

## **Romans 8:1-4      What is it therefore?**

A little while ago, I was on the telephone to a young woman who works for a large printing company in North Yorkshire. Her name is Rachel. Always looking for an opportunity to have a significant conversation with people I remarked, ‘that’s a lovely Bible name but who was Rachel in the Bible?’ My new young friend had to admit that she did not know. I said, “I expect you have heard of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* - well, Rachel was Joseph’s Mum.”

Rachel and I proceeded to have quite an interesting conversation but part way through Rachel said, “You’re not trying to convert me, are you?” My answer completely took the wind out of her sails.

I replied, “I shouldn’t worry too much even if I am trying to convert you because people are trying to convert me all the time. After all,” I said, warming to the subject, “people want to convert me to what they believe – a universe that just happened, a world where things seem completely out of control and where many people are wondering how things will go on, and individual lives that seem to have little purpose or meaning.” This obviously seemed to strike a chord. “You see,” I continued, “they want to convert me and I want to convert them. They want to convert me to believing in a universe without a creator, to a world without a Saviour and a life, even when things are going well, that is ultimately hopeless and meaningless. I want to convert them to a universe with a creator, to a world with a Saviour and a life that, even when things are difficult, has hope and meaning.”

For many years Christians sat in the pews of Bible-based churches listening to Christian teaching that more or less spoon-fed them (or should I say ‘us’?) with ideas of Christian doctrine and morality. We had stock answers to most of the issues that raised themselves. There is little doubt that 50 years ago Christians would not have taken too long to consider the Islamic view of God or the morality of homosexual practice. This was made all the more easy by the fact that most of us never met a Muslim and, if we met someone who was ‘gay’, we probably did not know it. As Douglas Moo reminds us,

Most Christians today are brought into direct touch with other religious options — at work, at school, at social gatherings — in ways that did not happen so often in the past. Meeting the challenge of Islam seemed easy when we learned rote responses out of a book; it may not seem as easy when we enter into discussion with a live Muslim who lives next door.

(Moo, 2000)

Today’s challenge is to be thoughtful, Biblical, practical Christians, ready to engage with the world, with our neighbours in word and deed. To do so, we must know how to think in a Christian way about the culture in which we live and be prepared, as I tried to be with young Rachel, to give a robust account of Christian faith and our hope in Christ.

For many years, doctrine has been a word to which many Christians have responded ambivalently. Evangelicals have not normally been hostile to sound doctrine but have sometimes thought that it took second place to experience. I don't know enough about other denominations to be sure but I have a hunch that this is something to which Methodists have been particularly susceptible. The classic Methodist model of Christian experience as the 'warmed heart' has scriptural roots (Luke 24:32) that go back long before John Wesley's experience at Aldersgate Street (24 May, 1738) but the 'heart strangely warmed' must never be an excuse for the 'head strangely empty' for Jesus opened the minds of the disciples so that they could understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45).

The New Testament book of Romans is undoubtedly the Apostle Paul's greatest work – it is his *magnum opus* and takes prime place among the New Testament letters. The longest of the New Testament letters, it is also considered to be the most difficult. You can almost hear people speak in hushed tones, even at the thought of doing a series of Bible studies on Romans but it is to Romans that we are going to turn our attention and, in particular, to what is often considered to be the greatest chapter of the letter, Chapter 8, a chapter sometimes called 'the Christian's Declaration of Freedom' (Wiersbe, 1989:538)

Christian doctrine is about what Christians believe or you might say how we think. Some people tell me, 'it does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere'. That is clearly nonsense. Was Hitler sincere? Was Saddam Hussein sincere? Other people tell me that they are very private about their religion. I think by that they normally mean that they do not talk to other people about their beliefs but it is preposterous to suggest that our beliefs are somehow remote from our words and our actions. A person who believes that a person of the opposite sex is inferior, or that a person of a different ethnic group is inferior, or that a person of a different social background or religious group is inferior, is likely to start speaking and behaving in a way that shows those beliefs in practice. The distinction, therefore, between theoretical Christianity (what we believe) and practical Christianity (how we live) is not so clear cut as some people would have us think. In fact, I wonder if such a distinction exists at all.

As a child, I was not a great reader of books. Indeed for many years one of my claims was that the only book I had ever read from cover to cover was *The 101 Dalmatians*. As an adult, one of the first books I was given was Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. It was an excellent gift and I have used it a lot. I would be delighted if everyone had such a book of systematic theology though I guess that these days the standard evangelical text would be Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, or I would recommend *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne. That said, when God, who I firmly believe inspired the Holy Scriptures to be written, gave the Christian community his Word he did not give us a systematic theology or a text book on Christian doctrine but a collection of works that we call 'gospels' and 'letters' and the exciting, mysterious book of Revelation. Even Romans, Paul's longest letter, is not a *systematic* theology. There are no sections on Christology, eschatology or ecclesiology but it is an *occasional* theology (Moo, 2000:19) and by addressing specific situations, Paul also addresses our situation. The

book of *Romans* is Christian theology earthed in a specific context. Therefore, any treatment of *Romans* that seems arid and theoretical cannot do justice to the letter. I am expressly avoiding using the word 'epistle' because that gives an other-worldly feel that I don't think does justice to the letter. This is a real letter, to real people in a real context but, as the Word of God it is a timeless letter, to us, in our context today.

Most Christians know something about Paul. By virtue of his birth, Paul was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. At first, Paul (formerly known as Saul of Tarsus), was implacably opposed to Christian teaching but after his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, a journey he was making to persecute Christians all the more, Paul became a fervent Christian, the last of the Apostles, evangelist, church-planter, and pastor.

In New Testament times, the Roman Empire stretched from Britain in the west through Europe to Arabia. As the capital of the empire, Rome was the centre for politics and trade and had become a wealthy and cosmopolitan city. It is possible that the church at Rome was founded by Hebrew Christians but, however it was founded, by the time Paul wrote to the church, it was famous for its faith (Romans 1:8). Paul wrote to Rome from Corinth, while staying at the home of Gaius (Romans 16:23), in about A.D. 57. It would be an intelligent guess that Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) carried the letter from Corinth to Rome.

The letter to the Romans is rather more formal than Paul's other letters, presumably because Paul had not visited the church. Paul intended to visit Rome but had been prevented from doing so. It is possible that Paul wrote this letter to Rome to prepare the Christians in the capital for his arrival so that Rome could become a strategic base for his mission in the west, as Antioch had been his base in the east. Paul had already preached the gospel in the strategic centres of population at the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. Later he wanted to journey through Rome and on to Spain to plant the gospel there (Romans 15:22-28). He hoped to encourage the Christians at Rome, strengthening their faith and winning their support for his continued mission.

It is also possible that Paul realised that he might never reach Rome in person. A passage requesting prayer for his safety and success follows the section that sets out his plan for future mission on his journey to Judea before leaving for Rome (Romans 15:31). If that were to be the case then Paul would need to write an orderly and comprehensive letter to Rome so that the church could continue his work, proclaiming the gospel to the farthestmost parts of the empire.

A major theme of *Romans* is justification by grace through faith (Chapters 1-5) and, though this doctrine is found throughout scripture, it receives its most thorough and systematic treatment in this letter. After a short introduction, Paul states his theme (Romans 1:16-17). It is about one people (Jews and Gentiles) being made righteous before God (that is justified) by faith. Everything that comes after is an exposition of that theme. Justification is needed because of human sinfulness (Romans 1:18-3:20) among Jews and Gentiles alike. Individual 'sins' are symptoms of the big problem 'sin'.

God's remedy for sin is justification (Romans 3:21-5:21). The doctrine of justification by divine grace through faith needs repeating over and over again. We live in a world where sin is not taken seriously enough. The fall of humanity (mankind) is real and has real consequences, past, present and future. A life of religion or good works will never be adequate to put a guilty sinner in a right standing before God. Indeed, nothing that we can ever do can make us right with God. Into this hopeless situation God has come himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ appeases God's anger against human wickedness. Jesus Christ is the sacrifice of atonement (3:25) or 'propitiation' (KJV) for our sins. God forgave sins in Old Testament times in anticipation of the death of Christ and on that basis alone. Paul contrasts the unbeliever's position in Adam, where there is sin and death, with the believer's position in Christ, where there is righteousness and eternal life. The outcome of justification should be sanctification. That is Christians are called to holy living (Chapters 6-8). Sanctification has nothing to do with keeping Old Testament law, which could only give a sense of failure; rather the Spirit of Christ gives the believer the power to overcome all things (Morris, 1988:304).

The New Testament church needed teaching in Christian doctrine and so has every generation of Christians, even to the present day. The impact of the letter cannot be measured for it has changed the lives of such great men as Augustine, Luther, Bunyan and Wesley, as well as the lives of countless ordinary men and women. Paul's letter to the Romans is as relevant now as it was to the New Testament church. 'God's holiness has been satisfied because Jesus paid the penalty for human guilt. God's love has likewise been satisfied because the death of Christ provides a way by which the sinner may be forgiven' (Gundry, 1970:295). There is nothing that the world more urgently needs to hear. It is this account of the gospel that Paul rehearses. Today's Christians need to be sure of their ground and know confidently what the gospel message is, why people need to hear it, how they can experience it, what it will mean for their future and what it has to do with their everyday life.

When I first attended the Southport Methodist Holiness Convention in 1991, the year before our friend Trevor Staniforth came up with the name, 'Summer Fire', which we have used from 1993 onwards, I was Methodist minister in North Cornwall at St Agnes. In one of my five village chapels, one of my members asked if I would do a Wednesday evening Bible study on his favourite chapter of the Bible, Romans 8. To be fair, he came regularly as we made our way through the first seven chapters of Romans but when we came to Romans 8 he could contain himself no longer. "I only asked you to do this chapter," he said, "but you have done the first seven chapters as well."

"Yes", I replied, "but did you notice with what word Chapter 8 begins? It is the word, 'therefore' and it was to understand that word that I had to do Chapters 1-7."

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by

the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.  
(Romans 8:1-4)

Joking aside, we cannot possibly cover the whole of Romans Chapters 1-7 in a short space of time but we do need to know to what 'therefore' is referring. As someone once said, "whenever you see a therefore ask, 'what is it there for?'".

The great Bible expositor Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1973:259) regards Romans Chapters 6 and 7 as a digression from Paul's main theme. The reader has hardly been prepared for the great statement that there is 'no condemnation' by the two preceding chapters. 'Therefore' takes us back to Chapter 5 verses 12 to 21, where Paul demonstrates that those who belong to Christ escape the 'condemnation' (Romans 5:16, Gk *katakrima*, κατακριμα), literally the punishment that comes after condemnation (Bruce, 1963:159) that is due to everyone through Adam's sin.

Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought *condemnation*, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.  
(Romans 5:16)

The word is only used three times in the New Testament. Paul repeats it two verses later.

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was *condemnation* for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.  
(Romans 5:18)

After using the word twice in the space of three verses (Romans 5:16 and 18) Paul does not use that word again until the opening of Chapter 8.

Therefore, there is now no *condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus.  
(Romans 8:1)

The little word, 'now, is easy to pass over but we should give it full force' (Ziesler, 1989:201). 'Now' is this present age of Christ and the Spirit. God justifies us by his Son and sanctifies us by his Spirit (Stott, 1994:219). For the believer, the good news that there is 'no condemnation' is not simply a matter of not feeling guilty about sin, what might be termed a 'subjective experience'. There is an 'objective reality'. It is through

our union with Christ that we can escape the sentence of spiritual death that our sins have rightly earned (Romans 6:23).

Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

(Romans 8:2)

The key word in the second half the sentence (that we call verse 2) is ‘Spirit’ (Gk *pneuma*, πνευμα, which is used 21 times in Chapter 8), the power which defeats sin and death. It is the Spirit of God who works for the salvation of the believer, who is in Christ Jesus. The power of sin is more than matched by the power of the Spirit. Paul uses ‘Spirit of life’ here to make the contrast with the ‘law of sin and death’. The law as given to Moses was not the ‘law of sin and death’, for the law was faultless in itself and a revelation of a holy God. Nevertheless, it was also impossible for a man to keep the law in his own strength. The work of Christ by the Spirit in the life of the believer is such that the dominion of sin is broken. This does not mean that the believer does not have the power to sin but it does mean that the believer has the power not to sin.

In Chapter 5 verses 12 to 21, Paul has shown that the common fate of all humanity (‘in Adam’) is to be dominated by sin and death. ‘All have sinned’ (Romans 3:23) and ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23). Most of us know that the function of the law is to instruct and convict. The law makes demands and condemns when those demands are not met. The function of the law is not to guide and congratulate. Therefore, when I see a road sign that says ‘30’ that is an instruction and not a guide. If I drive consistently at 29 miles an hour, I will probably annoy a lot of other motorists but, although I will remain on the right side of the law, nothing else will happen. However, if I drive at 40 miles per hour in a 30 mile per hour limit, sooner or later, I will have a brush with the law that will end in my conviction and I will be on less than thin ice if I say that I thought that the law was only there to guide me and not to instruct me. The law instructs and convicts. It does not guide and it never congratulates. Therefore, believers should not expect any help from the law. In times of temptation, the law simply gives a clear view of what is wrong but no power to do what is right.

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

(Romans 8:3-4)

Believers belong to the two ages of Adam and Christ at the same time. There is therefore a battle going on within every believer – but Christ has conquered sin and death and by the Spirit of life the believer also has the power to live not according to the sinful nature (Gk *sarks*, σαρκῆ) but according to the Spirit. When God puts his Spirit in our hearts, he writes his law there (Stott, 1994:221, cf. Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26f.).

The newer *English Standard Version* (2001), a revision of the *Revised Standard Version*, translates this verse 3 and 4 in this way:

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, 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.

(Romans 8:3-4, *ESV*)

Paul is still addressing the issue of condemnation (Romans 8:1). 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' In personal experience, the Spirit of life has set the believer free but now Paul explains how that can be the case and why being made right with God is not achievable by works of the law. The law could not offer salvation (freedom from condemnation) because the only way it could do so would have been if man had not sinned – but the very nature of humanity ('in Adam') was sinful. Therefore, humanly speaking, there cannot be any salvation by law. It is only God who can take the initiative for salvation. So God sent his own Son 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'. This does not imply 'docetism' (the heresy that Jesus only appeared to be human). Jesus did not come as an angel, he came as a man. He did not come 'in sinful flesh' for that would have made him a sinner (Wiersbe, 1989:539). Jesus came fully in the flesh (that is he became fully human) but only 'in the *likeness* of human flesh' that is fully human yet without sin (cf. Philippians 2:7). Again, it is easy to miss the force of one of the little words. Jesus is God's 'own Son', indicating his unique and special relationship with God. God's purpose in this act of incarnation was not simply to show us what he is like (the human face of God) but to fulfil his plan of salvation.

'And for sin' shows that God's plan of salvation was for Jesus, his own Son, to be a sin offering (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). God has given the decisive verdict against sin, 'in the flesh'. The death of the sin offering effects God's condemnation of sin by the destruction of the sinful flesh. It is by the self-offering of Jesus, the Son, that God, at one and the same time, provided both a sinless substitute to die for sinful man and one on whom his condemnation rests. By becoming fully human and, therefore, identifying with sinful flesh, Christ broke the power of sin by destroying its base in the flesh, bringing to an end the whole era characterised by sin's domination of human flesh. The death of Christ on the cross was 'the righteous requirement of the law'. It is this doctrine, 'penal substitution', that is one of the doctrines binding evangelical Christians together but that is currently being attacked on every side, not least because it opens up the possibility of victory over sin in a generation that wants a Christ who does not demand and offer consecration. God's purpose did not end in Christ's death. His death was a means to an end, so that people may walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). 'Walk' is simply a common biblical word for daily living (Ziesler, 1989:208). The gift of the Spirit, which was also a consequence of Christ's death and resurrection, makes living this new life possible. To be 'in Christ Jesus' means not simply a theoretical

assent to the importance of his death and resurrection but an experience of power which makes it possible for the believer to live on a different level from that characterised by the weakness of the flesh.

Charles Wesley probably wrote one of his greatest hymns to celebrate his experience on the day of Pentecost (21 May, 1738). Although less well-known than his brother's more famous experience at Aldersgate Street on the Wednesday evening of that week, it could even be that the brothers sang Charles' new composition to celebrate the experience that they shared in Christ.

And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above -  
So free, so infinite his grace -  
Emptied himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray -  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

*(HP 216, And can it be?)*