

## **ROMANS 7:1-6 FREED TO BEAR FRUIT**

### **1. TEXT AND TRANSLATION**

7:1 Or, are you ignorant brothers and sisters, (for I am speaking to people who know the law), that the law rules over a person as long as they live? (2) For the married woman is bound to her living husband by the law. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. (3) Therefore, while the husband is still living, if she marries another man she is called 'adulteress'. However, if the husband dies, she is free from the law, and she is not an adulteress if she marries another man. (4) So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, in order to become joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, so that we might bear fruit for God. (5) For when we were in the flesh, the sinful desires aroused by the law were continually at work in the members of our bodies, with the result that we were bearing fruit for death. (6) But now, we have been freed from the law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in a newness of the Spirit and not in the old way of a written law. (Own translation)

### **2. INTRODUCTION**

Paul's letter to the Romans is responding to a situation in the Roman Church, while also being related to Paul's apostolic mission. From the opening verses it is clear that Paul, a Jew, is writing to all the saints in Rome – both Jew and Gentile (1:7), though there are indications that this church may be predominantly Gentile (1:13; 11:13-32; 15:15-16).<sup>1</sup> Having been ejected during the rule of Claudius, it is likely that the Jews returning to the church in A.D. 54 would have found that it had moved

---

<sup>1</sup> This view has wide support. So, James Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988), liii. Also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 5.

away from its Jewish roots.<sup>2</sup> Switching between addressing Jews (eg. 7:1) and Gentiles (eg. 11:13) throughout the letter, Paul deals with issues pertinent to each group,<sup>3</sup> as well as promoting unity between them (chapters 14–15; 16:17). Preparing to visit Jerusalem, Paul is possibly seeking Roman support for his gift to the Jewish Christians there (15:26-27), while also attempting to draw the Roman church (which he had not yet visited) into his apostolic orbit,<sup>4</sup> as well as preparing the way for a stop at Rome on the way to Spain (15:23-24). This letter is dated around A.D. 57,<sup>5</sup> toward the end of Paul's third missionary journey, before his trip to Jerusalem where he was arrested.

Gathering together Paul's stated reasons for writing (1:8-15; 15:14-33), and linking this to the body of the letter (1:16-15:13), while also being mindful of the situation in Rome as well as Paul's apostolic mission, it is suggested here that – broadly speaking – Paul's *primary* purpose in writing is to present his gospel to the believers (who are predominantly Gentiles) in Rome.<sup>6</sup> As part of this purpose, Paul identifies that he has a priestly duty in writing: so that the faith of the Gentiles may be built on firm foundations, and as a flow on from this, their worship will be acceptable to God (15:15-16). A key aspect of Paul's gospel is that believers are free from sin, because they are not under law but grace (6:14). However, it must be stressed that in response to Paul's gospel, some fellow Jews raise the objections that (1) this

---

<sup>2</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 3. Moo and others emphasise the high likelihood of the Church in Rome being founded by Jewish pilgrims who had been 'converted' at Pentecost and had subsequently returned to Rome. A further implication of this hypothesis is that the Church wouldn't have been under any specific apostolic authority.

<sup>3</sup> For example, to the Jews: Paul responds to objections to his gospel (6:1ff), to the Gentiles: Paul warns against boasting (11:17ff).

<sup>4</sup> If it is true that the Church at Rome was not under any specific apostolic authority, Paul's references such as "Apostle to the Gentiles" (11:13), and "minister to the Gentiles" (15:16) as well as opening remarks regarding being appointed to call people from among the Gentiles (1:5-6) may have been used as a way of drawing the Gentiles in Rome under his apostolic authority.

<sup>5</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 3. Moo is confident of this date within a year or two either side.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding methodology in discerning the purpose, Dunn highlights that it is important to link (1) Paul's more explicit references to reasons for writing (1:8-15; 15:14-33) with (2) the body of the letter (1:16-15:13). He helpfully identifies a three-fold purpose including missionary, apologetic, and pastoral aspects. Dunn, *Romans*, lv-lvii. Regarding the main body of *Romans*, Moo sees *the gospel* as the unifying theme, and as such he suggests Paul's primary purpose is to communicate this gospel to the church in Rome, while dealing with potential objections and distortions along the way. Moo, *Romans*, 20-21; 29.

leads to moral anarchy (6:15) and (2) Paul is denigrating the law (7:7).<sup>7</sup> The passage in focus in this essay (Rom 7:1-6) is part of a wider literary unit where Paul is responding to these objections (6:1– 8:39). In particular, Romans 7:1-6 is part of his response to the objection regarding the denigration of the law, and as such, in this passage Paul is writing particularly to Jewish readers (7:1) because they are more susceptible to this objection.

Reflecting the style of an orator,<sup>8</sup> Romans 7:1-6 is arranged logically, presenting and explaining an analogy regarding the believer's *freedom from the law*, which is a key theme that can be traced throughout the letter (2:14; 3:21, 28; 6:14; 7:6; 8:2; 10:4). Verse 1 introduces the issue of the law and the scope of its authority over a person. Verses 2-3 then present an analogy exploring the law and its limitations regarding a marriage relationship. This is then applied to the believer in verse 4, and this application is further explained in verses 5-6.

### 3. VERSE ANALYSIS

**v1** Using a rhetorical question, Paul introduces the general principle that the law rules over a person as long as they live. The two ideas embedded in this principle are the lifelong rule of the law, and liberation only through death.<sup>9</sup> Paul includes a remark regarding his audience, stating that they “know the law”, however the exact meaning of this phrase and what it reveals about Paul’s audience is debated. While Moo suggests it unlikely that Paul has narrowed his audience here to Jewish believers, his argument though plausible, is highly speculative.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that

<sup>7</sup> It should be stressed that rather than seeing the law as a burdensome set of rules, the Jews held the law in the highest regard. They loved the law. The clearest picture of this is Psalm 119, cf. Rom 7:12, 22

<sup>8</sup> Witherington highlights that Paul’s style is more that of an orator or rhetor rather than writer, which would have lent itself well to the oral delivery of this letter. Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Romans* (IVP NTCS; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Moo cites Zahn, who suggests that had Paul intended to narrow his audience here to Jews he would more likely have used τοῖς ὑμῖν γινώσκουσιν νόμου. Moo, *Romans*, 411. The argument of ‘what Paul would have said’ is less than convincing.

νόμος (*law*) here is referring to the Mosaic law,<sup>11</sup> since this is how it is used elsewhere in this section (6:14, 15; 7:4) and it is nowhere used by Paul referring to secular law. Therefore, the address “those who know the law” could refer either to Jews or to God-fearing Gentiles, yet in light of Paul’s immediate purpose here of responding to Jewish objections, it is best to understand this phrase as indicative of a Jewish audience. The rhetorical question as a whole can then be seen as both introducing the issue Paul wishes to address, as well as functioning as a rhetorical device used to gain the support of Jewish believers.

The use of the verb κυριεύω (*to rule over*) to express the idea of the law ruling over a person recalls to mind Paul’s previous argument in which he, using the same verb, described the rule of sin over a person (6:14). Using a very similar argument as that of chapter 6, Paul implies here, and makes explicit in the following verses, that the reign of the law, just like the reign of sin, will be broken by death (7:2, 4; cf. 6:6-7). Coupled with these allusions to the bondage of sin, a person’s bondage to the law is seen here as a baneful thing, one which must be escaped.<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising then, in light of this presentation of the Gospel, that Paul must defend the charge that he is denigrating the law (7:7, 12).

**vv2-3** These verses have historically been understood in a variety of ways. Some of the confusion is introduced by the fact that unlike the introduction in v1, the one who is released from the law in vv2-3 is not the one who dies. Quite different conclusions are drawn by those who see these verses as allegory, to those who see them as analogy. While an allegory presses a one-to-one correlation between each of its elements, an analogy illustrates more broadly by highlighting similarities between things that are otherwise dissimilar.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> So Moo, *Romans*, 411; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AnchorBible; New York, Doubleday, 1993), 456; Osborne, *Romans*, 168. Contra John Robinson, *Wrestling With Romans* (London: SCM, 1979), 77. Although it should be added, contra Dunn, that νόμος is not used solely to refer to Mosaic Law, but Paul also uses it to refer to general principles (eg. Rom 7:21, 23).

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 359.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce A. Little, ‘Paul’s Use of Analogy: A Structural Analysis of Romans 7:1-6’ in *CBQ* 46 (1984), 84.

Those trying to interpret these verses allegorically experience difficulties. Categories such as the woman being the believer, and the husband being the law are applied to v2 in isolation, but do not correlate with the way this verse is applied by Paul in v4. Verse 4 is a conclusion or application of vv1-3 rather than an interpretation of an allegory in vv2-3.<sup>14</sup> Some grope for an allegorical solution in the text by making distinctions between ‘old self’ and ‘new self’,<sup>15</sup> however for others, such as Dodd, the solution is to suggest that Paul is muddled or unable to construct a coherent allegory.<sup>16</sup> These difficulties are unnecessary, since the key to understanding these verses is not to interpret them allegorically, but rather to view them more broadly as an analogy, or illustration.<sup>17</sup>

Paul’s analogy from marriage makes two interconnected points. The first is regarding *how* one is released from the law of marriage, the second is regarding *what may happen as a result* of being released from this law. Paul’s analogy highlights that (1) a person is released from the law by death, and (2) this person who has been freed may then be joined to another. Regarding Paul’s first point, the two verbs in the perfect tense in v2 – δέδεται (bound) and κατήργηται (released<sup>18</sup>) – emphasise the contrast between bondage and release. The woman was initially held in a state of bondage by the law<sup>19</sup>, to her living husband<sup>20</sup>, but then because of

---

<sup>14</sup> Osborne, *Romans*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> See J. A. Little’s discussion of various attempts to interpret these verses allegorically. Little, *Paul’s Use of Analogy*, 85-86.

<sup>16</sup> An extreme of this position is that of C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 101. Quoted in Little, *Paul’s Use of Analogy*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> Arguing against viewing Paul’s argument as hopelessly confused, Witherington shows that the analogy answers the question “How can the death of *another* person affect *my* relationship to the law?” Witherington, *Romans*, 176.

<sup>18</sup> Rogers and Rogers suggest that κατήργηται has more a sense of nullify, or render inoperative, as such emphasises that the woman is completely absolved or discharged. This does add a helpful nuance, however, rather than translating using a verb like ‘nullify’, the emphasis of the contrast with bondage is captured adequately by ‘release’. Rogers, C. L III and Rogers C.L Jr. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 328.

<sup>19</sup> NIV puts “by law” toward the beginning of the verse giving the sense of ‘according to the law’, however it is more fitting within the context of the argument (especially v1 “the law rules over a person”) to read νόμῳ as an instrumental dative, giving the sense that the law is doing the binding. This sense is better captured in v2 by the translation “bound ... by the law”.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding τῷ ζῶντι ἄνδρῖ, if the participle is taken as adjectival, there are two choices regarding the dative case: (1) instrumental dative or (2) dative of indirect object? “The married woman is bound...” (1) *by* the living husband; or (2) *to* the living husband. Given above choice of νόμῳ as an instrumental dative, it is probably best to take the dative of indirect object here for ἄνδρῖ.

death, the woman enters a new state of release or freedom (cf. Rom 3:21). The woman<sup>21</sup> is freed not from the husband, but from the law.<sup>22</sup> Verse 3 develops the second point of Paul's marriage analogy. When there is no death, the woman may not be joined to another. But when there is death, the woman is free from the law of marriage and is able to be joined to another.

**v4** Paul begins verse 4 by applying the first point of the marriage analogy to the believer. He states that the believer died<sup>23</sup> to the law διὰ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*through the body of Christ*). This is a curious phrase, the meaning of which is not immediately clear. The term 'the body of Christ' can generally have a collective sense referring to the church (1 Cor 12:17; Eph 1:22-23; 4:12), or a literal sense referring to the physical body of Jesus, usually with his death on the cross in mind (1 Cor 10:16; Heb 10:10). The usage here is the latter and must be understood in light of Rom 6:3-6, where the central idea is the believer's union with Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-21). Since Christ died, the believer who is in Christ, is counted as having died (cf. Col 2:8-15). In Rom 6:3-6 Paul makes a very similar argument regarding how the believer is released from the bondage of sin, and he utilises baptism imagery to support the central concept of union with Christ as also including a participation in dying and rising with Christ. Similarly here in 7:4, it is through this union with Christ that believers participate in the death of Christ, and thus are released from the law.

Having described the believer's participation in the death of Christ which brings about their release from the law, Paul then applies the second point of the marriage analogy: that this new freedom enables them to be joined to another. The verb γίνομαι translated here as "become joined" is the same verb used in v3 regarding

<sup>21</sup> Ὑπανδρος γυνή (*married woman*) this particular phrase used only here in the NT is used in the LXX also in the context of marriage and adultery, and carries the meaning of 'a woman under the authority of her husband' (ὕπ' ἀνδρὸς LXX Num 5:19, 20, 29). Paul's usage of this phrase further emphasises the focus of one being under the authority of another.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 360. This highlights that the central point is regarding the law, and the marriage analogy is illustrative and supportive of this point.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek is passive, ἐθανατώθητε lit. "put to death", but this phrase, used by Moo, *Romans*, 410 is a bit too cumbersome if included in the translation: "put to death to the law".

the woman “marrying” another man. In this way Paul connects the analogy and the second key point he is making here, and shows that the believer may now legitimately be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead - Christ.<sup>24</sup> With death in mind as the vehicle for breaking the dominion of the law, beyond referring to participation in both Christ’s death and resurrection, perhaps this way of referencing Christ as “he who was raised from the dead” is also suggestive that this new union will not be broken.

Building on from the analogy and moving now into new territory, Paul shows that ultimately, the *purpose* of being free from the law is to bear fruit for God. In a parallel passage in Galatians, Paul again uses the aorist subjunctive to describe the purpose of dying to the law: to live for God (Gal 2:19). This new found fruitfulness for God that Paul describes will be further emphasised by way of a contrast with its opposite in verse 5.

**vv5-6** A contrast of two states of being, or two ways to live in vv5-6: “for when we were ... but now we have...” further explains the two points made by Paul in v4. The first state, adequately described by Dunn as the “pre-Christian” state,<sup>25</sup> is designated by Paul’s usage of ἐν τῇ σαρκί (*in the flesh*). Avoiding an oversimplification and wooden application of this term, Erickson identifies six key ways in which σαρξ (*flesh*) is used by Paul.<sup>26</sup> Here, as is clear also in Gal 3:3, it refers to rebellious human nature. Gathering together the key themes of Romans 7 and 8, Moo adds that ἐν τῇ σαρκί refers here to an existence or life governed by sin, the law, and death.<sup>27</sup> Being in the flesh is described from another angle by Paul in v6 as ‘serving in the old way of the written law’. In this state, the sinful nature is

<sup>24</sup> Dunn aptly describes this as a “transfer of Lordship”. Dunn, *Romans*, 362.

<sup>25</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 363.

<sup>26</sup> The six categories Erickson identifies are (1) Physical matter, (2) Human body, (3) Human person, human race, (4) Morally Neutral sphere, (5) Morally negative sphere, and (6) Rebellious human nature. R. J. Erickson, ‘Flesh’ in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.F.Hawthorne, R.P.Martin & D.G.Reid; Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1993), 303-305.

<sup>27</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 418-419.

continuously at work. The continuous aspect is captured by the imperfect tense of ἐνηργεῖτο (*working*).

The result of this continuous work of the sinful desires,<sup>28</sup> is to καρποφορῆσαι τῷ θανάτῳ (*bear fruit for death*). Paul develops this concept from the previous verse, since *bearing fruit for death* directly contrasts the stated purpose for being joined to Christ: *to bear fruit for God* (v4). θανάτῳ (*death*) understood as a dative of advantage, adds the nuance of bearing fruit to the advantage of, or to advance the cause of death. The key concept in v5 is the negative effect of the law, a theme that will become the major focus for the remainder of chapter 7 (starting at v7).

Although, before expanding on the negative effect of the law, Paul continues to explain v4 and in so doing, briefly introduces the theme of new life in the Spirit which will become the major focus of chapter 8. In emphasising the believer's new state of freedom from the law, Paul uses a double antithesis: καινότητι πνεύματος (*newness of spirit*) and παλαιότητι γράμματος (lit. *old way of a letter*). The letter/spirit contrast, as in 2:27-29, is a contrast between the old and new covenants (cf. 2 Cor 3:6).<sup>29</sup> καινότης (*newness*) is used nowhere else by Paul except Romans 6:4 where it speaks of newness of life, there also as a result of participating with Christ's death and resurrection. πνεύματος (*spirit*) is likely a genitive of source giving the sense that this newness comes from the Spirit. Using these contrasting images, and foreshadowing his train of thought to follow, Paul underscores the believer's freedom from the law under the old covenant, which bore fruit for death, and their new life under the new covenant which bears fruit for God.

---

<sup>28</sup> Sinful desires: desires that were forbidden by the law. Moo, *Romans*, 420. This perspective of Moo aids in understanding the phrase τὰ διὰ τοῦ νόμου translated here as 'aroused by the law'.

<sup>29</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 421.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Given Paul's purpose for writing (see §2), in this passage Paul is responding to objections that have been raised regarding his gospel, in particular the charge that he is denigrating the law. As such, he explains the role of the law in the life of the believer. Using a marriage analogy, and applying it to the life of the believer, Paul makes two interconnected points: (1) death has brought about freedom for the believer from the law, (2) this freedom enables the believer to become united to Christ. The emphasis of movement from once being bound to the law, and now being united to Christ and living in the newness of the Spirit is ultimately for the purpose of bearing fruit for God.

#### **5. APPLICATION**

Far from being bound by the old covenant, and hence giving sin the opportunity afforded by that covenant to bear in us fruit for death, rather through our union with Christ *every* aspect of our life is empowered to bear fruit to God. Whether it be time at work, time at home, time with family, time alone, in the midst of stressful situations, and during times of relaxation, our union with Christ and newfound life in the Spirit enables us to bear fruit for God. In every relationship: husband/ wife, son/ father and mother, youth leader/ follower, church member/ pastor, brother/ sister and so on, we are enabled to bear fruit for God. Beyond individual aspects, perhaps more importantly as members of local churches we are empowered to bear fruit for God. As we serve in this newness of the Spirit, this may take the form of exercising spiritual gifts so as to build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11ff). As children of the new covenant, united with Christ, we live lives marked by forgiveness (Jer 31:31-34), and having been reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:14-21), we too may bear fruit for God by calling those around us into reconciliation with Christ who died to free them also from the law, sin and death.

## 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dunn, James. D. G. *Romans 1-8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988).

Dunn, James. D. G. 'Romans, Letter to the' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.F.Hawthorne, R.P.Martin & D.G.Reid; Downer's Grove: IVP, 1993), 838 – 850.

Erickson, R. J. 'Flesh' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G.F.Hawthorne, R.P.Martin & D.G.Reid; Downer's Grove: IVP, 1993), 303 – 306.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *Romans* (AnchorBible; New York, Doubleday, 1993).

Ladd, George, E. *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev.ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

Little, Joyce A. 'Paul's Use of Analogy: A Structural Analysis of Romans 7:1-6' in *CBQ* 46 (1984), 82 – 90.

Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Osborne, Grant R. *Romans* (IVP NTCS; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

Robinson, John. *Wrestling With Romans* (London: SCM, 1979).

Rogers, C. L III and Rogers C.L Jr. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

Witherington, Ben III. *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).