

**Title: No Condemnation**  
**Text: Romans 8:1-4**  
**Date: 17 February, 2013**  
**Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron**

This week we celebrated Ash Wednesday, which for centuries has marked the beginning of Lent, a forty day season that leads up to Easter. Lent is a time when many Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline. People will fast in all sorts of ways during Lent; giving up eating one meal a day, or eating meat, or caffeine. I have a friend who one year gave up eating Magnum Ice Creams for Lent – for her a real sacrifice. I have another friend who this year has given up all access to social media – Facebook; twitter and so on – a very 21<sup>st</sup> century form of Fasting.

But Lent, this season leading up to Easter, is not all about fasting and self-denial; it's about much more than that. Scotty Smith puts it this way:

Lent isn't for beating ourselves up; but for lifting Jesus up.  
(Scotty Smith)

As we journey towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday we are purposely setting aside time as a church to reflect on Jesus Christ - his suffering and his sacrifice, his life, death, burial and resurrection, and what it means to us. To help us do that we are going to spend the next six weeks in just one chapter – 39 verses – of the bible; Romans, chapter eight.

Now I need to make a confession right up front. If I had to choose a favorite chapter in the bible, Roman 8 would be it. Outside of the direct words of Jesus himself, I believe Romans 8 offers perhaps the most beautiful, profound, clear and compelling pictures of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible. I am not alone in elevating Romans 8 onto such a pedestal. One commentator summarizes Romans 8 like this:

The inner sanctuary within the Cathedral of Christian faith, the tree of life in the midst of the Garden of Eden; the highest peak in a range of mountains.  
(Douglas Moo)

A month ago while I was preparing for this series, I read this tweet, which I loved:

Romans 8. The masterpiece within the masterpiece. The kryptonite to despair. A million floating lanterns released into and against a dark sky.  
(Jared Wilson)

As we begin this journey I have two hopes for what will happen along the way:

First, for those of us who are still on the edges of faith, wondering whether it's all too good to be true, who still have lots of questions – my hope is that enough of those questions are answered and doubts addressed over the next six weeks for you to say 'yes' to the love of God that will not let you go.

Second, for those of us who already know Jesus as our saviour and Lord, my prayer is that over the next six weeks we will allow Romans 8 to elevate Jesus to the point where we are again lost in wonder, love and praise that spills out into lives lived for and to him. 1600 years ago Augustine said this:

To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek him the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement.  
(Augustine)

For all of us, my hope and prayer for the next six weeks is that we will encounter Jesus.

We have prepared a travelling companion for this journey; this 39 day devotional that we are inviting you all to participate in. Let me explain how it works.

Romans 8 has 39 verses and this devotional has 39 reflections, one for each of those verses. If, starting tomorrow, you read one reflection a day you will finish on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday. Each daily reflection has some observations I have written about the key verse, a question or two for you to apply the verse to your life, a guide to prayer and then a Going Deeper section that has an additional bible reading that relates to the verse for the day and some web resources that you can explore.

But here is the most important thing we are inviting you to do; every day for the next 39 days we are inviting and challenging you to read Romans 8 – all 39 verses. If you do nothing else, do this. We have timed it; it takes not much more than 5 minutes. Why are we asking you to read one chapter of the bible every day for 39 days? We believe that as we linger over this rich passage of scripture, as we marinate ourselves in it, its truth will leach into us and transform us from the inside out. The Psalmist says this:

Corker our one eyed wonder dog is getting old and slow. He finds it harder to drag his arthritic legs up our stairs. He sleeps most of the day. But Corker still finds the energy to eat the marrow bones we give him. He takes it outside, chews it for a while, then buries it, and then for the next week or so will go back to it from time to time to chew on it again. Corker loves chewing bones, nit for a moment, but for days on end.

The Psalmist says this;

(Blessed is the one) but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.  
(Psalm 1:2)

Here is the interesting thing. The Hebrew word that is translated as meditate is 'hagah'. It's used elsewhere in scripture, including this passage in Isaiah:

As a lion growls (hagah), a great lion over its prey...  
(Isaiah 31:3)

To meditate in God's word is to growl and purr over it as a lion contentedly lingers over their prey, or to chew on it not for a moment, but for days, like a dog delights in a bone – finding every juicy morsel. For the next 39 days we are going to growl over, chew on, marinate and soak in the life-giving wonder of Romans 8. As with the rest of the bible, we are not reading it for our information, so that we can become smarter or more knowledgeable. We are reading Romans 8 for the next 39 days for our transformation, in the hope that in soaking in its truth we will become more like Jesus.

So, as we step into this adventure, will you pray with me?

## **PRAY**

Let's jump straight in. The book or letter to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul around twenty years or so after the resurrection of Jesus. Paul had never visited the Roman church. He was writing to people he didn't know, but longed to see.

In the first four verses of Romans 8 he spells out the what, why and how of the gospel.

Let's read:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.  
(Romans 8:1-4)

Last Sunday in the northern Indian city of Allahabad the largest religious festival in the world was held. The normal population of Allahabad is 1.2million; last Sunday it was 40million – or almost twice the population of Australia. More than half of that figure, or 30 million pilgrims, were gathered down by the River Ganges. Experts say this is the largest gathering of humanity in one place, 20 square kilometers in area, ever. This vast number of people was there for the

Maha Kumbh Mela, a Hindu cleansing festival. Each pilgrim, 30 million in one day, waded into the river, dunked themselves in it and even sometimes drank its water as they did. Over the full 55 days of the festival, 100 million people will do the same.

Why did such a vast sea of people gather in such crowded conditions to dunk themselves in, and even drink such heavily polluted water? The Hindu belief is that if pilgrims bathe on this one day that happens every twelve years in this and a few other places, then they will be cleansed from sin and freed from the cycle of rebirth. One pilgrim, who had travelled from London, said this:

‘One dip in the river has the power to change life forever.’  
(Malti Devi cited in The Age, February 11)

Hinduism isn't the only religion that has a cleansing ceremony that seeks to deal with the problem of sin.

In Islam, before a man enters the mosque for prayer he will perform the ritual of wudu, cleaning his face and arms and hands and feet.

In ancient Judaism, pilgrims travelling to the temple would immerse themselves in Mikveh like this on the southern steps of the Temple Mount, cleansing themselves before they entered into the Temple itself.

All through all cultures are similar forms of ritual purification, the common purpose being to rid oneself of physical and spiritual impurity – or sin. These and other forms of ritual purification are some of the oldest, most ancient acts of worship. Which should come as no surprise. You see, it doesn't matter if we are born a Hindu in India, a Muslim in Pakistan, a Jew in Israel, a Christian in America or an agnostic in Australia – in our heart of hearts all human beings know we have a problem with sin. Let me trace the argument that Paul develops in the first seven chapters of Romans.

In the second chapter of Romans, Paul speaks about people who aren't Jewish – pagans. He says this:

The requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness.  
(Romans 2:15)

Paul is saying that written on every human heart and seared into every human conscience is the understanding of what is right and wrong. Our understanding of God's law – of what is right and wrong – is something we know with our minds (our conscience) and feel with our hearts – whether we are Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, agnostic or even an atheist. The curse of sin is this; even with this heart and mind deep knowledge of what is right and wrong, we still choose to do, think and say things that fall far short of what God requires of us, and who God created us to be. Again, Paul puts it starkly earlier in Romans:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.  
(Romans 3:23)

There is a chasm of infinite proportions that separates unholy or sin-stained people from a holy and perfect God.

In Romans chapter 7 Paul speaks powerfully and personally of his desire, passion and attempts to do what is right. In the end though, every attempt to do what God requires fails. No matter how powerful his desire to do what is right is, there is a stronger desire that always wins out – what he calls his sinful nature:

I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.  
(Romans 7:18-19)

Here is another way of putting it:

There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.  
(Carl Sandburg)

Have you ever wondered why God created some animals, like mosquitoes and spiders and snakes and...cats? Now, of course every animal fulfills a God-ordained purpose, but that doesn't take away the fact that some animals are, well, 'Yuk!' Take the guinea worm. It is a parasite that infects human beings in sub-Saharan Africa. People drink water that has guinea worm larvae in it. The larvae hatch in the person's intestine and then over a year, this microscopic larva grows into a worm as thick as a spaghetti noodle and up to a meter long. Yuk, yuk, yuk! I will spare you all the horrible details, but this worm will move out of the intestine and through the body, causing excruciating pain and, if untreated, in some cases will lead to an awful death.

Why am I offering you this terrible picture? As destructive the impact of a guinea worm on a human host, it does not compare to the death and destruction caused by sin. When Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, sin infected them and we their descendants. Sin is a parasite that lives in every human heart, eating us from the inside out and if untreated will not just kill us physically, but will destroy us spiritually. Earlier in Romans Paul says this:

The wages of sin is death.  
(Romans 6:23)

Unchecked and untreated, sin will kill us. Sin condemns us to death. Paul knew this – he knew that he lived with a death sentence hanging over him. At the end of seventh chapter of Romans he speaks of the hopelessness of his situation and ours:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?  
(Romans 7:24)

Paul is saying that because of sin, because of his sinful nature, he is a condemned man. He is asking and pleading, who will lift his death sentence?

I want to hit the pause button for a moment. As Paul does in Romans, I have shared the bad news that necessarily precedes the good news. Human nature responds to bad news in a number of ways.

The first, and perhaps most common, is denial. We hear this news of sin and death and condemnation and we say, 'Oh come on, that's over the top! I am basically a good person. I might mess up now and then, but on balance, I mostly get it right.' Even if that were true, basically good is not good enough; mostly right is not right enough. You can try all you like to do what is right, but in the end, because we are all afflicted with the same curse of sin, all our attempts will in the end fall short. That is why one of the most important 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit is the gift of conviction. Jesus told his disciples that when the Holy Spirit would be poured out in a new a fresh way at Pentecost:

He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.  
(John 16:8)

Holy Spirit conviction pierces our flimsy denials and leads us to a place where we can surrender.

Rather than living in denial of our sinful condition, we may instead live in despair. We don't need to be told we make mistakes, that we fall short of God's best for us. We live with the pain of our mistakes every day in the form of shame that cripples us and guilt that strangles us.

But there is a third way other than denial and despair; deliverance. Now we get to the Good News in Romans 8.

First, Paul gives us the 'What' of the gospel:

After spelling out just how bleak and seemingly hopeless our situation is, Paul tells us that the death sentence that hangs over all of us can be commuted – that God has made a way for us to be pardoned. This Good News is contained in two words: ‘No condemnation.’ We no longer need to be dead men and women walking, but can live abundant lives now and forever. No longer do we need to be strangled and crippled by our sinful nature, but are liberated to live in joy-filled freedom. In John’s gospel, Jesus says this off his own mission”

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.  
(John 3:17)

This truth was no more powerfully demonstrated then when Jesus encountered a woman caught in adultery. Some religious leaders were callously using her as a means to trip Jesus up. They knew that in the way the Jewish law was interpreted in those days, the woman’s sins condemned her to death by stoning. Jesus refuses to play their sick game, and thwarts their plans by turning their accusations back on themselves, ‘Whoever is without sin, let them cast the first stone!’ The crowd that was buying for blood falls away, and all who are left is Jesus and the woman. This is what happened next:

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”  
“No one, sir,” she said.  
“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”  
(John 8:10-11)

The ‘what’ of the gospel is the commuting of a death sentence; the gift of eternal life and freedom from condemnation.

How is this possible?

Paul says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

What does it mean to be ‘in Christ Jesus’? Simply, it means that we do not respond to our sinful condition with denial or despair, but that we receive from God the deliverance he offers. In Romans 10:9, Paul says:

If you declare with your mouth that “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.  
(Romans 10:9)

To be ‘in Christ’ is to place our faith and trust in him and to believe that he alone has the power to save and deliver us from the sentence of death that hangs over each and every one of us.

Which leads to the ‘why’ of the gospel. Why is being ‘in Christ’ the path to our deliverance?

Paul says that Jesus became a sin offering for us. What does this mean?

At the heart of the Jewish faith was the sacrifice of animals to atone for the sins of the people. To atone means to make amends. In making sacrifices to God the people were seeking to make amends for, and cleanse themselves from their sins – to remove the stain of sin, the condemnation of sin, the death sentence of sin. And so tens of thousands of animals would be sacrificed every year by thousands of priests – doves, pigeons, goats, sheep and bulls. Just as people attempt to cleanse themselves of sins through ritual bathing, in ancient days the blood of animals would be shed in an attempt to wash away sin. But it could only ever offer temporary relief. The writer of the New Testament book Hebrews says this:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

(Hebrews 10:11)

Here is the terrible truth; no amount of animal blood, no amount of ritual washing - no matter how sacred the river - can remove the condemnation of sin. That is the terrible truth and the bad news. But the Good News is that God made the offering that we couldn't. The writer of Hebrews says in the next verse:

But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.  
(Hebrews 10:12)

Jesus is both our High Priest and our Sin Offering. On the Cross his blood was willingly poured out. The condemnation that rested on us, on the Cross rested on him. One of the most radical statements in the bible is made by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.  
(2 Corinthians 5:21)

On the Cross Jesus willingly absorbed the condemnation that was ours because of our sin. He died the death we deserved. Nicky Gumbel puts it this way:

The essence of sin is us substituting ourselves for God. The essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for us.  
(Nicky Gumbel)

It is only the blood of his willing sacrifice that can liberate us from the chains of our sinful nature.

It is only the blood of his willing sacrifice that can commute our death sentence.

It is only the blood of his willing sacrifice that can cleanse us from every stain of every sin, who can free us from all shame and all guilt.

There is power in the blood of Jesus – wonder working, life-giving, chain breaking, prison-destroying power!

The what, how and why of the gospel is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, the One who was God's sin offering for us.