

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 17, Chapter 8

We have reached the (more or less) halfway point in the Book of Romans as we enter chapter 8. So it is fitting that the first word of chapter 8 is “therefore”. “Therefore” is a word that indicates that what follows is a conclusion of things previously said. Because Paul has been using the Talmudic style of debate popular among rabbis (complete with straw man), then the sentence and religious ruling that Paul makes in verse 1 is meant to sum up (at the least) what he said throughout chapter 7. But from a higher view it is actually a ruling of the extensive case that Paul has been building since the opening of chapter 1 for trusting Yeshua of Nazareth as Israel’s Messiah and how this solves the problem of sin and death.

So I too will begin today’s lesson with a “therefore” and use this opportunity to summarize some things we have learned in order to continue building up your general body of knowledge about various aspects of our faith. The goal of Bible study here at Seed of Abraham is not about study and knowledge for its own sake. Rather it is a search for divine truth as a means to spiritual and personal maturity in the Lord, and an ever closer and more obedient relationship with Him. Sometimes to achieve that we need to look to our own history as the body of Christ and understand how we got here from there.

While chapter 7 of Romans is thought by many Bible commentators to be the most theologically important chapter in the Bible (a very questionable perspective in my opinion), chapter 8 is thought by other Bible commentators to be the pinnacle of New Testament narratives that portrays just what it means to be a Christian. What I’d like you to take from this is that Western Christianity finds Romans chapters 7 and 8 to be both a Bible within the Bible and the primary source of doctrinal belief for the Church from the time of the early Church Fathers right on up to our current era. For those who have studied with Seed of Abraham Torah Class for a few years, learning what the Old Testament has to say, I suspect it is a little easier for you to see that there is danger in a mindset that makes a mere 2 chapters of the New Testament as essentially the molten core of our faith; 2 chapters that decides the most important of Christian doctrines. When studying the Bible, at any point in either Testament, one must look not only at the meaning of individual words but also at the entire sentence in which the words appear. And the sentence must be understood within the context of the entire chapter, and the chapter within the context of the entire book. But even a Bible book must be taken within the larger context of the entire Word of God. In other words, to arrive at a well-rounded conclusion and a proper doctrine we must look at Scripture from the near, mid, and far view.

Some time ago I told you that many Christian Bible commentators readily admit that the Church as we have known it for centuries, and never more so than within the last 200 years, is not so much the Church of Christ as it is the Church of Paul. By no means am I saying that the modern Church believes in Paul rather than Jesus as Lord and Savior. However the Church has decided to rely more on the words of but one single highly venerated man, Paul the

Apostle to the Gentiles, for our doctrines and theology than all the other Biblical writers combined. But even more, Church authorities have decided to focus on words of one particular book in the Bible more than any other; the Book of Romans. And even beyond that, Romans chapters 7 and 8 are regularly regarded as the epitome of doctrinal teaching above all else written in the New Testament or Old (I'm speaking in broad generalities of course, since the Church is not monolithic in its thoughts and doctrines). Thus whatever else is written in the Bible, it is often made to conform to Paul's supposed thoughts of Romans chapters 7 and 8. I say "supposed" thoughts because Paul has been miscast and poorly misunderstood over the centuries; less so by the Bible scholars, but more so by the Church government. This leads me to a brief comment about Church structure in order to perhaps help you gain some insight on how it is traditionally operated.

The institutional Church within a plurality of its mainstream denominations (including Catholicism) is usually organized into two basic branches: the academic branch and the governing branch. The academic branch is those scholars and Bible commentators whom the Church looks to for Biblical knowledge on the one hand, but on the other hand they also are the scholars who devise the apologetics for accepted Church doctrine. That is, these scholars who are devoted to a particular denomination of Christianity provide for both Biblical exposition and for a formal rationale as to why their denomination believes the things it does. However this branch of Church organization is visible only in books and commentaries as reference sources. It is the governing branch of the Church that Christians are most familiar with because it is the visible branch; it is what we see and hear when we attend a worship service. The governing branch on the local level is the Pastor and ministerial staff. Above him, if he is part of a recognized denomination, are usually a regional and then a national board that not only determines Church rules and doctrine, but also enforces them. However their decisions on rules and doctrines influence and control the academic branch far more than the academic branch influences the governing branch. From the governing branch's viewpoint, the search for biblical truth was concluded long ago upon the establishment of their denomination. With their founding a set of doctrines were established by the original founders that would henceforth be considered as immutable truth. These doctrines are not meant to be reexamined; they are meant to be obeyed. The job of the governing branch is not to continue searching God's Word to be certain that their beliefs are accurate; their job is to enforce the status quo and to emphasize the validity of their doctrines upon the members. From an institutional perspective it is imperative that the research and knowledge of its scholars validates what the governing branch of denomination already believes.

As I have conducted my biblical studies and research I have found that the Catholic Church seems to allow their academic branch far more freedom of thought and doctrinal expression than any other denomination I've run across. It can be quite striking to read the works and conclusions of some of the finest Catholic scholars that regularly run counter to Catholic Church doctrine; even openly challenging it. However it is also self-evident how little influence the academic side has on the governing side of the Catholic denomination. I don't wish to communicate that other denominations don't have their mavericks as well; but my point is this: it is always dangerous to begin a search for truth from the consensus Church doctrine and then working backwards from it to establish it in the Bible. More times than not the doctrines will prove out; but at other times they won't. So the typical solution for this dilemma is to either

ignore those passages that fly in the face of a denominational doctrine and instead highlight those passages that seem to uphold it.

Since Paul is the primary writer of the New Testament then indeed it is nearly always Paul's statements that are used as the basis of Christian denominational doctrines. However as anyone who has ever carefully studied Paul knows, he can be frustrating because on any particular subject one doesn't have to look hard to find more than one viewpoint. Thus a denominational Church board has to pick those statements of Paul they will rely on the most and dismiss the others as of lesser importance.

So when we take 2 chapters out of one book in the Bible as the source of the truth and beliefs that we all ought to hold; 2 chapters out of the hundreds of chapters in the Bible as having the most weight or even as a manual of corrections for what other parts of the Bible seem to say, we need to be equal parts cautious and skeptical. To be clear: I am not a Paul skeptic. But neither do I hold up Paul as the highest Biblical authority on spiritual matters. For a proper understanding of what Paul says at any given time, it must be taken in context not only within the particular book we find it in, but within the overall context of the several books he wrote. And not only within the several books he wrote, but within the context of what Our Savior said within the Gospel accounts. And not only that, but within the context of what other writers have said in all parts of the Bible. As I have stated on more than one occasion: to take Paul as the preeminent writer to rely on for our Christian doctrine is as wrong as taking Luke, or King David, or John as preeminent. This is not Paul's fault; it is gentile Church authorities who have placed him in that position. It is critical that Believers remain balanced; but if we are going to lean especially hard on anyone's words in Holy Scripture, then it must be the Father's first, Christ's second and Moses's third with all other biblical writers and characters falling in behind them.

But the other thing that needs to be said at the halfway mark of our study of Romans is this: because Paul is rightly called the Apostle to the gentiles, this is the main reason that the gentile Church has held him above all others writers of the Bible. The thought is that Paul is like a specialist; he is the theology-for-gentiles specialist. So we need to listen to the specialist first and foremost and give less credence to the non-specialists (meaning all the other writers and characters of the Bible). Yet at the same time, because of this designation Paul has also come to be perceived as more gentile than Jew with his Jewishness very nearly disregarded. Thus his words are stripped of their Jewish cultural and religious contexts and so are regularly misconstrued. This is why we are crawling along so deliberately through the Book of Romans, just as we did through the Book of Acts. For the earliest readers of Paul's letters (those to whom his letters were addressed), the context was understood because they were living within it. However for the early Church Fathers who were gentiles, the Jewish cultural context was mostly a mystery, they were antagonistic towards it, and over time the Jewish component was deemed to be irrelevant. It is this combination of mindset and circumstance that has led us, as the Church body, to some very dubious doctrinal conclusions that are said to originate from the words of Paul. Hopefully our lessons in Acts and now in Romans have shown you that what Paul is supposed to have said is often terribly misunderstood due to a lack of knowledge about Paul's Jewishness, about Judaism in his time, and thus his intended meaning.

As we take up Romans chapter 8, I'll spend more time adding in the Jewish cultural backdrop that I hope will aid in our taking Paul's words as he meant for them to be taken.

Open your Bibles to Romans chapter 8.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 8 all

As I stated at the outset, the first word of this chapter is "therefore". This means that what Paul is doing is summing up (coming to a conclusion) about what he has previously said. Remember that when Paul wrote this there were no chapters and verses, so it only appears as though there is a break between the final verse of chapter 7 and the first verse of chapter 8; originally it was just all one long letter. The point being that we don't have to debate whether the "therefore" is truly Paul drawing a conclusion about what he said in chapter 7 and before; it is. And what is Paul's conclusion as stated in verse 1? Is Paul's conclusion that the Law is now a dead letter for Christians? He says nothing of the kind. But you'd think so if you were to listen to most denominations and their scholars. Paul's words to open chapter 8 are very specific and I want to give them to you in 3 English versions so that you can see that there is no issue of different translation possibilities.

CJB Romans 8:1 *Therefore, there is no longer any condemnation awaiting those who are in union with the Messiah Yeshua.*

KJV Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

NAS Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

As you can see, these verses from various versions all say essentially the same thing and use the same key word: condemnation. What Romans chapters 1 through 7 all adds up to according to Paul is that there is no "condemnation" awaiting those who are Believers in Yeshua as Lord and Savior. What does condemnation mean? In modern times to condemn mostly means to judge someone, or to publically censure them, or to denounce some action that someone has taken. That is not at all what condemn meant even a couple of hundred years ago. In the Bible era it meant one thing only: to sentence to death. So to use modern words this verse says: 'Therefore, there is no longer a death sentence awaiting those who are in union with the Messiah Yeshua'. What death sentence is Paul speaking about? It is the death sentence that all humans have coming to us due to our a) being related to Adam and thus inheriting the consequence of Adam's original sin and b) for us, as individuals, who break God's divine laws. As Paul has carefully pointed out in making his case during the previous 7 chapters, God's laws come in 3 forms: 1) a direct commandment given one-on-one from God to a specific person (as when God told Adam not to eat a specific fruit from a specific tree); 2) the Natural Law, which is inherently present within all human beings regardless of race, culture, ethnicity or nationality; and 3) The Law of Moses.

I want to point out a couple of things to consider: if, as some Christians claim, the only divine

law that Believers have to obey is the law of love, then why doesn't Paul mention that as a 4th form of God's divine law? If our only commandment is to love, then why when we don't show love isn't that breaking God's divine laws? And of all people that might overlook mentioning it, it would certainly not be Paul. The other thing Christians often claim is that the Holy Spirit directly tells each person the laws he or she should do and not do and that is the sum total that any particular individual has the obligation to follow. Or that only the things Jesus repeated from The Law of Moses are divine laws for His followers. Do we hear a hint of any of that from Paul? No. For Paul there's only 3 sources of God's laws and instructions; not 4, 5, or 6. And all 3 come directly from the Old Testament, the *Tanach*. These other so-called sources of "laws" that are popular in the modern Church are no more than manmade doctrines.

So it is the death sentence of God than Believers no longer face as a result of our union with Christ. Does this mean that Believers don't die? No. This is referring to eternal or spiritual death that is the result of sin. So biblically, and as it relates to any of the 3 forms of divine law (including the Law of Moses), the ONLY aspect of those laws that changes due to the advent of Messiah Yeshua is that breaking those laws does not condemn us. Or using the word that The Law of Moses employs (but it means the same thing), Believers are no longer subject to the "curse" of The Law. The Law itself is not done away with nor is the Law a curse; Believers can still break the Law and sin as Paul lamented to end chapter 7. It is only that the eternal death penalty due to us has been paid for by Messiah and so we don't suffer it.

Verse 2 can create some problems for us if we don't recognize something important. The problem is that Paul uses different words and phrases for essentially the same thing. Why? Because within Judaism in his day all these words and phrases were in common use, and people understood them. Too often we try to nuance what are essentially synonyms so that we can show some differences between those choices of words; but the differences aren't actually there. For instance: Paul says that the "law" of the Spirit, which produces life, has set him free from the "law" of sin and death. This is not a new kind of law he is speaking about; it is simply a manner of speaking. In our modern English it is like saying "principle". But what else can be confusing is the introduction of the word "spirit" into the narrative. What does he mean by spirit in this case? If you were a Jew in his day, you would probably understand his reference.

I've told you of the doctrine of the Two Ways or Two Masters that was common knowledge within Judaism and how even Yeshua used this long held Jewish doctrine in His teaching (no man can serve two masters). Throughout Romans Paul constantly falls back on the doctrine of Two Masters in his teaching as an essential element of the effect of the Gospel. The Essenes (the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls) held essentially the identical doctrine but being the separatists that they were, they gave it a slightly different name that they preferred: the doctrine of Two Spirits. So they thought and wrote of the evil and good inclinations as spirits of evil and good. Thus Paul was merely using the Essene's vocabulary when he introduces the word "spirit" in verse 2; but it is virtually synonymous with the Two Masters doctrine and that's how Paul meant it.

Paul says a mouthful in verse 3; enough that theologians could write entire essays just on pieces of it. First Paul says that what The Law could **not** do, God did. This is definitely referring

to the Law of Moses, and Paul is about to tell us that there was something that the Law was not capable of, so God accomplished it using another means. Most often this is an “Aha!” moment for Christian Pastors and Bible Teachers. They see this as an admission by Paul that the Law of Moses was defective and so God had to apply a patch; or perhaps it was an excuse for God to just get rid of it for something else that worked better. All that is being said is that God did something that The Law was never created to do. The Law of Moses was not designed as some kind of universal redemption devise that solved all of mankind’s problems with sin and death. It served a limited but critical set of purposes that will remain needed until we have the new heavens and earth that we are promised will eventually come. The thing the Torah, The Law, was never created to do was to change the nature of humans. It could not effect the evil inclination that dominates what Paul calls “our old nature”. The Law defines sin, it characterizes God’s nature, it explains how to live a righteous life, and it tells us what to do to make peace with God when a law is broken. But The Law could not cause a person to love God or obey God; it could only instill a fear of God in them due to harsh consequences for disobedience.

Yet in a certain, very real, sense The Law was God being accommodating towards His people. He knew that His people needed a rather detailed roadmap on how to live as His redeemed people; the Natural Law was very broad and left much for humans to determine for ourselves (always to our detriment). But the moment He issued The Law His people would need help for when they did not follow God’s road map as they knew they should; they would need to be rescued from God’s wrath when they sinned. So in a marvelous act of grace, God instituted ritual animal sacrifice. Why is this grace? Because when one of His people broke a law, instead of them facing the spiritual death penalty (which is permanent separation from God) the life of an innocent creature (an animal) could be substituted. That is the essence of the purpose for the sacrificial system and it is important to remember that the God-principle behind this system is exactly what has saved us. Yeshua’s death was nothing more nor less than substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf.

In the second half of verse 3 Paul says something that has caused enormous debates within Christianity. He says that the way God accomplished doing this thing that The Law of Moses was never designed to do, was by sending His Son as a human being with a nature like our own sinful one. Notice that Yeshua was sent as a human being; He was not an apparition who only appeared to be human; He was fully human. In fact, says Paul, Yeshua had the same nature as all humans; a sinful one. That is another never ending doctrinal battle within Christianity; the idea that Yeshua had the same sinful nature as all of us is not universally accepted within the Church.

In most English versions the word “likeness” is present to modify the words about Yeshua having sinful flesh. Here is an example of other English versions of this verse:

^{KJV} Romans 8:3 *For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:*

The word “likeness” is indeed there in the Greek; but what does it indicate? Does it mean that

while Yeshua looked like He was made of the same stuff as regular humans (flesh), in fact He wasn't an actual human? Was his physical presence merely an illusion? Was he like the Terminator? Flesh stretched over a non-human frame? If the word likeness was not there, then it would unambiguously indicate that God sent His Son in typical human sinful flesh; but the word is there. So what's the answer? I think the most logical answer that fits with the context of the chapter, with what Paul says elsewhere, and within the context of what we read about Messiah Yeshua in the Gospels is this: indeed He came in sinful flesh, but as we find out later, He never succumbed to it. That is, He had within Him an evil inclination so that He could be tempted and feel what all the rest of us feel; but He also had God's Spirit in Him and with the power of the Spirit He was able to resist His evil inclination.

So Yeshua, theoretically, could have lived to a ripe old age and died (as do all humans). But, He never sinned; He never once allowed Himself to be a slave to the Master of His evil inclination. Yet He could suffer, He could feel pain and cold and heat; He could feel hungry and thirsty; He had emotions including fear and anxiety; He could bleed and He could die.

Matthew 26:38-39 CJB ³⁸ *and he said to them, "My heart is so filled with sadness that I could die! Remain here and stay awake with me."*

³⁹ *Going on a little farther, he fell on his face, praying, "My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet- not what I want, but what you want!"*

Or, in this even more dramatic version:

Luke 22:42-44 CJB ⁴² *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, let not my will but yours be done."* ⁴³ *There appeared to him an angel from heaven giving him strength,* ⁴⁴ *and in great anguish he prayed more intensely, so that his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

So I can only conclude that Paul added the term "likeness" to make it clear that the Word had become flesh; real human flesh.

CJB John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....*

¹⁴ *The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his Sh'khinah, the Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.*

That is, the Word that was with God from the beginning remained Himself even when He became flesh and blood (Jewish flesh and blood), was brought into this world through a human mother as are all humans, and was given the human Jewish name of Yeshua. And since it was the Word of God who was the author of the Torah, then what else could He do but fulfill what Christians always say is impossible; He did The Law and never once broke it.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 CJB

¹¹ For this mitzvah which I am giving you today is not too hard for you, it is not beyond your reach. ¹² It isn't in the sky, so that you need to ask, 'Who will go up into the sky for us, bring it to us and make us hear it, so that we can obey it?'

¹³ Likewise, it isn't beyond the sea, so that you need to ask, 'Who will cross the sea for us, bring it to us and make us hear it, so that we can obey it?' ¹⁴ On the contrary, the word is very close to you- in your mouth, even in your heart; therefore, you can do it!

So since Yeshua had an evil inclination, then it means He also had free will. He could have chosen to avoid the cross and clearly as He was in the Garden of **Gat Shemanim** (Gethsemane) He was battling His own will that wanted to live and not die. But, His good inclination again won as He virtually defined the difference between the good and evil inclinations....between the evil Master and the good Master....when He said: **Matthew 26:39 CSB Yet not as I will, but as You will.**" Because the good inclination is doing the Father's will, while the evil inclination is doing our own will.

The Good News is that once arisen, Christ no longer suffered with an evil inclination. And that is one of the things that we Believers can look so forward to; when we arise from our rest upon our resurrection we will no longer have to battle an evil inclination. It is gone, forever, never again to afflict us because as Paul said, we have died in Christ. Through our baptism we have identified ourselves with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. We have already achieved the likeness of His death and burial; but now we await the End Times and His return, and for the likeness of His resurrection.

I want you to appreciate why Paul spends all this time and ink speaking about the same two or three principles that were already well known and taken for granted within Judaism. Please hear me: as much as Paul's teaching has crossed the boundaries of time and space to affect us in the 21st century, he was by no means thinking in terms of speaking to gentiles in the 3rd Millennium A.D. He was writing this letter to the Roman congregations and addressing matters directly pertinent to them, using terms they generally understood. But at the same time it is important to understand that because these principles that Paul quotes were well established and operating within 1st century Judaism, then of course Believers in every age need to understand them within that same Jewish context. I think one of the better ways to help bridge this difficult gap is to hear what the renowned 12th century Jewish sage RamBam (Maimonides) had to say about the limitations of the Torah. In his work the "Guide for the Perplexed" he says that The Law of Moses indeed has no power over the human nature, and so no power to affect change to the human nature, and nothing ever will. This belief was a core doctrine of Judaism in Paul's day and so this is why Paul was going into such depth and essentially repeating himself a number of times, or better, saying the same thing a number of different ways to get this difficult point across especially to his fellow Jews (the gentile Believers would not have known much if anything about this Jewish doctrine). He was refuting this 1st century doctrine of Judaism that there is no way to change our human nature and be rid of the evil inclination. Paul was explaining that while that may have been true at one time, it is no longer. Yeshua is able to do the impossible; He can change human nature. Listen to the RamBam:

What was there to prevent (God) from causing the (human) inclination to accomplish acts of obedience willed by Him....to become a natural disposition fixed in us? God does not change at all the nature of human individuals by means of miracles.....it is because of this that there are commandments and prohibitions, rewards and punishments. We do not say this because we believe that the changing of the (human) nature of any individual is difficult for Him. Rather it is possible and fully within His capacity. But according to the foundations of the Law, of the Torah, He has NEVER willed it, nor shall He EVER will it. For if it were His will that the nature of any human individual be changed because of what He wills from that individual, the sending of prophets and all giving of the Law would have been useless.

What an amazing admission from Maimonides. First that the human nature is untouchable by any earthly device, including The Law of Moses. And second, that IF God decided to change the nature of humans (to get rid of the evil inclination), then the RamBam couldn't understand what the role of The Law would become. If only he would have read what Paul had to say here in Romans.

Again: in his letter to the Romans Paul was not establishing some distant, ethereal, theoretical systematic theology. He was directly addressing real issues of his time. It was a firm and settled belief within Judaism that God, although fully capable, would never undertake the task of changing the human nature.

We'll continue with chapter 8 next time.