

The eighth chapter of Romans is regarded by many as the preeminent gospel chapter in the entire New Testament. It is argued that nowhere else are the great gospel realities of deliverance from sin and law, new life in Christ, adoption by the Spirit, and the full assurance of hope by virtue of divine intention and accomplishment more clearly or powerfully set forth. One thing is certain: just as 3:21 represents a major hinge in Paul's argumentation regarding justification by faith alone, so also does verse 8:1 with respect to freedom from sin by divine power alone. After carefully demonstrating the universal guilt of men because of sin (1:18-3:20), Paul's "*but now*" introduced the sole remedy that is God's own righteousness appropriated through faith. In the same way he showed in chapter seven the enslaving power of sin and the impotence of self and law to secure deliverance, and then immediately proclaimed with his "*now therefore*" that the needed resource is the power of the indwelling Spirit through union with Christ. As God's grace in Christ by His Spirit is the remedy for sin's *guilt*, so also it is the remedy for sin's *power*.

1. Sin's tyrannizing power has left the human race enslaved and without hope. The human provisions of self and law inevitably prove utterly incapable of bringing deliverance, and yet these are the only two resources available to men. The result is that every person is left without hope, being constrained – if truthful to oneself – to exclaim, "*Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death?*" The legacy of humanity proves this out. For every human culture is ordered around some social and/or religious ethical framework, even societies like America that are cultural and religious "melting pots." In spite of this, every society throughout history has been characterized by the same list of social ills, regardless of their particular religious tradition or cultural norms. Societies are corrupt because individuals are corrupt, and because no person can find deliverance from sin's tyranny in the resources available to him, there is no hope for ever achieving a righteous society. If man is to find what he is looking for, and what he so desperately needs, he must find it in a power outside of the natural order.

Paul hinted at this power earlier (5:1-11, 7:6), and explicitly addresses it in chapter eight. It is the triune God alone who stands as every person's hope of deliverance; man's hope of true freedom from sin lies in the saving intention of the Father, wrought through the atoning work of the Son and applied and perfected by the Spirit. Thus Paul answered his own despairing question with the praise of thanksgiving, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Chapter eight, then, picks up that doxology and begins to unfold it for the saints at Rome. What Paul has affirmed in various ways throughout the epistle is here expressed in a succinct yet overarching declaration:

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (8:1).

Man's core problem is his inescapable bondage to sin. But sin incurs guilt and guilt brings condemnation and death (cf. 2:1-3, 5:12-19). Sin is slavery, and this enslavement yields enslavement to death (both present and future). As surely as men cannot free themselves from sin's tyrannical hold, they cannot escape God's just verdict of condemnation and the penalty of death attached to it. And so enslavement to sin brings not only despair of true righteousness, but also a nagging inward terror – a fear of death and judgment that leads people to spend their lives doing everything possible to suppress their conscious sense of what they innately discern (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Whether they consciously acknowledge it or not, all men live their lives in fear because of their inescapable sense of guilt and condemnation. They are estranged from God and innately sense that their estrangement is attended with His displeasure. The result is that, even while they continually flee from Him in their hearts, they also seek to appease him through the things they do, whether through morality, religion, philanthropy, etc.

Cornelius Plantinga has insightfully observed that sin is both the **vandalism of the principle of *shalom*** and **man's refusal of God's restoration of it**. His statements regarding "shalom" make his meaning clear: "*The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call **shalom**. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights...In sum, shalom is God's design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.*" (Not the Way It's Supposed to Be)

Thus the Hebrew concept of *shalom* refers to the perfect, harmonious ordering of all things according to God's eternal and creative intention and design.

- The principle of shalom is introduced in the opening verses of the Bible, notably by its initial absence in a world that was "formless" and "void," which is to say *disordered* and *uninhabited*. God's presence and work are the source and basis of shalom, as is seen in His pronouncement of "very good" over His creation following His work of filling and ordering it (Genesis 1:1, 31).
- The account of the Fall reveals that man's insistence upon independence and self-determination shattered the principle of shalom, and replaced God's perfect, harmonious order with *estrangement* – man's estrangement from God, from himself, from all other people, and from the rest of the creation.
- Sin has vandalized God's created harmony, and men instinctively seek to restore it. But they insist upon doing so themselves in accordance with their own designs and convictions. *In a grand twist of irony, the deification of self is the root of man's problem, and yet men seek to remedy the problem in accordance with and for the sake of self* (Romans 1:18-23, 9:30-10:4). This universal human characteristic is a central thesis in Paul's writings (cf. esp. Galatians 3:1-5:7), and was the focal point of Jesus' ongoing confrontation with the Jews.
- As God was the source of shalom in the first creation, so He is its source with respect to restoration and the new creation. As Plantinga rightly observed, shalom is the defining principle of both creation and redemption. Accordingly, the Hebrew prophets, as they spoke of God's promise of restoration, spoke of a time to be preeminently and permanently characterized by the peace that is shalom (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12:6, 26:1-12, 32:1-18, 52:1-55:13, 66:1-13; Jeremiah 33:1-26; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 37:1-28; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 6:9-15, 8:9-23, 9:9-17; etc.).

- Most importantly, the prophets spoke of this coming peace in the context of God's promise of a global restoration under David's son; the Son who is Yahweh's true Prince and Shepherd (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12:6; Jeremiah 23:1-6, 33:1-26; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 37:15-28; Amos 9:11-15; Luke 1:26-35, 67-79, 2:1-14, 19:28-44; John 14:27, 16:19-33, 20:18-22; Acts 10:34-43; Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:11-18; Colossians 1:1-23; Hebrews 13:20-21; Revelation 7:9-17, 21:1-7).

Thus Paul's "no condemnation" speaks to more than simply a forensic justification. It extends in an all-inclusive way to the full restoration of the true peace that is *shalom*. The restoration of *shalom* brings comprehensive wholeness to man – restored relationship with himself, other people, and the creation, all subsumed under the restoration of his relationship with God. As will become evident later in the chapter, this restoration is focused by Paul in the relationship of *sonship* (ref. 8:12-25). Sonship was God's design for man as image-bearer (cf. Genesis 1:26-27 and 5:1-3 with Luke 3:38), and so is essential to the reinstatement of *shalom*. God's restoration of man to Himself is the grand theme of Romans 8, and so also the pinnacle reason for the Christian's hope.

In these things, then, is seen the glory of Paul's declaration in verse 1: *it proclaims to all men that they need not continue under the cloud of estrangement and condemnation*. There is a remedy for their plight; the guilt and fear of condemnation that plague them in their hearts can be set aside – not by affording to themselves the delusion of self-righteousness or other lying maneuvers of the mind, but by divinely wrought satisfaction, cleansing and renewal. Condemnation is lifted for those who are joined to Jesus Christ.

*Shalom* is restored through man's deliverance from his bondage to sin and death, and thus the prophets' promise of a kingdom characterized by peace was inseparable from the promise of a great *redemption*. God would restore *shalom* through the work of His appointed Redeemer. From the beginning this was the marrow of God's revelation to men: His coming kingdom was to be a dominion defined by the restoration of a perfect, harmonious, peaceful and delightful ordering of all things. But, given the presence and power of sin, this kingdom would only emerge through an act of divine redemption.

This truth was exemplified in the Israelite kingdom which had its origin in redemption (Exodus 20). Subsequently Israel experienced numerous acts of divine deliverance as God rescued the nation from repeated episodes of subjugation to enemies during the period of the Judges. And even when the Israelite kingdom was devastated during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, God delivered and restored a remnant from exile by means of a sovereign redemption through His "messiah" Cyrus (Isaiah 44:24-45:13).

One need only refer to Israel's prophets to recognize that each of these redemptive events prefigured and built the case for the grand act of redemption by which God would establish his true and everlasting kingdom. Whether Moses, the various judges, David, or even the Gentile king Cyrus, each of God's appointed deliverers was a type of His ultimate Servant/Deliverer. *Furthermore, each act of redemption presupposed and proceeded upon an act of judgment against the subjugating power*. This was true of Egypt and Israel's local enemies in Canaan, and it was later true of Babylon.

2. So also, the redemption that has come in Jesus Christ stands upon God's judgment of the enemy that had tyrannized and subjugated men since the Fall in Eden: "*The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death*" (8:2). Paul's fundamental thesis at the outset of the context is that there is no condemnation for those in Christ, and verse 2 explains *why* his assertion is true.

a. The reason that sinners can be delivered from condemnation is two-fold: in Christ they are set free from the *law of sin* and the *law of death*. The first is concerned with the sinner's deliverance from sin's enslaving power, and the second his deliverance from sin's penalty. Both are crucial to a true deliverance. For a person could be set free from the guilt and penalty incurred by the sins he has committed, but unless he is also delivered from sin's *power*, he will only continue as a forgiven slave of sin. Forgiveness is crucial, but it is only half of the equation. To be "free indeed" a person must also be delivered from the principle of bondage that defines and governs him. This is precisely Paul's point: the Christian has been justified by Christ (5:1-21), but has also died to sin's tyranny (6:1-23).

b. This freedom from both the penalty and the power of sin comes in accordance with the "*law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.*" In Paul's theology *life* is the property solely of those who have been made partakers of Christ. Having shared in His death, they also share in His life (6:1-11). This life, then, consists in a true renewal of the person himself and not merely his legal justification – if any man is in Christ he has become a part of a new creation. By a spiritual "rebirth" he has been set free from the principle of death (estrangement and corruption) that previously defined his existence. And this renewal is everywhere in the Scripture ascribed to the sovereign, divine power of the Holy Spirit. It is this understanding that brings clarity to Paul's phrase, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus."

1) Some have here (as previously) regarded Paul's use of the term *law* as referring to the Mosaic Law. They contend that Paul was indicating two aspects of the Law: on the one hand it presents and points to life (7:9-10); on the other it acts to condemn sinners. But this sense is awkward at best, for what does it mean that the Law has delivered the believer from the Law? Much more, given Paul's previous argumentation, it is impossible to ascribe deliverance from sin and death to the Law of Moses (or any other law). The whole point of chapter seven was that law is *powerless* to effect deliverance, and Paul's introduction of the Spirit into His argument does not in any way change that fact. Douglas Moo observes:

*"To be sure, Paul affirms that the law is **God's** law and that it was given with a positive purpose within the overall plan of salvation (7:7-13; cf. Galatians 3:19-4:5). But this purpose is not the liberation of the believer from a misunderstanding or misuse of the law, or from the power of sin and death. The Pauline pattern, enunciated in v. 3, is clear: the impotence of the law has been met not with a new empowering of the law but with God's gracious activity in Jesus Christ."* (emphasis in original)

- 2) It is most natural to understand his terminology as before (7:21, 23-25), where *law* refers to a binding or authoritative principle. Thus Paul's point: ***the determinative principle of new life by the Spirit that has come in Christ is the sole means for a person's being delivered from the otherwise universally determinative principles of sin and death.***

In the introductory section the Spirit's crucial role with respect to *life* was briefly considered. He was the active agency behind the first creation and its principle of life, and God's promise was that the eschatological (spiritual) life associated with the new creation would also come by the power of the Spirit (ref. Ezekiel 37). The first Adam brought condemnation and death, and the Last Adam has overcome them and reintroduced the principle of life. But this work of renewal is by the Spirit's power, so that Jesus' promise of the outpouring of the Spirit was the promise of life (cf. John 6:47-63 and 14:1-29, 20:19-22; also Romans 8:6-11).

3. Verse 8:2 has been seen to address the reason for Paul's proclamation in 8:1 – there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus *because* of the principle of new life by the Spirit, which new life indicates the conquest of the principles of sin and death (6:1-23). This conquest obviously has personal relevance, in that the Christian himself has died to the former dominion of sin in his life and its sentence of death. But Paul's argument is primarily redemptive-historical rather than individual. That is, he was speaking in the categories of reality that define the two “ages” of human history: the age of the former Adam – the age of the tyranny of sin and death – and the present age of the new Adam – the age marked by the conquest of sin and death and the entrance of righteousness and life by the Holy Spirit. The new reality promised by God from the beginning has come, and it has brought the end of condemnation for those who rest in the Redeemer.

Verses 8:3-4, in turn, serve to explain the *mechanism* for this new life in the Spirit and the end of condemnation: “*For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*”

- a. Paul's thesis in 7:14-25 is that law is powerless to bring deliverance from sin's tyranny, and so also from condemnation and death. Another deliverer must be found, and that deliverer is the triune God: *What the Law could not do, God did.* Again, the problem does not lie with law per se (in this context the Mosaic Law), but with the power of sin and its capacity to effectively use law for its own purposes – the Law is made impotent *through the flesh* (ref. 7:7-13).
- b. And the way that God accomplished what law could not was by taking matters into His own hands: *He sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.* Paul's emphasis in God's sending of the Son is notably not upon the Incarnation, but the reason for the Incarnation, namely Christ's self-sacrifice at Calvary. For Christ's coming in the likeness of fallen man was for the purpose that He would be a suitable sacrifice for sinners (Hebrews 2:9-18, 5:1-10, 9:1ff).

Jesus Christ did not take upon Himself our sinful humanity, but the *likeness* of sinful humanity. He clothed Himself with our weakness and mortality and subjected Himself to the temptations of life in a world marked by the vandalism of shalom. In every way He identified with man in his plight, and He did so in order that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God – first as an acceptable propitiation for the sins of men (Hebrews 2:17), and then as an effectual intercessor for them in their weakness (Romans 8:31-34).

- c. In this way God *condemned sin in the flesh*. Because of the power of sin, law cannot help men in their need for deliverance. Quite the contrary, it only acts as sin's ally by exacerbating their unrighteousness and bringing upon them the inescapable sentence of death. Law can only condemn *sinner*s; it has no capacity to condemn *sin*. Obviously law does condemn sin in the sense that it identifies sin and finds fault with it, but this is foreign to Paul's meaning. The condemnation Paul spoke of is a judicial judgment according to which sentence is passed on the condemned entity. His point is that sin has rendered all men violators of righteousness and perverters of God's perfect order. In that sense sin raises a just claim against them before the "bar" of God. But by sending His Son to be a sin offering, God *judged sin*; that is, He satisfied the demands of justice with respect to it. But in so doing, He also destroyed its power, for sin no longer can use law to raise a charge against those who share in Christ's satisfaction (ref. 8:31-34).
- d. God's goal in the offering of His Son was not merely the exacting of just punishment upon human guilt. The satisfaction of justice was foundational, but not ultimate. God's ultimate end was that *the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit*. This statement has been interpreted most often in one of two ways:

The first is that Paul was speaking of the Christian's new spiritual capacity to be a "law-keeper." Thus his phrase, "...*the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us,*" is to be understood as the Law (usually "moral law") being fulfilled **by** us. It is further argued that this law-keeping is made possible by the Christian choosing to walk in the Spirit rather than in the flesh. At least two considerations argue against this view.

- 1) The first is Paul's noun translated *requirement*. His language does not indicate individual obligations associated with a so-called moral law, but *the singular, defining righteousness* required by the Law of Moses. What the Law required was a perfect human existence – a life marked by perfect conformity to and communion with God. Can any Christian suggest that he has ever (or could ever) meet this requirement?
- 2) The second is his verb *fulfilled*, its occurrence in the passive voice, and his use of the preposition *in* ("in us"). Together they indicate that he was thinking in terms of God's act of redemptive fulfillment in Christ, rather than what we ourselves do in the daily living out of our Christian faith.

The second view is that Paul was speaking of God's satisfaction of the Law's "righteous requirement" **in** us through the means of Christ's atoning self-sacrifice. In this case his concern was not with the Christian's practical obedience, but with God's work of redemption in His Son and the deliverance from sin and death and the new life that have resulted from it. This view is entirely consistent with the context and Paul's emphasis. But if this is indeed Paul's meaning, then the final clause of 8:4 must also be interpreted differently than in the former view. For in that view, Paul's qualifier of walking according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh indicates the *means* by which the believer satisfies God's demand that he be a law-keeper. In other words, it is by walking in the Spirit that the Christian is able to fulfill the Law. The obvious implication of this understanding is that the other option – namely, walking according to the flesh – also applies to the believer. He can choose either to walk according to the Spirit or the flesh, and his choice directly affects his success in keeping God's commandments.

But the latter view sees Paul as indicating the *persons* in whom the righteous requirement of the Law has been fulfilled. His point is that those in whom the Law's righteousness has been fulfilled are those who are defined by a new paradigm of life: they now walk according to the Spirit rather than as formerly, according to the flesh. According to Paul, the Holy Spirit is the point of differentiation between men: the believer is *renewed* by the Spirit (8:1), *indwelt* by the Spirit (8:9), *adopted* through the Spirit (8:15-17), *led* by the Spirit (8:14), *empowered* by the Spirit (7:6), and *upheld* by the Spirit (8:26-27).

*Paul was not here using "flesh" and "Spirit" to contrast two ways in which Christians can order their lives. He was indicating the two realities that define the two "ages" of salvation history, and therefore the two principles by which a man can live in relation to God. This becomes clearly evident in the next context in which Paul contrasts "flesh" and "Spirit" as the principles that define unbelievers and believers respectively. These principles are shown in this passage to be mutually exclusive: one is either "in the flesh" or "in the Spirit"; those governed by the flesh do not have the Spirit at all (8:9). For this reason those defined by the flesh are hostile to God and cannot please Him, whereas those defined by the Spirit are sons of God. Likewise, the mind set on the flesh is *death* (from which believers have been delivered), while the mind set on the Spirit is *life and peace*.*

*"Evil rolls across the ages, but so does good...Creation is stronger than sin and grace stronger still. Creation and grace are anvils that have worn out a lot of our hammers. To speak of sin by itself, to speak of it apart from the realities of creation and grace, is to forget the resolve of God. God wants shalom, and will pay any price to get it back. Human sin is stubborn, but not as stubborn as the grace of God and not half so persistent, not half so ready to suffer to win its way. Moreover, to speak of sin by itself is to misunderstand its nature: sin is only a parasite, a vandal, a spoiler. Sinful life is a partly depressing, partly ludicrous caricature of genuine human life. To concentrate on our rebellion, defection, and folly...is to forget that the center of the Christian religion is not our sin but our Savior. To speak of sin without grace is to minimize the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, and the hope of shalom." (Plantinga)*