

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to *Defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

Ben Best, co-host

Might a popular understanding of Paul's words in Romans 7: 14-25 contribute to a learned helplessness with respect to sin in the lives of many Christians? New Testament scholar Dr. Joseph Dodson believes the answer is yes and explains why in his book *Conquerors, Not Captives: Reframing Romans 7 for the Christian Life*. In this lively episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss his take on this much contested passage. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Dr. Joseph Dodson is the Dr. Craig L. Blomberg Endowed Chair of New Testament at Denver Seminary. He studied at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland and the University of Tübingen in Germany. He has published numerous academic and popular works, including the one we're going to talk about today, which he wrote with Mattie Mae Motl, *Conquerors, Not Captives: Reframing Roman 7 for the Christian Life*, published by Lexham Press. Joey, welcome to the podcast, and thank you for making the time.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Thank you so much for having me. Your voice is such a great voice. I'm already intimidated and and in awe.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Do not be either. Before we jump into the meat of the matter, I have to ask ask about an illustration you use in the book. You write about having attended a Fourth of July barbecue in Queens, New York. Are you from Queens?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I'm not. I help out with a church plant there in Queens.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Okay.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I have best friends, but I'm a Yankees fan. I'm guessing if you are from Queens, you may be a Mets fan.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. I grew up in Queens. I grew up a stone's throw from LaGuardia Airport, and what will always be Shea Stadium to me. Right. People can call it City Field if they would like. It's always going to be Shea Stadium to me.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

The church that we help out with is in the Ditmars area.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I'm a Spider-Man fan, too, so it just works out.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay. All right. Well, we're on the same page there. Definitely. Well, that illustration brings up something that will make a nice segue into what we're talking about, because it's that illustration that you refer to Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA." What does that have to do with interpreting Romans 7?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

It's been a while since I've read the book and wrote the book, but if I remember correctly, it's during the Fourth of July, and I had just being in the greatest city of the world, I was bursting out, "Born in the USA." I have ADHD, so I often just burst out with random songs. I was singing this at the height of patriotism, and my buddy, who's a pastor there, says, "You know, that song is critical of America. It's not actually praising America." I was like, "What are you talking about, Willis? No, no, no. This is an American song, Born in USA." And he was like, "No." And so he pulled out his smartphone and pulled out the lyrics. And sure enough, it's a criticism of America. But I had kind of eisegesised it. I had read my own presuppositions and made it actually mean something that it meant the opposite. And so also when Romans 7, we come to it many times we read our own experiences into that text rather than actually doing proper exegesis. So eisegesis is where we read something into, and exegesis is where we're supposed to reading out from its context. And as Americans, not only when it comes to Bruce Springsteen songs, but especially with scriptures, we can be prone to eisegesis or maybe like Narc-eisegesis: we probably think this passage is about us. And so, yeah, that's just an example of how sometimes we think something means something that it actually means the opposite of.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So the subtitle of the book is *Reframing Romans 7 for the Christian Life*. Start out by telling us, how has it been framed and why is it that you think that there's a necessity to reframe it?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Sure. Yeah, great question. So for most people, Romans 7, of course, is the passage where Paul says, "The things I want to do, I do not do. The things I don't want to do, that's what I find myself doing. Oh, what a wretch I am. Who would rescue me from this body of sin?" Talks about being impotent, but for the power of sin, being sold as a slave of sin. That's how we usually read this passage from our pastors to our devotional thoughts, our devotional text, where people say, "Well, this is Paul talking about his own struggle with sin. He wants to do good, but he can't. He wants to be holy, but he can't. It's not him. It's sin that's dwelling within him." For most of your listeners, I'm guessing, and for most of us, we've always been taught that this is the typical Christian life. But what we find out is that most scholars do not think that this is Paul talking about a believer. We take Romans 7 as typical for our Christian life when really it's meant to be talking about someone else. I want to reframe it in light of its context in Romans, in light of its specific context in Romans 6 and Romans 8, and reframing it in light of what Paul says elsewhere, as well as what the New Testament writers and Jesus say about the Christian experience with sin.

Dr. Keith Plummer

One of the things that I really appreciated was the care and the time that you take in terms of tracing the flow of the argumentation and how it is that these verses fit within the context of this unfolding argument. You say that "Our thesis is this: Looking at Romans 7 in context, rules out the view that Paul meant to present here the typical Christian life and the plight of a mature believer. Instead, those dedicated to the Lord increasingly experience freedom from sin because of the Spirit's empowerment for them to put to death the misdeeds of their body." And before we look at some of your reasons for taking that position, I want to ask you, give your best effort at steel-manning the position that you say is the popular one. What are the strongest cases that you can think of to be made in its defense?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah, I think probably the biggest reason most people see Romans 7 as a typical Christian experience is because it does look a lot like our own experience. For many of us, we read that and we're like, "Yes, that's me when I'm on the road and someone cuts me off. I don't want to get angry, but I do." For many of us, this has been our experience with sin. When we read that, it resonates and hits us at that level. To me, the majority of people who take Roman 7 in traditional way, that this is Paul talking about himself, and therefore talking about people, we have that experience and that struggle. I think there's a difference, however, between struggling with temptation and actually being absolutely defeated by temptation and sin. And so I think that's where the distinction comes in.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And what about exegetically? For those who do take the popular view from a scholarly position, what are the things that they will point to textually that you would say, "Okay, these are strong arguments that need to be dealt with?"

Dr. Joseph Dodson

It's really hard because I don't see strong arguments for that outside of our personal experience. Will Timmins has given the best, most recent argument for this being the traditional Christian experience in his book, and he's going to talk about how we still have this flesh, that old Adam that's there. His thesis is that although Romans 7 is not a Christian's experience, it is a Christian experience. We do experience that old flesh that's still part and parcel that's there. He gives the best counter argument, I think, to my book, but even he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that actually the typical Christian experience is supposed to be Romans 8, where, "Therefore, there's now no condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus, for the law of the life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death" that we saw in Romans 7. Now we don't walk according to the flesh like what we see in Romans 7, but now we walk according to the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I grew up in the dirty South, not in Queens, and we didn't call the Holy Spirit, the Holy spirit growing up. We called the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost. We would say, "There ain't no party like a Holy Ghost party because a Holy Ghost party don't stop, and it don't stop, and it don't stop, and it don't stop." Romans 8 is this life that is expected of living according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh, not according to the law. Paul even is going to go on to say that because we walk according to the Spirit, we're no longer obligated to fulfill the desires of our sinful nature, which stands in contrast to what we see in Romans 7. I'm so convinced that Romans 7, it's hard to actually do a steelman argument from the other side outside of just Christian experience.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In your book, I think this probably comes close to offering a steelman position, you give major reasons for the not Paul view, and you contrast, which you say this is somewhat of an oversimplification, but you say "There are two views. There's the not-Paul view and the totally-Paul view," or quoting one of your students from the south, "the totally Paul, y'all view."

Dr. Joseph Dodson

All Paul, y'all.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But you say the major reasons for the not-Paul view are the immediate context is about how sin manipulates the Mosaic law. Oh, wait, this is for the not-Paul view. Let's look at the... Because that's your position. But the Paul view looks at things such as, "We are dealing with someone who is expressing a desire to keep God's law, which is uncharacteristic for an unbeliever. He declares himself wretched, which only a spiritual man would do. He gives thanks to God who delivered him through Christ, and he describes the common Christian experience of constant misery, resulting from becoming more conscious of sin as one matures in the faith." I do want to come back to some of those, but let's just say historically, one of the things that you do is you look at how major figures in church history understood what was going in Romans 7, particularly the identity of the "I" in 14 through 25. What do we see when we look at early church commentators moving on into later church history.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah. The very first interpreter that we have on Romans is Origen. Origen was an original Greek speaker. As he reads this, for him, it's obvious that Paul is doing an impersonation. So similar, if I were to say to you, let me ask you real quick, your audience, what age? Are we looking at university students?

Dr. Keith Plummer

We're looking at university students and up. That's not exclusively university students.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Okay. My 15-year-old is really into this one artist. And so if I were to say, "It's me, I'm the problem, it's me, because I knew you were trouble when you walked in. Trouble, trouble, trouble." I'm using "I" and "me," but it's obvious that I'm doing an impersonation of someone else. In this case, it's Taylor Swift. All your Swifties that are listening would immediately pick up on that. Also, according to Origen, Paul is doing an impersonation that his original audience would obviously know that he's not talking about himself. For example, at the very beginning, he says, "I was alive before the law came, but when that commandment was given me, sin sprang to life, and it deceived me, and I died." Now, who was alive before the law came? Before that commandment, no one except for Adam and Eve. Then you have the sin deceiving me, and it killed me. And so Origen would say that that's just as obvious as me quoting Taylor Swift for the original audience that's there, taking it all the way back to Genesis 3.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

We may say, Oh, Dodson, you're really stretching. Your learning has driven you mad. But know that Paul has just got through talking about in Romans 5:12-21, which sets up chapter 6, where he introduces sin and the law, talking about Adam and how sin and death came in and ruled through Adam. Adam has already been a part of the conversation. For many of us, when we read Romans, we read it piecemeal, a little here, a little there. Then we're like, it's like this and like that and like this. But the truth is, the original audience read Romans 1 all the way through Romans 16. There's hints and gestures and references to Adam all throughout. I just mentioned the Romans 5, And in Romans 8, he's going to talk about how creation stands on her tiptoes, tippity toes (I don't know how they say it in Philly) stretching out her neck, waiting for the redemption because at one point she was subjected to futility against her will and hope. This sounds a lot like Genesis 3 there as well. Romans 16:20, Paul's culmination, the climax of Romans, "May the God of peace crush the head of Satan under your feet." Even scholars believe that Romans 1:18-32, that fall of man discussion that he has where the wrath of God is being revealed, has undercurrents of Adam. The story of Adam and Eve goes all throughout this undercurrent of narrative dynamics with there. For Origen, this is obviously Paul talking about the old man rather than the believer.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you also look at how it is that figures like Jerome and Erasmus and Wesley also didn't see this as Paul being self-referential.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And then on the other side, you point to the figures of Augustine, Calvin, and Luther. Of course, what position we take can't be a matter of authority or prestige, but those are some heavy hitters.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

They are, right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That you say that you think that in all of their cases, their reading of what was going on in Romans 7 was perhaps more influenced by their interaction with certain opponents.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

That's correct.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Than it was due to careful exegesis in a following of the argument. Tell us a little bit about what makes you say that.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Let me say this. I admire these reformers, but we need to understand that these reformers, they are not canonized, that they also have flaws. Augustine, for most of his life, agreed with Origen. "Yeah,

this is not Paul talking about himself. Look at the context." However, in his discussion, in his debate with respect to free will and this idea of human choice over against total depravity, Augustine, he changes it. And so young Augustine says, "This is totally not Paul." But when we get to old Augustine, he rings that bell to say that this is Paul talking about himself over against his haters that's there. But Augustine does two things. One, in this debate, he's not actually doing exegesis, he's doing apologetics in order to argue for human depravity over against the Pelagians. And then second, one thing that Augustine is doing is he's not reading from the Greek text. Instead, he's reading from the Latin. And in the Latin, there's a word that's added where Paul says, "I can't do these things perfectly." He has this word perfectly. I agree with Augustine's interpretation that we as Christians, we can't do anything perfectly outside the grace of God. But that's just not what the passage is talking about. In Romans 7.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Augustine rings that bell, and that bell continues to resound when we get to Luther. Again, Luther is arguing over against his opponents rather than doing careful exegesis. He's going to say that Paul's frustration, however, is just that he has these desires, not that he's actually doing those desires. Even though Luther is taking what would be more traditional, it's still different than how most of us deal with it. Calvin is going to follow suit along those lines. For many of us who come from a Protestant Reformation tradition, these are the lenses. It's obvious to us that Romans 7 is talking about the Christian life because that's how we've always been taught it within our tradition. We're swimming in those waters. But John Wesley is going to be the first one that I found that actually comes and says, "Hold up, wait a minute. Let's put some exegesis in it." He says, "Actually, Romans 7:1 is talking about those who know the law, the Jewish law, the law of Moses." He puts it in the context and says, "Actually, this is someone who is under the law rather than walking under the Spirit."

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Everything that I'm saying here and what that I say in the book, this is not new, this is not original to me. I'm not coming up with this idea. In many ways, I'm bringing Wesley back or I'm bringing Origen back. I'm also just taking what's in the ivory tower. The majority of scholars don't think that Paul is talking about the Christian life here. I'm just trying to take what's in that ivory tower, what Wesley and company had done, and bring it to a more popular audience.

Dr. Keith Plummer

When I wrote you, I told you that my first thinking about this in-depth was stimulated by a chapter that Dennis Johnson wrote in a collection of essays in honor of Richard Gaffin. And his chapter was called "The Function of Romans 7:13-25 in Paul's Argument for the Law's Impotence and the Spirit's Power, and its Bearing on the Identity of the Schizophrenic Eye." Really good dissertation length title there. But what I really appreciated about it, and your book reminded me of what he's trying to do there. He's saying, "Okay, before we go to 14 through 25 and answer, who is this? Let's look at what comes before, what comes after, how does this fit within it?" And that was one of the first times that I really started thinking, "Well, it doesn't seem to make much sense to me that after talking about dying to sin, the necessity of dying to the law, and then on the other side, saying what the law could not do, weak as it was, God did sending a son, that all of a sudden, just rather, abruptly, Paul is going to launch into this discussion of the nature of the Christian life."

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Now, for people listening, unless you're driving, you might want to grab your Bible if you haven't already, because there's so much here, and we're only going to be able to scratch the surface. But let's talk about... You started talking about how Romans 7 begins. Paul is addressing those whom he says, know the law. And he says some things about... He uses the analogy of marriage and how a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she's free to be joined to another. And then he flips it. And then he says, But you have died to the law, and this was necessary so you could be joined to another, so that you would bear fruit for God because, joined to the law, you were bearing fruit for death. Tell us, how is it that, particularly, verses 5 and 6 are an intro to what is going on in the rest of

the chapter?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah, great question. Thank you for setting me up for that. I think there are three identity markers that help us understand Paul's train of thought. One reason I love Paul, and I've been studying him now for about 30 years, I'm giving away my age, is it's easy for Paul, especially in Romans, to follow his train of thought. Here he begins with this vocative. Now, I'm speaking to those of you who know the law. So either his Jewish audience or maybe his God-fearing audience that he's mentioned the Mosaic law. If we back it up to Romans, then the Romans 5, the law came in order that it might increase trespasses, and where sin abounds, grace super abounds. Paul has introduced the law there in chapter 5. In chapter 3, he's even said that the law shuts people's mouth so that they realize that they are under sin. That under sin is not just a deed, but probably that power that he's going to bring out here. Maybe a little bit of a hint, a foreshadow to what's going to come. Then even in Romans 6, where he's talking about free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we're free at last.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

We are no longer under sin. Sin is not the boss of me. We're also no longer under the law. Thanks to be to God that once I used to be a slave to sin, now I am free. It's for freedom that Christ set us free to borrow from Galatians. When we get to chapter 7, he gives us a shift. Okay, now I want to talk about those of you who know the law. Not only are we set free from sin, but we're also going to be set free from the law. That's going to be the first indicator. The second one you set me up with as well is verses 5 and 6 give us, in a sense, the table of contents. He's going to talk about the old way of the law that led to flesh, flesh, flesh, sin, sin,, death, death, death. Frustration over against the newness of the new covenant, the new way that leads to life, life, life, spirit, spirit, spirit, freedom, freedom, freedom. Verse 5, and again, if your audience has the Bible, they We're going to look at it. Verse 5 gives us what Paul is going to be talking about in the rest of chapter 7.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Then there's going to be that big but, and we cannot lie. But the new way, the life in the spirit, is going to be what we see in Romans 8. The first indicator that Paul is changing the subject that he's not talking about the normal Christian life as he's talking about the mosaic law and living underneath the Mosaic law. The second one is it gives us that table of contents, if you will, verse 5 and 6. It gives us a preview of how Paul is going to make his argument. The third way to follow Paul's train of thought is to look at the rhetorical questions that he asked. He's been doing this throughout Romans, even as I mentioned in Roman 5:21, where sin abounds, grace superabounds. Then Paul asks that question, "Shall we continue in sin so that grace may abound?" Paul uses that Greek word me'ge'noita. Again, growing up in the deep south, we would translate this as, heck to the naw, to the naw, naw, naw. Heck, no. You've died the sin. How can you live in it any longer? He uses this syllogism from Aristotle, the philosophy where Jesus Christ died to sin once and for all.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

We died with Christ through baptism. Therefore, we are dead to sin. How can we live in it any longer? He will ask a rhetorical question and he'll answer it. Romans 7, if you look at the two rhetorical questions that he asked, they're in 7:7 and 7:12. The rhetorical question is, is the law sin? Paul has seemed to say some really nasty things about the law. Paul is going to have to come to the defense of the law and say, even though the law seems to be on the side of sin, flesh, and death, the law is wholly righteous and good. The law was there to show us how nasty sin was. The law is not sin. The law points out sin. And so 7 through 11, Paul is explaining that. Here's the law. It's not sin, despite of what it seems like I might have said. It's wholly, righteous, good. Then we get to verse 12, and Paul is like, Well, is that what you meant good for me? That is the law, was it meant to produce death? And Paul is like, No, no, no. This is what it's doing. And so the rest of chapter 7, verses 13 through 25, is talking about how sin exploits the law in order to produce death inside of us.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

To just recap, the who he's talking to in verse one, the table of contents, if you will, in verses five through six, and the two rhetorical questions tell us that this is not Paul talking about the normal Christian life struggling with sin. Paul does talk about that elsewhere. Let's go to Galatians 5. Paul

talks about that elsewhere. Let's go to 1 Corinthians 10. But here this is talking about what happens when one tries to live under the law rather than walking according to the Holy spirit.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So his concern is a redemptive historical argument where he's doing a comparison and contrast between life under the mosaic economy and life under the new covenant. Okay. And it seems as though we've even had something of a preview in chapter 6, where he says, "For sin shall no longer be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace." And so what is going on in 7 is he's further illustrating what that mastery looks like. Would that be correct?

Dr. Joseph Dodson  
Correct. Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Okay.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah. He's going to continue to make a distinction between the righteousness that comes by the law, which is like self-righteousness, as opposed to the righteous of God, the righteousness that comes from circumcision of the flesh, the snip-snip, as opposed to the righteousness that comes by the circumcision of the heart. And so all throughout the Romans 1-16, Paul is having a discussion that has Hebrew sense and sensibilities. He's showing his Jewish underwear. Once we put those lenses on, we realize that Paul is having to discuss them where the law on the one hand comes to condemn us, but also the law gives us a testimony because now there's a righteousness that has been revealed that's outside of the law. But wait, wait, wait, wait. But the law and the prophets are still pointing to it. This is Paul dealing with somewhat of inside baseball, an intramural discussion with his audience that still wants to say, Hey, what's up with the law now that Christ has come? It's not Paul's first time to talk about this. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's writing from Corinth, he ends by talking about... We're familiar with the passage, "Oh, death, where is your sting? It's been swallowed up in victory." But then he's talking about how "the stinger of sin is death, and the poison of that sting is the law." He makes a conversation about that in 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians, he says, "Whenever the law is claimed, there's a veil over people so they can't see the truth of the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But when the gospel is freed, then we have that freedom." In Galatians, he's talked about it. What we see in Romans 7, it's not just an oddball where Paul is struggling and wrestling with the law. It's something that he is having to deal with throughout his other letters leading up to Romans.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I know it's a while back that you have, you wrote this. Several places, you referred to Tom Schreiner. For example, one of the places that you do that is where he shows what he believes is a parallel between 7:5, life under the law in the flesh, and 7:7-25, life under the law in the flesh, elaborated. Life in the spirit, verse 6, and life in the spirit, elaborated 8:1-17. I have not been following as closely as I should have. But now, hasn't Dr. Schreiner gone in a different direction, at least in terms of his understanding of what's going on in Romans 7?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah. In his recent redo, his remix of his Romans commentary, he's going to follow the Will Timmins line. He's been influenced by Timmins, who's going to give that traditional view that it's not a Christian's experience, but it's a Christian experience. But Romans 8 is still what is intended. He's going to argue that Romans 7 can be the normal Christian life, but it's not supposed to be Christian life. He's going to follow along those lines. It's interesting. As far as I know, the only scholars that still promoting a more traditional understanding of that this is the typical Christian life, that this is Paul post-conversion, are actually Baptist. Tom and Garland, and then Will Timmins has a Baptist background. But outside of the Baptists, I haven't seen anyone from a Pauline scholar perspective, that's arguing that this is Paul, post-Damascus, that this is Paul, giving us an example of the typical Christian life.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's take a break here. Then on the other side of that, I want to hone in on that use of the term typical. What exactly we mean by that. We'll do that on the other side.

Dr. Joseph Dodson  
Sounds good.

Ben Best, co-host

Cairn University invites pastors and lay leaders to our annual Church Leaders Conference. Join us on Thursday, March 5th, for a day of encouragement, fellowship, and sessions designed to equip you for effective leadership. This year's topic is recognizing, resisting, and recovering from gospel drift, which will be by keynote speaker, Jared C. Wilson. Conference registration includes a copy of his book, *Lest We Drift*. Don't wait. Find more information and register today at [cairn.edu/clc](http://cairn.edu/clc). That's c-a-i-r-n.edu/clc.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back with Dr. Joseph R. Dodson, and we are talking about his book, *Conquerors, Not Captives: Reframing Romans 7 for the Christian Life*. And when we left off, mention was made of Paul, those who hold that Paul is describing the typical Christian life. And I watched the discussion, the debate that you had with the man who's named your chair, who's named after her, Craig Blomberg. I felt for you, I was like, boy, this must be intimidating. But he was making the point that, well, I'm not saying that this is the typical Christian life. I'm saying that this is possible for a Christian to be mastered by sin. Otherwise, Paul wouldn't give the command not to let it reign. What do you say in response to that? Because he's pushing back that. I'm not saying this is supposed to be illustrative of the regular Christian life.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah, it's I was at his birthday party last night. He turns 70. So if you're listening to this, Craig, happy birthday. We've had a lot of fun going back and forth with this. For him, he thought this was the, "ah ha! I got you moment." Because I agree, Romans 7 can be the Christian life. I agree that for many Christians, this is their normal Christian life because of Romans 7. But I don't think that's the intention of Paul, and I don't think that is what's meant to be the normal Christian life. I think that especially in America, the reason Romans 7 seems to be our normal Christian life is because we've been taught that it's supposed to be. If we wake up every morning convinced that we're going to be defeated by sin, then we're already defeated by sin. For many of us who have grown up in church, we've always been taught that this is a typical Christian life. It's almost like a self-fulfilled prophecy. Second of all, what we see in Romans is, I, I, I, I, me, me, me, me. I think if we try to walk in Holiness, walking in the spirit all by ourselves, which is Americans, we're like the John Wayne individual I can do it by myself, then we are doomed to fail.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

And so holiness, freedom from sin and addiction can't be done alone. It has to be done in the body of Christ. And so when it's just me, me, me, I, I, I, then that's the case. I think a third reason that so many Christians relate to Romans 7 as their experience is because they're under a law. It may not be the mosaic law, but underneath legalism, a new form of legalism rather than knowing what it is to be in the Holy Spirit. My tradition, we were a little bit afraid of the Holy Spirit. Our Trinity was the Father, the Son, and the Holy Bible. Walking according to the Spirit was something that we just didn't talk about very much. If we're walking underneath this new type of law, rather than walking in the Spirit, that's going to make Romans 7 more of our experience. In Romans 7, it's not just the I and the me, myself, and I. But in Romans 7, it's just no mention of the Holy Spirit. But we get to Romans 8, then there's spirit all over the place. I think walking under the law is one reason, whether it's a new law or whatever it may be.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

But the last reason is that we haven't been taught to actually walk and live according to the Holy Spirit. It's not a got you moment to say that Romans 7 can explain the Christian life. In my opinion, it's saying that everywhere else, Paul says, this shouldn't be our case. If we're living in Roman 7 rather than Romans 8, then we're really missing out on a huge aspect of the gospel that Jesus Christ came, not just to forgive us of our sins, but to set us free from the power of sin.



Dr. Keith Plummer

Would it be accurate to say that one of the things that Paul is primarily concerned with in Romans 7 is he's making a full-throated defense of the goodness of the law while simultaneously making a case for its impotence with respect to the power of sin.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yes. You probably could just teach this better than I can with the interview. Your questions are totally on point. Again, we need to remember that chapters and verses weren't part of the original Greek text. For many of us, we stop there in verse 25. But in Romans 8, the Therefore, we look and say, What is it there for? Now there's no condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus. Why is that the case? Because that which the law was powerless to do, impotent to do, because it was weakened by the flesh, God did, by sending Jesus Christ in the flesh, to condemn sin so that now we can be set free. Paul is going to end up explaining why he did Romans 7. Romans 7 explains how and illustrates how the law could not overcome sin, but it sets sin up so that it can be taken out by Christ.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You also include in the book, you're anticipating some of the major objections to the position that you are saying and some of the things that have offered in defense of what you're calling the popular view. What are we to make of such things as the apparent transition to the present tense, in addition to the use of the personal pronouns seemingly, people would say, Paul making reference to his current condition, and such things as the expression of a delighting in the law of the inner man, which the traditional view or the popular view would say would not be descriptive of someone who is not regenerate.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

You gave me three. First of all, we'll hit the Greek one.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I don't expect you to do justice to all of them, so you can select what you want.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I'm a Greek scholar, so I get really excited, and I tried to do my best not to get too deep in the Greek weeds in the book because it's to be a popular book, so feel free to rein me in. But there's an old view that the aorist view, the verb that Paul uses at the first part of Romans 7, and the shift to the present tense is Paul moving from the past. They take aorist as a past tense and present as the current present experience. Greek scholars don't believe that anymore. The present tense is a misnomer. You have two different aspects of this that moves from the past and the present. First of all, aorist just means undefined. It's your default verb. It's your plain white vanilla latte. There's nothing special about it. The old, old, old school is aorist is past and present is right in here, right now. For many people who are still arguing for this being Paul's present experience, they're on way, way, way back, our Greek, and we've moved beyond that in our understanding of Greek syntax. The second one says, well, aorist is going to be punctiliar. It's a point in time, a snapshot, whereas the present tense is a continuous aspect. It's not right here right now, but there's this continuing ongoing.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

And so in this case, your audience can't see me because it's recorded. But if I say I jump, that would be the aorist tense, according to this understanding of Greek. But if I were using the present tense, it was, I am jumping. But the emphasis is not on time, it's on the aspect. I jumped once, as opposed to, I'm jumping, I'm jumping, I'm jumping, I'm jumping, I'm jumping, I'm jumping. So that's one view. A third view is that we have the verbal aspect, and it gets into huge weeds here, but it's a matter of emphasis. And so you want to put the right emphasis on the right syllable. And so the aorist has really no perspective, no underlining, no caps. But when Paul uses the present or the perfect tense, he zooms in. He's doing some type of emphasis. Again, it gets debated on what exactly that emphasis is. For this view, for the two newer views as opposed to the old one, this doesn't have a shift to Paul talking about himself in his time. Will Timmins, again, the guy who argues more for the traditional view, He even admits that this understanding of moving to the present tense is misguided.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

The present tense doesn't mean present. It either means this continuous, this is a continuous existence, experience for someone under the law, or Paul is emphasizing the frustration, the dramatic power of that bondage under the law. Not that that's talking about him right now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That would be for the purpose of intensification?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And dramatization. Okay.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Occasionally, when my mom is texting me, she accidentally hits the all caps, and I'm like, Mom, why are you screaming at me? For some people, they think that when Paul uses the present tense, he's moving to the all caps for him. Not that he's talking about his experience. And so that deals with the aorist versus the present shift.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And the "I" you somewhat talked about in terms of you the terminology of impersonating, not for the purpose of anything deceitful, but rather just dawning a character for the purpose of making a point. And you say that first century Greco-Roman audience would understand some of the rhetorical aspects of that, that this was not at all uncommon.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Correct. Yeah. So two ways that scholars say that Paul could be using the "I" here. The most common is that Paul is using prosopopoeia, is the Greek word. He's putting on a face. This would be something that grade school students would have been taught, how to put on a prosopopoeia. If I were to get up and say, "I'm free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last." You all know that that's not coming from me, that I'm quoting Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Just like we would know that, the original audience would have these cues. One of the cues is that Paul doesn't use just I am. He uses I am. He uses that ego that's at the beginning of it. For those like Origen, the first readers say that Paul is doing that prosopopoeia. That would have been obvious.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

The impersonation is often used in context where you have an imaginary opponent, and we're like, Wait, was there a frenemy in Romans? Yeah, actually going back to chapter 2, But what about you, oh, man? You think you're better than those people? You're hating on them? Don't you realize it's the goodness of God that leads them? Paul has already introduced a dialogue partner, an opponent, and this type of diatribe, this type of impersonation is common within that type of discussion. The majority of scholars, again, think that this is that impersonation, and it gets debated on who it's impersonating. But elsewhere, when we see Paul talks about his previous experience with the law, I was blameless according to the law. In Philippians, Paul is like, Man, I got swagger according to law. The law, it didn't mean nothing to me. This idea of this confidence that Paul had before the law in Philippians over against what he's saying about the law in Romans 7, seems to be obvious that this is not his experience with the law growing up because he was blameless according to the law.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Another version, and this is the one that I lean even though it's not the majority of the scholarly view, is that Paul is talking about himself. So the I is correct, but this is not Paul as a mature believer, as an apostle who got knocked off his donkey on Damascus, but instead that this is Paul talking about his own previous experience in the law in continuity, in concert with Israel and with Adam. This is Paul not as necessary individual, but Paul as one who is part of Israel, who is part of Adam, who is under the law. Now that he realizes the freedom that he has, he understands that that's who I used to be. Now,

this gets us into another Greek weed or somewhat of a complicated discussion. But in Romans 8:2, Paul says, again, "Therefore, there's now no condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus, for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set blank You free from the law of sin and death." Some of your audience, they're reading an English translation that says, Has set "you" free from the law of sin and death. The you there is actually second person singular. It's you singular, you individual. Again, coming from the deep south. It's not the y'all. He doesn't say, Has set y'all free from the law of sin and death. He says, You, individual, have been set free. But some of your audience, they're going to be reading an English translation that says, "For the law of the life of Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and the death."

Dr. Joseph Dodson

No matter what English translation your audience is using, there's probably a little asterisk. If you go down to the bottom, it's going to say, Some text have me or some text have you, depending on which translation that you have. If it's me, then Paul is giving us a clue right now that Romans 7 was that which was in the past, but now I have been set free from that experience. It could be that Paul uses I in Romans 7 to say, That's who I used to be. But to quote T. I, back in the '90s, "The old me is dead and gone, dead and gone, dead and gone." We look at elsewhere where Paul talks about I am who I am, and there it's never this impotent, but I no longer live, not I, but Christ that lives within me. In the life I live in the body, I live by faith. Not me, but Christ that lives within me. We see Paul saying, I'm ecthroma, I'm abnormally born. I'm the least of the Apostles, the leastest of the Apostles, probably is a better translation of it. But guess what? By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

And by the grace of God, I outdid all those other Apostles. I slowed the dark on them. Not me, but the grace of God that's within me. So we see when Paul uses this I elsewhere, it is this idea of victory that he has over sin, not being impotent of that. And so, again, it It could be that Paul is putting on this mask, the prosopopoeia, the impersonation. That's why he's using the I in order to argue against this opponent, this dialog partner that he has. Or it could be that the I represents who he used to be in Romans 7, but then now who he is in Christ in Romans 8.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you do a good job of looking at how it is that Paul refers to himself with relationship to sin elsewhere. You raise the question of, is the popular view of Romans 7 consistent with that? You were just doing some of that. One of the things that you touch upon in that section is Paul's reference to himself as the chief of sinners, which oftentimes people will recite or recount as though what we have here is Paul describing his current sinful state. You say, contextually, that's not right. Why?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Right. Well, again, not I say, but pastoral scholars say that when he's talking about being the chief of sinners is that he persecuted the church. He says being the chief of sinners, he was there when Stephen was stoned. When he hears himself as a chief of sinners, he was the one who was taking people and dragging them from their families and putting them into prison. In the context of chief of sinners refers back to how he was one who persecuted the church. But if you look in the pastor's roles, Paul is setting himself. When he talks about this, he's setting himself up against his opponents. Paul is going to say, No, no. Hey, you imitate me as I imitate Christ. He's going to look at the Corinthians and say, Hey, how are you still living in the flesh? Instead, Imitate me as I imitate Christ. He's going to come and say, Hey, no temptation has excised you except what is common. God is faithful. He will all always provide a way out for you. It's interesting that if Paul is the one who is still going out and being a part of slave trade and being an adulterer and a murderer, that's not the context that Paul is talking about.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Instead, the chief of sinners refers about who he used to be as one who persecuted the church, not who he is as one who continues to call the church to follow his example, to live a life in which is worthy of the calling that they received.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, someone listening to this could be alarmed in some respects because they might hear what you're saying as arguing... Well, number one, they might hear it in two ways. They might hear it as saying, well, there is no conflict in the ordinary Christian life, and/or is he arguing for some form of perfectionism?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right. Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So speak to those concerns as someone might raise them in light of what you're saying.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

And what I try to say at the very beginning of the book and in the middle and at the end is that, yes, sure, sure, sure, right, right, right. We struggle with sin. Peter was right when he says, Hey, we're aliens and strangers, and because we're aliens and strangers, we have to wage war against us. We have to wage war against a sin that wages war against us. What Paul says in Galatians, Hey, you know what? Walk according to spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of your flesh. But the spirit goes against the flesh, and the flesh goes against the spirit. And so Paul acknowledges that. Polycarp, a later church father, he rephrases Paul's statement that says that the spirit goes against the flesh, that they're at war with one another. And so there is that experience of us battling and struggling with the flesh. Sometimes we get the right theology, but it's the wrong passage. The right theology is, yes, we struggle, we battle with the flesh. The idea of us being perfect, this is why Augustine and Luther and Calvin wanted to go with the traditional idea is because they were fighting against this idea that a person can be perfect.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Paul does not present perfectionism either. Philippians 3, he says, Not that I've already attained it. I'm not there yet. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind, I press on. I don't think that we will receive perfection until the coming of Jesus Christ, until we're with the Lord. But maybe to help out, something Sometimes we combine, we use perfection and holiness as analogous. I think you can be holy without being perfect. So we don't make that distinction. But Paul does in 2 Corinthians, right? He says, Perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. I think who we already are with Christ is not that we are trying to become holy. We are holy. He that knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness. I think we could put holiness in there, the righteousness and the holiness of God. The pursuit for holiness is not to become someone that we're not. It's to become someone who we already are. Paul says, I reach out to grab hold of that which Christ has already grabbed hold of for me. I'm not arguing for perfectionism. I'm not saying that we can be sinless in this life, but we can definitely, through the grace of God, sin less in this life.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Sin is no longer our master. With the grace of God, it has given us not a license to sin, but the grace of God has given us finally a license to say no to sin. As Paul says in Titus, the grace of God has shown up. It's like, move, get out the way, get out the way, and it shows up to teach us to say no to sin and the desires of flesh. But, yeah, to righteousness and to self control. I'm saying that my interpretation of Romans 7 and Romans 8 shows us that holiness is not only a possibility, it's a responsibility. But it doesn't come overnight. It comes as we are growing and walking in community. So often we get discouraged because we measure our holiness by days rather than by decades. If we're struggling with the same sin and the same and being defeated by the same sin now that we were 10 years ago and then 10 years in the future, then I don't think that should be the case. I think that we should, by the grace of God, miss less and and hit more and more.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you say towards the end of the book, When it comes to sin, many believers suffer from a learned helplessness. Speak to that a bit as it relates to how it is that some conceive of what's going on in Romans 7.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Good. Let me use a different illustration that happened after the book. I'm a hiker, and I was hiking the Upper Cheeseman Trail here in Colorado. As I was hiking it, I saw another hiker coming my way with two dogs. I met up with the hiker and talking to her, and we're talking about the trail and everything. She looks at me and she says, Hey, do you mind if I let my dogs off the leash? It was a beautiful area to run, and I'm a dog person. I was like, Yeah. She let the first dog off the leash. It was a golden retriever, and it went and it began to bound, and it was living its best life. If you've ever been around golden retriever. They're just so much fun. But then she unleashed her other dog. The other dog, rather than running after the golden retriever and having a great time, it just began to run in circles over and over again, just like it was chasing its tail. I started laughing because it looked quite humorous. Then I asked her, I said, 'Why is your dog just running around in circles?' Then she looked at me and said, 'Well, see this dog, I just rescued it two weeks ago. All of its life, it's lived in a small cage and has never been able to run. When it gets happy, it just runs around in circles rather than running straight.'

Dr. Joseph Dodson

I began to cry, Keith. I'm like, There's no crying in baseball. There's no crying in hiking. But I felt sorry, first of all, for the dog that it had lived most of its life in a small cage and some anger, too, at the one who had this dog in that cage. But then also, just for a lot of Christians, I think a lot of Christians, Christ came to set us free, but we're still running in those same circles when Christ didn't come just to set us free from the cage, but we could have life and have it to the fullest to borrow from John. For many of us, we're continuing to run in those circles. We're still living as we're in that bondage because it's all we've ever lived. We haven't been given the other option that, Hey, we can actually now say no to sin and live in the freedom and the life and the abundance of joy that Christ came to give us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's good. I'm curious, what has been the response that you have had from people who have read your book, whether it be students, whether it be some feedback that you have gotten through people who have communicated with you outside of your seminary context? And then what has been some of the scholarly reaction to the book?

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Yeah, let me begin with the last. I haven't had much scholarly reaction because I'm just spelling out what is the common interpretations in scholarship. It's not meant to be a scholarly book, what I'm saying for most... Whereas for many in the pulpits or the pews, they were like, Wow, I've never heard that before. For the scholars, I go, Nothing to see here. Same old, same old, same old, same old. I tried to make that clear from the beginning as well. I am somewhat of a bridge person trying to bridge what's in the Ivory Tower to the church. That's what I'm doing. With Scholarly, it hasn't gotten any negative or positive because it's not meant to be a Scholarly book. It's been mixed reports for those. I was hoping I would change Craig Bomberg's view. For many, they're like, Yeah, I can see what you're saying, but no. This was the hope and the goal is that even if you don't come to my conclusion, that at least you realize that this is really complicated. You can't just say, well, Romans 7. But instead, if we're going to look at how our relationship with sin and temptation goes that Romans 7 shouldn't be the first place that we go because it's so highly debated.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

You don't have to take it off the table, but at least don't put it at the center of the table. One of the first rules of hermeneutics of biblical interpretation is that we don't read our own experience into the text. First of all, we read the text in light of its own context. But another rule of hermeneutics Bible interpretation is that we don't take that which is complicated and highly debated and look at the easier text and interpret them through the lens of that which is hard and debated. Instead, we look at what the Bible says clearly about this topic. Once we see what it says clearly, then we look at that. In I do use the illustration. Growing up in the '80s, I'm part of the Gen-X. We didn't start the fire. It's always burning the world's returning. But as Gen-X, I was raised on Sesame Street and you had Cookie Monster. Cookie Monster would come out and he has the cookies and they're all the same except for the one. Then Cookie Monster will begin to say, One of these things are not like the other. One of these just don't belong. I want the audience to see that Roman 7, it's the cookie that looks different

from the other cookies.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

We need to do something with it rather than just continuing to lazily and just continue to say, Well, Roman 7, it's the Christian life. Yeah, it's Roman 7. The things I want to do, I don't want to do. At least it muddy the water enough to say that, Hey, we can't that quickly. There's some heavy hermeneutical lifting that has to happen here at that point. I have had some that have come and said, Wow, I never had the articulation of it, but I see that I do have that freedom. It's not meant to discourage people. Some people are like, Wow, I don't want to believe this because this has been my experience. Instead, it's meant to give them hope to say, Yeah, this may be your experience, and I sympathize with you in that, but it doesn't have to continue to be. It's not meant to judge and bring condemnation. Instead, it's to say that, Hey, there's hope that your life can look more like Romans 8 than Romans 7.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I certainly didn't get the impression. I've read it twice now, and neither reading did I have the idea that it was condemning or discouraging, nor did I have the idea that what you were arguing for was the victorious Christian life as it is traditionally conceived of as you have this second experience, and then sin is a thing of the past. I would say that if nothing else, even if someone else were not to be persuaded, as you said, I think it is a very good volume for tracing out how to follow a line of thinking in a book. And because we call the podcast defragmenting because everything is so splintered. Our approach to the Bible, as you said, is often piecemeal, and we're dealing with verses that we have memorized or maybe larger passages, but often divorced from what is around them. And I just really, really appreciated the fact that you were trying to get the reader to say, let's look at how this passage fits within the broader argument. And so I would commend it to listeners for that reason alone. The book is *Conquerors, Not Captives: Reframing Romans 7 for the Christian Life*, published by Lexham Press and written by Joseph or Joey Dodson.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And thank you so much for taking the time to be with us, Joey. It was a pleasure. I hope that people will pick it up and at least be challenged. It is a thought-provoking book.

Dr. Joseph Dodson

Thank you so much. Had a great time. I really appreciate you having me on.

Ben Best, co-host

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Defragmenting*. Please take a moment to review us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify so that more people can benefit from these conversations. *Defragmenting* is part of Faith & Truth Media, a digital resource produced by Air University. You can find more podcasts, articles, and videos designed to equip you to engage the world from a biblical perspective at [faithtruthmedia.com](http://faithtruthmedia.com).