

Free from Condemnation

Numbers 21:4-9, Romans 8:1-11, John 3:14-21.

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In the letters of Paul we find one term used extremely frequently: “in Christ.” Because the term is used so frequently, it is something that we should pay attention to. What does it mean for us to be “in Christ?” Briefly, to be in Christ is to inherit salvation, as salvation is found only in Christ, only through being “in Christ.” For Christ is the one who has bought salvation for us through his death on the cross and has made it possible for us to be saved through his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God. To be “in Christ” is to be a part of the new humanity, the congregation of God’s very own people, to be a member of his body, joined together with all those who believe in every time or place.

Paul has discussed throughout his letter to the Romans what it means to be “in Christ.” Let us then take a lightening tour through the first seven chapters of Romans. Paul starts with the Gospel as the power of God through whom everyone, Jews or Gentiles, can be saved, and which reveals the wrath of God against those who reject the Gospel and worship idols of their own making, leading to sin and depravity of every kind. Paul explains that it is right and proper for God to exercise his judgement on those who reject the Gospel and persist in unrighteous behaviour and rebellion. Those who reject God’s law will be punished; those who did not know God’s law will be commended if they do right, as their consciences and their own thoughts disclose right and wrong to them. Paul explained that it was no good for the Jews simply to hold on to the law, as if the law itself would save them. It was only in keeping the law that they could experience the grace and forgiveness of God through his covenant, that is, by faith in God, not faith in the law of God. And as the law reveals, no one is righteous, since even those who have the law do not abide by it, but violate it continually. Thus it is not the law that saves us, but faith in God who gave us the law. And now that God has sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us to bring us to salvation, it is necessary for us to have faith in Christ. Nothing we can do can save ourselves; only God can save us through faith in Christ.

Abraham is the prime example for Paul of faith: he did not have the law, but was declared righteous by God because of his faith. As a result he became the father of all those who believed, including those who were descended from him and to whom God gave his law. But not only them: for Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether or not they belong to Israel to whom God gave the law. It is Israel with whom God made his covenant; and from that covenant people came Christ Jesus, who was to save not only the Jews who put their faith in him, but also those outside Israel who had faith, and thereby became members of the new covenant people of God. And as a result of having faith in Christ, we are saved from God's wrath against the unrighteous, since the essence of unrighteousness is to reject God and his way of salvation through faith in Christ. Death came through Adam, the first to reject God's law and to choose his own ways; Christ, however, is the one through whom life came, since he reversed the disobedience of Adam through his own obedience, even to the point of dying to pay the penalty of death for those who deserved to die, when he himself being sinless had no penalty to pay on his own behalf.

Those who are in Christ then by faith, are no longer bound by the law of sin and death, and having been freed from that law, they are no longer slaves to sin. Instead of rebellion against God, we have died with Christ and are risen again with him to newness of life; a change which is symbolised and made real for us and in us through baptism. We no longer follow the path of sin, but are instead slaves to righteousness. Instead of earning death as the penalty for sin, we are heirs of eternal life and followers of the way of holiness as the gift of God to us in Christ. For the law has its power over us only while we live, and once we are dead we are no longer bound by that law. We are dead in Christ, having put off the sinful nature and the life of disobedience, and having been born again in Christ, being heirs of life and made new through the Holy Spirit. We are therefore no longer bound by the law of sin and death.

But that is not to say that we are free from the temptations of our old sinful nature, which in spite of being put to death through Christ still has a hold on us as long as we are alive. We can at any time fall prey to the deceitfulness of sin and the power of unrighteousness. The law brings the penalty of death to all those who transgress against the law; and insofar as we continue to sin against God, even after having placed our faith and trust in him, we again make ourselves subject to the force of the

law. It is only in Christ that we are freed from the penalty of death for sin, and only by remaining true to Christ, faithful and obedient to his law, that we are freed from the power of sin and death. And how do we achieve this? Not by our own efforts, but by acknowledging that it is only by faith in Christ that the grace of God is received by us, and only by grace that we are saved. We cannot earn our salvation by anything that we do. It is not faith that saves us, it is by the rich, unmerited and free grace that we are saved through placing our faith in Christ. The sinful nature still rises up within us, which is why we need to continually come to God in penitence and faith, seeking his forgiveness and grace to pardon us and renew us again to live as his faithful and obedient followers. So if we have been saved by Christ, and have thereby been delivered from the power of sin and death which is at work because of the law, then we have been made truly free. It is the grace of God which makes all this to happen, which grace is openly offered to all who will repent and place their faith in Christ alone. Without that, there is only the certain knowledge of the judgement of God and his condemnation of us, for we do not and cannot keep the law of God because we have given ourselves over to the power of sin and therefore are under the dominion of death. Those who persist in their rebellion against God can face only his condemnation.

And what of those who are “in Christ,” who have placed their faith in him and are made new through God’s grace? We have now arrived at Chapter 8, our reading for today. Therefore, Paul says, because of everything that I have described for you, because of all that God has done for you and in you through Christ, there is now no condemnation. Because for those who are in Christ, the work of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death. The law was powerless to save us because of our sinful nature that rebelled against the law. But God enabled us to be saved by sending his son, seemingly a sinful man like all the rest of us, but in fact the one who alone was righteous and therefore was able to fulfil the requirements of the law, living the life of perfect obedience and faith. Because he had fulfilled the law in his own life, and therefore was not subject to the penalty of death on his own behalf, he was then able to die to pay that penalty on behalf of others who fully merited that penalty through their sinfulness. What the law could not do, Christ was able to do, and what the law could not achieve, Christ alone was able to achieve. Through his righteousness, that is, through fulfilling all the requirements of the law, Christ is able

to take upon himself the condemnation that was due to us, so that we could be freed from the condemnation and instead to inherit eternal life.

As a result of being freed from that condemnation, we are no longer in thrall to the law, and can instead follow the path of the Spirit, through setting our minds on that which the Spirit requires. This does not mean that we can simply jettison the law, as something of no benefit for us. No, Paul has just described the law, in chapter 7, as something that was holy, righteous and good. Instead of the law being something external that we are obliged to obey, the law of God is instead written on the hearts of those who believe, so that by living out of the life of Christ, we will follow his ways and obey his laws. The sinful nature cannot and will not submit to God's law; the believing nature of those who have faith in Christ are indeed no longer bound by a sinful nature, but are being transformed and made new by the Holy Spirit, in order to make us in every way like Christ. We are no longer controlled by the sinful nature but by the Holy Spirit. And while we are still subject to death because of our sin, we are no longer enslaved by either sin or death. We have been made alive through the Spirit of God because of righteousness. Those in whom the Spirit of God dwells, are led by the Spirit, and not by the sinful nature. The presence of the Spirit of God dwelling in us is not optional for the Christian: if we are in Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in us. If we do not have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, in other words, if we are not being daily transformed into the likeness of Christ; if we do not follow in his ways; if we do not love his law and commandments; if we do not have faith in him; if we do not show love for others both inside and outside the community of faith, then we do not belong to Christ, and we are still dead in sin and subject to the condemnation of God.

The culmination of Paul's explanation of the new life in Christ is to exult in the hope that lies before us: because it was the Spirit of God who raised Christ from the dead, then if that same Spirit dwells in us, then we too will be raised from the dead in the same way. Note that Christ was raised from the dead by God the Father through the Spirit: he did not rise from the dead on his own power, as it were. No, we believe that Christ was fully, truly, totally dead, and would remain permanently so, had it not been for the work of the Holy Spirit in raising him from the dead. Christ did not go to the cross thinking, well it's not a nice way to go, but all I have to do is wait a few days then I'll come back to life again. No, Christ won the victory over death not by playing

possum, as it were, then coming back to life and saying, "I win!" Rather, Christ had to entrust himself totally to the Father, believing not that he could come back to life after being put to death, but that after he had died, and when he was no longer able to do anything at all about it, in others words, fully, completely and properly dead, then the Father would step in and vindicate him and defeat death by delivering Christ from the power of death. God burst through the chains of death and set him free by raising him from the dead and restoring him to life again, but not as Lazarus, or Jairus's daughter, or the widow's son whom Christ brought back to life. They were simply raised from death and lived, but would eventually die again. Christ, on the other hand, was not simply raised but transformed, glorified, justified, and made immortal to live forever as the Son of God at the Father's right hand. He was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit bursting through the bonds of death and making him live once more. And that, says Paul, is what the Holy Spirit will do for you if you have that same Spirit living within you. All those who are Christ's have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, and in that case, will be raised from the dead and transformed and glorified, made immortal to share forever with Christ in his eternal kingdom.

You can no more raise yourself from the dead than Christ could. You can no more transform yourself than Christ could. You can no more make yourself immortal and fitted for the everlasting kingdom of God than Christ could. But the Holy Spirit can and will do all these things in you and for you, just as they have been done in and for Christ. Just as the Spirit raised Christ from the dead, so that same Spirit will raise you from the dead. Your mortal bodies will receive life, and the power of death will be broken for evermore! Hallelujah! That is our inheritance as the heirs of Christ, members of his body, covenant partners with God, children of Abraham, the new Israel, those who have placed their faith in Christ and have received grace from God.

But there is a dark side to all this, one which we often suppress and rarely admit to ourselves even in our private thoughts. And we certainly rarely hear it spoken of even in the context of our community of faith. And this we find in the passage from the gospel of John, where Jesus is speaking also about the themes that Paul has explained in his letter to the Romans. We can read verse 16 so quickly, that we neglect to see what comes before it, and what comes after it, and as a result, I believe we mistake what it is that this verse itself is saying to us. Let's look a little more carefully at this

passage reporting the very words of Jesus. Firstly, the wider context of this passage is the conversation Jesus was having with Nicodemus, regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing new life to those who believe. Those who do not accept the work of the Holy Spirit, those who do not accept the words of Jesus, but continue in their rebellion against God even while still holding on to the law of God, will fail to inherit the salvation they profess to desire. They have refused to accept that Jesus was the one that God had sent to them to call them back to obedience and faith, he one they were to follow if they were to receive grace and life.

Then Jesus makes this obscure comment about Moses and the snake in the desert, comparing himself to that snake. What on earth is this all about? From the passage read to us from Numbers, we can see what Jesus meant. The people of Israel were complaining, again, about the problems they experienced as a result of being set free from generations of slavery in Egypt, where they had been cruelly treated, forced to work under extremely difficult conditions, had their children murdered because there were too many of them, and suffered appallingly in many ways. So God stepped in and delivered them through many marvellous deeds, taking them out from Egypt through the leadership of Moses. So they complained! There's not enough water! There's not enough food! We hate this manna that God has provided for us to eat! Why are we wandering around in a desert? So in response to their ingratitude, God sent a punishment on them: poisonous snakes invaded their camp. Many of the people were bitten and died. Then the people saw the error of their ways, and repented of their complaining. They begged Moses to pray to God that the snakes would be taken away. So Moses prayed. But what happened next? Did the snakes go away? No. Did they stop biting the people? No. Did the people stop dying? No. So what did happen? Moses was commanded by God to make a figure of a snake, put it on a pole, and tell the people that if they happen to be bitten by a snake, they could simply look at the figure of the snake on the pole and they would not die but live. So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole for people to look at if they were bitten, and then they would not die. The snakes remained; they kept on biting people; but there was now a way of salvation: to look at the snake on the pole, which would mean life and not death. Now imagine a stubborn, hard-hearted and rebellious man who was bitten by snakes: is it not possible that he would say, What a load of nonsense. I can't see how looking at a bronze snake on a pole can make any difference. How is that going

to help me – I'll deal with this my own way... He left a wife and six children. God did not ask them to do anything difficult or extreme. He did not require sacrifices or self-denial. He did not ask anything at all except that they look at the snake on the pole: and in doing so, they accepted what God had told them to do, and obeyed. They believed, as a result, they lived.

So Jesus said, just as Moses lifted up a snake on a pole, so I will be lifted up so that anyone who believes will have life, not just healing from a snake bite, but eternal life. What do we have to do to have eternal life? Look to Jesus, lifted up for us to look on, not with scorn or derision, not with ridicule or contempt, but with faith; and in placing our faith in Christ, we live, just as those who looked at the snake on the pole also lived. Because God loves the world he has made so much, that he gave his one and only Son, so that anyone who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. The dark side then comes to the fore: those who do not believe, who do not look to Christ as those who refused to look at the snake on the pole, do not have eternal life, but will perish. Paul said that for those who are in Christ, there is therefore now no condemnation. Jesus said, that God did not send his son into the world in order to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. So then, whoever believes in him is not condemned. Paul and Jesus are saying the same thing: faith in Christ enables us to escape from the condemnation of God, his anger against those who break his laws and rebel against him, denying his sovereign Lordship and divine power.

Jesus continues, those who do not believe will not be condemned sometime in the future, no, they are condemned already. Every one of us stands under the condemnation of God because of our sin. We are already condemned to punishment. But those who believe in Christ is not condemned, because they have believed in the name of God's one and only Son. What does that mean? If we are already condemned, then what we need is a way of removing that condemnation. It is not that those who do not believe will be condemned at some future time; no, all of us are already condemned, but by believing in Christ we can have that penalty of condemnation removed. If we do not believe, that condemnation remains. But how does believing in Christ remove our condemnation? In the same way that the Israelites could escape from the penalty of death by looking at the snake on the pole. God asks

us to place our faith in Christ, to acknowledge our rebellion and sin just as the Israelites recognised and acknowledged their complaining and rebellion, to admit that the penalty God has imposed on us is righteous and just, and to pray to the Lord to deliver us by his grace. And most importantly of all, we are to accept the way of salvation that God has provided for us. It is no good us saying that we find the whole Christian story just too hard to accept, and that it doesn't make sense to us, so we will come up with our own way of salvation and trust that God will accept that instead. God is not in the bargaining mode here. We have a need of salvation: God has provided one for us, and expects us to make use of it. He has no other way to offer; there is no smorgasbord for us to choose from, and we are not entitled to come up with our own alternatives. God has in his grace offered us a way of salvation: if we wish to receive his grace, then it comes to us in God's way, on God's terms, on his conditions. You can look at the figure on the pole and live, or come up with your own alternative and take the consequences. And if your alternative fails to achieve what you hoped, then there is no point in complaining to God about it! It's God's way or no way: you decide, but remember this: God is under no obligation to accept anything other than faith in Christ as the way to salvation, and has in fact declared that all other alternatives are automatically disqualified.

It is common for people to hold these days that it is intolerant, or judgemental, or exclusivistic, or arrogant, to hold that there are benefits accruing to the Christian which are not available to those who are not Christians. We even find it difficult to see a distinction between Christians and non-Christians, preferring to see everyone as believing in their own way, or finding other paths to God. These days, we can speak about having a spirituality, something that everyone has, which is expressed in a variety of ways. This "spirituality" is seen as what is important, the content or focus of that spirituality is not important, because it is so intensely personal and individual that all we can do is appreciate each person's spirituality as if this in itself is what matters. But the Scriptures are not interested in whether or not we have a "spirituality" to express: it proceeds from the assumption that everyone is spiritual and lives out of that spiritual reality in their lives. What the Scriptures stress as important is that the spirituality we express is founded on the work of God in Christ, communicated to us by the Holy Spirit, and shared with those who likewise believe.

It is clear from the Scriptures that it is only those who are “in Christ” who share the fruits of his labours: the salvation won by his death and resurrection. While we are usually willing to speak of the benefits received by those who believe, who are in Christ, who are one with other believers in the community of faith which Christ has formed, we are often reluctant to speak about the converse, that those who are not in Christ do not share those benefits. And it is also a widely held view that while there are benefits arising from faith in Christ, those benefits are not exclusive to Christians, but are available to anyone at all. But this is not what the Scriptures teach us. There we read not only of the salvation which is available to all those who will believe in Christ, place their trust and confidence in him and follow in his ways, but also of the converse: that those who do not believe, who will not follow him, will reap the consequences of their response. In the passages we read from John 3 and Romans 8, it is made explicit for us. There are two outcomes for us, dependent on whether or not we have faith in Christ: those who believe are saved, those who do not believe are condemned. It is stark, and explicit, and unavoidable. There is no way around this clear and repeated teaching of Scripture, regardless of our distaste for it, regardless of whether we would prefer it was not there, whether or not we believe it to be true.

Let us then place our full trust in Christ, believing in him and following his way, so that we too, just as he was, can be set free from the bonds of death, and through the Holy Spirit working in us, be raised to immortality, glory and eternity in the kingdom of God.

May his grace continually work in our hearts, and bring us to share in his eternal kingdom with all the saints throughout the ages, Amen.