

Who Is the Man in Romans 7?

Part 1

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Who is the man in Romans 7? This is a continuing controversy among Christians and a question I am often asked. Usually, I'm asked whether I think the man is Paul before or after his conversion. I find it impossible to directly or quickly answer because it is the wrong question. But who is this man whom Paul refers to as "I," and who seems to believe the Gospel while, at the same time, he struggles with the law and sin?

The only way to properly understand the answer to this question is to understand Paul's purpose in writing Romans, the historical context of Paul's letter to the Romans, and the textual context of Romans 7. I hope you'll find this study as interesting as I do. I also hope you'll see how relevant the lesson we will learn is to our spiritual lives today. For, while the man of Romans 7 is quite historical, his "ghost" still haunts us.

Purpose of Paul's Letter to the Romans

It's not really possible to separate Paul's purpose for writing Romans from understanding the historical context, but I'll make a few, brief comments before going into the history.

I think it would be hard to argue against the position that one of Paul's primary purposes in writing his letter to the Roman believers was to clarify their understanding of the Gospel. He wanted to establish that salvation is God's gracious gift to those who believe on His Son as their Savior. By doing this, he is removing the possibility that any aspect of our salvation is the result of law-keeping or works of any kind.

Paul could hardly have been clearer when he wrote,

Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:20-23

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Righteousness is not through the law. The righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Of course, Paul's stress on the graciousness of our salvation apart from the works of the law is not unique to Romans. Paul emphasizes the Gospel in all he writes. So, what is his particular slant in Romans? To understand that, we must understand who the Roman Christians were and what had recently happened to them.

The Jewish Christians in Rome

A peculiarity of Paul's letter to the Romans is that Paul had not established the assembly in Rome, nor had he even visited Rome. Yet, from news he had received from Rome, he felt a need to visit: "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end that you may be established" (Romans 1:11). As we'll see, what Paul had heard was disturbing and indicated to him that the Romans needed strengthening. Through his letter, he hoped to introduce the reason for his wanting to visit.

If Paul didn't establish the assembly at Rome, who did? Acts 2:10 tells us that among those who heard Peter preach in Jerusalem on Pentecost were "visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes." It's possible, even likely, that these visitors brought Christianity back to the synagogues in Rome. From there, it sprang into a distinct sect while retaining decidedly Jewish characteristics.

[First-century, Jewish Christians] looked upon Christianity as a sect of Judaism with believers still regulated by the Old Covenant. Faith in Jesus Christ was merely added onto the continuing need to keep the law, including even the necessity to observe Sabbaths, holy days, feasts, and dietary restrictions.

We know from Paul's dealings with Jewish Christians elsewhere (see, for example, Acts 15; Galatians; Colossians 2:16) that they frequently had problems understanding the graciousness of salvation; the end of the law and the Old Covenant; and the termination of Israel's special status with God. Many believing Jews held that it was necessary for Gentiles to first become Jews through circumcision and law-keeping before they could be accepted as

Christians. In other words, they looked upon Christianity as a sect of Judaism with believers still regulated by the Old Covenant. Faith in Jesus Christ was merely added onto the continuing need to keep the law, including even the necessity to observe Sabbaths, holy days, feasts, and dietary restrictions. I think it is fair to assume that the Jewish Christians in Rome suffered from these same problems.

Given the centuries-long history of the Old Testament, these notions are understandable, and we can have compassion on those who hold them. But that doesn't mean we should accept these ideas as valid and harmless. They are serious problems, toxic beliefs that can lead to anything from a weak faith and distant walk with God to complete apostasy. Paul saw that they had to be dealt with.

The Historical Context of Paul's Letter to the Romans

What particularly brought this to Paul's attention was what happened after a couple of historical events. In AD 19, the Roman Emperor Tiberius expelled Jews from Rome because of their proselytizing. At some point, the authorities allowed the Jews to return. Then, between AD 41 and 49, Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the city. We read of this in Acts 18:1-3:

After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth. He found a certain Jew named Aquila, a man of Pontus by race, who had recently come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome. He came to them, and because he practiced the same trade, he lived with them and worked, for by trade they were tent makers.

Aquila and Priscilla were Jewish, but they were also Christians. So, the expulsion of the Jews included the Jewish Christians. Moreover, Christianity may have been the cause of the eviction. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome" (*Claudius 25*) (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Lives_of_the_Twelve_Caesars/Claudius#25). Suetonius wrote some seventy years after this happened, so he likely didn't fully understand the event and got the name slightly wrong. Chrestus could easily be a misspelling of Christus, the Latin name for Christ. In other words, there was so much turmoil between the believing and unbelieving Jews of Rome over the teachings of Christ that Claudius kicked them all out.

We shouldn't assume, however, that because Christianity started in Rome with the Jews, that there were no Gentile converts. There were. And when the Jews

left, the Gentiles were left to themselves. With the law-promoting Jews gone, the Gentiles quickly changed the character of Christianity in Rome. Although we have no records, it's easy to surmise that the Gentile Christians had somewhat resented, or at least questioned, the dominance of the Jews. Without the Jews, they likely dropped the stress on the law and emphasized liberty.

Claudius died in AD 54, and Jews—though perhaps not all who had left—began returning to Rome soon after. What the Jewish Christians returned to shocked and dismayed them. They left a Torah-observing assembly; they returned to what they considered to be a disobedient and licentious people. Likewise, the Gentile believers now looked upon those who once taught them the law as weak-in-the-faith legalists. This division between the Gentile and Jewish Christians, then, is a material issue behind Paul's letter and his desire to visit Rome. These intertwined themes—legalism, the misuse of liberty, and the division between the Gentile and Jewish believers—are the primary points Paul addresses in his letter to the Romans, and these themes greatly apply to how we must understand Romans 7.

The Textual Context of Romans 7

Here is a very brief sweep of the context.

[Romans 1-3](#)

We've already seen that Paul expressed his longing to visit Rome. And, in Romans 1:16-17, he nails the centrality of the Gospel as the power of God for salvation to both Jews and Greeks. With our understanding of the historical context, we can appreciate that Paul was using this fact to begin putting both groups in their places. What is important is what Jesus did on the Cross, not who we are, whether Jews or Gentiles. And, as he then goes on to detail, all mankind—Jews and Gentiles—are unrighteous and under God's wrath. Again, the historical context makes 2:1 leap off the page: "Therefore you are without excuse, O man, whoever you are who judge. For in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself. For you who judge practice the same things." Then, beginning in 2:17, Paul pulls the rug out from under the Jews' attitude of superiority by identifying it as hypocrisy and saying that the only real Jew is one who is circumcised in the heart, in the spirit.

Beginning chapter 3, Paul asks, "What advantage does the Jew have?" The Jews' advantage is that God gave Israel the Old Testament Scriptures. But this "advantage" is a responsibility (see Luke 12:48). Even having the Scriptures, the Jews were unfaithful, so that God's wrath against them is not unjust. Thus, Paul, who was himself a Jew, writes, "What then? Are we better

than they? No, in no way. For we previously warned both Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin” (Romans 3:9). No one is righteous.

Very important for our understanding of chapter 7 is what Paul says here:

Now we know that whatever things the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God. Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:19-24

There can be no boasting (verse 27). God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles, and both are justified by faith.

Romans 4-5

While Paul certainly addresses and corrects the Gentiles in Romans (see, for example, Romans 11:13-36), he seems to usually aim his big guns at the Jews. In chapter 4, Paul sets the Jews straight by using the example of Abraham. The patriarch wasn't justified by works. His belief was counted as righteousness. Thus, having the law doesn't make one an heir of Abraham; the faithful are the heirs.

Keep this in mind when we get to Romans 7: “For the law produces wrath, for where there is no law, neither is there disobedience” (Romans 4:15).

Paul begins Romans 5 with the logical conclusion of what he covered in chapter 4: “Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

In verses 12-14, he makes another point that is crucial to chapter 7:

Therefore as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; so death passed to all men, because all sinned. For until the law, sin was in the world; but sin is not charged when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until

Moses, even over those whose sins weren't like Adam's disobedience, who is a foreshadowing of him who was to come.

Romans 5:12-14

Before the giving of the law at Sinai, although sin was in the world (people did what those who are aware of the law would call sin), it was not counted against anyone. Nevertheless, people died because of Adam's sin, which caused death to pass down to everyone.

God gave the Jews the law at Sinai to cause them to see the pervasiveness of human sinfulness so that, when grace came, it could be appreciated for just how gracious it was.

There is much theological meat here, but to stick to our focus, I'll simply point out verses 20-21:

The law came in besides, that the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace abounded more exceedingly; that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5:20-21

God gave the Jews the law at Sinai to cause them to see the pervasiveness of human sinfulness so that, when grace came, it could be appreciated for just how gracious it was.

Romans 6

Now, let's look at the more immediate context of Romans 7 by examining Romans 6.

In Romans 6:1, Paul asks a question that's become famous: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" Unfortunately, the answer that too many preachers and Christian writers give is, "No! We must obey the law." That is the wrong answer, and those who give it haven't been paying attention to Paul.

We have just seen that Paul continually stresses in Romans (as he does everywhere) that righteousness doesn't come through the law but only

through faith. Why, then, would he ever say that the way to avoid sin is to obey the law? He wouldn't! That position is in diametric contradiction to Paul's entire platform.

The answer to "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" is not that we must keep the law. The answer is that we will not continue in sin because we have died to it! "For he who has died has been freed from sin" (verse 7). And the reason sin cannot reign over us is because we are not under the law: "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (verse 14).

Being under the law caused sin and sin caused death.

But now, being made free from sin, and having become servants of God, you have your fruit of sanctification, and the result of eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:22-23

Romans 8

If we were to skip Romans 7 and simply go from Romans 6 to Romans 8, we would see complete continuity. We go from "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" to, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." This isn't because chapter 7 is parenthetical and can be taken out. That's not the case. It's because Paul continually hits on the same theme that righteousness doesn't come through the law; it comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jews and Gentiles are equally condemned, and both can be graciously saved through belief. Law-keeping will save no one.

...what legalists call antinomian is exactly what Paul taught. Because of the weakness of the flesh, the law cannot accomplish salvation. Moreover, preaching law-keeping deflects sinners from the aim of the Gospel and hinders the ability of believers to fully experience the peace of their walk with Christ.

Too many Christians hesitate to stand up for the truth of the Gospel because they don't want to be labeled antinomians. They give in to a peer pressure to stand up for the law lest anyone think them immoral. But what legalists call antinomian is exactly what Paul taught. Because of the weakness of the flesh, the law cannot accomplish salvation. Moreover, preaching law-keeping deflects sinners from the aim of the Gospel and hinders the ability of believers to fully experience the peace of their walk with Christ.

For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace; because the mind of the flesh is hostile towards God; for it is not subject to God's law, neither indeed can it be. Those who are in the flesh can't please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if it is so that the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if any man doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his. If Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:6-11

Why, then, would we ever turn to the law to save us or to complete us or to sanctify us or to do anything? The law can only give us the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20) and condemn us (Romans 7:5; 8:2; 1 Corinthians 15:56). When God frees us from being under the law and puts us under grace (Romans 6:14), He frees us to become the righteous creatures He wants.

This occurs because of two things. 1) There can be no sin when there is no law. If I am not under the law, if I am dead to the law and the law is dead to me, then, whatever I do, it is not sin. Some people will scream in horror over what I've just said. But it's clearly what the Bible teaches. Sure, I may know that I've done what, by the law, would be called sin (1 John 1:10). But God does not see it as sin because He has removed me from the law and placed me into Jesus Christ. As a Christian, I cannot sin (1 John 3:4-9).

The other thing that happens is, 2) Christ, acting through the Holy Spirit who dwells in me, begins to change me. I am not under the law. Thus, I am not subject to the temptations it creates in my flesh, and I am not condemned by it. Instead, God, over time, creates in me the creature He wants. I cannot force this creation by keeping the law, and I must not criticize God if the creation is not going the way I think it should. And it should go without saying that I have no right to criticize what God is doing in other believers.

But know this: I don't do good things for people because the law puts the screws on me to behave that way. I behave that way because of love, and I love because God puts that love in me. Those who turn to the law are denying the very power of God.

So, on both sides of Romans 7, the context of Paul's letter is that law-keeping cannot save, the law brings only sin and death, and when we are alive in Christ, we are dead to the law, sinless, and righteous.

Now that we've covered the preliminaries, in Part 2, I will answer, "Who is the man of Romans 7?"

You might also be interested in reading, "Romans 7:2–Loosed From the Law" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/loosed-law/>)
