuss how this old law is related to the new law/ testament through Christ. Afterwards let us discuss what struggles occur within our mind and body as we strive to keep the law.

1. Limited role of Mosaic Law: v. 1~12

In the beginning part of this chapter Paul explains that the law—referring to the Jewish Mosaic Law and associated traditions—had dominion over the life of the Jewish people over their entire life. We can say the same thing about the law of the land we live in. The Constitution of the United States, the federal, state and municipal laws and regulations have dominion over our daily lives for all citizens, residents and visitors to some degree.

Then Paul declares that we are ‘dead to the law by the body of Christ’ and are now ‘married to Christ—that we should bring forth fruit unto God.’ In verse 3 Paul explains that a woman, who is married to a man, is bound to be loyal to him as long as he lives. But when her husband dies, then she is no longer bound by this obligation and is now free to marry another. Paul likens the conversion of a Jewish person from his old self, who was under the dominion of the Mosaic Law, into a Christian using this analogy. He argues that a Jewish Christian, thus converted, died¹ to the Mosaic Law but is married to Christ and the purpose of this conversion is to bring good fruits to God. The law was still there governing the life of the Jewish society wherever they were living. But when a converted Jew ‘died’ to the law, Paul argues, consciously declares to himself and others that he is no longer under the rule of this old law but is now governed by the new covenant of Christ because he was now married to Him. This entailed quite a drastic, fundamental change in life’s position and had a significant impact on the person’s stand within the society he was living. And this whole argument was addressed to the Jewish Christian community.

It is truly amazing for Paul, a former zealous Pharisee, now declares that the Jews who convert to the Christian faith are supposed to say ‘good bye’ to the Mosaic Law and march on to join the flock of Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, dedicated to following the teachings of Jesus Christ. Paul then argues why this drastic conversion and change in profession was really what God intended to occur in His people’s lives by addressing the original purpose of the law and its limited nature, particularly since Christ came.

First, Paul says the commandment of the law was ‘ordained to life’ [v.10]. In other words, the law was given to enrich the lives of the people of God, to help them achieve true, blessed life in God. Moses told the people of Israel that keeping the commandments was their way of honoring and thus showing that they respect, fear and worship God:

¹ Died is *thanatoō* in Greek, meaning ‘put to death’ or ‘kill.’

Therefore you shall keep My commandments, and perform them: I am the Lord. 32 You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you. [Leviticus 22: 31-32]

The law was also given to this people to make them a holy people amongst the heathen, ungodly nations:

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' [Deuteronomy 4: 5~6]

The law was also a way for God to bless His people:

If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.⁵ Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. [Leviticus 26: 3~5]

If the Mosaic Law had such good purposes, then why should a Jewish Christian deny the dominion of this law to his/her life? Paul argues the following reasons:

1. Sin came to our consciousness because of the law [v. 9], but the law was ineffective in helping us gain triumph over the sin [v. 11]. The law makes people become sinners/ offenders when they fail by defining what is sin/ offence. But the law fails to help us overcome sin and the desires in us to sin. There is the inherent limitedness of the law.
2. Much of the Mosaic Law governed the worship of God including the priesthood, the tabernacle, and the sacrifices, besides the do's and don'ts that regulate the day-to-day living and behaviors of the people. The latter's domain was the same as that of the common law today that regulate our society, its citizens and their livelihood and activities. The Jews in the first century and in preceding centuries, however, had focused on the do's and don'ts, thinking strict compliance to them was the way of showing their faithfulness to God and thus was the pathway of securing God's favor. They had forgotten that Moses and the law pointed to Christ and God's salvation, to which God had been trying to lead the people over the past centuries. Jesus explained this point to the Pharisees and His disciples a few times as follows:

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.[John 5: 39]

Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." [Luke 24: 44]

Thus, it was the Jewish religious community that made the Mosaic Law of none effect.

Discussion topic: What is the meaning of Old Testament to you? Is it a story about the Jewish nation or a history of how God dealt with His people? Are the laws of OT still relevant to us today?

2. Inward battle within a person—spirit vs. flesh: v. 13~25

Some people seem to think that this part of Romans 7 describes the personal inward struggle that Paul had in his own heart. True, Paul must have known this struggle before he met Jesus. Rather, Paul describes the struggles that occur within us daily if we are not alive in Christ. He is describing the struggle between the 'law of our mind,' meaning the tug of our conscience, and the usual loss of our mind's power due to the overpowering of our sinful nature so that we end up doing the things that we really do not want to do from our conscience [v. 18~19].

Paul explains that this repeated failures occur because there is another law in us, namely, the law of sin, which dominates our daily actions and make our struggles. [v. 23] Thus, Paul calls us, not just himself, as 'wretched men.' [v. 24] He bemoans the futility of the human struggle against sin in that the law of sin, which we have inherited from Adam due to the DNA change in us since his fall, is powerful in all of us, making us wretched failures. Now, here comes Christ, who makes us victors, not losers, in our struggle against sin and death. Through Christ the law of sin is overcome and the law of life takes its center stage. Therefore, there is no condemnation when this new law of Christ has liberated us from the law of sin and death [v. 8:2].

Discussion topic: Paul's description of the inward battle in a person – is it still true in your life or have you gotten over the struggle mostly? How did Jesus help you become victors?