

# Romans 8

No Condemnation

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*Romans 8: No Condemnation*

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This volume was compiled using the notes from a series of sermons through the book of Romans that Pastor Paul delivered to his congregation at Branch of Hope OPC in Torrance, California.

This section, titled *No Condemnation*, is comprised of sermons on chapter eight of Romans.

At the end of each of his sermon notes, Pastor Paul has included a section of “Questions for Study and Meditation.”

We hope the reader will find these helpful in their study of and meditation on the Word of God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*







# Romans 8:1-4

## *He Condemned Sin*

November 24, 2013

***There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4).***

### **Introduction**

It is a common practice for organizations to develop a mission statement. A mission statement is a brief phrase designed to tell others, and remind those within the organization, what the purpose of the organization is—its reason for existence. Sometimes it helps to have short, accessible propositions that we can hide in our hearts operating as a sort of anchor when we find ourselves confused or distracted from what's truly important.

In marriage, for example, there may be a variety of ways we might express our love to our spouses, but the bedrock of the marriage extends back to, and is expressed in, the vows. At the risk of sounding morbid, it may not be an unhealthy exercise to consider writing your own obituary. What would be an accurate paragraph expressing your purpose for existing, how you expressed that purpose and what you ever leaned on for strength in obtaining that purpose?

Throughout the history of the church, short statements, like the Apostles' Creed have been of immense help in reminding Christians what they believe. John 3:16 has, little doubt, been one of the most quoted verses in the Bible; it is a short verse which says so much. I once heard a prominent theologian asked what verse or phrase from a hymn or song granted him the most comfort. He answered: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

As we turn to the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, we might find quite a few verses that would fall into the ‘I must memorize that verse’ category. But for me, there are very few simple and succinct phrases that have granted my heart more solace than the very first verse under our consideration this morning.

***There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).***<sup>1</sup>

## **No Condemnation**

It is generally understood that Paul is completing a thought he began in chapter five (Romans 5:12) where he describes how through one man (Adam) sin entered the world and how through the last Adam (Christ) that sin is vanquished. Though having no disagreement with that, I prefer to think of this verse as Paul’s deep sigh of relief tightly attached to the end of chapter seven.

Paul’s conjunction “**therefore**” *ara* is a marker of result as an inference, the way we might say “consequently.” So one of the most comforting verses in the Bible is preceded by Paul’s very intense journal of conflict with own sin (Romans 7:13-23), his confession of his own wretchedness, followed by his cry to God for deliverance (Romans 7:24) and his thankfulness to God—through Jesus Christ (Romans 7:25). Paul now elaborates on why he is so relieved, so thankful.

To those who are in Christ Jesus—to those who have called upon His name—to those who believe—there is no condemnation. How important it is that we not be mistaken about condemnation! Condemnation may or may not be accompanied by the feeling of oppression, guilt, sorrow or shame. We all know people who can make us feel very guilty about things for which there should be no guilt at all. There are also those who can make us feel vindicated about things for which we should be ashamed.

But condemnation *katakrima* is not the feeling, it is the sentence. It is a decision against someone with a condemnatory judgment and a suggestion of punishment to follow. It might be quite

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<sup>1</sup> The second portion of the verse is disputed. But since it is repeated in verse 4 (where it is not disputed), we will take it up there.



easy to go through life and push aside any feeling of condemnation; and there may not be a more dangerous disposition for a human being to have. My ability to dismiss any feeling of condemnation apart from actually dealing with the condemnation would be like a patient ignoring the doctor's certain diagnosis of his terminal disease. So the patient just tries to avoid doing things that hurt until the disease eventually kills him.

If I may follow through a bit with my own metaphor, the sinful human avoids acknowledging that there is a God, that there is judgment and that we will be held accountable. And if we can bring this closer to the text, the Apostle Paul seemed to have much greater joy and peace in the knowledge of this condemnation being lifted than do most Christians. Why? Because he was a Christian who sought to obey with all his heart. He was a man keenly aware of the **“kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22)**.

Paul's Christianity was no mere afterthought. Paul's moment by moment awareness of God, of God's law, of his effort to obey it by loving God and loving his neighbor attended the pen of Romans 8:1. The law of God was to Paul like the Ark of the Covenant which housed it. It was there, and it was glorious, you want to be close, you want to obey, but you best not touch it—let alone stand on it to reach for salvation—for apart from Christ it will consume you. Paul could now interact with the law and the God of that law as a man risen from the dead.

**For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2).**

### **The Law of the Spirit**

There are various suggestions as to what is meant by the use of the word **“law”** in this verse. It might be referring to the law of God in different contexts. The Spirit of God puts the law of God in its proper place—how to live, how to better grasp the character of God, the awareness of sin and need for the help found in Christ. Or, the law of God as it pertains to sin and death heaped upon those who would seek to keep it in an effort to approve themselves before God. For them, the law of sin and death can be summed up in “you have sinned and therefore will die.”

As theologically true as that might be, I tend to agree with those who would understand the word “**law**” here as referring to “**an inward principle of action, operating with the fixedness and regularity of a law,**” it thus appears that “*the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus*” here means, “**that new principle of action which the Spirit of Christ has opened up within us—the law of our new being.**”<sup>2</sup> So, it might be said that man is operating under one of two possible principles or laws: the law of sin and death, wherewith we are consigned to the inevitable condemnation of “**The soul who sins shall die**” (Ezekiel 18:20); or the “**Spirit of life**” where, by the grace of God, the gospel is preached and life is given. It is quite possible that Paul, as one conversant with the Old Testament, had Ezekiel 37 in mind.

**The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:1-6).**

The law of God will *teach* righteousness, but it cannot *grant* righteousness. It is the gospel—the Good News that God has kept His covenant promise to send His Son to die for sinners—that is the power of God to salvation “**for everyone who believes**” (Romans 1:16). “**So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word**

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<sup>2</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:2). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

of God” (Romans 10:17). When the gospel is given, it is the prophecy over the bones. It is the means by which God gives life.

**For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:21-25).**

No less than thirteen times in the first 27 verses of this chapter we see a reference to the Spirit. The redemption of souls, the giving of life from the dead is a spiritual enterprise, driven by the Spirit of God. Little wonder that the world has sought to hijack spirituality and wrench it from its life-giving context!

Spirituality, it must be said, is not necessarily a good thing. There are certain types of spirits from which people need healing: **“In that hour he (Jesus) healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits” (Luke 7:21).** But the law of the Spirit of life is in Christ Jesus, and it is a Spirit which sets men free from sin, death and condemnation. It is a Spirit which opens our eyes to see and inclines our hearts to believe what the law could not do and what God did do. Paul continues:

**For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3, 4).**

## Something is Condemned

There is a temptation to think of the forgiveness of God in the way we tend to forgive one another. One of my children offends the other and we tell them to say they are sorry. Then we tell the other to forgive. Then they say something like, “That’s okay” and we move on. But in God’s economy, in God’s world, forgiveness is not the simple brushing aside of the offense as if it didn’t happen. God is just. It would be more like an unthinkable court scene where the guilty defendant says, “I’m sorry for the carnage and havoc I wreaked” to which the judge would not dare say, “That’s okay.”

There must be justice. And in a world where sin has invaded every nook and cranny of the human soul, the just payment is deep. A condemnation must take place in order for the ledger of human iniquity to be settled. Those who trust in Christ have escaped condemnation, but that doesn’t mean there is no condemnation. Verses three and four might be thought of as an amplification of John 3:16.

God sent **“His own Son** (He didn’t create His Son, but sent Him) **in the likeness of sinful flesh.**” Jesus was not Himself sinful (Hebrews 4:15), but you wouldn’t know by merely looking at Him. Everything that makes a human a human (except sin, which is not necessary to being human, as with Adam prior to the Fall) was to be found in Christ. Much can and has been said and written about this;<sup>3</sup> but for now we must recognize that a condemnation, a full condemnation, was necessary to meet the justice of a Holy God, and this condemnation meant death and judgment. God cannot die, but Jesus, the man, could.

**Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Hebrews 2:14, 15).**

It was mankind who sinned and it would be man who would pay for it. When we think of God condemning sin we rejoice; like

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<sup>3</sup> One can begin with question #39 from the Westminster Larger Catechism.

Isaiah 25:8 where we read that God will “**swallow up death forever.**” And we *should* rejoice. But there is a popular habit of de-personalizing sin with phrases like, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” A phrase like that has its price when we consider a passage such as the one before us. It may well detract from our understanding of the price paid for our redemption to think of sin as devoid of personality, especially when it is used as a description of Christ Himself!

**For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).**

And God’s condemnation of sin in the flesh involved His own Son becoming, not only sin, but its attending curse.

**Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13).**

We mentioned briefly why it was necessary for our Mediator to be fully man. But why is it requisite that He be fully God as well? If I may briefly quote Question 38 of the Larger Westminster Catechism, it just begins to touch on it:

*Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God?*  
**It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death, (Acts 2:24–25, Rom. 1:4, Rom. 4:25, Heb. 9:14) give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; (Acts 20:28, Heb. 9:14, Heb. 7:25–28) and to satisfy God’s justice, (Rom. 3:24–26) procure his favour, (Eph. 1:6, Matt. 3:17) purchase a peculiar people, (Tit. 2:13–14) give his Spirit to them, (Gal. 4:6) conquer all their**

**enemies, (Luke 1:68–69,71,74) and bring them to everlasting salvation. (Heb. 5:8–9, Heb. 9:11–15)<sup>4</sup>**

The story of redemption does not end with Jesus dead and under the curse. It ends with Christ as the conquering King, that all who trust in Him might be **“more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37)**. This is why any form of Christianity which seeks to undermine the deity (Godhood) of Christ, has an incomplete salvation which must somehow be filled up by human works—a fool’s errand.

When it comes to being delivered from condemnation, those who trust in Christ have nothing to fulfill because the Father sent the Son to condemn sin in order that **“the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”** And though Paul will soon write of those to whom these blessings belong, in terms of their walk of life, he is not here informing us of what Christians will do, but rather what has already been done for them. In other words, he is not telling us that now that we have the Spirit we can fulfill the law, but that because of Christ the law is fulfilled in us. Calvin weighs in:

**They who understand that the renewed, by the Spirit of Christ, fulfill the law, introduce a gloss wholly alien to the meaning of Paul; for the faithful, while they sojourn in this world, never make such a proficiency, as that the justification of the law becomes in them full or complete.<sup>5</sup>**

We should not from this draw the conclusion that faithful Christians are mere statues cleansed from pigeon droppings of sin—standing clean and still. As Paul has labored in his instruction, those who have been brought to life have a heart that beats, lungs that breathe and they walk around. In other words, they demonstrate that they are in fact *alive*. To put it in Paul’s words, they **“do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”**

To **“walk”** *peripatousin* means the way we conduct our lives. As Paul taught elsewhere:

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<sup>4</sup> *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:4). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

**I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:1, 2).**

At the risk of sounding judgmental, it can be a source of great concern when Christians observe other Christians behaving in a way indiscernible from the world. Paul specifies the marks of the person under God’s grace—it is the person who walks according to the Spirit. But let’s be clear, the blessings are not theirs because they walk in the Spirit—they walk in the Spirit *as a result* of the blessing; as Schreiner puts it: **“The logic seems to be that a transformed life is evidence that believers are not guilty in God’s law court.”**<sup>6</sup>

In short, we are not condemned because sin is condemned in Christ, that the law might be fulfilled in those who have demonstrated that this has happened in their lives by walking in obedience. But the walking in obedience is not the means by which we are approved before God. I don’t know if it can be said any better than Calvin:

**How are we righteous in the sight of God? It is assuredly in the same respect in which Christ was a sinner. For he assumed in a manner our place, that he might be a criminal in our room, and might be dealt with as a sinner, not for his own offenses, but for those of others, inasmuch as he was pure and exempt from every fault, and might endure the punishment that was due to us — not to himself. It is in the same manner, assuredly, that we are now *righteous in him* — not in respect of our rendering satisfaction to the justice of God by our own works, but because we are judged in connection with Christ’s righteousness, which we have put on by faith, that it might become ours.**

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<sup>6</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 404). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. If you were to write a mission statement for yourself, what would it be? Can you think of a Bible verse, a line in a hymn or a short statement from which you have derived great peace? What is it and why?
2. What is condemnation and how do we know we are not under it? Why do you suppose Paul rejoiced so in this?
3. What is the law of the Spirit? Compare this to the law of sin and death? Is spirituality always good? Explain. What is the means by which the Spirit gives life?
4. How is God's forgiveness different from the way we tend to forgive?
5. Why was it requisite that the Mediator (Christ) be both fully God and fully man?
6. What does it mean that the "righteous requirement of the law was fulfilled in us"?
7. Define what it means to walk according to the Spirit.
8. Discuss the quote given by Calvin. How is a person righteous in the sight of God?



## Romans 8:5-6

*Things of the Flesh, Things of the Spirit*

December 8, 2013

**For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace (Romans 8:5-6).**

The first paragraph of chapter eighteen of the Westminster Confession of Faith contains one of the most unsettling statements a professing Christian might ever hear. The chapter is entitled *Of Assurance Of Grace And Salvation* and begins with these words:

**Hypocrites and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions about their being in God's favor and about their being saved. Their presumptions will die with them.**

Not exactly the type of rhetoric on the shelves of contemporary Christian bookstores! It might be helpful to recognize that this was written during a period of intense ecclesiastical corruption and cruelty. The authors, little doubt, had the Roman Catholic clergy in mind when they wrote this—motivated by events recorded in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*—providing an account of the sufferings of Protestants under the Roman Catholic Church.

It wasn't a cushy Christian atmosphere. Deception in religion had reached a fever pitch, and the divines who wrote this realized souls were at stake. The truth can have an edge to it and it is not healthy to shrink back. Those who found deliverance from their false assurance would surely say of these teachers:

**Faithful are the wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6).**

This, of course, doesn't mean there is no application for us today. Living in a culture which cradles a very casual approach to religious convictions, false hopes and carnal presumptions about

being in God's favor may be running quite prevalent. And the Scriptures are not silent on the matter.

**So *are* the paths of all who forget God; and the hope of the hypocrite shall perish, whose confidence shall be cut off, and whose trust *is* a spider's web (Job 8:13, 14).**

**Her heads judge for a bribe, her priests teach for pay, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, "Is not the Lord among us? No harm can come upon us." Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed *like* a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest (Micah 3:11, 12).**

**Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness' (Matthew 7:22, 23)!**

It is the healthy fear (at least, it should be) of every Christian pastor and every Christian parent that those they love might fall into the above category; that their church or home would be inhabited by those who bless themselves, saying, "**I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart**"—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober" (Deuteronomy 29:19).

The Apostle Paul had been accused of presenting a brand of Christianity which had eliminated the pursuit of holiness—the call to obedience—the call to love. His response to this accusation was very firm—"Their condemnation is just" (Romans 3:8).

Having just written one of the most comforting verses in all of Scripture ("**There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus**"), Paul wants to make sure his readers

understand that this great promise is not dished out indiscriminately; that is to say, not everyone can hold this promise as their own.

A recent candidate for ministry was asked how he would respond to a member of his church who had doubts about his salvation—who struggled with assurance. The candidate began to answer the question by suggesting that the very concern on the part of the member was a good thing—the natural man tends not to be concerned about such things.

The presbyter who asked the question didn't seem to care for the answer, though. In a mild correction, he asked, "Would you not direct your member to the promises found in God's word?" But I must say I thought the presbyter was missing the point of his own question. The hypothetical member is not asking if there is a God in heaven who makes and keeps His promises; he's asking if he, the sinful man, is the recipient of those promises.

In verse four Paul had taught that the promise is for those who **"do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."** Paul will now define what he is talking about. And in doing so, he is not offering an exhortation (although after observing it, an exhortation might be appropriate) but describing what is.

**For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace (Romans 8:5, 6).**

### **Being in the Flesh/Spirit**

A literal translation of the beginning of verse five might read: **"Those being in the flesh, of the flesh think."** **"Being"** is the Greek word *ontes* from where we derive the word ontology (the philosophical study of the nature of being). Paul is describing two types of people here; one whose being (or nature) is according to the flesh and the other whose being (or nature) is according to the Spirit.

The one whose being is according to the Spirit is the one who has been delivered from condemnation through the blood of Christ. So this might be an important thing for us to consider, keeping in mind that Paul is not saying we need to be more spiritual to be the

recipient of God's promises, nor is he saying that the spiritual man has obtained the promises by being spiritual.

The heirs of my household are my own children. Other children may come into my house and behave more appropriately than my own, but that will never make them heirs. If they want to be heirs, they must become my children—I must adopt them. And adoption is the act, not of the child, but of the parent.

This brings us back to the question of the hypothetical church member. *How do I know if I am adopted? How do I know if I am recipient of the promises of God? How do I know if I am an heir? How do I know if my being is of the flesh or of the Spirit?* The answer to these questions seems to require more than a mere awareness of God and His promises.

### Setting Their Minds

Paul answers by informing his readers that those whose being (or nature) is in the flesh “**set their minds on the things of the flesh**” and conversely the man whose being (or nature) is of the Spirit sets his mind on “**the things of the Spirit.**” So if I were to reason backward, if my mind is set on the things of the flesh, I can conclude that my nature is still of the flesh. But if my mind is set on the things of the Spirit, I can have that assurance of knowing that my nature is of the Spirit; or to put it another way, I can know that I am new creature in Christ.

I think it is a very a good question for a person to ask him- or herself. Is my mind set on the things of the flesh or the Spirit? What does that even mean? Charles Hodge gives a nice working definition of the “**mind**” *phroneo*.

**It...is used for the seat of all mental affections and faculties...any form or mental activity, any exercise of the intellect, will, or affections. The mind, therefore, means, they make the object of attention, desire and pursuit.<sup>7</sup>**

Does it mean my mind never strays? That all my mental activity—that every single exercise of my will—my moment by

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Hodge, Commentary on Romans. P. 255.

moment affections—every desire, large or small is in the pursuit of the things of the Spirit (which we will define momentarily)? Remember, this passage is not an exhortation but a description.

Before we become **“swallowed up with too much sorrow”** let us hear Calvin’s take:

**...for as he had exempted none from the curse, but those who lead a spiritual life, he might seem to cut off from all mortals the hope of salvation; for who in this world can be found adorned with so much angelic purity so as to be wholly freed from the flesh?<sup>8</sup>**

When heaven and hell hang in the balance, it is of great import to hammer out our definitions. After all, Paul gave the conclusion of the two natures, not merely as one slightly preferable to the other, but one (**“the carnally mind”**) being death and the other (**“the spiritually minded”**) being **“life and peace.”** From this we conclude that death and all its torments is attached to the one against true life from heaven with all its peace—**“the very element of the soul’s deepest repose and true bliss”<sup>9</sup>** attached to the other.

Let me offer here that Paul is neither saying that one can merit the promises of Christ by way of spiritual living nor is he proposing that the spiritual man never errs. One need but turn to Peter, where Jesus uses the same verb *phroneo* used to so strongly rebuke such a prominent apostle.

**But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23).**

Or, as one translation renders it: **“thou savourest not the things of God.”** It may not be a good move here to question the salvation of Peter, though there may have been times when his own

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:5). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>9</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

assurance waned. No; Peter was a Christian man who, in his many faults and failures, never ceased to trust in His Christ as both Savior and Lord.

The Christian man or woman is a person whose being or nature is redeemed by the grace of God through the gospel. They will consequently set their mind, will, affections, desires and pursuits upon the things of the Spirit. *So how can I examine myself and draw the conclusion that I am that spiritual man—the man whose being is changed and has set his mind on the things of the Spirit?*

The spiritual man is not synonymous with the mystical man. The spiritual man is not one who detects impulses within himself and interprets them as the Spirit of God. The spiritual man—the man led by the Spirit—is a man who resists behaving one way and seeks to behave another way.

**But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another (Galatians 5:18-26).**

This should not be reduced to mere moralism. There are other components to the spiritual man, not the least of which is the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16). The promise of deliverance from condemnation is directed toward the person who walks not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. And that walk includes a fight, a fight that can at times be exhausting. Why else would Paul write these words:

**For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:8-10).**

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose the quote from Chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession sounds so harsh? Is there a time to risk saying something that might appear hurtful? Explain.
2. What is *assurance*? What does the Bible teach about false assurance? Why is this so important?
3. How do you know whether or not the promises of God are for you?
4. The Apostle Paul is describing two types of people in this passage. Who are they? What does the Greek word *ontes* mean?
5. What does it mean to set your mind on the things of the flesh or the Spirit? Why is this an important question for a person to ask himself?
6. Can a person merit (earn) the promises of God by spiritual living? Explain why or why not.
7. What marks a person out as a truly spiritual person—a person led by the Spirit? Where would you place yourself?



# Romans 8:7-8

## *The Carnal Mind*

December 15, 2013

Though we're looking at verses seven and eight, we will begin reading in verse five for context.

**For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8).**

### Review

Paul had given a great promise in verse one that there is, **“therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1a).** He then explained how that promise comes to sinful men. **“For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son” (Romans 8:3a).**

God, knowing our weakness to be obedient to the law, because of His great love for us, sent His Son to accomplish that which we could not—Jesus defeated sin and death, and gives His victory to all who call upon His name (Romans 10:13).

Paul then begins to describe the attributes of the person to whom this promise of deliverance belongs; it is the person not **“walking according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4).** It is important to realize that Paul is not setting a condition on sinful people, as if he were saying a person must demonstrate a sufficient level of walking in the Spirit in order to acquire heaven. He is rather describing the person who already has the promise. He is describing a Christian.

Paul continues with his description of a Christian in verses five and six, and he does this by way of comparison. Those whose **“being *ontes* is according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh” (Romans 8:5).** This is the person who has no concern

to believe in Christ or walk in faith. But those whose being is **“according to the Spirit”** set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

To set our minds *phroneo* on the things of the Spirit means to set our mental affections, pursuits, desires and allegiances upon those things that are truly of the Spirit of God. A person who has set his mind on the things of the Spirit is a person who has been rescued from the condemnation of the law by faith in Christ—it is the person who cries out **“Abba, Father”** (Romans 8:16) as if to say **“Father, my father,”**<sup>10</sup> a **“term of endearment”**<sup>11</sup> and very personal.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the person who has set his mind to the things of the Spirit will ever seek to abandon or mortify the **“works of the flesh”** (Galatians 5:18-21), i.e. they battle against the sinful life. The spiritual man seeks to **“keep in step with the Spirit”** Galatians 5:25), which amounts to obedience flowing from the Spirit-given fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and so forth.

Paul is describing the being or natures of two different types of people manifesting two different minds—one mind being death and the other mind being life and peace. There is no in-between. The difference between those who have the promise and those who do not have the promise is as different as life and death.

## No Bridging the Gap

In the verses we are looking at this morning we learn that there is no incremental bridging of the gap. There is no moral,

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10 Zodhiates, S. (2000) The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

11 Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000) A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>12</sup> Abba (אַבְבָּא, (5)) is an Aramaic word, found in Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6. In the Gemara (a Rabbinical commentary on the Mishna, the traditional teaching of the Jews) it is stated that slaves were forbidden to address the head of the family by this title. It approximates to a personal name, in contrast to “Father,” with which it is always joined in the N.T. This is probably due to the fact that, “Abba” having practically become a proper name, Greek-speaking Jews added the Greek word *patēr*, father, from the language they used. “Abba” is the word framed by the lips of infants, and betokens unreasoning trust; “father” expresses an intelligent apprehension of the relationship. The two together express the love and intelligent confidence of the child.

ethical, political, philosophical or religious pursuit that can bring us even to the lobby of heaven.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter IX (*Of Free-Will*), paragraph three, explains this well:

**Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: (Rom. 5:6, Rom. 8:7, John 15:5) so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, (Rom. 3:10, 12) and dead in sin, (Eph. 2:1, 5, Col. 2:13) is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto. (John 6:44, 65, Eph. 2:2–5, 1 Cor. 2:14, Tit. 3:3–5)<sup>13</sup>**

We cannot convert ourselves, nor can we prepare ourselves for conversion. There is a great danger in all venues (political, familial, educational, sociological, the arts, philosophy—and especially religion) to underestimate the corrupt nature of the fallen human being.

Our religion, if it can be said this way, must address the fact of man's spiritual death, lest we seek to establish a bridge-building religion which ignores the holiness of God and the inability of man. Instead of a bridge, these types of religions will find they have consigned their adherents to stand comfortably on a plummeting meteor.

As Jesus taught:

**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:44).**

However we might frame our religious pursuits, to neglect a proper understand of the inability of man is fatal. And what does Paul write about the natural man—the man whose mind is carnal (of the flesh)?

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<sup>13</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996) Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:7, 8).**

## **Enmity against God**

It is often supposed that man is in a spiritually neutral condition. All man needs, according to this supposition, is access to facts or access to goods. In other words, if a person is given correct information and is not thrown into an environment where they are tempted to evil (because of a want of the necessities of life), they will morally thrive and be spiritually fulfilled. Again, entire political, educational, religious and philosophical systems are built upon this notion.

But the Apostle Paul has something else to say about this. The natural man's carnal mind is **"enmity against God."** Enmity *echthra* means hatred and hostility. Now this hatred and hostility against God might not always manifest itself by seething vitriol (though that is becoming more common); it may be more like the convenient ignoring of someone you detest.

But let us not underestimate the phrase **"enmity against God"** as if it were mere detestation of religion or some unattractive member of the Greek or Roman Pantheon. God is the source of all that is good, right and true. So to hate God means to hate all that is good, right and true. Or, as the Proverb teaches, **"all who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:36).**

The implications of such knowledge should reveal the need for Christ in all things. The natural man is hostile to God and, therefore, loves death. We should, therefore, have no other expectation, in whatever the field, that when Christ is expelled, death is the design. This may sound dramatic—at least until you get the phone call to do the funeral of the person whose life revolved around whatever Christ-less orb held them in darkness.

## **Total Depravity**

But the church, of all places, should know this truth—the truth of man's inability to do right or choose right. This inability is known

in theological circles as Total Inability or Total Depravity,<sup>14</sup> and it is at the heart of the Doctrines of Grace (Calvinism). For the true grace of Christ to be appreciated the true depravity of man must be acknowledged.

The Christian faith should not be presented as an option that the natural man might gravitate toward if it can be properly whittled into something meeting his felt needs; although it may certainly include a day-to-day method in meeting life's challenges with direction and integrity. But at its heart, the Christian faith is a God-glorifying rescue mission. And the ones rescued are God's very enemies who, in their living death, like recalcitrant children, spurn their very Maker and Provider.

We are entirely at the mercy of God, if it can be said this way, not merely because of our Total Inability to do that which is good, but because of our great ability to do that which is evil. So when the Father sent the Son to die for sinners, we had to be saved from ourselves. The Son did not come down to open arms, but to clenched fists. He saved us from ourselves and He saved us from Himself—that is, from His judgment.

Because the natural or carnal mind is hostile to God, it is unwilling to put itself under God's law. The carnal mind is not merely unwilling, it is unable. **“It is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.”** Paul then draws the necessary conclusion in verse eight of the natural man, **“those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”**

We fawn all over man's free will, man's innovation and human enlightenment. This is sophistry—a methodology which, if left to itself, would result in our ultimate demise. This is not to say that there aren't things to be observed in the natural order which are resplendent and of great beauty—worthy of admiration.

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<sup>14</sup> **Total Depravity Is Not**—Total depravity relates to sin nature and the effects of the fall. It does not mean man is as evil as he can possibly be; he is not the devil. We are not speaking of abject or absolute depravity.

**Total Depravity Is**—Total depravity does mean that evil pervades every faculty of the soul. The whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin; so much so he cannot take one step toward heaven. Total depravity is not intensive but extensive. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

## The Brightness of Mercy

But by the grace of God, these things should ever bring our minds to their Creator. That we would ever throw ourselves upon His mercy, which in the final analysis, will shine brighter than all things created. I simply couldn't say it better than Calvin:

**Behold the power of free-will! which the Sophists cannot carry high enough. Doubtless, Paul affirms here, in express words, what they openly detest, — that it is impossible for us to render our powers subject to the law. They boast that the heart can turn to either side, provide it be aided by the influence of the Spirit, and that a free choice of good or evil is in our power, when the Spirit only brings help; but it is ours to choose or refuse. They also imagine some good emotions, by which we become of ourselves prepared. Paul, on the contrary, declares, that the heart is full of hardness and indomitable contumacy (stubborn rebellion), so that it is never moved naturally to undertake the yoke of God; nor does he speak of this or of that faculty, but speaking indefinitely, he throws into one bundle all the emotions which arise within us.<sup>15</sup>**

He continues:

**Far, then, from a Christian heart be this heathen philosophy respecting the liberty of the will. Let every one acknowledge himself to be the servant of sin, as he is in reality, that he may be made free, being set at liberty by the grace of Christ: to glory in any other liberty is the highest folly.<sup>16</sup>**

As we prepare this morning for the Lord's Table, may our hearts rejoice that we have been set free from sin and death! Let us ponder the glory of knowledge that there is therefore no

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:7). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus—that we have been made free, being set at liberty by the grace of Christ.

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review the first six verses of Romans 8: From what are Christians delivered? How does this deliverance come? To whom is this deliverance given? Discuss “being” *ontes*. Discuss “mind” *phroneo*.
2. How capable is man when it comes to approaching God? How should our answer to this question affect our approach to life in all areas?
3. What is meant by *enmity against God*? What are the implications of this fact in man’s nature?
4. What is Total Depravity and why is it important for Christians to understand this concept?
5. From what have Christians been set free and in what should we rejoice?



## **Romans 8:9**

*In the Spirit, In the Flesh*

January 12, 2014

**But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His (Romans 8:9).**

### **Introduction**

I have been made privy to a slight groundswell of moderate concern/discomfort some have when it comes to our membership vows. In our church we have people stand before the congregation and profess their beliefs in certain things: that the Bible is the word of God; that God is the triune God; that Jesus is fully man and fully God; that they trust in Him as Savior and Lord; and that they will put themselves under the accountability of the church. These are basic questions we believe any Christian would embrace.

Prior to presenting the vows, I instruct the new member that the appropriate answer to the question is ‘yes.’ This is not to put words in their mouths, as if the questions were sprung on them for the first time. They have already indicated through instruction and interviews that they believe these things. My purpose is to make clear that ‘yes’ is simply preferable to ‘sure’ or ‘uh-huh.’

I think the concern people have—a valid one at that—is that members may embrace a false sense of assurance—as if membership, and even baptism, in the visible church is sufficient paraphernalia to find approval before God. In verse nine Paul makes a statement that, in the final analysis, would contradict such a notion. What Paul mentions would be the most horrifying state in which a person might find him/herself.

**But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His (Romans 8:9).**

## In the Spirit, In the Flesh

What we see here is a common practice of the Apostle Paul. He addresses the entire church “**you**” *hymeis* (second person plural) with the affirming designation that they “**are not in the flesh but in the Spirit.**” But since Paul was, no doubt, aware that there would be, as the hymn reads “**false sons in her pale**”<sup>17</sup> the affirmation is followed by the conditional conjunction “**if**” *ei*. “**If**” now becomes the biggest word in our eternity.

**“If indeed the Spirit of God dwells (literally housed—*oikei*) in you”** you belong to Christ and are heirs of the benefits of that union. But “**if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.**” Calvin would invite the reader, at this point to, pause.

*If indeed the Spirit of God, etc. This qualifying sentence is fitly subjoined, by which they were stirred up to examine themselves more closely, lest they should profess the name of Christ in vain.*<sup>18</sup>

This speaks to the legitimate fear attending people’s discomfort with the formality of membership vows. This is not an argument against the vows any more than infidelity would be an argument against marriage vows. But if the vows are not appropriated (that is, lived out), they become more a testimony against the ones who made them than some sacred religious ceremony from which we falsely conclude we have fulfilled all that God requires of me.

In short, if we have not the Spirit of Christ, we are not His. We are still in our sins! In light of this, it seems like a pretty important question to ask of ourselves. *Do I have the Spirit of Christ? Does the Spirit of God dwell in me? How would I know?* Not to be unnecessarily troublesome, but this is where the emphasis found by our charismatic/Pentecostal brothers and sisters is not at all helpful.

I am not mentioning this to bring a harsh critique upon fellow Christians. I mention this because of so many brothers and sisters who are embroiled in confusion when examining what our charismatic siblings are promoting when it comes to the indwelling of

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<sup>17</sup> The Church’s One Foundation

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:9). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

the Spirit. Paul does not have tongues, prophecy, divine healing or personal revelations in mind here when he writes of the work of the Spirit.

So how do you know if you are in the flesh or in the Spirit? When you examine yourself, what are the questions on the exam and how are they to be answered? I would like to offer a threefold answer to that question:

## **The Word**

First, is our acknowledgement of the authority of the word of God. The Apostle Paul was not shy about this. He wrote:

**If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37).**

**Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13).**

Along with this, Paul explains how he knows his readers to be chosen of God—because of the way they responded to the word of God.

**For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).**

The Gospel, the good news, didn't merely land as dead words. The gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. What did that look like to an observer—to the Apostle? They received the word, even though in much affliction, with the joy

of the Holy Spirit. But what does the word of God principally teach? The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers that question:

**The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.**

## **Believe**

Secondly, the person who has the Spirit of Christ and the riches of heaven is the person who has found that they believe what those Scriptures say concerning God. And this is no mere history lesson—as if you found out for the first time that Alexander the Great by the age of 33 had conquered and ruled in nine time zones. One might be fascinated by such knowledge and even find some obscure way that it has had some effect upon their life. In this they might say they believe in Alexander the Great.

But belief in God is quite different. It would be more similar to finding adoption papers with your name on it. I recall, after my father died in my early twenties, going through the paperwork to settle matters for my mother. I found a marriage certificate that had my mother and father's names on it. But it was dated 1966—I was 11. What could this be? What did this mean? I asked my mother about it, who then explained to me that my parents were not married until then. That was quite a little experience for me.

The person who has the Spirit of Christ is the person who has found adoption papers have reached their own mind and heart. Jesus didn't merely die, He died for *me*! It is an intensely personal event. Later in this chapter Paul will explain:

**For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:14-17).**

In the verses to come we will learn how our bodies are still subject to death. We have also learned of our perpetual battle with sin and doubt. But the one who has the Spirit of Christ has within their soul the knowledge that God is their Father and...

**...what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3, 4).**

The person who says yes to the vow “do you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone” may find some level of weakness and confusion within their hearts. Thankfully faith itself is not the efficient cause of salvation but only a necessary means, or instrument, by which one takes hold of the body and blood of Christ. Faith can be such a fickle taskmaster. It is not faith that is the rock but Christ only.

Nonetheless, the one who has the Spirit of Christ has faith. And by the Spirit of God and the blood of Christ we can have that blessed assurance. Calvin put it this way:

**The meaning of Paul then is — that although sin adjudges us to death as far as the corruption of our first nature remains in us, yet that the Spirit of God is its conqueror: nor is it any hindrance, that we are only favored with the first-fruits, for even one spark of the Spirit is the seed of life.<sup>19</sup>**

One spark of the Spirit is the seed of life. Like walking through a dark cave and seeing only the tip of the vein of gold, the Christian sees now through a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), but they do see.

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). Romans (electronic ed., Ro 8:10). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

## Obey

Finally, the person who has the Spirit of Christ is the one who obeys—the person whom that Spirit sanctifies. There is a walking **“according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4)**. We ought not neglect the conditional conjunction from Romans 8:17: **“and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17)**.

The final question of the self-examination has to do with an examination of our own lives; or, as the catechism question answers, **“what duty God requires of man.”** Our obedience does not pay for our sins or tip the scales of God’s justice in our direction—not a scintilla. But an unsanctified life (a life that is not seeking to be righteous or obedient) is a sign of an unregenerate heart.

**Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).**

**Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).**

**Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you (1 Corinthians 3:16)?**

Listening to a sermon, I heard the pastor bemoan the call he heard from many Christians regarding the lordship of Christ. He

repudiated the notion that we should make Jesus Lord! He did not like the question: “Have you made Him Lord?” He felt it placed an undue burden upon the necks of God’s people. In light of these comments, he humbly confessed his own sin and weakness and his continual need to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

I wanted to ask him through the radio, ‘So, if you don’t acknowledge the lordship of Christ, why do you keep repenting?’ I suspect the problem had to do with a confusion regarding justification and sanctification. It is enough to say for now that the person who has the Spirit of Christ is a person who will confess their sins before God and ever seek to walk in faithful obedience. “If you love me,” Jesus taught, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

The Apostle John sums up the entire concept very tightly in his short epistle:

**My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments (1 John 2:1-3).**

The one who has the Spirit of Christ will seek to obey. In our failures we have an advocate in the blood of Christ. But this is how we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

*Who has the Spirit of Christ?* The one, who by the grace of God acknowledges the word of God, believes that the Father sent the Son to die for them and demonstrates that faith by seeking to walk in obedience. It is with great pastor concern that the Apostle Paul challenges his readers to:

**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you fail to meet the test (2 Corinthians 13:5)!**

Matthew Henry once wrote:

**The Spirit visits many that are unregenerate with his motions, which they resist and quench; but in all that are sanctified he dwells; there he resides and rules. He is there as a man at his own house, where he is constant and welcome, and has the dominion. Shall we put this question to our own hearts, Who dwells, who rules, who keeps house, here?**<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Henry, M. (1994) Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume (p. 2211). Peabody: Hendrickson.



## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Have you ever wondered about people taking membership vows? What concerns you?
2. How does the Apostle Paul address the entire church? Why is the conditional conjunction important?
3. How would a person examine whether or not they have the Spirit of Christ?
4. How do we know the Spirit has worked on someone through the gospel?
5. What do the Scriptures principally teach?
6. What is the difference between believing in Alexander the Great and believing in God?
7. Does a person's obedience save him?
8. Does a person with the Spirit of Christ seek to walk in obedience? What does he do when he fails?



# Romans 8:10-11

*I Walked on the Moon*

January 19, 2014

**And if Christ *is* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:10-11).**

## Introduction

*What About Bob* was a comedy made in 1991 starring Bill Murray and Richard Dreyfuss. Richard Dreyfuss played the part of a would-be famous psychologist and Bill Murray, playing Bob, was his deeply troubled patient. There is a scene in the movie where Bob, who had endeared himself to Dr. Marvin's (Dreyfuss) family, is in a late night discussion with Dr. Marvin's young son, Sigmund, who has issues of his own.

Sigmund asks Bob (who is afraid of everything) if he's afraid of death. Bob responds in the affirmative after which Sigmund presses the issue by informing Bob of the inevitable, "There's no way out of it...you're going to die...I'm going to die...it's going to happen." Death is on all our calendars. There is an appointment we all have with our last day on this earth.

**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).**

And death is not a pleasant thing. The Apostle Paul calls it an "enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). It is often surrounded by pain and tears. It has even had the ability to bring people to question their faith. For this reason, the Apostle Peter wrote:

**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also**

**rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12, 13).**

A couple of months ago a fellow pastor called me with a concern about a mutual friend. Our mutual friend had gone through many difficulties and it seemed to create a major shift in his thinking. The pastor, a man with many ministerial years under his belt, indicated he had seen this kind of shift in those who have grown bitter due to their difficulties. Like a child who doesn't get what he/she wants, we are capable of rebellion—if not in our actions, at least in our hearts. And in one way or another every person will undergo the difficulty of facing death.

Years ago, I heard a young pastor give a message where he conveyed what he was seeking to teach his two young children. “The first thing I want my children to learn is how to die.” I initially found the statement a bit morbid. But it made sense when he concluded with the words, “Because it is not until they learn how to die that they will know how to live.”

The two verses under our consideration lead to a **“therefore”** *oun* in verse 12, where we are said to be **“debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.”** In other words, we owe nothing to the flesh that we should obey it. Paul wrote of such people who operate this way (governed by the flesh) in his letter to the Philippians:

**Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:19-21).**

Through chapter 8 Paul appears to lay groundwork for strength against difficulties. In verse 18 he indicates that he considers that the **“sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”** In verse 31 he will write words indicating a conflict in which his readers would find themselves. Why else would he write, **“If God is for us,**

**who can be against us”? In verse 36 he writes, “For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”**

Christians are not to live in this world as if there will be no difficulties—as if their deliverance from sin and death means they will not be required to fight sin and encounter death. But what we are assured of in a passage like this is the ultimate and final (at the risk of sounding crass) trump card of all eternity—citizenship in heaven and a transformed, glorious body.

The comedian Brian Regan has a routine entitled *I Walked On the Moon* in which he recounts being at a dinner party with a man who couldn't stop talking about himself; he called him the “me monster.” The guy found it necessary to top everyone else's story and couldn't stop blathering on and on about his business being a global enterprise, his journeys through the Pacific Rim and driving on the autobahn. Regan said he has a social fantasy of being one of the 12 astronauts who walked around on the moon because he could beat anybody's story. When the ‘me monster’ paused for a moment regarding his super exciting and superior life, Regan would simply interject: “I walked on the moon.”

It is in the midst of life's blathering difficulties that the Christian is to find comfort in his/her eternal estate. Paul put it this way:

**For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).**

**And if Christ *is* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness (Romans 8:10).**

## The Body is Dead

That Paul is speaking to Christians is shown by the conditional conjunction “if.” We spoke last time of self-examination. How do we know if the Spirit of Christ dwells in us? Do I acknowledge the truth and authority of the word of God? Do I believe Jesus died and rose again for me? Do I seek to ever walk in obedience? But even for the faithful, the body is dead. This statement is to be taken as a concession, as if he were saying “even though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

It is not contained in the promise of the gospel that the Christian will advance to the eternal state without facing death. Matthew Henry addresses it well:

**We cannot say but that *the body is dead*; it is a frail, mortal, dying body, and it will be dead shortly; it is a house of clay, whose foundation is in the dust. The life purchased and promised does not immortalize the body in its present state. It is dead, that is, it is appointed to die, it is under a sentence of death: as we say one that is condemned is a dead man. In the midst of life we are in death: be our bodies ever so strong, and healthful, and handsome, they are as good as dead (Heb. 11:12), and this *because of sin*. It is sin that kills the body. This effect the first threatening has (Gen. 3:19): *Dust thou art*. Methinks, were there no other argument, love to our bodies should make us hate sin, because it is such an enemy to our bodies. The death even of the bodies of the saints is a remaining token of God’s displeasure against sin.<sup>21</sup>**

What will keep our minds more attuned to the glory of Christ than the reality of our own sin and subsequent mortality—as young Sigmund said, “We are going to die.” Death for the Christian, as difficult as it might be, is said to be “**Precious in the sight of the**

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<sup>21</sup> Henry, M. (1994) *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (p. 2212). Peabody: Hendrickson.

**Lord” (Psalm 116:15), as if God is a parent putting His children to sleep—knowing that when we awake He is there.**

**If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me (Psalm 139:8-10).**

It is from the “**second death**” that those in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells have been delivered.

**But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8).**

## **The Spirit is Life**

The concession of inevitable death is followed by the great promise of true and eternal life—as if we were told, “You can’t have the Rambler, but you do get the Rolls Royce.” Because the first death is nothing compared to the second. The second death never holds the euphemism of sleep. It is this life, the second life, that is our hope, our true citizenship. And life *now* is to be lived in light of that reality. It is for this reason that we are debtors—not to the flesh.

And what does it mean that the “**Spirit is life because of (through *dia*) righteousness**”? Whose righteousness? For chapters, Paul laboriously denounced the ability of man to present himself righteous to God. There is only one righteousness that has the power to lift men beyond the second death—it is the righteousness of Christ given by grace through faith.

**For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).**

Eternal life is not merely eternal existence—it is quantitative (eternal) and qualitative (life *zoe*).

**When the body dies, and returns to the dust, *the spirit of life*; not only living and immortal, but swallowed up of life. Death to the saints is but the freeing of the heaven-born spirit from the clog and load of this body, that it may be fit to partake of eternal life.**<sup>22</sup>

Let us have no misgivings about the joy of heaven. “Heaven,” it has been said, “is a prepared place for a prepared people.” The sinful man, in his current sinful estate, can no more enjoy heaven than a fish can enjoy a banquet in a fine palace. God, by His love and grace, invites us, inclines us and dresses us for dinner.

**As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness  
(Psalm 17:15).**

**But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:11).**

## **Life to the Body**

There are various theories about the state of men after death. Some think our souls enter as a drop in an ocean of souls into eternal oneness. Others think we remain disembodied spirits floating in a sort of super celestial bliss. The eternal state of man is neither immaterial nor does man lose his individuality.

It is true that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), but there will be a final resurrection where our souls will be reunited with our bodies. The second to last chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith succinctly explains the state of men after death, and the resurrection of the dead:

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<sup>22</sup> Henry, M. (1994) Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume (p. 2212). Peabody: Hendrickson.



**1. The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: (Gen. 3:19, Acts 13:36) but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: (Luke 23:43, Eccl. 12:7) the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. (Heb. 12:23, 2 Cor. 5:1,6,8, Phil. 1:23, Acts 3:21, Eph. 4:10) And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. (Luke 16:23–24, Acts 1:25, Jude 6–7, 1 Pet. 3:19) Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.**

**2. At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: (1 Thess. 4:17, 1 Cor. 15:51–52) and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls for ever. (Job 19:26–27, 1 Cor. 15:42–44)**

**3. The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour: the bodies of the just, by His Spirit, unto honour; and be made conformable to His own glorious body. (Acts 24:15, John 5:28–29, 1 Cor. 15:43, Philip. 3:21)<sup>23</sup>**

The power of the cross does not fall short of redeeming the mortal body of man—simply put, there will be hugging in heaven.

**(Jesus) will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21).**

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<sup>23</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42).**

**For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”  
“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting” (1 Corinthians 15:52-55)?**

Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown give these words of encouragement, in which we all can take heart:

**“Your bodies indeed are not exempt from the death which sin brought in; but your spirits even now have in them an undying life, and if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, even these bodies of yours, though they yield to the last enemy and the dust of them return to the dust as it was, shall yet experience the same resurrection as that of their living Head, in virtue of the indwelling of same Spirit in you that quickened Him.”<sup>24</sup>**

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<sup>24</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997) *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:11). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Do you have difficulties in your life? Does it make you question your faith? How should a Christian understand difficulties—even death?
2. Why is it important to learn how to die?
3. What does it mean that we are no debtors to the flesh? To whom, then, are we debtors?
4. How is the Christian to be comforted?
5. What does the inevitability of death accomplish in the life of a Christian?
6. What is the second death? Whose righteousness delivers us from the second death? Explain.
7. Discuss the state of men after death and the resurrection? Do we remain disembodied spirits? Do we lose individuality?



# Romans 8:12-17

Complete Outline

February 16, 2014

**Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:12-13).**

## Introduction

We ask only five questions of those taking membership vows in this church. We don't issue a theology exam. Membership, in a manner of speaking, marks the beginning of a Christian's knowledge and growth in the love and grace of Christ. The vows are not so much a test of Christian maturity as it is a public profession that the person taking vows is indeed a Christian. It is by no means a stretch to suggest that any true Christian would say yes to every question put forth in the vows.

As you have no doubt heard many times, the vows amount to an affirmation that one believes the Bible is the word of God; that they believe in the Triune God—Jesus being fully man and fully God; that salvation is not found in ourselves but comes by Christ alone; the final question has to do with fellowship in, and accountability to, the church. The fourth question has to do with the acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ in our lives.

I highlight this because, as I mentioned, we believe any true Christian would not balk at such a question. You will see the wording is, in part, extracted from the passage under our current consideration. The vow reads:

**Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?**

In a chapter which bursts forth with such gracious proclamations—**“no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...free(dom) from the law of sin and death...(that) the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies”** and more to come, it’s as if Paul wants to make sure all the kids are in the car.

In Philippians Paul recounts, with tears in his eyes, those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

**Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Philippians 3:17).**

Paul wasn’t railing against these people—it was said with tears. It must be recognized that these glorious and gracious affirmations of the favor of God (found in this chapter and elsewhere) are not poured out indiscriminately. Having just declared that God will **“give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you”** we are met with the ominous conjunction **“therefore.”**

**Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh (Romans 8:12).**

## **Debtors**

Perhaps it is unwitting, perhaps by design, but there are people who master the art of making others feel as if they owe them something. We will occasionally see this quality in the interaction of small children who think they can obtain approval from a friend by giving them something—I distinctly remember, as a child, being taught that you can’t buy meaningful friendships.

Perhaps you have encountered such people only to recognize what a fool’s errand you’ve been led on. Because the more they realize their success, the more they demand. Our minds might naturally go to family, friends or acquaintances that fall into this

category in our lives. But what may not be so readily apparent is that this type of person resides in each of us. There is part of me that is obsessed with itself and makes demands.

Our flesh does not free us from condemnation. It does not deliver from sin and death. And it certainly cannot raise us from the dead. Yet we live as if we owe it. We have even adopted a phrase to accommodate our highly demanding carnality—*I owe it to myself*. It is sad, dark and pathetic, like an abused child seeking comfort from the very one bringing forth the abuse.

And the church/religion does not always escape this mentality. I was recently in a doctor's waiting room reading a magazine which told the story of a celebrity who found she had lost her faith. She had gone through difficulties earlier in her life which led to depression and self-destructive behavior. As she recounted finding her faith, it all revolved around her—*her* needs, *her* dreams, *her* success, *her* happiness. It was the kind of faith which, at least most recently, culminated with her doing a high profile wedding at an awards ceremony of a couple of the same gender.

It is in this headlong pursuit of selfishness (of catering to and owing the flesh) that true joy, goodness and peace is altogether lost. We can call it faith or religion. But it is not true faith.

Suffice it to say that none of us are immune from the call in our own flesh to behave as if we owe it. And it is precisely here that we must act as our own executioner. For Paul is not unclear in stating that the person who governs his life according to his own flesh is giving evidence that they are on the road to death.

It might be of value to point out that Paul is not suggesting here that the flesh is necessarily sinful in all its affections and desires. To enjoy your spouse, your children, your friends, a delicious meal or a beautiful sunset does not, by the nature of the case, make those things wrong and lead people to eternal death. Living according to the flesh means that you do what you like to do, feel like doing or even that which seems right to you, in opposition to the will of God as revealed in His word. To live according to the flesh means you're committed to following your flesh rather than following the Scriptures which reveal to us the goodness of a God who "alone is wise."

It is not terribly complicated. Paul taught elsewhere:

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).**

Or, as he stated earlier in Romans:

**But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Romans 6:22).**

Perhaps the problem many of us have comes from an abridged understanding of the Christian faith; as if God is piecemeal fixing our broken selves. I woke the other morning to my wife informing me that our washer was broken, our dryer was broken and our sprinklers were broken. So you begin to calculate what you can afford, what really needs to be replaced and how much it will cost to start replacing parts versus just buying a new unit.

God did not save part of us, nor is He sanctifying part of us. He paid the full price (in the blood of His Son) to both justify us and entirely renew us. By the grace of God, the Christian has **“put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10).**

We should not view certain aspects or categories of our lives as if they are to remain untouched by the grace, wisdom and power of God. In fact, though not explicitly stated in this verse, is the implication made by many that we, though not debtors to the flesh, are debtors to God. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servants gives ample testimony that we, having been forgiven an immense debt, are obliged to forgive others.

In short, we have no debt to pay to the flesh, with its many alluring demands. We do, nonetheless, have a debt to God (one which can ever truly be paid—like trying to pay back our parents for raising us), and that payment looks like our love, adoration, worship, obedience and seeking to give glory to God rather than man. That payment of that debt also includes our interaction with our fellow man—especially as it relates to their spiritual well-being, as Paul wrote earlier:

**I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me,**



***I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:14).***

Again, the message is somewhat simple. But it is not easy, nor is it unimportant, as Paul follows up with an attention-getting verse:

**For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:13).**

### **Life and Death**

So, we're not talking about one methodology being slightly preferable to the other, like painting a house brown or tan. We're talking about a house full of life versus one that is burning down. Trying to separate the way we conduct our lives from truly being bound for heaven (justified before God) results in what Calvin calls a "mutilated faith."

**It is indeed true, that we are justified in Christ through the mercy of God alone; but it is equally true and certain, that all who are justified are called by the Lord, that they may live worthy of their vocation. Let then the faithful learn to embrace him, not only for justification, but also for sanctification, as he has been given to us for both these purposes, lest they rend him asunder by their mutilated faith.<sup>25</sup>**

It must be said that our behavior cannot save us, but it certainly can condemn us and it shows us what path we're on.

**For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death (Romans 6:20, 21).**

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Believers are exhorted to put the deeds of the body to death. The verb *θανατοῦτε* demonstrates that the desires to carry out the deeds of the body are incredibly strong, so strong that the overcoming of them is best described as putting to death that which is longing to burst forth into life (cf. Col. 3:5, where the imperative *νεκρώσατε*, *nekrōsate*, “put to death,” is used to convey the need to conquer sins). Human beings must summon and harness their wills in order to overcome sin, which bubbles up within us and desires to manifest itself in bodily actions. The squelching of sinful impulses is not finally attributed, however, to the agency of human willpower.<sup>26</sup>

Those who live will die and those who put to death will live.

“If ye do not kill sin, it will kill you.”

**7** Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. **8** For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.<sup>27</sup>

**3** But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. **4** Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. **5** For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. **6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.<sup>28</sup>

**7** Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. **8** Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from

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<sup>26</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 421). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>27</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ga 6:7–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>28</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Eph 5:3–6). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. **9** No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning (ou dunati hartanein) because he has been born of God. **10** By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.<sup>29</sup>

Vs 14

**14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.**

ἄγονται — are led or conducted: “A metaphor taken from the blind or those in darkness, who know not how to proceed without a conductor. So we have need to be led by the Spirit in the way of truth, for we are blind and see no light. Or it is a metaphor taken from infants, who can hardly walk without a guide; for the regenerated are like little children lately born. Thus we are reminded of our misery and weakness; and we ought not to ascribe to ourselves either knowledge or strength apart from the Spirit of God.” 30

The “leading” (ἄγονται, *agontai*) of the Spirit does not refer to guidance for everyday decisions in determining the will of God. It refers to being “controlled by” or “determined by” or “governed by” the Spirit (Murray 1959: 295; Lloyd-Jones 1975: 175; Byrne 1979: 98; Moo 1991: 533; Fee 1994: 563). The passive form of the verb is significant, in that it suggests that the Spirit is the primary agent in Christian obedience, that it is his work in believers that accounts for their obedience (Cranfield 1975: 295; Käsemann 1980: 226). Although this does not exclude the need for believers to follow the Spirit (Barrett 1991: 152; Deidun 1981: 79), it emphasizes that any human obedience is the result of the Spirit’s work.<sup>8</sup> A link is forged with verse 13, for those who are led by the Spirit put to death the

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<sup>29</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Jn 3:7–10). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

deeds of the body by the agency of the Spirit (Byrne 1979: 98; Deidun 1981: 78–79).<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, Gal. 5:16 is parallel to Gal. 5:18, and in the former verse those who walk by the Spirit do not fulfill the desire of the flesh. These parallels confirm that the leading of the Spirit in Rom. 8:14 refers to the Spirit's governing authority in one's life that is manifested in human obedience.<sup>32</sup>

**6** And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" **7** So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.<sup>33</sup>

Vs 15

**15** For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

for he has not been given for the purpose of harassing us with trembling or of tormenting us with anxiety; but on the contrary, for this end — that having calmed every perturbation, and restoring our minds to a tranquil state, he may stir us up to call on God with confidence and freedom.<sup>34</sup>

You are not however to infer from this, either that no one before the coming of Christ was endued with the spirit of adoption, or that all who received the law were servants and not sons: for he compares the ministration of the law with the dispensation of the gospel rather than persons with persons.<sup>35</sup>

But it must at the same time be noticed, that it was designedly, on account of false apostles, that a contrast was made between the literal

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<sup>31</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 422). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>33</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ga 4:6–7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:14). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

disciples of the law, and the faithful whom Christ, the heavenly Teacher, not only addresses by words, but also teaches inwardly and effectually by his Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

The faithful also under the law did indeed call God their Father, but not with such full confidence, as the veil kept them at a distance from the sanctuary: but now, since an entrance has been opened to us by the blood of Christ, we may rejoice fully and openly that we are the children of God; hence arises this crying. In short, thus is fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea,

*“I will say to them, My people are ye: they in their turn will answer, Thou art our God.” (Hosea 2:23.)*

For the more evident the promise is, the greater the freedom in prayer.<sup>37</sup>

All things under the Old Testament were involved in great obscurity, when compared with the clear light of the gospel.<sup>38</sup>

**12** Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. <sup>13</sup> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. <sup>39</sup>

**7** for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. <sup>40</sup>

**4** But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. **6** And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our

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<sup>36</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:14). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Co 2:12–13). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>40</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (2 Ti 1:7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.<sup>41</sup>

**35** And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. **36** And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”<sup>42</sup>

In both verses 14 and 15, that believers are children of God is inseparable from the obedience of believers. In verse 14 it is those who are controlled by the Spirit who are children of God, and in verse 15 those who are adopted are those who are not slaves to the power of sin.<sup>43</sup>

the glad acknowledgment that God is the loving Father of believers. His fatherly care and rule guard believers from fear of condemnation. The use of  $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha$  is particularly striking and has been the subject of much discussion (see, e.g., Jeremias 1967: 11–65). The word is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic term and presumably reflects the early practice of Hellenistic Christians. Indeed, the use of the word in Christian communities probably stems from Jesus himself (Mark 14:36). Intimacy with God is certainly suggested by  $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha$  (and by  $\text{\textit{\pi\alpha\tau\eta\rho}}$  as well), but some scholars have overplayed the intimacy and uniqueness of the term (so Jeremias 1965: 9–40; for a corrective see Haenchen 1966: 492–94; Barr 1988a; Barr 1988b).<sup>44</sup>

**to fear**—as under the law which “worketh wrath,” that is, “Such was your condition before ye believed, living in legal bondage, haunted with incessant forebodings under a sense of unpardoned sin. But it was not to perpetuate that wretched state that ye received the Spirit.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ga 4:4–7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>42</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Mk 14:35–36). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>43</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, pp. 424–425). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>45</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:15). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

vs 16

## **16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God**

our mind of its own self, without the preceding testimony of the Spirit, could not convey to us this assurance.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the OT requirement of at least two witnesses (Deut. 19:15) is adumbrated here in order to convey the certainty believers have in knowing they are children of God. Ultimately the text describes a religious experience that is ineffable, for the witness of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit that one is a child of God is mystical in the best sense of the word.<sup>47</sup>

**19** We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

**20** And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. **21** Little children, keep yourselves from idols.<sup>48</sup>

Vs 17

## **17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:12-17).**

such as Christ possesses; and his possession of it takes away all uncertainty: and it is a commendation of the excellency of this inheritance, that we shall partake of it in common with the only-begotten Son of God.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:16). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>47</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 427). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>48</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Jn 5:19–21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:17). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

“We are co-heirs with Christ, provided, in entering on our inheritance, we follow him in the same way in which he has gone before.”<sup>50</sup>

and that it may not be doubtful, its possession as been already conferred on Christ, whose partners we are become: but Christ came to it by the cross; then we must come to it in the same manner.”<sup>51</sup>

The latter is more suitable here; because a son by *adoption* might not be heir of the property, whereas a son by *birth* certainly is, and this is what the apostle is now coming to.<sup>52</sup>

**29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.<sup>53</sup>

**2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.<sup>54</sup>

**24** Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. **25** Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26** If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.<sup>55</sup>

**24** Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For

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<sup>50</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:17). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:16). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>53</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ro 8:29). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>54</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Heb 1:2). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>55</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Jn 12:24–26). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.



whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.<sup>56</sup>

**11** The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

**12** if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he also will deny us;

**13** if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Mt 16:24–25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>57</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (2 Ti 2:11–13). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Do you have difficulties in your life? Does it make you question your faith? How should a Christian understand difficulties—even death?
2. Why is it important to learn how to die?

## **Romans 8:12-13**

*What Then Is This Bleating of the Sheep in My Ears?*

February 23, 2014

**Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:12-13).**

### **Introduction**

We ask only five questions of those taking membership vows in this church. We don't issue a theology exam. Membership, in a manner of speaking, marks the beginning of a Christian's knowledge and growth in the love and grace of Christ. The vows are not so much a test of Christian maturity as it is a public profession that the person taking vows is indeed a Christian. It is by no means a stretch to suggest that any true Christian would say yes to every question put forth in the vows.

As you have no doubt heard many times, the vows amount to: 1). an affirmation that one believes the Bible to be the word of God; 2). belief in the Triune God—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—Jesus being fully man and fully God; 3). that salvation is found not in ourselves but by faith in Christ alone; 5). the final question has to do with fellowship in, and accountability to, the church. The fourth question, the one I would bring our thoughts to this morning, has to do with the acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ in our lives.

I highlight this because, as I mentioned, we believe any true Christian would not balk at such a question. You will see the wording is, in part, extracted from the passage under our current consideration. The vow reads:

**Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?**

In a chapter which bursts forth with such gracious proclamations that there is **“no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...(that we are) free from the law of sin and death...(and that) the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies”** and more to come, it’s as if Paul wants to make sure all the kids are in the car.

In Philippians Paul recounts, with tears in his eyes, those who would walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

**Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Philippians 3:17).**

Paul wasn’t railing against these people—it was said with tears. It must be recognized that these glorious and gracious affirmations of the favor of God (found in this chapter and elsewhere) are not poured out indiscriminately—as if they’re a human right—as if a man can shake his fist at God then demand his daily bread. Having just declared this great gift (that God will **“give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you”**) we are met with the ominous conjunction **“therefore.”**

**Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh (Romans 8:12).**

### **Debtors—Not to the Flesh**

Perhaps it is unwitting, perhaps by design, but there are people who master the art of making others feel as if they owe them something. We will occasionally see this quality in the interaction of small children who think they can obtain approval from a friend by giving them something—I distinctly remember, as a child, being taught that you can’t buy meaningful friendships.

You may have encountered such people only to recognize what a fool’s errand you’ve been led down—it’s a chasing of the tail.

Because the more they realize their success, the more they demand. Our minds might naturally go to family, friends or acquaintances that fall into this category in our lives. But what may not be so readily apparent is this type of person resides in each of us. There is part of me that is obsessed with itself and makes demands.

Our flesh does not free us from condemnation. It does not deliver from sin and death. And it certainly cannot raise us from the dead. Yet we live as if we owe it. We have even adopted a phrase to accommodate our highly demanding carnality—*I owe it to myself*. It is sad, dark and pathetic, like an abused child seeking comfort from the very one bringing forth the abuse.

And the church/religion does not always escape this mentality. I was recently in a doctor's waiting room reading a magazine which told the story of a celebrity who found her lost faith. She had gone through difficulties earlier in her life which led to depression and self-destructive behavior. As she recounted finding her faith, it all revolved around her—*her* needs, *her* dreams, *her* success, *her* happiness. It was the kind of faith which, at least most recently, culminated with her doing a high profile wedding at an awards ceremony of a couple of the same gender.

It was as if the sole purpose and exercise of the god of her religion was to nod *yes* when it came to her flesh. During difficult times he (the god of her flesh) nodded *yes* to her substance abuse until it became life threatening. Now he is nodding *yes* to her flesh as it relates to a culture constructed religious system.

It is in this headlong pursuit of selfishness (of catering to our perceived debt to the flesh) that true joy, goodness and peace is altogether lost. We can call it faith or religion. But it is not true faith.

Suffice it to say that none of us are immune to the call in our own flesh to behave as if we owe it. And it is precisely here that we must act as our own executioner. For Paul is not unclear in stating that the person who governs his life according to his own flesh is giving evidence that he is on the road to death.

It might be of value to point out that Paul is not suggesting here that flesh is necessarily sinful in all its affections and desires—he is not endorsing masochism (that self-inflicted pain is spiritually beneficial) or even asceticism (the practice of self-denial to all bodily pleasure). To enjoy your spouse, your children, your

friends, a delicious meal or a beautiful sunset does not, by the nature of the case, make those things wrong and lead people to eternal death.

Living according to the flesh means that you do what you like to do, feel like doing, or even that which seems right to you, in opposition to the will of God as revealed in His word. To live according to the flesh means you're committed to following your flesh *rather than* following the Scriptures which reveal to us the goodness of a God who **“alone is wise.”**

It is not terribly complicated. Paul taught elsewhere:

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).**

Or, as he stated earlier in Romans:

**But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Romans 6:22).**

## **Piecemeal Sanctification**

Perhaps the problem many of us have comes from an abridged understanding of the Christian faith; as if God is piecemeal fixing our broken selves. I awoke the other morning to my wife informing me that our washer was broken, our dryer was broken and our sprinklers were broken. So you begin to calculate what you can afford, what really needs to be replaced and how much it will cost to start replacing parts versus just buying a new unit.

God did not save part of us, nor is He sanctifying part of us. He paid the full price (in the blood of His Son) to both justify us and entirely renew us. By the grace of God, the Christian has **“put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10).**

We should not view certain aspects or categories of our lives as if they are to remain untouched by the grace, wisdom and power of God. In fact, though not explicitly stated in this verse, the implication is made by many that we, though not debtors to the flesh, are debtors to the God. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant gives

ample testimony that we, having been forgiven an immense debt, are obliged to forgive others.

In short, we have no debt to pay to the flesh, with its many alluring demands. We do, nonetheless, have a debt to God (one which can ever truly be repaid—like trying to pay back our parents for raising us), and that payment looks like our love, adoration, worship, obedience and seeking to give glory to God rather than to man. The payment of that debt also includes our interaction with our fellow man—especially as it relates to their spiritual well-being, as Paul wrote earlier:

**I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:14).**

Again, the message is somewhat simple. But it is not easy, nor is it unimportant, as Paul follows up with an attention-getting verse:

**For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:13).**

### **No Mutilated Faith**

So, we're not talking about one methodology being slightly preferable to the other, like painting a house brown or tan. We're talking about a house full of life versus one that is burning down. Trying to separate the way we conduct our lives from truly being bound for heaven (justified before God) results in what Calvin calls a "mutilated faith."

**It is indeed true, that we are justified (God's grace where He pardons all our sins) in Christ through the mercy of God alone; but it is equally true and certain, that all who are justified are called by the Lord, that they may live worthy of their vocation. Let then the faithful learn to embrace him, not only**

**for justification, but also for sanctification (God’s grace where we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness), as he has been given to us for both these purposes, lest they rend him asunder by their mutilated faith (parenthesis mine).<sup>58</sup>**

We must be careful that our justification is not merely *just-a-fiction*. It must be said that our behavior cannot save us, but it certainly can condemn us, and it shows us what path we’re on.

**For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death (Romans 6:20, 21).**

## **Put It to Death**

Paul writes that we are to “**put to death the deeds of the body.**” These are very strong words because the deeds of the flesh are a formidable opponent. They are not to be talked to. They are not to be reasoned with or mildly tranquilized. They are to be put to death.

We will occasionally hear of a police officer, in an encounter with a criminal wielding a knife or a bat, who shoots to kill. I’ve often thought and asked: *Why doesn’t he shoot him in the leg?* But when you speak to law enforcement you get an answer. Enough officers have been killed by a criminal holding a knife while concealing a gun, or on the type of narcotic that would render a bullet to the leg meaningless. The explanations are numerous that would cause an officer to obey his training with the hidden thought, “What chances do I take at leaving my children orphans?” The threat must be disposed of—entirely.

Before I was married I recall seeing a spider in the house and mercifully allowing it to have its space. After my first child woke up with a spider bite, I became the spider’s worst nightmare. Godly

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<sup>58</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.



virtue must be protected and it is protected by means of a sort of self-assassination. What are those things, those events, those temptations, those proclivities, those people to whom you have remained alive at the expense of your own soul's well-being?

**Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them (Colossians 3:5-7).**

### **What Then Is This Bleating of Sheep?**

We are aware that King Saul was deposed by God as King of Israel. We're also aware of the words of Samuel that **"to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fats of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22)**. But we may have lost the intensity of the chapter where we are given this information.

The Amalekites were a desperately evil people. Certainly this is a judgment only God can make, but their depravity had no remedy; God therefore determined that when King Saul went, once again, to war with these intensely wicked people<sup>59</sup> that he would **"kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:3)**. It might be said that the Lord had determined that He would no longer strive with the Amalekites (Genesis 6:3).

But Saul had better ideas. He thought it would be a good idea to let Agag, the king of the Amalekites, live. He thought it would be smart to spare the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs and all that was good...but everything despised and worthless (at least in his own estimation) he utterly destroyed (1 Samuel 15:9).

The prophet Samuel then met with Saul, at which time Saul, no doubt with great excitement of his victory and good decision-making, greeted Samuel with the words: **"Blessed are you of the**

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<sup>59</sup> We see, periodically, times or people in Scripture where they wickedness brings them beyond redemption—the whole world during the time of Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and here the Amalekites. It is difficult for people raised in a culture highly influenced by the gospel to grasp the evil to which people can descend.

**LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD” (1 Samuel 15:13). “What then” replied Samuel, “is this bleating of the sheep in my ears” (1 Samuel 15:14)?** Of course Saul had all manner of rationale for his decision—we “**spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord” (1 Samuel 15:15).** In other words, we have disobeyed God in order to more efficiently worship Him. It was in this context that Samuel informed Saul that God preferred obedience over sacrifice and that he would no longer be king.

Agag (who was apparently in a very cheerful disposition) was then brought to Samuel and sought to win his favor with light-hearted dialogue about how the bitterness of death is all behind us. But Samuel reminded the butcher of a king how many women he had made childless and proceeded to hack him to pieces (1 Samuel 15:33).

It’s a rough story. But we only find it a difficult pill to swallow because of our naiveté when it comes to the destructive nature of sin. At a different time or even now in a different place, if confronted by the barbaric and despotic power of an Agag, every one of us would pray as the “**souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had born...how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 6:9, 10).**

All this to say, we are not to follow the example of Saul. Is the bleating of sheep in your ears? What are those areas in our lives where we entertain sin rather than put it to death? Sin is a cancer, and not one that we merely seek to wound, but to put to death. It would perhaps go beyond the text to begin to address all the weaponry God has given for this task (suffice it to begin with the Word of God, prayer, fellowship, worship, sacraments, accountability and more).

It is also critical to note that it is not by virtue of our success in putting to death the deeds of the flesh that we eventually arrive at life. When John writes:

**Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous (1 John 3:7).**

John is not saying that the person has merited or earned righteousness by his success in practicing righteousness. His

behavior does not merit but it does give evidence. As he shortly thereafter notes:

**By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:10).**

It might be a healthy practice for all of us to ask, **“What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears?”**

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are the five vows asked when someone desires membership in our church? Why are these questions important?
2. Was the Apostle Paul mad at unbelievers? Why does he write so strongly about them?
3. What does it mean to be a debtor to the flesh? In what ways do you feel your flesh makes demands of you?
4. What does it mean to live according to the flesh? Where does this lead?
5. If we are not debtors to the flesh, to what/whom are we debtors? What does that look like?
6. What did Calvin mean by a *mutilated faith*?
7. What response should a Christian have to the *deeds of the body*? How would one go about enacting this response?
8. What was the great transgression of King Saul? Discuss the story.
9. In what ways do you hear the bleating of sheep?

# Romans 8:14

*Led By the Spirit*

March 9, 2014

**For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:14).**

## Introduction

I came to faith during the tail end of what was called the “Jesus Movement.” The Jesus Movement (with some serious exceptions) was to the 60s what the Reformation was to the Renaissance. Instead of getting high on drugs, the Jesus Movement touted getting high on Jesus. Instead of inhaling the secondhand smoke of pagan rock, Christians were encouraged to purchase and enjoy Christian rock; as Larry Norman sang in 1972, “Why should the devil have all the good music?”

I think it is a bit of a delusion to think the secular music of the 20s, 30s, 40s and early 50s (or any era really) was safe and benign. But when we reached the late 50s, 60s and 70s things became less subtle. There was a clear and aggressive promotion of licentiousness—whether drugs, alcohol, sex, rebellion against authority, etc. Parents were forced to work with more diligence, guarding the gate of their children’s virtue from the shock and awe of lyrics streaming from their stereos into their ears, hearts and souls.

This can be tricky business. Do we not listen to secular music at all or do we teach our children how to be discerning observers of their culture with an eye toward being a positive influence and witness for Christ? Where are the lines drawn (whether in music, movies, books, art, etc)? This is its own conversation, and not one which I intend to pursue here.

What I am a little more concerned about, when we reach a verse like the one before us this morning, is not whether Christians influence their culture as much as how culture influences the Christian or the Christian church. Going back to music, there are certain songs and artists with whom we feel safe. We let them in to play with our children (and our own minds) like a trusted babysitter. Then our children (or we) begin to see certain words or ideas proceed

from our lips, followed by the typical parental question: “Where did you hear that?”

One example, one I think that has had an effect upon the way we understand a verse like the one we’re studying, surfaced in 1977. At the time I was a volunteer helper in youth ministry. As youth workers we struggled with the issue of appropriate entertainment for the teens and pre-teens. But one song came out that we all liked. The song was performed by professing Christian and daughter of a well-known Christian entertainer, Debby Boone. She stated that this was a song she recorded for God. It was a huge hit; ten consecutive weeks at No. 1, longer than any other song in the Hot 100 history to that point. It was the biggest hit of the 70s and was featured in a movie of the same name. It was entitled *You Light Up My Life*.

It was with great passion that she sang the lyrics which millions of teenage girls (and boys, but under their breaths) imitated: “It can’t be wrong when it feels so right. Cause you...you light up my life.”<sup>60</sup> The song promoted a not-so-subtle form of hedonism (the doctrine that pleasure or personal happiness is the highest good). This methodology adopted a Christian vernacular, finding a place on stage in the church and among Christians.

Phrases like “I really felt led to...” or “God has given me a real peace about...” is often followed by a proposition expressing some type of carnal comfort or a conventional cultural influence that has pushed the Christian away from the counsel clearly taught in Scripture. “It just feels right” wedged its way in. Carrie Underwood sang *Jesus Take the Wheel* in 2005 and the Christian parents let down their guard. She now speaks out in support of gay marriage.<sup>61</sup> Did Jesus not take the wheel when she offered it? Does she want the wheel back? What is the means—the operating principle—by which a Christian (or anyone for that matter) says or does one thing, then later says or does something quite contrary? The “it can’t be wrong when it feels so right” principle is hard at work.

The Apostle Paul appears to be drawing a line in the sand with this verse and the one that precedes it. He has stated that **“if you live according to the flesh you will die” (Romans 8:13)**. So Paul is not

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<sup>60</sup> Interestingly enough, the song was written by Joe Brooks who later took his own life while on trial for 91 counts of sexual assault.

<sup>61</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/carrie-underwood-gay-marriage-backlash-london\\_n\\_1612498.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/carrie-underwood-gay-marriage-backlash-london_n_1612498.html)

merely speaking of some type of intuitive spiritual acuity that is more or less highly developed in certain Christians; he is addressing an attribute which marks one out as a “**son of God.**” That makes this a pretty significant verse.

**For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:14).**

### **What ‘Being Led by the Spirit’ is Not**

It might be as critical to determine what being led by the Spirit is *not* as much as what it is. Years ago, somewhere in a sermon, I had given the impression that people should try to obey God’s law. Shortly after the service a couple of young Christians stood before me with Bibles opened. I admired their courage and resolve. I admired that their hands held Bibles. I admired that they sought to gently and lovingly correct me. This type of thing ought to happen to pastors with regularity. I was gently accused of seeking to put Christians under the law. That we are to be led, not by the law, but by the Spirit was their thesis.

The law of God is often viewed as cold, external and superficial. It is equated with the flesh and should be set aside by true believers—after all “**...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**” (2 **Corinthians 3:6**). Interestingly, Paul used letters to convey that. There are so many passages in Scripture which, if skimmed<sup>62</sup> instead of scanned,<sup>63</sup> seem to place God’s Spirit so at odds with God’s law that it makes God out to be a bit schizophrenic.<sup>64</sup>

In this young couple’s mind (and in my own mind at one point), being led by the Spirit meant the removal of the law of God as a means by which we make wise or moral choices. We somehow came to the conclusion that reading God’s law and doing our best (heart, soul, mind and strength) to obey it was a mistake—it was relying on our own strength. What Christians should do, according to them, is trust in the power of the Spirit. Instead of seeking to excel in obedience to the revealed law of God, one must excel in appropriating the power and direction of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>62</sup> To pass lightly and quickly over.

<sup>63</sup> To examine closely.

<sup>64</sup> Behavior that appears to be motivated by contradictory or conflicting principles.

## Law or Spirit?

Is it law or Spirit? Is making an effort to obey the law of God relying on your own strength? Let me suggest that seeking to obey the law of God is actually just the opposite of relying on your own strength. It is a Spirit-generated dependence on God's wisdom and strength. This is the means by which one appropriates a well-known passage found in the book of Proverbs:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil (Proverbs 3:5-7).**

We must be careful that we don't seek to repackage the message in this passage. When we lean not on our own understanding we go outside of ourselves—to the wisdom and counsel of God found in His word. We don't merely seek a higher impulse in our own natures. This won't help.

It's like the line from the movie where the man, having made some terrible errors, assures his friend that he is not going to make the same mistakes. His friend offers the disquieting response, "No, you're making all new mistakes." Just a few verses later we see more specific counsel as to the source of our understanding.

**Hear, *my* children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding; for I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law (Proverbs 4:1, 2).**

When I seek to do what God's law says I ought to do instead of what I feel like doing (even if I try to interpret that feeling as something spiritual) it demonstrates that I am being led by the Spirit. The very desire, and whatever success, we have to walk in the law of God is generated in all Christians by the Spirit. This is what the Holy Spirit does.



**I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel 36:27).**

## **Not Everyday Decisions**

T. R. Schreiner makes a very thought-provoking comment when he writes:

**The “leading” (ἄγονται, *agontai*) of the Spirit does not refer to guidance for everyday decisions in determining the will of God. It refers to being “controlled by” or “determined by” or “governed by” the Spirit...it suggests that the Spirit is the primary agent in Christian obedience, that it is his work in believers that accounts for their obedience...it emphasizes that any human obedience is the result of the Spirit’s work. A link is forged with verse 13, for those who are led by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body by the agency of the Spirit.<sup>65</sup>**

Being led by the Spirit is not being in tune to isolated impulses where the Spirit informs a person to turn left or make a phone call or order the chicken salad. It is rather a phrase which describes the entirety of a Christian’s willingness to walk in obedience to the counsel of God found in His word.

There are innumerable passages in both the Old and New Testaments which indicate that the spiritual man will seek to walk in the law of God. In fact, every command in Scripture makes the assumption that those led by the Spirit will regard God’s law as commands which are to be obeyed. Obvious examples are found in the words of Jesus Himself:

**If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15).**

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<sup>65</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 422). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

John also writes:

**And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:3-6).**

In Galatians 5:16 the Apostle Paul exhorts his readers to **“walk in the Spirit.”** But he does not leave it up to his readers at that point to put their fingers in the air to determine which way the Spirit is blowing. Paul is very specific about what the works of the flesh are (adultery, fornication, lewdness, hatred, selfish ambition, etc.), that the spiritual man will not be confused about his instruction.

## **Impulses**

I recall that when I first wrestled through this issue some twenty years ago, I made the observation that even though there are many who would argue against the law of God, they will seldom put their theory to practice. They’ll always, for example, agree that it’s wrong to steal. But what we have seen in recent history among Christians is how devastating it can be to misinterpret the means by which we access truth, for there are many now who profess faith in Christ while at the same time promoting ethics which are in stark contradiction to the revealed word of God found in Scripture.

This is what happens when you let a camel’s nose in the tent. It is as if the vast majority of western Christendom today has fallen into that category addressed by Paul in his pastoral epistle to Timothy. He writes of those who hold to **“a form of godliness, although they have denied its power.”** And how they...

**...enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses (2 Timothy 3:6).**

The church has become driven by “**impulse**” *epithymiais*. Obviously, an impulse isn’t necessarily bad. Paul uses the word to describe the great desire he had to see the brethren face to face (1 Thessalonians 2:17). But desires, impulses, cravings, comforts or any determination which is generated from within the skin of humanity is not to be relabeled as the leading of the Spirit.

I pray that nothing that I have said will be construed to conclude that the Spirit of God is not at work day to day in the life of the believer. It is by the Spirit of God that we have embraced the hope of Christ. It is by the Spirit that we are granted a keener understanding of God’s law and how that law is applied in our daily lives. It is by the Spirit that we are sanctified and grow in wisdom.

But, brothers and sisters, growing in wisdom by the Spirit of Christ is generally a lengthy and often painful enterprise. There is no cheap and easy way to grow wise in Christ. The wisest person seeking to make the godliest decisions is often fraught with anxiety and uncertainty in their next step. At times decisions are easy to make but difficult to execute. Other times, all things appear so similar that it may get down to the flipping of a coin (Acts 1:26).

But for the sake of the verse before us, let us recognize that the person led by the Spirit is not a person who simply follows their own impulses, but they will have the same view of the law that David had:

**The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of *coins of gold and silver* (Psalms 119:72).**

Of course, this needs to be understood in light of the weakness of the law to save. When one views their keeping of the law as their hope of righteousness, the law becomes their executioner. We praise God that there was One who was executed on our behalf. Let our thoughts move in that direction as we prepare for the Lord’s Table.

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What kind of effect do you think popular culture has had on you and on those you know?
2. To what extent should we engage the culture or remove ourselves from it?
3. How have hedonistic lyrics weaved their way into the church and into the lives of Christians?
4. Is being “led by the Spirit” an option for a Christian or is it a necessary attribute? Explain.
5. Does a person who is led by the Spirit remove the law of God as the means by which they determine what is good and wise?
6. How does a person apply the phrase, “Lean not on your own understanding” to their life?
7. Schreiner taught that the leading of the Spirit does not refer to “everyday decisions.” What does he mean by that? Do you agree/disagree?
8. How has today’s church become *impulse driven*?
9. How does the Spirit of God work in the life of a Christian?
10. Does our hope of righteousness come from our obedience to the law? Explain.

# Romans 8:15-17

## *The Spirit of Adoption*

March 16, 2014

**For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:15-17).**

### Introduction

The Winter Olympics recently came to a close. People enjoy watching the Olympics because there is so much invested and so much at stake. If you fail, you won't get another opportunity for four years—if ever.

Many years ago I lived with an athlete who made the Olympic team. We would train together. One day a film crew came out from the network that had secured the right to broadcast the Olympics. They filmed us working out (I was just the window dressing) so they could give the viewers an up-close-and-personal relationship with the competitors, so the audience would be more intimately involved in the event. They want to make it personal. They want you to rejoice with them when they win and feel sorrow when they lose. This is a very intriguing method of entertainment.

We see movies and television shows utilizing this technique in programs like American Idol, X Factor, The Voice or The Hunger Games, Divergent and others. You take the risk and you may fail. I've experienced this as a parent watching my children. Whether it's a piano recital, a drama performance, an athletic contest or an academic endeavor, when they begin to perform I am rooting for them. I am trusting that they are prepared, that they will do their best, that they will maintain their integrity, and that this will not be a psychologically crumbling experience for them.

A parent can get very wrapped up in this type of thing; as if we care more about the event (whatever that event may be) than the child does. That is why the camera-man is always instructed to find

the parent in the audience. They're easy to spot. They're the ones with no fingernails left. Why?

Because when the event is over, the lights go out and the fans and judges go home, mom is still mom and dad is still dad. The network easily loses interest and the fans are no longer entertained. They rooted for you. Maybe you won, maybe you lost, but it's over now and they've moved on to the next show. The celebrity judges like you, but they had to cut you. While you were on stage they were all about loving you. But if you showed up at J-Lo's back door a month after the competition her security team would likely escort you off the premises, because she's not your mom. And Keith Urban is not your dad.

There is certainly a significant sense in which we think of God as a Judge and the audience. God watches and scrutinizes (Psalm 139). God evaluates. We can do things which are “**pleasing**” or “**displeasing**” to God (Hebrews 13:16; 1 John 3:22; Mark 10:14). Paul is not diminishing the attributes of God as Creator, Judge and King when we come to a passage like this. But he is bringing in an element that sort of cuts through the transcendent God who sits in the heavens and brings His children into sweet communion with Him.

In a passage like this the emphasis is not on God the Judge or God the audience, rooting for us, but then forgetting us when the next contestant enters the arena. He is God the Parent.

**For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15).**

### **A Son or a Slave?**

Christians are not to live in a spirit of bondage—fearing whether or not we have found favor with God—fearing being cast off. The Westminster Confession says it so thoroughly, yielding such great comfort and understanding. Chapter 12, paragraph 1 (*Of Adoption*) reads:

**All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, (Eph. 1:5, Gal. 4:4–5) by**

**which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, (Rom. 8:17, John 1:12) have His name put upon them, (Jer. 14:9, 2 Cor. 6:18, Rev. 3:12) receive the spirit of adoption, (Rom. 8:15) have access to the throne of grace with boldness, (Eph. 3:12, Rom. 5:2) are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, (Gal. 4:6) are pitied, (Ps. 103:13) protected, (Prov. 14:26) provided for, (Matt. 6:30,32, 1 Pet. 5:7) and chastened by Him as by a Father: (Heb. 12:6) yet never cast off, (Lam. 3:31) but sealed to the day of redemption; (Eph. 4:30) and inherit the promises, (Heb. 6:12) as heirs of everlasting salvation. (1 Pet. 1:3–4, Heb. 1:14)<sup>66</sup>**

So much can be said of this. Suffice it for now that those who are justified—those who by faith in Christ have had their sins pardoned—God vouchsafeth, or deigns, to adopt. He puts His name on us. It is a spiritual union which reaches deeper than any union found by blood or human passions.

**I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:5).**

As a husband and parent, it is difficult for me to get my arms around a unity that excels beyond that of my own family—but such is the case.

We enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God. We are liberated from sin and death, we have the privilege of approaching the throne of grace with boldness. God will protect, provide and discipline. But there is one thing He will never do; He will never “**cast off**” His children (Lamentations 3:31).

“**Abba, Father**” is an intimate term. “**Abba**” is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic term and is used by Jesus Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Some have suggested the

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<sup>66</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

modern expression would be found in the word “daddy.” That may not be ironclad, but there is little doubt that the expression—especially with the repetition—should bring our hearts to consider an intimate and tender relationship that we have with God.

Of course, a fair question might be, ‘How do I know that I am included in that number?’ The Apostle explains:

**The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).**

### **The Spirit Himself**

Interesting that the first word in this sentence in the Greek is the personal pronoun “**Himself**” *autos*. We recognize that in the Greek, the orders of the words in the sentence are often given to demonstrate importance or emphasis. My own knowledge of who I am in Christ—that I am a child of God with all the liberties and privileges thereof—(though not contrary to) is not left to human intellect and calculation. What parent would leave it up to the child to figure out that he/she is their parent?

It would be an anomaly in human relationships for the child to somehow have to figure who their mother or father is. It is, if I can use the phrase, organically woven into the knowledge of the child whose first words ‘mama or dada’ often reflect the knowledge—even if at an infantile level.

That God is our Father and we are His children is not something the Christian feels (at least not according to this text) but something the Christian *knows*. God’s Spirit “**bears witness**” (one word in the Greek *symmartyrei* meaning to testify together) with our spirit. God’s Spirit “**testifies together**” with our spirit. This means to bear witness with or to confirm.

Some have suggested that this, perhaps, appeals to the OT requirement of two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15) to convey a sure verdict. Anyone who has studied philosophy, logic, ethics, epistemology (the theory or knowledge), ontology (the theory of what is real) rapidly arrives at the conclusion that it is quite difficult to know anything for certain. But in Romans we’ve already come in contact with two instances of certain knowledge: In chapter one we came to learn that all men know there is a God; here in chapter eight



we learn that all of God’s children know that He is their Father. The first knowledge holds men without excuse. The second knowledge is a knowledge of God as our Father and the life we have in Him through Christ.

**We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:19, 20).**

**...and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:12-17).**

### **Heirs with Christ, If...**

It is very difficult to comprehend as finite, sinful creatures what it means to be an heir with Christ—to be promised the joy and peace of the unsearchable riches of the new heavens and the new earth. The Scriptures use the strongest language available to convey these eternal treasures: no tears, no pain, no sorrow, no death, no mourning, all things new, streets of gold, nothing accursed, radiant like a most rare jewel, perfected union with Christ. The hymn is likely accurate in communicating that “the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”<sup>67</sup>

The Apostle then asserts, as he so often does, the pesky little conditional conjunction “*if*” *eiper* or “if indeed.” These conditions in Scripture are not designed to inform the reader that they must earn or merit their approval before God. Paul, and every author in Scripture, has taken great pains to dispel the notion that sinful humans can in any sense make God their debtor.

But it is an attribute of a person who is truly saved to “**suffer together**” (*sympaschomen* suffer the same thing) with Christ. Jesus was not unclear in the matter when He taught:

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<sup>67</sup> Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.

**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him (John 12:24-26).**

**And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:38, 39).**

We often use the phrase “bear our cross” or “take up our cross” as if it means to bear a heavy burden. But historically, a person who was seen carrying a cross was carrying it to their own death. There is but one God, one Savior and one true Master. Many have no idea who their god is or who their master is or how this master has subdued their souls. What Jesus is teaching here is that a person must abandon a life which is actually death in order to have true life.

Jesus went to a cross. We must follow. It is generally our lack of willingness in this category that shakes and confuses the clear testimony of the Spirit that we are children of God. My wife works hard (harder than I) at making sure we have family meals and family time because our children are at an age where they like to spread their wings in freedom. We want them to know, to ever be reminded who they are, lest they become confused in their understanding and behaviors, an attitude that can become a vicious cycle.

I must say, when I read the Apostle Peter, I can't escape the thought of what he must have gone through when the drama of Satan demanding to sift him like wheat unfolded (Luke 22:31), how his faith must have been shaken. I think of that when I think of how he would counsel others to make their calling and election sure.

**His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and**

**excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:3-11).**

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. What are the different ways you think of God? As a judge, a teacher, an observer, etc.
2. What does it mean to live in a spirit of bondage?
3. How is being a son or daughter of God similar, dissimilar, superior to be the son or daughter of our human parents?
4. Why do you think the Apostle Paul uses the phrase “Abba, Father”?
5. How can/does a person know they are a child of God?
6. What does it mean to “suffer with” Christ? Does this mean we earn our own salvation? Explain.
7. How can our behavior affect the peace of knowing we are children of God?

# Romans 8:18

*No Comparison*

March 23, 2014

**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).**

## Falling Away

Many, many years ago I attended a Bible study of high school and college students. There was one young lady in attendance who exuded extreme enthusiasm for the faith. She prayed profound prayers for someone her age. She invited friends on a regular basis. She was boldly evangelical. She was a model Christian. A couple of years later I ran into her on a college campus and she pretended she didn't see me. Later that week I asked a friend, who I knew to be close friends with her, how she was. She had met a boy who was not a Christian and was no longer interested in church, Bible study, or faith in or obedience to Christ.

I don't know what has happened to her since. That was almost forty years ago. But that was one of the first times I witnessed something that I have seen many times since—a person making a profession of faith and then walking away from the faith. The reasons for this type of falling away are various and the intensity of the apostasy varies as well.

The reasons are summed up by Christ in one of His first parables in Matthew 13. A person who is not truly rooted will endure for a while, but tribulation and persecution will cause such a person to **“fall(s) away” (Matthew 13:21)**. For others, the **“cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22)**.

And the intensity of the apostasy can range from an aggressive embracing of atheism and attack on Christ and His followers to a quiet dismissal of oneself from the Christian community. I recall speaking with a young man who fell into this aggressive category. He was so blasphemous that at first I thought he must be joking

(inappropriately). As I pursued the conversation further, I realized that this might turn into a physical altercation. It was shocking.

But more times than not, people just quietly disappear. They become hard to find. They don't return phone calls or emails. Perhaps they have self-consciously abandoned the faith or they trust that their previous religious experience (having been baptized or having prayer the sinner's prayer) is sufficient to enter heaven, but they are simply not interested in walking by faith as the Bible would define it.

This can all be so very confusing. If we believe that once God saves a person they stay saved, what do we make of those who walk away? The only biblical conclusion we can draw is that they were never truly saved to begin with.

**They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us (1 John 2:19).**

Now we need to be careful not to immediately throw people into this category. I am in hearty agreement with our confession which teaches that it is quite possible for Christians...

**...through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; (Matt. 26:70, 72, 74) and, for a time, continue therein: (Ps. 51 title, Ps. 51:1) whereby they incur God's displeasure, (Isa. 64:5, 7, 9, 2 Sam. 11:27) and grieve His Holy Spirit, (Eph. 4:30) come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, (Ps. 51:8, 10, 12, Rev. 2:4, Cant. 5:2-4, 6) have their hearts hardened, (Isa. 63:17, Mark 6:52, Mark 16:14) and their consciences wounded; (Ps. 32:3-4, Ps. 51:8) hurt and scandalize others, (2**

**Sam. 12:14) and bring temporal judgments upon themselves. (Ps. 89:31–32, 1 Cor. 11:32)<sup>68</sup>**

But the same chapter begins with the words,

**They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. (Phil. 1:6, 2 Pet. 1:10, 1 John 3:9, 1 Pet. 1:5, 9)<sup>69</sup>**

### **The Call to Persevere**

It is because of the power of God's grace that Jesus can confidently call a Christian to do that which we would have no power in ourselves to accomplish (or even begin). In an environment where lawlessness increased and the love of many grow cold, where the faithful will not be cheered on by their environment but hated (Mark 13:13), Jesus issues the call, **“But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13)**. To the faithful church in Smyrna, Jesus says:

**Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death (Revelation 2:10, 11).**

There is a call that should ring in the ear of the Christian, that they are called to persevere.

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<sup>68</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996) Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. (Chapter XVII).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

**...but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Hebrews 3:6).**

**For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:14).**

Perhaps one of the difficulties is the ease (at least in recent history) at which one can bear the name of Christ in our culture. Perhaps it's the method of presentation—Jesus the soother of my psyche—Jesus the idea that is a bit better (perhaps) than other ideas—the ‘maybe this will work for me’ Jesus rather than the ‘count the cost’ Jesus.

### **Counting the Cost**

Years ago, I had a college professor ask how many in the class were Christians. A number of us raised our hands. He then asked a question that raised my eyebrows. “How many of you knew when you came to faith, what you were getting yourself into?” Even then, in the tender years of my faith, I had come to realize that was much more to being a Christian than praying that prayer, being baptized and attending church on a semi-regular basis.

Jesus did not present the faith with small print or hidden clauses. The follower of Christ in the infancy of the New Testament church would have answered that professor's question in the affirmative. It was almost as if the first hurdle for the aspiring follower of Christ came from the lips of Jesus Himself:

**Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost,**



**whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:25-33).**

It wasn't as if Jesus surveyed the crowd, looking for and speaking to those who He thought had inherently fortified souls; as if He only wanted the impressive people. It wasn't Jesus' faith in man that led Him to present His message with such a challenge. It was in light of the knowledge of His own victory and authority, the regenerating and preserving power of His own Spirit, that He could issue the call with the assuredness of success.

### **Suffering With Christ**

In light of these things, it would have been no surprise to the careful student when he read the words of Paul, that we are **“joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17).**

The suffering was a given. It was to be expected. Let not the suffering take us by surprise—we are not to let it lead us from Christ but *to* Christ. Let it not estrange us from the assembly of the saints but rather draw us to the assembly of the saints. In the passage before us (up to verse 25) we will learn how “suffering furthers hope instead of suppressing it.”<sup>70</sup> But in this one verse we are called to make a comparison; especially when we ask if it's worth it.

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<sup>70</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 432). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).**

### **A Glory to be Revealed**

Paul beckons the Christian to compare his present suffering with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Some of your versions may read the glory revealed “to us” or “for us” *eis hēmas*. Neither English phrase captures precisely the meaning of the text, for the idea is that the glory apprehends us and is bestowed upon us.<sup>71</sup>

We observe a nobility in those who are guided by that which cannot be seen; people who are willing to pay a price for that which is virtuous, honorable or just. We are told here that if we had any true notion of this future glory, the cost-benefit analysis would be overwhelming. One of the reasons God graciously calls His people to observe the Sabbath and meditate upon their eternal Sabbath rest is due to our tendency to forget that...

**...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:20, 21).**

When we are young and strong and healthy and busy it is easy to dismiss how precious the message that we “**have died**” and our lives are “**hidden with Christ in God.**” And when Christ, who is our life appears, then we also “**will appear with him in glory**” (Colossians 3:3, 4).

### **Suffering or Sleeping**

Perhaps it is our lack of suffering which allows us to be so sleepy in our faith. We’re comfy. The world has invited us to sit on her couch. Suffering presupposes some type of antithesis. It should be loving, gentle and as peaceful as possible (Romans 12:18), but we

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<sup>71</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 434). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

must be rowing in a different direction. Living in a culture which is rapidly abandoning their Christian underpinnings, one of the most distressful things is not the future demise of the culture (though I pray not) as the culture's ability to so effectively draw the professing Christian into their ethical and philosophical vacuum.

Perspicuously ungodly behaviors regarding the sanctity of life and marriage, etc. are now embraced by churches and their members. Our understanding of beginnings and the makeup and purpose of creation are being wiped off the table like wrappers after a meal. Perhaps a more intense suffering would refine the church. But suffering should not be relegated only to those who have courageously faced their culture like John the Baptist who lost his head for having denounced Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife (Matthew 14); most of the time suffering is much less dramatic.

Paul delivers the same counsel to those whose outer self is "wasting away" *diaphtheiretai*, meaning to become gradually incapacitated—to lose one's strength.

**So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).**

Whether the suffering and affliction comes from the hands of a tyrant like North Korea's Kim Jong-un and his murderous hostility toward those who would promote the name of Christ within the borders of his country, or the vitriol within our own borders that has silenced believers out of sheer embarrassment, or the fatigue of our own aging bodies and jaded disposition toward the church and the ministry therein, we are called to engage and to make the comparison—and there is no comparison.

We are called to suffer with Christ, to endure hardships, to joyfully remain faithful—to the glory of God and the redemption of

men, ever mindful of the glory that apprehends us and is bestowed upon us.

**In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:6, 7).**

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. If we believe that true Christians will persevere, how do we make sense of the reality that there are professing Christians who fall away?
2. If we observe someone fall away, does that mean they are not a Christian? Explain.
3. To what extent did Jesus present the necessity of perseverance?
4. What does it mean to count the cost?
5. Was Jesus looking for the strongest and most virtuous people?
6. To what extent should Christians expect suffering?
7. What is Paul telling Christians to compare their suffering to?
8. What does a Christian do that would bring about suffering? What does suffering look like?



# Romans 8:19-25

*Eagerly Waiting*

April 6, 2014

**For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for *it* with perseverance (Romans 8:19-25).**

## Introduction

In this race of life, the Scriptures will occasionally call us to set our minds upon who is watching. In the twelfth chapter of Hebrews our attention is brought to the “**great cloud of witnesses**,” very likely referring to the faithful mentioned in chapter eleven. This is designed to spur us on to run with endurance, fixing our eyes upon Jesus and what He had endured, looking to an ultimate joy.

When I ran track, I would occasionally have to run the 400m or 1500m. As you make the final turn, exhausted, you see the stands and the people cheering for you and it would make a difference. Professional athletic teams play all year merely to secure home court advantage. The Lord wants us to open our hearts to the often-unseen reality that surrounds us since the world often seems like seems like an away game.

In the second chapter of the Revelation, we are told that Jesus “**walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands**” which are the churches. There is a unique consecrated presence of the Spirit of Christ when the church gathers. With this comes a warning—in the case of the church at Ephesus, they had left their first love and they

are warned that their **“lampstand would be removed from its place” (Revelation 2:1, 5).**

These are inspiring, yet sobering contemplations. Meditating upon these types of things can change the casual disposition we have in engaging in worship. Who is really watching? I think of how it affects me as a pastor. I once visited a church in Italy that had angels in the upper corners behind the pulpit looking toward it with a book and quill in hand, as if to record every word that came from the pulpit.<sup>72</sup>

I heard a quote years ago from a 19<sup>th</sup> century clergyman that had a significance influence upon me regarding the importance of the pastoral ministry. He wrote of the pastor:

**His throne is the pulpit; he stands in Christ's stead;  
his message is the word of God; around him are  
immortal souls; the Savior, unseen, is beside him;  
the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation;  
angels gaze upon the scene, and heaven and hell  
await the issue. What associations, and what vast  
responsibility!**

In the verse which opens our current the passage, we are called to make a comparison—that whatever it is we are suffering in this present time, pales in comparison with the glory which apprehends us and is bestowed upon us (Romans 8:18).<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps recognizing our natural aversion to meditate upon things future—to be guided and encouraged by something as ethereal as a promise—even a promise from God—Paul builds upon the expression of that glory with what almost appears to be an odd personification of creation itself.

**For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the**

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<sup>72</sup> I have this recorded in my notes. I have visited churches in Italy, but can't recall if I actually saw this or read it elsewhere.

<sup>73</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 434). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.



**bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now (Romans 8:19-22).**

### **Something Else Watching**

Here we see something else watching. The very created order is “**eagerly**” expecting *apokaradokia* something. That something has to do with the “**revealing**” or unveiling *apokalypsin* of the “**sons of God.**” The feeling a verse like this gives us is that the trees, the mountains, the oceans are, with great anticipation, waiting for the full manifestation of God’s redemptive work in man—what Paul in verse 23 refers to as “**the adoption, the redemption of the body.**” All of creation becomes animated when contemplating the future of Christians. Why would that be?

We tend to think of redemption in very individualistic terms (and it certainly includes that), but here we learn that the redemption of man is like a heart transplant which subsequently brings blood, life and health to every limb. The restoration of the heavens and the earth (Isaiah 65:17) will coincide with the full manifestation of our adoption and resurrection. This is something creation is excited about!

Sometimes I go out at night and look at the moon, thinking about how long it’s been there, contemplating its past, thinking of how many people have gazed at it. But the moon is also looking at me, ruminating over my future—eagerly waiting—patiently waiting.

For, as beautiful as the moon is, there is something wrong with it. It is not living up to its original design. And it knows that its liberation from the bondage of its corruption will be an extension of “**the glorious liberty of the children of God.**”

Perhaps we can understand it this way: in the beginning the earth was without form and void and God began to generate and form a created order that was good, even very good. And if we are to utilize Paul’s personification here, we can consider the beasts, the birds, the fish, the dry land, the vegetation, even the sun, the moon and the stars observe with horror the dialogue between the serpent and Eve and Adam. For it would be a consequence of the transgression of the man that the very ground would be cursed and thorns and thistles formed (Genesis 3:17, 18).

Through Adam the heart of creation (man, made in God's image) was turned to stone and all things felt the effect. Is there still beauty in creation? Certainly there is, but there is something amiss. Not to encourage images of deity, but when visiting St. Peter's in Rome I had the opportunity to view La Pieta, Michelangelo's sculpture of Mary holding Jesus. It is a phenomenal piece of work. In 1972 a mentally ill geologist named Laszlo Toth took a hammer to it while yelling, "I am Jesus Christ."

Nobody would look at it after the damage was done and even began to suggest that there was no beauty left. But clearly something tragic had happened and restoration was necessary. The creation now eagerly, patiently waits and watches for the full restoration through the second Adam, who is Christ.

## **Labor Pains**

For this reason, the creation does something that we also do, which is groan **"and labors with birth pangs."** So, in a certain sense, the entire experience of history is to be thought of as labor pains with the anticipation of the full manifestation of the new birth. So why is Paul putting it this way—the personification of the creation?

It's almost as if he is saying, "If the bushes and brambles eagerly wait...if shrubs and mindless amoeba patiently anticipate the hope of deliverance from the bondage of corruption...should not we, as reasonable creatures...the central objects of redemption to whom the promises are made and understood...be willing, in the midst of our groaning, to set our minds and hearts upon the fullness of our adoption and redemption as we share in our sufferings with Christ?"

Some of you own animals. They don't fully understand that you earn the money to pay for the house they live in or the food they eat. Even still, they are generally more excited to see you when you get home than anyone else in the house. The sea roars in its praises, the rivers are clapping, the hills sing for joy in the midst of their groaning, but those who are the primary recipients of the promise have a great tendency to have our groaning transition into grumbling and our grumbling into lethargy and rebellion.

Paul pushes it even further.

**Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for *it* with perseverance (Romans 8:23-25).**

## **We Have the Spirit**

Paul begins with the words “**not only that**” *ou monos*, as if to say the lifeless ornaments of creation, fully devoid of the Spirit of God, find hope and perseverance in what will happen to the children of God, but the children of God themselves seem behind in the program. The rivers are clapping and we’re groaning.

When I was in Pony League I was a pitcher. I had accuracy and could throw good junk (curves and such), but I had no speed. My catcher used to throw the ball back to me faster than I pitched it to him. That’s not the way it’s supposed to be! Especially when we consider that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit.

By the Spirit of God we know we are His children and He has made known to us the riches of our inheritance in Christ—we know of our adoption, we know of our redemption. Christians, of all things in the created order, have great cause to both groan and rejoice. But there is a problem. We are saved in “**hope**” *elpis* and hope is not “**seen.**”

## **The Guardian of Hope**

Whether we wish to admit it or not, we all live under the massive influence of the empiricism of a John Locke (I believe in that which I see) or the rationalism of a Rene Descartes (the human mind is capable of figuring it all out). These men, and those influenced by them, were responsible for at least two things: great technological advancement and devastating philosophical, theological and ethical folly.

The Christian’s hope is not in what man can achieve or what our hearts can imagine; no, that is the beastly substitute (Revelation

13:18). Our hope is in the promise of God. It has been said that “one of the principal graces of a Christian is hope.”<sup>74</sup>

**So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).**

The world will say, “Trust me, see the fruit, smell the fruit, taste it...today!” But Christ says, “Trust in me...I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-1). We are called to persevere in the midst of struggles and suffering, not to grow weary of doing good (Galatians 6:9), and even to excel still more (1 Thessalonians 4:1), and we do all of this in the patience of hope.

*The fall, the promise, and the fulfillment* is the order laid down by God. We do not groan in despair, but rather like a patient who knows the medicine is working and hopefully anticipates the fullness of the healing.

**If then it be grievous to any to groan, they necessarily subvert the order laid down by God, who does not call his people to victory before he exercises them in the warfare of patience. But since it has pleased God to lay up our salvation, as it were, in his closed bosom, it is expedient for us to toil on earth, to be oppressed, to mourn, to be afflicted, yea, to lie down as half-dead and to be like the dead; for they who seek a visible salvation reject it, as they renounce hope which has been appointed by God as its guardian.**<sup>75</sup>

The guardian of our salvation is our hope in the fullness of our adoption and redemption. Let us not lose the context here—that the **“suffering of this present time”** and all the groaning it produces, is not worthy to be compared to the glory which will be revealed in us—the glory which apprehends us and is bestowed upon us.

Paul concludes the passage with the word **“perseverance”** *hypomones* as if to say, ‘If in our suffering we are tempted to fear,

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<sup>74</sup> Henry, M. (1994) *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (p. 2213). Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:24). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

embarrassment, fatigue or lethargy, or whatever else our weak human condition throws our way, let us continue to faithfully, boldly, confidently bear up for the joy that is set before us—our hope, the fullness of our adoption and redemption.’

## Questions for Study and Meditation

- 1, Who or what is watching us in our walk of faith? Why is this important?
2. What is the comparison Christians are to make in Romans 8:18?
3. Why is the creation so interested in the *revealing of the sons of God*?
4. Explain how history is to be viewed as *labor pains*.
5. What is “personification” and why is the Apostle Paul using it?
6. What do Christians have that beasts and inanimate things don’t have, and why is that significant?
7. What are the different things men have put their hope in throughout history? In what do you put your hope?
8. The Apostle Paul concludes the passage with a reference to perseverance; why do you suppose he ends with this?

## **Romans 8:26-27**

*Prayer – A Treatise on Human Incompetence*

May 11, 2014

**Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27).**

### **Introduction**

Some of you know I celebrated a birthday this last week. My wife and I went out to dinner, just the two of us, to a pretty fancy restaurant. This restaurant offers a free dinner if you come in on your actual birthday. We went to the same restaurant on my wife's birthday and received the same deal. But the place is pretty expensive, so even though we received a free meal the bill was still quite high. We wanted to make sure that didn't happen again.

One category on the menu that can really get you is the wine list. I thought one glass of wine with dinner would be appropriate, but as I perused the options I was reminded that this establishment was not shy about its prices. I had to be very careful here. I found the cheapest glass of wine and ordered it, as if it were my preference, to which the very courteous food server responded, "Very good sir." 'Look at me' I thought with my wife observing in admiration, 'I did very good.'

We enjoyed an intensely delicious meal after which we received the bill which strangely resembled a mortgage payment. I apparently accidentally ordered the wrong glass of wine. A little embarrassed I asked the waiter to double check, which he graciously did. After my perceptive and attentive wife confirmed that I did in fact say "Twomey" rather than "Roth" I thanked the waiter, paid the bill and became, once again, reacquainted with the reality that I know nothing about wine and that it is moderately irresponsible for me to hold a wine list in my hand.

I share this little story because I think most of us have a general notion of our own limitations in a variety of areas in life. As an example, I would never fix my own brakes nor would I perform surgery on myself. And when my mechanic or my surgeon seeks to explain what they're doing to my car or my body, I generally arrive at the conclusion (after a little courteous head-nodding) that I am entirely at their mercy.

## **We Know in Part**

As a pastor, having been educated both experientially and institutionally in the field of ministry and theology, one would think that I have my field of expertise and that I can confidently tread the waters of the ministerial enterprise of being a Christian and helping others along that path. And I won't pretend that, at some level, this is not the case. But it does seem that every step forward I take (or have ever taken) in the landscape of Christian maturity and piety, I come to see another acre of unexplored territory.

How emphatically true Paul's words are, **“For we know in part...” (1 Corinthians 13:9)**. I don't want to be misunderstood here. I am not remotely suggesting that the knowledge of God and the things of God are so vast that it becomes a meaningless gesture to take those steps forward. The verse does say **“we know”**. And I don't think it is a stretch to say that that knowledge, as minute as it might be when one contemplates the infinite breadth of the Godhead, is true knowledge and the most precious treasure contained in our souls.

But what the Apostle Paul seems to be saying here is that our prayer list is like a wine list and we really don't know what to order. We may know how (*pos* in Greek) to pray, but we don't know **“what”** (*ti* in Greek) to pray. Now our initial response to such news may be to simply disengage in prayer. *Why would I bother praying when I really don't know what to pray for?* But these two short verses should encourage us in just the opposite direction.

## **Prayer and Magic**

We may all have various explanations as to why we engage in the sin of lethargy when it comes to prayer. Maybe it's our schedule,



maybe we're shy, embarrassed, inarticulate, confused, distracted, etc. But maybe we just think it doesn't matter. We expect prayer to be magic and, because it doesn't appear to magically work, we have grown cold in the exercise of it. Can you imagine how active your prayer life would be if it were magic? You could go from house to house healing people, feeding people and solving people's various problems. We could all be Dumbledore!

But we seldom stop to consider how self-deifying (making ourselves God) such a notion actually is. Someone might say, how could it be wrong to heal, to feed and to solve problems? Certainly, as human beings we should do what we can to minister in these areas within our own limited capabilities. But it is quite beyond us, even if we had the power, to have the wisdom of God when it comes to having the final say in governing the course of human events.

Of whom but God can it be said, **"The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble" (Proverbs 16:4)?** Or what created being could righteously call **"for a famine" (2 Kings 8:1)?** If prayer were magic and you were given the autonomous power to **"form light and create darkness...make well-being and create calamity" (Isaiah 45:7)** how would you wield such power? For what would you pray? If God called for a famine could you, with the same wisdom, authority and end game in sight, call for its end?

## Helps In Our Weakness

Perhaps we can begin to see just how weak we are in this category. And how unreasonable our complaints when our prayers are not answered in the manner in which they are submitted. Again, our natural inclination might be to cease in prayer altogether—which would be, and has been, a monumental error. Because it is with our weakness in mind that the Apostle Paul writes of the Spirit who **"helps" *synantilambanomai***.

There is tremendous force in this word **"help"**. It carries the idea of the Spirit taking part in our burden. The word was used of assistance offered to an infant unable to support himself or the sick **"tottering and hardly able to walk."**<sup>76</sup> It doesn't require deep examination to see (what is called) the economic relationship of the

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<sup>76</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Trinity working in harmony on the part of the children of God. It is by the blood of Christ that we approach the Father and it is by the intercession of the Spirit that our prayers are, as it were, refined.

## Groanings

The passage begins with the word “**likewise**” *hosautos*, beckoning back to the universal and collective groaning of creation (verse 22) and our own groaning (verse 23) in anticipation of our final resurrection (verse 23). We read now of a groaning extending to our prayers. What do we make of this groaning? What is taking place here?

The noun “**groanings**” *stenagmos* merely means to sigh, as one oppressed. It is the word from the Septuagint found in Exodus 6:5 where God “**heard the groaning**” of the enslaved Israelites. Paul adds to the description the notion that the groanings “**cannot be uttered**” *alaletoios*. I think it would be a mistake at this point to draw the conclusion that God is operating via some secret language, e.g. the “**tongues of angels**” (1 Corinthians 13:1) that is utterly disconnected from rational thought lest we draw the conclusion that God is entirely unknowable (which itself would reveal something we can know about God—that He is unknowable—hence a self-refuting position).

Going down that road would leave us at the mercy and direction of impulses or “**passions**” *epithymiais* (2 Timothy 3:6). Or we may fall into a George Benson<sup>77</sup> epistemology where we try “to talk it over but the words get in the way.” If we dispense with knowable, godly thoughts and propositions we are left at the unpredictable dispatch of temperament, caprice and whim. Truth, beloved, loves a definition, and anyone who is not willing to at least make an effort at offering a definition is (whether wittingly or not, I won’t suppose to say) prefers for the water to remain sufficiently murky.

It must be briefly stated that this passage is not addressing the gift of tongues. Time does not allow a thorough examination of that subject; suffice it to say for now that the gift of “**tongues**” was not, even in the New Testament era, universally given to Christians: “**Do**

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<sup>77</sup> Lyrics from his 1976 hit *Masquerade*.

**all speaks with tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:30)?** the implied answer being ‘no’. But this passage addresses the condition of all believers.

Enough of what it is not, now we ask: what do we make of these groanings? Similar to the groaning of creation and the inward groaning of the believer due to his fallen estate, we have the Spirit-induced groanings which proceed from the believer in prayer. Whether we are praying for the weak, the sick, the unregenerate, the poor, the proud or the wealthy, we reach the end of ourselves to sufficiently vocalize what must truly take place.

Could not the most brilliant scribe in all of Israel have written, and offered, a beautiful, poetic and (even if not a prophet) relatively accurate prayer to God for deliverance from slavery? I would say ‘yes’. And yet in writing it, would he not have eventually, if he were a wise man, come face to face with his own inadequacy? Would he not then groan? If a child finds him/herself in danger and screams (because of the great fear and/or limited vocabulary) unintelligibly, does that mean there is no describable problem? Certainly not! It merely means that they/we currently have not the ability to express it.

But the mother knows the voice of her child. And when the cry for help comes, it is the mother who will properly evaluate the nature of the cry and the proper course of action in response.

## **Intercession**

It is just here that the “**intercession**” *hyperentynchano* takes place. Intercession means to plead for someone, to intercede on someone’s behalf. The passage is not easily worded, but for the sake of simplicity, it unfolds in this way:

- We don’t know what to pray. This is the current weakness addressed.
- Because of the Spirit’s work, the believer will pray, but the prayers are subject to human fallibility and amount to groaning.
- The Holy Spirit intercedes in such a way as to present our prayers to God according to God’s own will.

Thomas Schreiner expresses it well:

The Spirit fills this lack by interceding for the saints. Indeed, verse 27 indicates that he intercedes for them according to God's will, that is, he articulates the will of God in his intercession. Believers are weak in that they are unable to enunciate fully the will of God in their prayers. The Spirit compensates for their deficiency.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps it is easiest to understand that in the same way that Jesus intercedes (Romans 8:34) and presents us holy to the Father by His own blood, the Spirit intercedes and articulates and presents our prayers in such a way that they conform to the will of God.

### Searching and Knowing

The passage speaks of God who **“searches”** the hearts of men and **“knows what the mind of the Spirit is.”** What does God find when He searches our heart? It might be easy to answer with the typical Calvinistic truth, that He finds a great deal of sin. I am always a little concerned when someone finds comfort with the words, “But God knows my heart”. As someone once said, “that God knows our hearts...that’s the bad news.”

It would appear, at least in this passage (and in much of Romans), that Paul highlights the heart *kardi* as that aspect of man that is under the operation of the Spirit of God. In Romans 1:21 he describes the natural rebellious man as having a **“foolish”** and **“darkened”** heart. A similar thought is conveyed in Romans 2:5, where wrath is being stored up due to an **“impenitent heart.”**

He then begins to explain that true circumcision of **“a matter of the heart” (Romans 2:29)**. Later he will explain that **“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5)**. In Romans 6:17 Paul is thankful that his readers have **“become obedient from the heart.”** Earlier in this very chapter Paul will make the distinction between those who walk **“according to the flesh”** versus those who walk **“according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4)**.

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<sup>78</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, pp. 443–444). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

All of this to say that when God searches the heart of a Christian, though He will certainly find sin, He will also find a heart cultivated by the labor of the Holy Spirit yielding an unutterable longing to conform to the will of God, both in our lives and in all of creation. This was the work of the Spirit in that hour we first believed, placing our souls in the hands of Jesus and the Father as the Savior of our souls and Master of our lives. It is the first (first in priority and often also first chronologically) prayer of those who are the objects of God's grace. And when God searches the hearts of the elect, this is what He will find.

**And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought (1 Chronicles 28:9).**

It may be a profitable endeavor for us to ask ourselves if this is what God finds when He searches our hearts. Not to suggest a theology of perfectionism, but a theology of confession of sin and sincere faith in the One who delivers from sin and leads us in life by the wisdom of His counsel.

The Father knows, by the effective work of the Spirit who belongs to Him, and He knows the “**mind**” *phronema* of the Spirit. This is not the normal word for mind *nous*, but a word which means mindset or way of thinking. In other words, the Father knows what the Spirit has in mind—what His holy and sanctifying intentions are.

We pray with the general notion (though it may appear specific to us) that we are to subject all things to Christ, put off the old man and put on the new, glorify God in our thoughts, words and deeds and tend to the needs of our neighbors. We are a temple under construction and when in our prayers we order wooden pillars, the Spirit submits a request for granite. When we ask for ease, the Spirit intercedes, elevating the petition to strength and long-suffering. We ask for wood, hay and straw, but when the Spirit flies to the Father on our behalf the words are transformed to gold, silver and precious stones.

How much greater than magic is the gift of prayer! To list the tome of passages which elevate the value and power of prayer would

be an endeavor pushing past the length of any single sermon, but James says it succinctly:

**The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16).**

The Father is engaged in a divine, powerful and perfect work in the lives of us individually and in the creation as a whole. One of the means by which God accomplishes this work is through the fallible prayers of saved sinners, presented to Himself in their perfection through the Spirit of God.

I pray for my wife, my children and our church. But I continually walk away from those prayers with a sense of deficiency, as if I haven't the wisdom to say the right things or make the proper requests. But what if I knew that every time I prayed some shortsighted, inadequate prayer for my children that the Holy Spirit took that prayer and edited it to perfection and presented it to God to the eternal benefit of my beloved quiver full of arrows...would I not engage in that activity with renewed vigor?

We are told that we have not because we do not ask (James 4:2). In light of this passage, have we ever truly considered what we don't have because we don't ask?

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. What does it mean that we “know in part”? What human limitation is addressed in these two verses?
2. Have you ever thought that prayer should be like magic? What would be the problem if that were the case?
3. How do you see the Trinity at work in this passage?
4. Discuss what the “groanings” are and what they are not. Why is this an important issue to understand?
5. Explain the intercession of the Holy Spirit when it comes to our prayers.
6. When God searches your heart, what does He find?
7. What is the mindset of the Holy Spirit? What is He doing? What are His intentions?
8. Why should the knowledge contained in this short passage be a great incentive to prayer?





# Romans 8:28-30

*The Purpose of God, Part I*

*All Things*

May 18, 2014

**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).**

## Introduction

The initial verse under our consideration has been reduced to such a cliché that one hesitates to offer it as a remedy to human sorrow or hardship. You might even say it's become threadbare through overuse, often wrenched from its rich context—a context which would serve well to keep the nap of the verse's fabric thick with the warmth and comfort that was, little doubt, the Apostle Paul's intention.

It might be a little overly optimistic to suggest that a phrase exists which is capable of effectively and immediately extracting the pangs of sorrow from the human soul or the difficulty of sickness and suffering from our mortal bodies. So often I've thought if I only had a button I could push to alleviate your (or my) physical pain, emotional heartache or current trying circumstance, I would assuredly do so.

But, alas, there is no such a button and we are left to endure the sorrows and grief. Though sorrows and grief are generated from the fall of man, they in and of themselves are not inherently sinful. Of Jesus, it was anticipated that He would be **“a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).**

So the question, not merely for the Christian but for any human, is not ‘will there be sorrow, grief, pain and trials in this life,’ but ‘is there any sense to it?’ Is life, as so many dark poets suggest, a

tragedy? Are we humans merely carbon-based pain gatherers rocketing toward a meaningless oblivion? Or is there a message—news from heaven which turns that dark message on its head?

Years ago, in a physiology class I was given definitions of two similar feeling, yet dramatically opposite, experiences. The professor spoke of *pain* versus *discomfort*. The distinction was not a matter of intensity—that is to say that discomfort could be much more painful than pain (if you follow). The distinction between pain and discomfort (maybe there are better terms) is that pain involves injury and discomfort does not. Discomfort is a component of healing or the gaining of strength.

I am currently going through rehabilitation for a fairly minor knee surgery. I've gone through this before. The first time when I was in high school I did my rehab at Pauley Pavilion at UCLA. In one of my first sessions I recall the late legendary trainer, Ducky Drake, working on a member of the Los Angeles Lakers, Happy Hairston, who also had knee surgery. Happy apparently had scar tissue in his knee that Ducky was dealing with by bending his leg further than Happy was happy with. I recall Happy yelling, "It hurts Ducky, it hurts." Ducky was unmoved by the prayers and petitions of Happy. He continued bending and twisting until Happy was back on the NBA court. Ducky wasn't injuring Happy, but the discomfort was necessary for true healing to take place.

There is a great redemption, restoration, rehabilitation if you will, taking place in the cosmos. For those who by the grace of God have cried out "**Abba, Father**" (**Romans 8:15**) there is no (by the definitions offered above, for sake of clarity) pain for the children of God, for God is not seeking to injure His children. There is only discomfort. It may be a discomfort ending in the grave itself—it inevitably will be—at which point the faithful will cry with Paul, "**For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain**" (**Philippians 1:21**).

God's power to restore is not frustrated even by death itself. The "**gain**" of which Paul writes is certainly the gain as he enters glory, but it is also gain for the advancement of the gospel. God took Paul home at the perfect time for Paul and the perfect time for Paul's ministry. In order for a passage/verse like the one we are looking at this morning to have its desired effect, there are things that must be observed.

If we don't, for example, agree on what the **“good”** of which Paul writes is, we might be frustrated when things don't turn our way. If we think the chief end of God's goodness is ensuring our dreams are fulfilled (as in a sermon I heard recently), or that events in this life will eventually turn our way (at least by our own definition), then this passage will be a bitter disappointment.

Paul had just addressed our tendency toward frustration when our prayers are not answered in the way in which they are submitted. Our prayers are groanings which the Holy Spirit refines and submits **“according to the will of God” (8:27)**. We then have the confident knowledge that God's answer to prayer will always be superior to the prayer itself.

How perfectly Paul's short treatise on prayer folds into this most popular verse, utilized by the children of God for comfort in the midst of difficulty! In the same way our inadequate, shortsighted and perhaps even sinful prayers are utilized by God toward a just, holy and righteous end, Paul now expands that to **“all things”**.

**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose (Romans 8:28).**

### **We Know (at least, we ought to know)**

The verse begins with the verb **“we know”** *oikamen*, as if Paul is about to instruct on something that was common knowledge. What did everyone seem to know? What was so obvious? Perhaps it was the notion that if we have a Father in heaven who is infinite in being, glory, blessedness and perfection—who is almighty and everywhere present, knowing all things and most wise—who is most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth—who because of the great love with which He loved us, sent His only begotten Son to die for us, He certainly will not allow that great work to be in any way upset by a random universe.

There is not a micro-second nor a quantum or nano-meter that falls beyond His power and jurisdiction.

The **“all things”** in this verse is just that—every last single thing—things that at first blush might make us uncomfortable.

**The Lord has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Proverbs 16:4).**

**Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come (Lamentations 3:38)?**

**But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2:10).**

**Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it (Amos 3:6)?**

It is not uncommon for people to understand Romans 8:28 to mean that God will make the most of a bad situation, as if man has scrambled the eggs and God will make an omelet. But it is not as if God is walking into the room of tragedy and saying, let's see if we can clean up this mess. Such thinking puts restraints on our understanding of the true sovereignty of God. God is not merely the one who sees us through the storm, He is the one who **“commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted the waves of the sea” (Psalm 107:25)**. God is the one who makes the storm.

In the tapestry of God's unfolding history, we have threads of good and threads of evil. What we learn in a verse like this, and others like it, is that God has ordained all these threads to form the design of His purpose and pleasure.

And what Paul is telling you and me is that the aim of God in the administration of His infinite love and power is the inclusion of all those that love Him in His good and glorious plan; a plan that will most certainly include days of heartache and trial.

Yet God is doing something magnificent, so much so that Paul can only express it:

**What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9).**

We might be careful not to take Romans 8:28 and view it as a promise that we will eventually get what we want, though sidetracked for the time being. We will then be tempted to measure whether or not God has kept His promise based upon whether or not we approve of the way things have worked out.

The **“good”** of which Paul writes is a good determined by God. As we shall see in the verses to come, that good certainly includes the very personal and (to borrow from Paul) unimaginable *ouk anebe* (lit. beyond our thoughts) preparations of God. But unless we are moved to lay aside our own paltry definitions of **“good”** this glorious verse will lose its weight.

Not to be corny, but I can’t help think of the speech William Wallace gives the soldiers as they look across the battlefield, drawing the conclusion that they are about to be slaughtered. And why—that the nobles can have more land? Wallace convinces them that there is something greater than the nobles, greater than preserving the extension of their own lives. He makes the great speech for freedom. It is with an enlightened recognition of this greater thing that they fight like “warrior poets.” Have we been convinced of what the **“good”** is to which all things are being cinched?

## Lovers of God

When Paul writes that the recipients of this **“good”** are those that love God, it is just another way of denoting those who are Christians. This becomes clear with the phrase which accompanies it, **“those who are called according to His purpose.”** The **“call”** here being the effectual calling of God. It is not the outward call but the inward call—that irresistible call which transforms a heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) and opens blind eyes (John 9:25).

It is a great, comforting and glorious truth that all things work together for good. It is equally true that those who trust in Christ can rest in the assurance that they are the unique beneficiaries of all these things which are working together for good. But what is this **“good”**? Is it the job I want, the family I desire, is it health, friendships, reputation, respect?

Shortly, Paul will begin a thought with the words **“What then shall we say to these things” (Romans 8:31)?** Then he will give his own speech—a speech that in my opinion is virtually unparalleled in

terms of depth and encouragement. In that speech he sets the temporal, historical and stark reality of **“being killed”** and **“regarded as sheep to be slaughtered”** against the eternal and spiritual reality of being **“more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”** What is this **“good”** that God is accomplishing that can yield, that can justify, such a statement? We will pursue that more fully next time.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Are pain, sorrow and grief sinful? Why or why not? How do people generally deal with such things?
2. What is the distinction between pain and discomfort? Why is this significant?
3. What does Paul assume his readers know?
4. What is included under “all things”?
5. What kind of limitations do we put on our understanding of the sovereignty of God if we think of Romans 8:28 as God merely fixing the mess?





## Romans 8:28-30

*The Purpose of God, Part II*

*Conformed to the Image of Christ*

May 25, 2014

**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).**

### Introduction

In our last meeting, we touched on how the initial verse (Romans 8:28) conveys that God has a definite plan wherein He is utilizing “**all things**” toward the consummation of that which is “**good**” and glorious. In life’s difficulties, God does not enter in on the third, ninth or eleventh hour, like the cavalry who rescues and then seeks to make the best of a bad situation. All that we see in the course of human events is according to a glorious and benevolent design.

**God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: (Eph. 1:11, Rom. 11:33, Heb. 6:17, Rom. 9:15, 18)<sup>79</sup>**

Our heavenly Father doesn’t merely see us through the storm; He is the Maker of storms (Psalm 107:25).

But the artwork of God’s hand can be so intricate that the strokes will often appear to us as random and even devastating things. He is like the artist you will sometimes see rapidly painting a picture on a stage to music—a scribble here, a scrawl there and an occasional

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<sup>79</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996). Chapter III, 1. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

dot, and it just looks like a mess—until in the end he turns the canvas right-side up and you become astonished at the portrait that was painted before your very eyes.

This masterful, yet often difficult to identify, artwork is designed **“for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose”** i.e. Christians. We discussed last time how we lose the richness of the fabric of this verse if we nurture a false notion of what the **“good”** is that God has in mind. What is the good of which Paul writes? If we are called according to God’s purpose, what is that purpose?

The noun **“purpose”** *prosthesis* means “that which is planned in advance.” What is the resolve, the purpose and plan of God to which the Christian has become such a central component that we can view all of the operations of creation as having an aim toward our good? I must say, it’s an overwhelmingly optimistic view of life.

But we must dispense with the notion that the **“good”** and **“purpose”** have to do with our dreams of things working out the way we would prefer, which is where the verse often brings us in our thinking. As if the current difficulty is a bump in the road—a road leading to God eventually giving me what I really want. Romans 8:28 is much greater than that!

As we seek the context of Romans 8:28 we find a doctrine the Apostle connects to this great verse of encouragement that wars against not only the natural mind but often finds disfavor within the church itself. One might wish to consider that the passages in the Bible that war against our natural intuitions carry the most sanctifying messages; this certainly falls into that category.

We have been given the firm conviction that our prayers are submitted **“according to the will of God”** (Romans 8:27) by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, answered in perfection. The Apostle desires his readers enjoy the blessed assurance that all things, good and evil, are operating according to the impeccable design of God for the good of His children. This now culminates in an explanation of God’s holy and eternal decree as it pertains to His unalterable design for you and for me. This is expressed in the next verse (and again in the one following).

**For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29).***

### **For Whom He Foreknew**

Since this is one of the many flagship passages expressing the doctrines of grace, otherwise known as Calvinism, there is a temptation to launch into an apologetic in defense of that position (and there certainly will be a bit of that). I would prefer, though, to remain tethered to the encouragement and blessing (rather than entering into a polemic) the Spirit of God provides with these words. The doctrines of grace should not be reduced to a mere theological argument. The doctrines of grace are to be presented as a blessing!

In order for the child of God to enjoy the unadulterated encouragement designed lift us through and strengthen us in **“the sufferings of this present time” (Romans 8:18)** this verse needs to be understood in its fullness. For that to be achieved, certain impositions on the text must be addressed and dismissed. What I mean by that is this verse presents God as much more sovereign (or in control of all events, including our very hearts) than people are comfortable with. Because of this, the verse gets thrown into an exegetical blender where men push the button of human autonomy.

We find one example of that in the opening phrase **“For whom He foreknew.”** This phrase has been the source of continual and often acerbic debate for centuries. A popular understanding (the first one given to me as a young Christian) is that of God looking down the corridors of time and knowing in advance the choice a person will make. It is in the light of that knowledge that He predestines them to be conformed to the image of His Son.

There are numerous variations of this found in Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, Molinism, Open Theology, etc. But these all amount to approximately the same thing—that God will not impose His will upon the creature. Of course, with that comes the necessity of a reconstruction of our understanding of the level of sin and its damaging affects upon the human heart and will.

If you will indulge a few short answers (since I do prefer to offer why this is such a blessed message, I will be brief): There is no

shortage of passages in the Scriptures that teach of the complete and total inability found within the natural human heart to seek after God.

**As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).**

So, if foreknowledge meant that God was looking for who, in the future, would, according to their own will, seek after Him, it would be an empty set. Not to mention that if God sees that they will choose Him, what necessity is there in Him predestinating them? In this view, they can get there on their own just fine.

Recognizing this difficulty, some suggest that the Holy Spirit will supply a certain level of prevenient grace. He will sort of pick up the incapacitated sinner and seek to shake him to his senses. But in the final analysis, it is left to the sinner to exercise his own independent volition to grab hold of salvation. He will lift us to the top of the tree, it is supposed, but we must pick the fruit. He will throw us the life-saver, but we are left to our own will to grab it.

A question that is so often left unanswered in this brand of grace is: *what is the independent antecedent cause for the right choice of the sinner?* If it is not God who effectively and graciously changes the human heart leading the sinner to most assuredly grab the fruit, then *what is it?* Who is it? What is it about you that brought you to say “yes” to Christ—to cry out “**Abba, Father**” (Romans 8:15)? Some say free will, as if the human will is an uncaused cause rather than the hinges on the door of decision which must be pushed in one direction or the other.

It is precisely here that we begin to underestimate not only the strength of God’s hand in our salvation, but the eternal, infinite love of the Father toward those who have called upon His name. If our eyes have been opened by the grace of God to the truth of Christ our minds must go deeper than thinking that God is a friend that we just happened to meet—even though He knew in advance that it would take place.

“**For whom *hos* He foreknew**” is much more personal than simply knowing an event will happen, as if God is an infallible

fortune teller. **“For whom He foreknew”** conveys a superior thought than “For *what* He foreknew.” What this verse loses in that inferior understanding is that God knew you and He knew me.

What we find if we look through the Scriptures which speak of God knowing you or me is a reference to God’s eternal and covenantal love for those whom He has chosen. One of many examples can be found in God’s calling of Jeremiah as a prophet. There is a parallelism with God’s knowledge, consecrating and appointing:

**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;  
before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained  
you a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5).**

The verse is not limited to saying God knew *what* would happen with Jeremiah. From eternity past God *knew him*, sanctified him and ordained him to be a prophet. When God knows someone, it is not relegated to simple fact gathering or our resume—past, present or future. In Amos 3:2 God says of Israel, **“You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”** Did God not have infinite knowledge of the surrounding nations as well? He certainly did; but not in the same way.

In a very personal, intimate, loving and covenantal (promise making and promise keeping) way, God has known you from eternity past and has decreed—predestined—that you would not be left in your sins, but that you, brothers and sisters in Christ, would be **“conformed to the image of His Son.”**

## **Predestined**

**“Predestined”** has become a provocative word. Mention it in a Bible study and the eyes will roll and the excessive carbon dioxide which accompanies the immoderate exhaling, no doubt, contributes to the global warming crisis. But the word is in the Scriptures (numerous times, in fact), so to avoid it for the sake of peace does harm to the message contained therein. And the word does mean what it sounds like.

**“Predestined”** *proorisen* in the Greek, similar to English, is comprised of a prefix *pro* meaning in front of or before and *horizo*

meaning to mark out definitely or to determine; all this to say that our destinies are determined by God **“according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11)**. God has a purpose for you and me. There is a place where we are being brought—a destiny He has determined.

This is not presented to us by Paul, or by the Holy Spirit, to goad us into an argument or for us to figure out ways to dismiss it because, at first blush, it appears to violate our notions of human freedom. This is presented to us that we might rest in the peace of knowing that in the same way (to go back a few verses) our prayers are presented refined and perfected by the Spirit; in the same way every last single event is designed for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose; that God has, and will continue to work out His immutable purpose to bring those whom He knew in eternity past to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Humans, for some reason, like things to be left (at least to a certain extent) to chance. We like games where you roll the dice or deal cards. We like to combine that chance or luck with our own skill to see what we can do with what we’ve been given. From a certain perspective, life can be observed this way. But the last thing we should desire is that our eternal destinies be left to chance combined with human wisdom and virtue.

When by the Spirit of Christ we cry **“Abba, Father,”** when we, though checkered with sin and doubt, come to realize that we have faith in Christ, that says much more than we initially realize. We can rest assured that God has **“put His seal on us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Corinthians 1:22)**. We can know that **“all the promises of God find their Yes in Him (Christ)” (2 Corinthians 1:20)**. God knew us from eternity past and will most assuredly bring us to His desired good of which verse 28 speaks. So, *what is the destination?* What is the good toward which all things work? Verse 29 seems to indicate what God is doing in us and verse 30 what He has done for us. We will speak of what God is doing in us then get to verse 30 in our next meeting.

## **The Image of His Son**

The good to which all things are working and that which God has predestined to take place in all believers is that we **“be**

**conformed to the image of His Son.”** In an ultimate and eschatological sense, we see this reach its fullness in the final resurrection when the Lord Jesus Christ...

**...will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21).**

**The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:47-49).**

But the conforming to Christ is not restricted to the final resurrection. One might say the eschaton has invaded human history. For even though we will one day in glory fully bear the image of the man of heaven, it would be a mistake to assume that God is not currently doing that work of transformation.

**And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (present, passive, indicative) into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).**

No doubt this comes from the pastoral heart of the apostle. It comes from the pastoral heart of pastors, parents and all those seeking to see Christian maturity in those under their care. As Paul wrote:

**...my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19)!**

This is the good to which all things are working. As discussed earlier, this can be a highly uncomfortable process.

**For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).**

The “**good**” to which “**all things**” work should not be thought of as the events working out as much as the training of our souls. All of creation is God’s classroom and we are His students. He will faithfully train us. He will complete the work He began (Philippians 1:6) and then we will, like Christ (referred to here at the “**firstborn among many brethren**”), enter glory. Paul will build on what that glory consists of in the following verse.



## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Where is God when it comes to the storms of life? How is this comforting to the Christian?
2. Define the foreknowledge of God. What is it? What are some ideas people have about what it is?
3. Why do people choose to believe in Christ?
4. What is predestination and why is it so provocative?
5. What does it mean to be conformed into the image of Christ?
6. What is the good to which all things are working?



## Romans 8:28-30

*The Purpose of God, Part III*

*A Sure Destination*

June 1, 2014

**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).**

### Introduction

Jesus had a very inclusive and protective disposition when it came to children. He would often use children to provide a lesson. When the disciples would argue about “**who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven**” (imagine that argument while in the physical presence of Jesus), Jesus would put a child in the midst of them and tell them “**Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**” (Matthew 18:1-4). He would then explain that it was the one who humbles himself like a child who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

On another occasion we are told that the disciples rebuked people who were bringing children to Jesus. This was one of the few times we see Jesus “**indignant**”. “**Let the children come to me,**” Jesus said, “**for to such belongs the kingdom of God...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it**” (Mark 10:13-16). Then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them. It was a challenging yet moving event.

We also read of Jesus thanking His Father that He has hidden “**these things**” (referring to the source, aim and authority of His great works) **from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children (*nepios*—lit. infants)**. And again, Jesus taught “**out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes you have prepared praise**” (Matthew 21:16).

In a certain sense or category, we are to grow up and give up our **“childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11)**. But there remains a childlike trust, a childlike humility that we are called to nurture when it comes to our thoughts of God, heaven and His kingdom. That which seems so natural for a child, especially a small child, becomes elusive as we grow.

Sometimes I’ll watch children sitting in the back seat as their parent drives on the freeway. They might be playing a game or sleeping or arguing with their sibling. They never consider for a moment the speed at which they’re throttling down the road. At least not until they get a little older and start working toward a driver’s license. Then they have manifold concerns and suggestions.

But little ones are so secure in their parent’s car. They have no concern about the future of their journey. They are not struggling with the doubt of not knowing if they’ll make it to their desired destination. As far as their little hearts are concerned, what’s supposed to happen will happen.

Not so with the adult. We struggle with not knowing. Whether it’s the diagnosis of an illness, the future of a relationship or career, we want to know what’s going to happen. We want to see some evidence of things moving in a specific direction. We want to feel secure, like the child that Jesus actually held.

## **The Eschaton in History**

The Apostle Paul began this chapter with the blessed proclamation that there is **“no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1)**. Because of this great grace **“we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh”** but are rather called to **“put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:12, 13)**. Christians are called to **“suffer with”** Christ **“that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17)**.

Paul is quick to assure us **“that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18)**. He goes on to teach how we groan in anticipation of **“the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23)** and how we currently called to patiently operate in the **“hope”** of that promise.

But it is not as if the plan of God is restricted to the final resurrection. The eschaton has invaded history. Our prayers are, in this life, presented by the Spirit to the Father **“according to the will of God” (Romans 8:27)** and are, therefore, answered in this life according to God’s own wisdom and power. And it is not just the prayers which function in this way. **“All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).**

So, every last single event in the course of human history has a glorious design to it—a design Paul here calls **“good”** for God’s children, children who God knew, loved and chose before the beginning of time to be His own. When a Christian is told they are loved **“with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3)**, those words are only truly meaningful if they come from the **“Everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6).**

And the **“good”** which is the design of God’s loving foreknowledge and divine predestination is that His children would be **“conformed to the image”** of Christ. There is a transformation taking place (**2 Corinthians 3:18**). It is presented a couple of ways—we are **“conformed to the image”** of Christ and/or Christ is being **“formed in”** us (**Galatians 4:19**).

Whichever way one wants to put it, this transformation can be a highly uncomfortable enterprise, seeming **“painful rather than pleasant” (Hebrews 12:11)**. And whereas verse 29 appears, at some level, to be describing what God is doing in us, verse 30 dials in to what God has done for us.

In light of the **“sufferings of this present time”**, the anticipatory **“groaning”** and the struggle of this **“transformation”** where God is utilizing all the events in human history for our **“good”** to form Christ in us, Paul would have us enjoy the security of the small child resting in the sure knowledge that we will reach the desired destination. This is the penultimate climax leading into a series of rhetorical questions with which he will complete the chapter—questions like: **“If God is for us, who can be against us?”**

But right now Paul wants us to know who is driving the car and how we can know we are safely within it.

**Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:30).**

## **Predestined**

Since we spoke of this in detail last time, I will only briefly remind us that **“Predestined”** *proorisen* in the Greek, similar to English, is comprised of a prefix *pro* meaning in front of or before and *horizo* meaning to mark out definitely or to determine; all this to say that our destinies are determined by God **“according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11)**. God has a purpose for you and me. There is a place we are being brought—a destiny He has determined.

It should be a great source of security for the Christian to know that His inclusion in the plan of God is not an afterthought or generated from the mere wisdom or volition of man. From eternity past it was determined by God that we would, if you will, be sitting in His car going where He would have us go. But how do I know that includes me?

## **He Also Called**

**“These He also called.”** We can know this includes us from the calling *ekalesen* of God. The word *called* is used in religious circles in a variety of ways, e.g. someone called to the ministry or Paul himself **“called to be an apostle” (Romans 1:1)**. We make distinctions between an *inward* call (where within our own hearts/thoughts we detect a desire to ministry) and an *outward* call (where a legitimate ecclesiastical methodology acknowledges giftedness in this area).

But it is important for us to recognize that even though in the gospels the word **“call(ed)”** may involve some sort of outward invitation or acknowledgment (e.g. **“many are called but few are chosen”** [Matthew 20: 16]), the word “called...”

**...is never in the Epistles of the New Testament applied to those who have only the *outward***

*invitation of the Gospel...It always means “internally, effectually, savingly called.”*<sup>80</sup>

## Effectual Calling

The calling of which Paul writes is *effectual calling*. It is the grace of God which most certainly and irresistibly delivers sinners not only from the devil and the world, but from our own rebellious hearts. We are incapable of coming to Christ without it and we are incapable of remaining in rebellion when it is directed toward us. As Jesus taught:

**No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).**

We will often think of *drawing* as wooing or cajoling; as if God is seeking to gently coax or persuade us to make the right decision. That is not the meaning of “**draws**” *helkyse* in this verse. One translation renders “**haul**” (John 21:6). It is also used to describe unsheathing a sword, as when Peter drew his sword to cut off Malchus’ ear (John 18:10). It is used to describe being dragged into court (James 2:6). One might think of drawing water from a well.

It is not merely telling the kids they should get in the car. It would more closely approximate to putting the baby in the car seat and safely strapping him/her in their place.

Question 67 of the Larger Westminster Catechism asks and answers the question of effectual calling. Included in the answer:

- The acknowledgement that it is the work of God’s almighty power and grace (John 5:25, Eph. 1:18–20, 2 Tim. 1:8–9).
- That it extends from God’s free and special love and nothing in us that would move us in that direction (Tit. 3:4–5, Eph. 2:4–5, 7–9, Rom. 9:11).

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<sup>80</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:30). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

- This calling happens at a certain time (determined by God) in our lives through the work of God’s word and His Spirit (2 Cor. 5:20, 2 Cor. 6:1–2, John 6:44, 2 Thess. 2:13–14).
- This effectual calling savingly enlightens our minds, renews and powerfully determines our wills (Acts 26:18, 1 Cor. 2:10,12; Ezek. 11:19, Ezek. 36:26–27, John 6:45).
- That though we are dead in our sins we are made willing and able to freely answer the call and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein (Eph. 2:5, Phil. 2:13, Deut. 30:6).

In many ways we might view effectual calling as highly unremarkable. We believe in Jesus as the Savior of our souls and the Master we seek to obey. Jesus, on the other hand, describes this as an astonishing blessing from heaven.

**He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-17).**

The person who is the recipient of effectual calling is the person who has not remained in willful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them in Christ. It is the person who has come to Christ. Is there a greater question to be asked (or to ask of oneself) than *have you come to Christ?*

When one answers ‘yes’ to this, Paul (by the Spirit of God) would have us know the history behind this decision (that God knew us, loved us and chose us in eternity past); the future benefits that belong to those who have trusted in Christ (the glory, which we will speak of shortly); and the present condition of those who have embraced Christ—one of justification.

## **Justified**

**“These He also justified.”** We have the blessed assurance that God has called us; He has put us in this car, a car headed for glory. But we may wish to stop just for a minute and ask ourselves,



“Just who are we with in this car?” Consider the experience of the Apostles who were in an excited fear while Jesus slept through the storm at sea. Jesus wakes up and calms the storm, and then we read that they were (not just afraid) but **“filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him’?”** (Mark 4:41).

Suppose God were to say “Come to me” and suppose we did have left within our sin natures enough of an inkling to come (please excuse the hypothetical heresy for a moment); if this was the case, what happens to those who enter into the presence of God while still in their sins? How do we know the car isn’t headed for hell?

We can know this because God didn’t merely call us, He **“justified”** *edikaiosēn* us. *What is justification and how is it ours?* Again, if I can summarize questions 70 and 71 of the Larger Westminster Catechism, justification:

- Is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners (Rom. 3:22, 24-25, Rom. 4:5).
- In this grace God pardons all our sins and accepts us and accounts us as righteous in His sight (2 Cor. 5:19,21, Rom. 3:22,24,25,27,28).
- Our justification has nothing to do with anything we have done or what God has done in us (Tit. 3:5,7, Eph. 1:7).
- It is the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed (credited) to us and received by faith alone (Rom. 5:17–19, Rom. 4:6–8; (Acts 10:43, Gal. 2:16, Phil. 3:9).
- All of this satisfaction was provided by a surety; a surety which God Himself provided in his own and only Son...imputing his righteousness to them (us) and requiring nothing of them (us) for their (our) justification but faith, which is also his gift (1 Tim. 2:5–6, Heb. 10:10, Matt. 20:28, Dan. 9:24,26, Isa. 53:4–6,10–12, Heb. 7:22, Rom. 8:32, 1 Pet. 1:18–19).
- Their (our) justification is to them (us) of free grace (Eph. 1:7).

All this to say that when God calls a guilty and polluted sinner—a sinner He is in the process of transforming—He sees in that sinner simultaneously both their sin and their righteousness in Christ.

And Christ is our “surety” *engyos* (**Hebrew 7:22**) of this. *Surety* carries the idea of one taking responsibility for another. But the word goes deeper; it also expresses the quality or condition of being sure...a means of assurance or safety. It is like the small, perhaps very small, child in the car who does not question where they are going, the safety of the journey or the love of the one at the wheel. These things are all a given.

## Glory

It is such a given that Paul completes the thought, the thought of a future glory *edoxasen* as if we have already arrived. Childlike faith would not give it a second thought. Someone else has said it well:

**...and whom he justified, them he also glorified—brought to final glory (Ro 8:17, 18). Noble climax, and so rhythmically expressed! And all this is viewed as past; because, starting from the past decree of “predestination to be conformed to the image of God’s Son” of which the other steps are but the successive unfoldings—all is beheld as one entire, eternally completed salvation.<sup>81</sup>**

And it is with this in our heart, that the Apostle will begin to challenge anything, anyone or any thought that would seek to convince God’s child that he is capable of be extracted from the car.

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<sup>81</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:30). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Discuss the relationship Jesus had with children. What lessons did he use them to provide? How should we be like children? In what ways should we not be like children?
2. How has the eschaton invaded history? What is God currently doing in the lives of His children?
3. How is predestination a comforting doctrine?
4. What are some different ways the word “call” or “called” is used in religious circles? What is *effectual calling*? What does it mean to be drawn to Christ?
5. How do you know if you have been effectually called by God? Have you been called? What is the history behind this decision?
6. What does it mean to be justified? Define and discuss *surety*.
7. Why does Paul present *being glorified* in the past tense?



# Romans 8:31

*If God Is for Us*

June 15, 2014

**What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can* be against us (Romans 8:31)?**

## Introduction

Standing in line at the checkout of the grocery store, the lady behind the register asked me how I was. After a pause I briefly explained that I felt a cold coming on and that I didn't have a good sleep the night before. The young man bagging the groceries asked me the same question, so I thoughtfully contemplated other issues, subjects and concerns of my day. I informed him also of my pending illness along with my full schedule which would not bode well for my desired convalescence.

As it turns out, neither of them was terribly interested in the status of my well-being. I understand. But that simple question of how I am doing can cause me great pause. How *am* I doing? A true and comprehensive status update can be overwhelming—like a personal State of the Union address. How am I doing emotionally, physically, psychologically or spiritually? Are the circumstances of my life unfolding in a way as to yield ease or consternation? It can be an overwhelming question.

An easier question might be to ask about a specific category. I coach one of my children's athletic teams and people ask how the team is doing. It's a lighter question. It's not life, death, health, career, family—it's a question about a game. Of course, if you were to watch me coach or play you might draw the conclusion that it is more than a game because I've always enjoyed playing and coaching as if my life depends upon it—even though I know it doesn't.

But it is in that intense, yet somewhat fake, environment that true instruction takes place; where you learn how to respond to life's passions. Fatigue, anger, discouragement, humiliation, pride, fear can all surface in a game. And the feelings in the fake environment of a game are not unlike the feelings one experiences in the real environment of life as a father, wife, husband, employee, citizen or

neighbor. Thomas Jefferson, I am told, made the comment that “you can learn more about a person through an hour of play than through a year of conversation.” I like to ask young women, contemplating a relationship with a young man, if she has watched him play basketball. I would hope that coaches would view this as the true value of their posts—it is a character developing enterprise in a fake environment.

After all, when the game is over, they will still have moms and dads and homes and meals and health and friends. The events of the game have no real gravity. Every aspect of the game was merely pedagogical—instructional. You weren’t fighting for your life; you were fighting for a win. And if you didn’t get the win, it’s okay. There are deeper considerations. Hopefully none of us will fall into that trap found by Harold Abrahams in one of his most notable quotations from *Chariots of Fire* where he explains to Sam, his coach, prior to his 100 meter final in the 1924 Olympics:

**And now in one hour's time, I will be out there again. I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my existence. But will I?**

It’s only a line from a movie, but how true is this in terms of the way we approach life. Maybe we’re not seeking to justify our existence but find contentment in our existence, meaning or significance in our existence, rhyme, reason, comfort and direction in our existence—things that are ever so elusive depending upon the nature of the question.

Abrahams won the race, but what if he had lost and you asked how he was—even after giving him a moment to settle down. Would he lament that his very existence is not justified? Would he feel insignificant and without meaning or direction or hope or purpose? Would he be compelled to woefully meander through the remainder of his pathetic existence as a loser and an outcast?

So, *how are you doing?*

We’ve talked of games and movies—things that are more or less fake or fiction (though *Chariots of Fire* is based at some level in historical fact), but what about real life? We’re not talking about games and movies that end, but of life that continues. The Apostle

Paul is writing to real people living in an environment hostile to the Christian faith, met with the prospect of paying the ultimate price for their convictions—**“as sheep for the slaughter” (Romans 8:36).**

But Paul answers, as it were, the entirety of the human drama and dilemma with one simple rhetorical question (that will begin a list of seven). This question forms the ultimate backdrop—it is the *sine qua non* (the indispensable condition) which undergirds the structure of the human soul. In light of this question, when the checker asks me how I am and I push my thinking to the apex (or abyss, depending on my day) of my condition, I can give an answer that would most assuredly draw notice, **“If God is for me, who can be against me?”**

**What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)?**

**These Things—What Things?**

But God being for us is not really the first question. It is the very first question which sets the table for the remaining questions. And it is a table fully set with plates, bowls, knives, forks and food. It is a table prepared by God in the presence of our enemies where our heads are anointed with oil and our cups runneth over (Psalm 23), the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

The first question, **“What then shall we say to these things?”** is the question whereby we can be assured that the remaining questions—these phenomenally powerful, comforting and assuring questions—pertain to us—individually—that the meal is for us. Charles Haddon Spurgeon made note of Augustine’s view on the subject:

**First, how is God for us? Augustine, in his notes upon the verses preceding our text, has very beautifully said that God is for us, according to the preceding words of the chapter, in four senses. Look back a verse or two, and you will find it. He is for us, for he hath predestinated us; he is for us, for he hath called us; he is for us, for he hath justified us; he is for us, because he hath virtually glorified**

**us, and will actually do so. To the people of God here are four very prolific subjects of thought.<sup>82</sup>**

A Christian's inclusion in the rich blessings of Christ began in the mind of God in eternity past. It is not, in the final sense, the benefits of human wit, goodness, ethics or volition (will). God would not leave the ones He loves upon such shallow ice. It is by God's own predestinating decree that we are His—led by His sure hand upon our otherwise unwilling hearts.

Not only did He call us but He gave us ears to hear. As Jesus taught: **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27)**. He has known His own from eternity past and calls with an effectual calling, as with Lydia, whose heart was **“opened”** *dienoioxen* (lit. to make able and willing to understand—as with opening a door; see 1 Corinthians 16:9) by the Lord **(Acts 16:4)**. We know this includes us because we believe what we would never have otherwise believed and seek to walk accordingly.

He has ever known His own; He effectively calls His own and He justifies His own—that is, He makes them righteous with His own righteousness—that we might not be found in our own righteousness but that which is through faith in Christ, **“the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Philippians 3:9)**.

And all of this is in granite from heaven—so much so that the final glory which belongs to those who are found in Christ is said to already be the case. The table is set for the second question.

## **If God Is for Us**

**“If God is for us, who can be against us?”** Does not our experience tell us that there is a great deal against us? Do not the Scriptures also testify that the believer will be reviled, persecuted, lied about for the sake of Christ (Matthew 5:11)? Sometimes I feel like it's Pastor Paul *contra mundum* (against the world). Our enemies are manifold—the devil (as the spiritual source of lies and darkness), the world (its many philosophies and convictions posing as rational thought and reasonable discourse) and my own flesh (which ever tugs and whittles to cater to itself).

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<sup>82</sup> Spurgeon, C. H. (1864). *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 10, pp. 401–402). London: Passmore & Alabaster.



If I were to allow my mere experience to answer the question, I would say there is great deal against us, and it seems to be winning! I have often pondered what it must have felt like to the early church under the thumb of Rome (the most powerful government ever assembled) and the persecuting Hebrews (a religion full of lies and darkness—John 8:44) to receive a letter from John informing them that Jesus was “**the ruler over the kings of the earth**” (**Revelation 1:5**). *Maybe He’s ruling in heaven, they must have thought, but have you seen the earth and do you know the king?*

But Jesus is ruling; and He is not, as many in the church would have us believe, an absentee Landlord, who has put the house in escrow but has not yet taken possession. He both rules the events and preserves our hearts. When it comes to the events of the earth, we read:

**It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness (Isaiah 40:22, 23).**

Someone might say, ‘God is for me in the events, but I fear I haven’t the stamina to endure, especially in light of what appears to be God’s delay in delivering me from my current trial.’ To this, we read:

**Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).**

It is the great promise of God that He orchestrates all events for good to those called according to His purpose. But the promise extends further in that He promises preserve us and strengthen us through whatever the events may be.

Let us not miscalculate how close verse 28 is to verse 31. It may require maturity of Christian thought to embrace that which is designed for such deep comfort for the faithful to realize what John

Chrysostom observed so many years ago: **“They that seem to devise mischief are no less of service to him than benefactors.”**<sup>83</sup>

In hindsight, taking advantage of the Scriptures revealing that which would otherwise remain hidden, we recognize that in God’s grand design of redemption, Judas, in his sin and Satan-inspired intentions, was of no less service to Christ than the most faithful apostle. Truly, if it was God’s intention to bring redemption to the world through Christ, the great fiery red dragon and all of his armies of hell would not only fail to quell the great plan, but would unwittingly, even in their sinful deeds, become accomplices in it.

It is this great wise, righteous and unsearchable power that accompanies the phrase **“If God is for us,”** a phrase which, we shall see, is much deeper than we might initially realize. It is a phrase which Paul will build upon in the verses to follow.

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<sup>83</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. If someone asked you how it was going and you truly thought about your answer, what would you say?
2. What is the value in engaging in contests or sports, if any? How is this similar to real life?
3. How do you justify, find meaning, rhyme, reason, comfort or direction in your existence?
4. When the Apostle Paul writes, “What then shall we say to these things?” what are the things to which he is referring and why are they significant?
5. What are the things that are against us as we seek to walk in godliness? How are we to think of those things?
6. Jesus governs events and preserves our hearts. Explain how this works. How have you found this encouraging?
7. How is verse 31 similar to verse 28?
8. How are all things in service to Christ? How does this knowledge govern your reactions to the events and trials in your life?
9. How is the phrase “If God is for us” deeper than you previously thought?



# Romans 8:32

## *The Gift of Infinite Gifts*

September 21, 2014

**He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things (Romans 8:32)?**

### **Introduction**

I don't apologize for placing a premium on propositional truth; that is to say, if God has chosen to communicate with us via words, sentences, paragraphs and various forms of literature, it is in our best interest (to put it mildly) to seek to grasp what those words actually mean.

I was recently in a discussion with a friend who voiced discomfort with a political candidate because he felt the man was too much of an ideologue. I got what he was saying (he viewed the man as unnecessarily inflexible), but it must be said that *everyone* has an ideology (a body of doctrine which guides their thoughts and decisions). Some just don't have a well thought out ideology. Others, perhaps, seek to hide it. But everyone has one. And they are very important!

It is dangerous business to be governed by lights, music, some alluring visage or the comforting or powerful tone of a presentation. We see a warning in Psalm 55.

**My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords (Psalm 55:20, 21).**

One of the many reasons I find myself resistant to likenesses and images of Jesus is the tendency they have to form less than inspired caricatures yielding the Jesus I think I currently need rather than the Jesus who is. Scripture informs us that even if Jesus were here in the flesh He **“had no form or majesty that we should look**

**at him, and no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53:2);** all this to say that it is the *content* which must prevail. And what is the content of the opening phrase of our verse this morning?

**He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Romans 8:32a).**

### **Not a Systematic Theology**

As we consider this short phrase (clearly speaking of the Father sending His Son to die on the cross for our redemption), let us reflect on the possibility that if the current western evangelical trend is to overly depend upon emotive presentation at the expense of content, there is often an error in more academic settings and churches that place a premium on doctrine to reduce the Christian faith to a systematic construct devoid of affectivity—the warmth, the agony, the frenzy, the indignations, fatigue and joy that we find interwoven into God’s presentation of who He is and what He has done. The Bible is not a systematic theology.

We sometimes think our religious pursuits would be easier if Jesus simply would have written a confession of faith. But instead we are called to wrestle through stories, psalms, poetry and what amounts to be somebody else’s mail (which is what the epistles are). If I were the demonic Uncle Screwtape, for example, I might advise my nephew, Wormwood, to tempt the Bible student to ignore the simple yet profound opening phrase of this verse and proceed to excavate the theology.<sup>84</sup>

How easy it would be to brush by the phrase: **“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all”** in our attempt to unpack the divinity of the passage! I am reminded of a comic strip I read years ago of two pirates speaking to one another while standing on the deck of their ship. One pirate lamented that the evening before, during a movie they were all watching, he got too much butter on his fingers from the popcorn and a ring fell from his finger. It was a rare ring his father had given him as a young man and had special meaning to him. It fell to the ground and rolled off the ship into the ocean and he was heartbroken because his father had

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<sup>84</sup> A reference to CS Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*.

since passed away. The other pirate's response was: "There's popcorn?"

Even many translations leave out the emphatic particle *ge* "indeed." Some translations would read: "**Indeed, He who His own Son did not spare...**" The short particle designed to "focus the attention upon a single idea, and place it, as it were, in the limelight."<sup>85</sup> We must be careful, brothers and sisters, that we not dehumanize the narrative.

## Dehumanizing the Narrative

What I mean by dehumanizing the narrative (a story in the Bible) is the tendency, especially in the Reformed camp, to reduce the stories in the Bible into a literary device designed to more fully amplify the attributes of God, especially as it relates to the Gospel. Allow me a preemptive strike at those who take issue with my use of the word *reduce*. I am not suggesting, by using that word, that there is something better in the Bible than the Gospel, or even that the Gospel is not the primary point of the narrative. If the Bible is God's self-disclosure, one is hard-pressed to find something more prominent that God wishes to disclose than the Gospel.

But all too often, again in Reformed circles, we hear teachers ridiculing how some other teachers might present the stories of David and Goliath or Judah and Benjamin or Abraham and Isaac. Many will utilize these stories for the purpose of teaching about the requisite human faith and heart necessary for Abraham to reach out his hand, take a knife and slaughter his son (Genesis 22:10). More than once I have heard snarky comments, poking fun at these teachers when they seek to apply the story by asking their listeners: "What are the Isaacs in your life?" or "What Goliaths must you conquer?" or, as with Judah and Benjamin, "What prison cell are you willing to sit in for your brethren?" and so forth.

Now it may be true that the primary lesson in all these stories is the Gospel—God sacrificing His Son, Jesus conquering our giant enemy, Christ taking our place of condemnation and so forth. But we should not somehow draw the conclusion that Abraham, David,

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<sup>85</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Judah, Joseph, Daniel et al did not fight through the spiritual, psychological and emotional barriers as mere human beings called to faithfulness in the midst of horrible circumstances—there are certainly lessons here for us all. What I am suggesting here is that when we view these accounts in Scripture as mere types, or illustrations, we dehumanize the narrative. After all, God chose to instruct us through non-fiction biographies. Let us not turn them to fiction.

### **Not Sparing His Own Son**

Of course, fiction is not necessarily bad; the parables are fiction. In light of this opening phrase **“He who did not spare His own Son”** I am reminded of a dramatic presentation I saw as a young Christian. I had more or less forgotten it until it was brought to my attention by one of my own children recently because of the impact it had upon them.

The drama was an attempt to deepen our appreciation of the opening phrase of this verse. In short, it portrayed a man who had one child—a small boy who he dearly loved. The man’s job was to lower the drawbridge for a train as it would go over a river or canyon. As he began to lower the bridge, he noticed his own son had gotten stuck in the machinery of the drawbridge and he was confronted with the dilemma of either sacrificing his son or the people on the train. If I recall correctly, the son was also aware of the dilemma. Both the father and the son made the decision that it would be best to save the people at the expense of the life of the son. This story was moving.

Perhaps we have heard the verse **“He sent His Son...He did not spare His own Son”<sup>86</sup>** so much that it has lost its force. I would like to suggest that when we dehumanize the narrative, we depersonalize the sacrifice. And from here it is quite easy for our Christian faith to evolve into empty gestures and cold transactions. The second half of Romans 8 allows for no such disposition. A deeper grasp of this sacrifice transforms everything.

Imagine, if you will, that you were in that train and I was the man who had sacrificed his child. Suppose someone organized an event and you were invited to honor me. Would you even consider

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<sup>86</sup> **“Own Son”** *idios huois* denotes an exclusive relationship.



missing it? Say you attended the event. Could you envision any scenario where you would walk away from the event complaining that you weren't fed or that it didn't meet some need in your soul? When you put it that way, it seems one would have to be vehemently clueless to behave in such a manner. They could only walk away with those thoughts if they had walked in with an inappropriate idea of what the event actually was to be.

Of course, I'm comparing this to a church service. And a church service is, or should be, nurturing to the soul. But that is only achieved when the true purpose of the gathering is recognized and pursued. Not to push my illustration too far, but the questions following the service might gravitate more toward an accurate rendering of the goodness, grace, mercy and wisdom of the father, of what he did for the people. We would be more inclined to ask if the words spoken, songs sung, sacraments administered did justice to the beauty of the son.

As in most stories and illustrations, the train drama falls short in too many ways to enumerate. But, as it relates to the second half of the verse, it falls short in terms of the ongoing lives of the passengers on the train. In the drama, the father saves them, but he doesn't adopt them; he doesn't engage in the ongoing care of their lives and their eventual and inevitable deaths.

All of the problems the people on the train had before this near disaster are still there. Those without jobs still have no work; those who were sick are still sick; those in difficult and broken relationships are still right where they were before the train went over the bridge. It is precisely here that the Apostle Paul makes a marvelous statement—a statement that I have rested on numerous times over the years when life seemed to be getting the better of me.

**“...how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things”  
(Romans 8:32b)?**

### **All Things**

It almost sounds narcissistic at this point for the recipient of the gift of life (by way of the Father not sparing His only Son) to ask what comes with that gift. And yet, this is where the verse goes. And the answer is **“all things.”** What Paul seems to be saying here is that

although all other gifts are immeasurably less than this “Gift of gifts”<sup>87</sup> the other lesser gifts are virtually included in it. When we read **“with Him”** *syn autos* we should not think of receiving all things alongside Christ but *with* Christ.

Similar to how in Christ **“are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (Colossians 2:3), the gift of Christ includes the Father freely giving His children all things—Paul uses the verb form of grace *charisetai* which could be understood as how God will **“grace us with all things.”** An unsearchable transformation has taken place for every passenger on the train. Nothing will ever be the same. The Maker of all things has set His affections upon us. And His capacity for grace is deeper and wider than our feeble comprehensions.

Paul is about to launch into a series of rhetorical questions which we will pursue at a later time. But right now, I would like for us to briefly set our hearts on a parallel text to the one we’re in—keeping in mind that Paul, as a loving pastor, is addressing a suffering church (Romans 8:18; 36—*the present sufferings...sheep for the slaughter*).

Addressing another church which had broken into factions of personality cults, Paul seeks to bring their petty minds to loftier considerations. It is as if the answer to both suffering and internal strife consists of the same meditation.

**Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).**

Christ belongs to God, we belong to Christ and, therefore, all things belong to us. There is no other Maker, no other Owner, no other Savior. It all belongs to God, and because we belong to Him we can be assured that not only are all our enemies vanquished, but the very calamities which beset us are designed for us—as if they were

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<sup>87</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:32). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

contraptions in the exercise room for our souls. And the list is exhaustive.

Not only does Paul include himself and other instructors (it is easy to comprehend how they exist for the benefit of saints), but he almost casually includes **“the world...life, death, things present and things to come.”** How transformed must our thinking be to arrive at the platform where our current difficulty is not merely something to be endured, but is for us—including death itself—it is usually not an easy place to reach—as if the Lord must strip us down of earthly comforts to get there. But as T.R. Schreiner indicates, Paul’s readers were to understand that:

**All the woes and sorrows of the present world order are turned to their good.<sup>88</sup>**

Or, as Calvin observes:

**This passage ought to remind us of what Christ brings to us, and to awaken us to contemplate his riches; for as he is a pledge of God’s infinite love towards us, so he has not been sent to us void of blessings or empty, but filled with all celestial treasures, so that they who possess him may not want anything necessary for their perfect felicity.<sup>89</sup>**

There is no suggestion here to go about our business pretending there are no trials, but rather to view our trials (and everything else) through the eyes of faith in a God who **“from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>90</sup>** It was no doubt this mentality Paul had when he wrote of himself...

**...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things (2 Corinthians 6:10).**

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<sup>88</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998) *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 461). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>89</sup> Calvin, J. (1998) *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 8:32). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>90</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith III, 1.

Let us pray that in this, we have a more highly developed appreciation of our heavenly Father's power and affections toward us and a deeper grasp of the gift He has given us in His Son.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. What is propositional truth and why is it important? How has God chosen to communicate with us?
2. What are the dangers in an emotive presentation?
3. What is a potential problem if we pursue our faith as merely academic?
4. Why do you suppose Jesus (or one of the apostles or prophets) didn't write a confession of faith or a systematic theology?
5. What does it mean to dehumanize the narrative and what are the dangers in this?
6. How would a deeper understanding of God sending and not sparing His Son affect a church service? How would it affect other aspects of our lives?
7. When the Father sent His Son, what came with Him?
8. What belongs to those who belong to Christ and how does this transform our thinking?



## Romans 8:33

*More Than Conquerors, Part I*

*It Is God Who Justifies*

September 21, 2014

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is God* who justifies. *Who is he* who condemns? *It is Christ* who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39).**

### Introduction

I have witnessed a remarkable evolution in the psyche of western ethics during my relatively short span of life. Behaviors in the 1950s which would have brought shame and embarrassment are now endorsed by media, culture and government. Observations of human actions that would have sounded like an accusation are now a celebration.

The spectrum of these behaviors is too wide to enumerate here, so let us suffice it to say (beckoning back to Romans 1:29-32) that they would include various forms of *amorous*; *wicked*, self-serving motives for our behavior; a *covetous* desire to have that which is not ours; *malicious* thoughts and behaviors toward others.

The list goes on—some subtle sins, some not so subtle: *envy*, *murder* (or, hateful thoughts) and its attending *strife*, *deceit*, *gossip*, *haters of God* (which has become quite a force in the current west—in the 50s a person might be embarrassed for missing church—today it's worn as an intellectual crown). *Pride* was a vice, while it is now a

virtue; professional athletes have turned *boasting* into an acceptable art form imitated by children; the *dishonoring of parents* is standard counsel among secular psychologists. We have gagged out a culture of *undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving and unmerciful pagans*. Not only are these virtues dismissed, but their antitheses have replaced them. For young people to admit, for example, they are seeking chastity can be socially mortifying.

All this to say that the immensely comforting passage we are about to embark upon will only be of value to those who have a concern of how they are assessed by God. One of the great dangers of living in a culture that is dismissive of the law of God as a standard for life is the extraction of the effectiveness of that law to show the human heart that there are a great many charges that can be legitimately leveled against every one of us.

Nature may tell us there is a God and even reveal His righteous standard and our inexcusable status before Him (Romans 1:18-21). But that general revelation is like a letter that man is always pushing back in its envelope; it's a guest who is seeking to put his foot in the house while the owner works hard at shutting the door. The owner will seek to comfort himself by pushing back the notion that there is a God or that, if there is a God, God doesn't care about our behavior, or that God won't act or that he is a good enough person to pass muster when the face to face encounter with God arrives.

The law of God in His special revelation (Scripture) is gloriously more effective at disabling the excuses, revealing that there is a God, He does care, He will act, and none have the ethical chops to pass muster.

**Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).**

**The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple (Psalm 19:7).**



Pitting general revelation against the special revelation (Scripture)<sup>91</sup> John Calvin makes the observation:

**...and it is also true, that God has put into the minds of men some knowledge of justice and uprightness; but in consequence of the corruption of our nature, the true light of truth is not to be found among men where revelation is not enjoyed, but only certain mutilated principles which are involved in much obscurity and doubt. David, therefore, justly claims this praise for the law of God, that it contains in it perfect and absolute wisdom.<sup>92</sup>**

The law of God<sup>93</sup> makes wise the simple, and we need to wise up. May the grace of God teach our hearts to fear that we might enjoy those very fears being relieved by the gracious message contained in this second half of Romans 8!

In an effort to keep the message of this passage knit together I have chosen to approach this in a short series of sermons under the heading of *More Than Conquerors* from Romans 8:37. In that phrase, I do not take it as the Apostle merely being hyperbolic. I think it is well captured by Schreiner:

**To be more than a conqueror over affliction, distress, persecution, and so on indicates that these enemies are actually turned to the good of believers through the power of God.<sup>94</sup>**

This morning we will set our sights on a single verse.

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<sup>91</sup> Earlier in Psalm 19 we read that the “**heavens declare the glory of God**” (Psalm 19:1).

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, J. (1998) *Psalms* (electronic ed., Ps 19:7). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

<sup>93</sup> We recognize that the Law of God of which David writes can be said to contain the redemptive covenant of God toward our conversion. But that does not reduce its superiority and clarity vis-à-vis God’s holy and righteous standard of obedience. There is nothing like the word of God when it comes to unveiling our condition.

<sup>94</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998) *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 460). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

## **Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is God who justifies (Romans 8:33).***

It would be quite a labor to find thirteen words (eight in Greek) in all of Scripture more consoling to those with a heartfelt concern of God's assessment of them. What we will seek to briefly answer in the remainder of our time is:

- What are the charges?
- Who brings the charges and what does this look like?
- Who are the elect and how do you know if you are one of them?
- What is justification and how is it comforting to the elect?

### **What Are the Charges?**

Although the rhetorical nature of the question seems to force us to the conclusion that charges against the elect will carry no weight in the law court of God, charges do come nonetheless. And what is the nature of these charges? The short answer is *everything*.

**Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins (Ecclesiastes 7:20).**

**...as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God...Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God (Romans 3:10, 11, 19).**

Even on our best days our best thoughts and actions have some significant level of carnality attached to them. There is not a man living, even a Christian man, who is so sanctified that a thorough examination of his heart and motives will not render a verdict of guilty.

Time prohibits us from launching into the Ten Commandments in order to demonstrate (as easily as that would be) how we fall short of every one virtually every day. The charges are a

lack of love for God and lack of love for man, and undue love of self and all that entails.

## Who Brings the Charges?

Our second two-part question is: *Who brings the charges and what does this look like?* Apparently, the majority of the world did not receive Paul's memo that God will not entertain charges against His elect because they come in spades. Little doubt this is one reason for Paul's writing. He knows the elect will be assailed with charges.

Clearly, as established above, at some level the charges are legit—we are not falsely accused—we have done the crime—we have committed the sin, and still do! From where do the accusations fly?

At a very deep level the “accuser” is Satan who **“accuses...day and night before our God” (Revelation 12:10)**. Satan accused Job of fearing God simply because of the creature comforts afforded him by God. Satan accused Joshua the high priest as he stood before the angel of the Lord (Zechariah 3:1).

At a primary level we see Satan as the accuser. But at a secondary and more existential level—where it becomes a significant and distressful event in our lives—the accuser can be the world, our enemies, our friends, our church; whenever the dialogue is not designed for edification and restoration but for condemnation. Of course, this can get fairly subjective. When lovingly corrected, I may, for a time, feel accused and condemned; an experience both parties must wrestle through with grace and wisdom. But the charges come and we are once again reminded of our guilt.

Perhaps it's at the internal level that the charges are pronounced most loudly—our own consciences which are acutely aware that we are law breakers and the devil, our enemies and even well-meaning friends have a point. We would like to dismiss their accusations, but it's not so easy. We might find some solace when we comfort ourselves that their accusations are false and inaccurate. But I believe it was Spurgeon who said that “we should not be too offended when falsely accused, for God knows the truth—He knows that our true offenses are much worse.”

In a moment we will get to the great comfort in justification. But we must first recognize that these words of comfort are aimed at a

specific group. It is not a universal salve. God has set His grace and good will toward the elect. So it must be asked:

## Who Are the Elect?

*Who are the elect and how do you know if you are one of them?* The word “elect” *eklektos* simply means to choose or select. And there is no debate that God is the one doing the choosing. But it is about there that the agreement ends. Pastor Mike Stingley used to tell me he had a friend/instructor who would say that God elects, Satan elects, but man decides.

Others will (with a little more biblical substance) say that the election is a corporate election. God chose Israel as a corporate entity and He chose the church as an institution. And there certainly is a sense in which this is true. But it must be observed that if you don’t effectively choose at least some individuals, it becomes difficult to flesh out how corporate election works. That is, if God didn’t effectively choose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, how would there have ever been a chosen people?

God electing and Satan electing is, quite frankly, silly. Corporate election does not tell the whole story. Scriptures clearly speak of individual election. Paul will labor that point in the next chapter where he explains how God chose Jacob over Esau in order **“that the purpose of God according to election might stand” (Romans 9:11).**

Some will argue that Jacob and Esau here stand as representatives for the choosing of nations. Even if that is granted, how does the choosing of one nation over another solve what seems to bother people about election? And, again, even if that were the case, wouldn’t it still include the choosing of Jacob over Esau? The point Paul seems to be making in the ninth chapter of Romans is God’s prerogative to make choices.

One need only look a little further into Paul’s argument to see that it is not merely corporate election. In chapter 11 Paul will make the distinction between Israel who are a chosen people and the remnant of the faithful within those chosen people who have not bowed the knee to Baal (Romans 11:1-6).

Let us recognize that the blessings promised in this chapter (and elsewhere) belong to those individuals elected by God. The

curses against the faithless (as an individual) yet chosen (corporately) Israelite were severe. The same could be said for the church. There is a limited amount of comfort to be taken because of our church membership. The promises contained here are for the elect.

Years ago, I was in a debate on this subject. During the Q & A time a man asked how he could know if he was chosen, elect. It's a fair question. You might be a church member (corporately elect), but are you, as an individual, the elect of God? This is a much more important question for us to ask about ourselves! What we are speaking of here really gets down to assurance—how do I know I am saved, in God's favor?

Let me suggest that there are two ways to examine yourself to determine if this is you. Paul had written of one earlier in this chapter. The Spirit of God **“bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16)**. It is something we know by the Spirit of God. If you were to ask my children how they know I'm their father they might be confused by the question. They might point to family photos or say they have always lived in the house or some such explanation. Those methods, of course, would not offer certainty that I am their father. When it gets right down to it, they *just know* that I am. I would argue that the Spirit offers even greater, deeper certainty that we are God's children—His elect. How do you know if you're the elect of God? You believe.

Secondly, recognizing our tendency to doubt what we believe, Peter offers a list of virtues (knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love) and tells us that these qualities ought to be on the increase. It is in the pursuit of these virtues that we **“confirm (y)our calling and election” (2 Peter 1:10)**. If we live a life of rebellion, our own poor behavior can cast a shadow of doubt upon the assurance that we are truly Christians.

When Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he brings together both points (their God-given response of faith, along with their godly behavior) as the fruit indicating they had been chosen of God. He writes:

**For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind**

**of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7).**

How do you know you're the elect? You believe and you act accordingly. We've come all this way, speaking of charges and how legitimate they can be; where they come from; who the elect are; but we haven't addressed the depth and rich blessing of the rhetorical question, which really amounts to "who dares bring a charge against God's elect?" It is reminiscent of Zechariah 3.

**Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire" (Zechariah 3:1, 2)?**

Whether it's the devil, the world, our friends, our church or our own consciences—those who accuse the elect of God with an eye toward their condemnation (rather than correction) need to be rebuked. Why? In a line, "**It is God who justifies.**" Justification! What is that?

### **What is Justification?**

What is justification and how is it comforting to the elect? What justification is and is not was at the heart of the Reformation. It is because God justifies that He will allow no accusation against us. When it comes to our sin, the Devil has a point, the world has a point, our own consciences have a point; but in light of justification, God won't hear it. What is justification *dikaion*? Strictly speaking, it carries the idea of making something right, but it goes much deeper. What is justification and how is it a source of great comfort? If I can summarize questions 70 and 71 of the Larger Westminster Catechism, justification:

- Is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners (Rom. 3:22, 24-25, Rom. 4:5).
- In this grace God pardons all our sins and accepts us and accounts us as righteous in His sight (2 Cor. 5:19, 21, Rom. 3:22, 24, 25, 27, 28).
- Our justification has nothing to do with anything we have done or what God has done in us (Tit. 3:5, 7, Eph. 1:7).
- It is the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed (credited) to us and received by faith alone (Rom. 5:17–19, Rom. 4:6–8; (Acts 10:43, Gal. 2:16, Phil. 3:9).
- All of this satisfaction was provided by a surety; a surety which God Himself provided in his own and only Son...imputing his righteousness to them (us) and requiring nothing of them (us) for their (our) justification but faith, which is also his gift (1 Tim. 2:5–6, Heb. 10:10, Matt. 20:28, Dan. 9:24,26, Isa. 53:4–6,10–12, Heb. 7:22, Rom. 8:32, 1 Pet. 1:18–19).
- Their (our) justification is to them (us) of free grace (Eph. 1:7).

All this to say that when God calls a guilty and polluted sinner—a sinner He is in the process of transforming—He sees in that sinner, simultaneously, both their sin and their righteousness in Christ. And Christ is our “**surety**” *engyos* (Hebrew 7:22) of this. *Surety* carries the idea of one taking responsibility for another. But the word goes deeper; it also expresses the quality or condition of being sure...a means of assurance or safety.

It is like the small, perhaps very small, child in the car who does not question where they are going, the safety of the journey or the love of the one at the wheel. They look at their mom or their dad at the wheel and rest assured that they will arrive. These things are all a given. It is in this manner that we look away from ourselves and to Christ, knowing that all the accusations, all the storms and difficulties will not, *cannot* keep us from God’s favored status, for it is God who justifies.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. Why is it important that a proper understanding of the law of God prevail in the church and culture? Where is the law of God most accurately presented? Compare and discuss general and special revelation.
2. What are the “charges” that can be brought against people when it comes to our obedience to God? Of what is man guilty?
3. Who brings the charges against us? Have you had this experience? How did you handle it?
4. Who are the elect and how do you know if you are one of them?
5. What is (and is not) justification, and how is this comforting to the elect?



## Romans 8:34

*More Than Conquerors, Part II*

*Died, Risen, At the Right Hand, Making Intercession*

October 5, 2014

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. *Who is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39).**

**Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us (Romans 8:34).**

### Introduction

Is it possible that the Apostle Paul, in one verse, practically presents the entire accomplished work of redemption!? Certainly, with some exceptions, this verse bears a striking resemblance to the description of Christ's work expressed in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus Christ, God's only Son (see 8:32), *dead, risen, ascended* to the *right hand* of the Father.

But that accomplished work of redemption would mean little to you and me if it were not somehow applied to us—had Jesus done all those things and then simply left, what vehicle would we have to access His victory, to make it ours? It doesn't matter how valuable the gift is that I purchase for you if I have not somehow succeeded in

getting it into your hands! We therefore also see Christ's *intercession*.

## Condemnation

**“Who is he who condemns?”** Last time we spoke of how God will not entertain *charges* against the *elect* because it is God who *justifies*. We have been pardoned—acquitted by the blood of Christ nullifying all the accusations. I have found great comfort in the Westminster Confession of Faith XV, 4:

**As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; (Rom. 6:23, Rom. 5:12, Matt. 12:36) so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. (Isa. 55:7, Rom. 8:1, Isa. 1:16, 18)<sup>95</sup>**

Nonetheless, we do feel the charges leveled against us and with those charges the feeling of *condemnation*. Here again it is as if Paul views any threat of condemnation as preposterous—“who dares condemn!”

Going back to the courtroom scene that Paul seems to be setting up in this portion of the text, the accuser (which, as we have discussed, involves the devil and the world, but might also include our enemies, friends, church and our own conscience) has made a valid case against us. We are, in fact, guilty. And maybe we need to repent, change the way we think, speak and act. And maybe even our greatest enemies can be unwittingly helpful in our becoming better people.

But there is no place in the life of the Christian for entertaining the notion of **“condemnation”** *katakrinon*. The word Paul uses speaks of pronouncing a sentence against, to condemn, to adjudge guilty (Matthew 20:18). This is what Paul addressed from the beginning of the chapter:

***There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according***

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<sup>95</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).**

The Christian may feel conviction, shame and even some level of guilt—a pricking of the conscience—God’s heavy hand upon us, as with David in Psalm 32. But like David, we confess our transgressions to the Lord and are ever renewed, refreshed in the knowledge that He has forgiven **“the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5)**. The prosecutor may still try to make you feel condemned. You need merely look to your Judge and your Advocate, for they have made you right despite the glares of the world and even the accusatory tone of your own heart.

**...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything (1 John 3:20).**

## **Died, Risen**

And on what basis is this condemnation lifted? Is it because we have done so well? Is it because we died and paid the price for our own sins? Is it because we have been declared the Son of God in power by our own resurrection (Romans 1:4)? Were we delivered us for our trespasses? Were we raised up for our justification (Romans 4:25)?

No, it was the Son who died, suffered, yet not sinking under the infinite wrath of God, paying a debt that we could never pay, winning a battle that has vanquished every soul apart from God’s grace from the dawn of man. No, it wasn’t us who died for our sins and raised for our justification; but Jesus, as it were, took us with Him, because we have...

**...been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that**

**stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Colossians 2:12-15).**

It is simply not enough to remain in the courtroom, even if the glorious knowledge of pardon functions nicely to quell the haughty looks of those who would proclaim your condemnation. No, there is such a unity between us and our head, who is Christ, that to accuse us is to accuse Him! But Christ has put the dark, accusatory rulers and authorities to open shame at the cross.

**Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out (John 12:31).**

It is not the Christian who will find himself shackled and escorted out of the courtroom to his sentence. No, it is the accuser who is cast out. As Jesus so efficiently cleared the street of those who would stone the adulterous woman, He would clear the courtroom of the detractors of those for whom He died.

We might consider the experience of that adulterous woman when...

**Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:10, 11).**

“Neither do I condemn you” Jesus said. What else matters?!

## **Right Hand**

So much can be said about Jesus at the right hand of God. This comes from the most quoted (I am told) verse in the New Testament from the Old Testament.

**The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand,  
till I make Your enemies Your footstool” (Psalm  
110:1).**

The right hand was the seat of honor (1 Samuel 20:25; 1 Kings 2:19; Psalm 45:9) and denoted power and glory (Matthew 20:21). That Jesus would sit at the right hand (Hebrews 1:3) indicates completion of work. But it appears here that Paul would have us consider Christ at the right hand of God in His mediatorial work as our High Priest who **“makes intercession.”**

### **Intercession**

You may know that our church participates in a ministry at a rescue mission in Wilmington. This last week there was an unusual occurrence. A man wanted to address the meeting with a testimonial. We generally don't open the mic for these types of things, not having any idea where things may go, but we made an exception. The man briefly presented the numerous trials he'd been through, many self-imposed.

He spoke of his great sorrow, his loss of family, home, dog and a lack of desire to go on in this life. And then, almost as if he were addressing the unthinkable, he shared that he had “almost” lost his faith. But he hadn't lost his faith. It was as if he had been severed from all things valuable to him, but not his faith. Why?

In the passage under our consideration, the Apostle Paul will transition from a very legal setting in verses 33 and 34, speaking of ‘charges, condemnation, justification and intercession’ to the inseparable bonds of His love in verses 35-39.

One might think of a marriage, which has both civil sanctions and responsibilities (granting the security which comes from these types of things), while all the time recognizing that the relationship is no mere cold and contractile arrangement, but one forged in a commitment of love.

In all of this, it would appear that Paul's goal is to grant the great assurance that favor with God will not—cannot—be severed. I've heard people, from time to time, say that Paul never mentions in this passage the human will or the “self” as if that is the possible exception. They offer as an explanation that we cannot be separated

from the love of God through life, death, angels, principalities, height nor depth, but we can be separated through our own choice, as if that doesn't fall under the category of **“any other created thing” (Romans 8:39)**.

With all due respect, I fear these people miss the point of Paul's encouragement. For if we are dependent upon the unfortified will of untethered human choice, which of us, when barraged with forces of legal charges, condemnation, angels, principalities, powers and death itself, has the intestinal fortitude to shake our fists in godly defiance of these dark forces? The great promise that we shall never find ourselves separated from the love of God contains within that promise His gracious preserving of our faith, which is the instrument through which our redemption is applied.

**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8).**

There are times when we feel so like Peter and the other disciples:

**Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same (Matthew 26:35).**

And even for a while, they seemed to fare well in their convictions:

**And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear (Matthew 26:51).**

But shortly thereafter we read:

**Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it**

**before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean” (Matthew 26:69, 70).**

But, unlike Judas, that was not the end of it for Peter. Peter would bounce back, would he not? Why was Peter not overwhelmed with a worldly sorrow that would lead to death (as with Judas)? Why did Peter have a godly sorrow which produced repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10)? There is no mystery to this. Jesus informed Peter, similarly to how we are informed in this verse in Romans. It is the intercession of Christ that brought Peter back from the very sifting machinations of the devil himself.

**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:31).**

One wonders if, on that dark night when Peter was confronted with his own weakness and cowardice, these words rung in his ears as his only hope: **“I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.”** I wonder if Peter felt for a time that the Father didn’t hear the prayer of the Son. Yet we know by the outcome that He did. The Westminster Confession speaks of *Saving Faith*:

**This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; (Heb. 5:13–14, Rom. 4:19–20, Matt. 6:30, Matt. 8:10) may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: (Luke 22:31–32, Eph. 6:16, 1 John 5:4–5) growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, (Heb. 6:11–12, Heb. 10:22) who is both the author and finisher of our faith. (Heb. 12:2) (WCF XIV, 3).**

The dear brother at Beacon Light Mission felt as if he had almost lost his faith, but he didn’t. His faith will get “the victory” because true saving and persevering faith is itself a gift, grounded in the cross of Calvary and given through the intercession/prayers of Christ. As Jesus prayed in His High Priestly Prayer:

**Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We *are* (John 17:11).**

And it should be a great source of encouragement when we later read:

**I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word (John 17:20).**

And beloved, that includes us.



## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. What portions of Romans 8:34 do we see in the Apostles' Creed?
2. Do you ever feel condemned? Why? How should you respond to a feeling or accusation of condemnation?
3. By what authority is our condemnation lifted? How are we brought into Christ's death and resurrection? Why is it not enough to simply remain in the courtroom?
4. What are some things included in the *right hand of God*? Why do you suppose the Apostle Paul mentions it in this passage?
5. Is the human will or self the only thing that can separate us from the love of God? Explain.
6. Why did Peter repent?
7. What are some things we know about saving faith?
8. How does Jesus intercede for you?



## **Romans 8:35**

*More Than Conquerors, Part III*

*Who Shall Separate Us?*

October 12, 2014

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. *Who is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39).**

**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (Romans 8:35)?**

### **Introduction**

In my many years of ministry I have encountered, more than once, a brother or sister in Christ wrestling through a crisis of faith or some form of spiritual or moral failure or weakness. These types of things can be subtle and gradual or sudden and cataclysmic. I recall a friend going through this type of season. He said his current situation brought about a struggle through Proverbs 24:16.

**For a righteous *man* may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity (Proverbs 24:16).**

He wanted to know which one he was—was he the righteous or the wicked? He had difficulty grappling with how he related to God and how God was relating to him. It is not an entirely unhealthy pursuit. But when it gets right down to it, I shared with my friend (in terms of the way he and God relate) that he was the sinner and Jesus is his Savior. God is his Father and he is God’s son. This is the fundamental nature of our relationship with God. And there is only one reason the righteous man will continue to rise. It is found in Luke 22:31, 32.

**And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail (Luke 22:31, 32a).**

One might ask, *why does my Father in heaven give any power whatsoever to Satan to sift the children of the Living God?* God has His own just and glorious reasons why He ordains the difficulties of those whom He loves; not the least of which is presented by Calvin, who writes:

**We will never have confidence in Him unless we become distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in Him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in Him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.**

Chapter five of the Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of Providence*, explains it thus:

**The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; (2 Chron. 32:25–26, 31, 2 Sam. 24:1) and, to raise them to a more close and**

**constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends. (2 Cor. 12:7–9, Ps. 73, Ps. 77:1, 10, 12, Mark 14:66–72, John 21:15–17)<sup>96</sup>**

We see the obvious example in the life of Paul, when a messenger of Satan himself becomes an instrument in the hand of God to teach Paul humility. Paul did not bemoan his difficulties, but rather prayed, then took pleasure:

**And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).**

### **An Autobiography**

If we read of Paul’s accounts of his own ministerial and evangelistic efforts, we get the impression that the second half of Romans 8 is autobiographical. Paul would record how he was held in “**disrepute.**” He would write of his “**hunger, (being) buffeted, homeless, reviled, slandered...like the scum of the world**” (1 Corinthians 4:10-13). He would record his “**afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments**” (2 Corinthians 6:4, 5). He wrote of being “**beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, robbers, toil, hardship, sleepless nights, anxiety**” (2 Corinthians 11:25-29).

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<sup>96</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Strength and weakness are such odd dynamics for the Christian. There is a godly strength to which one arrives only through a recognition and experience of their own human weakness. But never in that weakness should we consider ourselves devoid of God's love and good favor; hence the numerous rhetorical questions: **“What then shall we say to these things? Who can be against us? Who shall bring a charge? Who is he who condemns? (and, our current one:) Who shall separate us?”** All of the answers to these questions are designed to elevate our souls. And Paul directs us to these questions via the unbreakable chain of God's foreordination.

### **An Unbreakable Chain**

Those who can lay claim to these glorious promises—the elect—the child of God—are brought into this dialogue with the marvelously shocking and soul-buttrussing revelation that their inclusion, so far from being the product of human will, goodness or intellect, is the product of God's eternal decree and providence. God **“foreknew”** us and **“predestined”** us to be **“conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29)**. At a certain time, He **“called”** us, **“justified”** us (pardoned our sins) and our ultimate glorification is as good as if it were past (Romans 8:30).

How comforting it must have been for Paul, during his many trials, to meditate upon the genesis of his own redemption! Paul believed—had faith—because in eternity past God had determined it to be so. That being the case, he would not entertain the notion that his current trials could somehow pull asunder that eternal bond which united Him to God through Christ. He is seeking here to persuade his readers to approach the matter in the same way. In all of this Paul doesn't diminish the severity of the trials; he merely puts them in their place.

### **Who Shall Separate Us?**

Paul asks: **“Who shall separate us...”** then gives a list of impersonal nouns. Of course, **“who”** sounds like a personal pronoun—because it seems as if somebody is out to get you.

**The apostle says not (remarks Calvin nobly) “What,” but “Who,” just as if all creatures and all afflictions were so many gladiators taking arms against the Christians [Tholuck].<sup>97</sup>**

The implied answer to the rhetorical question is *nothing* or *no one*. And it must be restated that that would include our own weakened will or strength of conviction or lack thereof. This would so defeat Paul’s primarily goal, which is to grant the great assurance that favor with God will not—cannot—be severed. If it is possible that our unity with God is dependent on the power of our own will, none of us are safe. For I have little doubt that unless my faith is decreed in eternity past and is forged by the power of God’s own almighty hand, I will most assuredly be crushed when **“death, angels, principalities and powers”** aim their guns in my direction.

### **From the Love of Christ**

Paul has now transitioned from the court room scene with its legal language of **“charges, justification, condemnation” (Romans 8:33, 34)** to the driving force of our redemption, which is the love of God. We should love God, love Christ, love our neighbor; but this is not, it cannot be, the ground of comfort. I had a well-meaning Christian friend (who is now in the ministry and has been for many years) who told me he desired not to get caught up in theology and doctrine. All he wanted to do was teach people how to love Jesus.

It is a sweet sentiment and he was (and I assume he still is, though I haven’t seen him in over 20 years) a sweet man. We should certainly seek to love God, love Jesus, and love our neighbors. But the message which must antedate our love for God and ever maintain priority in the heart of the believer is a deep and rich meditation upon God’s love for us.

I think the Wizard errs when counseling the Tin Man that “a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others.” But I most assuredly would assert that Christian comfort is not secured by measuring our love for others, but by

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<sup>97</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997) *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:35–36). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

seeking to comprehend, appreciate and enjoy the “**breadth, and length and height and depth**” of God’s love for us. It was toward that end that Paul bowed his knees (Ephesians 3:14-19).

The love of God can easily be, and should certainly be, part and parcel of every sermon on every Lord’s Day. But let us not, because of the incomprehensible breadth and depth of it, fail to seek to apprehend here the pinnacle of it—“**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son**” (John 3:16a). Or, as Jesus elsewhere taught:

**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).**

The love of Christ is expressed most fully in His sacrifice. It makes you wonder if we were to poll the natural minds of earth as to their assessment of what the greatest act of love God, or a god, could possibly be. Would they say that the greatest act of love would be to bring an end to disease, hunger, war? I dare say very few would come up with the incarnation (preparing a body for His Son) and atoning sacrifice on a cross for sin. Yet another testimony that we don’t truly know what we need. It has been said of love, *agape*, that:

**It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires. For example, John 3:16 states, “For God so loved [*ἔγαπᾶσεν*] the world, that he gave.” What did He give? Not what man wanted, but what God knew man needed, i.e., His Son to bring forgiveness to man.<sup>98</sup>**

**Tribulation, Distress, Persecution, Famine, Nakedness, Peril, Sword**

Paul then presents a non-exhaustive list of ordeals: “**Tribulation, Distress, Persecution, Famine, Nakedness, Peril and Sword.**” Every one of these, as we stated earlier, Paul had faced except for “**sword**” which he would soon face. These trials were not

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<sup>98</sup> Zodhiates, S. (2000) *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.



fiction. And Paul was not immune to the anxieties which would attend these sufferings.

“**Tribulation**” *thlipsis* carries the idea of “pressing” or “pressure” used of the treading of grapes, the pressure that bursts.<sup>99</sup> “**Distress**” *stenochoria* speaks of anguish. Literally *narrowness, tight* or *narrow place*; figuratively, as the restrictiveness and pressures brought on by inner or outer problems *distress, difficulty, trouble*.<sup>100</sup> To feel the whole world is closing in on you. Tribulation might be what is happening outwardly while distress is what it is producing within us.

“**Persecution**” *diogmos* means to follow, pursue, press toward or hostile prosecution. It is defined as “a program or process designed to harass and oppress someone.”<sup>101</sup> They don’t let up. There is no respite. Consider undergoing this while suffering “**famine**” *limos*. We’re not talking about being ready for dinner, but undergoing tremendous difficulties while weak with malnutrition.

Add to this “**nakedness**” *gymnotes*. Paul conveyed that his toil and hardship and sleepless nights and hunger also involved “**cold and exposure**” (2 Corinthians 11:27). Paul completes his list with “**peril**” *kindynos*—dangerous or threatening circumstances; then, finally “**sword**” *machaira* which likely refers to the executioner.

## Yet People Walk Away

The long and the short of this is God won’t hear a charge against His elect because we are justified by the blood of Christ. There is no condemnation because Jesus died, rose again and is at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf. Truly, “**if God is for us,**” how insignificant upon any deep analysis are those who are against us! Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ!

Yet we have a thing called apostasy. People walk away from the faith. Paul uses the same words for “tribulation” and

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<sup>99</sup> Morris, L. (1988) *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>100</sup> Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. (2000) *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>101</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

“persecution” that Jesus used in the Parable of the Sower, where He taught:

**...yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation (*thlipseos*) or persecution (*diogmou*) arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (Matthew 13:21).**

“**If God is for us**” (Romans 8:31) contains the conditional conjunction “**if**”. Let me submit that if people walk away from the faith—despite their testimonies to the contrary, they were never of the faith. It is plainly stated by John:

**They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us (1 John 2:19).**

People may walk away from the church, from fellowship, from a community; but not the faith. So, it might be a healthy exercise to “**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith**” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

I read a distressing article this week about the son of a popular evangelist (an evangelist I had the opportunity to meet and lovingly disagree with). His son described himself as an apostate, now defining himself as an “agnostic humanist.” It was notable how he chronicled his road to apostasy. He said he “passed just about every stage of heresy” on his way to apostasy.

His first step away from orthodoxy (his own term) was a rejection of the sovereignty of God—*how could God allow evil things to happen when He is capable of stopping them?* He must not truly be all powerful. The next step was in college when two of his roommates ‘came out’ regarding gender orientation. He admitted that he would “ignore certain Bible verses and underline others.” The article then records:

Having rejected the sovereignty of God and authority of the Bible — two cornerstone Christian beliefs — he

was already substantially outside the evangelical fold. But then Bart committed what many would call an unpardonable sin: He became a universalist. He simply couldn't fathom a God who would condemn his nonbelieving friends to hell for eternity.

Then he started rejecting miracles, the resurrection, that Jesus was the only way, and so forth. Then he got in a biking accident and just decided he didn't believe at all. It is a tragic testimony. But there was something written early in the article, almost in passing, that got my attention.

He said he had become a Christian in high school and was drawn by the sense of community and common commitment to love people, promote justice, and transform the world. These are all good things—things that we should enjoy, take advantage of, and should be in our hearts. But then came the soul-piercing comment, “All the dogma and the death and resurrection of Jesus stuff was not the attraction.”

If the death and resurrection of Jesus is not our treasure, we are still in love with the world; our souls are in great peril and we will begin to read the Scriptures through the eyes of one who is in an affair with the thief who comes to **“kill and destroy” (John 10:20)**, twisting them to our **“own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16)**.

The signature attribute of one who can lay claim to the glorious promise that they cannot be separated from the love of Christ is the one who seeks to abandon all trust in self, recognizing our sin, weakness and impotence before a holy God. Our wisdom and salvation is found in Christ and His word.

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. How would you describe the nature of your relationship with God? How can a person rest assured that, though they fall, they will rise again?
2. Why does God give any power to Satan to sift?
3. Discuss the odd dynamic of Christian strength and weakness.
4. Why is God's foreordination such a critical and comforting element for the struggling Christian?
5. Can a believer be separated from the love of God by his/her own choice? Explain.
6. Should Christians love God, Jesus and their neighbors? Is this the source of Christian comfort? Why or why not?
7. What is the pinnacle of God's love for us? Do we always recognize the best way we should be loved by God? Discuss your answers.
8. What are some ordeals Paul mentions which may make people feel that they may lose faith? What are some things you experience that make you feel that way? How do you confront those times?
9. What is *apostasy* and why does it happen?
10. How can we be assured we are in the faith?

## Romans 8:36

*More Than Conquerors, Part IV*

*Sheep For the Slaughter*

November 2, 2014

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. *Who is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39).**

**As it is written: "*For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter*" (Romans 8:36).**

### **Does the Christian Faith Work?**

*Does the Christian faith work? Is Christianity good for your marriage? Yes...unless Nero kills your husband. Is Christianity good for your family? Yes...until ISIS kills your children. Is Christianity good for your nation? Yes...until those who hate Christ and the followers of Christ scatter the faithful.*

It was during a period of relative faithfulness in Israel that the Psalmist wrote:

**But You have cast *us* off and put us to shame, and You do not go out with our armies. You make us turn back from the enemy, and those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves. You have given us up like sheep *intended* for food, and have scattered**

**us among the nations. You sell Your people for *next to nothing*, and are not enriched by selling them. You make us a reproach to our neighbors, A scorn and a derision to those all around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a shaking of the head among the peoples. My dishonor *is* continually before me, and the shame of my face has covered me, because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the enemy and the avenger. All this has come upon us; but we have not forgotten You, nor have we dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way; but You have severely broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a foreign god, would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long; *we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter*. Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast *us* off forever. Why do You hide Your face, *and* forget our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our body clings to the ground. Arise for our help, and redeem us for Your mercies' sake (Psalm 44:9-26).**

I do believe the counsel and wisdom of God is the wisest counsel for marriages, families, nations, businesses, educational systems, economical systems and everything else...especially the church. And I don't mean this in a 'even though it will make your life miserable, it's the right thing so do it anyway' sort of way. The wisdom of God, presented in the Scriptures, is tailor-made for the human condition. If a man is willing to love his wife as Christ has loved the church, for example, it will be the best thing for his marriage and the most honoring thing to God. It is not an either/or.

I also find myself under the impression that the Scriptures teach that all who oppose the wisdom of the Triune God or commit themselves to indifference when it comes to the loving sacrifice of the

ascended Christ—the Prophet, Priest and King of kings—will, in the final analysis, find themselves in a state of historical insignificance and eternal judgment.

**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I *was* envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* I understood their end (Psalm 73:2-3; 17).**

It is the Kingdom of God alone that advances victoriously through history. All other kingdoms have their wisdom and have their moment. But it is the truth of Christ—the kingdom of Christ—that will prevail through history then on for eternity.

**But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation. Thus shall you say to them: “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens” (Jeremiah 10:10, 11).**

Perhaps, at this point, I sound conflicted or confused. Is the Christian faith good for our marriages, families, nations, etc, or not? I offer an emphatic ‘yes!’ I mentioned something last week that brought an interesting question during our Q & A time. I had said that a minister/elder should never (with some exceptions) lay their family at the altar of their ministry. “What exceptions?” was the question.

I thought of martyrs, the faithful who are put to death for their convictions while their families watched—and would certainly suffer (especially in that hostile environment). Of course, one might argue that such a sacrifice wouldn’t hobble the struggling family, but would rather buttress their faith. The martyr would have to ask him/herself, ‘Would I rather I/my family be comfortable or faithful?’

You see, there is really no conflict at all. Jesus taught as much in the gospel of Mark when Peter began to engage in a cost-benefit

analysis (no doubt, wondering if following Jesus was working) of following Him.

**Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:28-31).**

“Now in this time” seems to speak of history and “in the age to come” obviously is referring to eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. The kingdom of Christ will advance and bear fruit throughout the earth, culminating in eternal life. But Jesus inserts a little phrase which should not escape our notice: “*with persecutions.*”

### **With Persecutions**

In Tertullian’s *Apologeticus* we see the phrase, “**The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.**”

Let us be careful not to throw a sweater on Jesus and place him in a late night infomercial giving proven talks on how to increase our cash-flow or extract immediate psychological benefits from his tips on having our dreams fulfilled in the here and now.

In the context of Paul’s statement “For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (Romans 8:36), it wasn’t their faithlessness that brought on the slaughtering but just the opposite. It was “For Your sake.” It was due to their faithfulness that they were accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10).**



And when Paul conveys this, he conveys it with the phrase “**we are killed all day long**” *holen ten hemeran*. What could that mean but that their lives consisted of death continually being perched above them like the sword of Damocles.

So, is the Christian faith work? Will it make your life better? On a wider scale, can it be said that the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ will make things better or worse on the earth? People hold Bibles in their hands and offer a variety of suggestions. Some emphatically propose that in spite of the advancement of Christ’s kingdom the climate of goodness in the world will crumble like the icecaps. Others view the kingdom in such an immaterial sense that it just doesn’t really matter that much—goodness will advance as will darkness. Still others present the Christian faith as if it is the immediate cure for all human sorrows—enough faith and you will be healed and happy here and now.

I find myself in disagreement with all of these eschatological/sociology theories when it comes to the gospel. We are not to consign history to the devil nor are we to view it as insignificant nor should we expect the immediate overthrow of darkness. Like a mustard seed the kingdom of Christ grows slowly, like leaven it permeates everything, but there is a price paid for this.

The Apostle Paul was not engaging in heresy (as if his own blood could justify the saints or that Christ’s work was insufficient to remit our sins) when he wrote:

**Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church (Colossians 1:24).**

It was rather a recognition that the blessing that would extend to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3) would require continual sacrifice on the part of the faithful. This was the lens through which Paul viewed his own sufferings:

**I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me (and these were bad things) has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial**

**guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ (Philippians 1:12, 13—parenthesis mine).**

The Christian faith works, it will bring up all the boats in the harbor. But not without storms—in a *three steps forward, two steps back* sort of way. The faithful are called to a battle. It is a battle of love and thoughts and truth, but a battle nonetheless.

### **A Hostile, Yet Fruitful, Relationship**

Make no mistake, at the heart of it there is a hostile relationship between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ. Upon deep analysis there is no common ground. The kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of Christ can mutually coexist only so far—like a bad marriage where the couple no longer have thoughtful discussions but must operate at a shallow level. For when ‘big decision’ time comes the conflict is revealed.

For the most part, the kings of the earth will suffer the folly of the Christian faith provided it stays in its zone—its jurisdiction. Have your Bible studies and prayer meetings, but don’t suppose to inform Herod that his marriage is “not lawful” in the sight of God (Matthew 14:4) or we’ll cut off your head.

It is for this reason that there is currently an underground church in China. The government-sanctioned Three-Self church is left untouched by the government provided they preach the gospel but leave the culture to the bureaucrats. Don’t attempt to live out your faith and certainly don’t question the authority and wisdom of the very government that has given you the freedom to exist.

There is a very unhealthy sentiment in today’s church which misunderstands Jesus’ words: **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21)** as if jurisdictions can be divided between God and men; as if there are things that are not God’s. Abraham Kuyper was spot on when he said:

**There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”**

It was in an effort to manifest their wholesale rejection of Christ that the people, when questioned regarding his kingship, offered the cry: **“We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15)**. There are those who resist the efforts of Christians to engage in cultural transformation and, at some level, I understand their concerns. We certainly don’t want the church reduced to the ‘social gospel.’ Those concerned teachers don’t want us to forget that the faithful are called to suffer for Christ. But they seem to ignore what (at least in part—a large part) is the cause of the suffering—the engagement with the culture.

In ancient Smyrna, around 2:00 on a Sunday afternoon in 155AD, the eighty-six-year-old Polycarp, leader of the church in that region, was given the option of acknowledging the lordship of Caesar or paying the ultimate price. It was a common occurrence that the faithful would be required cry out “Kaiser Kurios” (Caesar is Lord) in arenas where their deaths provided entertainment for a desensitized mob. Polycarp did not appeal to the common ground between Caesar and Jesus. He did not negotiate jurisdictions. “Iesous kurios” (Jesus is Lord) was his response and it brought a cruel death by fire and sword.

The world was not immediately transformed by the death of Polycarp. But it wasn’t as if his faithfulness has had no fruit—both eternally and culturally. In time, the Roman Empire with its Caesars would cease to exist and the kingdom of Christ would grow like a stone, becoming a great mountain and filling **“the whole earth” (Daniel 2:35)**.

The Apostle would convey to the suffering and persecuted saints at Rome that there was nothing that could separate them from the love of Christ. Like the faithful Israelite in the Old Testament, they might be tempted to ask of God what many of us have perhaps silently asked, **“Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face, and forget our affliction and our oppression” (Psalm 44:23, 24)?** They needed to know that God’s apparent inactivity is not inactivity at all.

They were to remain faithful in the midst of a hostile religious and political climate. They were to imitate Christ. It was through the death and poverty of Christ that He would bring life and riches. That they would be **“killed all day long...regarded as sheep to be slaughtered”** did not indicate God’s disfavor nor their faithlessness

or failure. The death of Christ did not signal failure on his part, and the death of the saints does not signal failure on their parts.

**For the blood of thy martyrs and saints shall enrich  
the earth, shall create the holy places,**

wrote T. S. Eliot.

**For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr  
has given his blood for the blood of Christ, there is  
holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from  
it.**

Does the Christian faith work? The question itself seems flawed. It's like asking if truth works or if love works. We must resist a consumer mentality and the expectation that God will indulge my current desire no matter how virtuous or beneficial that desire might seem to me. God has a plan to effectively save souls and transform the world. Our roles are to preach the gospel toward the saving of souls and obey all Christ commanded toward the transformation of ourselves and the world around us.

This was a source of encouragement toward those heavily persecuted Christians in the first century. It is a source of encouragement for those paying the price for their faith to this current day—brothers and sisters throughout the world for whom we must pray and seek deliverance (Proverbs 12:6).

But it is not as if this verse is restricted to the severely persecuted church. In a couple of chapters Paul will admonish his readers to present their bodies as **“a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1)**. We fantasize that we would be faithful in the midst of dire conflict when daily we live as if our own life is the only one that matters.

Husbands, wives, children, parents, citizens, politicians, employers, employees, coaches, team-mates, friends, church members, church leaders must ever resist that un-Christian non-sacrificial disposition that seeks self-contentment and self-exaltation over and above the welfare of others and the glory of God.

Peter, Paul, Stephen and Jesus Himself opened their mouths boldly when the glory of God was compromised (Matthew 21:13). But for the welfare of those He loved, we read of Christ, that...

**...he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth (Acts 8:32, 33).**

It would appear that for the sake of Christ we will barely allow ourselves to be inconvenienced, let alone regarded as a sheep to be slaughtered. May we aspire to the disposition of Paul, who wrote:

**But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24).**

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. The Christian faith is often presented as if it's a product. People say it "works" for you. How would you respond to the question: "Does the Christian faith work?"
2. Do things only go poorly for the saints when they're behaving in an unfaithful manner? Explain.
3. Which kingdom will advance through history? What will that look like?
4. Jesus spoke of His followers receiving a hundredfold in this age and in the age to come. What did He also say they would receive?
5. What did Tertullian say of the blood of the martyrs? What does that mean?
6. What affect will the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ have upon the world?
7. Will the advancement of Christ's kingdom always be smooth sailing for the believer? Why? Why not? Discuss.
8. Define and discuss the nature of the relationship between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of Christ.
9. Are there things that belong to Caesar that don't belong to Christ? Explain.
10. Was Rome immediately transformed by Polycarp's faithfulness? Did he accomplish anything? Explain.
11. What do you do that resembles a lamb being led to the slaughter? In what ways can you be a living sacrifice?

## Romans 8:37-39

*More Than Conquerors, Part V*  
*The Love of God in Christ Jesus*  
November 9, 2014

**Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is God* who justifies. *Who is he* who condemns? *It is Christ* who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39).**

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### **What God Has Joined Together**

In the fifth chapter of Ephesians the Apostle Paul compares the Christian faith to a marriage. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and wives are to put themselves under the care of their husbands the way the church is called to trust Christ. Jesus taught elsewhere that each individual marriage is an orchestration by God and **"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"** (Mark 10:9).

Of course, we see failures in this quite frequently. This is due partially to general human sin and weakness—infractions of the

marital vows by one or both parties. But it is also due to a diminished understanding of the nature of the relationship. The passage just quoted in Mark is preceded by Jesus teaching that the husband and the wife are **“no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:8).**

We make jokes about the two being one when we take cuts in the potluck line and we seem to somewhat grasp the concept, but I fear we don't always take it to heart. Our failure to appreciate the oneness we have in and with Christ undermines our marriages and vice-versa—our failure to appreciate the oneness we have with our spouses undermines the picture it is to give regarding our very faith.

Paul presses the analogy in Ephesians where he admonishes husbands to love their...

**...wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church (Ephesians 5:28, 29).**

Following this illustration, one would no more consider walking away from a marriage than they would consider cutting off a perfectly healthy arm or leg. Even the cases of justifiable divorce we see in Scripture (adultery and desertion) are not the person walking away from the marriage, but going through the proper (and usually heartbreaking) channels of determining that the perpetrator has indeed walked away from their covenantal vows.

Yet we live in a culture where people walk away all the time for less than sufficient/biblical reasons. Although they might use a traditional vow such as “as long as we both shall live,” what they mean is “as long as you keep me happy.” The marriage is often entered into with that focus.

Even premarital counseling (which can be very helpful) often, unwittingly, caters to this. It seeks to address our issues of compatibility. This is not necessarily a bad idea. It can be illuminating to discover things about yourself and your potential spouse which may be points of difficulty. But there is no guarantee that the issues of compatibility when you're 23 and 25 are going to be the same issues of compatibility when you're 33 and 35 with four children.



All this to say that in the minds of many, marriage has been reduced to a complicated form of living together—of *shacking up*, as it has been said, provided both parties live up to the expectations of their spouses. One is hard-pressed to think of an unhealthier disposition to carry through a marriage than the daily threat of defection. We don't think of our own bodies this way—as if my rib cage will leave if my femur spends too much money. We don't generally even think of our own children that way. It is easier to think of them as the “**flesh of my (our) flesh**” (**Genesis 2:23**), a phrase designed to capture the relationship between man and wife.

### **A Covenant—A Promise**

But it is the marriage which provides the most appropriate picture of the gospel—the relationship between Christ and His church—because it is not based upon genetics, whether it is my own actual flesh or my children. Marriage is the best picture because it is based upon a covenant; its foundation is that of *promise*—of vows or oaths.

When the author of the epistle to the Hebrews sought to instill strong encouragement into his readers to hold fast to the hope set before them, he didn't appeal to genetics or ethnicity or any other human attribute, but to God's character and oath.

**For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:16-20).**

Jesus, as the divine spouse, has made a promise to His bride—**“I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5)** We see a similar promise given to Jacob, Israel, Joshua, Solomon (Genesis 28:15; Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Joshua 1:5; 1 Chronicles 28:20). There is simply not a comparable spouse in all of creation! His conviction and faithfulness for His bride breaks beyond the borders of our contemplations.

May I submit that the feeble nature of our assurance (the certainty that we are saved and forever will be) is due, in part, to our neglect in understanding that the inseparable unity that we enjoy from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord is grounded in His unfailing commitment to us over and above our commitment to Him. Jesus sees Himself as the true spouse, where we, often times, think of ourselves as merely living together—we think God might leave us if He grows weary of us or maybe we’ll leave if things get tough or something better comes along.

## **The Fruit of His Covenant**

Of course, someone might object, saying: “But aren’t we to be committed to Christ? Are we not called to a life faith and repentance?” And certainly, the answer is ‘yes.’ But this is where the message becomes remarkable—that our commitment, our faith, our repentance (our side of the deal—however you want to put it) is not merely our thoughtful response to God’s wonderful offer. No, our commitment is the necessary fruit of His commitment!

We choose because we have been chosen (John 15:16, 19); we love because we have been loved (1 John 4:19); we seek to apprehend Christ because He has apprehended us (Philippians 3:12). How else could the apostle enter into this most formidable list of opponents (death, life, angels, powers, etc.) with such a solid conviction of their inability to accomplish that which they seem hell-bent on achieving? When Paul writes **“I am persuaded”** *pepeismai* in verse 38, he doesn’t mean mildly convinced, but firmly assured.

I don’t think it is necessary to pursue a detailed analysis of this list of opponents. The list is not exhaustive but it is designed to represent that which is exhaustive. Simply put, nothing in **“death nor life”** has the power to sever the bonds of this divine matrimony. If all the **“angels”** *angeloi* (and here he likely means fallen angels),

“rulers” *arche*, “powers” *dynameis* in the “present” or in the future, from the “height” of heaven or the “depth” of hell marshaled all their energies to wrench us from the hands of Christ, it would be an exercise in futility on their part.

In light of these things, it becomes perplexing how anyone can possibly draw the conclusion that our success in salvation is left, even to the slightest degree, to the strength, will, power, intellect or goodness of our own fallen hearts! Those holding this position offer a take on this passage that bears brief discussion.

### **My Own Will—My Own Choice**

It has been said that what we see conspicuously absent from the list is the human will—“Those outside forces will fail,” it is proposed, “but what of my own self, my own choice?” They say this as if their own will does not fall under the category of **“any other created thing” (Romans 8:39)**.

With all due respect, I fear these people miss the point of Paul’s encouragement. For if we are dependent upon the unfortified will of untethered human choice, which of us, when barraged with the unvarnished forces of legal charges, condemnation, angels, principalities, powers and death itself, have the fortitude to stand? If these enemies perceived one iota of unassisted human volition, would they not pounce upon it like syringe of poison finding a weak and vulnerable spot in the skin—a gateway to the crumbling of our entire souls?

The great promise that we shall never find ourselves separated from the love of God contains, within that promise, His gracious preserving of our faith, which is the instrument through which our redemption is applied. Nothing can separate us from the love of God because we are **“in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39)**. We are His very body (Colossians 1:18). T. R. Schreiner aptly states:

**Affliction, persecution, famine, death, and so on are mentioned because these are the sorts of things that would cause a believer to renounce faith in Christ.<sup>102</sup>**

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<sup>102</sup> Schreiner, T. R. (1998) *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 466). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Let us be clear, it is not through the will, might, effort or power of man that the oppressed and persecuted saint can claim such a victorious title of *More Than Conqueror*, but **“through Him who loved us.”** The height and the depth of darkness are no match for the boundless **“width and length and depth and height”** of God’s love communicated to the saints in Christ (Ephesians 3:18)!

## **But I Don’t Feel the Power**

I’m guessing most of us don’t feel quite that strong. Even in light of Paul’s glorious revelation of the power at work within us—God’s ability to **“do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20)**—we don’t feel that kind of power at all! Sometimes people search for the power through special spiritual gifts or high-powered prayer meetings or church services, yet it is intermittent and elusive if not absent altogether.

We seldom consider, in the face of our own depravity, the power of God already executed on our behalf—a power that triumphed not only over the devil (Colossians 2:15) but over our naturally recalcitrant hearts. That we believe at all is abundant evidence of the power of God already unleashed!

## **More Than Conquerors**

I have entitled this five-part series *More Than Conquerors* and I would like to conclude with a short look at what that phrase could possibly mean. With all the difficulties and enemies brought into the spectrum of the apostle’s discussion you might think that he would say something like “in spite of all these things we are more than conquerors.” He rather says **“in all these things”** *en toutois pasin* believers are more than conquerors or beyond conquerors *hypernikomen*—literally hyper-conquerors. How so?

I have a relative who is a DEA agent. He was telling me of a training program he was involved in where the instructor was advising the young law enforcement agents to “empty the canoe.” This was designed to aid in overcoming the natural frustrations that come when engaging the criminal element. The illustration is meant to give a picture of being in a canoe in a lake and being continually bumped into by a person in another canoe. You’re going to begin

getting frustrated and angry with that person because they just keep bumping into your canoe.

But if the other canoe has no person in it—if it's an empty canoe simply moved by the tide—it still may be an annoyance, but there is no one to be angry at; it's just the current. I appreciated the picture given there. But Paul goes well beyond the image of an empty canoe. In an ocean full of hostile canoes God has ordained every canoe, every captain of every canoe and every ripple of every current to direct our canoes—our very hearts and souls—to the precise destination of His purpose—which is to be **“conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29).**

This is a choice made by God according to His own divine pleasure and purpose in eternity past. It is a chain that cannot be broken (Romans 8:29, 30) either by the power of hell or the weakness of sinners. He will not forsake His bride for whom He gave Himself. He has made a covenant to sanctify, cleanse, wash and present her to Himself a glorious church without **“spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:26, 27).**

## **Questions for Study and Meditation**

1. In what ways is the Christian faith like a marriage? How does our view of marriage affect our faith, and vice-versa?
2. Why is marriage such an appropriate picture of the gospel? How does the author of Hebrews encourage his readers?
3. How does a proper understanding of the marriage analogy aid in our assurance?
4. How can we be confident that all those enemies of which the Apostle Paul writes will not succeed in separating us from the love of God?
5. Is it possible that the one thing that can separate us from the love of God is our own will? Explain.
6. Why do you suppose you don't feel the power of which the Apostle writes?
7. In what respect are God's children *More Than Conquerors*?



