

LESSONS FROM ROMANS 8

FROM HERE
TO
Eternity

Assurance in the face
of sin and suffering

RAY GALEA

“Romans 8 doesn’t pretend that life is a bed of roses. It contains a healthy realism about the Christian life. There is no promise of an unachievable perfectionism this side of glory, no promise of heaven on earth. But neither am I left with a pessimistic Christianity where I am always filled with doubt, always defeated by sin, never making progress. Throughout Romans 8, Paul emphatically and repeatedly affirms that neither sin nor suffering will drive a wedge between the love of Christ and us.”

Join long-time pastor and author Ray Galea as he takes you deep into “the most extraordinary chapter in the Bible”. With penetrating insight, good humour, and a disarming personal honesty, Ray opens up the wonders of this chapter and takes us to the heart of the Christian life. *From Here to Eternity* also features special contributions from Christians who share their personal reflections on walking with God through suffering and finding real hope and comfort in the promises of Romans 8.

This book is a treasure for living the Christian life, no matter how long you’ve been walking with Jesus.



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

From Here to Eternity

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This book is dedicated to my longest-standing
Christian friends,
Phil and Anne Gilchrist and Kimberly and
Stephen Sawyer,
whose fellowship and friendship I count as one
of God's precious gifts to me.

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Foreword

You're about to encounter the combination of Ray Galea and Romans 8. And I couldn't be happier for you, because it's a combination that changed my life.

In the mid-1990s, a group of friends—one guy in particular—patiently and persistently invited me to return to the church where I had grown up. I'd abandoned the church and run away from God as a teenager, but my friend didn't give up on me. Nor did God.

In September 1997, I finally relented and came back to church for the first time in about five years. Over the next few months, God used the faithful weekly preaching from the Bible—along with the godly example of church members plus several conversations with friends (praise God for late-night trips to McDonald's)—to soften my heart to the truth. But he used Romans 8 and Ray Galea to bring it all together and close the deal.

In January 1998, a group of young adults from my church went away to a Bible teaching convention a couple of hours outside Sydney. Though I was ready to commit to a weekend away, I really didn't know what I was getting myself in for. But that weekend ended up being a turning point in my life.

Ray Galea was a speaker at that conference, and his four

talks came from a single chapter of the Bible: Romans 8. I had no idea who Ray was, and I had only the barest inkling of the treasures that awaited me in Romans. In fact, when I first saw the weekend's program, I vaguely remember thinking, "Four talks from just one chapter of the Bible—really?!?"

Little did I know.

By the end of that weekend, everything had changed. As I listened to Ray preach from Romans 8, I saw reality as I had never seen it before. I caught a glimpse of God's sweeping plans for the universe and for history, and how I fitted into those plans. I heard about the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people, and learned that life now will be about continuing to struggle with sin, continuing to deal with suffering as we long for the glory that awaits us. I heard that nothing in all creation could derail what God is doing or separate me from his love. I understood—in my heart and my soul, not just in my head—that Jesus Christ stands at the centre of it all, and that it was his death and resurrection that enabled me to be reconciled to God, to escape the condemnation that I deserve. I finally knew that I needed to stop running from God, and bow the knee to Jesus. So I did.

I ended that weekend a changed man, having put my trust in Jesus as my Saviour for the first time, resolving to follow Jesus as Lord from then on. But that was just the beginning.

About 18 months later, I attended another conference where Ray was speaking. I thought he might be encouraged to hear my story, so I approached him after his talk and told him about how I'd become a Christian as I listened to him preach from Romans 8. As I shared my story, Ray listened, smiled gently, then said just one thing to me: "Spend the rest of your life praising God for it!"

As I've tried to follow Ray's simple, pitch-perfect advice, it turns out that the truths I heard on that fateful weekend in 1998 are the same truths that have sustained me through the ups-and-downs of the last two decades. And there are very few places in Scripture that illuminate those truths more powerfully and clearly than Romans 8. Time and time again, I've returned to the place where it all began—this majestic and glorious chapter, quite possibly the greatest chapter in all of Scripture. Every time I read it, new treasures emerge. I sometimes feel as though I've barely scratched the surface.

All of that explains why I love this book, and why I'm thrilled that you're reading it.

They say the Grand Canyon is one of those rare natural wonders that never disappoints, no matter how high your expectations or how many times you've already seen it. Romans 8 is like that. No matter how many times you've read these words, no matter what riches you might expect or how long and hard you've pondered these realities, this is one chapter that will never disappoint. It will continue to yield new treasures, if you're willing to dig deep. The effort we put into Romans 8 will be repaid to us a hundredfold.

In an age where more and more of us possess the attention span of an amnesiac goldfish, flitting from one distraction to the next at breakneck speed, *From Here to Eternity* is a book to help you stop and linger in a place that deserves our undivided, sustained attention. And just like a good tour guide helps you to make the most of a spectacular natural wonder, so Ray's insights, practical wisdom, and passion for the glory of God serve as the ideal guide to the life-changing and faith-sustaining truths of this most wondrous chapter.

This book is a treasure for living the Christian life, no

matter how long you've been walking with Jesus. May your life be changed as mine was, and is, by Romans 8.

Geoff Robson

Introduction

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

—John Wesley, referring to his experience on
Aldersgate Street

Josephine was the Lebanese mother of one of the young men at my church. As her husband's coffin was being lowered into the ground, she kept crying out a single phrase in Arabic. I asked an Arabic-speaking friend what she was saying. He told me she was saying, "I'm so jealous, I'm so jealous, I'm so jealous".

Josephine was so sure that God would keep his promises,

1 Percy Livingstone Parker (ed.), *The Heart of John Wesley's Journal*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2008, p. 66. Wesley describes going "very unwillingly" to a society that met on Aldersgate Street, where he heard a reading from Martin Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans.

and so certain that her husband was with Christ, that she was left with a proper jealousy, craving to be where he was. This was more than just a grieving widow wishing her own life would end, and it was anything but wishful thinking. It was a sure and certain hope.



It is far too common to find born-again Christians who see eternity with God as uncertain. Perhaps this is your burden. You walk the Christian life as if it were an emotional roller coaster where every sin puts you out of God's love, and every good work pulls you back in. You're only as confident as your last good deed. You may even have learnt to talk the talk when it comes to assurance—others might hear you utter words of confidence and assume you're like those Welsh Christians in the early 20th-century revivals who were known as 'The Assured Ones'—but deep down you are filled with haunting doubts that steal your joy and cripple your service. Maybe you feel like the girl plucking the petals from a daisy, rehearsing the same words to herself over and over: "He loves me, he loves me not; he loves me, he loves me not."

But did you know that it's important to God not only that he saves you through his Son, the Lord Jesus, but also **that you know you are saved**? God wants you to *know* that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

Assurance is one of the most precious and important gifts that any Christian can possess. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, often regarded as one of the great preachers of the 20th century, highlights what is at stake when assurance is missing:

We should all be concerned about our assurance of salvation, because if we lack assurance we lack joy, and if we lack joy our life is probably of a poor quality. ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’ (Nehemiah 8:10).²

The reality is, however, that we all live with a degree of doubt. Unlike ‘disbelief’, which belongs to the non-Christian, doubts find their place in the corners of all our hearts to some extent.

I invited members of my church to share their doubts. Some are listed below, and they are typical of the range of issues that afflict Christians:

- I’m 30, I grew up in a Christian home, and I often wonder: is this my faith, or my parents’ faith?
- I read that there is no condemnation for those in Christ, but I feel rejected by God.
- I live with constant pain, and I find it hard to experience God’s saving love.
- I live with the constant fear of deceiving myself that I am really a child of God.
- How many times will God forgive my repeated sin? I fear there must be a limit!
- I think to myself, “Unless my faith is perfect (minus any doubt), then it can’t be true faith”.
- If my works are evidence for my faith then how many works are required, and of what type?
- I fear that I may have put my faith in my works and not in Jesus.

2 D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, vol. 7, *The Sons of God: Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1974, p. 16.

- When I compare myself with other Christians, I don't have their joy or respond to trials with the same maturity.
- Is Jesus really God, or are the Jehovah's Witnesses right?
- Is the Bible really God's word, given how the New Testament canon was formed?

And the list goes on and on...

Based on these reflections, there are at least three categories of doubts that Christians experience:

- Some are unsure that the Bible's teaching is true (e.g. the Bible may say it, but did Jesus really rise from the dead?).
- Some doubt whether they have a correct understanding of the Bible's teaching (e.g. does the Bible really say that Jesus is God?).
- Still others know that Christianity is true, but they remain unsure whether they are included in God's saving purposes (e.g. am I really forgiven? Has God chosen me?).

Romans 8 will especially speak to a number of doubts within the second and third categories.

Does it matter if we don't experience assurance? It's worth stating that the experience of assurance of salvation is not the same as the salvation itself. Rather, assurance is a blessing that flows out from the gospel of our Lord Jesus. For example, you can be a genuine Christian and be poorly taught, or you may battle with mental health issues. There are many reasons you may be a Christian and yet not experience much certainty around your status in Christ. However, this is not God's intention for his people.

Romans 8 is the most extraordinary chapter in the Bible, in part because it wants to drown us in a sea of certainty. The apostle Paul opens the chapter with a stunning truth: “there is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). None! Then as the chapter concludes, Paul declares that *nothing in all creation* “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39).

Many years ago, while our family was driving along a coastal road, my then four-year-old son James piped up from the back seat: “Dad, why don’t we just drive over the cliff? That way we can die and go straight to heaven.” While I had to remind him that only God has the right to say when we come home, there was a confident, childlike trust that saw death in Christ as a gateway into the arms of God himself. My son was experiencing the assurance that he was entitled to as a child of God. Even at that age, he knew that being with God in heaven would be far better than life in this broken world. In essence, he simply wanted to reduce the gap between now and then.

But like it or not, life is lived in the here-and-now. We live from here to eternity.³ Our life in Christ is lived in this age—where we are justified, and where we eagerly await the glory that lies ahead. But between those two certainties, we are confronted with two realities in this age: sin and suffering.

Our experience of sin and suffering can undermine our

3 I first came across the expression ‘from here to eternity’ as the title of the classic 1953 film. The title was originally drawn from Rudyard Kipling’s 1892 poem *Gentlemen-Rankers*, about British soldiers who had lost their way and were “Damned from here to Eternity”. How different that is from the theme of Romans 8, which is all about us being saved from here to eternity. No matter how badly we may have lost our way, God can save us!

hope and our assurance. In 1654, the Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote:

Most Christians live between fears and hopes, and hang, as it were, between heaven and hell. Sometimes they hope that their state is good, at other times they fear that their state is bad: now they hope that all is well, and that it shall go well with them forever; [then] they fear that they shall perish by the hand of such a corruption, or by the prevalence of such or such a temptation... They are like a ship in a storm, tossed here and there.⁴

As we will see in Romans 8, the apostle Paul seeks to reassure us of the *certainty* of our hope in the face of pain and recurring sin.

In a sense this has never been more important, given that life expectancy in the Western world has improved dramatically. In Australia, “boys and girls born in 2013-2015 can expect to live around 33 and 34 years longer respectively [than those born just over a century earlier]”.⁵ There is now an extra 30+ years on the table for many of us (God willing). A longer life brings more opportunities to glorify God, but it also brings more challenges to overcome. And that means an extra 30+ years of remaining content, staying faithful to your spouse, managing your temper, enduring pain, staying passionate for Christ, and generally being other-person

4 Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth: A Treatise on Christian Assurance*, Banner of Truth, London, 1961 (originally published 1654), p. 11.

5 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Life expectancy’, AIHW, Canberra, 2016 (viewed 1 June 2017): www.aihw.gov.au/deaths/life-expectancy.

centred. It means 30+ years of opportunity for some kind of sin or some kind of suffering—those two constant companions, those two never-ending hurdles in our lives in this age—to derail our walk with Jesus.

If life is lived from here to eternity, it is a long ‘here’.

This is where Romans 8 comes in.

In the first section of this book, we will look at how God works to overcome not just the *penalty* of sin, but also the controlling *power* of sin. God will not allow our sinful weakness to rob us of our place in glory. In short, God’s gifts of his Son and the indwelling presence of his Spirit mean that obedience is not only possible; it is assumed and expected. By emphasizing this great reality, Paul puts to rest any accusation that the good news concerning Jesus is a licence to sin. Rather, God *will* change us; he will do what the law on its own could never do. Yet as we live out our new life in Christ, each Christian still faces an ongoing battle with sin and the ‘sinful nature’. But this battle takes place from ‘within the family’, with God as our Father being for us, not against us.

At the end of each chapter in part I, as an example of how we might engage in this struggle with sin, I will reflect on my personal struggle with anger and how the truths taught in Romans 8 have helped me in my lifelong battle with my temper.

In the second section of the book, we will shift our focus to the topic of suffering. We’ll see that the hardships of this life are actually part of God’s plan in this fallen creation, not a denial of his love. Suffering is a necessary element in allowing us to reach maturity in Christ. At the end of each chapter in part II, I have invited a number of people

who have battled and are battling with suffering to tell their stories and to reflect on how they have been sustained by the truths revealed in Romans 8.

If you'd appreciate some help getting oriented to the whole of Romans before you jump into chapter 8, I've included a summary of Romans 1-7 at the end of this book (see appendix B). You can also find the full text of Romans 8 printed in appendix A; I recommend reading it in one go before we start our step-by-step journey through the chapter.

In Romans 8, Paul doesn't pretend that life is a bed of roses. He maintains a healthy realism about the Christian life, and makes clear that God expects his people to groan in a broken world with a quota of pain. An ongoing battle with sin is also expected. There is no promise of an unachievable perfectionism this side of glory, no promise of heaven on earth. I am not forced to pretend that my life is one endless victory after another. But neither am I left with a pessimistic Christianity where I am always filled with doubt, always defeated by sin, never making progress. Throughout Romans 8, Paul emphatically and repeatedly affirms that neither sin nor suffering will drive a wedge between the love of Christ and us. Too often, Christians misread recurring sin and ongoing suffering, and in so doing they allow their walk with Jesus to be hijacked.

Throughout the journey of this life, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ not only wants to save his people; he wants us to **know** that we are saved. May you come to know this, and so much more, as you study Romans 8.

Part I

THE SPIRIT AND THE SINFUL NATURE

ROMANS 8:1-17



What the law could not do

Romans 8:3a

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did... (Rom 8:3a)

Humans are instinctively religious. As we battle with our failure to be what we want to be, and what God wants us to be, our default position is to go back to some kind of law to keep us on track. We search for lists of dos and don'ts, and we hope that keeping enough rules and observing enough laws might atone for our failings.

Christianity is not this kind of 'religion', and yet the law of God plays a central role in the Bible's unfolding storyline. Therefore, we need to grasp the purpose of the law of God: what it is intended to do and, importantly, not do. In this chapter, we explore the positive yet powerless role of the law of God to motivate obedience on its own. It is critical that we 'get' the purpose of the law, which includes understanding its limitations.

Our inability to keep the law

Yahoo! News once asked adults who admit that they text (or email or use apps like ‘Words with Friends’) while driving to share brief personal anecdotes of a recent experience. Michael Strauss told his story:

Whenever I see people texting while driving, I get furious. When any of my friends text while driving, I call them out on it. Naturally, I am a hypocrite.

Despite my avowed hatred for texting while driving, I found myself doing it in September last year. A friend had called me during work with very important news. Because I was at work, I had to put her off, but I promised to contact her as soon as I got off work. She told me she might not be able to answer the phone at that time, but could receive texts.

My ethics were simply thrown out the window. As soon as I got into the car, I started texting her to let her know I was free if she wanted to talk. I kept my text short and tried to do it only while stopped at a traffic light, but that wasn’t entirely possible. I don’t know the laws in Pennsylvania for certain, but I think it was illegal and I felt guilty the entire time.⁶

Like Michael, we all try to live by some kind of law. We each carry our own moral code. Life is filled with a quota of ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ that drive our decisions or wound

6 ‘Guilt, shame and stubbornness: What adults feel while texting and driving’, *Yahoo! News*, 28 March 2013 (viewed 4 September 2013): www.news.yahoo.com/guilt-shame-stubbornness-adults-feel-while-texting-driving-214000006.html.

our conscience. Some of these ‘oughts’ are shared within our community, and some are peculiar to us as individuals. If you struggle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, you impose more ‘oughts’ on yourself than most people.

Our codes affect us in strange ways. For example, we may feel proud when we keep our own moral code by putting our rubbish in the bin at McDonald’s. And we might look down on those who leave their trash sitting there on the table. Or we might be petrified that others could find out that we have failed to live up to our own principles by texting in the car. You may have experienced the nightmare of an ex-lover uploading those taboo private photos to Facebook, or the shame and embarrassment of having your worst moments laid bare.

Many may be ‘losing their religion’, as the R.E.M. song says, but they have not lost a personal sense of right and wrong. These ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ that we live by can feel as real and authoritative as the very words of God given at Mount Sinai. More often than not, we are born into a culture with a strong current of unquestioned beliefs that causes many of us to adopt certain values with little reflection—until they get in the way of what we want.

But whether we are talking of a personal moral code, the law given at Mount Sinai to the Jews, or the law of Christ for the New Covenant believer (see 1 Cor 9:20-21), we all eventually discover that we fall short of whatever standard we have chosen for ourselves.

Which of the following age-old solutions to this problem do you identify with?

- You let your moral successes ‘buy off’ or atone for your failures.

- You highlight to others and yourself those ‘oughts’ in which you appear to do well.
- You suppress your guilt by either pain or pleasure.
- You live a life of endless distractions to keep from introspection.
- You modify your personal moral code to suit your present lifestyle choices.
- You reduce your moral code to fewer and fewer ‘oughts’ as you get older, if for no other reason than life is short and feeling guilty is a drag.
- You focus on the failings of others, and compare yourself favourably.

So the Ten Commandments become the Ten Suggestions, which are then further reduced to two or three mild convictions, until finally all you’re left with is a vague principle that says, “Be nice!” And this is not just a religious problem. Atheists have the same battle, for they too have a moral code that they also break at times, violating their own conscience.

Everyone experiences guilt, whether it is legitimate or not, and each person has their own way of coping with it. Some years ago, while staying overnight at a friend’s home, I spilt coffee on the brand new and very stylish Norwegian raw timber bedside table. I knew I was in serious trouble. My first attempt to deal with my guilt was to not tell my friend, but to clean the stain myself. I went on YouTube to research different methods of coffee-stain removal. But no matter what I did, I couldn’t get rid of it. My next strategy was to use the base of the lamp stand to cover up the stain, hoping my friend wouldn’t see it. The third step was to tell myself it wasn’t all that bad and that the stain added character to the

table, all while trying to manage the guilt myself and avoid the possible anger of my host.

On a grander scale, the rise of psychotherapy may in part be the fruit of people's search for a resolution of their guilt. GK Chesterton once said that psychoanalysis is confession without absolution.⁷ Yet sometimes counsellors take that next step by offering strategies to cleanse consciences and absolve guilt. They do so with good intent, wanting to comfort their clients with words such as, "Given the pressure you were under, it's fully understandable that you did what you did".

Amid all the possible approaches to guilt, Christianity has, to my mind, the most profound and radical reflection on the role of the law and the reality of guilt. Unlike our personal moral codes, the Bible records God giving his objective law—in history, on public record—at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). He did that only after he had graciously saved his people from their enslavement in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5). That law defined how the God of Abraham was to be loved and worshipped, and how his people were to relate to each other and the world.

However, like every form of moral code, it could not inspire obedience. In fact, it proved to be impotent: "For what the law was *powerless* to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did..." (Rom 8:3).

Romans 8:1-4 closes out a discussion on the ineffectiveness of the law of God to produce change and give life (7:10). That discussion began back in Romans 7. So before looking

7 See Ralph A Connell, 'The Church and Psychiatry', *America*, 30 July 2001 (viewed 13 April 2017): www.americamagazine.org/issue/325/article/church-and-psychiatry.

at the opening verses of chapter 8 in detail, let's take a step back to the previous chapter so we can understand the place of the law.

The purpose of the law

In Romans 7, Paul reflects on the purpose of the law of God and describes how and why the law cannot overcome the controlling power of sin in our lives. On its own, the law leaves us as prisoners of sin. This is captured in the desperate cry at the end of Romans 7: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (v. 24).

By ‘the law of God’, the apostle means the 613 commandments found in the Old Testament, summarized in the Ten Commandments, and summarized further in the call of Jesus to love God with all of your being and to love your neighbour as yourself (Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:30-31).

In Romans 7, the law of God works like a double agent. In the movie *Salt*, it's unclear for most of the film whether the main character, played by Angelina Jolie, is an American spy or a Russian double agent. Likewise, it sometimes appears unclear whether the law of God is an agent of sin or a gift from God.

On the one hand, the law clearly comes from God. It is viewed as “holy, righteous and good” (7:12), and is clearly necessary to teach us exactly what qualifies as sin: “What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law” (7:7). God's law reveals God's character by drawing a line

in the sand to tell us what pleases him and what grieves him.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which the law does more harm than good. John Calvin rightly notes that while the law teaches righteousness, it cannot confer it.⁸ The problem is clearly not with the law. In every relationship, we need boundary markers to define how we should relate to each other. The problem, as Romans 7 tells us, is that the law of God is exploited by the power of sin for its own sinful purposes.⁹ Listen to Paul's description of this dynamic—one that every Christian knows all too well:¹⁰ “But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting” (7:8).

On its own, the law of God is depicted as being a bit like a nagging spouse, a demanding boss, a graceless pastor, a controlling parent who micromanages your life with a series of ‘do this, don’t do that’ directives. But the most frustrating thing about a nagger is that they are often right. I *should* pick up my clothes. I *should* lose weight. I *should* visit my mother-in-law more often. I *should* pray more regularly. I *should* speak up for those who can’t speak up for themselves. But even if a nagger is right, we all know nagging is ineffective. In fact, it brings out the rebel in us. This is one of the core conclusions

8 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, chapter VIII, ed. and trans. John Owen, Bibliolife, Charleston, 2009 [1849], p. 276.

9 Sin here is not individual acts of rebellion, but is personified as a force or power that operates within the heart of every human. This is seen, for example, in 7:8, where ‘sin’ is said to produce ‘coveting’, even though covetousness is clearly a form of sin.

10 For more on whether Paul refers to the Christian or the non-Christian throughout chapter 7, see appendix B. I take the view that Paul speaks from the Christian’s perspective.

of Romans 7. The law doesn't motivate; rather than reducing sin, it inflames it. The dos and don'ts of the law act like a catalyst for sin when they reach the ears of sinful human beings.

John Piper helpfully illustrates the misuse of the law by sin:

Picture the Law as a surgeon's scalpel. It is meant for life and healing. And here comes sin and takes the scalpel of God's commandments and slashes people's throats with it... The commandment—holy, just, good—was to be life to me, and it became death for me, because sin took the scalpel out of the surgeon's hand and with it slashed my throat and killed me (verse 10). That is not what a scalpel is for.¹¹

The law increases sin

From the beginning, God knew that when he gave the Ten Commandments in a fallen world, sin would increase, not decrease. That is exactly what happened, and that is why Paul can say, "the law brings wrath" (4:15) and "the law was brought in so that the trespass might increase" (5:20a).

The law does to sin what fertilizer does to my lawn: it makes it grow! Or to put it another way, the effect of the law on sin is not unlike the effect of shaking a can of Coke. As Paul says elsewhere, "the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor 15:56). The law, manipulated by sin, adds fuel to the fire of our rebellion, despite our best intentions.

11 John Piper, 'The deadly team of sin and law', *Desiring God*, 6 May 2001 (viewed 13 April 2017): www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-deadly-team-of-sin-and-law.

Some time ago, I did what I call ‘the Romans 7 test’. My wife, Sandy, was coming into the house with bags in hand after some serious shopping. I said to her, “Sandy, whatever you do, don’t read page eight of *The Star*” (the local newspaper that was lying on the kitchen table). Sure enough, without any hesitation, she went straight to page eight and asked, “What don’t you want me to look at?” You know the experience. You see a sign that clearly reads, “Wet paint: Do not touch!” and before you know it you are wiping the paint off your hands.

There is a classic example of this dynamic at the end of the book of Joshua. Joshua had led God’s people into the Promised Land. On his deathbed, he renewed the covenant and gave final instructions to Israel. Compare the people’s optimism with Joshua’s pessimism:

Joshua: Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness...

The people: Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods...

Joshua: You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God...

The people: No! We will serve the LORD.

Joshua: You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.

The people: Yes, we are witnesses. (Josh 24:14-22)

Then we turn ahead two pages in our Bible, and we read of the tragedy of the next generation:

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger... (Judg 2:11-12)

The law of God has many roles in God's plan, but saving people is not one of them. Nor is it the law's job to motivate people to do the right thing.¹² That is why it's called "the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). The law produces more sin and leads to our death. In one sense, Israel was the test case: the Israelites were under the law, privileged with election and entrusted with the oracles and commands of God. But as the Old Testament testifies, the children of Abraham, chosen to be a light to the pagan nations, mirrored the behaviour of the nations and in fact were accused of being worse than the nations. The result, anticipated from the beginning, was both the exile (Deut 28:36, 64) and the execution of the long-awaited Messiah.

This law dynamic probably explains why reverse psychology works: sinful people tend to do the opposite of what they are told to do.

In 1982, Timothy Wilson and Daniel Lassiter conducted a study to show how reverse psychology works. It involved creating a desire for a toy that at first was not appealing. The authors of the experiment chose the one toy that was least played with by a group of children. The children were then

12 Although both Old Testament believers (Ps 19:7-10) and Spirit-filled disciples can see wisdom's beautiful face in God's law (Jas 1:25).

divided into two groups. The first group was told they could play with any toy they liked. The second group was told they could play with any toy except one: the toy they had played with the least. What the researchers found was that when both groups were again allowed to play with the forbidden toy, the children in the second group played with it for three times longer.¹³

The experiment reminds us of what we all know to be true in our experience: on its own, any law incites within us the opposite response.

Left to ourselves, without the Spirit, we are prisoners of the law of sin (Rom 7:23), and as prisoners we are both powerless and condemned: “For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death” (7:5). Hence Paul’s exasperated cry, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (7:24).

We need to be set free.

Notice how the Bible’s view of the law differs from most, if not all, religions. Religion promises that obedience to its holy and spiritual laws, principles, or wise insights is achievable with human effort, or with sincerity, or with communal encouragement, or through some meditative technique. If only you want it enough, or believe enough, or know enough, you can obey. The power lies within you. In essence, religion abandons people to their own resources, and to a standard that their human will can’t keep.

13 Magda Kay, ‘How to use reverse psychology to make others do what you want’, *Psychology for Marketers*, no date (viewed 13 April 2017): www.psychologyformarketers.com/how-to-use-reverse-psychology.

That is why religion, with all its dos and don'ts, is a dead end and will always be a dead end. It generates either pride for those who appear to obey, or a sense of fear or failure for those who know they don't live up to the standards.

And yet, if God is personal and he has expressed his will—including a prominent place for the law—then having no law can't be a solution. But as we will see in the next chapter, the problem is not the law of God. The problem is me.

My battle with anger

It happened again!

The youth were celebrating their last meeting of the year with a formal dinner. The mood was positive, and rightly so. Our previous youth pastor had left with our blessing to plant a church, taking the youth leadership team with him. And now the new youth pastor and his wonderful team had had an extraordinary and fruitful year.

As I went around congratulating the team, I unwittingly expressed my exasperation with the state of the chairs to our youth pastor, doing so in front of the other youth leaders. I was so self-absorbed that I didn't even notice the damage I did to the youth leadership team until the next morning.

I'm tired of being the grumpy old pastor.

My congregation knows that my anger has been a constant area of weakness in my character. And even if most never see it, my family and staff have certainly experienced me at my worst.

Any attempt to blame the pressure of ministry, a father

with a short fuse, or my ethnic baggage (Maltese are known for being angry) is a dead end. They are neither explanations nor excuses. The law of God is clear: any ungodly display of anger is sin. It is possible to be angry and not sin (Eph 4:26), but this has not been my experience. It is all the more serious given that the pastor-elder is to be marked by gentleness (e.g. 1 Tim 6:11; Titus 1:7). The first word used to describe love in 1 Corinthians 13 is ‘patient’, and without this kind of love we are nothing—a waste of space!

I do believe in ‘righteous anger’; both God and Jesus demonstrate it repeatedly throughout the Scriptures. It’s also true to say that sometimes we are simply not angry enough—for example, when it comes to sexual abuse in the church, or the fate of the unborn. So often human anger does spring from a righteous concern. But it almost always ends up corrupted by a harsh comment, a passive sulk, or a sarcastic jibe that exposes the problem of the heart.

I may on occasion take comfort in the fact that I am not a violent man, but that is only because I am often unaware of the damage done by my demanding words, my harsh tone, or my vengeful silence—all of which spring from a heart that, according to Jesus, is effectively guilty of the sin of murder (Matt 5:21-22). And the book of James reminds me that my sinful display of anger never produces the righteousness that God requires (Jas 1:20).

Without exception, I have always regretted pouring forth or leaking out my wrath. I can’t think of one time when I said to myself after an overreaction, “I’m so glad I got that off my chest”. The unrighteous display of anger has a 100% failure rate. It’s my gentleness that needs to be evident to all, not my temper.

In all of this, knowing the role of the law is very helpful. Its prime task is to reflect God's righteous character and to define how we ought to live. The wisdom of the law teaches me that anger resides in the heart of the fool (Eccl 7:9). Jesus declared that the heart that leads to murder and the heart that produces anger spring from the same well.

When you're on the receiving end of anger it's clear that God's law is good, as it protects people from unrighteous displays of anger. As RC Sproul writes, "The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized".¹⁴ God speaks up for us when we are on the receiving end of rage, cynicism, verbal abuse and physical violence. God also entrusts to governments and other authorities the right to restrain sin, including the violent expression of anger, through their laws (Rom 13:3-4). Even Truman Capote acknowledged the value of the law when he said, "The problem with living outside the law is that you no longer have its protection".

When you're the cause of that anger, however, the rebuke of God's law is hard to hear. Seeing through God's eyes the seriousness of anger and the damage done to his image-bearers is critical. God has drawn the line in the sand. I have learnt to say to myself, "My anger is always worse than the thing I am angry about".

On occasion, my mother warned me of the dangerous consequences of my temper. She even voiced her fear that I would commit a crime of passion, resulting in imprisonment. But that only made me angrier. I certainly did not see

14 RC Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, 1998, p. 267.

the ‘evil face’ of my anger for the first 20 years of my life, when I did not know Christ or the power of his Spirit. The law, expressed through my mother’s wise instruction, fell on deaf ears until I was born again of God’s Spirit.

Even now, as a believer, the law of God on its own still won’t change my struggle with anger. I hate my anger, and I hate what it does to my loved ones—and so does God. I see the damage that’s been done when I ask others how they feel when I speak with an angry tone. When asked for feedback about my anger, one of my staff said, “I’m not sure which Ray I am going to get” (happy Ray or grumpy Ray).

Allowing God’s law to name the seriousness of the sin of anger is the first important step. Seeing the wisdom of God in his law is equally important. I can see that God’s way is indeed the best way. And yet, on its own, this law leaves me powerless and overwhelmed in guilt. I cannot change if all I have is “In your anger do not sin” (Eph 4:26).

I must keep reading.