

Faithful to Save:

Salvation Power to Those with Faith in Romans

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Introduction

The programmatic statement of Romans 1:16-17 includes a tightly compressed description of the gospel Paul proclaimed with such deliberate passion: the ‘power (*dunamis*) of God’ which is ‘for salvation (*sōtērian*)’, and ‘to everyone who has faith (*pisteuonti*)’.¹ Like a wide and deep plough, the theme of power displaces a bewildering amount of soil in Romans. In addition to noting the power of divine action, one can track when various kinds of human activity (doing, thinking, working, walking, believing, belonging and behaving) is or isn’t sourced in and sustained by divine power.

No attempt is made here to fully treat this vast theme, but rather the theme of the *power* of the gospel is tracked with particular reference to two key terms from 1:16: *salvation* and *faith*. In regard to *salvation*, we will see that Sin’s power through the Law is eclipsed by God’s power through Christ. In regard to *faith*, it will be shown that neither disbelief nor disunity can nullify the power of God’s sovereign grip on those with faith. We will then conclude with applications to contemporary life.

Power “for Salvation” Opposed

The Reign, Wages & Strength of Sin

The terms ‘sin’ (*hamartia*), ‘trespass’ (*paraptōma*), ‘unrighteousness’ (*adikia*), and ‘bad’ (*kakos*), are littered throughout the letter, with heavy concentration in Ch. 5-7. Romans mentions both ‘sins’ committed by humans and ‘Sin’, a ‘cosmic power’ that enslaves humans, opposes their salvation and thus inciting God’s wrath.² Gaventa describes Sin as a key ‘actor’ in Romans portrayed as a ‘cosmic terrorist’ which ‘can only be served or defeated.’³

Interestingly, this human power-play seen in the wholesale rejection of God in thought and action, progresses only with the permission of the eternally powerful (1:20) Creator God, who ‘gave them up’ (*paredōken*; 1:24, 26, 28) to their distorted desires and mindsets. Cheerful head-nodding Jewish Christians are subsequently placed on equal

¹ δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι.

² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition”, *interpretation* 58(3): (2004), 229-40; See also weighty treatment in Walter Grundmann, “δύναμαι”, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Ed. Gerhard Kittel et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), particularly relevant here is ‘The Demonic Powers’, 307.

³ Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin”, 235.

footing as sinners and law-breakers (2:12, 23, 27). Far from being a Gentile-only affair, all are ‘under [the power of] Sin’ (3:9).⁴

The principle or ‘law’ of Sin and Death has already been hinted at in 1:32, but becomes even clearer from chapter 5 onward, where we learn that with sin comes not only ‘weakness (*asthenōn*)’ (5:6), but Death, individually and corporately (5:12ff). Death, however, was not the only achievement of Sin – its most clever manoeuvre was the co-opting of the Law.

Before the Law was given, Sin was ‘in the world’; an ‘alien, potent and active power’ producing Death, but it was not yet ‘reckoned’ (5:12-13).⁵ With the giving of the Law, Sin was able to be ‘reckoned’ and thus became ‘sinful beyond measure’ (7:13). 7:8 puts it in even stronger terms: Sin was effectively ‘dead’ until it received a lease of life from the Law. The Law, itself ‘holy’ (7:12), is thus co-opted by Sin and serves as the means through which Sin does its work.

7:7-25 laments the resulting inner conflict.⁶ Three ‘laws’ are named (7:21-23): ‘another law (*heteron nomon*)’ called the ‘law of sin’ (*nomō tēs hamartias*) wars against the ‘law of mind (*nomō tou noos*)’, which serves the ‘Law of God (*nomō tou Theou*)’. Regardless of how these ‘laws’ relate to one another (or how their descriptions express different experiences of the one Law), they are eclipsed by the supreme ‘Law’ in 8:2 which frees from this three-way slavery: the ‘Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus (*nomos tou pneumatos tēs zōēs en Christō Iēsou*)’!⁷

Law & Flesh v. Christ & Spirit

8:1-13 resolves the conflict of 7:7-25. Flesh-oriented life is a life of self-conflicted slavery to Sin, and Spirit-oriented life is characterised by peace and is led by the Spirit (7:25;

⁴ As is often the case, though no ‘power’ terms appear in this text (γὰρ Ἰουδαίους τε καὶ Ἕλληνας πάντας ὑφ’ ἁμαρτιᾶν εἶναι), the idea is implied by the context – in this case being ‘under’ the rule [power] of Sin.

⁵ L. Morris, “Sin, Guilt”, in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 878.

⁶ For an interesting treatment of the “moral-psychological economy that informs” Paul’s statements in this passage and the rest of 6-8, see Emma Wasserman, “Paul Among the Philosophers: The Case of Sin in Romans 6-8”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30(4): (2008), 387-415.

⁷ See the excellent discussions in James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38A, Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 394-5; F. Thielman, “Law”, in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 541; and N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 241; Thielman (following Wright) describes the Mosaic Law as reaching its *telos* in Christ (10:4), and thus being ‘remoulded’ into the ‘Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus’.

8:6). Mindset is crucial (7:23, 25; 8:5-7). Those who are 'not in the flesh' but 'in the Spirit' must 'live according to' and 'set their minds on' not the flesh, but the Spirit, who was powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead, and thus well able to breathe life into dead, 'mortal bodies' (8:10-11; cf. 13:14).

Believers are delivered from Sin's power as they share the death of Christ, in whose body Sin has been condemned, and are empowered to obey God by the Spirit's power, who raised Him from the dead.⁸ The Law, intended to bring life (e.g. Deut. 30:19; cf. Psalm 1:2-3), was void of saving power.⁹ '[T]hose under God's good and holy law need to be delivered from it, as they resist it, break it, or use it in a misguided attempt to justify themselves.'¹⁰ *Sin's human-condemning power through the Law and death-working power in the Flesh (7:7-13) is exhausted and eclipsed by God's sin-condemning power through Christ and life-creating power by the Spirit (8:2-3).*

In allowing Sin's rebellion to play out in humanity, even including Sin's co-option of God's own Law, Sin is shown up for what it is: a mere pawn in plan of God. Every drop of Sin's power is allowed and out-matched by God's sovereign power. Gathercole writes, '[I]n Romans 7, God's overarching purpose in Sin's use of the Law is so that Sin might be shown up in its true colours.'¹¹ '[T]he function which we assert the Law to have in the divine plan for the world is finally achieved when sin is unmasked in its demonic character as utter enmity against God.'¹² Sin is like all other 'powers' (*dunamis*), none of which is able (*dunēsetai*) to separate believers from God's love in Christ Jesus (8:38-39).

⁸ E.P. Sanders, "Sin, Sinners (New Testament)", in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Vol 6*, Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 44; "[O]ne does not escape bondage to an alien power by repentance. The radicalness of the problem corresponds to the radicalness of the solution, escape from the "Flesh" by sharing the death of Christ." And I. Howard Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 131; "Being raised to newness of life through union with Christ in his death and resurrection brings deliverance from the power of sin and the capacity to obey God (Rom 6); this is precisely what the Spirit conveys to believers in Romans 8."

⁹ Martinus C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 180; "The cosmic hegemony of death (and of sin) disclosed in Christ's death and resurrection signifies that the Law is powerless to grant justification, righteousness, or eternal life. There is no ground for boasting in Law observance but only in God and the hope His redemptive action creates".

¹⁰ Gerald G. O'Collins, "Salvation", in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, vol. 5*, Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 910.

¹¹ Simon Gathercole, "Sin in God's Economy: Agencies in Romans 1 and 7", in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, Eds. John M. G. Barclay & Simon Gathercole (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 170.

¹² Walter Grundmann, "ἁμαρτία", in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Ed. Gerhard Kittel et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 311.

Power “to all with Faith” Opposed

The Challenge of Disbelief & the Strength of God’s Grafting Grip

The gospel’s power ‘to everyone who has faith’ is challenged by the painful (9:1ff) reality of Jewish disbelief. In 3:3, Paul gives voice to the objection that Jewish unbelief (*apistia*) could nullify God’s faithfulness (*pistin tou Theou*).¹³ 3:4 answers immediately. The familiar *mē genoitō* (‘By no means!’) is followed first by a sharp riposte that God remains true (faithful) even if humanity were composed entirely of (unfaithful) liars. The subsequent reference is to Ps. 51:6, juxtaposing David’s own sinfulness with God’s faithfulness.¹⁴ The question of 3:3 is unthinkable: since when, Paul asks, has God’s faithfulness depended on humans!?

God’s faithfulness, seen in the gospel, Law/Prophets (3:21-22) and Abraham (Ch. 4), doesn’t depend on human faithfulness (i.e. ‘works’; 3:27-28; 4:1-2, 4-6) but is seen in God’s graceful gift of justification (3:23), which is ‘effective through faith’ (3:25). Abraham’s faith was not in his dead body or Sarah’s barren womb, but in the faithfulness of God who is ‘able (*dunatos*) to do what he had promised’ (4:19-21).

Though not in the foreground, this theme continues through Ch. 5-8 until Ch. 9, particularly v. 6 where he deals again with the notion that Jewish unbelief shows God’s word has failed. If *God’s own people* have rejected *God’s own message*, to what extent (if at all) can it genuinely be said to carry *God’s own power*?

As in Ch. 4, Abrahamic faith is central to the answer. The word of God has not returned void – there are still true children of Abraham. However, by God’s decree, true children are promise children, not flesh children (9:6-8). As God displayed his power in Pharaoh’s whose heart he hardened (9:17-18), God’s adoption (election) of those with faith does not lessen his power or make him guilty of injustice (*adikia*; 9:14). Is not the ‘double predestination’ of two vessels (one prepped for destruction, the other for glory) a fitting display of God’s sovereign power (*dunaton*), particularly in his *patience* with the former and his *mercy* on the latter (9:21-23; c.f. kindness and severity in 11:22)?¹⁵

¹³ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 139-40.

¹⁴ Ibid, 133; observing the possibility that 3:4 could be an allusion from the LXX with ἀληθής translating ἠπίσταν in passages like Psalm 33:4.

¹⁵ Jouette M. Bassler, “God (God in the NT)”, in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 1055; ‘[T]he emphasis here is not on predestination per se, but on God’s power, faithfulness, and autonomy of purpose.’

Lest the Gentile readers become proud, Paul later reminds them (11:17-24) that God is able (*dunatos*) not only to 'cut off' the wild Gentile branches which had been graciously grafted in (if they do not 'continue in his kindness'), but also to mercifully graft in again the natural Israelite branches (if they 'do not persist in unbelief'). Both Jew and Gentile are equal members of a family which God wanted 'from all nations, saved without favouritism and hence by grace alone.'¹⁶

The Challenge of Disunity & the Strength of Love

The gospel's power is also challenged by disunity in the form of power struggles between Jewish and Gentile believers. Conflict over eating, drinking and 'day' observance (14:2-6, 14-23) has arisen between the 'strong' (*dunatoi* in 15:1) and 'weak' (*asthenōn* in 14:2; *adunatōn* in 15:1). In light of this disunity, is the gospel actually the power of God to *everyone* with faith, or just those with *strong* faith?¹⁷

Though Paul himself could be categorised as 'strong' (14:2), believing that 'nothing is unclean in itself' (14:14, 20), he urges both strong and weak to welcome and not despise or judge one another (14:3). The strong (*dunatoi*) are to 'put up' (15:1) with the failings (*asthenēmata*) of the weak (*adunatōn*), remembering that the Lord is able (*dunatei*) to make anyone stand (14:4). Judging or careless eating are not 'walking in love' (14:15), which does no wrong to a neighbour, and thus fulfils the Law (13:10).

The gospel is indeed power for *everyone* who has faith. Faith that is equally accessed by Jew and Gentile, who must now see themselves as equal branches of *the same tree*, and equal guests at *the same meal table*.

Application to Contemporary Church

God's Powerful Saving Spirit

Sin in the world, the Church, and the lives of individual believers can cast doubt on the power of salvation. Paul wants us to *know* that we have been powerfully saved from 'the law of Sin and death' (8:1). We are dead to Sin, alive to God (6:11), and not under Law but Grace (6:14).

¹⁶ Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 249; as part of his capable exegetical study of Ch. 9-11.

¹⁷ See the thorough treatment of Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1 – 15.13 in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Few Christians would identify as ‘under the Law’, but varieties and degrees of legalism are all too common. Be it the Law of Moses, modern Christian norms, or ‘another law’ (*heteron nomon*; 7:23), all laws – no matter how ‘holy’ or ‘good’ (7:12) – are powerless to save (8:3), and provide more opportunity for sin to do its work in us (7:11).¹⁸

In response to this knowledge, Paul wants us to ‘walk according to the Spirit’ (not the flesh); *setting our minds* on the things of the Spirit (not the flesh), and through the Spirit *putting to death* the deeds of the body. This is not self-help (or legalism) cloaked in Spirit-language; neither still is it a passive approach to the Christian moral life. The difference is not found in whether or not the believer exerts moral effort or discipline; the Christian life is characterised by striving and labouring toward maturity (cf. Col. 1:28-29). The difference is that our moral effort is exerted not as though we were *under Law*, competing against the power of Sin, but rather as one *under Grace*, cooperating with the powerful work of the Spirit (Cf. 15:16).

God’s Powerful Grasp on All with Faith

As in Rome, disbelief and disunity are realities which can challenge us also. Paul’s wisdom is urgently relevant. In regard to disbelief, we need to know that God himself is powerful and faithful even if nobody believed. Our faith is not in our own faith or anyone else’s, but rather in God’s own sovereign and faithful grasp. Paul’s passion, urgency and humility should characterise our missional posture toward the unbelieving world.

Perhaps Paul’s most urgent advice relates to our relationship to other Christians. Splits of opinion – and all too often mere *style* – happen at a seemingly exponential rate. The admonition to ‘welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you’ (15:7) is more challenging than we realise.¹⁹ Striving by the Spirit to fulfil the Law of Love (13:10), we must not only identify and eliminate causes of division, but also seek ways to work together across lines of preference, denomination, age, social, political persuasion, class, language, ethnicity, and many more.

¹⁸ This is not antinomian; the Law remains holy and good, and perfect tool which is perfectly co-opted by Sin to bring condemnation. Believers do not hate or despise the Law, they just aren’t under it or married to it. See the helpful recent treatment of Brian S. Rosner, “Paul and the Law: What He Does Not Say”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32(4): (2010), 405-419.

¹⁹ See, for example, Robert Jewett, “Following the Argument of Romans”, in *The Romans Debate, Rev. & Exp. ed.*, Ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), 276-7; who argues that Ch. 15-16 are to be seen as the ‘climax’ of the argument of the letter.

Interestingly, Paul expresses confidence in their goodness, knowledge and ability (*dunameno*) to instruct one another (15:14). Only a community united by love can disagree without dividing. The ability to which we are able to discuss divisive issues (i.e. evolution, homosexuality, spiritual gifts, etc.) will be indicative as to the depth of relationship we have. Indifference and pride must be done away with (12:9-21); our goal is not to merely tolerate, but to patiently share and deeply engage with one another in the common faith and salvation we all stand in.

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