

The Old Way of the Written Code

A Second Glance at Romans Chapter 7

by Michael W. Adams

A task of any interpreter of Scripture is to ascertain as closely as possible the intended meaning of the original author as he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A challenge we face in interpretation lies in the fact that none of the original autographs of Scripture exist today and the authors of those original documents aren't here to be questioned. This makes it our responsibility to handle Scripture conscientiously as we work to extract the meaning from a passage. Scripture itself mandates that we handle it with care: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)¹ There are times, however, when good men must agree to disagree on the intended meaning of a particular text. On occasion, more than one option of interpretation may exist and the interpretive data may point in more than one direction. At that point, it becomes the task and responsibility of the interpreter to decide the best meaning based on all of the available data, not the least of which is context. Douglas Moo makes this point concerning the epistles of Paul when he says, "The best interpretation will be the one that is able to do most justice to all the data within the immediate and larger Pauline context."²

One such passage is Romans chapter seven. Historically, there have been three prominent views of the intended meaning of this text. The first view was held almost universally by the early church until the time of Augustine. Simply stated, this view interprets Romans chapter seven as the experience of an unbeliever. The struggles of Romans 7 belong to the unconverted and are foreign to the Christian's experience. Augustine held this view initially, but perhaps due in part to his dealings with Pelagius, he eventually changed his view and taught that Paul was speaking of his present struggles as a believer obligated to obey God's law, but unable to consistently do so because of remaining sin. For Augustine, Romans 7 became that which constituted the normal Christian life:

And it had once appeared to me also that the apostle was in this argument of his describing a man under the law. But afterwards I was constrained to give up the idea by those words where he says, "Now, then, it is no more I that do it." For to this belongs what he says subsequently also: "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." And because I do not see how a man under the law should say, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man;" since this very delight in good, by which, moreover, he does not consent to evil, not from fear of penalty, but from love of righteousness (for this is meant by "delighting"), can only be attributed to grace.³

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 445

³ Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustine, Writings Against the Pelagians*, Chapter 22, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 384

A third and more recent view came from the Keswick, or “higher life” movement. This view is arguably the most prominent one within evangelicalism today. In this interpretation, a believer may live a “defeated” Christian life, overpowered by sin (Romans 7), and yet have the resources available to live the “victorious” Christian life outlined by Paul in Romans chapter eight. In this interpretation, the believer’s goal is to leave behind Romans 7 and live the victorious Christian life of Romans 8. This migration is from the mundane “carnal Christian” life to the exuberant “Spirit-filled” life.

I will attempt to demonstrate in this article that Romans 7:13-25 is a snapshot of the life of Paul as an unconverted Jew living under the law, or as Paul himself puts it, living in the “old way of the written code”⁴ (*Romans 7:6*). We will also demonstrate that this snapshot of Paul’s life before his conversion is taken at a time when he was under conviction by the Holy Spirit to abandon the “old way of the written code” and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, exchanging his old way of life for the “new way of the Spirit” (*Romans 7:6*). This “new way of the Spirit” is then explained and contrasted with the “old way of the written code” in Romans 8:1-4. It is our conviction that this approach to Romans 7 is the one that does the most justice to all of the available data and the one that answers all of the questions normally raised in interpreting this important passage. We leave it to the reader to decide whether we have adequately presented our case.

The Theme of Justification

Romans 7 cannot be isolated from that which precedes and that which follows it. Nor can the larger context of all of Scripture be ignored when dealing with Romans 7. It is important in our interpretation to examine any significant passages in the immediate context and to see what Scripture tells us elsewhere of the subject matter raised in Romans 7. This will enable us to more clearly understand what Paul is saying. Romans 7 and 8 are the climax of an argument that Paul begins to develop long before chapter 7.⁵ For example, Paul presents his definitive statement for justification by faith alone in Romans chapter 3. We define justification as God declaring a sinner righteous in the court of heaven:

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (*Romans 3:21-24*)

⁴ This wording is from Romans 7:6 in the *New International Version (NIV)*. Unless otherwise noted, the wording of the NIV will be used throughout this article.

⁵ Justification is a key topic woven throughout chapters 1-5 of Romans. Chapters 6-8 deal with sanctification, or the evidence of justification. We develop this later in this article, but we mention it here for the reader’s consideration.

The righteousness from God that Paul is referring to is that which is revealed in the gospel (*Romans 1:17*). We define righteousness in this context as our unconditional acceptance by God whereby every accusation that God has against us is graciously removed because of the Christ's perfect payment for sin. In these verses, the imputation of God's righteousness is obtained by grace alone, apart from any works of the Law. Imputation is defined as having the righteousness of Christ freely placed into one's account. All of this is made possible by Jesus Christ's perfect payment for sin on the cross. Unconditional acceptance with the Father and the complete and perfect forgiveness of sin is freely placed into the believer's account at conversion. By His sacrificial death on the cross for all of the elect, Jesus Christ executed the perfect payment for sin for all who believe:

¹²But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (*Hebrews 10:12-14*)

The theme of justification continues into chapter 5 where Paul illustrates our desperate situation and our need for a remedy. The problem is sin and the remedy is justification:

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (*Romans 5:17*)

Justification is the remedy God has provided for our predicament. The sin of Adam, our federal representative in the Garden,⁶ has caused death to reign over us all and apart from justification (God declaring us righteous in the court of heaven) we perish.⁷ Add to our predicament the giving of God's law and see what happens:

²⁰The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (*Romans 5:20-21*)

When Paul says, "the law was added," he is referring to the historical giving of the law and its effect on sin. The Old Covenant era serves as an historic example of the function of law in the life of an unbeliever. Israel as a whole was an unbelieving people, and the

⁶ With Adam as our representative in the Garden, we come into this world with both a bad record and a bad heart (*Romans 5:18-19*). In Adam, all die (*1 Corinthians 15:22*).

⁷ In the context of *Romans 5*, physical death is a picture of spiritual death or condemnation in contrast to justification (*Romans 5:16*). We cannot see spiritual death, but we can see physical death.

Old Covenant⁸ serves as a model for the effects of Biblical law upon an unbelieving heart. When God's law in any era, the New Covenant or the Old,⁹ addresses an unbelieving audience, the outcome is the same: sin becomes "utterly sinful." (*Romans 7:13*) When I say that Israel as a whole was unbelieving, I do not want to imply that there was no belief during the Old Covenant era. David is certainly one exception.¹⁰ There was always a believing remnant, but when spoken of as a whole, Scripture concludes that Israel is an unbelieving people (*Jeremiah 9:25-26, Malachi 3:7, Matthew 13:13-15*).

Paul's illustration of the addition of the law serves as an example of its effect on an unbelieving heart. Paul's argument in this passage is a judicial one: his theme is still justification and he is speaking of the objective status of a guilty sinner before a holy God. The outcome of the giving of God's law on an unbelieving heart makes an already bad record in Adam, worse. The giving of God's law to an unbelieving people had the effect of turning them into "their own Adam":

The word "trespass" alludes to the sin of Adam (cf. vv. 15, 17, 18), but considered in its corporate dimension as "power." ... Since Paul has used the sin of Adam in this context, we may say that the law has the function of turning those it addresses into "their own Adam": as a sinner who "transgresses" known law (cf. v. 14).¹¹

Instead of being a remedy for sin, the law makes an already sinful situation worse. With the addition of God's law, the unbeliever becomes a lawbreaker just like Adam; they begin to contribute their own sin as lawbreakers and the need for justification becomes even more apparent. Apart from justification, sin will continue to "reign in death," but for the recipients of grace and the justification that accompanies it, imputed righteousness reigns and the result is eternal life.

Before proceeding, let's review what we've said to this point. We have defined righteousness as our unconditional acceptance by God. If it is possible for God to accept us, we are by definition, righteous. We have defined justification as God's declaration that the believer is righteous. To be justified is to be declared righteous by God in the court of heaven. We have also defined imputation as the righteousness of Christ being placed into the believer's account. By definition, all who believe are declared righteous.

⁸ The Mosaic Law was the law of the Old Covenant era. The Ten Commandments represented that law. For more information explaining my theological point of view, visit the *Gospel Pictures* section of my web site at <http://thegospelinreallife.com/gospel-pictures/>.

⁹ Biblical law functions radically different in the life of a believer than it does in the life of an unbeliever. The two historic examples of law – the Mosaic Law and the Law of Christ illustrate this. The historic example of law in an unbeliever is the Law of Moses, which Paul uses here. Because it was given to an unbelieving people, it had the effect of "increasing" sin.

¹⁰ As a believer, David loved the law of God because he had experienced the forgiveness of sin. But he was an exception for that era, and not the rule.

¹¹ Moo, 348

The Evidence of Justification

Beginning in chapter 6 of Romans, Paul makes a clear shift away from his judicial argument of justification by faith alone into the experiential realm of a transformed life. A transformed life becomes the tangible evidence of justification. We cannot see justification, but we can see a life that is being transformed. By His death on the cross, Jesus Christ purchased not only the perfect forgiveness of sins, but a transformed life:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (*2 Corinthians 3:18*)

Failure on our part to fully recognize the transformation that accompanies salvation has resulted in a tendency to redefine what is “normal” in the Christian life. Transformation is guaranteed for the believer and is evidence of our justification. If one exhibits no transformation at all, their profession of faith lacks tangible evidence.

Every believer is being led by the Spirit of God to know Christ intimately and to pursue transformation by learning what pleases Him (*2 Corinthians 5:9, Ephesians 5:8-10, Colossians 1:10*). This is sanctification viewed from God’s point of view and it was purchased on the cross for all who believe.¹² This transformation and motivation to love Jesus Christ is the result of the work of saving grace.

¹¹For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹²It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (*Titus 2:11-14*)

This sanctifying work of the Spirit provides both the motivation and the ability to “say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.” The work of the Spirit in the believer’s life is the driving force that brings about transformation and unconditional acceptance with the Father. Everyone who believes the gospel and is saved receives this transforming work of the Spirit that guarantees change. We are now ready to move into chapters 6 and 7 of Romans to join Paul in his discussion of the new heart as the evidence of justification.

¹² In saying this, I don’t want to give a lopsided or unbiblical view of sanctification. Scripture commands the believer in numerous places to “sweat for Jesus.” I acknowledge the fact that there is human responsibility in “working out our salvation,” and that the believer is obligated to work hard and persevere as evidence that God’s “calling and choosing” him is certain. But from God’s point of view, our sanctification is guaranteed and every true believer perseveres in belief to the end because of grace (*Philippians 2:12-13*).

Is a Believer a “Slave to Sin?”

We can make a simple outline of the early chapters of the book of Romans as follows:

- Chapter 1 – 5: The Need for Justification
- Chapters 6: The Evidence of Justification
- Chapter 7: Life Under the Law
- Chapter 8: Life in the Spirit

Using this outline as our guide,¹³ chapter 6 begins a section of Romans that is experiential and extremely practical. In chapter 6, Paul answers the question, “What does justification look like?” In answering that question, he introduces us to a new term, “slave to sin.” In the transition out of chapter 5 and into 6, Paul is moving from cause to effect: the “reign” of sin in chapter 5 makes those in Adam a “slave to sin” in chapter 6. However, this is not the experience of a believer. In Paul’s argument, the believer is not a “slave to sin.” Let’s look at what he says:

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We 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. ⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- ⁷because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (*Romans 6:1-7*)

A believer is no longer a slave to sin because of the perfect work of Jesus Christ on his or her behalf on the cross. Because of His perfect payment for sin on the cross and the transformation that follows, a believer is granted the amazing privilege of living a “new life” (vs. 4), not as a “slave to sin” (vs. 6), but as one who is “freed from sin” (vs. 7). All of this is made possible by grace and our identification with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Because of the cross and what was purchased on our behalf there, the believer has been freed from sin’s control and is no longer a slave to sin.

When we use the terminology of Romans 6 and say that a believer is “freed from sin” or no longer a “slave to sin,” we mean that a believer is being transformed by the Holy Spirit into a slave of righteousness. He is motivated by the transforming work of the Spirit to want to please Christ. This work of the Spirit redefines the believer as a slave to righteousness and sin is no longer his master. We are not saying that believers have no struggle with sin. The fact that a believer continues to struggle with remaining sin is implied in Paul’s question, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning that grace

¹³ I will explain this division of Romans in more detail as we examine each section in the remainder of this article.

may increase?” (*vs. 1*), and is restated in verse 15: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” Believers do struggle with remaining sin, but the difference is that sin no longer controls a believer: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” (*1 John 3:9*) Because of Christ’s purchase on the cross of a transformed life, a believer is guaranteed to not “go on sinning” as a way of life. A believer struggles with sin, but is no longer a “slave to sin.” A believer is one who has been freed from sin’s dominance and has become a slave of righteousness:

¹⁷But thanks be to God that though you *used to be* slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching that you were entrusted. ¹⁸You have been set free from sin and *have become slaves to righteousness.* (*Romans 6:17, 18*) Emphasis added.

This is the transformed life in action and every believer is its recipient. There are no exceptions to this. There are no “carnal Christians” or untransformed Christians who seem to have an unending losing battle with, and are consistently under the control and mastery of sin’s ugly grip. Granted, we wrestle with sin and sometimes remaining sin can really knock us around (*Galatians 6:1-2*), but that’s vastly different than being dominated by sin’s lasting control.¹⁴ Instead, the Spirit of God is always at work transforming into the image Jesus Christ. This is what it means to be a slave to righteousness. Paul is speaking of the *experience* of being a slave to sin, in contrast to the *experience* of being a slave to righteousness. Each situation serves as evidence of the true condition of the heart. One cannot be both a slave to sin and a slave to righteousness at the same time. To be a slave to sin is evidence of unbelief:

²⁰When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!
²²But 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. (*Romans 6:20-22*)

We must keep in mind that Paul is still speaking in terms of sanctification. A life lived as a “slave to sin” is conclusive evidence that one is estranged from God’s righteousness and a stranger to justification. In the same way, a life lived under the “control of righteousness” is evidence of saving grace. A believer no longer experiences the crushing dominance of sin’s mastery, but serves a new master, righteousness:

¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³Do not offer the parts of your

¹⁴ Our ongoing struggle with sin is illustrated in passages such as Galatians 5:16-18. I do not believe that a believer’s struggle with sin is in view in the context of Romans 6 and 7, but that an unbeliever’s dominance by sin is. Because the unbeliever is represented by Adam (Romans 5), sin is his master in Romans 6. Paul’s argument is one of cause and effect.

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. ¹⁴For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (*Romans 6:11-14*)

Sin is no longer a believer’s master. The reason sin is not a believer’s master is because a believer is not under law, but under grace (*vs. 14*). This seems like an odd thing for Paul to say, and since it is his definitive statement in explaining why sin is not a believer’s master, we need to understand it before moving on. When Paul says that we are not under law, he cannot be saying that we are without law, or lawless.¹⁵ Nor is he speaking of law and grace in a judicial or legal sense, but experientially in terms of cause and effect. Let’s look at it one piece at a time. First, sin is not a believer’s master because a believer is under grace. Paul is speaking of the transformed life. He is speaking of the aspect of grace that produces transformation. In effect, he is saying “The grace that a believer receives as a result of a transformed life purchased on the cross, transforms him into a slave to righteousness and he is no longer a slave to sin. Sin is no longer his master because of the experience of grace.

In the same way, sin remains an unbeliever’s master because the unbeliever is under law. This statement takes us back to chapter 5 where Paul told his readers that the law was added to increase transgression (*Romans 5:20*). You’ll remember from our earlier discussion that when Biblical law addresses an unbelieving heart, sin becomes utterly sinful resulting in sin’s dominance or mastery. This is how Paul intends us to take the phrase “under the law” in this context. It is a reference to the experience of an unbelieving heart and has the effect of making sin more sinful, resulting in sin’s mastery over those it addresses. Reduced to its simplest terms, “under the law” = the normal experience of an unbeliever: “under grace” = the normal experience of a believer. Again, Paul’s argument is one of cause and effect and can be illustrated as follows:

The Believer’s Experience	The Unbeliever’s Experience
Under Grace	Under Law
A Slave to Righteousness	A Slave to Sin
Sin Shall Not Be Your Master	Sin is Your Master

We now know what Paul means when he employs the term “slave to sin.” Defining this now is important because he repeats the phrase twice in Romans chapter 7 (*Romans 7:14, 25*), but he defines it for us here. A “slave to sin” is the experiential evidence of unbelief and is foreign to the experience of a believer. The believer *used to be* a slave to sin. Paul has set the context for chapter 7 and is now going to discuss the believer’s relationship to God’s law.

¹⁵ Lawlessness is sin (1 John 3:4) and we are obligated to obey the Law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Believers are Released From the Deadening Effects of God's Law

Romans 7:1-5

Paul establishes the context of chapter 7 with an illustration of a believer's relationship to the law. He does this to illustrate what he meant earlier when he said that a believer is not mastered by sin because he is "not under law" (*Romans 6:14*).

¹Do you not know, brothers--for I am speaking to men who know the law--that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ²For 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 of marriage. ³So then, if she 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, even though she marries another man. ⁴So, my brothers, 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 to God. ⁵For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.
(*Romans 7:1-5*)

Verses 1-3 are Paul's illustration of a believer's relationship to the law and verses 4-5 are his explanation. The point of the illustration is to show that believers have died to the law in some sense. The analogy of marriage (in the context of the Mosaic Law) illustrates that a wife is bound to her husband unless or until he dies. All else being equal, nothing short of his death releases her from her obligation to the law. She is bound to that law unless he dies. When he dies, she is utterly free from the law's grip concerning marriage to her husband. She is no longer bound to that law because his death releases her.

In the same way, Christ's death on the cross sets the believer free from the law in some sense.¹⁶ Because Christ died, the believer is no longer bound to the law. We must remind ourselves that Paul's argument is in the context of experience. He introduces the subject of the believer's relationship to God's law in the larger context of the experiences of chapter 6. As we have already demonstrated, chapter 6 was not written from a judicial or legal point of view, but from the point of view of experience. That same context flows into chapter 7 and continues through chapter 8. The judicial arguments of chapter 5 give way to the experiences of chapter 6-8 as evidence of belief. In chapter 7, Paul is still presenting his case from the position of cause and effect and his argument is experiential. Verse 5 is crucial to understanding Paul's point: "For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death." As unbelievers, God's law used to arouse sinful passions, but that is no longer the case because we have been set free from the deadening effects of the law that we once experienced. The law no longer arouses sin in us because of the

¹⁶ Again, I am not advocating lawlessness or antinomianism. Paul is speaking experientially as I will now illustrate.

transformed life that Jesus purchased on the cross. The unbeliever has a deadening relationship to the law, but the believer does not. Paul is reiterating his earlier comment from chapter 6 that a believer is not “under law,” meaning that, because of grace, God’s law no longer has the effect of making sin more sinful in the life of the believer. For an unbeliever, God’s law arouses sin, but for a believer, God’s law is positive and serves a different purpose.¹⁷

David serves as a good illustration of our point. David lived in the era of the Old Covenant in an age characterized by unbelief. As we have already illustrated, the Old Covenant era serves as the historic example of the effects of God’s law on an unbelieving heart. David, however, loved the God of the Bible and had experienced the transforming work of the Spirit in his life, enabling him to say, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” (*Psalms 119:97*) God’s law functions radically different in the life of a believer than it does in the life of an unbeliever. The believer has “died to the law” in the sense that our relationship to it has changed and it no longer arouses sinful passions that lead to death. This new relationship is brought about because Christ died and secured the Spirit’s transforming work in us, releasing us from the law’s deadening effect. We can add to our earlier illustration as follows:

A Believer’s Experience	An Unbeliever’s Experience
Under Grace	Under Law
A Slave to Righteousness	A Slave to Sin
Sin Shall Not Be Your Master	Sin is Your Master
Died to the Law’s Deadening Effect	Sinful Passions Aroused by the Law
A Transformed Life	No Transformation

The Argument of Romans 7

Romans 7:6

Romans 7:6 is Paul’s summary statement for this entire section of Romans (chapters 6-8). Paul says,

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. (*Romans 7:6*)

Paul is about to contrast two different ways to live: the “old way of the written code” and the “new way of the Spirit.” In comparing the old way to the new way, Paul is highlighting one particular function of law and grace. He is highlighting the experiential aspect of each: to be “under the law” is the old way of life and the resulting experience is slavery to sin. To be “under grace” is the new way of life and the experience it produces is slavery to righteousness.

¹⁷ Paul is only highlighting the deadening effects of God’s law on an unbeliever in this section. He mentions the law’s function in a believer’s life only enough to illustrate how it works with an unbeliever. I develop this further when I deal with Romans 7:13-25 later in this article.

The Believer's Experience	The Unbeliever's Experience
Under Grace	Under Law
A Slave to Righteousness	A Slave to Sin
Sin Shall Not Be Your Master	Sin is Your Master
Died to the Law's Deadening Effect	Sinful Passions Aroused by the Law
A Transformed Life	No Transformation
The New Way of the Spirit	Old Way of the Written Code

We will use this verse as a simple outline for the remainder of our discussion because it compliments the flow of Paul's argument and may have been how he intended it to be used. The rest of this article will center on these two main points:

- The Old Way of the Written Code (*Romans 7:13-25*)
- The New Way of the Spirit (*Romans 8:1-4*)

How the Law Increases Sin

Romans 7:7-12

Prior to dealing with the main issues of *Romans 7:13-25*, Paul must first answer a charge that might be raised as a result of his statements in verses 1-6. The accusation that might be made is that since the law arouses sinful passions in an unbelieving heart, is the law itself sinful? Paul answers this accusation by clearing God's law of any wrongdoing:

⁷What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.⁹ Once I was alive apart from 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. (*Romans 7:7-12*)

In clearing the law of any sinful accusation, Paul is giving us an example of how the reception of God's law increases sin (*Romans 5:20*) in an unbelieving heart. To better illustrate his point, he speaks autobiographically and is using his own experience as a Jew under the law to show us how the law arouses sinful passions in its recipients. Not only is he speaking as a Jew under the law, but I believe it is equally important to note that he is also speaking as a Jew under conviction of sin.¹⁸ God's law reflects certain aspects of God's holy character and reveals His moral will for the era in which it was given. The

¹⁸ Paul writing from the point of view of a Jew under conviction of sin is an important part of our argument and we deal with it in the next section as we look at verses 13-25.

Old Covenant gives us a picture of the effects of God's law on an unbelieving heart and its recipients immediately become lawbreakers. The law is cleared of any wrongdoing and instead, sin is the culprit. The problem isn't the law: the problem is a bad heart that comes into contact with the law. The law is "holy, righteous, and good" and functions in its role perfectly. Its function, however, was never to justify or to transform a life:

¹⁰All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹²The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." (*Galatians 3:10-12*)

The Old Covenant was a legal, conditional covenant that required perfect obedience or God cursed you (*Exodus 19:5, Deuteronomy 28:15*). The law of the Old Covenant (the Law of Moses) was based solely on performance – it was a law of works that was impotent to transform a life, and was never designed to. From the point of view of its inability to transform a person, there was something wrong with both the Old Covenant and the people under it:

⁷For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. (*Hebrews 8:7-8*)

The law of the Old Covenant was "holy, righteous, and good" because it was an accurate reflection of God's holy character and the revelation of His moral will under the Old Covenant. However, from the point of view of gospel transformation, there was something terribly wrong with it. It could not transform a life and the result of its application to unbelieving hearts was the arousal of sinful passions. While there was nothing wrong with the law or the Ten Commandments, they become a ministry of death to anyone attempting to be justified by them:

⁷Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (*2 Corinthians 3:7-11*)

The “ministry that brought death” is the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments represent the entire Law of Moses. They are shorthand for the entire law. So much so that they are called the “words of the covenant” (*Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 9:11*). They function as a “ministry that brought death” (*vs. 7*) and as a “ministry that condemns men” in the sense that they could not effect change in an unbelieving heart. That was not their design or intent. By seeking to be justified by the law, the Jews experienced the law’s condemnation and the result was sin becoming utterly sinful. The law was “weak and useless” in its ability to transform a life: “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” (*Hebrews 7:18-19*)

This is how law functions in the life of an unbeliever. In this section of Romans, Paul is not highlighting the role of the law in a believer’s life, but the purpose of his entire illustration is to demonstrate the sinful experience of an unbelieving heart addressed by the law. This is the meaning Paul is driving at when he says, “For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death” (*Romans 7:11*), and, “I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.” (*Romans 7:10*) When it addresses a bad heart, the law functioned as a “ministry that brought death” (*2 Corinthians 3:7*) and produced a people who, as a whole, were “slaves to sin”:

²¹Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. ²⁴These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because *she is in slavery with her children.* (*Galatians 4:21-25*) Emphasis Added

The allegory of Sarah and Hagar further illustrates my point. In this allegory, Sarah represents God’s promise to save a people and bring them into a land. This part of the allegory finds its fulfillment in the Abrahamic Covenant and is first illustrated in a physical way under the Old Covenant where God brings a physical people, Israel, into a physical land, Palestine. These events serve as a physical picture of what God was going to do in the New Covenant era in saving a real people of God and bringing them into a spiritual land, heaven (*Hebrews 4:8-11*). The true Seed of Abraham is Christ and those in Christ inherit the spiritual promises made to Abraham (*Galatians 3:16, 29*). Hagar represents the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and the unbelief that resulted in Israel as a whole, becoming slaves to sin and sin becoming utterly sinful as a result of receiving the law with bad hearts.

To summarize this section of Romans, Paul uses his personal experience as a Jew under the law and under conviction by the Holy Spirit to illustrate the law's effect on an unbelieving heart. The result was that the law aroused within Paul all sorts of sinful passions and produced in him "every kind of covetous desire" (*Romans 7:8*). Instead of granting life, sin increased and "seized the opportunity afforded by the commandment," resulting in death (*Romans 7:11*).

The Old Way of the Written Code

Romans 7:13-25

This brings us to the main text of our discussion. In this section, Paul is going to tell us what life looks like living by the written code, the Mosaic Law. As I mentioned briefly at the beginning of this article, many good interpreters hold the view that since verses 14-25 speak in the present tense ("I am," "I do," "I find," etc.), Paul must be speaking of his present experience as a believer struggling with remaining sin. They reason that by using the present tense, verse 14 signals a shift in Paul's thought to his present experience as a believer struggling with sin. But I believe there is a connection between verses 13 and 14 and that this portion of Romans must be interpreted as a single thought. Paul begins with a rhetorical question:

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means!
But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death
in me through what was good, so that through the commandment
sin might become utterly sinful. (*Romans 7:13*)

This isn't the only occurrence in Romans of a rhetorical question. Paul uses this literary device on several other occasions.¹⁹ In each instance he employs this same method:

- A rhetorical question
- A short denial of the charge
- A brief answer to the question
- A longer explanation of his answer

Assuming this section of Romans 7 follows that same pattern, we are safe in placing verse 14 with verse 13 as Paul's longer explanation of the rhetorical question posed there. Paul's rhetorical question is, "Did that which is good (the law. *cf.* vs. 12), then, become death to me?" His short denial of the charge is, "By no means!" followed by a brief answer to the rhetorical question, "But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it [sin] produced death in me through what was good [the law], so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful." In keeping with the other instances in Romans of this rhetorical pattern, what follows in verses 14 –25 is Paul's more detailed explanation of this statement of verse 13. In other words, the remainder of chapter 7 answers the question, "How did sin use the law to produce death in Paul?" It is a look

¹⁹ See 3:3-5; 3:9-20; 6:1-14; 6:15-23; 7:7-12; 7:13-25; 11:1-10; 11:11-24. For an excellent treatment of the importance of this structure, See Daniel Thompson's exegesis of Romans 7 on-line at: http://www.solidrock.net/library/thompson/thompson_rom7.php

into Paul's life while still bound to the law and under the law's deadening effect as an unbeliever under conviction.

Another piece of evidence exists that convinces me of this structure. The Greek conjunction γάρ (translated "for" "since," or "because") begins verse 14, making a grammatical connection between verse 13 and the rest of the chapter. This is strong evidence that verses 14 – 25 belong with verse 13 and are its fuller explanation. In light of this, verses 14 – 25 become the long explanation of how sin became "utterly sinful" and through the law, produced death in Paul before his conversion. These verses serve as a glimpse into Paul's life under the law, or to use Paul's words in verse 6, it is a life lived "in the old way of the written code" where sin increases with the addition of the law. This being the case, these verses do not refer to the normal Christian life or what should be the anticipated experience of a believer at all.

Another problem with interpreting this passage as Paul's present experience is that the language of the passage itself will not allow it. We have already seen how Paul defines the phrase, "a slave to sin" in chapter 6 of Romans and we know that he uses it in reference to unbelief. Believers, however, are those who "used to be slaves to sin" (*Romans 6:17*), but are now "slaves of righteousness" (*Romans 6:18*). We are given no indication that Paul's definition of this phrase has changed in the transition from chapter 6 to chapter 7. Therefore, when Paul employs the term "a slave to sin" in *Romans 7:14* and "a slave to the law of sin" in *Romans 7:25*, he cannot be talking about his present experience as a believer because to be a "slave to sin" is to be "free from the control of righteousness." The two experiences are mutually exclusive. This is language that Paul has clearly uses in reference to the experience of an unbelieving Jew who is under the law and is being mastered by sin's relentless control. Paul's experience in these verses is one of being a slave to sin and a slave to the law of sin (*Romans 6:14, 25*). It's not until *Romans* chapter 8, and the transforming work of the Spirit of God, that Paul is released from the law of sin and death (*Romans 8:2*).

Romans 7:14-25 presents Paul's great struggle as an unbelieving Jew under the law and under conviction. I believe the language of the text indicates that Paul is referring to the time in his life when he was an unbelieving Jew, experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit in bringing him to saving faith. However, it is important to note that this same experience is shared in a generic sense by any unbelieving heart that is addressed by God's law. In a restricted sense, this passage is Paul's own experience, but in a broader sense it is the experience of any unbelieving heart addressed by God's law and under conviction to repent and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

It is my belief that this text is a snapshot of Paul being drawn to the Lord but not yet a believer.²⁰ This is why he speaks of sin in the third person as something outside of himself: spiritual things look attractive to him, but he is thwarted at every turn by this

²⁰ The process of being drawn to the Lord in repentance and faith becomes a believer's testimony after conversion. Our testimony is a description of the people, events, and circumstances God used in bringing us to Himself (*John 6:44*) and it is different from person to person. In many ways, *Romans 7:13-8:4* is a limited version of Paul's testimony.

annoying thing that hounds him, sin. The struggle he describes is an indication that he recognizes what he needs to do, but he is still unable to do it because he is a person in transition. He wants to obey, but at this point in his life, he has no power to obey. He understands the need to change, but he cannot yet deliver. It's in the midst of this struggle that he cries out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (*Romans 7:24*) and, "I am unspiritual; sold as a slave to sin" (*Romans 7:14*). This is the experience of a man under conviction who knows what he should do, but cannot do it because he is still a slave to sin. He simultaneously delights in God's law (*vs. 22*), but he is powerless to carry it out (*vs. 18*). As an unbeliever, he cannot please God (*Romans 8:7*).

The question is often raised, "Can an unbeliever delight in God's law (*vs. 22*) or really desire to do it? Aren't all unbelievers God-haters (*Romans 1:30*)?" The answer to this question is twofold: first, in the drawing process outlined above, spiritual things look attractive even though the person being drawn is still someone in transition and not yet saved, or as Paul puts it, "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (*vs. 14*). This could be what Paul had in mind in verse 22 where he says, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law" (*Romans 7:22*).

A second option is that the Jews were obligated to obey the law regardless of saving faith. The devout Jew of the Old Covenant would be zealous to obey the law even though that zeal would have been severely contaminated by sin and unbelief. They relied on the law to save them:

¹⁷Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; *if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God*; ¹⁸if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -- ²¹you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? (*Romans 2:17-21*) Emphasis Added

The Jews of Paul's day delighted in God and His law even though as a whole, the nation consisted of unbelievers:

¹Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. (*Romans 10:1-3*)

The Jews' zeal for God and His law was obvious, yet it was not based on knowing Him in a saving way. They were unbelieving, yet full of misguided zeal for Him. They looked much the same in Isaiah's day:

For day after day they seek me out; *they seem eager to know my ways*, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and *seem eager for God to come near them.* (Isaiah 58:2)
Emphasis Added

Concerning his own zeal for the law prior to his conversion, Paul told the Philippians:

⁴If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (*Philippians 3:4-6*)

The New American Standard Bible translates the last phrase of verse 6 more literally by saying, “as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.” Paul delighted in God’s law even while persecuting the church (*Acts 22:3-4, Galatians 1:13-14*). It is easy to see how Paul could not only say that as an unbelieving Jew he “delighted” in God’s law (*Romans 7:22*), but that he was also a “slave” to that same law (*Romans 7:25*). As a Jew under conviction, Paul may have delighted in God’s law in both senses: out of obligation to it and as a result of being drawn to repentance.

In this section of Romans Paul is recounting his pre-conversion struggles as a Jew under the law and under conviction. Every time he attempts to do the good prescribed by the law he finds that “evil is right there” with him (*vs. 21*), or that it is “sin living in” him (*vv. 17, 20*), making him unable to do the good that he is wants to do: “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” (*vs. 18*) He is unable to “do what is good” because although he is being drawn to the Father, he is still a “slave to sin” (*vv. 14, 25*) and those enslaved to sin are “hostile to God” and “cannot please” Him (*Romans 8:7, 8*).

The New Way of the Spirit

Romans 8:1-4

We come now to the solution God has provided – life in the Spirit. This is the “new way of the Spirit” first mentioned in Romans 7:6 from which we built our outline. For reference, we repeat that verse here:

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. (*Romans 7:6*)

Chapter 8 brings us back to the topic of justification and the evidence of justification, sanctification. Paul approaches the end of chapter 7 knowing that his situation is a desperate one and that apart from intervention, he is condemned to die: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (*Romans 7:24*) It is at that point of despair that he is able to recognize the solution that God has provided: “Thanks

be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (*Romans 7:25*) The solution God has provided is justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone. The result of Christ’s work on the cross is both judicial and experiential. We say it is judicial because the outcome is unconditional acceptance by God: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” (*Romans 8:1*). It is experiential because Jesus Christ guaranteed our transformation on the cross: “Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (*Romans 8:2*)

The problem that Paul stated in *Romans 7:23* is remedied in *8:2*. A side-by-side comparison of the two passages will help our illustration:

Romans 7:23	Romans 8:2
<i>The Problem</i>	<i>The Remedy</i>
<i>Paul is made a Prisoner of the Law of Sin</i>	<i>Paul is Released From the Law of Sin and Death</i>
But I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.	Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

The experiential aspect of the justification received in *Romans 8:1* is a life that is set free from sin’s mastery in *Romans 8:2* – it is “set free from the law of sin and death” and is instead, a slave to righteousness. A life no longer controlled or mastered by sin is the visible, experiential evidence of justification. I cannot emphasize this enough: the imputation of Christ’s righteousness into the believer’s account always produces tangible evidence that one is no longer a slave to sin. “Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” (*Romans 8:2*)

At this point it would be appropriate to ask the question, “How is a believer released from the “law of sin and death?” Paul gives us the answer in verse 3:

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, (*Romans 8:3*)

This verse tells us that the transformation we experience (*vs. 2*) is the result of the sin offering of Jesus Christ on the cross for all of His elect. The perfect payment for sin that Jesus Christ made on the cross issues in a transformed life because of grace, not law.

It is important to our discussion to also note that *Romans 8:3* is a restatement of, or is parallel with *Romans 7:6*. We have already said that *Romans 7:6* serves as Paul’s thesis statement for *Romans 6-8*, but we must not overlook the fact that it is repeated here. At the risk of being accused of over-using charts, another example will help illustrate our point:

Romans 7:6	Romans 8:3
But now, by dying to what once bound us...	For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature,
...we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit.	God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.

There are two points to be made in this comparison. First, Romans 7:6 and Romans 8:3 serve as bookends for Paul’s argument in this section. The old way of the written code was powerless to transform a person. In that sense, it was “weakened by the sinful nature” and has been set aside: “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” (*Hebrews 7:18-19*)

Second, Paul’s words in Romans 8:3 should remind us of his marriage analogy of Romans 7:1-5. The atonement for sin in Romans 8:3 is the death referred to in Romans 7:4 that released the believer from the deadening effects of God’s law and enables him or her to “bear fruit to God.” (Romans 7:4) Paul has placed his argument of the law’s deadening effect on an unbelieving heart between the bookends of Romans 7:6 and Romans 8:3. What the law was impotent to do, God Himself did by sending His Son as an atoning sacrifice: “in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” (*Romans 8:4*) The righteous requirements of the law being fully met in us results from justification and the perfect forgiveness of sin. Transformation accompanies justification because those who have been justified no longer live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. As I have stated throughout this article, Paul is speaking in terms of cause and effect. The new way of life in the Spirit is in contrast to the old way of life under the written code.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that Paul uses the following terms in Romans 6-8 to describe the life experience of two groups of people: a believer and an unbeliever.

The Believer’s Experience	The Unbeliever’s Experience
Under Grace	Under Law
A Slave to Righteousness	A Slave to Sin
Sin Shall Not Be Your Master	Sin is Your Master
Died to the Law’s Deadening Effect	Sinful Passions Aroused by the Law
A Transformed Life	No Transformation
The New Way of the Spirit	Old Way of the Written Code
Released From the Law of Sin and Death	Under the Law of Sin and Death
The Law’s Righteous Requirements Fully Met	Lives According to the Sinful Nature
Unconditionally Accepted by God	Cannot Please God

Romans 7:13-25 is a snapshot of the life of Paul as an unbelieving Jew living under the law, or as Paul puts it, living in the “old way of the written code.” (*Romans 7:6*) I have attempted to demonstrate that this snapshot of Paul’s life is taken before his conversion and at a time when he was under conviction by the Holy Spirit to abandon the “old way of the written code” and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, exchanging his old way of life for the “new way of the Spirit” (*Romans 7:6*). I have shown that this “new way of the Spirit” is explained and contrasted with the “old way of the written code” in Romans 8:1-4. As I stated previously, it is my conviction that this approach to Romans 7 is the one that does the most justice to all of the available data within Scripture and the one that answers all of the difficult questions normally raised in interpreting this important passage of Scripture.