

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ROMANS
Living Under Grace (Romans 5-8)
vi. Grace Trumps Law/The "I" of the Storm
Romans 7:14-25

'Who am?' They mock me, those lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine'. The answer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poignant probing is crucial as it will determine our values, lifestyle, future and ultimate destiny. It is here that Romans 7 enters the fray. Few passages of Scripture have been more influential in shaping how Christians think about themselves. However, the passage is not so much about the Christian life as about the law, the Torah and its effects upon the believer.

No one had kept the law with greater devotion than Paul. It was his devotion to the law that led him to persecute the church with a clear, albeit misguided, conscience. Right up to the moment of his confrontation with the risen Christ, Paul did not doubt that he was doing God's will. But, with the revelation of the resurrected Christ he realized how terribly wrong he had been. He now found a new way of righteousness, no longer based on adherence to the law, but on faith in Christ.

Rabbinic teaching saw two drives in Paul prior to his conversion and call, one bad, one good. The law was believed to be the God-given means of quelling the bad one. However, Paul's assessment of the law was less optimistic. The law cannot quell sin. At best it was a 'watch dog' keeping trespassers at bay. But that was only half the matter. The same law quickly becomes a 'hound dog' barking at the heels of the trespasser chasing him further into forbidden territory. It was only when confronted with the law against coveting that Paul realized the intrinsic nature of sin – capturing the heart and enslaving the will. Unlike the other nine, the tenth commandment was a matter of the heart.

At one level, the law may have been like the safety catch on a gun, but on another level, it was the trigger. Paul speaks of sin seizing the opportunity, a military metaphor depicting the point of departure, the base camp of an expedition. Thus far from checking sin, the law actually enhances and triggers sin. Paul's language is not that of reverse psychology. His concern is with the latent power of sin awakened and activated by the law in spite of the faith and will of the believer. Like petrol, sin is something of a theoretical hazard until a match is struck and the match which ignites it is the law. However, the law cannot be blamed for sin and death, any more than a detective who discovers a corpse and exposes motive can be said to be the killer.

In that sense Paul echoes a rabbinic saying, 'Sin begins as a guest and ends up master of the house'. To change the metaphor, the individual is not the captain of the ship but a prisoner on board. Freud might have claimed that the ship is not steered from the bridge of the conscience, but from the cargo bay of the subconscious. However, this is reductionist. Paul is even more forbidding. His analysis is theological not psychological. Not even the subconscious pilots the ship of the unbeliever, rather sin. The law may well accurately define and describe sin by way of diagnosis. But it cannot cure. That is the realm of grace. In the words of John Newton, "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Saviour".

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