

Chapter 6

So, I have concluded my comments on the last chapter by arguing that it was in Israel that Sin was magnified. This is not because the Jews were worse than anyone else; far from it. We were probably the most ethical nation on earth. Partly this was because we had the Instruction. However, having the Instruction proved to be a double-edged sword. It meant we knew what the rules were and therefore we knew when we broke them. The number of transgressions in Israel clearly exposed the presence of Sin; the Instruction might mean that overall we lived in better ways than other nations, but it also revealed the fact that we were living in ways other than the one God intended. However much better off we were than the other nations, we were still in the same boat – the boat called Sin. And in our case it was obvious.

This argument raises a number of issues. In particular, it might leave you wondering what possible basis there can be for an ethical life. If the Instruction is inextricably linked to transgression and Sin, how can you tell how you are supposed to live? I never argued that the Instruction is no longer relevant but lots of people thought that's what I meant. Or they thought that was what my argument amounted to. So, in the next section of the letter, I needed to begin an exploration of the basis for living a good life. After all, I have argued all along that only those who live in the way that pleases God will experience Life.

Verses 1-11 Crossing over from Death to Life

Do you recall that I said earlier that Adam and King Jesus are representative figures? What I meant by this is that they stand for the rest of us. Adam stands for all the ways to be human that do not conform to God's original plan, and King Jesus represents the way that does. The rest of us belong to one side or the other. I'm going to give an account of the way you can cross from one side to the other.

1. At this point I introduce a possible objection to my argument. In the letter I put the objection in the form of a question. The questioner effectively says that if it's really true that grace abounds where Sin is clearest, then surely the best thing to do is to keep sinning; that way we keep the grace flowing. Some have even accused me of teaching this kind of nonsense.

2. The argument doesn't work at all. In fact, it is wholly inappropriate for Jesus-followers to live that way; the whole point is to leave behind those wrong ways of being human and to embrace God's way to be human. I introduce here the idea that Jesus followers have 'died' as far as the power called Sin is concerned. This doesn't mean they no longer do things that are wrong; they may commit sins. However, they no longer belong to Sin. This means that sins (or transgressions), that is, the symptoms of Sin, are not a fitting part of the life of the person they are becoming. I am getting away from an ethic based on rules and developing an ethic based on being – one that is based on virtues and character. Those who follow King Jesus are engaged in a process of formation; they are becoming the kind of people who live in the way God intended. So their lives are not defined by rules but by the future God holds out to them. Sinning is not a part of that Life. The rules might be useful because they point to what Life is supposed to be like, but they are not the things that govern their lives.

3. All the communities of Jesus-followers have a ritual that derives from King Jesus. These days you can read about it near the beginning of the first three gospels. Those who trust Jesus are immersed in water and then come out of the water. We call this ritual 'baptism' and we understand it as being joined with King Jesus. This means that we are identified with him and that the things that are true of him are becoming true of us. When we go under the water we are joining him in his death. This is significant because his death was the culmination of his life of utter and total obedience to God.

4. In our baptism we find ourselves identified with King Jesus in his death, his obedience to God. But there's more to it than that, for we know that Jesus was raised from the dead and lives a new kind of life. In the same way, in the ritual of baptism we are also raised back out of the water. In this action, we identify ourselves with the new life of King Jesus, which is the Life that God always intended for humans. Baptism encapsulates something that has happened to us; we have left behind one way of being human and have embraced another. We have left Adam behind and become identified with King Jesus. We have left behind Death and have embraced Life.

5. We have been joined with King Jesus in his death, that is, in his obedience that led to his death, and so we are united with him in his life. And his life is resurrection Life. Resurrection Life is the kind of life that is no longer subject to Death. It is the kind of life that God originally planned for all of humanity. It is the kind of life that the followers of King Jesus are learning to live.

6. Look at it this way. The person that we used to be, the one who lived in the wrong ways and was therefore subject to Death, has died. Since they have pledged allegiance to King Jesus, they belong to him, they are *in* him. This means that the things that are true for their King are also true for them. They died with Jesus in his act of obedience that culminated on the cross. Their former self, that body, dominated by the wrong way of living, is no more. This means that those who follow Jesus are no longer controlled by those wrong ways of living. I introduce another picture in this verse. It's one that will be developed later in the chapter. It revolves around the idea of being enslaved. I've already argued that humans have chosen to live in ways other than those originally intended by God and that this means they live in the realm called Sin. Now I assert that if we are in Sin's territory we are enslaved by Sin. As I have already said, until God acted through King Jesus, there was no escape from this condition.

7. Do you remember that I have been saying that the consequence of living in the wrong ways, the ways other than those God intended, is Death? Well, once you have died, that's it – you've experienced the consequences. This suggests that if you've died and come back to life, things can start again. This is what has happened in our baptism. Only this time, when we come out of the water, we start as those who are freed from Sin, as those who are no longer its slaves or its subjects. This does not mean that we no longer do things that are wrong but that those things no longer define us. We are no longer identified with Adam and his *disobedience*, but with King Jesus and his *obedience*.

8. And there's more. Not only do we die with King Jesus, we now live with him. That is, we will live the kind of Life he lives. This should mean that we're getting to be more and more in line with God's original purposes for humanity.

9. Here I am emphasising some of the points I have already made or that I have implied. King Jesus has died. He is raised. He lives the resurrection Life that is beyond the reach of Death. He has escaped its power and influence. King Jesus, being a human being, could die, but now he's raised to a new kind of Life. He can't die again.

10. When King Jesus died, he died to deal with Sin and its consequences. He died once and he did it on behalf of everyone. His death makes it possible for humans to escape the consequences of their failure to live in the ways God intended. The Life he now lives has nothing to do with Sin and Death. It is lived entirely for God. Imagine that humans had never sinned but had been obedient to their original purpose and had fulfilled God's plans for them. Imagine where they would be. Well, that's where King Jesus is. And it's where those who follow him will end up too!

11. So, let's go back to the point where this discussion began, I was talking about whether or not we should continue in Sin. The answer is obviously that we should not. Indeed, for the reasons given, those who follow King Jesus should see themselves as dead as far as Sin is concerned but alive as far as God and God's purposes are concerned.

Forgive me if I repeat myself but this seems a good point to take stock of the key points of the argument. God created the world for a purpose and created humans with a key role within that purpose. Had they stuck to that purpose they would have been wholly fulfilled and all this would have glorified God. However, they chose not to do this and there were consequences for them and for the whole of creation. However, God was not going to give up on his purposes and found a way to get things back on track. He would enable humans to live the Life he had planned and they would fulfil all his purposes for them and they would be glorified. Adam represents humans getting it wrong. King Jesus represents them getting it right. God's actions in King Jesus deal with the consequences of humans getting it wrong and offer them a fresh opportunity, empowered by God's Spirit, to get it right.

There are a couple of pictures in my mind at this point in the argument. One concerns ownership. You have to remember that slavery was a fact of life in the Roman Empire. I was not commending it but borrowing the concept in order to make a point. Jesus-followers are those who have changed one owner for another. We used to live in ways that did not conform to God's original intention. In one sense we had no choice about this. These ways of living were like a power that controlled us; it's as though we were enslaved to it. However, just as a slave who dies escapes its master, so when we died – remember how I said that baptism is a kind of death – we escaped from Sin. In one sense it's really Jesus who died and now lives again. Those who follow him are identified with him and so we can say we have escaped Sin and now live with King Jesus and live the sort of Life he lives; Life that conforms to God's original purpose for humans. In being raised from the dead, King Jesus can never die again and so he has escaped the rule of Death. Remember that Death is the consequence of Sin. That's why I can say that Jesus, the one person who never transgressed, died to Sin, and now lives the Life God intended all humans to eventually enjoy, the Life of the age to come, the Life crowned with blessing, honour and glory. Those who follow Jesus are therefore also dead to Sin and live the Life God intended.

Verses 12–14 Know whose you are

The key idea here is that those who follow King Jesus should remember who they are. If Jesus is their King, then Sin should not be.

12. Clearly, all this ought to have consequences for those who follow Jesus. The power of Sin has no right to rule us, and we should resist its attempts to make us live in the wrong way. Our bodies remain mortal. They are subject to physical death. Committing sins is a very real possibility for us. But it is a denial of the things that King Jesus has done for us and of the Life he leads and in which we join. For the Jesus-follower to sin may be inevitable but it is at odds with the Life to which we are called and with the type of person we are becoming.

13. In the past, when we lived in ways that were not according to God's purposes for humans, there's a sense in which we presented our whole beings to the power I call Sin so that, under its rule, we did things that were wrong. Now we need to stop doing that. Instead, we should present our whole selves to God. After all, as I've been saying, we've been brought from Death to Life. This is who we are, so we should live like it. That means we should offer ourselves to God, place ourselves under his rule, so that we live in the way that God originally intended all humans to live. This is true for every part of our person, our minds, our spirits and every part of our bodies.

14. If you've started to follow Jesus, then Sin is no longer your boss. And this relates to the Instruction. Obviously, this applies to those who know the Instruction which means all those who are Jewish. It might also have applied to any non-Jews who have been influenced by Judaism. Those who follow Jesus are not subject to the Instruction but to grace. That is, they are treated as though they are living in the way God originally intended as a gift, and not because they possess the Instruction. I have already demonstrated that without King Jesus, every category of human being is in the realm of Sin. The Jewish people within that realm are also subject to the Instruction. When Jewish people become followers of Jesus they die as far as Sin is concerned and they also die as far as the Instruction is concerned. It is no longer the thing that defines them. Its outward manifestations no longer mark their identity. Instead, like all other followers of Jesus, they are part of the realm of God's generosity.

Indeed, as I shall try to explain later, there is a connection between the Instruction and Sin. It served to remind people that they were not living in the way God planned. Furthermore, it was understood to mean that what truly mattered was its outward badges, like circumcision and possessing the Instruction. People tended to rely on those things believing that, in and of themselves, they represented the kind of life God wants. As I've tried to make clear, that was never really the case. The good thing is that you can rely on the sheer generosity of God for help to live Life as God intended.

I think the main point of all this is clear. I am urging the followers of Jesus to live out the truth of their new identity.

Verses 15–23 Right living comes from right identity

The argument continues in this section. I develop the picture of slavery by arguing that those who follow Jesus have changed owner. Looking back, I'm not terribly comfortable with the image but it made good sense in the original context. It's worth bearing in mind that some of my Jewish friends struggled to understand the basis of morality in my

teachings. For them, ethical decisions depended on the Instruction. Since it seemed to them that I had abandoned the Instruction, they couldn't see how anyone could know how to do the right thing. They saw themselves as the beneficiaries of the Instruction since it showed them the right way to live. As I shall try to make clear later on, I am not against the inner parts of the Instruction, so much as its outward aspects. And I'm only really against those if they get emphasised at the expense of the inner meaning of the Instruction or are imposed unnecessarily on people who are not Jewish.

15. So, at this point I go back to the sort of question I was asking at the beginning of this section; does being the beneficiaries of God's generosity rather than the beneficiaries of the Instruction mean we should live in the old way? Of course it doesn't. Some suggest this because the only morality that they can imagine is based on obeying rules. As we will see, I propose that the only true basis for morality is the transforming work of God. This gets worked out in more detail later when I discuss the work of the Holy Spirit.

16. Now I extend my illustration from slavery. This was always a bad idea but it was a social and economic fact of life in the ancient world. It seemed perfectly reasonable to use it as an illustration at the time though it makes little sense in the contemporary world. Basically, I'm arguing that it all boils down to two options. It's like that old Bob Dylan song, *You've gotta serve somebody*. Either we live as God intended or we don't. Essentially, the question is, who will be our master, God or Sin? We offer or present ourselves to one or the other. It could be the wrong way to be human, which means our boss will be Sin and the consequence will be death. Or it could be obedience, which is to say, God's way for us to be human, which leads in turn, though I didn't spell it out at this point in the letter, to Life.

17. Those who follow Jesus, such as those in the churches of Rome, had once indeed been enslaved to the power called Sin. But they have experienced an inner transformation that enables them to be obedient, as it were, from the heart. The good Life they live emerges from within; it's an expression of their new identity.

18. They have been set free from the power of their old boss, Sin, and have become the slaves of righteousness, which is to say, they live in the way that God originally intended for humans. And this is, as we have seen, something that springs from their transformed characters. It is heart-obedience. This is an idea I'll expand on later. It is not about complying with a set of rules but something that springs from your new, true, God-given identity. It emerges from the very centre of who we have become – and are becoming.

19. At this point I was very careful to stress that all the stuff about slaves and masters is a picture. I talked about slavery because it was a means to get my point across. Some of the concepts involved are tricky to grasp and an everyday illustration can help. The idea is that at one time the Roman followers of King Jesus had presented themselves to do wrong and this led them on a slippery slope to doing worse and worse things. Sin gets you stuck in a vicious cycle. But now they should present themselves to do good, embracing a virtuous cycle, the result of which is that they become holy. The old way led to a kind of lawlessness, that is, to a life outside the true purpose of the Instruction, but the new way leads to all the things like holiness that were part of the true goal of the Instruction.

20. Expanding on the slavery picture, I emphasise that you can only have one boss. If Sin was the boss, you could not live in the ways that God intended.

21. And what did you have to show for having Sin as your boss? From doing those things that you'd now rather not think about? Death! That was the prize. As I have mentioned more than once, Death is the consequence of Sin.

22. But now your boss is God, you are free as far as Sin is concerned, you get made holy and that leads to Life in the way that God originally promised.

23. You see, when Sin is your boss what you earn is death. But God's economy is different. You don't get what you earn or what you deserve. God gives freely. And his gift is Life, the Life he originally intended for humankind. God does this because King Jesus, through his obedience, did earn and does deserve this Life. Those who follow him, who belong to him, are freely given the opportunity to share in that Life.

The heart of my argument is that we were enslaved to the power called Sin and as a result were headed for Death. God has intervened through King Jesus in a way that gives us a free gift. Part of this is that we are transformed by being joined to Jesus. This means we can begin to live differently. It is not something we do ourselves so much as something that happens within us because God is active in us. This means we no longer belong to Sin but instead belong to God. It's all about something that God has done. His activity means that we can obey God from our heart. It is something that springs from who we become, not something imposed on us from outside. It's an approach to ethics that sets us free to become the people that God summons us to be rather than one that puts us in a straitjacket. It's one that takes us off the highway to Death and puts us on the road to Life.