



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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Hope for the hopeless

By
Joseph Tkach



Newspapers are full of bad news—economic uncertainties, persistent problems in Iraq, more strife and terrorism. Many Americans are pessimistic not only about our nation’s future, but their own as well. Friends are not faithful; marriages are not stable; streets are not safe. Financial struggles, job problems, health problems. Life is depressing for many people. Where does a person turn to find hope?

The only hope that has substance is found in the gospel. The gospel does not promise a charmed life filled with constant blessings, but it gives solid assurance that life is worth living, that problems are worth enduring, that the risks of life are worth taking. The gospel provides hope that there is more to life than what we can see—the invisible world is even more real than the world we see. Even the sun will eventually fade away, but spiritual realities will not.

Benefits now and forever

The gospel offers several priceless benefits right now in this life—freedom from guilt, assurance of being loved, guidance on how to live, even an understanding that we can’t rely on the things of this world. And the gospel is a dose of realism, not advertising hype. The gospel lets us in on the secret that getting the most money, climbing the corporate ladder, or being the most popular does not achieve happiness.

Hungering for good relationships, many people live a constant charade, hoping no one ever finds out what they are really like. They are so afraid of losing friends that they never make any, because their fear of not being liked prevents anyone from knowing the “real” them.

The gospel does not guarantee us social skills and good friends (even Jesus’ friends let him down when he needed them most). But it does tell us that God loves us even when we fight against him; we can be sure that he loves us when we are trying to do right, too. There is no one too hopeless to receive the hope of Jesus Christ.

The gospel says that God sent Jesus to die even for the people who killed him. We can never do anything so bad that God will stop loving us. Even the best of friends in this world can let us down, but the gospel points us to an invisible but faithful friend, Jesus. The best in human friendships is only a foretaste of the eternal joy we will have with Jesus.

The gospel gives us hope in handling the problems of life, too. In Scripture, God gives us some amazingly practical advice on how to live. “A soft answer turns away wrath” is a remarkably effective strategy. It is a blessing, even in this life, to be humble, considerate, gracious, and grateful. The way of Jesus gives tremendous peace of mind; it is an effective antidote to anxiety, as much as we can put it into practice (sometimes we aren’t very good at it). But we have confidence in knowing that the Bible puts us on the right track.

No matter what

There is a remarkable serenity in Hebrews 13:6. This letter notes that Christians have been thrown in jail, had their possessions taken away, and were threatened with death. In the chapter on faith it notes that many of God’s people were persecuted, ridiculed, beaten and killed. And then it says, “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”

Yes, what can people do to us? They can beat us, steal from us, and even kill us, but we do not need to be afraid. That’s because the great promises of the Christian faith are not in our possessions, and not even in this life—they are in the peace of God that passes understanding, and in the wonderful eternity of tomorrow. Do not fear those who can kill you, Jesus said—they cannot take away the life to come.

No one can take the prize away from us. Our true hope is not here, but in the hereafter. Yes, we might “hope” that we’ll get a raise next week, but we don’t stake our life or sanity on it. Our real hope, the confidence we

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can have for the future, looks far beyond next week or even next year—it looks to the next life.

The gospel not only tells us how to live—it tells us how to die, too—to die without fear, to die without regrets, to die without guilt. It offers forgiveness for sin, confidence in salvation, and peace in our relationships. We don't always take full advantage of these, but the gospel offers them—free, because Jesus paid the price that was necessary. And when the Creator has paid the price, we know it has been paid in full.

The gospel doesn't promise us a long life (because of persecution, some people could actually live longer if they denied the gospel), but it enables us to die with the assurance that our life had meaning, and that it will go on forever. We are willing to let go of this life because we know that a better one is waiting for us. On the other hand, we accept this life as long as we are blessed to have it, because God is using it for good. Whether we live or die, we can be confident: The Lord is our helper; we will not be afraid.

Hope for eternity

The gospel helps us in this life, but its biggest benefits are in the next. That's because this life is temporary, no matter how good it is, and the next life is not only much better, it is without end. When Paul was on trial for his life, he said that it was "because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6; 26:6). Maybe he "hoped" to get out of jail right away, but the real hope on which he based his life and ministry was the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then his life was a waste, and his faith futile (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). If there is no resurrection, then we are all hopeless.

The hope on which we base our life is the resurrection—the promise of living forever with Christ in glory and joy. It is that kind of confidence in the future that allows us to make the minor sacrifices needed for us to serve other people. We don't have to be so protective of our time, since we have an eternity ahead of us. We don't have to be so worried about what other people think of us, when the Creator himself cares for us intensely. We need not fear, for the worst thing they can do to us is temporary. We don't have to cling to the wealth of the world, since we are promised riches far greater.

The gospel doesn't *force* us to let go of the temporary pleasures of this life, but it gently says, "Those things don't matter very much". Your life is a vapour, soon to pass away. Your pain will soon pass away. Your money is a vapour, too; you needn't drive yourself crazy trying to make it or hang on to it. Just use it, and your life, for God's sake. Your real hope is in the future.

A message of hope

Our hope, Paul says, is for "redemption of our bodies" at the return of Christ (Romans 8:23). And then he explains the nature of hope: "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (verses 24-25).

We do not yet see the glory that Christ has promised us; we do not yet experience all the blessings he will give, and that's why we call it hope. We don't have it yet, but we know it is certain. So we can be "joyful in hope" and "patient in affliction" (Romans 12:12).

Paul told Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). Our hope, he said, was in eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7). The "blessed hope" is the return of Christ, when we will be given glorious, immortal bodies (Titus 2:13). "Set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:13).

How do we get hope? It is "through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures" (Romans 15:4). Why can we have hope? Because of Jesus, the Root of Jesse (verse 12). "On him we have set our hope" (2 Corinthians 1:10). He is "our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1). And since we have a sure hope like that, we can be bold, confident in our eternal reward (2 Corinthians 3:12).

I pray with Paul "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:18). It will be worth the wait.

We were called to a hope (Ephesians 4:4), and the gospel holds out hope (Colossians 1:23). Through the gospel, God has made known this mystery: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Part of our spiritual armour is "the hope of salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5:8). Clearly, the gospel is a message of hope—confidence in eternity because of the grace of Jesus Christ.

I will close with the words of Paul, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). May we overflow with hope—enough to share with other people. That's something worth thinking about.

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Why should we tell people about Jesus?

Reflections on Romans 10:1-15



By Jonathan Stepp
Nashville, Tennessee, pastor

In Romans 10:1 Paul says that it was his heart's desire to see his fellow Israelites saved. But there was a problem: the Israelites that he knew were relying on the law to be right with God (Romans 10:2-4). Christ is the end of all that, Paul says. You cannot be right with God by improving yourself. The only way to be right with God is if God makes you right with him.

We have all lived under laws at times. When I was a boy I lived under my mother's laws. One of her rules was that you didn't track mud and dirt all over her clean kitchen floor when you came in from playing in the yard. You had to get the dirt off before you came in the house, even if it meant being hosed down on the back porch.

God cleans us up

God is no different. He doesn't want the filth of our sins tracked all over his house. The problem is, we have no way of cleaning ourselves up. It's a catch-22 situation: we cannot come in until we are clean, but we have no way of getting clean. Only those who are holy, sinless and pure of heart can see God, yet no one can achieve that purity on his or her own.

That's why God had to come out of his house, in the person of Jesus, and clean us up. Only he could make us clean. If you are waiting to come into God's house until you get the dirt off, you will be waiting until judgment day. But if you believe what he says, that he has already made you clean, you can come in right now and sit down to dinner at his table.

Understanding the remainder of Romans 10 hinges on understanding this fact. It is impossible to know God until your sin has been removed. Knowing God does not make it possible to have your sin removed; having your sin removed is what makes it possible to know God.

To back up this point in Romans 10:5-8, Paul quotes from the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)." As human beings we cannot seek out and find God; he comes to us.

God has found us

Moses had been to the mountaintop, seen God, received his word, and brought it down to Israel. They did not need to go find God and see what he says—God had already found them.

It is the same with Jesus, Paul is telling us. The eternal Word of God has come down to us, being made flesh as the man Jesus. We could not go up to heaven and find him, or summon him to our aid. But he could, and did, choose in his divine freedom to come down to us. Jesus saved the creation by cleaning up the dirt of sin and thus opened the way for us to come into God's house.

That leaves us with the question: will we believe what God says? Will we believe that he has come down to us, found us, and already made us clean so that we may enter his presence? Will we believe that Jesus has already washed the dirt off us so that we can now come into his house? To fail to believe this is to remain outside God's house.

This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 10:9-13. This is reality: God has redeemed his creation through Jesus Christ. This is reality: he washed away our sins and made us clean by his own work and righteousness, without any input, help or even request from us. When we believe in Jesus, confessing that he is Lord, we are now living in reality.

Here is an example. On Jan. 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This executive order said that all slaves

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in all states in insurrection against the U.S. government were now free.

The news of this freedom did not reach the slaves of Galveston, Texas, until June 19, 1865. For two and half years those slaves had been legally free, but they did not know it and could not live in the reality of it until soldiers of the U.S. Army arrived to tell them.

Jesus saves us

It is important for us to realize that it is not our confession that saves us. Jesus saves us. Remember what Paul has already told us earlier in Romans 10: we cannot obligate God to do anything. Our good works do not make us right with God, and it does not matter what kind of work we are talking about. Whether it is the work of obeying a rule—like keeping a day sacred or avoiding alcohol—or whether it is the work of saying, “I believe.” As Paul says in Ephesians 2:8, even our faith is a gift from God!

Maybe it is helpful to think of the difference between a contract and a confession. A contract is a legal agreement in which an exchange takes place. Each party is obligated to trade something to the other. If we have a contract with God, then our confession of Jesus obligates him to save us. But we cannot obligate God to act on our behalf; that would be like ascending to heaven to bring Christ down. Grace is Christ choosing, in his divine freedom, to come down to us.

In a confession, however, a person stands in open court and admits to the reality that already exists. A criminal might say: “I admit it. I stole the merchandise.” He has confessed to the true state of his world. Likewise, a follower of Jesus says: “I admit it. I needed to be saved and Jesus saved me.” He has confessed to the true state of the world.

Confess that we are free

What the slaves in Texas in 1865 needed was not a contract to buy their freedom. They needed to know and confess that they were already free. Their freedom

had already been established. President Lincoln could set them free, and he did set them free by his executive order. God had the right to save us, and he did save us by the life of his Son.

What the slaves in Texas needed was to hear that their freedom had been established, to believe that it was so, and to begin to live accordingly. Of course, this world being what it is, their freedom was only the first step in a long road toward being treated as free. Slaves need someone to come and tell them they have been set free. This is Paul’s point in Romans 10:14.

Can you imagine what it was like for those slaves, chopping cotton in the 100-degree heat of Texas on that June day to hear the good news of their freedom? When they looked up and saw the U.S. Army coming, don’t you think that was the most beautiful sight they had ever seen?

I think Paul would say that it was. In Romans 10:15 he quotes from Isaiah: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” What does that tell you about our role in God’s plan of salvation? We are his army, carrying the good news of what he has accomplished to all those who have not yet heard.

We cannot save a single person. Our job is to be the heralds, the messengers, the newscasters of the good news of what Jesus has already accomplished.

Why should we tell people about Jesus? Because they are living as slaves when they should be free. Jesus won their freedom 2,000 years ago, and they still haven’t believed the good news.

The Israelites that Paul knew were relying on the law to be right with God (Romans 10:2-4). Christ is the end of all that, Paul writes. You cannot be right with God by improving yourself. The only way to be right with God is if God makes you right with him.

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LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 8: Mark 1:16 - 20

A Lesson About Fishing



By Michael Fezell

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

When I was a small boy growing up in northern Louisiana, I went fishing every chance I got. By age six, though, we had moved to Southern California, and between the rigors of big city life and my family not having a lot of money, chances for fishing were dramatically fewer. Still, there were the occasional trips to the Malibu pier with a friend, and a couple of times a year my uncle took me out on one of the off-shore barges that local fishing enthusiasts flocked to. Between sessions of untangling lines with the elbow-to-elbow crowd on board, we usually managed to hook a couple of bonita, several mackerel and if we were really lucky, a small halibut.

We fished the Kern River a couple of times, as well as Lake Isabella and Lake Piru. As a boy, I had a clear definition of the difference between freshwater and saltwater fishing: Freshwater fishing is usually more relaxing, but the fish are smaller and you're less likely to catch one.

The kind of fishing the Zebedee boys were doing in Jesus' day was nothing like the hook, line and sinker kind I enjoy. What they did was work, hard work. They would have thought I was crazy if I had suggested: "Hey guys, let's take a break and go fishing. We all need some rest."

They had huge, heavy nets to cast out, draw in, unload, clean, dry and mend. They had hundreds of fish to process and sell. They had the boat to clean and repair. Fishing was not a sport or a break. It was their livelihood, and in many ways it was their life.

We are not told whether James and John liked their part in their dad's fishing business. All we know is that when Jesus called them, they left it and followed him. Presumably, Jesus said the same thing to them that he said to Simon and Andrew, "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men."

What did Jesus have in mind when he said, "Fishers of men"?

Most of us Bible types are quick to run analogies into the ground. Jesus, being a good bit smarter than we are and knowing a little something about analogies, probably was thinking more about the obvious parallels than the picky details that sometimes fill sermon time and Bible study sessions. Instead of casting nets to draw in fish for breakfast tables, these disciples would now be casting the gospel to draw in people for the kingdom of God.

In Mark's previous paragraph, he described Jesus as preaching, "Repent and believe the gospel" (v. 15). It's a rather indiscriminate message. Like a net, it falls wherever it falls and, like fish, some people get caught in it while others swim obliviously by.

We count the fish who, by time and chance, escape the net, as lucky fellows who will grow a little bigger for the next time the net comes their way. We count the people who run from or dismiss the gospel as missing out on the best thing that could ever happen to them, and we pray that they might get caught next time the gospel splashes down around them.

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However, as Jesus mentioned once in a parable, the fishing net gathers up a whole lot of stuff besides good eatin' fish (Matthew 13:47-48). The net does not discriminate; it picks up every kind of fish out there, good and bad alike. At the end of the day the worthless ones have to be separated out and discarded.

Likewise, the gospel does not discriminate; it applies to the whole world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:1-2). But the only ones who can join the great celebration of the kingdom of God are the ones who believe that they really are in God's gracious net. If they won't trust God's word of love and grace for them, then the gospel of their salvation is meaningless to them, and they cannot even understand the kingdom of God, much less desire to be part of it. They prefer their own kingdom, the shrivelled, selfish one they think is so grand. So they have to be tossed out of God's banquet room, where he had places set for everybody.

The kingdom of God is not a matter of choice; it's a matter of trust. Peter, Andrew, James and John trusted Jesus, which is why they followed him. It wasn't that they sized things up and chose, like choosing ice cream over spoiled milk. It was that they trusted this person who called them. He wasn't calling them to a finer and grander life; he was calling them to persecution and deprivation—and eventually to getting murdered.

If it was a choice issue, then only a foolish son would run off after an itinerant preacher instead of maintaining the family business and ensuring the care and security of his parents and siblings. But it was a trust issue—they trusted Jesus. Only in the light of trust can we see clearly that there really is no choice at all but to follow him.

Doubt

But let's face it, sometimes we doubt. We sin, and we doubt our standing with God. Our plans and hopes are frustrated, and we might doubt whether God cares. Bad things happen to us, and we might even doubt there is a God. Doubt is always just a downturn away, ready to move in on our often-fragile faith.

But those ups and downs in the strength of our faith are all part of learning to trust Jesus Christ. God accepted his faith in our place and on our behalf, so it isn't a matter of how strong or weak our faith is—Jesus' faith before God on our behalf is what matters. Again, we rely on him, not on our faith.

Likewise, our success in overcoming is not what we should use as a measure of our standing with God. God accepted Jesus' righteousness in our place and

on our behalf, so it isn't a matter of how much progress we make in overcoming—Jesus' righteousness on our behalf is what matters. That's why we rely on him, not on the level or steadiness of our success in overcoming. Indeed, the Spirit leads us into right behaviour, but right behaviour is no measure of our standing with God. We stand right with God for one reason only—God loved us so much that his Son took humanity into himself and through his life, death and resurrection made humanity righteous in his righteousness. That is the substance, the reality, of our righteous standing before God.

In spite of our sins

A friend who grew up as a foster child who was shuffled from home to home expressed how he had trouble trusting new foster parents. In the back of his mind, he believed that once the new parents discovered the extent of his faults and problems, they would reject him and send him on. He would try very hard to please the new family, desperately trying to measure up, but eventually he would have to pack up and move again.

Sometimes, we can feel a bit like that in our relationship with God. We want to believe his good word for us, but in the back of our mind, there is the nagging doubt that God won't really accept us in spite of our sins. So we make up all kinds of ways to keep ourselves on the straight and narrow, desperately trying to measure up to some semblance of a person decent enough for God to accept. And all the while, deep inside, we believe we are sunk, because in our most honest moments we know our sins are dark and many.

If we could only believe the gospel, we would believe that Christ died for us because we are sinners, and that in spite of our sins, he has determined not to be without us. He wants us to trust him to love us in spite of all we are, all the mess we've made of life, all the problems we've caused, people we've hurt, things we've said and places we've been. He wants us to trust him to be our righteousness, trust him to clean up our lives, and above all, to trust him to love us unconditionally and to never leave us nor forsake us.

The gospel is good news for bad people, and unlike fishing nets; it doesn't need washing and mending. It's perfect just the way it is.

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For Reflection:

When have you felt as though God couldn't really love a person like you? Have you talked to him about it?

LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 9: Mark 1:21 - 28

A Lesson About Authority



By Michael Fezell

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The teachers of the law didn't speak with their own authority. They necessarily prefaced their comments with something like "There is a saying that..." or "Rabbi Such-and-Such said..." Even the prophets rightly attributed their pronouncements to "Thus says the Lord..." But Jesus said simply, "I say to you..."

Here was a man who spoke with his own authority, not in the name of another. That alone was amazing. But if that were not amazing enough, Jesus demonstrated his authority when he told an evil spirit what to do, and the evil spirit obeyed.

In Jesus' day, evil spirits were considered, even by many Jewish teachers, to be numerous and powerful, hanging around everywhere and doing whatever they could to inflict trouble and suffering. When someone seemed to be possessed of a demon, the exorcists, whether Jewish or pagan, used complicated magical rites and spells to compel the demon to leave. The power was in the magic, it was believed, so whoever knew the right incantations and ingredients and

methods could use them to bring about the unseen conditions that would manipulate the spirit world.

But Jesus was astonishingly different. When the demon-possessed man disrupted the meeting, Jesus simply ordered the demon to leave, and it left. The people in the synagogue had never seen anything like it. Who could have such authority that even the evil spirits have to obey his straightforward word?

Not authoritarian

Jesus, the Son of God, had all the authority in the world—in the universe. God created all things through him and put all things under him. So even these spirits that turned evil, though he allowed them to exist, were completely subject to him (see Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 1:20-21).

Yet Jesus did not use his incomparable authority the way we humans tend to use our little sprigs of authority. Man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, wrote Shakespeare. For many humans, authority becomes merely a means of enriching oneself, of getting one's own way, of suppressing the truth, and of getting and holding the power to keep doing those things. Witness the parade of totalitarian regimes, corporate executive, government and ecclesiastical scandals, tyrannical parents, bosses, teachers, government officials and the like.

Not so with Jesus. He has all the authority there is, yet he uses it entirely differently from the way many people would. Let's look at a few examples:

He took action when necessary. Jesus did not stifle normal living by trying to prevent all possibility of something going wrong. He didn't post sentries at the doors to keep all potential demon-possessed-looking people from coming in. He simply dealt with the problem decisively when it arose.

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He didn't overreact. Jesus didn't make a Broadway production out of making the demon leave. He didn't knock the demon around for a while, tell it off for 10 minutes, scream at it, kill it or declare war on all demons. He just made it go.

He didn't crow about it. Jesus didn't use the incident to further his image. He didn't print up flyers and bill himself as the one who tossed out the demon.

Servant authority

Jesus uses authority to serve, not to be served. And that is how he wants us to use whatever authority we might have. Whether our authority is at home, at work, or somewhere else, he wants us to use it to help others, not to make ourselves into big shots.

Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus explained it to his disciples like this, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

What a difference it makes when the authority we're subject to is a blessing instead of a curse. "When the wicked rule, the people groan," says Proverbs 29:2. It is when authority is used to help, not to overpower, that those under it can rejoice.

Jesus doesn't overpower us to make us knuckle under. He serves us with patience and mercy, helping us grow to see how much we need him. Sin is a cruel, harsh, manipulative, unforgiving taskmaster. Jesus is compassionate, gracious, patient, loving and merciful. The authority of sin is fraudulent, but the authority of Jesus is absolute.

Walk with Jesus

When it comes to Jesus' authority in our lives, how do you think he uses it? To help us, or to lord it over us? Many of us live as though we think Jesus uses his

authority to lord it over us. We assume his love for us is conditioned on how well we behave. We feel discouraged and fearful that God no longer loves us when we fail to measure up in our obedience.

But Jesus uses his authority to help us, not to destroy us. He drives out the demons, not us. And literal evil spirits are not the only kind of demons Jesus has authority over and drives out for us. Sin itself is an enemy that does us damage and lords it over us. So are our fears and our doubts.

When our sins and fears start a commotion, it's time for us to take them to the one who knows how to handle them. We can take them to Jesus in prayer and trust him to know what to do.

What's your enemy? What habit, what sin, what fear plagues you, saps your courage and energy? What has you beaten down, enslaved? Whatever it is, it cannot withstand the authority of Jesus. When you give these battles to him, the complexion of the war changes—the enemy is on the run. When you stand close to Jesus, these enemies can't have the last word and can't push you around. When your attention is on Jesus, they don't seem so fearsome, so strong, because Jesus puts them into perspective as the puny weaklings they really are. In Jesus, you are bold and strong, and these bullying, fast-talking fears and sinful habits are weak and insignificant.

Why not take your needs to Jesus? Give your problems to him and trust him to see you through them. He's there for you, now and always.

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For Reflection:

1. Why were those at the synagogue amazed at Jesus' teaching?
2. Why did the evil spirits have to obey Jesus?
3. How did Jesus use authority?
4. How can Jesus help you?

Bible Study

Enslaved to Righteousness

A study of Romans 6



By Michael Morrison

In Romans 5 Paul explains that Christ saved us even while we were sinners. We are saved by grace, not by keeping the law. In chapter 6, he deals with a possible objection: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (Rom. 6:1).

If God's grace is always larger than our sin, should we go through the work of changing our ways? If our salvation doesn't depend on our work, should we simply remain the way we were? Is it OK for us to continue to sin?

"By no means!" Paul exclaims. We should quit sin, even though our salvation does not depend on our success in quitting sin. Obedience cannot earn us salvation, but it does have a purpose.

Death of the sinful self

"We died to sin," Paul says. "How can we live in it any longer?" (v. 2). What does Paul mean? Sin does tempt us, and we struggle against it. But sin makes no sense in our lives. It is self-contradictory to want salvation, to want to escape the death that sin causes, and yet want to sin.

"Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?" (v. 3). What this question needs, Paul says, is knowledge about what Christian baptism does. A person who is baptised into Christ is baptised into his death. But baptism doesn't make all our sinful desires disappear, so what has died?

Jesus died, and in baptism, we died with him. The penalty for our sins is fully paid. Through faith, we are united with Jesus in his death and in his burial. Paul then explains the purpose: "in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (v. 4).

We were baptised/buried with Christ for this purpose: that we might live a new life. We do not continue life the way it was—we change. Baptism unites us not only

with Jesus' death but also his life (v. 5). We were symbolically buried so that we might also rise to a new way of life.

But why would anyone want to live in sin and live with Christ? This combination makes no sense. Why would anyone want to live forever with righteousness, if they want to live in sin right now?

"For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with" (v. 6). Our old person was a body under the power of sin, and it was killed on the cross.

Why? ... "That we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (vs. 6-7). In baptism, our old selves die, so we can escape the bondage of sin. Sin has no more authority over us. When we are united to Christ, we terminate the old life, leave sin behind and live a new life.

In making this point, Paul introduces new imagery: slavery and freedom. Sin is not just something we choose to do—it is a power that works against us. When we die with Christ, we are liberated from this evil slave master. We do not continue serving it, but we live a new life. We do not live perfectly, but we are to live in a new way.

Alive to God

"Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (v. 8). In this chapter, Paul is dealing with life right now. Do we continue in sin? No—we live with Jesus.

"For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him" (v. 9). Jesus has been freed from death and sin, and as we are united with Christ, we are freed from those powers, too. They have no authority over us. Sin may attract us at times, but it cannot force us to do its will. We are no longer slaves of sin.

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"The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God" (v. 10). This is the choice set before us: We can serve sin, or we can serve God. Paul tells us to copy what Christ does: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). When sin tempts us, we are to count ourselves dead. We can say, No, my desire for that is dead.

This isn't automatic, or else Paul wouldn't have to tell us to do it. Our bodies may still have some life in them for sin, but we are to count ourselves as dead to sin. We must remind ourselves that we are really in Christ. We are to resist sin day by day.

But the Christian life is not simply a matter of refusing sin, of playing dead. We are to be alive—alive to God. Our desire to live for him should be vigorously alive!

"Therefore," Paul writes, "do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (v. 12). Of course, we do sin, but we know that Christ has paid the penalty. Our salvation is not in jeopardy, but we are still told to obey God and quit sinning.

A battle rages for control of our bodies. Christ has defeated the old slave master, sin, but it still continues to attack us. It tries to recapture us, so we must resist it.

"Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (v. 13).

Who will win the battle? Let God win, Paul says, because you have been brought from death to life. That is what baptism pictures. You don't have to let sin rule. Instead, let God rule.

We shouldn't let sin use our body parts as tools to make us more wicked. Instead, we need to let God use our bodies as weapons of righteousness, as people who work for his kingdom.

"For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (v. 14). Under the law, we'd be condemned to die. But the penalty of sin has been paid, the power of sin has been broken, the captives of sin have been set free. Christ's mercy has triumphed over the penalty prescribed by the law.

And because we are under grace, sin is not our master. Going back to sin is stupid—like running back to our old slave master, like a prisoner who has been pardoned running back to the old jail cell. It makes no sense to seek salvation at the same time as seeking sin. Either we want to get away from it, or not, Grace makes it possible for us to escape.

Slaves of righteousness

"What then?" Paul asks. "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (v.15). Paul tackles the question again. In this half of the chapter, he gives another way to arrive at the same answer. He develops the analogy of slavery.

"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (v.16).

If you choose sin, you are enslaving yourself to a master who will beat you and work you to death. Instead, choose to be a slave of doing right. The rewards are much better.

The Roman Christians made the right choice, Paul said. "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (vs. 17-18). They obeyed the gospel.

"I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (v. 19). How did Paul know that the Romans were weak? Because all Christians are weak, in their natural selves.

The Romans had become slaves of righteousness, but they needed to be exhorted to continue. If we don't resist sin, it gets worse and worse—ever-increasing wickedness. Instead, we want the habit of doing good. When we do that, it gets better and better—righteousness leading to holiness.

"When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!" (vs. 20-21). When we sin, it might look like we are free from outside control, but we are really enslaved. Sin produces death, and we do not want to serve that kind of master.

"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life" (v. 22). As shown in baptism, Christ has set us free from sin—but we are also under obligation. We are slaves to God, and his benefits are infinitely better: holiness and eternal life.

How is eternal life the "result" of being set free from sin? In earlier chapters, Paul vigorously denied that our obedience causes or earns our salvation—salvation is a gift, based on faith, not works. Here, Paul makes a contrast: sin leads to shame and death; obedience leads to holiness and eternal life.

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Why should we fight sin? Here is Paul's summary: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 23). Sin has bad results. It gives us what we deserve. New life in Christ, on the other hand, has wonderful results, in this life and in the future. It is not a miserly payout—it is a generous gift, given in advance.

Choose life, Paul says. Let righteousness reign! Be alive in Christ!

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Bible Study

The three-way struggle: Law, Sin and Me

A study of Romans 7



By Michael Morrison

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has explained that we are saved by grace, not by observing the law, because Christ died for us. This does not give us permission to sin—rather; we should serve God by being slaves of righteousness. Paul clarifies the relationship between law and sin in chapter 7. He begins by giving us an analogy from marriage, and he speaks to the Jewish believers, because they are the ones who are most concerned about the law.

An illustration from marriage

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? (7:1). Paul has already argued in chapter 6 that believers died with Christ, and we have therefore died to sin. In chapter 7, he will argue that, in our union with Jesus Christ, we also died to the law. When we die to sin, we also die to the law. In the eyes of the law, we are dead.

However, Christians have been given *new* life with Christ, so where does that put us? Paul's second point is that we are under a new authority. In verse 2, Paul uses the analogy of marriage, in which a death can affect the legal status of the living:

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. The law of marriage has force only as long as *both* partners are alive. As soon as one dies, the marriage restrictions are gone.

By analogy, Jews were once bound to *the law*. But since they died with Christ, they are released from the law, and as a result, a *new* union can be formed. That's what Paul is interested in—the new union: **So then, if [a woman] 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 if she marries another man** (v. 3). Because a death has occurred, a new relationship can be formed.

A new authority in our lives

Paul applies his analogy to the law in verse 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.**

Paul's point is that death breaks the bond with the law, and a new bond is permitted. The Jewish believers died to the law through the death of Christ, and their allegiance is now to him rather than the law. We have to be released from the law so we can be united to Christ.

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Jesus was born under the law, but in his death and resurrection, he escaped its obligations. The *risen* Christ does not have to keep the Sabbath or the other laws of Moses, and when we are in Christ, we don't have to keep them, either.

We *are* supposed to avoid sin, but sin is no longer defined by the laws of Moses. Rather, it is defined by the character of Christ. We are to conform to him, and since he is not bound by the law of Moses, neither are we. We belong to the one "who was raised from the dead." Why? To "bear fruit for God." We are to serve him.

Paul contrasts the before and after again in verse 5: ***For when we were controlled by our sinful nature*** [some translations say "the flesh" – the Greek word is *sarx*], ***the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.*** Before Christ, our lives were dominated by our sinful nature, and our sinful desires, instead of bearing fruit for God, brought us death. But with Christ, the flesh no longer controls our life.

Paul says that our sinful passions were "aroused by the law." As he said in Rom. 5:20, the law had the ironic result of *increasing* our desire to sin. Before Paul develops that thought more, he makes this conclusion in 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.***

The law once bound us, but we we have been *released* from it. Instead of serving God according to the law, we serve in a *new* way, defined by the Holy Spirit. Paul explains that in chapter 8; the rest of chapter 7 is a discussion of law and sin.

The law and sin

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? (v. 7). If the law causes our desire for sin to increase, is the law bad? Paul says, ***Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.*** The law reveals what sin is (Rom. 3:20), and that is a dangerous bit of knowledge.

Paul illustrates the problem with the tenth commandment: ***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 coveting*** (vv. 7-8). Paul, like everyone else, had covetous desires, and the law told him that his desires, although normal, were sinful. Paul could keep the external rules of Judaism, but he couldn't prevent himself from coveting, and he learned from the law that this was sin.

But the relationship between law and sin is worse than simply giving information. Paul is saying that the law, by defining sin, told his sinful nature how to *sin more*. Our sinful nature wants to violate laws. If you give it a

rule, it wants to break it. So the law, by prohibiting certain things, made people do them even more, because of our perverse nature. At least this is how it worked for Paul.

But is Paul really talking about himself, or is he just giving a general principle? Some people are troubled by the idea that Paul struggled with sin throughout his Christian life. They would like to put all that struggle in Paul's past, but Paul describes it in the present tense, and I think we should let Paul describe himself the way he wants to, without our theories telling him that he can't mean what he is saying.

In the literary flow of Romans, Paul is talking about something that happens after we come to faith in Christ. In chapter 6 he says that we died to sin, but we still have to fight it. In chapter 7 he says that we died to the law, but we are to serve Christ in the way of the Spirit. He does not want to make it sound effortless or automatic. He's talking about life right now, and so he discusses the relationship between the law and sin. The struggle that began before we came to faith continues even *after* we come to faith.

For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died (vv. 8-9). When was Paul alive apart from the law? Presumably when he was a baby, too young to understand. But when he learned the law, the sinful nature inside of him found a way to express itself—by rebelling. Sin sprang to life, and Paul sinned, and he was condemned.

He said, ***I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death*** (v. 10; see also Rom. 4:15). Paul is apparently speaking from a human perspective here, for in Gal. 3:21 he says that the law could not bring life, so presumably God did not *intend* for it to bring life. Instead, it brought death.

The law showed people what would happen if they went this way, or if they went that way. It gave guidance, but did not force people go either one way or the other. The Jews assumed that the law would give people life, but it actually gives death. Why? Because sin took over. That's what Paul says in verse 11:

For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. Since sin breaks rules, and the law offered rules, it allowed sin to exercise itself. The law allowed sin to trick me, and I got death when I was trying to get life. When Paul tried to be righteous by keeping the law, he relied on himself instead of on God, and that was a sin.

The law is not the problem—it's just that it is so easily hijacked by our sinful desires. The law didn't cause us

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to take a wrong turn—it just told us where we would end up if we took it, and the perversity inside us made us take the wrong turn. Sin deceived us and put us on the pathway to death.

The law isn't the culprit—it was an unwitting accomplice. So Paul concludes in verse 12 that **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good**. The law is holy, but it can't make us holy.

Were the laws of animal sacrifices good? Yes, because God gave them—but that doesn't mean they are required today. We can't use this verse to support any specific laws, because Paul isn't being specific here. He is just saying that God's law, no matter how you define it, is not the cause of the problem.

So Paul asks, **Did that which is good, then, become death to me?** (v. 13). Did the law cause my death? Certainly not, he says. Criminals can't blame the law for what they do. Rather, the law just tells us the results of what we've done.

Nevertheless, Paul says, **in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good [the law] to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful**.

The law is good, but sin hijacks it and uses the law to bring us death. God allowed this so we could see how terrible sin is.

The struggle inside us

Paul describes the struggle that goes on: **We know that the law is spiritual; but I am un-spiritual, sold as a slave to sin** (v. 14). Could this be the Christian Paul, who said he died to sin and is no longer its slave? Yes; Paul will explain how he is both enslaved and freed.

In v. 15 he describes the struggle: **I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do** (v. 15). He wants to do good, but he ends up doing bad, and he struggles to know why. He has a converted mind that wants to do good, but a body that does bad. Why? Because there is another power at work within him.

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good (v. 16). The fact that he doesn't like his own behaviour is evidence that he likes the law.

As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me (v. 17). All the blame goes to sin, not to Paul, and that is why he can say that there is no condemnation for people in Christ (8:1). Whatever bad they do is blamed on the sin within them, not on the new person they are in Christ.

Paul explains the problem by splitting himself in two—there is the old person, in the sphere of sin, and there is the new person in Christ. The new person is enslaved to Christ, but the sinful nature is still enslaved

to sin, and they are both active. Being freed from sin and enslaved to righteousness is not automatic—it involves a struggle.

I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature (v. 18). Paul qualifies his statement by saying that he's talking about the flesh, the sinful nature, not his new nature in Christ. All the good in Paul's life comes from Christ living in him, rather than originating in Paul. The good comes from the new nature, the bad comes from the old, and the Christian life involves fighting against the old.

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 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 (vv. 18-19). Paul wants to do good, but he sometimes sins. The sin within him is hijacking the law, making him do things he wouldn't otherwise do.

Now if I do what I do not want to do [that is, when I sin], **it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it** (v. 20). Paul blames sin, not himself. What he said in verse 14, that he was a slave to sin, is only the way it appeared to be. The reality, he says, is that all my sins are blamed on this hostile power within me, and Christ produces all the good. It is not me, but my old sinful nature that is still enslaved to sin.

Gal. 5:17 describe the same Christian struggle: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in *conflict* with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."

Paul summarizes it in Rom. 7:21: **So I find this law at work: Although 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 [or principle] 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** (vv. 21-23).

So there is a struggle in Paul's life. His mind, led by the Holy Spirit, wars against his body, which has been hijacked by sin. Although he wants to do good, the evil within him sometimes causes him to do things that he hates. So he *groans*, as he says in Rom. 8:23, waiting for the redemption of his body, the resurrection and the *ultimate* victory over his sinful nature.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? How will I escape the sinful nature that fights within me? Paul knows where his deliverance will come from: **Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!** (v.25a).

Paul, even as he writes, is in the *process* of being delivered. It's a lifelong struggle, but the victory is sure, thanks to God! How does it happen? That's what Paul covers in chapter 8—life in the Spirit. That's where the battle is won.

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Paul concludes this chapter with a summary: **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** (v. 25b). Even after he talks about the deliverance being given to him by Christ, Paul says there is a struggle between mind and body. He is enslaved to God's law, the law of Christ, but he sometimes falls short. He's got a new mind, but an old body, and he looks forward to all things being made new!

Questions for discussion

1. In Paul's analogy, is it possible to be yoked to the law and united to Christ at the same time? (v. 3)
2. The commandment against coveting helped Paul see that he was sinful (vv. 7-8). Have I had a similar experience to see that I am sinful?
3. If the commandment brings me death instead of life, how can it be good? (vv. 10, 12)
4. Have I struggled with sin in the way that Paul describes in vv. 15-20?
5. If I blame my sins on a hostile power within me (v. 20), do I reduce the importance of fighting against it?
6. Is God delivering me from the shackles of sin and death? (v. 24).

Michael Morrison

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The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898