

Why am I often not sure

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[0 : 00] The reading is from Romans chapter 7, starting at verse 15, and going to Romans chapter 8, verse 4. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being. But I see in my members another law, waging a war against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I myself served the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I served the law of sin.

[1 : 26] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

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 condemns 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.

Well, good morning everyone. We're going to be on week two in our series called Safe and Secure in Christ. A series that's really going to focus on assurance.

So I want to start this morning with just a statement to you as my Christian brothers and sisters. And it's this. God wants you, as a Christian, to have assurance of your salvation.

Let me say it again. God, it's our Father's intention that Christians like you and me are totally certain that we have been forgiven for our sinner rebellion, that we now enjoy a relationship with God, that he will never change his mind about us or abandon us, in spite of our ongoing failure and disobedience, and that finally we will make it home to heaven or glory forever.

[3 : 14] Our Father wants us to understand that, to experience that. Now the question is, do you believe it? Do you even dare to believe this?

A question may already be forming in your mind. If God wants me to be absolutely sure about being Christian, then why is it that I'm often, so often, anything but sure?

No doubt some of you here this morning are struggling with a massive lack of assurance, massive doubts, loads of doubts. And no doubt you'd love to be able to believe it, but just somehow or other it eludes you.

Your scam alert goes off in your mind saying, well, if something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is too good to be true. And given my experience of life as a Christian, it's too good to be true.

Some of you may actually be living with a lack of assurance because you think it would be arrogant or presumptuous, like sinful pride for a Christian, any Christian, to say they're certain of being a Christian.

[4 : 40] I've known people like that over my ministry years. Some of you may be lacking assurance because your thinking is all wrong.

And your actual thinking is robbing you of what God wants you to see and experience. So lack of assurance is a big thing for Christians for all different reasons.

But the Lord says to each Christian here this morning that assurance of salvation is his gift to us to know and experience.

Even better, as we move into Romans 8, even better, he actually gives us a series of reference points. If you know about navigation and triangulation, then you fix your bearings by triangulating different reference points.

Well, that's what God gives us here in Romans 8 in respect of assurance, a series of reference points which when properly triangulated or used together ensure we have our bearings right in terms of assurance of our salvation.

[5 : 50] And the first reference point this morning, in the first four verses of Romans 8, the first reference point is the unmerited and unchanging love of God in Christ and his objective work.

His objective work on behalf of his guilty, sinful people. Let's have a look at Paul's statement in verses 1 through to 4. Verse 1, Don's already opened up.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Now Dave and I didn't collude, but Dave's introduction picked up my next sentence. The idea of condemnation is horrible. In a courtroom, the convicted criminal may know of his guilt, but to hear the verdict or condemnation is an extra layer of awfulness even for the guilty criminal.

Condemnation expresses the awfulness of the crime. Condemnation expresses the finality of the sentence. And when we think that in this courtroom, this is the courtroom of the holy God of the universe, the idea of condemnation is even worse, if that's possible to imagine it.

[7 : 16] God's courtroom, God is the holy judge. That it says there in verse 1, therefore now no condemnation implies a time when these same people were under condemnation.

Now we need to go back through the argument of Romans to understand what's been said here. If you go back to chapter 1 verse 18, where Paul's argument starts, Paul argues from there right through chapter 2 and chapter 3, he's really saying, look, all people are condemned by God and stand under his wrath and guilt, under his condemnation.

Why? Because no person at any point in this universe has ever lived consistently with what they know about God. Let's call it the law of God.

Paul's saying, everybody is condemned because nobody lives according to the law of God. Now that law of God came to different people in different ways. For some, in chapter 1 of Romans, Paul says, all they had, the law of God, was what they could observe in nature and what was built into their conscience in a real sense of right and wrong.

And Paul says in chapter 1, these things scream out the truth about God, that he exists, that he's powerful.

[8 : 39] That he's just, that he's good. That there's right and there's wrong and there will be accountability. That's what the law of God spelled out to these people just by looking at nature or by observing their conscience.

But, says Paul, people reject that level of law and he says in chapter 1, they actually choose a domesticated God of their own making.

They ignore their conscience in determination to do as they please. So they stand guilty before God. And then he goes on to talk about the Jews. Well, they have the law of God in a different form, clearly spelled out in the Mosaic law, the Ten Commandments.

They were so proud of this privilege, says Paul. But they also stand guilty before God because they didn't actually obey the law. They twisted it to make it suit themselves.

Paul's conclusion, Romans chapter 3. No one is righteous. All stand guilty and condemned before God.

[9 : 58] None live in the light of what they know about God. So, how is it possible then, chapter 8, verse 1, to speak about those who now escape God's condemnation?

Well, we have it here, chapter 8, verses 1 and 2. It's the result of the gospel. There is, therefore now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

In Christ Jesus is the key to escaping condemnation. for the law of the spirit of life, which is just another way of talking about the gospel, I think, in simple terms.

You can go back and check that term out where it first appeared in chapter 7, verse 6. For the law of the spirit of life, or, in other words, the result of the gospel is that you've been set free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

death. In other words, it's the result of the actions of Jesus for and on behalf of his people who are now in him, that is united with him.

[11 : 05] It is that which allows this new pronouncement of no condemnation. a bit more detail, the death of Christ actually changes the way God views us.

He now views us in Christ. So, it's a really important thing here. We often think that the gospel is about how our view of God has changed. And there's a truth in that.

Our view of God does change when we become Christians. But the heart of the gospel is far more important than that. The heart of the gospel is that God's view of us has changed.

That's the really crucial part. And we're told through Romans that we have a totally new standing, a totally new status before God and it's called here in Christ Jesus.

That's a reference to how our status now, how God views us. We are now united with Christ.

Chapter 5 of Romans. Our being and future is now tied to Christ.

[12 : 14] Chapter 6 and 7 of Romans. And because God could never push away his own son, there can never be a possibility that God will push us away because we are in Christ.

And the death of Christ has actually freed us from the guilt and power of sin. Verse 2, for the law of the spirit of life has set you free. You're no longer obligated, you're no longer under obligation to or in debt to the law of sin and death.

Jesus' death and resurrection has set us free. But the question is then, how does a person be set free from the law of sin and death or the guilt which demands condemnation?

Well, verse 3 tells us, 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 other words, we're set free because the death of Christ has dealt with the very things that brought God's judgment upon us in the first place.

[13 : 42] That brought separation from God and condemnation from God in the first place. So, once they're dealt with, we can be restored into relationship with God by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Guilty, condemned rebels are legally released from condemnation. Now, again, I'll dig into it a little bit more.

Verse 3, for God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. That's the same sort of theme as was through chapter 7 we saw two weeks ago. And it works a bit like this, you see, the law of God and that means all levels of God law going back to the Gentiles whether it's just the law of nature or for the Jews, the Mosaic law in all its detail.

In either case, the law of God was meant to prompt obedience and therefore life or good relationship with God.

God's law that because people are both unable and unwilling to obey God's law or to live in the light of what they know about God or to seek after God's standard, then the law effectively just is reduced as we saw two weeks ago.

[15 : 01] It's reduced to the role of exposing failure, exposing rebellion, exposing guilt and ultimately demanding condemnation. It can't actually help us.

It just exposes us and condemns us. So the law that was meant to promote good life actually brings about condemnation. Well, through the sacrificial death of Jesus, God does for me what I could never do for myself, that is, deal with the legal requirements of God's justice.

The law says you should be living like this. God demands that. Death of Christ, in the death of Christ, Jesus satisfies God's anger, God's wrath at our disobedience.

He pays the penalty for my disobedience demanded by the justice of the law. And not only that, but he lives a life of perfect obedience into the future, which is essential for acceptance by the Holy God.

The result, verse 3, sin is condemned. In other words, all the legal requirements to properly deal with my sin have been taken out on Jesus instead of me.

[16 : 31] Even more amazing, look at verse 4. in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit.

The great transfer is completed when Jesus actually takes upon himself my sin, my guilt, my requirement to fulfill the law, and instead gives me his righteousness, his perfect life of obedience, his perfect fulfilling of the law, is given to me.

And that means I now both have the desire and the ability to obey God's law at every level and to bring glory to God as the law was originally intended to do.

So that's what the gospel does for us. It's a great transfer. It moves us from one realm, the realm of condemnation and guilt, to the realm of acceptance and new ability and desire and attitude to do that which the Lord actually originally created us to do, and that is live in a way that brings him glory through obedience to his law.

And all of this in these verses and Paul's argument right through the first eight chapters, all this is God's initiative. And so the wonderful thing that comes to his assurance is that God didn't cut corners.

[18:07] God didn't ignore my sin. He didn't play it down. He didn't say it was less than what it really is in terms of being offensive to him and being a judicial problem for him in relating to it.

No, God dealt with it fully and honestly and justly and completely. But he did so in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So the fact that God has done it right first time round means that we can have assurance that he's not going to have to revisit it, that it's not going to have to be redone in the future, that somehow or other the judgment will be called into question again and there be a retrial.

Since the demands of justice have been fully met, I can never be accused again. Verse 1, there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I am totally secure, totally guaranteed as a Christian never to be condemned. Now friends, if you don't hear anything else this morning, then hear this next sentence.

[19:24] The first reference point in assurance, the first step in finding assurance of your salvation is looking away from yourself and your own performance and looking to what God has done for you in Christ.

That's the only place you're going to find assurance. Why do I emphasize that? Because so often our own thinking is the greatest hindrance to our assurance.

Repeatedly we fall into traps that actually rob us of assurance, that very thing that God wants us to have, wants us to experience, wants us to enjoy. Two, I want to mention this morning, we don't take God at his word.

my friends, this is God's word to us in Romans chapter eight, verse one. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

God has spoken clearly. God has spoken clearly about our sin and about what he has done in Jesus to deal with our sin and guilt and about our being renewed by his Holy Spirit and about going home to heaven.

[21:00] God has spoken clearly spoken clearly about all these things. Surely, my friends, it's a simple thing to say that when the Lord speaks, then we should listen and be comforted by his promise.

Of course, we hear politicians making grandiose promises all the time, but you see, that's the fact. They're just people like you and me and we often realize they can't deliver their promises. They might want to, but sometimes they just can't.

But when God speaks, then we should listen and be comforted by his words, by his promise. You see, so often our own thinking about some particular sin in the past just robs us of that assurance. Because if you're like me, then you might think, well, okay, I can understand that I'm forgiven for these things and these things and these things, but when I go back in time in my life, there's one particular sin that nobody else even knows about.

I just can't get past that sin. That one's just too big, too bad to be forgiven. And so I get robbed of assurance because I think, well, okay, I can understand God's grace and forgiveness, but there's going to have to be an accounting one day for that particular sin.

[22:26] perhaps I'm convinced that the Lord will hold that particular sin against me. Nobody else knows about it. But if the Lord's going to hold that particular sin of all the sins against me, then my assurance is gone.

I'm done for. You see, that's contrary to what God says. it's contrary to what he says about sin, being removed as far from east as from west.

It's contrary to what he says about Jesus having dealt, completely dealt with everything that breaks the relationship in the first place. It's contrary to what he says about my end point, being in Christ.

It's contrary to what he says about the nature of sin, that the little white lie, as we call it, is just as offensive as the greatest mass murder in God's eyes.

Sin is sin is sin. So we get ourselves trapped there and messed up. The second point we often fall into the trap is we focus on our own experience rather than what Christ has done for us.

[23 : 33] In a very immediate way, Romans 8, 1-4, Romans 8, the whole chapter, answers the desperate question of verse 24, the previous chapter. What an awful creature I am.

I want to do good things, I want to do what pleases the Lord, but I find myself doing the very opposite, repeatedly. I'm locked into this struggle and it's just wearing me down.

Who can deliver me? Who will rescue me from the power of sin that operates in me, driving this endless, painful struggle within me?

The answer is look to Jesus. becoming a Christian frees us from all guilt of sin, but doesn't free us from all connection to sin.

In fact, chapter 7, as we saw two weeks ago, becoming a Christian actually starts a massive struggle against sin as we determine to act according to our new desires, our new attitudes, trying to say yes to righteousness and trying to choose to say no to sin.

[24 : 39] It's a struggle. It's a painful, ongoing struggle. And we repeatedly trip ourselves up and fall over. But you see, the problem with that is the harsh reality of the daily experience of struggle robs many Christians of any sense of assurance because deep down they believe that a true believer should not have to struggle.

So they're looking at their experience of life as this daily struggle and repeated failure and they think, well this can't be right if I'm a Christian and because it is right therefore I can't be a Christian. They want to be like Christ, they want to be obedient to God's word, so what do they do?

Well, they try even harder. They try even harder to rid themselves of the struggle and be in a place where they can say, yep, I've got it right today.

And so my experience of life today leads me to feel confident that I'm a believer. And the result of that, I've seen it so many times, is a boom or bust performance treadmill type of assurance.

Focused on feelings, when you're going really reasonably well in daily Christian life then, you feel quite confident and assured that you're a believer and that you're safe.

[26 : 13] But the inevitable spiritual fall comes. I say inevitable. The spiritual fall comes and then they crash and burn.

Worried, sick about whether they're saved or not because, well, if I'm doing this and this and this, if I've failed in this way and this way and this way, then I couldn't possibly be a Christian.

And so that cycle is up and down, up and down, it's very tiring. Cycle of extremes from joyful confidence to black despair. Other Christians get tripped up in a slightly different way.

They focus on their immediate circumstances in life. And so they might say, well, if I'm really a Christian and God is secure as a Christian, then when I look at my ongoing illness, my financial or business problems, my marriage difficulties, my health problems, then surely that's evidence that God's punishing me or holding me accountable in some way still for my sin.

And therefore, gosh, if these things are real in my life, then I can't really be sure that I'm a Christian. do you see the problem?

[27 : 29] It's losing a distinction between the secure status we have in Christ, no condemnation, perfectly acceptable, perfectly secure, bound for glory.

It's losing the distinction between that and our experience of life as Christians, which is a struggle, a struggle with repeated failures. Wanting to do the right thing, finding ourselves doing the opposite. And if we blur those two, again, we're cooked, we're done for. Justification is being saved, or sorry, justification or being saved is what God has done for us in the past and which completely qualifies us for heaven.

Gives us a new status before God. We're now adopted children. Justification means that once saved, we cannot ever be more acceptable to God than what we now are.

But our experience of this new status or relationship with God is struggle. Struggle to be who we now are in Christ, to live out the mind of Christ in daily life. And that struggle will show that we're always imperfect, incomplete.

[28 : 48] The struggle will be different from person to person this side of heaven, but it will be real. And it's precisely because of this changing experience of Christian living that we must base our assurance on our standing in Christ.

