

Week Four

Conversations with God

ROMANS 7

READ

Let's make a few observations about life and death. Prepare yourself; they're a bit odd.

First, death has implications on a person's obligations. When a person dies, that person is no longer personally bound to contracts, debts, and responsibilities. Yes, the estate will have to settle all accounts, but that person is gone and doesn't need to be concerned with such matters.

Second, both life and death have symptoms: breath or lack of breath, pulse or lack of pulse, brainwaves or lack of brainwaves. It doesn't take a highly trained eye to identify life and death in most circumstances. Yes, recent death may be difficult to discern, but give that body a little time, and the symptoms will make the assessment self-evident.

These two odd but obvious observations are helpful to this week's Reading from Romans. Last week, we acknowledged that in this letter Paul is building a case. Like a lawyer in the courtroom he makes his point, builds on the point, and then subjects his point to cross examination. The pattern continues this week as he continues to address questions of law, grace, and obedience.

First Observation: Obligations after Death

You'll recall that Paul has been addressing the question of grace and license. Is grace a license to sin? His answer is an emphatic "no" and explanation of this "no" carries into Romans 7. To explain himself further, Paul leans into the first observation above. When a person dies, that person is free from worldly obligations as is the spouse who was once bound to that person. If a person dies, that person's spouse is free to marry another. To get the weight of this illustration, consider where Paul left off at the end of Romans 6. He addressed a reality all too familiar to humanity. Despite our best intentions, we feel enslaved to destructive living. In Paul's words, "you were slaves to sin" (Romans 6:20, TNIV). It's as if sin owned us. We bowed to sin's wishes and obeyed sin's commands.

But then something happened. In Christ, we died. It's this idea Paul addresses at the beginning of Romans 7.

Do you not know...that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? 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 that binds her to him... So, my brothers and sisters, 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 for God (Romans 7:1-2, 4, TNIV).

The point? "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, TNIV). In other words, because we died in Christ, we are no longer bound to the external code of do's and don'ts, but we now have the beauty of God's Spirit who brings powerful transformation to our lives. We'd be foolish to turn our faith into a list of external do's and don'ts. We died to that. But we'd be even more foolish to

ROMANS 7

deny the powerful and transformative presence of God's Spirit in our lives and miss the life God has for us. As mentioned in the previous chapter, "What benefit did you reap...from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin..." (Romans 6:21-22, TNIV).

Which leads to cross examination and the usefulness of our second observation.

Second Observation: Life and Death Have Symptoms

A question is unearthed by Paul's discussion of law.

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? (Romans 7:7, TNIV).

Or put another way, is Paul saying that the external law is a bad thing? Why would God have created this system if it would be ineffective? Did God make a mistake with Old Testament law? As with his response to other questions, Paul's response is emphatic.

Certainly not! (Romans 7:7, TNIV)

Which gets to the point of diagnosing a problem by being aware of the symptoms. Listen carefully to Paul's explanation.

I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:7, TNIV).

The law is incredibly important. God did not intend for the law to produce righteousness but to diagnose unrighteousness. The law does not heal. It can't heal. It has no power to heal. What the law does do, though, is expose the condition of spiritual death and heighten our awareness of our desperate need for help. Without the law, one might see his or her actions as normal and good, despite the destructiveness, which is in fact what we often see today. Humanity barrels on destructively with a general sense of right and wrong but lacking the sharp definition that comes from knowing God's written law.

This week, as you read Romans 7, consider talking to God about your own awareness of sin. What symptoms do you see externally that point to your internal reality? Are there symptoms of spiritual life, or are there symptoms of spiritual death? If the symptoms are those of spiritual death, talk to God about your approach. Are you approaching life by the old way of the written code or by the new way of the Spirit? Are you attempting to break out in your own strength, or are you embracing this week's imperative and entrusting yourself to God?

MEMORIZE

This week's memory verses:

Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

John 6:28-29, "Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'"

MEDITATE

Meditating is simply talking and listening to God. Your conversation with God will be inspired and informed by reading and memorizing Scripture, but your conversation should also be personalized.

ROMANS 7

Carefully consider the passages, but don't *just* consider the passage. Talk and listen. Pour out your thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys. Or just sit in silence before God. Some talk best with God in a quiet room. Others prefer to talk with God while running or walking. Most importantly, engage God in a way that is authentic and personal.

Use the space below to record memorable thoughts or highlights from your conversations with God to share with your Small Group or Running Partners.



ROMANS 7

ROMANS 7

Week 4, Conversations with God, p. 120