

Who Is *the* Man of Romans 7?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 7.*

Memory Text: “Now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (*Romans 7:6*).

Few chapters in the Bible have created more controversy than has Romans 7. Concerning the issues involved, *The SDA Bible Commentary* says: “The meaning of [Romans 7:14–25] has been one of the most discussed problems in the whole epistle. The main questions have been as to whether the description of such intense moral struggle could be autobiographical, and, if so, whether the passage refers to Paul’s experience before or after his conversion. That Paul is speaking of his own personal struggle with sin seems apparent from the simplest meaning of his words (cf. [Romans 7:7–11]; . . .). [Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 19; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 475.] It is surely also true that he is describing a conflict that is more or less experienced by every soul confronted by and awakened to the spiritual claims of God’s holy law.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 553.

Bible students differ on whether Romans 7 was Paul’s experience before or after his conversion. Whatever position one takes, what’s important is that Jesus’ righteousness covers us and that in His righteousness we stand perfect before God, who promises to sanctify us, to give us victory over sin, and to conform us to “the image of his Son” (*Rom. 8:29*). These are the crucial points for us to know and experience as we seek to spread “the everlasting gospel” to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6*).

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 25.

Dead to the Law

Read Romans 7:1–6. What illustration does Paul use here in order to show his readers their relationship to the law, and what point is he making with that illustration?

Paul’s illustration in Romans 7:1–6 is somewhat involved, but a careful analysis of the passage will help us to follow his reasoning.

In the overall context of the letter, Paul was dealing with the system of worship established at Sinai; that is often what he means by the word *law*. The Jews had difficulty grasping the fact that this system, given to them of God, should end with the coming of the Messiah. This is what Paul was dealing with—Jewish believers still not ready to abandon what had been such an important part of their lives.

In essence, Paul’s illustration is as follows: a woman is married to a man. The law binds her to him as long as he lives. During his lifetime she cannot consort with other men. But when he dies, she is free from the law that bound her to him (*Rom. 7:3*).

How does Paul apply the illustration of the law of marriage to the system of Judaism? *Rom. 7:4, 5*.

As the death of her husband delivers the woman from the law of her husband, so the death of the old life in the flesh, through Jesus Christ, delivers the Jews from the law they had been expected to keep until the Messiah fulfilled its types.

Now the Jews were free to “remarry.” They were invited to marry the risen Messiah and thus bring forth fruit to God. This illustration was one more device Paul used to convince the Jews that they were now free to abandon the ancient system.

Again, given all else that Paul and the Bible say about obedience to the Ten Commandments, it doesn’t make sense to assert here that Paul was telling these Jewish believers that the Ten Commandments were no longer binding. Those who use these texts to try to make that point—that the moral law was done away with—really don’t want to make *that* point anyway; what they really want to say is that only the seventh-day Sabbath is gone—not the rest of the law. To interpret Romans 7:4, 5 as teaching that the fourth commandment has been abolished or superseded or replaced with Sunday is to give them a meaning that the words were never intended to have.

Sin and the Law

If Paul is talking about the whole law system at Sinai, what about Romans 7:7, in which he specifically mentions one of the Ten Commandments? Doesn't that refute the position taken yesterday that Paul was not talking about the abolition of the Ten Commandments?

The answer is "No." We must keep in mind, again, that the word *law* for Paul is the *whole* system introduced at Sinai, which included the moral law but wasn't limited to it. Hence, Paul could quote from it, as well as from any other section of the whole Jewish economy, in order to make his points. However, when the system passed away at the death of Christ, that didn't include the moral law, which had existed even before Sinai and exists after Calvary, as well.

Read Romans 7:8–11. What is Paul saying here about the relationship between the law and sin?

God revealed Himself to the Jews, telling them in detail what was right and wrong in moral, civil, ceremonial, and health matters. He also explained the penalties for violation of the various laws. Violation of the revealed will of God is here defined as sin.

Thus, Paul explains, he would not have known if it was a sin to covet without having been informed of that fact by the "law." Sin is the violation of the revealed will of God, and where the revealed will is unknown, there is no awareness of sin. When that revealed will is made known to a person, he or she comes to recognize that he or she is a sinner and is under condemnation and death. In this sense, the person dies.

In Paul's line of argument here and throughout this section, he is trying to build a bridge to lead the Jews—who revere the "law"—to see Christ as its fulfillment. He is showing that the law was necessary but that its function was limited. The law was meant to show the need of salvation; it never was meant to be the means of obtaining that salvation.

"The apostle Paul, in relating his experience, presents an important truth concerning the work to be wrought in conversion. He says, 'I was alive without the law once'—he felt no condemnation; 'but when the commandment came,' when the law of God was urged upon his conscience, 'sin revived, and I died.' Then he saw himself a sinner, condemned by the divine law. Mark, it was Paul, and not the law, that died."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1076.

In what sense have you "died" before the law? How, in that context, can you understand what Jesus has done for you by giving you a new life in Him?

The Law Is Holy

Read Romans 7:12. How do we understand this text in the context of what Paul has been discussing?

Because the Jews revered the law, Paul exalts it in every way possible. The law is good for what it does, but it can't do what it was never meant to do—save us from sin. For that we need Jesus, because the law—whether the entire Jewish system or the moral law in particular—cannot bring salvation. Only Jesus and His righteousness, which come to us by faith, can.

What does Paul blame for his condition of “death,” and what does he exonerate? Why is that distinction important? *Rom. 7:13.*

In Romans 7:13, Paul is presenting the “law” in the best sense possible. He chooses to blame sin, not the law, for his terrible sinful condition; that is, his working “all manner of concupiscence [lust]” (*Rom. 7:8*). The law is good, for it is God's standard of conduct, but as a sinner Paul stands condemned before it.

Why was sin so successful in showing Paul up to be a terrible sinner? *Rom. 7:14, 15.*

Carnal means “fleshly.” Thus, Paul needed Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ could take away the condemnation (*Rom. 8:1*). Only Jesus Christ could free him from slavery to sin.

Paul describes himself as “sold under sin.” He is a slave to sin. He has no freedom. He can't do what he wants to do. He tries to do what the good law tells him to do, but sin won't let him.

By this illustration, Paul was trying to show the Jews their need of the Messiah. He had pointed out already that victory is possible only under grace (*Rom 6:14*). This same thought is reemphasized in Romans 7. Living under the “law” means enslavement to sin, a merciless master.

What has been your own experience with how sin enslaves? Have you ever tried to play with sin, thinking you could control it as you wished, only to find yourself under a vicious and merciless taskmaster? Welcome to reality! Why, then, must you surrender to Jesus and die to self daily?

The Man of Romans 7

“If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom. 7:16, 17). What struggle is presented here?

Using the law as a mirror, the Holy Spirit convicts a person that he or she is displeasing God by not fulfilling the requirements of the law. Through efforts to meet those requirements, the sinner shows that he or she agrees that the law is good.

What points that Paul already had made did he repeat for emphasis?
Rom. 7:18–20.

To impress upon a person his or her need of Christ, the Holy Spirit often leads the person through an “old covenant” type of experience. Ellen G. White describes Israel’s experience as follows: “The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God’s law; and they readily entered into covenant with God. Feeling that they were able to establish their own righteousness, they declared, ‘All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient.’ Exodus 24:7. . . . Only a few weeks passed before they broke their covenant with God, and bowed down to worship a graven image. They could not hope for the favor of God through a covenant which they had broken; and now, seeing their sinfulness and their need of pardon, they were brought to feel their need of the Saviour revealed in the Abrahamic covenant.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 371, 372.

Unfortunately, by failing to renew their dedication to Christ daily, many Christians are, in effect, serving sin, however loath they may be to admit it. They rationalize that, in reality, they are undergoing the normal experience of sanctification and that they simply still have a long way to go. Thus, instead of taking known sins to Christ and asking Him for victory over them, they hide behind Romans 7, which tells them, they think, that it is impossible to do right. In reality, this chapter is saying that it is impossible to do right when a person is enslaved to sin, but victory is possible in Jesus Christ.

Are you having the victories over self and sin that Christ promises us? If not, why not? What wrong choices are you, and you alone, making?

Saved From Death

Read Romans 7:21–23. How have you experienced this same struggle in your own life, even as a Christian?

In this passage, Paul equates the law in his members (his body) with the law of sin. “With the flesh,” Paul says, he served “the law of sin” (*Rom. 7:25*). But serving sin and obeying its law means death (*see Rom. 7:10, 11, 13*). Hence, his body—as it functioned in obedience to sin—fittingly could be described as “the body of this death.”

The law of the mind is God’s law, God’s revelation of His will. Under conviction of the Holy Spirit, Paul consented to this law. His mind resolved to keep it, but when he tried he couldn’t because his body wanted to sin. Who hasn’t felt that same struggle? In your mind you know what you want to do, but your flesh clamors for something else.

How can we be rescued from this difficult situation in which we find ourselves? *Rom. 7:24, 25*.

Some have wondered why, after reaching the glorious climax in the expression “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord,” Paul should refer once more to the struggles of the soul from which he apparently has been delivered. Some understand the expression of thanksgiving as a parenthetical exclamation. They believe that such an exclamation follows naturally the cry, “Who shall deliver?” They hold that, before proceeding with an extended discussion of the glorious deliverance (*Romans 8*), Paul summarizes what he has said in the preceding verses and confesses once again to the conflict against the forces of sin.

Others suggest that by “I myself” Paul means “left to myself, leaving Christ out of the picture.” However Romans 7:24, 25 are understood, one point should remain clear: left to ourselves, without Christ, we are helpless against sin. With Christ we have a new life in Him, one in which—although self will constantly arise—the promises of victory are ours if we choose to claim them. Just as no one can breathe for you or cough for you or sneeze for you, no one can choose to surrender to Christ for you. You alone can make that choice. There’s no other way to attain for yourself the victories that are promised us in Jesus.

Further Thought: “There is no safety nor repose nor justification in transgression of the law. Man cannot hope to stand innocent before God, and at peace with Him through the merits of Christ, while he continues in sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 213.

“Paul desires his brethren to see that the great glory of a sin-pardoning Saviour gave significance to the entire Jewish economy. He desired them to see also that when Christ came to the world, and died as man’s sacrifice, type met antitype.

“After Christ died on the cross as a sin offering the ceremonial law could have no force. Yet it was connected with the moral law, and was glorious. The whole bore the stamp of divinity, and expressed the holiness, justice, and righteousness of God. And if the ministration of the dispensation to be done away was glorious, how much more must the reality be glorious, when Christ was revealed, giving His life-giving, sanctifying, Spirit to all who believe.”—Ellen G. White *Comments, The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1095.

Discussion Question:

❶ “In 7:25 the Apostle writes: ‘With the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.’ This is the clearest passage of all, and from it we learn that one and the same (*believing*) person serves at the same time the Law of God and the Law of sin. *He is at the same time justified and yet a sinner (simul iustus est et peccat)*; for he does not say: ‘My mind serves the Law of God’; nor does he say: ‘My flesh serves the Law of sin’; but he says: ‘I myself.’ That is, the whole man, one and the same person, is in this twofold servitude. For this reason he thanks God that he serves the Law of God and he pleads for mercy for serving the Law of sin. But no one can say of a carnal (*unconverted*) person that he serves the Law of God. The Apostle means to say: You see, it is just so as I said before: The saints (*believers*) are at the same time sinners while they are righteous. They are righteous, because they believe in Christ, whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them. But they are sinners, inasmuch as they do not fulfill the Law, and still have sinful lusts. They are like sick people who are being treated by a physician. They are really sick, but hope and are beginning to get, or be made, well. They are about to regain their health. Such patients would suffer the greatest harm by arrogantly claiming to be well, for they would suffer a relapse that is worse (*than their first illness*).”—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 114, 115. Can we agree with what Luther wrote here or not? In class, give reasons for your answers.

“Find the Book”

Gahida* was born into a Muslim family, in a country of the former USSR. For decades, she followed the religion of her family. One day as she was praying, Gahida saw an angel who told her to “Find the Book . . . Find the Book.” Gahida wondered what “the Book” was.

Five years later, she received the answer. A Seventh-day Adventist evangelist came to her city, and Gahida decided to attend the meetings. There she saw a Bible for the first time and was able to buy one.

“When I began reading the Bible, I realized that this was ‘the Book’ that the angel told me to find,” recalls Gahida. She soon found many parallels between her Bible and the Quran.

Although she enjoyed the meetings, Gahida didn’t immediately become an Adventist. She was afraid that God would punish her. The evangelist, however, was praying for her, and Gahida decided to visit the church “just once.”

“The sermon was about the Samaritan woman in John 4. I knew it was me,” recalls Gahida. “I was like that Samaritan woman, searching for something better. When I fell in love with Jesus, I understood that He is the best—I don’t need anything but Christ!”

Gahida was baptized and, after a while, wanted to find a way to share her new faith with those who were still in her former religious community. She decided to write a book about her own spiritual journey and compare some elements of her previous faith with Bible teachings. She prayed much about publishing the book and received enough donations to print 1,500 copies.

Unafraid, she hand delivered her book to hundreds of religious leaders of her previous faith. “You need to think about what you believe in, and I think you’ll find this book helpful,” she said.

Gahida also has translated several books by Ellen G. White into her native language, but one book, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, almost wasn’t published.

“When the central press received my translation files, it was a time of great political unrest. Someone tried to kill the country’s president, and immediately all publishing houses were closed. Government agents checked every publishing house, looking for controversial material. When the agents came to the central press, the chief editor wasn’t able to switch on one of the computers. It was the only computer that had the translated files for *Patriarchs and Prophets*. After the government agents left, the computer easily turned on and they were able to print the book.

“It would have been very expensive to publish,” Gahida recalled, “but we didn’t have to pay anything. The chief editor told us, ‘This is a great work that you’re doing—we can’t take any money from you.’”

Gahida is thankful for the special ministry that God has given her. “Many are very grateful to receive these materials,” she said, “and through her writings, Ellen White has become my best friend.”

*Not her real name.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 7:4–6*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that Paul is calling for a shift away from a law-sin-death identity to a new identity as one united with Christ.

Feel: Revel in the reality of his or her marriage union with Christ and in the knowledge that the Spirit will be fully operative in such a union.

Do: Bear fruit to God in a way never before possible outside of union with Christ.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus Will Not Share You.

A If the law is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual, why does Paul keep moving his readers to identify themselves anew around Christ instead of the law?

B Why can't we be married to both Christ and the law? What might Paul be afraid of if we tried?

II. Feel: Death and Remarriage

A What does it mean to “die” to something so that you can “live” for something (or Someone) else?

B Why is marriage such a fitting metaphor for being joined to Christ?

III. Do: Spirit Obedience

A What is the difference between serving in the new way of the Spirit and serving in the old way of the written code (*Rom. 7:6*)?

B In reference to the previous question, is the *content* of such obedience different, the same, or a little bit of both?

▶ **Summary:** Romans 7 expands on the contrasts in Romans 6 but more fully explains how the struggle between the two experiences—law/sin/death versus Christ/Spirit/obedience/life—then is played out in our personal lives.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 7:1–14*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As good as the law is, it has failed to produce the obedience and corresponding life expected of God’s people. In a sense, it seemed to aggravate the sin problem. Paul carefully sets out to replace the law as a primary source of identity, all the while affirming and defending it, and, instead, links his readers to their new identity in Christ. The results are Spirit, life, and, ironically, true obedience to the law.

Just for Teachers: As a church, we’ve echoed many of the Pauline affirmations of the law but, at times, have found Paul’s negative assessment of the law difficult to explain. Listen carefully to how Paul describes the phenomenon of the law in Romans 7, and guide the class in allowing Paul to explain himself.

Opening Discussion: If you are a Seventh-day Adventist, criticisms can come fast and furious from other Christians, such as: “You are still living under the Old Covenant”; “We’re saved by grace, not the law”; “The commandments were nailed to the cross”; “You’re a legalist”; “Paul says this and Paul says that”; and on and on it goes. So, how do we answer?

When it comes to others using Paul’s negative comments on the law against us, the temptation is simply to start popping out law-affirming verses from Paul, John, James, or Jesus. But this tactic only pits parts of the Bible against itself. What can leave a more lasting impression on our listeners is if we go to the very texts others are using against us and then explain *in context* what those verses actually mean. This approach is especially crucial in dealing with Romans 6 and 7.

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ In addressing controversies concerning the law, why is it more effective to stick with Paul’s arguments rather than pulling verses from other books?
- ❷ Though Romans 7 is currently controversial, do you think it was controversial when first read to the Romans? Why, or why not?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *Romans 7 is an expansion of Romans 6; so, look*

for parallel ideas that Paul may repeat and expand on. Also, glance at Romans 8 because many of the strands of Paul's thinking come together there, and you want to be sure your conclusions match those found in Romans 8.

Bible Commentary

I. A Funeral and a Remarriage (*Review Romans 7:1–4 with your class.*)

Paul connects two metaphors together (death and marriage) to explain a profound transition that has taken place as a result of the arrival of the Messianic Age. The illustration contains two husbands and a wife, but the interpretation is conceptually tricky, because the one who dies (“You also have died”) is the same one to remarry (“So that you may belong to another”). This meaning contains the idea that the “you” is the wife married to one husband. In other words, the other husband is the one “raised from the dead” (*Rom. 6:9*), i.e., Jesus. So putting it all together, Paul says that *you* have died so that *you* can remarry. In context, the dying “you” is the same as the one who “died to sin,” the “old self was crucified,” so that the “body of sin” could be destroyed (*Rom. 6:2, 6, ESV*). But in the same way as we die with Christ in His crucifixion, we also *live* through His resurrection (*Rom. 6:4*). So, it has already been introduced that the same person can die but also live. Therefore, being both a dead wife and a living wife is not so odd.

Some have mistakenly deduced that the law is one of the dead husbands. But the law is what the individual died *to*. The law itself did not die but our relationship to it did. The law in the illustration is the binding influence that held the woman to her first husband. Death was the means by which that bond was broken for the purpose of remarriage to Christ. It is a subtle but crucial difference.

So, what does all this nuance mean, and what is Paul's main point? First, notice whom he is addressing: “I am speaking to those who know the law” (*Rom. 7:1, ESV*). These are Jews and/or Jewish proselytes. Their identity, both ethnic and religious, is completely bound to the law in a way that would be difficult for twenty-first century, modern Gentiles (like the majority of us) to conceive of. However, in this Man from Nazareth, God has displayed the greatest revelation of His saving righteousness, and though witnessed to by the law, this revelation is “apart from the law” (*Rom. 3:21, NKJV*).

What Paul is wrestling with, in a sense, is the “good becoming the enemy of the best,” as it were. Making the transition from law-keeping as a source of national identity (with its temple services, types, covenant signs [such as circumcision], and so on) to a new identity revolving around the dying and

risen Messiah proved difficult. But Paul knows that God's people are in the Messianic New Testament age now, and the story of Israel has moved to its last chapter. He wants to encourage them to keep up with God's dynamic, prophetic movements.

Consider This: How does keeping the story of Israel in mind help one understand some of Paul's arguments? Remembering Christ's teaching on the law, what kind of life can the Christian expect when married to Christ?

II. Sin Exploits the Law. (Review Romans 7:5–14 with your class.)

Another reason, not often emphasized, that Paul gives his readers for the necessity of having “died to the law” (*Rom. 7:4, ESV*) is this developing theme that sin takes advantage of the law for its own ends. Notice the progression of verses along this line: “the law came in to increase the trespass”; “our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death”; “sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness”; “the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me”; “for sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me” (*Rom. 5:20; 7:5, 8, 10, 11; ESV*). But how could something as good and holy as the law (*Rom. 7:12*) appear to be complicit in sin and death?

The answer lies in an assumption Paul makes clear in at least three verses: (1) “For while we were living *in the flesh*, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death” (*Rom. 7:5, ESV, emphasis author's*); (2) “For we know that the law is spiritual, but *I am of the flesh*, sold under sin” (*Rom. 7:14, ESV, emphasis author's*); (3) “For God has done what the law, *weakened by the flesh*, could not do” (*Rom. 8:3, ESV, emphasis author's*). When the flesh—a flesh that is radically antagonistic to the law (*Rom. 8:7, 8*)—is confronted with the law, sin and death result, and it may *appear* that the law is causing both. But this conclusion is not the reality, and Paul emphatically denies that the law is culpable. “By no means,” he says, is the law sin, and “by no means” did that which is good bring death (*Rom. 7:7, 13; ESV*). The blame must fully lie on sin's doorstep; that is to say, though the law plays a role in the dynamic between sin and death, it is innocent.

Paul anticipated that these unexpected connections between sin and law would raise eyebrows. As a result, Romans 7 stands as the strongest apologetic (defense) of the law in the entire Pauline writings.

Consider This and a Discussion Question: In your own words, explain the dynamics of the law, sin, death, and flesh that are operating in Romans 7. Why must Paul so vigorously defend the law in light of his own arguments?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: If there is a strong legalistic constituency in your church, shifting one's identity from rules to a relationship with Christ is essential. On the other hand, with the antinomian age we live in, Paul's defense of the law is entirely appropriate, as well. Know your audience and minister accordingly.

Application Questions:

❶ What connections do you see between the two husbands (in the beginning of the chapter) and the inner struggle described at the end of the chapter?

❷ What does Romans 7 have to say to the soul that feels dominated by sin?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Paul is not always easy to read. But he often likes to say the same thing in many different ways. If we don't understand one way, there is still hope later on in his writings. Show an example of this repetition and restatement in his writings and encourage your students to persevere with Paul.

Activities:

❶ Think of Romans 7 as a commentary on Romans 6, or vice versa, and see how many verses you can find from one chapter that inform verses in the other.

❷ Read Romans 1–8 in one sitting with some friends and share what insights emerge from seeing the big picture rather than from a reading of isolated verses.
