

The deliverance from the power of sin

The experience of Romans 7

Translated from Dutch

Edited by

Stichting In Grazige Weiden

Postbus 2152

NL 1780 BE Den Helder

Telefoon .+31 223 – 683322

www.ingrazigeweiden.nl

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Introduction

When someone is led to conversion by God's Spirit, he is first concerned with the burden of his many sins, with the guilt he has burdened himself with. He learns to see that Christ died on the cross for those sins, and that through faith in Him he receives forgiveness for his sins. He becomes a child of God and knows that he is justified by the cross of Christ. He is grateful for his salvation, praises God, and has no other desire than to live for his Saviour.

After that, however, he must learn that he has also been delivered from the power of the sin that dwells within him, that old nature, the flesh. The doctrine of this can be explained to him – and it is important to do it! – but only through experience will he truly make it his own.

The question keeps coming up: “How can someone like me be accepted by God? I still sin so often! Did I perhaps make a terrible mistake when I thought I was saved? Am I really saved?”

This has nothing to do with the debt we had to God because of

our many sins. The Lord Jesus bore the judgement for that on our behalf, and our sins have been forgiven. That was the subject of the apostle's letter to the Romans up to chapter 5:11: our *sins* for which the Lord Jesus died. From chapter 5:12 to the end of chapter 8, however, the subject is *sin*, that is, the sinful nature within us.

Now it is about deliverance from the power that our sinful nature, the flesh, exerts over us.

Let us look at Romans 7.

Romans 7

Verses 1-3

The basic principle is simple: a law applies to a person only as long as he lives. When someone has died, it would be absurd for the government to demand that he obey the law. Anyone who understands what a law is would understand this, especially the believers in Rome, most of whom had converted from Judaism.

The apostle uses marriage as an example for a reason: death ends this union between husband and wife. A woman is bound to her husband by the law of marriage *as long as he lives*. As soon as he dies, she is free; and the same applies to the husband, of course.

Verse 4

That example of marriage is now applied to our Christian position. We took the place of the wife, the woman; our husband, the man, was the law. The believers who had come from Judaism had been bound by the law, that is to say, subject to it. However, they had now been "*made dead to the law by the body of the Christ*" so that they might belong to another Husband: Christ, raised from the dead. In this way, they could bear fruit for God.

The image of marriage is applied here in a reversed way: it is not “our husband” who has died, the law, through which we have become free, but we ourselves have died and thereby become free from the law.

Whoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has died. This is made abundantly clear in Romans 6:1-11. However, we ourselves have not died *by the law*, nor have we been condemned and killed by the law, for then we would not only have died, but we would also be lost forever. No, *Christ* bore the judgement of the law for us. He suffered the consequences of our sins in His own body and died; and we who believe have died *with Him*.

We have therefore died *to the law*. When you consider the relationship between the law and us, the law is alive, but we are dead. This is how God sees us, and this is how we may see ourselves. As a result, the law no longer has dominion over us. Christ has taken the place of the law; we are united with Him, He is now our Master, and we may serve Him.

Verse 5

What a difference from the past! About the time before our conversion, it is said: “*When we were in the flesh.*” That no longer applies to us; it is a thing of the past. Every unconverted

person is “*in the flesh*”. That means: he is completely controlled and characterised by his flesh, his sinful nature. He cannot do otherwise, because he has not received the nature of God in the new birth. He stands before God on the basis of the first Adam after his fall into sin.

When someone is still in that natural state, he goes his own way and strives to do his own will. He does have a conscience that tells him he cannot appear before God like this, but he does not feel the horror of sin, nor the power that sin exerts over him.

He goes with the flow, even enjoys sin, and does not realise that he is completely under the power of sin. Nor does he try to free himself from that power. Why should he? After all, he feels at home in it!

When we were still in the flesh, that is, before our conversion to God, we were bound as if in a marriage to the law. However, that law did not give us life, strength, or trust in God. It only forbade sin and condemned us because we could not keep it.

But not only that, the law also gave our sinful nature reason to become active. “*For when we were in the flesh the passions of sins, which were by the law, wrought in our members to bring forth fruit to death*”

By forbidding sins and desires, the law drew our attention to them. It aroused those desires. As a result, we bore fruit that brought death upon us.

Verse 6

While verse 5 describes our condition before our conversion, verse 6 speaks of what our position has now become: *“But now we are clear from the law, having died in that in which we were held, so that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in oldness of letter”*.

We used to be under the yoke of the law, and our flesh was the source of our many sins. However, we have now died, crucified with Christ – the eye of faith sees this! – so that we no longer serve the law. We now serve Christ, with whom we are united, in the newness of the spirit. Our dying with Christ heralds that wonderful transition: first we served the law as slaves, but now we serve Christ in the freedom of new life.

This is the *doctrine*. In the rest of Romans 7, the apostle speaks about *experience*, about the application of this doctrine in the practice of our lives. God's doctrine is perfect, our experience is weak and falls far short. However, our experience can never nullify God's doctrine. On the contrary, it only confirms it.

The doctrine is clearly presented in God's Word, but how do we put it into practice? There are many Christians who, in accordance with this doctrine, *know* that they have died with Christ, been buried with Him, and even been raised with Him. They believe this because the Holy Scriptures say so. They do not doubt that they are children of God and that every child of God possesses this position. But despite all that, they are *not truly delivered!*

There are even many sincere Christians who, when they do not live as they would like to, begin to doubt their conversion. They wonder if they are hypocrites, if they perhaps made a mistake when they thought they were converted and became children of God. They think – and of course they are right! – that God wants to see something different in them than what He sees. But their big mistake is that they let everything depend on what they are in themselves, and not on what Christ has done for them and is for them. They still think according to the principle of the law and not according to grace.

The answer to the question of how we can be delivered from the power of sin in practice is developed from verse 7 onwards.

Verses 7–11

If it is true that the law arouses sinful desires in us, the obvious question is: “*Is the law sinful?*” However, the answer is crystal clear: “*Far be the thought*” Two things are then demonstrated: through the law we gain *knowledge of sin*, and through the law *sin is waked*.

Knowledge of sin

When man was without law, he did not feel that God as Judge had to pronounce the sentence of death upon him, unless he specifically and directly went against his own conscience. “*I had not known sin, unless by law*”. He lived peacefully, without feeling that God had to condemn him, as long as he stayed away from gross sins.

However, when the law came, God pronounced judgement: not only on evil words and deeds, but also on desires. “*I had not had conscience also of lust unless the law had said, Thou shalt not lust*”. Our experience teaches us that these desires are present in our hearts. Now our conscience feels God’s condemnation.

Sin been waked up

The next verse goes a step further: “*Sin, getting a point of attack by the commandment, wrought in me every lust; for without law sin was dead*” (verse 8).

If I say, “There is something in this drawer that no one is allowed to know about”, everyone, old and young, will become curious about what it is and feel the urge to secretly look in that drawer.

However, the desires of sinful nature do not originate from the law, but from ourselves. They are only *waked up* by the law. Their root is the flesh, our old nature. Because the law wakes up them, it brought us death.

“But I was alive without law once; but the commandment having come, sin revived, but I died. And the commandment, which was for life, was found, as to me, itself to be unto death: for sin, getting a point of attack by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me” (verses 9-11).

Because the law promised life to everyone who kept it, it was given “*for life*.” However, because the flesh is not subject to the law and cannot keep it, it becomes clear that the law actually brought death to man.

Verses 12-13

Verse 12 acknowledges that the law is holy and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. That is easy to understand, because the law is given by God; and everything that comes from God is good. However, this naturally leads to the

following question: “*Did then that which is good become death to me?*” Is it possible that something that is good could have such consequences? The apostle's answer is again unequivocal: “*Absolutely not!*”

What has brought us death? The law? No, sin! “*Sin, that it might appear sin, working death to me by that which is good*”

The cause of death is sin, committed by us humans. The law, that good thing given by God, has only brought sin to light and made it fully public. The true character of sin has been revealed by it, and sin has even become “*exceeding sinful*” by seizing upon that good thing from God, the law, to bring forth death. Sin is so evil that it even abuses what is good in order to increase evil.

Sin is always completely wrong in itself, but when God gave the law, sin also became disobedience. That gave sin an extra heavy weight. Thus, through the commandment, it became “*exceeding sinful*”.

If a child is running around instead of doing his homework, that is not good. However, if I, as his father, forbid him to run around and instruct him to do his homework, and that child does not listen and continues to run around, that is also disobedience.

It shows that humans not only have evil desires, but also a own

will that does wrong, despite God's prohibition – or, even worse, precisely because of that prohibition. That person despises God and His command. That only increases his guilt.

Verse 14

God also uses the law to teach us an important lesson: the lesson of our complete powerlessness, even when we want to do good. A person who has been led to repentance and has received new life from God, but has not yet been delivered from the power of the sinful nature that dwells within him, is unable to do what he wants to do: good. He lacks the strength to do so. Through the sad experience of repeatedly stumbling and doing wrong, which he does not want to do at all, he comes to the conclusion that although *“the law is spiritual”*, he himself is *“fleshly, sold under sin”*.

It is important to pay close attention here to the difference between, on the one hand, a natural man, an unbeliever, who only has a conscience, and, on the other hand, a man who has been born again and has thus received a new life. What is described in our chapter is the condition and experience of the latter.

In His grace, God ensured that man, after becoming a sinner,

received a conscience. Even the conscience of natural man distinguishes between good and evil. That conscience condemns what is wrong; yet he does wrong. Therefore, every man is condemned by his conscience. He realises that he cannot appear before God because of his sinful deeds. However, in his natural state, this man possesses a sinful nature and will. He may say, “I know that my conscience tells me what is right, but I do not want that; I want to do precisely what my conscience tells me God condemns”. That is the natural, unconverted man.

However, this is not the case with the person the apostle is talking about here! The person speaking in this chapter – the first-person narrator in verses 7 to 26 – has been born again. He has therefore received the divine nature and a renewed will. He takes pleasure in the law of God. That is the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This proves that this person has been converted to God and has received a new life. He is born of God and saved.

The conscience in the unconverted person lets him know what is right and wrong, but the will of his flesh remains unchanged and stretches towards evil. He lives in the flesh; he has a conscience, but not a new life and a new will. In contrast, the person described in Romans 7 does not lack the new *will* to do good,

but the *strength* to do what he strives for. This clearly refers to the condition of a person who wants to do good – and that proves that he has received a new life from God.

This born-again person speaking here in the first person thus concludes that he is still in the power of sin and is a slave to it, “*sold under sin*”. He knows that the law is spiritual, given by God and therefore good, but that he himself is fleshly, under the yoke of sin, sold to that evil power to serve it as a slave. His conscience is active; he knows the will of God and the law. He realises that the law not only contains rules regarding his actions, his words and deeds, but that it also condemns the source of evil in his own heart.

Outwardly, you can be blameless; this was true of Paul, for example (Philippians 3:6) – only the righteousness he possessed was *his own* righteousness and not the righteousness that comes *from God*. However, as far as his inner state was concerned, the law condemned Paul just as it did everyone else. For that reason, God added the tenth commandment: “*You shall not desire*” (Exodus 20:17). That is a touchstone for man. Even if someone has not sinned in word or deed and, after his conversion, desires true holiness, this commandment clearly reveals his old nature and condition. He cannot attain the

holiness he strives for. If the law also condemns everyone in whose heart an evil desire arises, it is clear that there is not a single person who is not condemned.

In order to be truly freed from the power of sin, we must learn – through experience! – that we are imprisoned in the power of that sin and do not have the strength to free ourselves from it, no matter how much we want to. To teach us this, God uses the law in combination with the desire of the new man to be delivered from the yoke of sin, which he hates. In this way, a Christian learns that within himself, while he desires to attain holiness, a principle of sin is at work in his flesh.

The law teaches him that God *cannot* tolerate sin; his renewed inner being and disposition understand that God *must* not tolerate sin; and he himself does not *want* it either. And yet this principle of sin is present in him, indeed, it is powerfully at work, so powerfully that he cannot deliver himself from it! This penetrates deeply into a person who has sincerely and truly repented.

Verses 15-20

So it's not about what *I have done*, but about who *I am*. I have come to the painful realisation that there is nothing good in me!

I want to do good, but I don't, because I don't have the strength to do so. I fully acknowledge that the law is good, and I hate sin, but still I sin. Time and again, I find myself trapped in sin, under the yoke of sin.

Here stands the born-again man. He has been saved by Christ, is a child of God and longs to live in righteousness, without sinning, but his Christian life is turning out completely differently than he had imagined. What is happening is a mystery to him: *"I do not understand what I do"*. He concludes: *"I do not do what I want – that is, righteousness – but what I hate – sin – I do"*. He does not understand himself: how is it possible that he wants to do good with all his heart, yet fails again and again and does wrong?

He realises and admits that God's law is just, because *"if what I do not will, this I practise, I consent to the law that it is right"*. After all, he does not want sin, but condemns it, just as the law does. He is therefore completely in line with the law, but he acts contrary to it.

However, what he hates is not himself, for no one hates himself. In this way, he learns to distinguish between himself and his sinful nature, as it is said: *"it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells in me"*.

Through painful experiences, he learns that there is nothing good within him: *“I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, good does not dwell: for to will is there with me, but to do right I find not”*. In his old nature, the flesh, there is simply nothing good to be found. That is why it is so pointless to look for it there. Yet many have done so for a long time!

He repeats it in his great distress: *“I do not practise the good that I will; but the evil I do not will, that I do”*. And again: *“If what I do not will, this I practise, it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells in me”*. All this expresses his despair at the darkness in which he finds himself, but on the horizon the first light of morning is visible.

He has now learned an important lesson and taken a big step on the road to complete deliverance. He first had to learn the bitter lesson that there is nothing good in him, but now he has also learned to distinguish between himself as a converted and born-again person on the one hand, and the sinful nature that is still in him and exercises power over him on the other.

He desires to do what is right and strives to do so. What he still lacks is the strength to actually do what is right, because he has not yet fully experienced deliverance from the power of his sinful nature. Through experience, he learns not only that he

does not do good, but also that he *cannot* do good. The power of his sinful nature is always there. It is a slavery from which he cannot possibly deliver himself.

That is precisely what we all need to learn, namely that we do not have the strength within ourselves to do God's will! That is a painful lesson, because the person speaking here is still full of himself and still expects something of himself. In the section from verse 7 to 26, he says 'I', 'me' and 'my' more than forty times. These are his experiences. Only verse 14a is an exception, but that is a general truth. Anyone who is so self-centred does not have Christ in mind.

Verses 21–23

He draws the conclusion, this “law” for him: “*The law upon me who will to practise what is right, that with me evil is there*”. This is the sad diagnosis of his problem. He then elaborates on this.

He expresses his desire to do God's will: “*I delight in the law of God according to the inward man*”. That was the sincere desire of his heart. This cannot be said about an unconverted, natural man. Here speaks a born-again person, a person who has received new life from God.

The desire to live righteously and do God's will is normal for the new life in a born-again person. After all, what is born of God cannot sin (1 John 3:9). Rejoicing in God's will is like a “law of the nature” for the new life.

However, he notices a struggle within himself, because his old, sinful nature is still present. It is a law of nature that the flesh loves and pursues sin. Both of these “laws of the nature” are present in him and struggle with each other. The “law of the nature” of his renewed mind and understanding works directly against the “law of the nature” of his old nature. The latter makes him a slave and prisoner of sin.

What misery!

Verses 24-25

Indeed, that is why he cries out: I am a “*wretched man!*” It is a cry of distress from the depths of his heart. He thought that after his conversion he had done away with sin and would live in righteousness, but he has come to the horrible discovery that he is still in the power of sin. He is a slave and prisoner to it! Does he not therefore deserve judgement? Is he actually redeemed?

He has come to the conclusion that he cannot deliver himself from the power of sinful nature. It is therefore necessary that he

be delivered. That knowledge must be worked out in him; that is the result of the experiences he has had, which are described in Romans 7.

He expresses this awareness in his desperate cry: “*Who shall deliver me?*” In doing so, he makes it clear that he has realised and accepted that he cannot deliver himself, but that he needs someone else. That is what he must learn, after receiving forgiveness for his sins: his total weakness, his complete powerlessness, his total dependence on God.

It is clear that only someone who has been in this situation themselves, but has been rescued from it – in other words, an expert by experience – can describe it. A person who has become stuck in a swamp cannot possibly describe their situation calmly while they are sinking. At that moment, they only feel that they are sinking deeper and deeper and dying, so that they can do nothing but cry out for help in despair. However, after he has been pulled out of the swamp, is safely on solid ground and has calmed down, he can put all his experiences into words. Someone who has never been in such a situation might say to him, “Why didn't you slowly crawl to solid ground until you were safe?” The answer would be, “That's easy to say, but when I tried to pull one foot out of the mud, the other one just sank

deeper!” That is the condition of man in Romans 7, written by a Christian who has been in that condition himself but has been delivered from it.

The born-again person who goes through this experience is still strongly focused on the law during those experiences. He agrees with the law that it is good, yes, he rejoices in that law. He also acts according to the principle of the law: he wants to do something himself, namely the good, but in his own strength. His conscience works and his will is right, but they have the law as their standard.

However, in verse 25, true deliverance from the power of sinful nature is achieved, and the liberated Christian thanks God: *“Who shall deliver me out of this body of death? I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord”*.

How this deliverance is achieved is explained further in Romans 8. Here, however, he first realises that he needs help from outside himself. And secondly, it is clear to him that this salvation can only come from God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the last verse of the chapter, he summarises once again what is happening within him: *“So then I myself with the mind serve God`s law; but with the flesh sin`s law”*.

The deliverance

Romans 8:2 and 3 show true deliverance. For those of us who believe, there is no more condemnation, *“the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death”*.

We have been removed from the influence of the “law of the nature” of sin and death by another “law of the nature” that is stronger. That is the “law of the nature” of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the new life that we have received in Christ Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit of God Who has worked that new life in us and also dwells in us Himself. He is the Spirit of life – and it is like a law of the nature that He works in us to do righteousness. The power of the Holy Spirit is greater than the power of sinful nature.

If you drop a screw, it falls to the ground. This is due to gravity, the Earth's gravitational pull. However, if someone holds a strong magnet above it, the screw flies up and sticks to the magnet. This is due to the magnetic pull of the magnet. Two laws of nature are at work, but one is stronger than the other. The power of our flesh is stronger than the power of the new life within us, for the new convert is like a baby who is very much alive but does not yet have sufficient strength. At the same time,

however, the power of the Spirit within us is stronger than that of our sinful nature.

Furthermore, God “*condemned sin in the flesh*” at Golgotha. That was impossible under the law. The law condemned sinful nature and pronounced judgement on it, but God actually destroyed sin on the cross in the judgement of His own Son.

That is why we know that the sinful nature in us that keeps rearing its head has been fundamentally overcome and condemned at Golgotha. And for our practical lives, we have the Holy Spirit in us, who is “*power from on high*.” (Luke 24:49). He delivers us from the slavery and captivity of our sinful nature. When we allow the Spirit of God to work in us, sin is overcome.

It is true that the struggle continues as long as we are on earth. Galatians 5:16-18 tells us: “*Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall no way fulfil flesh`s lust. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these things are opposed one to the other, that ye should not do those things which ye desire; but if ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under law*”. If we walk and are led by the Holy Spirit, we are no longer under the law, so we are no longer in the situation described in Romans 7, but have arrived at chapter 8.

We may realise that God not only judged our sins at Golgotha, but also judged our sinful nature; He made Christ “*sin for us*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). We died with Him: “*I am crucified with Christ, and no longer live, I, but Christ lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20).

Fortunately, we are not called upon to fight against the power of the sinful nature that is still in us, for we can only lose that battle, but to occupy ourselves with Christ and feed on Him. “*He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him*” (John 6:56).

Every day we can look up to Him who went to the cross for us. That is what the Holy Spirit always wants to do in us: focus our attention on the Lord Jesus. By looking to Him, the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to become more like our Saviour and to follow Him.

In earlier times, a man travelled around with two large dogs, one black and one white. In every place he came to, he let the two animals fight each other. Beforehand, he let people bet on which dog would win the fight. The bets were closed the day before the match. The dog that had received the fewest bets always won, so the man could pocket his winnings every time. His tactic was simple: the dog that was supposed to lose was not fed the day

before the fight and was weakened. The dog that was well fed emerged victorious from the battle.

When we nourish our new life by focusing on the Lord Jesus and the things of God, by reading God's Word attentively and praying intensely, the Spirit gains the upper hand in our lives and we do what is good, to our own blessing, but above all to the glory of our Saviour!