

## STUDY GUIDE 8 – ‘Experiencing the tension’

Read **Romans 7:1-25** in the dramatised script and/or in another version.

(1) Why do we need to be <i>released from the law</i> ? (4-6)	
(2) How can we be <i>released from the law</i> ? (4-6)	
(3) Why do I <i>covet</i> (want what I’m not allowed to have)? <b>(7-8)</b>	
(4) How did the <i>command</i> bring <i>death</i> instead of <i>life</i> ? <b>(10-11)</b>	
(5) So is God’s <i>law sinful</i> ? <b>(7, 12)</b>	
(6) How does <i>sin</i> operate? <b>(13)</b>	
(7) What does Paul mean by <i>unspiritual</i> ? <b>(14)</b>	
(8) What is ‘my’ problem? <b>(15-19)</b>	
(9) What two <i>laws</i> do I find <i>waging war</i> in me? <b>(21-23, 25b)</b>	
(10) What is my greatest need? <b>(24-25a)</b>	
(11) Read Jeremiah 38:1-13, the story of Jeremiah in the cistern (an underground water reservoir). Jeremiah has been preaching what some royal officials consider to be heresy....	
What do the officials intend should happen to Jeremiah?	
What state is Jeremiah in at the bottom of the cistern?	
Who takes the initiative to rescue him? Is he an official?	
How do they get Jeremiah out again? What part does he play in his own rescue?	
How is this story a parable of the state we have got into spiritually?	
What part are we meant to play in our own rescue?	
In rescuing us, how did Jesus go farther and deeper than Ebed-Melek?	

(A) Read the dialogue overleaf. At one point Leslie says, ‘I try’. What does (s)he mean by this? Why isn’t it working?	
(B) Think of examples of ‘laws’ (for instance, household rules) that you find it very hard to keep. Why is this? Is it enough that we sincerely want to keep them?	
(C) We often hear it said that we should ‘let go and let God.’ Does this mean that we stop trying completely? In smaller groups, look up and discuss: <i>Ps 40:1-3; Isa 40:28-31; Jn 15:4-5; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Phil 3:12-14; Heb 4:1-3a, 9-11.</i>	
(D) What is the basis of our confidence as Christians? Is it possible that religious pride has infiltrated our faith, so that we are actually opposed to the good news of God’s grace in Christ?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there one point about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) that I have understood in a new or deeper way?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there one practical step I could take as a result of studying this section of Romans?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there something in this section which I could turn into praise or prayer to God?</li> </ul>	

## 'Contrasts' by Paul McCusker (slightly adapted)

*The minister is preaching. Overlapping, though not necessarily as a reaction to, what he is saying, we hear the thoughts of someone listening to him.*

MINISTER There are fundamental promises from God that each one of us can claim for ourselves. Then we can live a victorious life in Christ as His blood cleanses us from sin.

LESLIE *I don't understand why I fight with the same problems over and over again.*

MINISTER You can expect God's presence in your life.

LESLIE *I want to change. I want to live the way God wants me to, but I feel so alone in it. I wonder if He's there at all and – if He is – why isn't He helping me more?*

MINISTER God will keep you and give you strength for His service.

LESLIE *I mean, I'm so weak in things I reckon I should have worked through by now.*

MINISTER You can expect answers to your prayers.

LESLIE *And when I pray – it feels like something isn't connecting. I can't figure out what I'm doing wrong. Maybe I don't have enough faith. I thought I did. I try.*

MINISTER God will work miracles in your life.

LESLIE *I see things happening in other people's lives. They seem so ... so close to God. And I'm not. And I don't understand why. What do they have that I don't?*

MINISTER God will fill your life with love.

LESLIE *Sometimes I resent them. When they try to help me, I accuse them of being self-righteous. I act like they couldn't possibly understand how I feel – what a struggle it is for me.*

MINISTER God honours obedience as you surrender to Him.

LESLIE *They make it sound so easy. It's as if their Christianity fits them like a glove. So snug, so comfortable. I'm an odd size, I suppose.*

MINISTER God wants you to overcome your temptations.

LESLIE *I just can't seem to get it right. I make the same mistakes over and over and can't get ahead. It's miserable.*

MINISTER God wants us to live in peace and unity.

LESLIE *And I'm finding it harder and harder to want to go to church. I feel like a hypocrite. Oh sure, I can put on a good front and make it look like I'm doing all right – but I know better. I'm not fooling God, I'm sure. I look around at everyone else and wonder if any of them feel like I do. Probably not. So I resent them all over again.*

MINISTER God wants you to be a witness for him. Amen. [Steps down from the pulpit.]

LESLIE *Maybe I should give up. Maybe being a Christian is only good for some people. It's certainly not something I feel comfortable talking about. I mean, how could I explain it to others when it doesn't seem real to me? I ... I feel such a failure.*

## RIGHT THROUGH ROMANS

### 'Experiencing the tension' (7:1-25)

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Imagine Adam and Eve talking the day after they are expelled from Paradise. Adam wants to put as much distance as he can between him and God; he's blown it and there's no point in trying to go back. But Eve is wistful – she longs to return to the old relationship with the Lord, so why don't they just apologise and say they'll do everything God commands from now on? Here we have the tension of the 'old human nature': it wants to be independent of God, yet it longs to be good.

Many people who attend church, go to philosophy self-help courses or take up spiritual aids like yoga, find that however much they want to improve and escape the worst aspects of themselves, they continually fall into their old ways. Romans 7-8 are an attempt to get us to see that we were never meant to achieve goodness (or keep the moral law) in our own strength. The only way we can do it is through the Spirit of Christ.

The pronouns 'I', 'me', 'my' dominate this section. Who is this 'I'? Is it just Paul giving us his own experience before he met Christ? Possibly – yet at the same time the 'I' represents all of us, from the first human beings to our present generation. In particular, it represents the Jewish believer brought up under the Ten Commandments and the law of Moses ('law' and 'commandment' occur some 25 times here.) Basically, 'I' in Romans 7 is the human being trying to go it alone without Christ. But Jesus says, 'Apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn 15:5). This leads to Romans 8.

**7:1-3 An illustration from marriage (c).** Paul means that death terminates a legal relationship, for instance in a marriage. Are we hitched to the law? Dying with Christ unhitches us.

**7:4-6 Freedom from the law (b).** **5** *The sinful passions aroused by the law.* The point Paul is going to develop is that not only can we not stop doing what we know to be wrong, but the very existence of the command makes us want to break it. In his *Confessions* St Augustine tells how in his youth he and his friends stole some pears. 'My desire was not to enjoy what I sought by stealing (I already had much better pears in my own orchard) but merely the excitement of thieving and doing what was wrong....Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed.' **6** *By dying.* What we need is a complete break from this lethal law, and only death can end our relationship to it. (In ch 8 he will show how there is a new law of freedom, the 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus,' which replaces the old law of slavery to sin.)

**7:7-12 The goodness of the law and the evil of sin (a).** **7** *Is the law sinful?* Paul has to tread a delicate line here. He mustn't picture the good and holy will of God, as expressed in the majestic Jewish Torah, as something ugly and hateful. But why is it human nature to desire the forbidden fruit (it wasn't always so)? So he pictures himself as Adam and Eve, in the presence of the tree of good and evil, being tempted by the deceitful serpent (this is one interpretation of these verses). As soon as he yields to the temptation, sin enters his bloodstream and kills him.

**7:13-20 Human nature pulled in two directions (a).** This masterly passage of spiritual psychology describes the agony of anyone who sincerely desires to live a good life and to overcome temptation. It's not just that there's an upward pull and a downward pull, like good and bad angels in a medieval mystery play. It's as though the downward pull actually comes from inside us and is like an alien presence in our lives. The harder we try to resist it, the more force it exerts on us. It's like being caught in a quicksand, or a bog on the Yorkshire moors. The mistake is to try to deal with it ourselves by struggling. We need outside help.

**7:21-25 The situation from which Christ rescues us (a).** **21** *I want to do good.* 'Original sin' doesn't mean that, because our first ancestors sinned, we are all now totally evil. We are still made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), and our consciences retain flickers of 'the life that gives light to everyone' (Jn 1:9). But sin has invaded every part of our nature, even our holiest longings. How else could the Pharisees in their zeal for God want to murder Jesus? **24** *Who will rescue me?* Like Jeremiah in the cistern (Jer 38:6), I am sinking in deep mud – but help is at hand! The final sentences summarise the hopeless situation; but they also point back to the gospel (chs 3-6) and forward to the new life of the Spirit of Christ (ch 8).