

DEATH TO THE LAW THROUGH THE BODY OF CHRIST

“So, 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.” (Rom 7:4)

The Scriptures are emphatic about the dramatic difference between law and grace. Jesus spoke about the difference as new cloth sewed on an old garment, or new wine placed in old skins. Jeremiah contrasted it with a covenant written in stone and a covenant written in the mind and heart. Ezekiel spoke of replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh. Then also we have the contrast between freedom and slavery, laughter and argumentation, confidence and fear, mercy and judgement. Romans 5:15 states it succinctly: “The gift is not like the trespass”. The “gift” is so incredible that no eye had seen, no ear had heard, and it never entered into the heart of man what God was going to do for us in Christ (1 Cor. 2:9). Perhaps no illustration, however, is more meaningful and dramatic than the one used in our text, life and death.

Before addressing our text let us make a few comments about Claudius, the Emperor of Rome. He is mentioned two times in the Scriptures.

- First, we are told that a severe famine spread through the Roman world during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28).
- Second, and more significant to our text, is the fact that Aquila and Priscilla came to Corinth because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome (Acts 18:2). This fact provides insight into the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Rome. Breaking down the wall of partition between these two groups is a major theme in the New Testament Scriptures.

Claudius was born at Lyons, France about 10 B.C. Even though he had both physical disabilities and intellectual weakness, he ultimately became the Emperor of Rome. He lived a secluded life under the Emperor Tiberius, but was favored with several government positions under the Emperor Caligula. When Caligula was killed by a band of assassins in A.D. 41 Claudius was named Emperor by the praetorian guard. Though obviously a puppet, he remained in power for 13 years until he was poisoned by his wife in A.D. 54.

(Let us parenthetically take a closer look at the death of Claudius as it provides insight into the corrupt nature of the Roman Government, and by inference, of all earthly kingdoms. As Jesus said: “that which is born of the flesh, is flesh”. Claudius was married four times. He had his third wife, Messalina, executed for infidelity. Then, at the urging of his freedman, Pallas, he married his niece Agrippina. She wanted her son, Nero, by a previous marriage to be the next emperor. Claudius insisted, however, that his own son, Britannicus, have that honor. Before he could make that decision public, however, Agrippina killed him. This is the way that Nero became the emperor. Nero was a corrupt and cruel despot who set fire to Rome, and then blamed Christians for his own crime. He killed his mother, first wife, best friend, and many others. He ultimately put thousands of innocent Christians to death, including Peter and Paul. He died by suicide on June 9, A.D. 68).

The question arises, why would Claudius order all the Jews to leave Rome? Suetonius, in his writings on the life of Claudius, points out the answer. It seems that the Jews were constantly causing disturbances at the instigation of “Chrestus”. Some conclude that these were Jewish Christians, and that “Chrestus” was “Christ”. If that be true, these troublesome Jews may have returned to Rome after being converted to Christ as Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Remember, they that were scattered went everywhere preaching Christ (Acts 8:4). Remember also that Paul and his company were accused of being part of a movement that caused trouble all over the world (Acts 17:6). Luke reported that the unbelieving Jews in Rome knew that people everywhere were talking

about the followers of Christ, but had received no specific complaint about Paul (Acts 28:22). Be that as it may, it is important to note that the Jews, like Aquila and Priscilla, were at one time driven out of Rome. By the time Paul dictated the Roman letter, however, the Jews were back in Rome. Aquila and Priscilla themselves returned to Rome (Rom. 16:3). Paul refers to Jews many times in the letter (See Rom. 1:16; 2:9, 10, 17, 28, 29, etc.)

With this background, let us consider both our text, and its context.

Rom 7:1 - Do 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? This message would be especially relevant to Jews as they “knew the law”. The meaning of this verse is obvious. If a man dies while fleeing from the police, there is no need to have a trial. If a convicted criminal dies in prison he will be buried without serving out his full term. He that is dead is free from the law.

Rom 7:2 - For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. This too is easily understood. A widow is not obligated to perform the duties of a wife to her deceased husband. His death terminates their marriage and her obligation to him as a wife.

Rom 7:3 - So 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. This too is obvious. A widow who remarries is not committing adultery. It is impossible for her to be a wife to a dead husband.

Rom 7:4 - So, 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. This verse requires more thought.

- After using the illustration of a husband dying, Paul reverses the analogy and refers to the death of the wife.
- The law doesn't die. We die! Legalism was alive and well when this letter was written, and it is still alive and well today.
- Therefore, in order to escape from our husband (the law), we cannot expect him to die. We have to die!
- Our death to the law comes “through the body of Christ”. We will speak in greater detail about this later.
- Remember! Our relationship with the law was like a marriage, and our relationship with Christ is also like a marriage. Once we are dead to our husband, the law, we are free to be married to a new husband, Jesus Christ. The church, as you know, is the Bride of Christ.
- Fortunately, not only was Jesus Christ raised from the dead, He also has the power to raise others from the dead. Once we are dead to the law by the Body of Christ, Jesus can raise us up from the dead to walk in newness of life.
- Once we are raised up together with new life in Christ, we can bear fruit unto God. Remember, in order for a seed to bear fruit, it must fall into the ground and die. In similar fashion, in order for a person to bear spiritual fruit we also have to experience spiritual death and a spiritual resurrection.

TWO KINDS OF DEATH

There are obviously two different kinds of death mentioned in the Scriptures. One is physical and the other is spiritual. Note this contrast:

Heb 9:27 - Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,

1 Cor 15:31 - I die every day-- I mean that, brothers-- just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The first reference refers to “physical” death, and the second to “spiritual” death. Physically, of course, we die only once. Barring the miraculous exceptions of Lazarus and a few others, physical death is complete and irreversible until Christ comes again. Spiritual death, however, is different. Spiritually, we can “die every day”.

The first time death is mentioned in the Scriptures it refers to spiritual death. Remember, Adam was told: **“but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Gen 2:17 NIV)**. Other versions read “in the day” you eat of it you will surely die. On the very day Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they were banished from the Garden and the tree of life (Gen. 3:23). Separation from God and the tree of life is death in a very real sense of the word, but that death was not physical. Adam actually lived 930 years before he died physically (Gen. 5:6).

Jesus referred to both kinds of death when He said “Let the dead bury their dead” (Matt. 8:22). Paul referred to both kinds of death when he said that a widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives (1 Tim. 5:6).

The reference to death in Rom. 7:4 does not refer to physical death. Those who received this message were alive physically at the same time they were dead to the law through the Body of Christ.

THE REALITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

At this point, it is important for us to examine our own hearts. Do we really believe that someone can die to self and be “born again”? Do we really believe that Christians are dead to the law through the Body of Christ that we might belong to the One Who was raised from the dead? Do we really believe that Christians are a “new creation”?

- When someone confesses Christ as Lord and is buried with Him in Christian baptism, he comes out of the water dripping wet, but otherwise looking just like he did when he went in.
- From the human point of view, he is going to look just the same, have the same name, same address, same job, and wear the same clothes.
- Regrettably, he is still going to make mistakes. He will still need an eraser on his pencil and insurance on his car.
- How then can we say that this man standing before us is a New Creation in Christ Jesus who is dead to the law through the Body of Christ?

ONLY ONE ANSWER

It seems to me that there is only one answer - FAITH! Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things NOT seen. If God says something, we must believe it regardless of what we cannot see.

- Jesus said that when a sinner repents there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God (Lk. 15:10). We cannot see that, but we can believe it.
- The Scriptures teach that when we turn to Christ our sins are “blotted out” or “wiped away” (Acts 3:19). The Greek word so translated is “exaleiphein” It is used only 5 times in the Scriptures. The Greek word “chiazein” also means to cancel a debt. The Greek letter “chi” is shaped like the English letter “X”. When some debts were paid the note would be crossed out with a big “X”. Our sins, however, are not “crossed out”, they are “blotted out.” It is just

- as if they had never happened. We cannot see that, but we can believe it.
- John said that if we walk in the light the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). We cannot see that but we can believe it.
- John also said that if we do sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and He is the “propitiation” or “atoning sacrifice” for our sins (1 John 2:2). We cannot see that, but we can believe it.
- THE SCRIPTURES TEACH UNEQUIVOCALLY THAT THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION TO THOSE WHO ARE IN CHRIST JESUS (Rom. 8:1). DO YOU BELIEVE THAT OR NOT!

There are a great many activities that we are involved in every day that involve the principle of faith.

- When we go to the bank and give our account number, the teller will look on the computer and write down the amount of money we have in the bank. We don’t need to see the money in order to believe it is there.
- The weather man comes on the radio and tells you that a tornado is approaching your house. You don’t need to see the tornado in order to believe that it is there.
- You get in your car and start on a trip. You don’t have to visually look into the gas tank to know how much fuel is there, you can simply look at the gas gauge and believe what it tells you.
- Every day thousands of airplanes operate safely even though the pilot may not be able to see outside of the cockpit. Pilots are trained to have faith in what their instruments are telling them.
- No decision we make in life, however, is more meaningful and significant than our decision to receive Jesus Christ as Lord. There is no way to make this decision without faith. The Scriptures are emphatic - without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

THROUGH THE BODY OF CHRIST

Our death to the law comes through the Body of Christ. What does this mean? There are, as you know, two different meanings that can be assigned to the “Body of Christ” Both have relevance to our “death to the law”.

1 - First, the Body of Christ refers to His physical body. Jesus became a part of mankind. Anyone died that Jesus Christ came in the flesh was not from God but was an antichrist (1 John 4:3). The first meaning involved in being dead to the law through the Body of Christ involves His death for our sins, His burial in the grave, and His glorious resurrection. Through death, Jesus destroyed Him that had the power of death, that is the devil (Heb. 2:14). **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Pet 2:24)**

2 - Second, the Body of Christ also refers to His church. He is the Head of His Body, the church (Col. 1:18). By one Spirit are we all baptized into one Body (1 Cor. 12:13). In teaching about communion Paul reminded the Corinthians that we being many are One Body (1 Cor. 10:17). Just as our human bodies have many members, so also the Body of Christ has many members. These many members, however, need to function as one. If they came together as a divided body it was impossible for them to take the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20). If they ate and drank without discerning the Lord’s Body they ate and drank condemnation to themselves (1 Cor. 11:29).

Yes! We are dead to the law because Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and was raised again for our justification. His Body, the church, however, cannot be eliminated when we seek to understand the full and complete counsel of God.

The new convert to Christ needs a spiritual environment where he can gain the victory over the devil and grow to maturity in Christ. That environment not only includes our fellow Christians, and gifted leaders like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, it also includes God, Christ, angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect (see 1 Cor. 3:22 - 23; Heb. 12:22 - 24).

Let us consider again the babe in Christ who comes forth from the watery grave of Christian baptism. Please note that the phrase "one another" is repeated over and over in the Sacred Scriptures. Here are a few examples. Christians are to:

love one another, serve one another, edify one another, prefer one another, exhort one another, comfort one another, submit to one another, forgive one another, receive one another, admonish one another, minister to one another, care for one another, pray for one another, members one of another, have compassion for one another, and be subject to one another, etc.

These are some of the vast array of Scriptural references to the integral relationship that Christians have with one another. When every member of the Body maintains a proper relationship with Christ, the Head, then the whole Body, with it's ligaments and sinews ministering to one another, grows as God intends for His Body to grow (Col. 2:19). Thus, the new convert, dies to the law through the Body of Christ. He does not die once and for all, he dies daily. He is progressing every day from the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit. He is not alone in his journey. Not only has Jesus promised to never to leave him or forsake him, but he has become part of living Body that ministers to him in ways too numerous to mention.

THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We cannot separate the ministry of the Body from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Remember, as Christians our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Remember, that he who is united with the Lord is one with Him in Spirit (1 Cor. 3:17). This being true, it is difficult to distinguish between what "you" do and what the "Spirit" dos through you.

Here are some of the many things the Spirit did as recorded in the Scriptures:

Gave utterance to the apostles (Acts 2:4); was poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17); directed Philip to the Eunuch (Acts 8:29); caught away Philip so that the Eunuch saw him no more; directed Peter (Acts 10:19; 11:12); directed Paul and his group (Acts 16:7); directs all believers (Rom. 8:14); distributes gifts to believers (1 Cor. 12:7); brings us into the One Body (1 Cor. 12:13); is in conflict with the flesh (Gal. 5:17); produces fruit (Gal. 5:22); produces unity (Eph. 4:3); etc.

The Holy Spirit is Sovereign and can do whatever He pleases in any way He wants to. These, and many other Scriptures, however, point out that some times the Spirit ministers on earth through members of the Body of Christ. As we ponder the way that we are "dead to the law through the Body of Christ" we should not avoid, and cannot eliminate what the Holy Spirit does through people.

THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

As you know, under the Law the Hebrews were not permitted to make sacrifices to God anywhere they wanted to. They were required by God to bring their offerings to the priests. The

blood of the animals was to be shed at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 17:6). In addition to individual offerings, there were regular offerings of a lamb each morning and each evening. These regular offerings were doubled on the Sabbath day. In addition to this there were a great number of animals sacrificed at the New Moons, Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Suffice it to say a lot of blood was shed at the Tabernacle. The priests were also responsible for taking care of the hides, meat, and “inner parts” of the sacrificial victims.

At the risk of sounding indiscrete, there must have been a very strong smell at the Tabernacle. Remarkably, this odor is repeatedly described as an “aroma pleasing to the Lord” (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 2:9, 12; etc.) Yet, when the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies, he was required to take with him a censer full of burning coals sweetened by two handfuls of fragrant incense (Lev. 16:12 - 13). If he did not do this he would die!

There were two altars in the Tabernacle. The first was 5 cubits square and 3 cubits high and situated in the eastern part of the court. It was the first major feature visible to those approaching the Tabernacle. The second altar was smaller (1 x 1 x 2 cubits) and was placed before the curtain to the Holy of Holies. It was therefore associated with approaching the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Not only was Aaron commanded to take incense with him into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he was also commanded to place fragrant incense on that altar every morning and every night (Ex. 30:7 - 8).

This fragrant incense before God is said to be the “prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8; 8:3, 4; etc.). Please ponder the significance of this association!

Fragrant incense is used to cover over and hide a bad smell. It was used for this reason in Bible times, and it is still used for the same reason today. That’s why many people put sweet smelling air fresheners in their bath rooms. That’s why Nicodemus wrapped the Body of Jesus with linen and 75 lbs. of spices (John 19:39 - 40). John reminds us that this in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

But now, let us return to the beautiful symbolism of the Tabernacle and Temple. Just as the sweet smelling incense covered the stench of death in the days of animal sacrifices, the prayers of the saints also cover the stench of death in the church!

Peter reminds us that we are a Royal Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). It is certainly appropriate for our prayers to rise to God like sweet smelling incense. We cannot do this on our own, it is the Spirit of Jesus within us that enables us to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute us. When our enemy hungers, it is Jesus who empowers us to feed him. When our enemy is thirsty, it is Jesus who empowers us to give him something to eat. The devil is the accuser of the brethren, but we, like Christ, are advocates for their acquittal. Someone quipped that Noah could not have endured the stench within the ark, if it had not been for the storm outside of it. Yes! The ark was a type of the church. And yes, sometimes there is a terrible stench within the church. That’s why our prayers are so important! We do not pray prayers of condemnation, but join with Christ in His ministry of forgiveness and intercession. That’s why our prayers arise like a sweet smelling savor in the presence of God. James said it like this: **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16)** May our prayers be like sweet smelling incense!