

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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The Epistle to the Romans

V: Romans 7-8
From Flesh to Spirit

Paul's reflections on the life of hopeful faith, inaugurated by baptism and dedicated to living in righteousness has laid the foundation for his attempt to explain further his thinking about the Jewish Law and the relationship of believers to it, an issue that clearly concerned his Roman congregation. He begins with a metaphor, the logic of which is challenging, then he moves into an analysis of the human condition and its relationship to the will of God expressed in the Torah, arguing that that condition, encapsulated in the term "flesh" overpowers and subverts the good that is in the Law. He then returns to a description of the spiritual condition of people who have been "justified," now focusing not on their legal status, but on the life they lead in the spirit, a life of hope.

Believers and Widows: Free from former subjection (Rom 7:1-6)

Paul draws an analogy between the situation of believers who have either as Jews or as Torah-observant Gentiles, been "under the Law" and a married woman. While her husband is alive, the woman is subject to him, by the laws of marriage, but when he dies, she is free to marry another (vv. 2-3). That situation is clear enough, even if the language of "subjection" is not what we would tend to prefer. How it applies to the believers' situation is obscure. In their case a symbolic death has occurred (cf. chap. 6) and they have died (v. 4) with Christ, and by that death they have been freed to belong to another, the Christ who has been raised from the dead (v. 4). Paul abandons the limping analogy to conclude with an assertion that the results of the interaction of sin and the Law have been eliminated so that believers have been enabled to live lives "enslaved to the spirit" (vv. 5-6). The metaphors, some echoing Paul's graphic imagery of 2 Corinthians 3, are as bold as they are complex in what is a transitional sentence. Paul at once looks back to the description of the life of "freedom" which is paradoxically enslaved to righteousness (chap. 6) and ahead to his discussion of the interaction of Law and flesh.

It is worth pausing to notice in verses 5 and 6 a structural hint at how Paul will navigate the issues of fleshly and spiritual living in these two chapters. These two

sentences offer a table of contents for what follows. In verse 5, Paul writes, “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions (Greek: *pathemata*), aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” In these words, governed by a past tense verb, Paul encapsulates 7:7-25, where he will detail the futility and misery of a life lived under the power of Sin. Verse 6 then offers the hopeful interruption of misery: “But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” Here the time-frame and verb tense are present (see the use of the word “now”) and the futility has given way to a new and more hopeful Spirit slavery. This description governs 8:1-17, where the faithful “walk in newness of life.” But in the interest of realism, Paul qualifies the euphoria of the “now” time once again in 8:18. “I consider that the sufferings (*pathemata* again) of this present time (literally “the now time”) are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” The present life in the Spirit may offer a greater prospect of moral success, but it is not void of mortal pains, and so 8:18-40 tilt us forward toward a glory yet to be revealed.

The Power of Sin and the Goodness of the Law (7:7-12)

Paul begins the next segment of his argument with a rhetorical question that puts as sharply as possible the issue of the status of the Law. Is it the equivalent of Sin? Certainly not, says the apostle, but it can be an instrument of sin (v. 7). In order to illustrate how that might be so, Paul adopts a first person style. Some readers have found here a window into Paul’s own personal development, perhaps as a youth discovering his sexuality, but Paul may be less confessional than rhetorical, using the personal discourse for dramatic effect, a technique that the ancients called *prosopopoeia*, or personification. In fact the “I” that he adopts could be understood to be a Biblical character, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, who is prompted to do the forbidden deed by the prohibition itself. Whomever he has in mind, Paul suggests that the Biblical prohibition on desire (NRSV “covet” - Exodus 20:17) has the effect of instigating desire (v. 8). The “I” continues its graphic story of life once lived innocent of the Law then spoiled by the command that stimulated desire (v. 9). Paul may here mingle some of his own experience and that of his Gentile converts, with an ideal situation, such as the Genesis story, conflating the single prohibition given to Adam and Eve with the entirety of the Torah. In any case, his conclusion is clear, the Law itself, the Torah of Israel, is holy and just and good, but it can become an instrument of sin (vv. 10-12). Just as the serpent jumped in to exploit the divine command to Adam and Eve, just as the parent who says, “Don’t touch that!” arouses the two-year-old’s interest, so Sin jumps at the chance to exploit Law and produce in us the desire to disobey.

The Problem of the Weak Will (7:13-24)

Starting out again with a rhetorical question, Paul continues to probe the issue of the relationship between the Law and Sin (v. 13). Again he uses the device of first-person discourse to illustrate the dynamics he sees at work between the “spiritual” Law and the fleshly self (v. 14). At this point he apparently has in mind not a persona from the Bible, but one familiar to the Greek stage, Medea, known for killing her children in an act of desperate revenge against her unfaithful husband. The Greek poet Euripides wrote a famous play on the subject of that myth and its themes were widely echoed. The Roman poet Ovid’s version of the story attributes to Medea a line that is virtually equivalent to the plea of the tortured self in v. 15 and v 19: *Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*, “I see what is better and approve of it, but I follow what is worse.” By conjuring up such a stock character of moral weakness, Paul attempts to highlight the problem of the human condition. Personifying the behavior traits that he believes are common, he speaks of the Sin that dwells within (v. 17) that overpowers the rational mind. If Paul were writing Romans today he might well use the language of addictive behaviors to illustrate his point. His conceptual world is, however, that of the first century, where “flesh” encapsulates what is negative about the human condition (v. 18).

Paul concludes this reflection with a nuanced view of the Law (vv. 21-23). In itself it is good, but there is another “law” operating within the human person that leads in another direction. The plaintiff call for someone to save humankind from this condition (v. 24) evokes the joyous response that God in Christ has provided a solution.

The life of the Spirit (8:1-17)

From Paul’s triumphant celebration of God’s victory over the power of Sin that informs humankind, one might suspect that he had too rosy a view of the condition of those who had been “justified.” Part of the next chapter corrects that possible misreading. Paul will insist on the “not yet” of the process of salvation, on the incomplete character of the victory that God has won, but he does so while celebrating the fact that the lives of the justified are lived “in the Spirit” and therefore transformed in the present.

Paul begins with positive affirmations. He first recalls the legal imagery of the earlier chapters. There is not condemnation for those who are “in Christ” (v. 1). He then turns to the language of the “spirit” which has liberated those who in Christ from the regime (“law” in another sense) of sin and death (v. 2). Paul believes that those who have undergone baptism and been accepted into a community of believers

have indeed experienced a transformation. They no longer walk “according to the flesh” (v. 4), but according to the spirit, where there is life and peace (v. 6). Further contrasts between flesh and spirit reinforce the point (vv. 8-10), and the source of that spirit is the resurrected Christ (v. 11).

The note of celebration of what is now possible for those blessed with the Spirit leads to exhortations, a move often found in Paul whose admonitions often take the form of “become what you are.” We are obligated, he says, not to live according to the flesh (v. 12) but according to the spirit. He introduces a new theme in v. 14, one which he had used previously in Galatians 4. Those who have the Spirit are children of God and they know that fact because they experience it in their prayers to God as Father (v. 15). Paul may have in mind here a version of the Lord’s Prayer, said in unison by the congregation. The very act of their prayer is a manifestation of the transforming Spirit and their prayerful recognition of their relationship with God is a foundation of their new life (v. 16). Alternatively, he may be harkening back to the baptismal imagery we developed in our comments on chapter 6, where the newly-baptized spoke the name “Abba” for the first time and became a part of God’s family.

Up to this point Paul’s argument has focused on the positive transformation that he and others experienced in joining this community, an experience often replicated in revivalist movements and denominations, and institutionalized in the sacramental system of many mainline churches. The final verse of this section (v. 17) is a reminder that the life of the spirit is one rooted in the cross of Christ and the victorious transformation does not preclude, indeed, it assumes participation in Christ’s sufferings.

Present Distress and Future Glory (8:18-30)

The reference to suffering with Christ in the hope of future glory sets the theme for the next section of Paul’s argument. He takes a broad view of the earthly condition; the whole creation is in distress, a theme with which we in our era can readily sympathize. The theme continues in another register the notion of a new creation that had formed the basis of Paul’s comparison between Adam and Christ in chapter 5. Paul puts his readers in tune with nature, suggesting that they too are groaning, in expectation of that condition as children of God that they have already celebrated (v. 23). Paul’s penchant for pregnant paradox surfaces again in his declaration that “we have been saved in hope” (v. 24). Salvation, or full integration into an everlasting relationship with God, remains for Paul a future reality and the reference to hope scores that point. Yet the tense of the verb points to the other pole of the reality that Paul wants to grasp, the relationship that has already been established with God by God’s gracious act toward humankind. Nonetheless, the

emphasis now lies on the hope and the fact that the object of hope is as yet unseen (vv 24-25).

Paul ties together several of the themes that he has been developing in a poignant passage. Life is lived “in the spirit” manifest in prayer. We live in a condition of hopeful expectation for the full realization of the reality of which we now have a foretaste. Paul articulates these notions through an allusion to the prayer life of the community. He may here draw on his experience with the Corinthians, whose charismatic “speaking in tongues” he worked to appreciate and regulate (cf. 1 Corinthians 12-14). Perhaps alluding to such experiences he tells of the way in which the Spirit, at work in the community, groans with the community, yearning for fulfillment (v. 26).

The presence of the Spirit in the worship life of the community, even in its yearning and longing, leads Paul to a final reflection on the assurance of God’s love. He first expresses that assurance in a carefully framed progression (vv. 28-30), that sounds themes of election and predestination. Similar themes will loom large in the reflection on God’s dealings with Israel that will follow in chapters 9-11, and they form the foundation of an important strand in Christian theology. As usual, Paul does not develop that train of thought, but sounds the themes in order to end this section of his argument on a remarkably positive note.

The Assurance of God’s Love (8:31-39)

Another rhetorical question punctuates the argument (v. 31). What shall we say? asks Paul. His answer is a poetic affirmation of the assurance of God’s fidelity. More rhetorical questions drive the hearer to the realization that God and his Christ are firmly “on our side” (vv. 32-34). A final rhetorical question, “Who will separate us from the love of God” introduces the hymnic conclusion of this section of the epistle. Though we might be “sheep destined for slaughter” nothing in creation whatsoever can separate us from the love of God manifested to us in Christ Jesus (vv 35-38). Paul probably expected his hearers to respond, as have Christians ever since, with a firm “Amen.” This firm assurance will also be necessary as Paul begins the next stage of his argument, reflecting on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God’s plan for humankind.

Questions for Reading:

1. Are the literary allusions in Romans 7 to scripture and ancient myth clear?
2. How effective is Paul's use of the first person, "I" in chapter 7? Does it matter that when he reaches chapter 8, he refers always to "we" instead?

Questions for Reflection:

1. While Paul clearly meant for Romans 7:7-25 to describe a past reality, before the onset of faith ("while we were in the flesh" in 7:5), many Christian readers through the ages have recognized their own experience in those words. E.g., "the good that I wish I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish (7:19)." Do you experience Christian life more in a Romans 7 or a Romans 8 way?

2. Have you ever experienced the Spirit doing what Paul gives it credit for in chapter 8: guiding your everyday life (8:4)? helping you pray (8:26)?

3. What role does “hope” of an afterlife with God play in your Christian belief and practice? Important? Not so much? Sometimes yes, sometimes no?

Words to Remember

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).”

For Further Reading:

Stendahl, Krister, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) pp. 78-96.