

# Secure in Christ

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[ 0 : 00 ] So our reading is Romans chapter 8 on page 1137 in the Bibles on your chairs. Romans chapter 8 and beginning at verse 1.

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 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.

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.

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law.

[ 1 : 31 ] Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 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. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness.

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.

So then, brothers, we are debtors not to the flesh to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die.

But if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the spirit of God are sons of God.

[ 2 : 48 ] For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him, in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Well, good morning, everyone. I think you'll find it help to turn back to page 1137, to that reading we had a few moments ago in Romans chapter 8.

We're just looking at the first four verses this morning. We'll look at the rest of verses 1 to 17 next week. So Romans 8, verses 1 to 4. I'm sorry that there isn't an outline on the back of the service sheets, but there is a space there for you to take notes.

If you find that helpful, I think the outline will become hopefully quite clear as we go on. So do make the most of that if you like. Shall I lead us in prayer as we begin? The psalmist says this, speaking about God's word.

[ 4 : 05 ] Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart. Our Father, the verses that we're looking at this morning are in some ways complex, and we pray, therefore, that you would stir our minds to be thinking hard in order to understand them.

But we pray, also, that as we understand the wonderful truths that they contain, that you would bring joy to our heart, and therefore transform our wills, that we might live lives which are pleasing to you.

Amen. How can I be sure? It's a big question in the modern world. How can I be sure what the truth is about global events in an era of fake news?

How can I be sure of what the experts tell me when financial forecasts, opinion polls, and pundits so often get it wrong? It can be a more personal question.

How can I be sure my spouse will still love me when the initial feelings of excitement in a relationship have dulled, and my looks have faded, and those habits that were once endearing have become irritating, and when I fail to meet their expectations and cause disappointment?

[ 5 : 24 ] How can I be sure? It's a question we ask in many areas of life, isn't it? And it's also a question that those of us who are Christian believers can find ourselves asking.

How can I be sure God really loves me? How can I be sure I really am a Christian when I no longer feel that excitement that I felt when I first started to follow Jesus, or at least not so often?

How can I be sure I really am forgiven when I so often fail to meet God's holy standards and feel like a hypocrite? How can I be sure?

How can I be sure? How can I be sure? How can I be sure? How can I be sure? Well, if there are questions that trouble us, and I'd be surprised if there are many people here who never ask such questions, well then I hope that these next four weeks, when we're looking together at chapter 8 of Paul's letters to the Romans, will be a great help to us and be deeply reassuring.

Because the question of assurance lies at the very heart of this chapter of the Bible. In fact, if you just look down, the chapter begins with the promise of no condemnation in the first verse, and ends in the final verse with the guarantee of no separation.

[ 6 : 40 ] Nothing can separate us from God's love or shatter our assurance if we're Christian believers. It's a marvellous truth about which we can have total confidence.

And it's little surprise actually that Paul's addressing this question of assurance in Romans 8, given how things have been left at the end of Romans 7. We're jumping in in the middle of this great letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome, a letter which perhaps gives the clearest outline in the whole Bible of what lies at the heart of the Christian faith and its implications for the Christian life and God's great plan for his world.

And here at the start of Romans 8, we find ourselves in the middle of a very carefully constructed argument that culminates in our chapter. Because in Romans chapter 7, Paul describes what is, in my view, supposed to be a picture of normal Christian experience.

Perhaps I've looked back to chapter 7 and verse 15 for a little flavour of what Paul has been describing. In Romans 8, chapter 7, verse 15, he writes there, For I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

We'll have a look at the second half of verse 18. 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.

[ 8 : 06 ] Or verse 21. 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 war against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Is that your experience of the Christian life, I wonder? It certainly is mine. In fact, it's been precisely my experience this week.

I can think of areas where I so wanted to do good, but then found myself doing the opposite once more. And Paul says that's the normal Christian life.

A life of struggle between the good, which we want to do, and the evil or sin that dwells within us also. And yet it's a struggle that, of course, can rob us of our assurance.

I wonder if some of us can relate to Paul's conclusion in verse 24, as he, the great apostle, reflects on his own Christian life. We will often feel like wretches as Christians, as we acknowledge over and over, perhaps in the confession at church each week, how we've fallen again and again.

[ 9 : 28 ] And the result, of course, is we easily wonder if we really are Christians at all. If we are forgiven, or if the condemnation that our sin deserves still hangs over us, perhaps.

And so that's the question to which Paul very naturally turns as we arrive at Romans chapter 8. This week, as I said, we're just looking at the first four verses of the chapter, and we've got three headings, three momentous truths that Paul reminds the Romans of, with each one, I think, explaining the previous one and giving us grounds for assurance.

Here's the first one that I want us to notice from these verses. A great acquittal. A great acquittal. Have a look down with me at verse 1 again.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The therefore here most likely looks back to everything that Paul has said in chapter 6 and 7 of Romans.

We haven't got time to look at everything in those chapters, but fortunately, as we'll see, Paul gives us a summary of his teaching in verses 2 to 4. But for now, just notice the extraordinary declaration with which Paul starts this chapter.

[10:40] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, which is just one of Paul's favorite ways of talking about Christians. No condemnation.

If we're Christian believers, even though our sin deserves condemnation, a great acquittal has taken place. No condemnation whatsoever.

Now, in case this feels too good to be true, we'll see the grounds for Paul's declaration later on. But for now, I just want the wonder of this to sink in. No condemnation.

No guilt. No anxiety about whether we're going to heaven. No burden of unforgiven sin. No judgment to fear.

No condemnation. None. None at all. Either now or in the future. This is the privileged status that every Christian believer can enjoy.

[11:49] And yet I fear that we can be very slow to allow ourselves to believe it. Or at least to live as if we believe it. Because so often we worry that we are under condemnation.

We feel we have to do something to achieve or at least maintain our no condemnation status. We do lack assurance and therefore rob ourselves of the sheer joy and relief that these great words in this single verse of the Bible ought to give us.

No condemnation. Isn't it wonderful? God doesn't relate to us like the strict parent who's never quite satisfied with their child's performance, who's always condemning them for something.

Where we always have a nagging feeling we're not quite good enough, that we're a disappointment to God, that we need to do more to earn or retain his favour. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The Russian writer Maxim Gorky once wrote, the most beautiful words in the English language are not guilty. The most beautiful words in the English language are not guilty.

[13:01] I can't imagine what it would be like to be on trial facing life in prison and then to hear those words from the jury. Not guilty.

Occasionally we get to see, don't we, a defendant walking out of court after being acquitted in a high profile case. I can just about remember the images of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four walking out of court as free men, having served many years in prison for crimes they didn't commit, and the images of joy, relief and victory.

But the wonder of the no condemnation verdict that God gives to us is that he gives it, of course, to people like you and me who do deserve condemnation.

And yet the sad thing is how many Christians still live in a kind of prison thinking God could never forgive them, fearing his judgment, weighed down by sin because of something they've done in their past perhaps, when he's already declared his verdict, no condemnation.

So I hope we can see how wonderfully precious Romans 8 verse 1 is. One of the most precious verses in all the Bible perhaps.

[14:17] Because it tells us that the basis of our assurance is not whether we feel loved by God, feelings will come and go, or whether we're performing well in some area of the Christian life. As we'll see, seeking assurance through obeying God's law will only lead to condemnation.

But here in this verse, on the basis of the promise of God's word, a not guilty declaration he has made to us. That's the first basis for assurance that Romans 8 gives us, not feelings or moral performance, but the word of God.

Imagine the wife who's worried her husband doesn't love her anymore. Not now that the wrinkles and the grey hairs have arrived. And she says to her husband, Do you love me?

I don't feel very lovable. And I know I get so many things wrong. I burnt the supper again last night and I forgot to do that thing that you asked me to do. How can I know that you really love me? And the husband replies, You can be sure I love you because of what I've said.

Because I promised to love you on our wedding day. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. Do you see the point?

[15:31] The wife's assurance is to come from her husband's promise. From his words. And while sadly we humans don't always keep our promises, God always does.

And he says to us, even when we don't feel very lovable, no condemnation. So when we're haunted by that awful thing we did in the past, of which we're still so ashamed, and the memory of it enters

our minds, God says to us, no condemnation.

When we slip again into that besetting sin and once more feel dirty because we've again joined in with the office gossip or indulged that lustful fantasy or lost our temper with the kids or had too much to drink, God promises us no condemnation.

Just as a jury declaring a verdict of not guilty declares someone safe from condemnation forever. Or it would have done in the days when a double jeopardy wasn't permitted. Well, so God's declaration here guarantees safety from his condemnation forever.

There's been a great acquittal. But maybe we're wondering why or how this can be. How is it God can say no condemnation to people like you and me?

[16:50] Why is he able to make such a staggering promise? Well, that brings us onto our second heading and the second thing I want us to notice from our verses. A great liberation.

A great liberation. Let me read from verse 1 again. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

For, do you see how verse 2 explains the grounds for the promise of verse 1? For the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Now, like quite a lot of this passage actually, there are a number of different views on what verse 2 means dependent on what exactly people think Paul means by the word law here and what the laws are that he refers to.

And certainly it's a tricky verse. But when we're struggling to understand something in the Bible or we're not sure which interpretation is correct, we need to remember that the Bible is itself its own interpreter.

[17:51] And I think the context here helps us work out what Paul means. So just look on, if you would, to verse 6, part of the section that we'll be looking at next week, which uses the same language that we find in verse 2.

Because in verse 6, Paul describes two different mindsets. One, if you just look, the mind set on the flesh, or is sometimes translated the sinful nature, which leads to death.

While the other, the mind set on the spirit, leads to life. Similar language, isn't it, to verse 2, which speaks of the law, which here probably means a natural orientation, a bit like how we might talk about the law of gravity or the laws of physics.

So verse 2 speaks of the law of the spirit of life and also the law of sin and death. In other words, if we allow verse 6 to interpret verse 2 for us, Paul is talking about two mindsets or orientations in verse 2.

The desire of the Christian to please the spirit and our natural desire to please the flesh or to live for sin. One leads to life and the other leads to death or condemnation.

[19:08] I think the context before our verses helps too. This is a bit of the sermon where we just need to engage our minds a bit. But remember that chapter 8 follows on from chapter 7.

And in chapter 7, verse 23, just have a look, Paul also talks about two competing laws. The law of my mind, which seeks to obey God, and the law of sin, that also dwells inside us.

If you want to trace this up further afterwards, chapter 7, verses 5 and 6, are also helpful where Paul explains that whereas living for the flesh leads to sin and death, Christians now serve in the new life of the spirit, language that he picks up again in verse 2.

And in my view, these two laws or orientations that he refers to in verse 2 don't therefore refer to two completely different types of people or to external principles, but rather to two controlling influences which are both present in the Christian believer.

They refer to that internal struggle that Paul describes in chapter 7 between the good he wishes to do as he delights in God's law and the desire to do evil which continues to reside in him.

[20:27] In other words, here's the point. Within the Christian, there is a civil war going on between the natural desire to sin and the desire of the spirit who now lives in every Christian to please God.

But the wonderful truth of verse 2 is that victory has been secured in this civil war. Yes, the battle continues to rage, but verse 2, the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

The picture is, I guess, of a liberating army defeating a hostile power that had been in command, a sort of spiritual SAS, invading the Christian to defeat the sinful nature which had held it captive, to use the word that Paul himself has used near the end of chapter 7.

So while the battle rages, victory has been secured. The Islamic State Group set up a caliphate in a part of Syria in 2014.

But on the 23rd of March last year, the BBC News website ran this headline at the top of one of its stories. IS caliphate defeated, but jihadist group remains a threat.

[ 21 : 49 ] IS caliphate defeated, but jihadist group remains a threat. Victory had occurred, but the threat hadn't gone away.

There would be further battles needed to express that victory. And yet, in a sense, those battles, the last stand of Islamic State in Syria, was a sign of its defeat.

Because for years beforehand, they had been able to reign in that caliphate in peace, unopposed.

And so it is for the Christian. By nature, sin's controlling influence reigns unopposed in us.

But when we become a Christian, a civil war breaks out. It's a war that is won already because

we're now free to serve God. The spirit has invaded because of the victory Jesus has secured.

But just as Islamic State remained a threat in Syria, so the sinful nature hasn't yet gone away. It's making its last stand against the spirit who now reigns.

[ 22 : 51 ] And we therefore need to be vigilant in carrying on the fight against the counter-offensives that sin continues to launch against us. And we'll think more about that next week. But for now, do we see that this struggle with sin is a sign of the spirit's victory?

That we have been set free from captivity to sin and the death it brings. That sin's reign has been defeated. Because before we were Christians, there was no struggle, no civil war.

Sin reigned in peace. But now the spirit has taken over. There's been a great liberation from sin's captivity. And that brings with it a daily struggle with the sinful nature, which, as we'll see next week, will remain with us until the end of our lives in this world.

So what is the second ground of assurance for Christians in these verses? Well, actually, it's the very thing that often causes us to worry about assurance. It's the fact that there is a struggle, that the battle rages, a battle that actually shows the spirit of life has set us free, that we are Christians.

Because if we weren't Christians, there'd be no battle. We wouldn't care about sin. We'd just do what we want. When we fall into sin, we can easily get discouraged and ask ourselves questions like, have I really been changed?

[ 24 : 14 ] Am I actually a Christian? Will the spirit win the battle or will sin eventually triumph? But Paul tells us the battle has already been won and the spirit's presence in our lives causing us to want to fight sin, however imperfectly and feebly is evidence victory has taken place.

A great liberation has occurred. If we're engaged in the battle, we have been set free. But how have we been set free?

Because it doesn't always feel like that, does it? Didn't to Paul at the end of Romans 7? Well, the answer is not because we have won a battle through our own efforts to stop sinning, but as the past tense of verse 2 suggests, we have been set free through an event that has happened, set free in Christ Jesus because of what he has done.

And that brings us on to our final heading, which I'm calling a great sacrifice, a great acquittal, a great liberation, and a great sacrifice. Let me read from verse 2.

For the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For, notice again how verse 3 explains what's come before. How has the spirit of life set me free?

[ 25 : 37 ] 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.

You see, the law, meaning in verse 3, I think, the Old Testament law, was powerless to release us from captivity to sin. It does bring condemnation.

Not because it's bad, God's commandments are perfect, but because as Paul puts it earlier in the letter, the law simply makes us conscious of sin as it shows how far short of God's standards we fall.

And because, as Paul explains here, our flesh or sinful nature is unable to keep it. but God has done what we could never do.

He sent Jesus in the likeness of sinful flesh as a man but without sin for sin or as the footnote puts it, as a sin offering.

[ 26 : 47 ] It is, of course, a reference to Jesus' death where he paid the full penalty for sin on the cross to set us free from the hold that sin and death had over us.

He paid for sin and died our death that we might no longer be captive to either. Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher received the George Cross, the highest medal for gallantry in the British Armed Forces in 2008 for his bravery in throwing himself on a grenade while serving in Afghanistan earlier that year.

During a reconnaissance mission at night, Croucher felt a trip wire against his leg and realized he'd activated a grenade. So he threw himself and his rucksack over the grenade in order to protect his comrades.

Amazingly, despite being thrown some distance by the explosion which followed, Croucher survived and insisted on not being evacuated for treatment as he suspected that the detonation of the grenade would cause Taliban fighters to investigate and provide an ideal opportunity for an ambush.

He was proven right and he killed a Taliban fighter shortly afterwards before receiving treatment. His self-sacrificial act saved his comrades and led to a great victory against the enemy.

[ 28 : 09 ] Well, Jesus Christ also won a victory through an act of self-sacrifice but in his case it did cost him his life and those he saved were you and me if we're Christians.

He made his life a sin offering for us even though he was without sin to rescue us from captivity and certain death. He made a great sacrifice.

You see, did you notice that there is a condemnation in our passage despite the assurance of verse 1? But it's not we who are condemned but verse 3 sin that has been condemned because of Jesus' victory over it at the cross.

And verse 4 shows us where this leaves us and why Jesus' sacrifice gives us great grounds for assurance. Why did Jesus do all this? Well, verse 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.

Incidentally, I think the end of verse 4 isn't a condition saying we must walk according to the spirit for these things to be true of us but a description. If we're Christians, we are those who now walk according to the spirit.

[ 29 : 28 ] More on that next week. But what does the first half of verse 4 mean? Well, as with verse 2, there are a number of possible interpretations of this verse so we'll just need to engage our brains again for a moment.

So some think that Paul is saying that Jesus has made it possible for us now to live a life of righteousness albeit imperfectly. Others, that the righteous requirement of the law is that sin should be punished by death and Jesus has fulfilled that on our behalf by dying.

Certainly, both of those things are true. But I think it's more likely that by the righteous requirement, notice that word is singular even though it's sometimes translated requirements, by the righteous requirement of the law, Paul means the requirement of the law for us to be righteous, to meet its standards in full, the very thing the flesh is powerless to do in verse 3.

So Paul is teaching here what is sometimes known as imputed righteousness, the important truth that at the cross a double swap takes place. Yes, Jesus dies for sin, our sin is taken upon him, but also his righteousness is transferred to us as a result.

He makes us righteous in God's sight so we can meet the requirement of the law to be righteous before God. We often think of the cross as if only one swap took place, a bit like a substitution in football where one player comes onto the pitch to replace another who is then no longer part of the action and just disappears from view.

[ 31 : 07 ] So Jesus swaps with us and pays for our sin and that's our only involvement, it's the end of the matter. But actually the substitution at the cross is much more like when a coach at a kid's football match tells two players who are already playing to swap teams to try to even them up a bit.

So one player who's played the perfect game for the winning side is forced to put on the shirt of the team that's losing and share in their defeat. And a hopeless player from that other team can then suddenly enjoy the privilege and victory of being on the winning team even though he contributed nothing to that victory apart from his errors.

So do we see the final basis for assurance in these verses? Not only the word of Christ in verse one promising us no condemnation like a not guilty verdict from a jury.

Not only the internal wall of verse two which shows sin's power has been defeated but also the work of Christ in verse three at the cross where he won a full and final victory for me which enables the spirit to reside in me and fight sin.

Perhaps there's someone here this morning who isn't a Christian believer and you think you never could be accepted or loved by God because of what you've done or what you do. Or do we see that no one can ever be right with God by what they do but Jesus has done it all for us.

[ 32 : 42 ] And for those of us who are Christians do we see that if I lack assurance I must look not to my deeds which will always lead to discouragement but to what Jesus has done at the cross which guarantees my right standing before God and the righteous demands of the law being met for me.

Striking actually that there are no commands in Romans 8 only descriptions of what has happened and who we are because our assurance doesn't come from anything we're to do but from what Christ promises us in his word pledges for us by his spirit and has purchased for us by his death on the cross.

Shall I lead us in prayer? There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Father God we recognize again this morning that we deserve condemnation. We deserve condemnation even for things we've done this morning and yet how we thank you that for those who are in Christ Jesus who benefit from his work that we can have full assurance total confidence of being freed from sin from its power and its penalty.

And we pray therefore that you would help us to know the wonderful joy and relief that we are entitled to enjoy as Christian believers as we look not to ourselves but to the promise of your word to the presence of your spirit and to what Christ has done in purchasing us at the cross and paying for our sin in full and how we thank him for it afresh this morning in Jesus' name.

[ 34 : 30 ] Amen. Amen.