

# NO CONDEMNATION

SERIES: BOUND FOR GLORY



Catalog No. 20200426  
Romans 8:1-11  
First Message  
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April 26, 2020

*Romans 8:1-11*

For the next five weeks, we're going to dive into Romans 8, in which the apostle Paul articulates his breathtaking vision of what God is doing in the present and what he will do in the future. What is God doing? What will he do? In short, we're bound for glory. Oh, my goodness, how we need Romans 8!

Our study is a fitting follow-up to our study of Job, which featured suffering. Romans 8 also features suffering. However, when Job suffered, Christ hadn't yet suffered. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ—and ensuing gift of the Holy Spirit—allows Paul to see suffering in an entirely different light.

If you're a believer in Christ, do you feel that no matter how well you're doing, whatever it is that you're doing, that you're not doing well enough? If so, you're not alone. Listen to Jan Johnson, who writes of her struggle to understand herself as “the Beloved” of God:

*Though the experience of being the Beloved has never been completely absent from my life I never claimed it as my core truth. I kept running around looking for someone or something that could convince me that I was indeed the Beloved. I was much more eager to listen to the other, louder voices saying: “Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire.” Meanwhile, the quiet, gentle voice that speaks in the silence and solitude of my heart remained unheard or, at least, unconvincing.<sup>1</sup>*

Like Johnson, I have listened to the louder voices. I need to listen to the Spirit in Romans 8:1-11 as much as anyone.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes of a new exodus, with the Holy Spirit replacing the Mosaic Law. In Romans 7:7-25, he tells the story of Israel's relationship to the law, which Israel received in the wilderness. In Romans 8, he tells the story of the renewed people of God, who have received not the law but the Holy Spirit, who leads them through the wilderness of this world to the new Promised Land, the new creation.

In Romans 8, Paul explains his statement in Romans 7:6: “But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.” The Holy Spirit, who we receive glimpses of in Romans 1-7, comes out in the open in Romans 8.

## Life conquers death

**Romans 8:1-4:**

**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

Paul's statement in verse 1 excluding condemnation for those in Christ Jesus is based on the previous context, which reaches as far back as his treatment of condemnation in Romans 5:12-21. When we believe in Christ, when we give our allegiance to him, we are united with him. Therefore, because of our union with Christ, by which we are released from both sin (Romans 6) and the law (Romans 7), and now, in the new era inaugurated by Christ, we need not fear the condemnation of God.

Condemnation, which Paul also speaks of as death, is God's punishment for sin. It involves final exclusion from the presence of God and the people of God. Such is not the destiny for those who are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

I have heard it said that Romans 8:1 is the greatest verse in the Scriptures. Indeed, it's hard to overstate its importance: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

In verses 2-11, Paul further explains the exclusion of condemnation. The basic explanation, in verse 2, is that life has conquered death. If death is exclusion from the presence of God and the people of God, life is inclusion in the presence of God and the people of God, even beyond the grave.<sup>2</sup> There can be no condemnation—no death—for those who have life. Sin issues in death, but the Holy Spirit replaces sin and imparts life. The Holy Spirit applies Christ's victory over sin and death to us by uniting us with Christ so that we are liberated from sin and death, just as the Israelites were liberated from Egypt.<sup>3 4</sup>

The Mosaic Law, which God gave to Israel immediately after the exodus, was unable to conquer sin and sustain Israel's covenant relationship with God. In a sense, it wanted to sustain such life. Instead, the law provoked sin and resulted in death: condemnation for Israel as a whole (Romans 7:10). The "flesh" of Israel, taken over by sin and bent toward rebellion against God, was unable to respond to the law (Romans 7:18, 25).

In verse 3, Paul explains how God dealt with sin and death. In verse 4, he explains how the Spirit brought life.

God himself, through the work of his Son, did what the law could not do. The Son, at great cost both to himself and to the Father, came in the "likeness of sinful flesh," in human flesh but not in *sinful* human flesh. As the Son of God, the Messiah who represented Israel and the world, he became a sin offering.<sup>5</sup> God thereby condemned the sin of the world in the flesh of Christ: he judged it, passed sentence against it, and brought its reign to an end.

God condemned sin in order to fulfill not the "righteous requirement" of the law but the righteous intent of the law, which is the life the law wanted to sustain.<sup>6</sup> God imparts such life, relationship with him, not through the Mosaic Law but through the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Those who receive this life, in fulfillment of the law, are characterized by walking according to the Spirit, not according to the law. Paul is not saying that we fulfill the law *by* walking according to the Spirit. The Spirit sets us free from sin and death and gives us life. We can therefore be *defined* as those who walk—however imperfectly—according to the Spirit.

In short, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because God has condemned sin and given his people life.

As believers, we therefore have life in the present.

## Life in the present

### Romans 8:5-8:

**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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**

In verses 5-11, Paul distinguishes between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit. The difference, quite simply, is that those who live according to the Spirit possess the Spirit while those who live according to the flesh do not. For believers, life "in the flesh" is a thing of the past, however much they may yield to sin in the present.

This difference can be seen first of all in what people "set their minds on." This entails not isolated decisions or shifting thought patterns but a basic orientation in life: either toward the things of the flesh or toward the things of the Spirit. Those who possess the Spirit can be defined as those whose orientation in life is toward the things of the Spirit.

The orientation of the flesh is death.<sup>8</sup> Death, which results from sin, involves the condemnation of God. The orientation of the flesh can therefore be defined as being "hostile to God." This was evident in Paul's description of the "flesh" of Israel in Romans 7:7-25, where he used the first-person singular "I" when speaking of Israel. Israel was unable to subject itself to the Mosaic Law. It found itself, or it should have found itself, in solidarity with the rest of fleshly humanity, alienated from God. All humans who do not possess the Spirit of the new covenant "cannot please God" no matter how good their deeds may appear.

The orientation of the Spirit, on the other hand, is not death but life—the covenant life that Paul has been speaking of all along. The other orientation of the Spirit that Paul highlights is peace, which involves peace with God and is in contrast to the hostility to God that the flesh provokes (Romans 5:1). Peace, like life, was also a covenant feature (Numbers 25:12, Isaiah 54:10, Ezekiel 37:26). It involves more than just cessation of hostilities but human wholeness. The implication of

Paul's comparison between the flesh and the Spirit is that those who possess the Spirit, with their orientation toward life and peace, are able to subject themselves to God and please him.

If you believe in Jesus, you're alive with the life of God.

## Applause and horn honking

I've been encouraged by so many of you who are living the life of the Spirit in the current crisis. I've heard many stories of people in our faith community who are turning to the Lord, serving each other, and serving our community. The Spirit, who gives life in the present, is mobilizing God's people.

Bruce Maez, a leader in our recovery ministry who almost died from Covid-19, felt the love of God through the community. "I can't describe it," Bruce said last week. "I've never felt so loved in my whole life." When he was finally able to go home, after having spent several days in the hospital, a collection of people greeted him (from afar, of course), with cheers, applause, and horn honking. Here's what Bruce wrote to our church:

*I want to express my gratitude and appreciation for all of your love, prayers, and encouragement during my battle with the Coronavirus! I could not have survived without your support that filled me with hope and peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding! The Lord showed me his love through your kind words of support and encouragement and of course your prayers!*

*I am also grateful for how much support you gave to my loving wife Lucy, who was able to trust God through this process, along with all of your love, encouragement and prayers! Neither Lucy nor I have ever experienced the kind of overwhelming outpouring of love that we have over the last few weeks as we all battled this together!*

*I thank you all and will never forget the love you have shown both Lucy and me! I love you all very much!*

As believers, we not only have life in the present, we also will have life in the future.

## Life in the future

### Romans 8:9-11:

**You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of**

**Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.**

In verse 9, Paul emphasizes that he's speaking of two kinds of people. If the Spirit dwells in you, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit. If you do not have the Spirit, you do not belong to God. Whereas the Spirit of God dwelt in the temple in the Mosaic covenant, he dwells in believers in the new covenant. Paul said that "nothing good dwells in me," speaking of fleshly Israel (Romans 7:18). What Israel needed, what all humans need, is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Possession of the Spirit—not possession of the law, as some Jews would have supposed—and the faith that the Spirit inspires are the twin marks of membership in the new covenant people of God.<sup>9</sup>

If it is true that the life-giving Spirit dwells in us, we may be surprised that our bodies are still "dead," subject to decay and death. This condition, Paul says, is attributable to sin. Our bodies are experiencing the effects of an old era and an old life dominated by sin. Sin, therefore, can still exert influence in our "mortal bodies," though we can resist it (Romans 6:12, 8:13).

Nevertheless, we should be encouraged that the Spirit is "life." The Spirit is imparting to us the life of God, even now, and bringing about renewal for the inner person (Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:16).<sup>10</sup> The presence of the Spirit in our lives is attributable to the righteousness of God, by which he conquered sin and death through Christ so that the Spirit could be given to his people.

Although our bodies will die, death is not their final state. As Paul says later in the chapter, we are waiting for "the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). The presence of the Spirit, who unites us with Christ, is the guarantee that God will raise us from the dead, just as he raised Christ, who represents us. It must be this way, for our enemies are sin and death. God, through Christ and the Spirit, conquers both. Heaven's gates are open wide!

Two of my heroes in the faith are Jack and Ione Mackay, who continued serving on our mission trips to India well into their eighties. Two more alive people you will never meet. I had heard that Ione spent some time in



the hospital with something that wasn't COVID-related, so I wrote an email to check up on them. Jack wrote back that all things considered, Ione is doing well.

He finished with these words: "We recognize that God is in control and we have faith and confidence that he has a plan and a time for each of us. God is good, and because he lives we can face tomorrow and whatever that brings!"

Indeed, God will raise each of us from the dead.

Verses 9-11 thus cap Paul's argument that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God has condemned sin and given his people life. The presence of life, through the Spirit in the present, promises life in the future, beyond the grave. Condemnation will not be—it cannot be—the fate for such people.

## **The presence of the Spirit**

The presence of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is determinative. If you possess the Spirit, you have life, and you need not fear the condemnation of God: final exclusion from the presence of God and the people of God. If you do not possess the Spirit, you are experiencing a kind of living death, and unless the Spirit enters your life, you will face the condemnation of God.

How, then, do you know that you possess the Spirit? First, you believe in the righteousness of God as it is understood in the death and resurrection of his Son. In other words, you believe the Gospel and give your allegiance to Christ. Second, there is an orientation in your life toward God. Your version of life is relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

If you believe in Christ and thereby possess the Spirit, then the Spirit defines you. Your family doesn't define you. Your culture doesn't define you. Your classmates or coworkers don't define you. Neither your enemies nor your friends define you. Not even your spiritual family, your brothers and sisters in Christ, defines you. Add one more person to the list of people who don't define you: you. You don't define yourself.

The Spirit defines you, and the Spirit defines you, as we will see next week, as a child of God (Romans 8:12-17).

If you have given your allegiance to Christ and you prefer the presence of God, then you have good reason

to be confident. If, on the other hand, you have not given your allegiance to Christ and you prefer the absence of God so that you can pursue your version of life, then you have good reason to be fearful.

## **Modern guilt**

What needs to be said is that there will be condemnation for those who are not in Christ Jesus: for those who do not give their allegiance to Christ, for those who don't possess the Spirit. They will rise from the dead, just like everyone else, but they will spend eternity separate from the presence of God and the presence of his people (John 5:28, Acts 24:15).

Although most people who haven't given their allegiance to Christ don't believe this is their fate, many of them nevertheless live with the dreadful sense that they're not good enough. They may not believe they are guilty before God—indeed, they may not believe that there is a God—but they feel guilty nonetheless. Why is that? It's because they are guilty—before God, that is—just like everyone else. They have rejected God and his ways.

In response, many people who haven't given their allegiance to Christ try to do better—academically, vocationally, ethically, whatever. But doing better usually doesn't assuage their consciences for long. It seems that they can never get off the meritocracy merry-go-round.

One writer calls this "modern guilt—a kind of pervasive, amorphous, free-floating sense of worthlessness; an existential dread of censure; a furtive writhing of conscience permanently lodged in the soul." Modern guilt "squats inside us, unrelieved and unarticulated, growing ever more rancid."<sup>11</sup>

Many kids, especially in our area, are besieged by modern guilt. One local student, interviewed in 2015 when she was a high school junior, said, "I feel like I'm never doing enough, not using my time wisely, not working hard enough. It goes deep, this disappointment in ourselves."

The answer is not doing better. The answer, if you don't yet believe in Christ, is to confess your sins and give your allegiance to him. Get off the meritocracy merry-go-round. If you have not yet done so, please give your life to Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

## Believers' feelings

Many people who have good reason to be confident that they will not face the condemnation of God, and in fact do not believe they will face such condemnation, nevertheless live in the present with something that feels to them like condemnation. They live with an almost perpetual sense that they have done, are doing, or will do something wrong. They worry that they're not doing enough. They're concerned that they're not meeting expectations, either their own or those of others. They weigh themselves in the balances and find themselves wanting.

One critical comment directed their way can send them into a tailspin. Or, they make a comment to someone and later awaken in the middle of the night obsessing that it was inappropriate. They call the next day to apologize to the offended party, who has no recollection of the supposedly deplorable comment.

Martin Luther's words concerning the sense of condemnation he felt before delving into the writings of Paul are memorable:

*Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually loathed him. I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this . . . And yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, "You didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that out of your confession."<sup>12</sup>*

Luther spent up to six hours a day confessing his sins. One superior advised him, "If you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—patricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes."<sup>13</sup>

## Pathway into the presence

Guilt feelings are not unfamiliar to me or to many of the people I meet with. What do you do with them? Of course, based on Romans 8:1, pray that God would take them away. But what if he doesn't? I've prayed that he would take them away, and though I'm not haunted as I once was, neither would I describe myself as completely free. Something within me still wants to do something

relevant, spectacular, or powerful in order to prove that I'm worth something. But I'm always free in this sense: I'm free to meet with God, and that's what I've done. I've gone deeper with God.

Guilt feelings can be a pathway into the presence of God. Really, anything that serves to take you into the presence of God can be befriended, even something that drives you into his presence. If God doesn't take the feelings away, consider that he's taking you to a deeper place with him.

Years ago, when I was meeting quarterly with a spiritual director, I told him, "I'm stuck." His answer stunned me. He said, "Why not stay stuck?" Maybe I wasn't ready yet for freedom. Maybe I needed to go deeper where I was. Maybe I needed to go deeper so that I was ready for freedom when it came.

And maybe going deeper with the Lord, even if he doesn't remove the feelings, gives me something to offer the world. Yes, I think it does. Going deeper with God gives you something to offer the world. If it takes guilt feelings to take us to a deeper place with God and give us something to offer the world, so be it.

## What is there?

Regardless of how you feel, let me assure you, because Paul assures you, because God assures you: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Paul does not say that there is no condemnation for those who are successful or those who are getting good grades or those who are having an impact or those who are changing the world or those who are improving. No, he says that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Years ago, I was teaching at a new church of mostly new believers when an argument broke out, in the middle of the worship service, about whether a certain member of the fellowship should be allowed to take communion inasmuch as he had "too much sin in his life."

In contrast, the story is told of a sixteen-year-old Scottish girl who turned away in shame as the communion cup was passed to her one day in church. The pastor of the church, John Duncan, approached his wounded lamb, put his hand on her shoulder, and said, "Take it, lassie. It's for sinners."

God has condemned sin in the flesh of his Son. He therefore doesn't condemn it in those who are in his Son.

Indeed, it's hard to overstate the importance of Romans 8:1. But I'm not inclined to call it the greatest verse in the Scriptures. By itself, it tells us what there *isn't*. It doesn't tell us what there *is*.

Well, what is there? The rest of the passage, not to mention the rest of Romans 8, tells us. There's life! There's the life of God in us! We're alive with the bliss of God, with the sorrows of God, with the hope of God. We're alive today, we will be alive tomorrow, and we will be alive forever!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1996), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Life and death were both connected to the Mosaic Covenant. If the law was obeyed, so that Israel worshiped the Lord and not other gods, Israel would enjoy "life" in the Promised Land. Death was removal from the land where God chose to dwell (Deuteronomy 4:40, 30:15-20).

<sup>3</sup> In verse 2, Paul speaks of two kinds of laws. The first kind, the law of the Spirit of life, has set people free from the second kind, the law of sin and of death. An interpretive question, similar to the one raised by Romans 7:21-25, is whether Paul is speaking of the Mosaic Law in one or both cases or whether he's speaking of a "principle" in one or both cases. In the interest of consistency, it seems best to understand the law of the Spirit as the Mosaic Law fulfilled by the Spirit and the law of sin and of death as the Mosaic Law taken over by sin. The law, in Romans 8:1-11, would then be similar to a human. Both the law and a human fulfill their purposes through the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, both the law and a human are dead.

<sup>4</sup> The word "you" in verse 2 is singular, not plural, in keeping with the first-person "I" of Romans 7:7-25. By changing pronouns but retaining the singular number, Paul, a Jew who is able to identify with fleshly Israel because of his life prior to Christ, is now emphasizing that he has all along been speaking about "you," Israel as a whole. In this way, he also throws open freedom from sin and death to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles who would believe the Gospel.

<sup>5</sup> The language Paul employs is the same that was used of the sin offerings called for in the law (Leviticus 5:6-7; 16:3, 5, 9).

<sup>6</sup> Paul used the same word that is translated "requirement" (*dikaiōma*) in a similar context in Romans 5:16. There, as in Romans 8:4, it is contrasted with "condemnation," though it is translated "justification." In Romans 5:16, Paul says that Adam's transgression resulted in condemnation but that the free gift through Christ results in *dikaiōma*. In both Romans 5:16 and 8:4, *dikaiōma* concerns a result, not a requirement.

<sup>7</sup> God expected Israel's failure and said he would provide for it through a new covenant that would feature the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would give new life to God's people (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27, 37:1-10).

<sup>8</sup> The verb translated "set their minds on" in verse 5 (*phroneō*) is related to the noun translated "aim" in verse 6 (*phronēma*). In verse 6, Paul is defining the things on which the two kinds of people set their minds.

<sup>9</sup> Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, tying the work of Christ to the work of the Spirit, and identifying both the Spirit and Christ with God. So when he speaks of the indwelling Spirit in verse 10, he can also speak of Christ, for it is the Spirit of Christ who dwells in believers.

<sup>10</sup> The word "Spirit" in verse 10, in keeping with Paul's use throughout Romans 8:1-14, is likely another reference to the Holy Spirit and not the human spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Colin McGinn, "Something is Wrong and Somebody is to Blame" (*Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2001), A24.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 207. 9

<sup>13</sup> R. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Mentor Books), 41.