

THE WAR WITHIN

By Steve Zeisler

We will do well to have in mind the model of a soap opera with all its dynamics, difficulty, and complexity as we approach our study of Romans 7. It begins with a description of a struggling marriage and the allure of adultery. The dysfunctional marriage and the pain it inflicts are clear. Eventually, apparent triumph and renewal and hope are offered. The villain seems to have finally shuffled off stage, and yet it crawls back later in the story to continue to inflict hurt.

I became a Christian at the age of fifteen. I was in a youth group, most of the members of which had known the Lord a few months longer than I. I bought a New Testament and began reading it as the others were doing. I noticed that they had underlines and little notes in the margins of their New Testaments, so I randomly underlined things because I wanted mine to look like everyone else's. It was entirely for appearance's sake with the exception of one verse that gripped me. It was Romans 7:15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." I couldn't believe it was in the Bible, but I understood that description of the Christian life immediately because it was what I was living. So I underlined that verse twice. And most of us are more familiar than we would wish with soap operas, struggle, and lives that aren't what they ought to be, that are a mixture of triumph and tragedy.

Now let's begin our study. This chapter is going to speak in some depth about the nature of the law. Paul will begin by saying, "I am speaking to men who know the law." In chapter 6 he described why it is a misunderstanding of grace to think we can do whatever we want whenever we want, throwing the law aside as if it meant nothing. Now Paul is going to return to the question of law. As before, he is going to uphold the value of the law, but he is also going to let us know what the law cannot do: It cannot save us.

BOUND TO THE SINFUL NATURE

Verses 1-6:

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? 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

This chapter is going to use the Greek word translated "law" two different ways. In verse 21 and following the word is used to mean a principle of operation. We would speak of the law of gravity in that sense. Here in the opening verses we encounter the word law to mean, as Paul says at the end of verse 6, the written code. These are the moral statements that come directly from the heart of God, describing what humanity ought to be like.

We see a number of aspects of the law in this chapter. First of all, the law is completely inflexible. There is no

bending of the rules and no exceptions. The law is not at all dynamic; it is lifeless and cannot generate anything new. It cannot help us, only measure us or judge us. Yet, the law is completely true, and it is therefore good. But it is always external to us; it stands outside us like a mirror. It declares to us exactly what ought to be and then measures us by that.

The law is going to be an important part of the drama before us in this chapter. The other players in the story who are introduced early on are a husband and wife. We are told in verse 2 that a woman is bound to her husband by the law. This woman understands the law regarding marriage, but she does not want to be married to her husband. He is a lout who is making her life miserable. She longs to be free of him, but she is nonetheless bound to him.

When we read this story we need to realize that in its complexity it is really using the idea of marriage in two different analogies. First it is speaking of us (the individual reader) as a whole marriage, both husband and wife and their relationship together, and then it is speaking of us as a wife in a marriage. Eventually the first marriage ends. That is what Paul means when he says, "You also died to the law." The person represented by the total marriage---husband and wife and their interaction---was finally put to death. And then, united with Christ in his death, we will be united with him in his resurrection. All is new. Here he is speaking of us as the wife in a second marriage with a new husband; one who was strong, loving, and good.

But we begin in the hard part of the soap opera by reading of the first marriage in its pain. The husband here is someone to whom the wife feels anchored. She would love to be free of him, but can't be. We can well imagine his gambling away the paycheck, humiliating the children, and driving away good friends. He has terrible habits and worse friends. He is an entirely difficult and destructive person to be married to. The wife looks outside the marriage and wishes that she could find Prince Charming, a good man to be married to; someone who didn't sit in front of the TV spilling beer on his T-shirt, and make rude noises. She thinks, "I'm just a different kind of person. I have refined and exquisite tastes. And I imagine myself with high-born, beautiful people who live successful, and creative lives. And yet here I am stuck with this bozo."

But the law says it doesn't make any difference what her vision of herself is. "I am totally uninterested in that," says the law to her. "You are married to him, and that is true however much you would like things to be different. If he squanders all the money on bad investments and you bear responsibility for the debts he incurs, it may not be "fair," but you are stuck with the choices made by this man to whom you are married."

Now, remember that the whole marriage in this opening scene of the soap opera is an analogy for us before we were Christians. The husband is our old nature; that part of us that is thoughtless, hateful, lustful, and self-centered. Yet, it is characteristic of humans to rationalize and evade honest appraisal. We all have a noble image of ourselves and tell ourselves, like the wife in verse 2, "But that's not really me. I'm not the base sort of person who does those terrible things. I really have refined sensibilities. In my higher moments I want better things for myself; I don't want to be associated with those things in my life." That is the mentality that many of us adopted before we were Christians to deal with the problem of seeing ourselves doing things we hated.

And the law said to us, "Too bad. Whatever you want to think about yourself, you in fact do the things you do. It was you who just struck your child in anger, even though you say to yourself, 'I'm not the kind of person who would ever strike my child.' And I know you would like to think of yourself as an honest person, but you just spent the last half-hour telling a string of lies. I'm going to measure what you do, and you are bound to the old nature that does such things." The law measures us remorselessly, "You love to stand outside and look on at the passion and tragedy of other people. And even though you don't want to call yourself a voyeur, that is exactly what you are." The law said, "You are defensive and prickly and you won't let anyone near you to bring hard evaluation of shortcomings. Yet, you are completely unwilling to give the people around you an inch; you are totally intolerant of their weaknesses. The law looked at us in hard terms and told the truth, no matter what we wanted to think of ourselves.

The wife who wants to think better of herself at times looks around for a Prince Charming, somebody other than her old sin nature to be attached to, but unless it is death and resurrection in Christ she chooses, the new person to whom she would attach herself will be just as bad as the one she just left. In this analogy, the

adultery of verse 3 is likened to fleshly self reformation.

We frequently see unbelieving efforts to throw off the old and become someone new-to turn over a new leaf. There are two options for self-reformation. The first of them was known in the first century as Gnosticism. It is encountered under different names today. It essentially says this: Drive a wedge between your loutish bum of a husband, or the sinful nature, and the higher self, the part of you that can stand apart and observe. Learn to live on high planes, to know great truths and think great thoughts, and thus see yourself as merely the exalted person. The fact that in your body you are sinning left, right, and center; that you're trampling on the feelings of other people and acting like a miserable jerk, shouldn't alter your being able to think of yourself as an exalted soul." There are any number of New Age gurus and others who will teach us to do the same thing today. The gospel alone can truly change us, but time after time people will try to believe such things about themselves.

The second method of self-reformation is to decide to fix your bad behavior. So every six months or so you go through ambitious renewal programs where things are going to be different. "This time I've learned my lesson, and I won't make a mess of it again. This time I'll be different. I'm going to get a whole new circle of friends, or move to a new place. I'm going to buy the latest self-help tape and study guide. And by gosh, I'm going to be an entirely new person." Six months later your new circle of friends are a bunch of jerks just like your old circle of friends. The effort to reform yourself goes nowhere.

DYING WITH CHRIST

Just as adultery is not the solution to a bad marriage, self-reformation is not the solution to being bound to the sinful nature. In the long run the only solution is that we join Jesus Christ in death on his cross and be raised to new life in him. Look carefully at verse 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." In this new marriage, it is not the insistence of the law that binds us to Christ. We follow Christ because we love him. He has taken up residence inside us, and he is teaching us that he loves us. We are in every sense completely loved and filled with him. We do not have the law outside us measuring and excoriating us, but Jesus changing our hearts and renewing us to obedience from the inside. It is a completely new arrangement.

This seems like really good news! Finally our heroine is out of the bad marriage, she has undergone a dramatic experience of dying to herself, and she has gotten married to a good man who really loves her. Our old nature is executed, and we are united with Christ, and it seems like the story ought to be really wonderful from here on. But let's look at verses 7-13:

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

Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

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

From his new position of release from the sinful nature, Paul is glorying in his new relationship with Christ, looking back on the law, and saying, "How shall I understand the functioning of the law in the past? It was the

law that bound me in the first marriage to the bad husband, the sin nature. It seems that therefore the law is a bad thing. Is that true?" And he concludes, "No, of course not." Looking back at the past, he realizes that what the law did was primarily two things: It clarified what was true of him, and it intensified it.

Paul highlights the tenth commandment in talking about how he discovered his own sin nature. The first nine commandments can be obeyed outwardly, but the tenth commandment is very clearly something that is inward. It has to do with coveting-loving what you don't have, greedily wanting what is not yours, resenting people who have more than you do. You can be part of a very religious environment when you are inwardly lusting greedily for the things that belong to another person and that you have no right to. Paul says that when the law finally made clear to him what was inside him, he began to see things that had been there the whole time, but he had never known what they were. So the law made his inner life clear as it had never been before.

But the law also intensified what was there. Sin took opportunity through the law, he says, and made things worse. He says that sin grows, deceives, and kills, in that order, by its contact with the law.

Suppose you are HIV-infected and don't know it. You get up in the morning, your throat is a little dry, and you cough to clear your throat. You get a cup of coffee or water, and you are off with your day. You have been out in the sun a lot lately, and you notice a little dark mark on your leg, but you think it is probably from the sun and it's no problem. You're carrying on in life assuming yourself to be a healthy person.

But once you have been diagnosed as being HIV-infected, when you get up in the morning and cough to clear your throat you say, "Oh no, what does that indicate? Is it the beginning of something worse?" And despair begins to fill your life. You start measuring every cough and every drop of sweat on your brow. The spot on your leg that you assumed was caused by the sun is probably cancer. All of a sudden, knowing that you have a disease that can be named and described gives opportunity for despair, anger, anguish, resentment, and bitterness. You are no more HIV-infected after you have found out than before, but the mirror that tells you what is true of you gives sin new opportunities for expression.

To use another analogy, you might picture yourself and some companions in a rubber raft with no oars in the middle of a big river. You have to float down the river; there is no getting out of it. But it's a sunny day and a quiet river, the birds are singing, and there are trees and clouds to look at. Everyone in the raft is companionable. It's a fine experience for everyone-except for the one man who looked at the map before he got in the boat, and he knows that around the bend is a huge waterfall and all are going to die. The sun is still out, the birds are still singing, and the others are still companionable. But he is despairing, miserable, and unable to enjoy the conversation or anything else about it. Finding out didn't make the situation more deadly, it just made it worse to experience.

In the same way sin takes opportunity through the truth-telling of the law and is more destructive, hurtful, and misery-inducing as a result. That is what Paul means at the end of verse 9: "For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died." It isn't that he was genuinely alive and that only the entry of the law into his life made him sinful. What he is saying is that he was morally naive before the law shook his life; he made foolish assumptions. He thought he was fine; he was alive and happy and he was going to live forever. But when the law entered his life he realized he was living under a death sentence, and sin sprang to life and took over more and more of his experience.

Still in the course of our soap opera, Paul is looking back at the ministry of the law; this powerful, truth-telling, immutable word from God; what it did for him; how it worked in conversion; and how he was finally willing to be executed on Jesus' cross and raised to new life. But now in verse 14, the verbs abruptly change to present tense. He thought he was done with the hard business of sin and its influence on him, but now all of a sudden it is back in the picture, even though he is a new man in a right relationship with God and the old self is put to death. Verses 14-24:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 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. 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. 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.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 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. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION

Now that is soap opera language! We thought that the dawn had broken, and the violins were playing. And now all of a sudden the villain is back in the act and the individual who was renewed and hopeful is saying, "Oh, what a wretched soul I am! Who will deliver me?" Then verse 25 through chapter 8 verse 2 continues:

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.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Having died and been raised with Christ, we are like the wife in the new marriage who is not bound by law to her husband but completely in love with him. She wants to do what is right, to walk through life hand-in-hand with her husband completely honoring him. He is truly good, deeply in love with her, and committed to her, and in her heart of hearts she is committed to him. She does not in her inner being ever want to disobey or dishonor him. But there is still a problem, just as there is in our relationship with our Lord. As Christians we have to acknowledge that even though we love our Lord Jesus, we are still frustrated by sin and that over and over again we do what we despise.

I have performed a number of marriages in which one or both spouses are remarrying, and I was thinking about the counseling that goes on in those settings. The dynamic that Paul is speaking of now is very much observable in second marriages. Take, for example, the case of a woman who has been married to an abusive husband who humiliated her, lied to her, and twisted everything that was positive into something negative. When a woman has lived a long time in that kind of a relationship, even though she is now married to a really good man, the memories and the learned responses of the old life don't go away immediately.

The new husband whom she loves and who loves her comes to embrace her, and she recoils from his embrace because she remembers the approach of her first husband. He gives her some generous gift just because he loves her, and immediately she is defensive: "Generosity always leads to something terrible. There's a hook in this. This can't be good." The new husband says something kind and up-building, and she doesn't believe it. She finds herself lying to him when he did nothing to deserve it. Over and over again what she is living out is what she learned in the first marriage, and she hates it because he is a good man and she is a different person on the inside who doesn't want to do these things anymore. But it is so hard to stop doing them. The cry of this woman is, "Oh, wretched soul that I am! Who will change me, who will deliver me?"

There are two sides to the problem that we would do well to note. One is that she wants to do things that she can't do. She is all for what is honorable, true, sacrificial, and loving, but the minute she steps forward to do such things she finds herself inhibited from doing them. And just as surely on the other side, the things she has learned to hate and doesn't want to do anymore because she is not that kind of person, the things the deepest part of her rejects, are what she is drawn to and finds herself doing.

You will probably experience both of these problems in the course of the Christian life, but you may have one

or the other problem more severely. You may be an inhibited person or you may be a rebellious person, but they both stem from the same root problem. That is, we learned how to live with the old relationship to the sin nature, and we haven't yet learned how to live completely responsively to the new person to whom we are attached, the Lord Jesus who has taken up residence in us.

The answer to the cry, "Wretched soul that I am! Who will deliver me?" is going to take some time as we progress through the rest of chapter 8. But there are two wonderful statements here that speak to us of the shape the answer will take. Verse 25: "Thanks be to God-through Jesus Christ our Lord!" "Thanks to God the Father who has provided us with a truly good husband!" is what Paul is saying. However dysfunctional a person I am in this relationship with the good husband, however bad and twisted and frightened and bedeviled I am, the new husband to whom I am married is a good man. Jesus Christ our Lord remains our hope. He will not grow tired of us, fed up with repeated failure. We have a champion and Savior who is completely worthy of our thanks to God for him. Our hope is in the new husband that he is going to see the process through to the end.

The second great point Paul makes is in verse 1 of chapter 8: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...." When we turn to God with our shortcomings and approach him with the same thing over and over again, our confessions are inhibited because we're so mortified to bring them up again, and we assume that he can't possibly embrace us this time, that surely the condemnation is going to come eventually. But however much we feel that, the announcement is that there is no condemnation. We have a great champion in Christ, and God has every reason, however often we've done the same thing, to receive us again with open arms. There is no waiting period and no penance to do; when we turn again to the face of God his face is always turned toward us.

"Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

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