

5 Journey to God's reign (Romans 6–7)

God's gospel—his good news that he has raised up his Messiah to reign as our Lord—liberates us from the powers of sin and death so the earth can be all God promised in the beginning. God's gospel therefore calls us to allegiance to his Christ. It's out of trusting his leadership (faith) that God sets us right (justifies) so we do right[eousness]. In this way, the gospel of the Christ ultimately restores everything.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome that was still finding their identity as the people of the Christ. The Jewish Christians had grown up with an allegiance to the Torah as the revelation of what God expected of his people. The gentile Christians recognized Christ's leadership, but were not observing the Torah.

Paul aimed to bring them together under Christ's leadership (Romans 6), to explain the Torah's limitations (Romans 7), and to give them a vision of shared life as the people of God (Romans 8).

But first, any questions from the first five chapters of Romans we need to address?

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5.1 Released from Sin to serve the Son (Romans 6)

Do Christians still sin? Do we go on sinning after giving ourselves to Christ? You might find Paul's answer confronting.

Romans 6:1-2 (NIV)

¹ What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Christians often think of *sin* as any act that is less than perfect. By that standard, we're so conscious of our failures. These verses make us feel more of a failure.

Paul defines sin differently. *Sin* is the tyrant we serve in a world that has cut itself off from God as the one who decides good and evil. Paul is not asking whether you've achieved "sinless perfection." He's questioning whether it's appropriate to keep spending our lives in the service of Sin when we've given our loyalty (faith) to the anointed ruler God gave us. Instead of continuing to serve Sin, offer yourself in the service of your new Master (Romans 12:1).

The whole world was under the tyrant *Sin* (3:9). Then the righteousness of God arrived in his Anointed ruler. Jesus' faithfulness, at the cost of his life (his blood), rescued us from Sin, and restored us to God (atonement). So we give our loyalty (faith) to the Son who rescues us from Sin, the Son who sets us right (justifies). All of that was in Romans 3:21-26.

So, Paul's question is: which master will you serve today? Sin, or Son?

The power you serve (6:1-14)

At the cross, Jesus faced the power of Sin and its ally Death. The reign of Sin and Death ended when the Spirit of holiness raised Messiah Jesus out of death, appointing Jesus as *the Son of God in power* (Romans 1:4).

Your baptism was a sign of your liberation from living under the power of Sin, into the reign of the Son:

Romans 6:3-4 (NIV)

³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

The promise of the gospel is: out of faith[fulness] we're set right (justified) so we do right[eousness]. It's not a matter of striving to do better. Paul doesn't say, "Try harder!" He asks, "Who will you serve today?" There's no point in straining God's grace by continuing to serve the old power (Sin) when Jesus has already overturned that power. Spend the life King Jesus has given you in his service.

If you're still not seeing Sin as a defeated tyrant we no longer need to serve, hear this:

Romans 6:5-14 (NIV)

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body **ruled by sin** might be done away with, that we should **no longer be slaves to sin**—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set **free from sin**.

Sin is the tyrant humanity chose to serve by not recognizing God as our sovereign, by giving power to things that are not God (Romans 1:21-23). Redefining good to mean 'what's good for me' causes us to do evil to each other. That's how the world became enslaved to Sin.

The righteousness of God arrived in the Messiah who overturned the reign of Sin, emancipating us from our enslavement to Sin, returning the world to the reign of our heavenly Sovereign.

Effectively, we were already *dead* under Sin, so it's the resurrection *life* of the Messiah that brings us to *life* in him:

Romans 6:8-11 (NIV)

⁸ Now if we **died** with Christ, we believe that we will also **live** with him.

⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the **dead**, he cannot **die** again; **death** no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The **death** he **died**, he **died** to sin once for all; but the **life** he lives, he **lives** to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves **dead to sin** but **alive to God** in Christ Jesus.

Who do you recognize as Lord? The defeated lord who ruled with death? Or the Lord who brings us to life? Who do you now serve with the life he has given you?

Romans 6:12-14 (NIV)

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness [un-right], but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Is this practical? Will this help you to frame each day in the service of our true ruler as you rise to offer yourself to him each morning?

The final phrase of verse 14 needs further explanation. What does it mean to say we are *not under the law, but under grace*?

- *The Law* is the Torah, the foundational books of YHWH's covenant with Israel that constituted them as his people. The Torah was a good thing: it provided Israel with a picture of what God defined as right for them. But the Torah only made Israel more aware of their failure, since it did not have the power to set them right with God (3:20). Like the rest of humanity, they remained under the power of Sin.
- *Grace* is God's generous treatment of humanity. *Grace* arrived in a person—the gift of his Son. So *grace* achieved what *Torah* could not: liberation from the power of Sin, into the reign of God's Son.

The contrast is all about who is in power. *Under Torah* they were still living under Sin. *Under Grace* they (and the nations) live under the leadership of his Messiah.

Messiah versus Torah: how are we set right? (6:15-23)

Paul's Jewish audience is now having a meltdown. They've always looked to Torah as the definition of what pleases God. If Paul tells them they're *not under Torah*, they fear that their gentile brothers and sisters will feel free to do whatever they like.

But *under grace* does not mean, "Make up your own rules." It means, "Live under the Messiah." The point is that the people of God are no longer **defined** by the Sinai covenant with all of its requirements. The people of God are now defined as those who are in Christ, in the covenant established by God's gift of the Messiah as our leader.

Grace calls us to leave the tyranny of Sin, and serve the Son instead:

Romans 6:15-18 (NIV)

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Whose are you? If you belong to Christ (giving him your loyalty/faith), you have come to life in him, and you now live in him. No longer slaves of Sin, we live in the service of the King of Righteousness.

So how can the Jewish Christians understand this concept of being liberated from the tyrant we were forced to serve, to become the people of God instead? Can you think of an example in Israel's history when God liberated them from a tyrant, to serve the LORD instead?

Romans 6:15-23 (NIV)

¹⁹ I am using an example from everyday life [a human-like case] because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. ²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Pharaoh was serving Sin when he refused God's command to "Let my people go, that they may serve me!" With ten mighty acts, the LORD revealed his authority. With the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh was shown to be merely a human ruler. At the Red Sea, Pharaoh's weapons of death sank, and the people rose from the water to live as a nation under YHWH's leadership through the Sinai covenant.



Passing through the Sea: out of slavery, to be God's people (1 Corinthians 10:1-

What God did for Israel then is what he has now done for the whole world in Christ. So while the gentiles

are not under the Sinai covenant (Torah), they are under Christ. As Israel was freed from Pharaoh to serve the LORD, the nations are freed from Sin to serve the Messiah who restores God's holiness and righteousness to the world.

The question is therefore the same for Jews and gentiles: **Who do you serve?**

- Serve Sin, and it will kill you.
- Serve *the gift of God* (i.e. *Messiah Jesus our Leader*), and we participate in his enduring reign that restores enduring life to a dead world (*eternal life*).

Your thoughts on Romans 6?

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5.2 Torah's hope and limitations (Romans 7)

What role does the Torah play in the life of a Christian? Should we avoid “unclean” food (Leviticus 11)? Should we avoid all work on Saturdays (Leviticus 19:3)? Should we avoid shaving our heads and the edges of our beards (Leviticus 21:5). Should we never wear clothes that are a mixture of cotton and polyester (Leviticus 19:19)?

Paul has already described the Torah as limited to the Jewish nation: *Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law* (3:19). Now he says that the Torah's reach is limited in time also:

Romans 7:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? ² 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 that binds her to him. ³ So then, if she has sexual relations with 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 if she marries another man.

⁴ So, my brothers and sisters, **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 for God.

The marriage illustration (verses 2-3) makes it clear that you are no longer **bound** to a partner who died. The point is that **the Torah bound Israel** in covenant relationship with God until the Messiah died. Israel's life in partnership with God died (literally *was put to death*) when their God-appointed king died (*through the body of Christ*). That was the end of the old covenant relationship with God. The **body of the Messiah** was the evidence that the previous covenant relationship was over.

The resurrection of the Messiah was therefore the start of a new relationship. God's good news calls everyone—Jew and gentile—into faith[ful] relationship bound to the life of the one whom the Spirit of holiness raised from the dead, the Son in power (1:4).

Jews and gentiles had already died, and through faith come to life in the resurrected Christ. That's what our baptism declares (6:4). Consequently, Jews and gentiles *are not under the Torah* (6:14). The death of the Messiah terminated the Torah's claim on the Jewish people.

So now it's the resurrected Messiah—not the Torah—that lays claim to the Jewish people: *you belong to another: to him who was raised from the dead* (verse 4).

This is a new marriage, a new covenant relationship with the living God in Christ:

Romans 7:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. 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.

Paul uses the word *flesh* for your natural life, the life your parents gave you. When you're reborn, you receive a new life from the Holy Spirit. The trouble with our flesh-life is that Sin was operating in us, tugging us to do evil, things that lead to death. The Torah highlighted what *not* to do: *Thou shalt not ...*, said the Ten Commandments.

Romans 7:7-12 (NIV)

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." [Exodus 20:17] ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Picture a school with a decorative water fountain and a sign saying, "No swimming." The sign has no power to reduce a student's desire to have a splashing time on a hot day. Students may never have considered jumping in, but the sign makes them think of it. The prohibition is powerless to prevent our desires, and it may inflame them.

So is the prohibition evil if it creates the desire to do wrong?

Romans 7:13 (NIV)

¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

God's Torah was a good thing. It helped Israel to recognize Sin for the tyrant it is. It blessed for those who obeyed, and cursed those who disobeyed. The blessings included fruitfulness, victory, and prosperity, if they did not *turn aside from any of the commands I give you* (Deuteronomy 28:14). But Torah also delivered disaster for disobedience: drought, defeat, disease, dearth, and death (Deuteronomy 28:18-24).

That was Israel's history. Solomon disobeyed, so God took most of the kingdom from him (1 Kings 11:31-33). Elijah announced a drought to call Israel back to YHWH (1 Kings 17–18). Eventually, both Israel and Judah were defeated by their enemies because of their disobedience (2 Kings 17, 25). The Torah brought death to the disobedient nation. Other kingdoms that were ruled by Sin and Death captured God's nation too, as Sin became utterly sinful throughout the whole earth.

You may have noticed how Paul put himself in this story. Did the good Torah *become death to me, ... bring about my death?* (verse 13) What does he mean by *me*?

- Is Paul seeing himself as part of Israel's story? OR
- Is Paul describing his own person struggle to do right as a Christian?

It's easy to impose our own feelings on what Paul is saying here, but this section is all about (dis)obeying Torah. Any suggestion that Paul is describing his personal struggle completely misses the point Paul made about *not being under the Torah* (6:14), about having been *released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code* (7:6 ESV). Let's read on.

Romans 7:14-25 (NIV)

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ 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.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

As early as the third century, Origen recognized that Paul was speaking “in character.” He was describing how helpless God's people felt before the Messiah came. The Torah was a good thing, but it could not save God's people. Only the Messiah could do that.

And that's Paul's conclusion in verse 25. God delivers his people through the gift of his Messiah as our leader (*Jesus Christ our Lord*). He is the one who rescues us from the wretched, miserable reality that was Israel's experience for more than 1000 years, the unending conflict of being torn both ways: a people yoked to God through his Torah, while also being born as a slave under the power of Sin.

The Torah was a good thing, but it could never save them. It left them cursed, conflicted and condemned—until the Messiah Jesus arrived to deliver his people, *thanks be to God*.

And it's so different now that the Messiah has come to rescue God's people. The next sentence describes life in the Messiah like this: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (8:1).



Israel receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai —
Painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

5.3 So what?

In Romans 6–7, Paul was speaking to those who knew the Law (7:1). He takes them on the journey Israel took to become the people of God: out of slavery to Pharaoh, through the Red Sea, as the people committed to serve the God revealed in the Torah.

But Torah could only take them so far. It guided God's nation, but it could not save them. What the Torah began could only be completed by the Messiah.

Just as Israel faced death at the Red Sea and came out the other side, the Messiah faced death for his people and came out the other side to lead us. That's what our baptism means: we pass through the waters, set free from the tyranny of Sin and Death, rising into life with the Messiah (Romans 6:1-14). It's the same imagery Paul used in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2.

With Pharaoh's army defeated at the Red Sea, God's people were no longer enslaved to the tyrant. But their salvation didn't mean they served themselves; they were freed to serve the LORD, their new sovereign. That's what salvation means for us also: *Now that you have been set free from Sin, you have become slaves of God (6:22).*

Immediately after the exodus, Israel journeyed to Sinai to receive the Torah, the basis of their covenant relationship with the LORD. Romans 7 follows that journey.

Paul explains the goodness and the limitations of the Torah. It was good for them to have their heavenly sovereign's law, but it did not have the power to save them. It led to the death of their nation. Not until God sent his Messiah were the people of God raised to life in a new covenant—not based on the Torah's requirements but based on the life-giving power of the resurrected Christ who liberated God's people from their crushing inability to fulfil what Torah demanded of them (Romans 7).

Romans 7 contrasts the old covenant (based on Torah's requirements) and the new covenant (based on the life-giving power of the resurrected Messiah).

So, do we have anything to say to a believer who is struggling to avoid sin and to do right? Romans 8 is wonderfully helpful. Galatians 5 also describes how our natural flesh-life expresses itself. But Paul doesn't say, "Fight the flesh!" He tells us to live the life of Christ born in us by the Holy Spirit. He offers this promise: *Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).*

By living the life the Spirit has birthed in us, the Spirit produces his fruit. Decide to live today in the life the Spirit has given you. At the end of the day you'll find you were not giving expression to the ways your selfish human nature wanted to react.

Living as restored people of the Messiah is so liberating. What do you think?

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For next week, read Romans 8.