

The Subjunctive – Really?

Movies provide a banquet of quotable quotes. Sometimes there are words, phrases or sentences that can be applied to our study of the Bible. Take for instance the term “You must ask the right questions.” This quote from “I Robot” is actually a good guide when studying the Bible. If you come across a difficult passage, a well thought out question may lead you to the correct answer.”

It is true that many movies, perhaps most movies produced recently are marketing liberal thinking. Yet, there are sometimes hidden gems embedded in the dialogue. So, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to mine them and bring them to light.

Today’s quote comes from the movie “Avatar.” That is the first of the Avatar movies. In it, there is a safety briefing. In it, the colonel says, “As head of security it is my job to keep you alive. I will not succeed. Not with all of you. If you wish to survive you need to cultivate a strong mental attitude. You’ve got to obey the rules.” In my opinion it was portrayed very well. It was also very true. It almost sounds like something colonel R. B. Thieme Jr. might have said. And if reworded and applied to our Bible study, it is a useful warning.

As the pastor-teacher for today, “It is my job to communicate to you Bible doctrine/answers to keep you alive spiritually. I will not succeed. Not with all of you. If you wish to survive you need to cultivate a strong mental attitude through the intake and application of Bible doctrine by walking by faith. You’ve got to obey the rules.” As Herman taught, the rules are obeyed via faith. The obedience is faith. We walk by faith. That is how you stay alive in your spiritual life. When we choose to sin, we must return by realizing that we sinned, identifying/acknowledging the sin and move on in faith dependence on the Holy Spirit.

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Today's lesson delves into grammar. For some this may be "more about penguins than they care to know." That is a term I picked up working among engineers. Some who are not engineers don't really care about how something works only if it will meet schedule and come under budget. Yet how something works, the scope of the product is important to the customer. So for you the listener may want to know how the Bible is worded. For some it can be a beautiful gem of language. For this lesson, even the mathematician may be interested in the logic that Paul uses. But studying the Word of God finds embedded gems that can open doorways of understanding for all.

In English grammar, we don't often talk about the subjunctive. My first encounter with this form of the verb was in Spanish class in 9th grade. It was, for me at first, difficult to understand. It expresses a wish or desire. It is something that might be real. One of the few lessons from that Spanish class that I remember is that if a sentence starts with Ojala que, then the following verb must be in the subjunctive.

Here is Webster:

"The subjunctive mood expresses wishes, proposals, suggestions, or imagined situations. It's usually found in a sentence with two clauses, with one clause having a verb like wish, suggest, or demand, and a second clause having a verb in the subjunctive. Note the difference between "She visits that fabulous cat every week" and "They suggested that she visit that fabulous cat every week"; the second sentence has visit instead of visits because it is in the subjunctive mood.¹"

Here is another explanation of the subjunctive mood in English from Wikipedia:

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/grammar/getting-in-the-subjunctive-mood>

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“The subjunctive (also known as the conjunctive in some languages) is a grammatical mood, a feature of an utterance that indicates the speaker's attitude toward it. Subjunctive forms of verbs are typically used to express various states of unreality, such as wish, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, obligation, or action, that has not yet occurred. The precise situations in which they are used vary from language to language. The subjunctive is one of the irrealis moods, which refer to what is not necessarily real. It is often contrasted with the indicative, a realis mood which principally indicates that something is a statement of fact.”

“In Modern English, subjunctive forms are usually marked by the use of the bare form of the verb in the present subjunctive, with the third person singular lacking the -s ending, or by the use of were instead of was in past subjunctive constructions.”

“Subjunctives occur most often, although not exclusively, in subordinate clauses, particularly that-clauses. Examples of the subjunctive in English are found in the sentences "I suggest that you be careful" and "It is important that she stay by your side."²”

Having identified the subjunctive in English, let us shift into the Greek. Daniel Wallace, a Dallas Theological Seminary Greek scholar, summarizes the subjunctive in Greek.

“In sum, the subjunctive is used to grammaticalize *potentiality*. It normally does so in the realm of *cognitive probability*, but may also be used for cognitive possibility (overlapping with the optative) or *volitional intentionality* (overlapping with the imperative.)”

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjunctive_mood

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“It should be added here that the tenses in the subjunctive, as with the other potential moods, involve only *aspect* (kind of action), not time. Only in the indicative mood is time a part of the tense.³”

This topic becomes important in Paul’s dealing with the sin nature. Let us look at some of the verses in chapter 7 that delve into the subjunctive.

I mention subjunctive here because Paul uses the subjunctive six times in Romans chapter 7. It is also something that Americans are not always familiar with.

First subjunctive:

Romans 7:2 For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.

If her husband dies. This is what is known as a Greek third class condition. It is “if” (in the Greek *ean*) plus the subjunctive. Sometimes Bible teachers might say this is “maybe its true and maybe it isn’t.” But what Paul is doing here is setting up an analogy using a *hypothetical*.

Hypothetical. If you are in America and have watched a law and order show, you may have seen a scene in which a known criminal is negotiating with a district attorney while sitting in an interview room of a prison. The prisoner says, “Hypothetically speaking, if someone says they are guilty of this crime and can give you a crime boss, what will you give him?” In this case it is assumed to be true but presented as a possibility to evade actually admitting to the crime until the deal is sealed.

³ Wallace, D.B. (1996). *Greek grammar beyond the basics an exegetical syntax of the New Testament ; with scripture, subject and Greek word indexes*. Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan [20]08, 463

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Daniel Wallace has much to say on this. Here is just a snippet. “The third class condition encompasses a broad semantic range (a) a logical connection (if A, then B) in the present time (sometimes called Present general condition), indicating nothing as to the fulfillment of the protasis; (b) a mere hypothetical situation or one that probably will not be fulfilled; and (c) a more probable future occurrence.⁴”

Paul is using the subjunctive here for a hypothetical situation to illustrate a principle.

Second subjunctive:

In Romans 7:2 Paul is setting up an analogy from the Mosaic Law using a hypothetical. Using the subjunctive.

Romans 7:3 So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

The word order is different in the Greek.

Romans 7:3a (literal) Then therefore, being alive the man, an adulteress she will be called if she is to a man, another (joined); ...

The English translation makes it sound as if the condition relates to the man living while the Greek uses the subjunctive to set up the condition if she is joined to another. Interesting that there is no word in this Greek text for “joined.” It is assumed from the Greek grammar.

⁴ Wallace, D.B. (1996). *Greek grammar beyond the basics an exegetical syntax of the New Testament ; with scripture, subject and Greek word indexes*. Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan [20]08, 696

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The hypothetical is if the woman is joined to another man. It is not if the man is living. It is assumed in the text that he is living. The hypothetical is if she is at the same time joined to another man.

A note: As I write this lesson, I am struck by difficulties in the logic and grammar. Some commentators remark on the logic. I don't know that any really dig deep into this text. So what I am writing now is just touching the surface of the argument. It is likely that the study of Paul's logic combined with the grammar would be a fascinating topic.

[OK, skip this part if you don't want to see what some of the issues are: 1. In the first part of the analogy it is the man that dies freeing the woman to marry someone else. In the second part of the analogy it is the woman (believer) that has been put to death to the Law freeing the believer to be "married" to Christ. 2. There may be some details concerning what is meant by being joined. There is no word, no verb used there, just "if she is to another man." What exactly is the relationship. To dig deep into what Paul has said here is complicated, in my opinion. Peter said that some of what Paul wrote was difficult 2 Peter 3:15-16]

Romans 7:3b (literal) ...if however should die the husband, free she is from the law so as not to be her an adulteress having been to another man.

Third Subjunctive. The third subjunctive involves the death of the husband. Again, this is another third class condition using a hypothetical to set up the analogy of husband and wife under the law compared to the believer and sin nature.

Romans 7:4 Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to

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**another, to Him who was raised from the dead,
in order that we might bear fruit for God.**

The NASB is missing a word in the translation. The NIV, which I don't normally use, is in this case a better translation:

**Romans 7:4 (NIV) So, my brothers and sisters,
you also died to the law through the body of
Christ, that you might belong to another, to
him who was raised from the dead, in order
that we might bear fruit for God.**

The word “joined” in the NASB is not there. Instead the word “belong” is there.

So now Paul has the other side of the analogy. But here the hypothetical has vanished. This is real. As a believer you were made to die to the Law and to the sin nature. Yet as stated in previous lessons, we still have a sin nature and the problem is choice. Will you choose to walk by faith in the Holy Spirit or return to the sin nature?

Paul has gone very fast here in a single sentence. We have gone from being “married” to the sin nature to being joined or married “to another” who is “Him,” Jesus Christ.

Subjunctive #4. But whoa! The subjunctive is now embedded in a purpose clause. We have been ~~joined~~ made to belong to Christ **IN ORDER THAT WE SHOULD BEAR FRUIT TO GOD!** Once I saw that, I realized that Paul is using grammar to get the reader's attention. In the first half of the analogy the woman's choice is in the subjunctive. In the second half of the analogy, the believer, who is parallel to the woman, is joined to the second man, Jesus Christ for the purpose of

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producing fruit to God. And, as we saw, it is not “joined” but “belonging to Christ that...”

We might pause for a few seconds and let that sink in. Yes we are saved so that, purpose clause, we avoid or are saved from the Lake of Fire. That is good but it is from a negative perspective. But the purpose of our salvation in this chapter is so that we produce fruit. Paul is careful to not mention “works.” You might get the wrong idea. We do not work for rewards from our sin nature or according to the Mosaic Law. We have a higher law, the Law of Christ. We do not produce the work or the righteousness. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit. It may be a bit frustrating here because the answer to these questions is in chapter 8. But Paul has to get us into the question mode so that we will ask the right question. How do I do that? How do I let the Holy Spirit empower me to do this? See chapter 8.

Fifth Subjunctive.

Now we jump to verse 13 to arrive at the fifth and sixth use of the subjunctive.

Romans 7:13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Here we are back to the hypothetical. Paul sets himself up as the sinner to demonstrate the struggle between what we know to be the right course of action and what the sin nature pushes us to actually do.

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It might be shown. Paul has spent much time and effort to explain that the Mosaic Law is perfect. It is good. Yet humans have a sin nature which is incapable of avoiding sin. It is provoked into sin, not just sin but “utterly sinful.” The Greek is closer to “beyond excess sinful.”⁵ We sometimes see a person who is well behaved who all of a sudden becomes violent. It can be there was an imaginary red line. When crossed, a person may become unrestrained in anger, hatred and eventually violence. We have seen that on the news in the last few years. So the Law sets a red line in front of an unbeliever and a believer out of fellowship. The person is tempted to cross the line. Once crossed, sin can lead to personal disaster. Just ask Judas Iscariot.

Sixth Subjunctive:

Sin would become utterly sinful. The logical outcome of the struggle against the sin nature assuming there is no involvement of the Holy Spirit.

Paul takes great pains to emphasize that the Law is good, even spiritual.

Romans 7:14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Here is another Uh Oh. The Mosaic Law is spiritual? Since Paul says it is spiritual and what he wrote is in the Word of God, it is an inerrant statement. So how is the Law of Moses spiritual?

1. The Torah, the Mosaic Law, was given by God who is spirit. God's character is perfect and righteous. So what God produced is spiritual. In part God wrote it. Part of the Torah was written by God on stone. That was spiritual.

⁵ <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/romans/7.htm>

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Exodus 31:18 When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.

Deuteronomy 9:10 The Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them were all the words which the Lord had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.

2. The Torah contained the ritual illustrative sacrifices that foreshadowed the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. When we speak of the “Blood of Christ” the blood is a reference to death as in the death of the animal sacrifices. That was spiritual.
3. The history of the sons of Israel is the history of God’s fulfilling the promise of salvation. It started with Genesis 3:15, the first gospel. God’s promises were enshrined in the covenants made with Israel. The Abrahamic covenant which contained three paragraphs: land, seed, blessing. God’s promises were spiritual. That was spiritual.
4. The Torah contained instructions for a theocracy. In this theo-crazy or God rule, God was supposed to be the king. Unfortunately for the sons of Israel, they did not heed the instructions of the king. But they will one day. In the Millennium.
5. The Torah contains promises that even Christians today use. We apply faith plus the promises. That is spiritual.

Exodus 14:13 But Moses said to the people, “Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of

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the Lord which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever.

Exodus 14:14 The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.”

Where do you think David got the promise, “The battle is the Lord’s?” David understood the Torah and the promises that God made to Moses. David applied Bible answers to his own situation. That was spiritual.

Romans 7:15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

Romans 7:17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Romans 7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

Romans 7:19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

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Romans 7:20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.