

Christian assurance

The purpose of Romans 8 is to give Christians assurance, confidence and security in their faith. So often we lack assurance, assailed by all kinds of doubts and problems. What problems cause us to doubt? Paul focuses on two areas: the ongoing battle with temptation and sin in the Christian life and the experience of suffering and death. Romans 8 answers these problems.

Answering the problem of temptation and sin (8:1-13)

In Romans 7 Paul has been wrestling with the problem of temptation and sin. How come, as a Christian, I keep on struggling with temptation and sin? Shouldn't this cause me to doubt that I have been fully forgiven, the penalty for sin removed? And is progress in living a righteous life *really possible* or is a defeatist acceptance that I can't really change more realistic? We can surely identify with Paul's struggle when he concludes: "Wretched man that I am!"

To these real doubts Paul gives a three-fold answer.

First, through Christ's death we've been *saved from the penalty of sin* – 'There is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus' (v1). Condemnation (which means everlasting judgement in hell) is the just penalty of a holy God against sinful humanity. It's an awful prospect, but the wonderful news of the gospel is that our condemnation (the penalty for our sin) has been borne by Christ. For those who believe there is therefore now no condemnation.

Second, through Christ's death we've been *saved from the power of sin* (vv2-9). A change has taken place in our inner being, liberating us from sin's control. We are now controlled by a greater power, the Holy Spirit.

Third, through Christ's death we've been *saved from the presence of sin* (vv10-11). This is a future promise. Verse 11 makes the point very clearly: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies, through the Spirit who dwells in you.' Paul points us forward to the day we will be raised with resurrection bodies, free at last from the presence of temptation and sin.

Through Christ's death we've been saved from the penalty, the power and the presence of sin. How do these achievements of Christ's death become ours? Through the indwelling Holy Spirit which we receive when we believe (v9b). God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit invades our life, liberates us, imparting to us, and in us, all the achievements of Christ's death. Real Christianity is not faith in something outside of us; real Christianity is the Holy Spirit indwelling us, a fundamental change in who we are at the very core of our beings.

And so in response to the question – 'Shouldn't my struggle as a Christian cause me to doubt that I have been fully forgiven, the penalty for sin removed?' – the answer is an emphatic 'No!' You are safe and secure for all eternity. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And in response to the question – 'Is progress in the Christian life really possible?' – the answer is an emphatic 'Yes!' Progress is possible because the Holy Spirit indwells you and is changing you from the inside out. Real progress in living a righteous life is possible, *but not perfection*. Our old self, which still resides in our ageing sinful body will go with us to the grave. Only then will we be raised with a resurrection body, free at last from the presence of sin.

An illustration might be helpful. Think of your body like a ship in enemy hands, sailing in the wrong direction. When you became a Christian your body was invaded by the Holy Spirit and the bridge captured. With the bridge captured the battle is won and victory assured, but there's plenty of fighting still to do. All over the ship there are strongholds of temptation and sin, pockets of resistance holding out. The fighting will go on until every part of ship down to the last rivet will be secured. But the point is, every last rivet *will be secured*, because the bridge has been taken.

And so, as Christians, we have an obligation to kill sin and temptation in our lives (vv12-13). That's the strength of language Paul uses – 'put to death the deeds of the body' (v13). How? First, by recognising the seriousness of sin – as Christians we must never learn to live comfortably with temptation and sin. And then we need to

see temptation and sin through the eyes of the cross as mortally wounded. Temptation and sin in my body is dying, so kill it off. But not in our own strength. We can only kill temptation and sin in the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to keep on acknowledging that we can't do it in our own strength and ask God to enable us through the Holy Spirit. Make that your daily pattern in prayer and default when the crises come. And don't be discouraged. Real progress is possible.

Answering the problem of suffering and death (8:14-30)

The second problem Paul addresses that causes us to doubt is suffering and death. Whether it's suffering opposition because we're Christians or living with the effects of a fallen world – illness, grief, tears, anxiety and death. This is a real struggle for us all as Christians. Are our lives any different from people who are not Christians? Does God really love us? Is it *really true* that 'for those who love God all things work together for good' (v28), that 'in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (v37), that nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (v39)? In light of the reality of suffering and death, are these statements *really true*?

Paul's answer focuses on who we are as Christians and what we hope for. While there is no 'apparent' difference between a Christian and someone who is not a Christian, in truth there is an eternity of a difference.

The Christian is a child of God (vv14-16). The indwelling Spirit is the Spirit of sonship that enables you to call God 'Father'. This is an intimate, dependant relationship. 'And if we are children then we are heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...' (v17a) What an astonishing statement! As Christians we're children of God, and therefore heirs with Jesus of his glorious inheritance. If you're a Christian, right now as you read this, you're an heir to a glorious inheritance. And no-one can take that inheritance away from you. It's guaranteed by the Holy Spirit within you. You'll get it – guaranteed – *but not yet*. Like Prince Charles who is heir to the throne but not King yet, you're an heir of a glorious inheritance, but *not yet*. Sorting out the 'now' and the 'not yet' in our Christian experience is very important. The 'now' is this life, where suffering is our experience. The 'not yet' is the glory in the world to come, when we live with resurrected bodies in a New Creation (literally a resurrected earth). It's this 'now' and 'not yet' tension that Paul is referring to in the second half of verse 17: '...heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him (now) in order that we may be glorified with him (not yet)*.'

So what's our experience as Christians on the journey through this life to this glorious inheritance in the life to come? The answer is *groaning in hope*. What a powerful perspective on life this is. We groan – that's real. But we groan *in hope* – Christian hope looking forward in eager anticipation remembering that 'the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (v16). As Christians we need this perspective – the sufferings of this life are just 'a breath' as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it (likewise Peter refers to 'now for a little while' (1 Peter 2:6) compared to an eternity in glory.

Paul tells us first that the *Creation is groaning in hope* for its redemption (vv19-22). The Creation is crying out for its redemption. The Creation is suffering (*now*) but has a life to come (*not yet*). The Creation's life to come is the New Creation, which is part of our inheritance. But for now, the Creation is groaning in hope. Second, Paul reminds us of what we know and feel every day. *We are groaning in hope* (vv23-25). 'And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' (v23). Paul's not contradicting what he said earlier. He's not saying we don't have the indwelling Spirit, that we're not children of God. What he's saying is that we've not yet come into all the benefits and blessings of who we are. That will only come when our bodies are redeemed (resurrection bodies). For now we groan in hope. Then third – and what an encouragement and comfort it is – the *Holy Spirit, God himself, groans* in us and prays to God for us (vv26-27). The Spirit's groaning is 'too deep for words' (v26b). What a depth of love and care God has for his children and heirs. Finally, in verses 28-30, Paul sums up his argument, reminding us as Christians that God will bring us safely home to glory and the journey, hard as it may be, is never outside his providential care and sovereign control.

The problem of suffering and death is a real problem for Christians. Paul's answer is strong, gentle and deeply reassuring. We are children of God, heirs with Christ of a glorious inheritance, for which we groan in hope with the whole Creation and with the Holy Spirit. And God will get us home to glory guarding us every step on the journey.

Judgement Day verdict (8:31-34)

In verses 31-34 Paul takes us forward in time to Judgement Day, that day in the future when all people – Christians and people who are not Christians – will stand before the Lord Jesus as our Judge. The clear and consistent teaching of the Bible, not least from Jesus himself, is that there will be a Judgement Day – the first day of eternity. What defence will we offer against the prosecuting council that demands a guilty verdict and everlasting condemnation in hell? That we never heard the Gospel? That's no defence, because we have heard. That we intended to trust Jesus but never go round to it? That's no defence, because we had countless opportunities. That we grew up in a Christian home and went to a Christian church? These are great privileges but they don't save us. God has no grandchildren and keeps no attendance record at church. Every one of us needs to make a personal decision to trust Jesus as our Saviour.

The only defence we can give on Judgement Day is the death of Jesus, the cross where our sin was condemned in his sinless flesh that we might not be condemned. If that's our defence we will be welcomed with open arms into the New Creation. Three times in these verses, Paul emphasises that the verdict in Judgement Day will be on the basis of our decision about the cross: 'He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all...' (v32) 'Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.' (v33) 'Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died...' (v34)

This is very important! Judgement Day is exactly that – judgement day – not decision day. Today is decision today. And because the verdict on Judgement Day is based on the death of Jesus, we can know now, right now, what that verdict will be. Those who are in Christ Jesus, those who have looked to the cross of Christ for their salvation and trusted Jesus, can be a hundred percent sure what the verdict on Judgement Day will be, because the verdict is based on our decision now about the cross.

Unbreakable line of love (8:35-39)

Paul concludes with a powerful statement about the unbreakable love of God in Christ for the Christian. Think of it like a lifeline. At one end is the cross. At the other end is the Lord Jesus welcoming us into the glory of the New Creation, the inheritance we will share with him. Faith is laying hold of the cross and to taking hold of that life-line. When we do we are secure in God's grip and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, nothing can prevent God bringing us safely home to glory. 'For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (vv38-39). Wonderful words to end a wonderful chapter.

I hope if you're a Christian reading this letter – and much more importantly reading Romans 8 – it has given you assurance, confidence and security in your faith.

Where do you stand?

Some of you reading this may not be Christians. Where do you stand? Are you 'in Christ Jesus' or 'outside Christ Jesus'? What will the verdict be for you on Judgement Day? There are eternal consequences to your decision – an eternity in hell or an eternity in a New Creation. Where do you stand today?

As your minister, my earnest desire is that every one of you, young and old, will be found safe in Christ. If you are unsure about where you stand, or have any questions, please speak to me or one of the Elders. Or if you are reading this and are unable to be at church, please get in touch and I would be glad to visit you.

In January-March 2015 Robin preached a series of sermons on Romans 8. The talks are all online if you would find it helpful to listen to them.