

ROMANS COMMENTARY

The following is an excerpt from the Romans Commentary by Bob Fox. Access the entire commentary on Red Mountain's website.

Romans 8

8:1—"there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Through belief in Christ, we are set free from the Law's condemnation of our actions. Apart from Him, all we did was continually fall short of the Law's standard, even when our intentions were good. That cycle starting with good intentions, followed by a lackluster performance, followed by guilt, is only broken through turning to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 7 described the cycle and the frustrating reality of being caught in it. It isolated the problem. The problem is in us—more precisely, our problem is that sin has attached itself to our being. Like a parasite it draws life from us and develops a life of its own and becomes in a sense its own body within ours. It cannot be shaken through our own efforts at self-reform or self-improvement. Only Christ can set us free from this body of death.

Chapter 8 describes how that salvation comes about and the absolute certainty of it. It speaks of mysterious things that we must ponder. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God brought to bear with respect to the issue of our salvation. The goal of this gospel is to do much more than set us free from sin's eternal penalty. It is to break the cycle described by Paul in chapter 7, a cycle, believers are still susceptible to.

The gospel has the power to lift us to a higher moral ground and to impact our practical follow-through with respect to our intentions. God's will in the gospel is that we "get saved" from poor implementation of His will. It is that we would become effective instruments of His rule over creation.

The first thing that must be addressed is our guilty/condemned status with God. He cannot work through us if we are alienated from Him. Christ's death as God's designated sin-bearer allowed for our offenses and our sinfulness to be pardoned by God. The result is that for all who believe in Christ there is no condemnation. The word rendered condemnation is κατακριμα, what we could refer to as "down judgment." It is to mark someone out for punishment. In the imagery of the gladiators, it is a thumbs-down judgment by the crowd that called for their death. There is no more down verdict from God on us, not ever. It is simply not part of our world any longer. Instead, there is a constant willingness on God's part, because of Christ, to reach out to us and use us in His work and plan. There is an endless stream of pardon and forgiveness.

The precise reason for this is that we are “in Christ,” that is, identified as part of Him due to our belief in Him and His Spirit’s presence in us. The absence of condemnation is not because we are without sin. It is that our sin is now pardoned and forgiven. We are at once both the same and different. We are sinners, guilty apart from Christ. We are saints, forgiven in Christ. We must not overplay either of these or we let go of something of the truth. The one thing we are certain of is this, that there is no condemnation now of us by God. There will be conviction of sin, but no condemnation. The difference is that conviction is meant to correct. Condemnation is meant to separate out for punishment. We no longer have something to make up for, and no outstanding moral requirement to meet. This impossible task has been finished for us by Christ.

This verse and its truths are of enormous consequence in one’s spiritual pilgrimage. In this truth there is comfort, encouragement, and power. Every spiritual leader must know how to access these if they are to stand against legitimate accusations that arise within them from the evil one regarding their own unfitness for the thing God has called them to. They will not be at His business long before they will need to be rescued by this great truth.

8:2—“for the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the Law of sin and death.”

This verse provides more explanation for the statement in verse 1 that there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ. Paul has spoken of the Law of God which he serves in his inner man (7:22). This is likely a reference to the Mosaic Law. He has spoken of the law of sin which is present within his members (7:23). This refers to the presence of sin, which like a parasite, has attached itself to us. It acts as a sort of spiritual gravity, keeping us bound to our earthly ways. Counteracting that law is what Paul speaks of as the law of the Spirit of life. This is a reference to the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, and the spiritual inertia—an inertia of motion, that we can now experience.

In this chapter Paul will mention the Holy Spirit 21 times, more than any chapter in our Bibles.

Through the Holy Spirit there is now a different law that operates in us that can overcome what Paul refers to as the law of sin and death. It is the actual person of the Spirit of God who has taken up residence in all who believe in Jesus Christ. In this sense this life is in Christ Jesus. It is found in and experienced through belief in Him. It is available because His death atoned for our sins and made peace between ourselves and God. There is no offence or sin remaining on our account, and so God’s justice has been satisfied. He is free to relate to us now as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. His presence is continually in and with all who have embraced Christ and the work God has done on our behalf through Him. This means that the law operating in our beings whereby we never rise to the things God has called us to, need no longer hold us down. Through the Holy Spirit we can rise to obey the Law of God that we have embraced in our minds. We are in this sense set free. We have a choice where before little choice existed, because of who we were and specifically our spiritual makeup. There was no inner force that offset our fallenness. It reigned. Now there is more than a force, there is a person.

Paul has spoken previously of the law of sin (7:23). Here he adds to that term, calling it the law of sin and death. Because of sin there is spiritual death, separation from God, and ultimately the second death, eternal separation from God. This is the scope of the effect of the law of sin and of death. It operates in us and apart from the work of Christ, sin and death would do their full work in us and would isolate us forever from God. We have been set free from all this through belief in Christ. The result is that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and there is hope to rise above falling short of the will of God, and of experiencing partnership with Him in every matter of our lives.

8:3—“for what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh.”

The Law clearly communicated the standard of righteousness and goodness. It clearly described all that we should and should not do. It was not able to help us do what was good. It was information, and it was accurate and good information. It could not solve the problem because due to our makeup we are unable to apply and implement the information. The Law gave us the parameters of behavior that in the end we are not capable of sustaining. The problem was not that it required too much. It was precise in its requirement. The problem was that we were capable of too little. There was something the Law could not do and that was to change our makeup so that we can keep the Law perfectly. It could not change our humanity. It can and does make our fallen humanity readily apparent.

God can change our inner makeup. But to do this He had to be able to pardon our offences so that He could unite with us, as had been His original design. This He did through Christ. Paul makes a precise statement here about Christ—what He became and what He did.

Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh. Christ had a body like our fallen bodies. He was fully human. But Christ was without sin. He was tempted in all points as we are yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus was not born with a body like Adam had before he sinned. He came in a body like Adam had after he sinned. Yet Jesus never sinned.

Now what exactly are the parameters of the statement that Christ came in the “likeness of sinful flesh.” There have been many ideas set forth over the centuries on this “likeness of sinful flesh” idea. Some of the early Gnostic heresies taught that Christ only looked like a man, that He was like men in appearance but not really a man. The Greek word itself has a breadth of meaning that would allow this interpretation. However, John refuted this idea by stating clearly that Jesus had come, “in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). He said that any spirit that denied this, was not from God. Sound doctrine therefore demands that we teach that Jesus’ body was real, normal human flesh.

Paul’s statement preserves the humanity of Christ but also preserves His sinlessness. The proper way of understanding this statement is to say that Christ was fully human, even to the extent that His body suffered the same weaknesses as ours. But He was not a fallen human. He was a second Adam, born of a virgin, so that he lived in a fallen body, without inheriting Adam’s fallen nature. It is in this sense He came in the likeness of sinful flesh. Again, Jesus was not born with a body like Adam had before he sinned. He came in a body like Adam had after he sinned. Yet Jesus never sinned.

Paul also says that Jesus came for sin. The NASB captures the intent of Paul's statement by adding the idea that he came "as an offering" for sin. This was Yahweh's designated purpose in Jesus' coming, to be God's designated sin bearer. As a bona fide human, He could serve as a substitute for humanity. As one who is without sin He qualified as that substitute. As the one sent by God to do this, He was so designated not just in theology but by His actual name (Matthew 1:21), assigned at the command of God to convey the decree He Himself made about Jesus' role as sin-bearer.

By offering Himself as the satisfactory payment for our sin, Jesus "condemned sin in the flesh." By this Paul means that Jesus' death spelled the end for sin's unmitigated attachment to our inner beings. Our relationship to God can be restored and we can be united in spirit with Him. By this His character can be imparted to us. This solution perpetrated by God for sin's presence within us, is a real-life person. His own Spirit takes up residence within us, the very person who inspired the words of the Law. Sin's spell over us has been broken by Him and the character of God Himself can now take root in us.

Our inability to rise to the kind of life God desires, as was express in the Law, has been addressed. The very person who inspired in human writers the Law, speaks within us. He writes in our hearts the Law He brought to be written on tablets of stone centuries earlier (Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:1-11; Hebrews 10:16). The Law could describe what we needed to rise to, but it could not help us rise due to sin's sway over our inner being. Christ came to break that sway and to allow the Holy Spirit to occupy our inner beings.

8:4—"in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

The phrase "in order that" identifies this as a statement of practical result. We find then stated in this verse the intended result in real life of the actions of God that were reported in verse 3, namely the sending of His own Son. The intended result is that the righteousness of the Law be fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit.

The NASB has rendered δικαίωμα as requirement. Now that is an accurate rendering that conveys the full adequacy of the sacrifice of Christ in our behalf. The requirement of the Law, if one should try to gain favor with God through it, is that the entire Law be kept, all the time (James 2:10). Paul has made it clear that such obedience is impossible for us.

So our first observation about Paul's thought here is that Christ's sacrifice meets that requirement of the Law, all of it. So complete would be Jesus' obedience that He Himself said that He had come to fulfill the Law (Matthew 5:17). The requirement of the Law, that we keep it in its entirety, is fulfilled in our behalf by Christ.

Paul adds to this an important thought that transitions us to all that He wishes to say about the Holy Spirit. To those who have believed in Christ forgiveness has been granted. They have been justified, declared righteous through the righteousness of Jesus. Without a pause or break, Paul states the present reality of all those who have had the requirement of the Law fulfilled for them by Jesus Christ. They do not "walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." They are not merely normal people. They have a different life possible for them.

The word “walk” conveys how someone is choosing to live. Walking in the Spirit is the process of making life decisions, from the smallest to the biggest, according to the promptings and urgings of the Holy Spirit. It is the opportunity made available to all who will trust in Jesus’ sacrifice for them and be forgiven. Living by the flesh and dabbling in sin has been presented as absurd by Paul. Here he seems to talk as if it is just assumed that to be forgiven and freed from sin is to live the new way, by the life-giving Spirit. Anything else would be unthinkable!

So we should not take Paul to be stating here that a person walking in the Spirit will do all the Law prescribes. He never demands conformity to the Law from believers. Nor should we suggest that we can tell whether a person is “walking in the Spirit” because they are righteous by the Law’s standard. Remember, to be justified by the Law one must always keep the entire law (James 2:10). Here, Paul is saying that because we have placed our trust in Jesus’ sacrifice, we now have spiritual life, life with the Spirit. It is our privilege to be steered by the Holy Spirit of God in even the smallest matters of life. Were Paul saying that all who are forgiven, de facto walk in the Spirit, then he would not have had to command people like the Galatian Christians to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

Having said that, something important must be affirmed. It is never presented in Scripture that God is interested only in saving us from the penalty of sin. He longs to rescue us from its powerful grasp and the death it works in us. God’s will and plan in our justification is that we be sanctified. This is conditioned upon us walking according to the Spirit. This describes the process of making life decisions, from the smallest to the biggest, according to the promptings and urgings of the Holy Spirit. This is His will for us, plain and simple! The opposite is to make those decisions according to our natural instincts, the flesh. It must be clear in our thinking that to not walk according to the Spirit is sin.

At this point Paul begins a series of thoughts that speak to this journey of sanctification. Because that process depends absolutely on setting aside the voice of the flesh and obeying the voice of the Spirit, Paul will make several references to these two forces at work in humanity. These must be interpreted precisely to emerge with a clear theology of both justification and sanctification. The force of Paul’s words here is that our sanctification is the intended result of our justification. But his words also clearly say that this intended result requires our cooperation.

8:5—“for those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”

Paul is contrasting two different systems of motivation inside people. The flesh, that portion of our being that has been damaged, distorted, and warped by sin, always leads us in the direction of self-gratification and preservation, and even self-deification. So those who are “according to the flesh,” that is, being shaped by it, have these things as their motivations. They can be believers or unbelievers (verse 8 will affirm that this is possible for believers though should be resisted). In either believers or unbelievers, the result will be the same. Their acts may be noble and good, or they may be incomparably evil. The distinguishing thing is the motives, which we cannot see. The motives of those motivated “according to the flesh” relate to themselves. This eventually tarnishes their deeds even though by outward appearance their deeds themselves may not be evil. Their rewards for those deeds are whatever they get from this life. They will not be rewarded by God.

An unbeliever who responds to the work the Holy Spirit is doing in them and so begins to place their mind on the things of the Spirit, will soon become a believer. A believer who sets their mind on the flesh, will soon do things that only unbelievers should do. So our lives will take the shape of what we are setting our minds on. If we set our minds on the things the Spirit is planting in us, we will trust think things that align with the character of God. Appropriate motives will lead to a myriad of different actions that align with Scripture.

8:6—“for the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Paul now speaks to the contrasting results of these two mindsets. The mindset of the flesh leads to death. When Paul uses the term death in this letter it most often refers to spiritual death and its symptoms. The symptoms of spiritual death occur whenever we lose touch with God. So these certainly appear in those who are spiritually dead, in whom God’s Spirit does not dwell. That is easy to see. But it is also true that those who grieve and quench the Holy Spirit can experience and portray all the signs of spiritual death, though technically they belong to Christ. In either case it is true that the mind set on the flesh, thinking thoughts about how to gratify oneself as opposed to pleasing God, results in journeying away from God and that is the essence of spiritual death. There is nothing in the flesh that leads to anything good (7:18). The best it can do is to produce a mixed bag which in the end is more destructive than what is straightforward evil.

On the other hand, the mind set on the Spirit brings spiritual life. The person who is listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit and is obeying it, who is listening for His subtle leadings and responding to them is experiencing spiritual life. It is a life lived in union with God, as life was meant to be lived. Anything else is not life. It is death.

A life lived in union with God always brings with it peace. There is an inner tranquility and confidence that comes with knowing one is in harmony with the Creator and nothing else matters.

8:7—“because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so;”

We must understand the depth of the problem that is part of who we are as humans. No one is morally neutral. We are either looking to God’s Spirit or we’re listening to the flesh, and when we listen to the flesh, we are pondering things that are hostile toward God. The things that concern God we react against. If we are sensitive to our own feelings and the voice of the Spirit, we will recognize that hostility. We’ll recognize our minds are set on the flesh. We are thinking of us, our concerns, and pleasures we would like to indulge. We have allowed ourselves to get into a mode of thinking thoughts that are not subjected to God’s laws. When we allow our mind to settle into such thinking it is only a matter of time before we act in the same way.

We can never rid ourselves of the danger of drifting into this mode. We are unable to reform what Paul refers to as “the flesh.” It is a fact of our earthly existence, and it is a particularly stark and ominous reality. “The flesh” cannot be subjected to the Law of God. So as we live this life not only does it resist our walking with God, it seeks to take us the other way. “The flesh” is that portion of our very own beings that fights us every step of the way in our journey to become more holy. It is constantly looking back and so we have thoughts of turning back. If we allow our minds to become set on the flesh, we will never make progress in the things of God.

8:8—“and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Up to this point in this chapter Paul has been speaking of walking “according to the flesh,” or of having one’s mind “set on the flesh.” That is something believers can fall into rather easily. Now in this verse he mentions those who are “in the flesh.” Not only are they walking according to the flesh, not only are their minds set on the flesh, but they are also “in the flesh.”

Just as a believer is “in Christ,” an unbeliever is “in the flesh.” As the next verse will reveal, these are those who do not belong to Christ. There is no voice of the Spirit in them. They have no choice in the matter of their mindset. They cannot be in the Spirit; they can only be in the flesh. They cannot please God because they cannot subject themselves to the Law of God. Even where the standard is set for godly behavior, they have no desire to rise to that standard. It is simply not in them to please God.

Therefore, the gospel is good news. Apart from God breaking the stalemate there could be no escape for humanity. It is simply not in us to please Him. The gospel is the account of how God has brought his power to bear on this stalemate.

8:9—“however you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.”

A believer is “in Christ.” Not only does God see him as in Christ, but he actually has also been joined to the being of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This experience for believers of the Spirit somehow became fuller and deeper after the death of Christ. It is somewhat elusive to try to articulate the change that occurred between the Spirit of God and humans at the death of Christ. Jesus spoke of the change that would transpire before He died. He said, “He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-18, 26; see also 16:7-15; 15:26-27). The contrast in prepositions in English translations might be the best way to explain the change. Before Christ’s death, the Holy Spirit was “with” us. Now He is “in” us. The finer points of the Greek prepositions raise some debate about that simple explanation. But it is useful.

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit had been at work among humanity before Christ died (Genesis 6:3; Matthew 10:20). But His ministry was able to become more intimate to the point of permanent union once sin was atoned for. This we believe is the change that occurred as we look at the statements of Scripture. The Holy Spirit now dwells inside every child of God without exception and without hiatus. This union then produces the organism known as the church.

Of this we can be certain from Paul's words here. The inference of the first word in this verse, "however," is that the presence of the Holy Spirit was within the readers Paul was addressing. His presence in us means that we can do the impossible. We can know and to live in subjection to the desires of God. Such things that promote spiritual life and peace. If we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are "in the Spirit" even as we are "in Christ." In the Spirit in this usage refers to having been baptized in the Spirit by Jesus, as John the Baptist predicted (Matthew 3:11). Being under the control of the Holy Spirit was a special occurrence during Old Testament times, i.e., Matthew 22:43). But it is normal and routine for God's people since Christ died. That is both glorious and remarkable, but it also represents staggering potential which the ensuing verses allude to.

8:10—"and if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness."

To believe in Christ is to have Him in you, and to have Him in you is to have hope. It is hope of growing past who you are to whom God would have you be. It is the hope of a whole different sort of potential in this life. It is hoped of rising from the dead both literally and figuratively. It is hope of eternal life.

The body is dead because of sin. By saying this Paul is referring to a level of inability in us due to our mortal and decaying bodies. We are limited in many ways by what happened to our bodies when Adam sinned. Physical weakness became a fact of our existence.

But through belief in Jesus our spirits are infused with divine life through the Holy Spirit. There is divine power within us which can strengthen us when our own strength is lacking. It can heal us physically when we are sick. Even as we witness increasing weakness in our bodies, we can observe increasing strength in our inner being (2 Corinthians 4:16).

All created things bear the marks of their Creator, but none more so than the person who begins to submit to the promptings of the Holy Spirit from within them. This is the righteousness of Christ being expressed through their bodies, and such a life is part of the new creation that God is bringing about in His world (2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Ephesians 2:10).

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8:11—"but 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 indwells you."

The word “if” could be rendered since, and that would capture Paul’s thought in this verse. The same power that gave life to Christ’s body in the garden tomb gives life to our bodies. They are infused with divine life through the Holy Spirit. Though they are mere mortal bodies, God’s Spirit orchestrates His plan and carries out His work in this world. Through our bodies, His body, the Church, becomes visible. Just as Jesus overcame physical death, we who have believed in Christ overcome spiritual death. Our bodies, which formerly dishonored Him (1:24), now become instruments through which He can be glorified (1 Corinthians 6:20), and each Christian should rise to this potential.

Our hope is that just as Christ was physically raised from the dead and had a different body with different capabilities, we too will be given new bodies. Our destination is to be like Christ in every way and that include His miraculous changing of our physical makeup.

8:12—“so then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—”

It is possible for Christians to be led by the flesh. This verse makes that clear. We can make such choices in the moments of each day, though they go against all sound logic. Such choices also go against the purposes of God. All that He has done for us is aimed at lifting us above such a life.

We have an obligation. Since Yahweh has done so much and loved so deeply, and since His grace has made everything freely available to us that pertains to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), we have an obligation to respond to His Spirit’s promptings. These are obligations to rise to the agenda of our Creator who has come in that moment to our rescue. We have no obligation to the flesh. We have spent enough time gratifying it. It has done nothing in our behalf.

An obligation speaks of that which is owed. Though grace is freely given, the writers of Scripture still represent us as being indebted to God. This should be understood as the same obligation the rescued one owes the rescuer. It is a debt motivated by gratitude and integrity. It is the demand of all that is logical and decent. In purely human thought anything less would be considered treachery. God’s motive in extending grace to us is first and foremost His own love. His love compels Him to address our spiritual plight. So what also motivates Him is a love-vision that we should grab hold and rise to new life (2 Corinthians 5:15-17). Next to our obligation to Him, any other obligation pales.

8:13—“for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

“Living according to the flesh” is simply responding to and pursuing the self-centered desires that spring up in us. It is the natural way to live. It requires no special effort on our part. All we have to do is what comes naturally, and we will live apart from God, which is the definition of spiritual death. As long as we live according to the flesh, we will continue to experience symptoms of spiritual death. This is true even of those who are spiritually alive. They will have all the symptoms of spiritual death if they choose to live by the flesh.

On the other hand, by the Spirit's promptings and power we can say "no!" to those desires that rise in us and so stop the natural course of our behavior. Paul calls this "putting to death the deeds of the body." That is a graphic picture. It is the truth about things our body does, from the places our thoughts take us to the places our feet take us. We can absolutely kill these courses of action. Paul's language tells us that doing so must be intentional and premeditated. It will likely be painful. But the result is life.

It is a great paradox that to live we must die. Paul is, of course, talking about living in harmony with our Creator and dying the death Jesus died to Himself long before He died physically (2 Corinthians 4:9-12). Our dying that we must do is the same. It is dying to ourselves. It is dying to our own desires—intentionally putting to death those thoughts and acts that take us away from what God desires us to do. Our desire to be praised, recognized, treated with dignity, and our desire to enforce our personal rights, to repay wrongs, to get what we "have coming," all of these would have made Jesus unwilling to be crucified. He would have missed God's mission for Him. We must imitate Him in dying to the desires of the flesh. To do that is the way to life. Anything else is not really living.

8:14—"for all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God."

This verse is often taken as being a statement about spiritual identity. Those who maintain this see it as saying that all those who are truly sons of God are being led by the Spirit of God. Therefore, anyone not being so led is not a son of God.

There is another way to look at this statement. It can be seen as a statement of the simple reality that the Holy Spirit is supplying direction to every believer from within. It says nothing about their ability to discern precisely that leading and their willingness to respond obediently. It is a simple witness to the fact that they are being led and directed in a certain way. So from a practical point of view though He is leading them, the degree to which that shows through is subject to factors within particular individual's own makeup and will. The verses that follow would seem to fit well with understanding the statement in this way. It is a statement about what God is doing in our lives, not necessarily about what we are allowing Him to produce in terms of practical outcome in our actions.

Our reality as outside observers of other's lives is that we cannot always be certain of people's spiritual identity. This is because we cannot know all that is going on inside them. The reality is that people who are in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can at any time choose to live according to the flesh. In that moment if they belong to Christ, they are being led by the Spirit. But they are not listening. What we can be confident of is that those being led by the Spirit are certainly the sons of God, and that is what Paul is saying to us here.

Paul does not make the converse statement. We must be careful about any inference that those were not following the leading of the Spirit are not sons of God. It is certainly true that many who are not following the leading of the Spirit of God are not His children. But it is a different matter to suggest that all who are not following the Spirit are not being led by Him and do not belong to Christ.

8:15—"for you have not received the spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

This verse begins with a conjunction “for” which means it is adding further explanation to what has preceded it. It is the third verse in succession to begin in this way. All these verses follow in the wake of Paul’s inference that we have an obligation as believers to live by the promptings of the Spirit. He clearly and plainly states that we have no such obligation to the flesh. Listening to the Holy Spirit opens a new way of life for us.

Those in Roman knew about spirits. Their pagan religions had taught them thoroughly about spirits to the point of superstition and fear and slavery. There is nothing quite so enslaving as spiritism, where everywhere and always one need be concerned with satisfying and appeasing this spirit and that, and where even inanimate objects are believed to have spirits. The gentile Roman certainly knew that world well. To them the thought of following the Spirit would conjure up all sorts of anxious thoughts. They had done this before and existed in the bondage of that world. The Jewish believers had witnessed the bondage of spiritism in the pagan culture. Though they were by upbringing monotheistic, they were familiar with spiritual slavery. Their own history was laced with it.

Perhaps for those reasons Paul feels the need to describe the spirit that develops in one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. That is most likely what he is doing here. He’s not so much describing the Holy Spirit as he is describing the human spirit under the control of the Holy Spirit. Apart from Him our spirits are whipsawed by other spirits who enslave us to various fears. Fear is the great weapon of the evil one and through it he gains power in our lives. Paul wants to contrast this former spiritual state which the readers have experienced with the spiritual state the gospel brings about in the life.

Yet another reason the gospel is good news is that it addresses the state of what is certainly the most critical part of our being, our innermost being, our spirits. Our spirits are eternal. They are the essence of who we are. When they leave our bodies, our bodies become lifeless. We are spirits as much as we are physical beings.

Something happens in our spirits when we receive the Holy Spirit. Our own spirits, rather than being afraid of the Creator, increasingly sense they belong to Him, in a relationship of unconditional, unwavering love. They are restored to the One by whom and for whom they were made, God. They are increasingly secure and tranquil provided they are fed with what is true and good.

The words Paul uses to express the new bond between our spirit and God’s reveal some very important ideas about that relationship. We feel a sense of belonging to God so that the relationship moves beyond friendship. There is a growing spirit of adoption in us. The security, the care, the love, the interest, the communication, all that we can imagine a perfect father being to his son, develops between ourselves and God. The longer the journey, the closer we become if we listen and respond to Him.

This growing intimacy within us between our spirit and God’s, is expressed outwardly by a crying out. Sometimes it is verbal, and audible cry, by which we call out to God as an expression of a burden we are carrying or a blessing He has granted. At other times that cry is within us. Paul expresses the cry with two words, Abba and father. The term Abba is one of endearment that a child would commonly use in Paul’s day to address their father. Dad, or even papa or daddy, would be the equivalent in our culture. It is a cry that expresses the familiarity of our relationship with God. The other term, father, is just what the word expresses. It too is a term of endearment, but also the title of respect that expresses the more formal and even authoritative side of God’s role in our lives. We should daily experience both ends of this relational spectrum.

Both ideas are present and in balance in the healthy and intimate relationship with God that is expressed in these two words. As our spirits are led by God's Spirit a deepening intimacy develops. This is as it should be. It is to this purpose that Yahweh set about to save us.

8:16—"the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

As the Holy Spirit unites Himself to our spirits there is a growing consciousness in us that we are dear and important to God. It is a rational thought, but it goes much deeper than that, and that is the only way the experience Paul is referring to here can be described. There are thoughts that our minds ponder that originate in our senses. There are other thoughts our minds deal with that originate in our spirits, in this case through the Holy Spirit. That is the deepest kind of thought there is. It is more like a realization, and sometimes is an entire state of mind. Such thought's grip us in a way that they can govern all others unless we resist them, and we intentionally steel ourselves against them.

This experience of a heightened inner consciousness and conviction that we belong to God, is both a precious and a powerful thing. It is precious in that it provides tranquility. It is powerful in that it carries great potential for life change. The grieving of the spirit (Ephesians 4:30), begins with a negative response to this inner witness on our part. It happens when we doubt God's love. It happens when shame makes us lose sight of Christ's death for us. It was very visible in the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. It was termed a lack of faith by the writer to the Hebrews. This lack of trust in the love and goodness of God robs us of peace and power to rise and leads to the quenching of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

The inner witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit is the essence of the power of the gospel's power to change our lives. It is the net result of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. It is salvation at work in day-to-day matters.

8:17—"and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him."

The voice of the Holy Spirit also speaks to our own spirits about the wonderful implications of being children of God. The great implication of our being called His children, is that with Christ we enter all that is God's, which is everything. This concept was an important part of the mindset that the Apostles taught the early Christians to develop. We are God's heirs! (Titus 3:7).

Our adoption as God's offspring is not just a way of speaking and thinking that makes us feel valued. It is the reality of how God looks at things. That includes us entering ownership of all that He has, which is a remarkable idea to contemplate. In terms of His kingdom, Christ is its designated ruler for all eternity, but we will rule with Him as co-heirs. Since that kingdom extends to all things and places, the scope of our inheritance is beyond our capacity to comprehend.

Now where there is a kingdom there are those who rule and there are generally subjects, those ruled over. This raises an interesting question. If God has a day for judging the wicked and if all who have not embraced faith are confined for eternity to hell, who is left but believers to be subjects in this kingdom? And if all believers are heirs of this kingdom, over whom will they reign?

To those who believe that Christ will return to earth to set up an earthly kingdom, this is not a significant problem. They believe that Christ will rule on this earth as its rightful ruler and that all who are His from all ages will be raised to rule with Him. Together they will rule over all who are left on earth following the judgment associated with “the day of Yahweh” (Is. 2:12ff).

Those who do not believe in a kingdom of Christ on this earth believe that we will rule over a new heaven and earth, even as Adam did over God’s created works. Humanity’s original role as God’s appointed rulers over creation will be restored in the new creation. They also point to the scriptural idea that we will rule over other beings such as angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

Now if it is true that believers will rule with Christ over an earthly kingdom, then we have a concept that significantly impacts how we understand this verse. We can be open to the possibility that believers will have differing experiences of their reign with Christ. All are His heirs in terms of being present with Him when He rules the earth. Those who have been faithful to the truth and who have been faithful in discharging their responsibilities will be rewarded with positions of leadership in that kingdom. Those whose love was lukewarm and whose obedience was intermittent occupy lesser positions and will to some degree be themselves subject to the rule of more faithful saints.

There is much scriptural evidence to support this latter idea. The second half of this verse is typical of that scriptural support. It is clearly a conditional statement about who is an heir. In this case the condition is that one suffer with Christ and if they do so, then they will be His coheir.

Now given that condition, being an heir can certainly not be equated with being justified. If being an heir is being justified and having the right to enter heaven, then making it conditional upon one’s willingness to faithfully suffer would certainly go against what Paul has stated thus far in this letter to the Romans. However, if our role in the future kingdom is a reward for faithfulness, then the statement makes perfect sense. It is likely that our glorification is in some way connected to our being sanctified, submitting faithfully to that process of God in our daily lives whereby He conforms us more to the character of Christ. This faithfulness He will reward.

It is a solid exegetical conclusion in respect to this verse and in respect to many in Scripture like it, to say that the roles of believers in the future earthly kingdom will be varied. These will be assigned by the Sovereign Ruler based on our faithfulness in serving His kingdom in its present form. Those willing to suffer with Christ on this earth are promised in many places great reward when He arrives on earth to rule.

8:18—“for I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Paul and the other early Christians who had seen Christ always had this mentality toward the suffering connected with Christ, the Gospel, and all that goes with belonging to God. It is nothing (2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 1:6). That is how Paul “reckons”, values on the official record, the sufferings he himself encountered in the work of the gospel.

When Paul says in these words that these sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory of Christ, that is a much stronger statement than simply saying that our present sufferings are worth it. He is suggesting that the glory we will one day gain, makes the present sufferings of such miniscule value as not to be mentioned in the same breath. Even if these should involve our very lives, they are not worthy of mentioning. Our present sufferings have nowhere near the value necessary to even open negotiations to purchase a smattering of what will one day be freely given to those who are faithful. That is how great the treasure is that awaits us.

8:19—“for the anxious longing of creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.”

Here Paul begins a series of comments that have to do with creation, and by that he seems to be speaking of created things, apart from humanity. In doing so he employs figurative language, giving human-like characteristics to the matter that makes up the things of creation. In the process Paul uses three lengthy compound words that start with the preposition *απο* (*ἀποκαρδοκία* anxious longing; *ἀποκάλυψιν* the revealing; *ἀπεκδέχεται* waits eagerly). This gives the phrase a rhythmic flow like a sad song of lament. The result is a picture of creation with a collective soul, expressing a collective sorrow.

Creation, speaking first of our planet and its immediate atmosphere, is the host to the jewel of God’s creation, humankind. Humanity is its designated ruler and was so created that they have powerful impact on creation. But it is a fallen humanity, separated from their Creator, and so not equipped with knowledge and wisdom to rule as they should. The task of ruling is either left undone or in some cases over-done. So fallen humanity’s rule is usually done wrongly.

To speak in harmony with Paul’s figurative language, we are self-serving and abusive toward creation. The fall of humanity and the resulting self-centeredness, compulsiveness, and impulsiveness that drives them is clearly seen in the condition of the planet. Paul pictures a collective groaning of Earth under our self-serving rule in these verses. He depicts creation as a person who has an anxious longing. Paul uses this word one other place (Philippians 1:20), where it refers to his own personal desire for the day when prayers of many would be answered and he would be released from prison. So creation here is pictured as waiting, languishing for release from its abusive masters.

The better day creation longs for is said to happen at the time of the revealing of the sons of God. The revealing of the sons of God is a reference to those who through faith, by means of the sacrifice of Christ, have been made right with their Creator. Paul affirms elsewhere that the day will come when Christ returns to earth to rule it with all his children, resurrected from the dead in new bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). It will be the beginning of a different era for this creation. It will be radically different because the rule of creation will be carried out by those who are perfectly executing the will of the Creator. All who have been rescued by Jesus will be revealed by Him.

The accurate and precise picture of these events must be pieced together from the words of Jesus, the Old Testament prophets, and the apostles (Matthew 13:36–43; 24:29–31; Luke 19:25–28, 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; 51–58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11; Romans 11:25–32; Revelation 19:11–20:10). But it is the revealing of the sons of God in a redeemed, restored, perfect state that creation is appointed for and awaiting. Presently, creation bears everywhere the scars of fallen humanity who are separated from their Creator. It also bears the scars of the evil one who also is forever separated from the Creator. The planet has borne the brunt of both the abusive evil beings and evil humanity. Creation behaves differently when it is addressed by one perfectly related to its Creator. Christ demonstrated this when he calmed the storm, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Creation is designed for a certain kind of ruler, and it bears the wounds and scars of lacking that.

It is important not to get caught up in the figurative language and attribute to matter a collective soul. Nowhere in Scripture do we find evidence for that. Terms like “mother nature” are misnomers if taken in the literal sense. Creation as it is referred to here is separate from humanity. Though God’s spirit is active in it, it is itself simply soulless matter. But as the host of fallen humanity, it bears everywhere the scars of their self-serving rule.

8:20—“for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope”

Creation did not choose to become what it has become. It cannot make such a choice. When God made it, creation was not as it presently is. Four critical things besides natural law have happened that have made the planet what it is. These four things are important factors in the concerns over our environment. First, evil has entered the human stream as the immediate consequence of the curse on man and woman (Genesis 3:16–19), and on the ground itself (Genesis 3:17–19). Second, evil in humanity has caused humanity to not steward the earth according to God the Creator’s wisdom, so it bears the marks of our foolishness. Third, humanity became so evil God had to destroy much of original creation by means of a flood, which had cataclysmic impact that is still visible today. Fourth, God as ruler over natural Law acted on it, so that the earth simply functions differently. It may be an oversimplification to say that the earth’s former equilibrium was interrupted, but it seems to be the case. It seems that some natural processes were slowed, perhaps by the interaction of opposing forces against them. The result is that the earth we experience produces less and recovers slower than original creation.

Thus, the present earth is not at all like the original creation. Paul uses the term futility to describe the thing that shaped much of what we now see. It is a word that summarizes well what God predicted would happen due to sin on the earth when he spoke with Adam after his sin. “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground . . .” Due to our sin, “no sustainable progress” became our lot. We can certainly produce and invent. But the earth will not sustain our processes and provide the necessities of survival as we wish. Work became toil. The earth provides for us only by great and repeated effort.

Futility is a word that describes much about our human existence, as “the preacher” repeated so often in Ecclesiastes. Without becoming depressed and excessively pessimistic, we must admit that a few pursuits involved in survival come with great effort and do not remain “done.” They’re completed, only to have to be initiated all over again. So there’s much futility in this life and this was unknown before sin. This experience of futility can and does overwhelm humans at times. That is by design.

Now Paul says clearly that God did this, that is, He subjected creation to futility. We can say then that the curse was just that—a curse. It was not that evil shaped the creation. Rather creation changed due to the will and action of the Creator. So we see confirmation of the idea that the creation, and all the natural laws that were part and parcel of it, remain under the control of its Creator, God. We see that creation is not something He set in motion that became bigger than Him—the monster that grew out of the lab experiment. We are given the plain truth that God subjected creation to futility.

We are then given a one-word clue about what motivated this action. It was done “in hope.” It was not done in resignation, or anger, or as a final act of withdrawal. It was done in hope. This can only mean that it was done with a particular result in mind other than the futility that immediately followed. There was a desire and a plan that the futility would help bring something other than itself about. The futility would act as fertile ground that would help produce something else the Creator wanted to bring about. The next verse will allow us to see what that result would be. Our futility would make an important contribution to the germ of faith that God wished to infect humanity with.

8:21—“that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

God subjected creation to futility with this hope in mind, that such subjection would be temporary. God’s plan aimed to glorify all humans who would acknowledge Him. These would be glorified—raised from the dead and given new bodies. These would help move creation toward freedom from its slavery to futility. And looking at these statements and to rest of Scriptures testimony, we believe that the time will come when Christ rules the earth and His “glorified” people carry out His rule.

To digress for a moment from the present text, at the time of Christ’s rule with His holy ones over the present earth, there will be a lightening in the curse that now devours humanity and creation. This lightening of the curse will be a result of the transformation in those ruling over creation, who are conformed to the character of Christ. Once glorified and being guided by King Jesus their rule over creation, these will alter and restore the earth considerably. This likely happens when Satan is bound for 1000 years (Revelation 20).

There are numerous references in the Scripture to future conditions on earth that, if they are to be taken literally of the present earth, can only be true if there is this lessening of the curse’s effect (Isaiah 11:6–9; 65:20–25, for example). This is not to say the earth is eternal. We know that the present earth is destined for complete destruction (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12; Revelation 20:11; 21:1), and that the eternal state will be experienced in the new earth (Revelation 21:1). Such projections of this creation being set free, we take as referring to the millennial reign of Christ when the curse is apparently lightened. We would agree that these will be fulfilled to their fullest degree when a new heaven and earth are created. But we argue for a redemptive work on the present planet because we believe the Scripture speaks of it.

It would seem reasonable to project that God's subjection of creation to the curse was meant to lead that portion of creation that was most precious to Him, humanity, to faith. In the same way that the Law makes us aware of our sinfulness, the futility of so much related to this life is to instruct us about the consequences of living independently of our Creator and exercising our will against His. So creation came to be one of God's agents to lead individuals to faith in God. Through the sheer futility of activities essential to survival, humanity would have the ongoing confirmation that it is hard to live outside the sphere of the Creator's will and plan.

8:22—"for we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."

Paul has established that God intentionally acted in response to evil. His action was to subject creation to futility. The curse was not in this sense a natural consequence of evil, as if built into the fiber of the universe. Nor were evil beings the first cause of this change. It was a state intentionally established by God. Though He is not the source of futility, He allowed it for a period. It will be lifted once He is revealed and is present on earth, and with Him a completely redeemed portion of humanity. These will rule with Him for 1000 years over a believing, though still fallen humanity and creation.

In this verse Paul likens the journey toward that point in history to the pains of childbirth. The gathering of these children of God and their accompanying care, education, and development is the work God is occupied with. He has marshaled all His created works to help bring humanity to mature faith. It is a work being carried out against great resistance. Creation for the sake of illustration, is assigned a collective nervous system here in Paul's thought, and so moans as a woman giving birth.

Paul is not suggesting that creation itself produces the new strain of humanity, free from the consequences of the fall. The creation does not behave according to its intended design and so in this illustration is pictured as laboring to help bring about the existence of the community of the redeemed. When that occurs, it can then be redeemed, recover, and resume the existence it once had before the fall of man. Until the present time this has been the story of salvation history, the focus of all of God's created works and work. to bring about this restoration of the dignity of humanity through the formation of a community of the redeemed. This community, with Christ as its king and source of wisdom and with new bodies, will then be used by Him for the restoration of creation.

8:23—"and not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

Not only is creation groaning under the futility now inherent in it, we ourselves as God's children groan even moan in agony within ourselves. There is presently, even within us, a gnawing, unsatisfied longing to be who we were made to be. Our restoration is currently incomplete even in Christ. We have what Paul refers to as the "first fruits of the Spirit." The first fruits are great! God has placed His Spirit within us, and our spirits are united with Him. But the various things that are a part of our bodies—particularly our minds with their old patterns of thinking and behavior, remain a mixed bag. There is a ceiling above which we cannot rise in the moral sense, the emotional sense, the intellectual sense, in every arena of our existence.

Though it is proper to speak of the Christian life as one that is deeply meaningful and gratifying, it is also proper to speak of it as incomplete, as unfulfilling, and even as frustrating. These are obviously not things we speak of much in our proclamation. But this groaning within that Paul is describing is something we both think and feel.

It is one of the great blessings of the human experience to receive the Spirit of God. There could be nothing which could add more to the human experience than this. Paul describes us as having the "first fruits of the spirit." We're like farmers who have tasted the harvest. We know it is there and that is assuring and is fulfilling. It is cause for celebration. There is much anxiety that disappears with this assurance. The full harvest lies ahead. Security is our destiny of hope and conviction. But it is not in our grasp. There is much yet to do and it requires much of us, including some pain.

Continuing with the imagery of farming and of first fruits, Paul says we wait eagerly for a different season to arrive. What we're doing is good in one sense and it is accomplishing that which is of value. But it is not the end for which we are destined. It is what we do for now. We wait eagerly, as we anticipate an experience which we have been told is good beyond description, that the Holy Spirit gives us a taste of (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). But Paul generally presents the abundance as a hope, as something that lies ahead for us.

There is a truth we can be convinced of from Paul's writings, and we can say we have been adopted as God's children (Ephesians 1:5). There is another sense in which we await the entire experience of that adoption for which we are predestined. Here in this context Paul is talking about that greater experience of adoption, which he equates with what he calls "the redemption of our bodies."

Paul does not feel the need to elaborate on the details of this redemption of our bodies in this letter to the Romans. He was apparently comfortable that they would understand how this redemption of our bodies would be brought about. He gives greater detail of this in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:51-58). To the Corinthians he also speaks of the same inner groaning describing it as a desire to be clothed (2 Corinthians 5:1-10). There is still much that remains a mystery about this redemption of our bodies.

We don't know exactly what was lost by humanity in terms of the physical body when Adam and Eve sinned. We are told that their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked. They had an immediate awareness by their sense of sight of something missing. Whatever was lost by us physically, can be linked to our inner groaning and our inner loss of significance. But it was also discernable to the eyes of Adam and Eve. Whatever the loss, it results in a longing that leads to the passionate pursuit of more out of life.

In our natural human state ungoverned by truth God has revealed, this groaning is a hopeless pursuit of something that eludes our grasp. To the degree that the child of God is obedient and exercises his faith in the truth, this is groaning is soothed. While it is not totally satisfied, these know and are confident that it will be. They understand what it is about and are not taken in by those pursuits that promise fulfillment apart from God himself.

The understanding of this groaning is a watershed idea to grasp. Understanding what it is keeps us from much heartache and the compounding of our emptiness. It helps steer us right at the crossroads. It helps us endure in kingdom work at those times when we might choose to let go and pursue pleasure. It pushes us through the very normal seasons when life gives us a heightened sensation of its fleeting nature, and when the dread that life may be passing us by sweeps over us. Our thoughts go to the day of the redemption of our bodies. We recognize the groaning and can turn to our hope in that day. It is the only means by which this inner need of ours will be satisfied. To seek to deal with it in any other way would be an empty pursuit, a chasing after the wind.

There is a great shortfall in all of life's experiences. Our hope in an indescribable future is why "the preacher" could make his simplistic sounding conclusion about how life is to be lived: "fear God and keep his commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

8:24—"for in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees?"

Paul is explaining here that we are not making the choices we are making to achieve more in the present life. It is in the realm of the unseen that we are placing our hope. He begins by saying that we have been saved "in the hope." Earlier he explained that God subjected creation to futility "in hope" (verse 21). In that statement he was speaking of God's hope. It is difficult for us to conceive of a timeless God hoping. But here we learn that hope is His motive in allowing creation to suffer under the rule of fallen humans. It was a means by which a better state could be brought about, a rescue of humanity could be made.

The plan of salvation is based in hope, God's hope. Now admittedly the hope of an all-knowing, all-powerful God, is different from ours. But it is still hope. It is a vision for a better situation, which vision is in this case certain, because it is God's. It is not our vision. In hope we have been saved and in this context the hope in view is God's great and majestic vision for us. His hope is in a particular day when He will save us from our fallen bodies that experience such weakness, deterioration, and ultimately death.

The hope we can embrace is not just a higher plane of existence we rise to in this life through Christ. No matter how high that might be by virtue of God's grace and our obedience, it is still the first fruits of the Spirit. It is not our hope. What we already have cannot be construed to be hope. Paul's point is that hope, relates to what one does not yet have or experience. It is a great error for us to believe that any present experience of God, no matter how great, is the ultimate experience that can be lived. We simply cannot yet lay hold of that for which we are laid hold of. Our inner expectation arises from our spirit. That expectation cannot be met until our redemption is completed.

The reality of this life, even for the saved, is an ongoing inner groaning. Our hope does not relate to anything that can be experienced in our present life. There is a sense in which we will die disappointed because this life simply cannot deliver that for which we have been made. We are saved in hope, God's hope. He has a vision for our restoration, a destination toward which He is moving us. We will realize our hope only on the day we experience His completed plans/vision for us. We live for that day, and presently we only get tastes of what will be. These are meant to give us hope. They are not the end He has promised.

8:25—"but if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it."

The person whose only hope is what they can presently achieve from this life will not persevere in the face of trouble, even if their hope in the present experience of life is a grand one like a deeper experience of the Spirit. Our hope must be grander, grounded in what God has revealed regarding eternity. Only then will we persevere in obedience in this present state of incompleteness, amid all the hungers aroused by it.

Paul says plainly that if we hope for what we do not see we will persevere, and our wait will be an eager one. Now it is a risky thing to live life hoping in what cannot be seen. We discipline ourselves to think in terms of tangible concrete realities. This is the only kind of living that can be construed to be wise. But in and of itself, this is not wise. We must not allow ourselves to slip into the sterility of the purely concrete. While conducting much of our practical affairs based on concrete data, we must allow faith to invade every aspect of our lives so that there are no compartments. In the end Jesus must be Lord of all. When He is He always requires faith and trust of us.

Herein lies a tension that is the difficulty of the Christian life. It is why it cannot be reduced to patterns and routines. It is said of the father of our faith, Abraham, that "he went out not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). The hope and conviction of the reality of the unseen must shape our lives as it did his if we are to persevere. Yet we must live with present realities firmly in view. This tension is critical to maintain because power and wisdom lie only in truth. We must live life in terms of what is concretely true, i.e., the outgo must not exceed the income. At the same time, we must live life in terms of what is abstractly true and real, i.e., the kingdom of God and eternity. Both elements of truth should shape our life decisions. If we hope in what is not seen we persevere in the pattern of delayed gratification, of not doing what we might hunger for. At the same time, we persevere in a pattern of doing the works of God that faith inspires.

8:26—"And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Paul has spoken of the idea that creation "groans" under the futility allowed by God because of evil (verse 22). He has spoken of us groaning as we live in our imperfect bodies, awaiting God's completed work of redemption in us (verse 23). Now we are told of the groaning of the Spirit. Just as creation aches as it is used by God to bring about His purpose, and just as we ache, longing to be more what God wants us to be, the Holy Spirit aches also. We are told several things about His efforts on our behalf.

First, the Holy Spirit helps our weaknesses. It is a given in Paul's letter that we are weak regarding becoming who God would have us be. We are vulnerable to sin, due to what he has called the flesh. We are weak physically. We are weak emotionally. We are weak in terms of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. It is these various weaknesses that the Spirit counters through His work in us.

Second, due to our weakness we do not even know how to pray as we should. We know that the Spirit orchestrates prayer and directs us to pray, and so we're told to "pray in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18). This is prayer that is composed of thoughts placed in our minds by God Himself. They consist of the will and mind of God in the matter. So we are enabled to ask for that which He desires to do, and led to pray prayers that will surely be answered. In this verse however we are told of an activity of the Holy Spirit that augments our own prayerfulness. We are told that He intercedes for us, making up for a lack of understanding and knowledge. He does so with groanings too deep for words.

This is referring to something that happens within the Trinity that we can only slightly understand from our own experience. We experience our spirit communicating with our mind. An example of this is found in Paul's description of our "groaning" in verse 23. As we read there of our groaning, we are aware of what Paul is talking about. It is difficult to understand how our mind and emotions might be functioning regarding this inner groaning of our spirit, but we are very much aware of an inner sense of incompleteness at times. It is the sense of there being a shortfall in all that life has to offer. It can be quite pronounced, especially in those who have no knowledge of truth. But the point is that our spirit's communicate something to our minds.

Just as our spirits are not at rest in this life, so in harmony with our own spirits God's Spirit living in us is also not at rest, and so within God there comes to be a "groaning." It is a longing to bring completion to that which is lacking in us and in our world. This is likely an overly simplistic view. It always is such when we try to understand God in terms of our experience. But there are similarities, and it is a helpful way to begin.

It seems to be Paul's understanding that there is a way of communicating within the Godhead which cannot be captured by language. The Holy Spirit's activity in our behalf is felt by God Himself from deep within His being. God aches together with us and with His creation. This is a profound concept and idea, that when the Holy Spirit groans, God feels it. The Spirit's intercession does not come to God from outside His being, in the same way our prayers come to Him. It comes from within Him. It is a product of who He is. It must be granted that we are imagining this based on what we are reading here and expressing it in human terms. God is a different being than us, but He often expresses who He is in ways that attribute humanlike characteristics to Himself, to help us understand His nature in a clearer way.

What this verse captures is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit includes providing a pathway into the very inner being of God whereby He is acutely aware of the needs that we cannot articulate. Many other Scriptures speak of the Spirit being how things of God are imported to us. This verse describes how things related to us are known to God, are felt by Him, and become innate to His greater understanding of all things. His omniscience is in this way tied to His omnipresence. His understanding of us and our needs far exceeds our own as He is present in the deepest part of our beings and everywhere in His creation simultaneously.

This truth allows us to that our vast God is personal. We can be strengthened by the fact that our needs are not lost on a gigantic whiteboard in heaven or buried in a list in the recesses of heaven's database. Yahweh feels them and processes them as we experience them, and this happens because of the truth of the gospel which reunites us with our Creator. It is the power of God brought to bear on our existence. This verse captures how dramatic the change comes about in our existence through our belief in that gospel.

8:27—"and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

One of the great challenges of living life as a fallen human being is that there is so much that we were meant to know which is now veiled. When Adam and Eve fell, they came to know about evil, but they lost the ability to know God as they had. Though there was much they did not know before, all they needed to know was accessible to them because they knew God.

The fall changed dramatically how humanity lives. Ever since that event our key difficulty is that we do not know the mind and the desire of God in day-to-day matters. Another way of saying this is to simply say that we do not know God well. We do not know Him as one gets to know a friend so that we sense what He is thinking. And even in the case of the obedient and the mature who know God as one does a best friend, there are still issues that arise in which they simply do not know the mind of God. And so the challenge of both the weak and the strong is to know the mind of the Spirit.

Knowing the mind of the Spirit is a challenge because we cannot see and know the heart of another, much less that of God. There is a spiritual dimension that we need to be able to function in which has been lost to us. God functions well in that realm, in fact, He functions perfectly. There is nothing He does not know. He searches the hearts, we are told here, and the word heart is plural. There is no inner being and therefore no motive of any being in existence that is unknown to Him, and that includes Himself.

Through the ministry of God's own Spirit, He has restored some of this to us. As we live for Him we grow in our ability to hear the Spirit's voice and discern His leading. But it remains our greatest handicap that we do not know the mind of the Spirit of God, and worse we don't even know our own heart and the voice of our own spirit well.

There is no such dilemma within the being of God. Just as God easily knows the hearts of all beings, He thoroughly understands what is happening within Himself. Because He is a perfect being, there is no conflict within Him. His mind and His Spirit are in perfect harmony. There are not multiple voices or influences in Him. To know what His own Spirit is saying to Him in behalf of us is very simple in that it is an exact harmony with what His mind is telling Him, and what His mind has already ordained and planned. His Spirit is orchestrating and seeking to bring about His will. His Spirit is pleading within Him in complete and utter harmony with Him about the very things He is doing and desiring to do. The Holy Spirit's requests on our behalf are always heard and always granted.

Paul's point here is that there is from God's end of things no mystery world of the Spirit. So there is not the waiting, nor the uncertainty, nor lack of clarity on the part of God that is so apparent on our end as we groan and struggle for perspective, for words, for wisdom, and for understanding. It is all crystal clear to God, and His Spirit and His mind are always in perfect harmony. What the Spirit is saying within God from within us is clearly heard, known, agreed-upon, and embraced by God.

8:28—"and we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose."

Our comfort and strength amid all that we do not know and understand in this life is our faith. And we know that all things that exist are allowed to do so because they fill some function in what He is bringing about. We know that no single thing is out of the Spirit of God's understanding (Colossians 1:16). Ultimately then, we who have been summoned to believe in Christ can be assured that good is being worked and brought about in our behalf.

This is true not because it is all being done by good people, good beings, or good forces. But ultimately it will be shown that those things He in His goodness has done have so countered and shaped the results of even the evil and vile things of the devil, that good is brought about through it all. This is not to say that we must see all things as being good. They are not. He is asking us to trust His judgment in allowing their existence and to trust that He can act in a way that creates something good out of what was intended to be evil.

In relation to this verse, God does not want us to imagine that the origin of all things is Him. Rather, He wants us to trust in His omnipotence and believe that all things were not only created by Him, but were created for Him, and this extends to the realm of evil. We must remind ourselves that if this is not true, then He really is not omnipotent. The moment we identify something He cannot do, such as bringing about something He desires through the acts of those dead set against Him, we have admitted that He is not omnipotent.

In this verse, God is calling us to believe and embrace the complete sovereignty of His creative power. He is good and He is the cause of good. Because He is good and is all-powerful, He is continually working and initiating at strategic moments those things that will shape all things, so that His purposes are brought about. We must understand by saying this that we are not to see in this that God is reacting and counter-acting continually. Rather in His foreknowledge, knowing all that would be initiated and brought about by lesser beings, He ordained his own creative events so that in the end His good pleasure would be brought about.

There is clearly in these words limitation on whom may bank on being an object of God's goodness. It is those who love God who will be beneficiaries of His goodness. These words do not ensure that everyone can count on a good outcome, or that everything will turn out good for everyone. Those who rebel against God, who deny Him, who have aligned themselves with all that He hates, will simply have what they have created for themselves, complete separation from Him and His goodness. It is those who love Him that can rest in the belief that He will bring about good for them even though the evil they suffer is horrific.

Paul's words explain something important about those who love God. He says here that they are "called according to purpose." The translators of the NASB have added the word His, and it is obvious from other Scripture that this edition is warranted. This idea that those who love God are "called according to HIS purpose" is such an important one that Paul will spend the next two verses expanding it. It will be clear that those who love God have been acted upon by God, and are being acted upon by God in love, so that their lives are moving in a certain direction. Their love for Him is explained by His love for them. He is the first cause. The presence of this love for God in their lives is a sign of the work that He is doing in them and so is a sign that in their case all things will be caused by God so that all works together for good.

Paul will explain what that good is that is being brought about by God for them. His words will also reveal some representative actions God has already taken all of which assure us that His love guarantees that nothing can rob us of the good He intends to bring about in our behalf.

It is this grand end, and all the intermediate actions from God required along the way, that the Holy Spirit knows and intercedes for. At the limit of our own understanding, His takes over. His "groaning" addresses these actions of God that assure that His purposes are carried out according to his great plan. It is in God's purpose, known to the Holy Spirit, that we find our greatest good, and He intercedes for us according to that purpose of God.

8:29—"for whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

Verse 28 spoke of us being "called according to purpose." Yahweh has a clear end in view. God has summoned people intentionally and purposefully. That verse implied that specific ones are summoned, and this verse continues to employ language in terms that convey that idea. It tells us that those whom He has summoned, He knew before. Some have suggested that He summoned those whom He knew beforehand would respond to the truth. While this is somewhat possible in terms of the language and grammar, and while it avoids the problem of God not acting to save all, it is a point of view that creates other problems. It makes salvation a result of human choice (see John 6:65), and it makes faith something inherent in us (see Ephesians 2:9-10).

These subjects have been the source of vigorous and at times violent disagreement. One cannot find in the meaning of the words themselves absolute clarity. Furthermore, in what has become known as the Calvinist/Armenian debate, no matter what choice one makes they must live with certain scriptures that seem to argue in favor of the view that opposes their own.

So does God call all men or only a chosen few? Do believers arrive at belief by their own free will or are they acted on by God to believe? If God influences the decision of a person, does that mean that the person does not have free will? Conversely, if man makes a choice poorly on his own, in the exercise of free will, does that mean God is not sovereign? All these questions become part of this debate.

These verses seem to be describing a believer's life journey from heaven's point of view. There is no reference to human action in them. They are a description of action God has taken, is taking, and will take, actions that are meant to ensure that His purpose is brought about. These are offered as an expansion of the idea that God works among all the things that come about, through various influences, so that a good final ending for those whom He has called is guaranteed.

Paul speaks in this verse of two actions of God in behalf of believers that precede their call. He speaks of God foreknowing them. This of course means that He knew about them, because there is nothing He does not know. While this is all the word itself demands in terms of its English meaning, it is also within its biblical meaning to say that God related Himself to them in a special way. While this idea of previous relationship is present in some of the other instances of this word usage, it is not necessarily present in all of them (see Acts 26:5; Romans 11:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:17; for the other occurrences of προγινώσκω).

Whatever the scope of action included in this word, one thing is certain. His knowledge of us before time, includes all He knows about everything, which is everything. Our call to adhere to the truth began with what God knew beforehand. God's call of us was preceded by Him knowing us, whatever that might entail, and there is considerable evidence in this context that this included God personally relating Himself to individuals who would then be objects of His special mercy and love.

Another word used here that has big implications is the word predestined. This is the second great action of God taken before His actual call to individuals. Based on His foreknowledge, God predestined people. The word means to limit beforehand or to set boundaries beforehand. God assured a certain outcome in the life of those He foreknew. This can only mean that He exercised control over events in time to bring about a certain result. So we must say that from heaven's perspective those whom God foreknew are acted upon by God sovereignly so that a specific thing is certain to happen which Paul names here.

The destination of those God called is stated in the original language very precisely. They are "predestined conformed to the image of his son." The result of God's call will be that Christ will be the firstborn of many that bear His likeness. The addition of the verb "to be" or "to become," is legitimate, but it can add some confusion to what Paul is teaching here. It seems best to understand our being conformed to Christ as a destiny that we will realize when God's processes have been finally completed. This means it will occur after a resurrection from the dead when we are given new bodies and stand perfected before Him.

It does not seem that our being conformed to the image of Christ in the completed and perfect sense is being guaranteed in this life. There is nothing in Paul's writings that suggests that he viewed our obedience in this life as predestined. The mere presence of his letters, and his many exhortations and commands indicate that he felt it was not destined to simply happen in this life apart from great effort and diligence on our part.

Yet our destiny is certain. It is a work God has begun in His collective family and He will complete it in them (Philippians; 6). This work of His will go on in us collectively until the day of Christ when it is fully realized. So believers are predestined to this absolute conformity to Christ. It is their destination. But it is a mistake to embrace the idea that there is a guaranteed degree of holiness that is predestined and therefore guaranteed in the present life. Holiness is the will of God for us, and we are to pursue it. All the power of heaven is available to aid us in that pursuit. But it is not a guarantee that we will pursue it in each moment as we should. Our own wills enter the process each moment of our lives, and we can't assume that we will get more holy and be conformed even if we pay no attention to the process ourselves and do not distance ourselves from sin.

8:30—“and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

In this verse key actions taken by God in His sovereignty and in our behalf are set down. It is important for us to observe in these words that none whom God has foreknown are lost along the way. Reaching back to those whom he foreknew in verse 29, we see that actions He took in behalf of them are carried out toward each of them. They are not carried out towards some of them and there is no partial experience of being justified and glorified.

Each of these actions displays God's love for us. Having related Himself to us in some way in eternity past, He predestined us for glorification. That means instruments through whom He will be glorified through all of time and eternity. We sometimes refer to glorification as Heaven. Glorification does involve a place. But it involves a role as well which is of prime significance. Yahweh ordains events and experiences that are essential to us getting to that destination, providing for faith to take root in us and to be embraced by us. These ordained events include the work of Christ done in our behalf, the various acts of special revelation whereby humanity could know of God, and the events whereby that revelation became personally known by those He foreknew.

Those who were thus predestined He called. This has been mentioned already and refers to a special work of the Holy Spirit within that convinces a person of the truths of God with respect to Himself and to themselves. It is not that they know it all. It is that they come to trust the integrity of what He does make known to them. The call of God is the inner conviction that “this is the way, I must walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21). It is an intellectual affirmation, and it is a more subjective assent at the same time, the witness of one's inner being as it is drawn along by the Holy Spirit. Those who are thus called respond. There is no percentage of success on the part of God in drawing those humans He has predestined. They are predestined and so they respond to the call. He is the only one who bats 1.000.

Because of their faith, these are justified. This term means to declare righteous. It is not that they are righteous. They are declared righteous, forgiven, and pardoned by the work of Jesus Christ in their behalf. The result is that they are accepted by God and so reunited with their Creator. This is part of their destiny, to be cleansed from all sin by the mercy of God so that their sins and lawless deeds are no longer counted against them.

This restoration to their Creator with the ability to accurately depict His glory is what is being captured in the term “glorified.” The glory of man is sourced in God, the glorious one. What was weighty (that is the meaning of glory) about man, as opposed to all the other created creatures, was that man bore the image of God. God's glory was visible in humanity. Evil marred that glory, and individually as we live, we continue to journey further from Him and mar it further, apart from the work of God described in these verses. When a person is foreknown, predestined, called, and justified, they are on the road back to God's glory being fully restored in them. They are reconciled to their Creator.

As Yahweh's plan unfolds, the day will come when that restoration is complete, and the physical creation is restored (that is the context of these verses). At that point this work of glorification will be completed. We will be physically reunited with God, meaning we will live in new bodies that host His glory, no longer "naked" (2 Corinthians 5:1-8). The dwelling of God will be with humanity (Revelation 21:3), and His glory will be experienced by them in a totally different way (Revelation 2:5 for example). That is the destiny of all who have been foreknown, and that is the completeness of our conformity to the image of Christ that awaits us.

God's work in us was initiated before creation (Ephesians 1:3-4). It is fixed, having been decreed by Him who knows all things and has power over all things. It is complete, in that all in whom the journey was instigated will take it and will arrive at their destination where the glory of God is fully restored even in their physical bodies and outward appearance. The work of glorification will be completed in all whom He has foreknown. It is certain and unstoppable.

8:31—"what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

This verse begins with the question we should always ask as we learn the truth about God. What should we say about these things? Given what is true about God and His kindness toward us, what should now be our response? What impact does this have on our opinions and ideas about real-life situations?

Because no person or thing can thwart the purposes of God, and because we have been called in conjunction with those purposes, and because our present faith is the work of Him bringing about those purposes, we can have utter confidence in our eternal destiny. There is no calamity that can take from us what God will measure out to us. There is no plan that Satan can perpetrate to keep us from being glorified and forever being God's children. None of this is to say we will not have trouble in this life or that we cannot lose everything of this world's goods. Trouble in this life will be more pronounced because of our faith (John 16:33). But it remains true that nothing can rob us of the good that God has planned for us when we are ushered into His presence. By asking this question, Paul is calling us to reflect and be blessed repeatedly by our privilege.

We must note that no one can stand against us because God is for us. There remains room in that statement for us to hurt ourselves by failure to obey or persevere. We must accept even in this statement some degree of responsibility on our part to take up our cross daily and follow Him. At the same time, we must not suggest that those were predestined can by their own wills reverse God's eternal destiny for themselves. It seems from all of Scripture's calls to us to obey and persevere in the faith, that we must embrace the idea that it is possible for us to not rise to moments in this life as God would have us to. And so what happens in those cases? It seems from Scripture that we will suffer loss of reward and blessing (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). But we are secure in our position as His children. Nothing can undo God's choice of us. In this sense no one can stand against us.

8:32—"He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

The message of this verse is that if God gave us His Son, He certainly gave us all else that is His, which is everything. This staggers the most vivid of imaginations. The love of God is unknowable; it is so wide, high, and deep. Yet it is important for us to know it (Ephesians 3:19). This question posed by Paul is one of those statements made in Scripture that quantify God's love, or more accurately, show that His love for us is unquantifiable. More statements that develop this idea of the boundless nature of Christ's love will follow in this context.

The action Paul summarizes in the phrase "deliver Him up" warrants the attention of all humanity. It is the statement made elsewhere of Judas, that he delivered Christ up (Matthew 27:4). It is true that Judas did deliver Christ up and is eternally responsible for that deed (Acts 1:15-20). It is also true that Satan put that thought in Judas' heart (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). It is also true of Jesus Himself that He delivered Himself up (Acts 3:13). But God knew in eternity past all those actions would come to be. To bring about a different purpose He allowed them and allowed them to grow to fruition at just the right time. So God's loving acts were premeditated.

When we understand all that was included in the incarnation, God's Son becoming human flesh, we understand that in crude terms God "packaged" His Son in just the precise way to serve us best. He delivered Him to us, allowed us to do as we pleased with Him, then reversed the intentions of hell and humanity to bring about our eternal salvation. He saved us at our worst and even through our worst, and that helps us see the boundless nature of God's love.

Yahweh's "delivering up" of his own Son shows that His love for humanity cannot be separated from His quest to establish His glory. Our conviction that His own glory is the goal of this plan is an accurate one (Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25; 1 Corinthians 15:28). But it is not perceived accurately by us if it somehow relegates His great love for us to being a mere means to that "greater" end. His love for humanity and His glory are melded together. They are inseparable. We must be careful that the subtle error that His own glory matters more to Him than our rescue, does not creep into our thinking. They are inseparable. It is in rightly comprehending the love of God that we can be filled with God's fullness (Ephesians 3:19). And it is in the wake of the salvation of a remnant of fallen humanity that the universe will be filled with Yahweh's glory.

Paul's message is that in so presenting His Son in human flesh and delivering Him to us, God was delivering to us all that is His, which is all that is. And these things come to us freely. This is a concise affirmation of all that Paul has said so far in his letter about the workings of God. This is the outcome the gospel achieves for all who believe. It is good news about a message of mercy, love, and grace that involves no merit on our part. It is a report of all that comes to us because of something in God that instigated actions of God that then created a reality. His goal is that we should receive far more from Him than forgiveness. That is from His point of view a means to His end of giving us all that is.

8:33—"who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies;"

If God has related Himself to certain people, and done so in eternity past, if He has predestined them to bear in their physical beings His glory for all eternity, if He has forgiven them and declared them righteous by means of sending His own Son to die for their sins, then there's no possible means by which any charge could be effectively leveled so as to prevail against them to prevent His plan from happening. To be one who has in this way been summoned by God to Himself is what is meant by the term God's elect. The word elect comes from a compound Greek word that means "spoken out." It came to be used of all who were spoken through God's sovereign decree into the existence summarized in verse 29.

The term rendered "bring a charge" is similar in sound to the word for elect but is a different word. It too comes from a compound Greek word, one that means "to call in." It came to be used of calling an outstanding debt due. Employing words with similar sounds might have been intentional on Paul's part, to produce a catchy phrase, and to make the summary of an important truth easy to recall.

The most significant word in the verse is likely "God's." It is important because it affirms that we are what we are by the sovereign choice and decree of God. This gives us security. His omnipotence renders all other powers powerless. That is the reality of our situation. It is a blessed reality. God assures us that our faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4), because it is His victory. It is rooted in the fiat command of God, the same command that spoke into existence the heavens and the earth. It is inviolable and unthwartable. It is no exaggeration to say that all the blessings of our position that have been enumerated in Romans 8, and they are numerous, exist, repeat themselves, and are certain because they are works of God. They are established and finished in His mind. We are God's elect. That makes our position what it is.

Clearly then, we can say we are Christians because we were spoken into existence, and we were spoken into existence because we were found by God to simply be the best expression possible of who He Himself is. That is a remarkable thing. And so a word "God's" in the phrase "God's elect" is likely the most important word in this verse. It is the key word in Paul's entire articulation of the gospel. The gospel is good news because it is the work of God's power, His omnipotence brought to bear on the issue of our salvation. Thus, the gospel creates a final and thorough solution to man's greatest dilemma, the dilemma that all religions have sought to solve.

8:34—"who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us."

This verse completes the thought started in the previous verse by the statement "God is the one who justifies." Having stated this, Paul asks, "Who is the one who condemns?" His thought is that we are declared righteous by the One who is the lawgiver and the judge, and since this One answers to no one, being Himself Almighty God, there is no one who can legitimately level the charge against us. Who would they be by rank, title, qualification, or character who had such judicial power?

The remainder of the verse supports the idea that God's judgment of us is final and cannot be swayed or subverted. Our sins were paid for by God himself. So there is no doubt about the payment being made. Not only did God the Son die for our sins, but He was also raised, proof positive that God is pleased with Him and His sacrifice. This was also proof that our information which we received from Christ was in fact from God. It was not the words of a deluded, would-be savior. Jesus is at the right hand of God, exalted due to His obedience, His obedience affirmed. This is an important idea, that the exaltation of Christ is proof that His condescension and sacrifice was pleasing to God. But the phrase also sets up the last statement of the verse, which pictures Christ interceding for us.

This idea that Christ is at the right hand of God borrows from earthly imagery to show us His influence within the Godhead. We believe that Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons, yet all of one being, all of them equally divine. We also believe the Son, having become a man, remains forever one. This statement in this verse allows for those complexities in the Godhead which stretch the best of our analytical abilities to their limit.

The overall picture of these verses gives us iron-clad assurance of our unchangeable position in the family of God. We are there by God's choice of us before time, but also because of determinative action in the detail of our lives which led us to faith, by His provision of Christ to sacrifice Himself for us, in an act which was affirmed by God by the bestowal of the reward on Christ of a position above all others (Phil. 2:10-11). Our position remains secure through the intercession of Christ for us at God's right hand so that we are protected from all the forces that would undo what God has done.

8:35—"who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

These are the sixth and seventh in a string of rhetorical questions Paul has asked. Each of the questions in its own way strengthens his point, namely that those who believe in the gospel are secure in their position as God's children. They have faith as proof that they have been acted upon by God. It is also proof that they will continually be acted upon by Him and so come to be glorified. There is no force that can act effectively against what God has Himself determined to bring about in them.

This verse gives a list of examples of things that have been a part of the Christian experience over the centuries. There are things that can cause misery and result in death. They're things that cause great anxiety. But they are powerless to take away from us that which God has proclaimed ours.

8:36—"just as it is written, "for thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

This is a quote from Psalm 44:2. That Psalm is a song that recites God's past blessings, then speaks of the present time of difficulty, when God seemingly rejected His own people. There are seasons when the kind of circumstances Paul has just named sweep over our lives. At such times it feels and looks like God has turned his back on us. Paul was familiar with these types of circumstances. He knew that in the plan of God these things intrude into the lives of God's children. They are in fact, quite normal.

It is easy at such times to apply the terms of the old covenant to our situation. We can begin to surmise that God must have turned against us and brought the curse against us (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Paul cites this Scripture to remind us that there are times even under the old covenant, when these types of things were simply part of life. There is no evidence in Psalm 44 that anything had been done to deserve such things. They were and are many times simply the result of living in an evil world that lashes out against God's people. If no linkage could be established between suffering and our behavior under the old covenant, then it certainly cannot be assumed under the new covenant.

In such circumstances the Gospel assures us of two things. First, because of Christ we are accepted by God, even when we are unacceptable, and loved by Him even when we're unlovable. Second, the curse of the old covenant (not of original sin), has been removed in Christ. He was punished, and we will not be. When the abuses of the world are heaped on us, we can be certain that God is with us. They are a result of fighting alongside Him and He will certainly strengthen us through them.

8:37—"but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us."

The message of this verse is exhilarating. Paul does not pretend that we do not experience the various traumas of verse 35. They are part of our experience. It is what happens to us when we are "in all these things" that is significant. We overwhelmingly conquer. That's military imagery that describes decisive victory and total domination. In the athletic imagery of our day, it would be termed a blowout, or lopsided victory.

Now what does this mean in real life terms? What is it we conquer and what objectives do we gain as we suffer tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword (verse 35)? The objective we gain is that which God has predestined us to possess. It is to be glorified—redeemed and restored to rule over God's creation as He originally intended. That destiny for us is mightily opposed by those who would take the world as their own inheritance. But all of the power of God is directed against them, and the outcome is never in doubt. It is a battle that was decided early, the outcome was never in doubt. The victory will be a lopsided one despite moments of drama. It is through God that our victory is secure, and it's overwhelming nature is due to his overwhelming love.

In Romans, this handbook of the gospel that Paul is writing, he wants to assure his readers that there is great power in the gospel, so much so that our celebration is an absolute certainty. That is why it is good news and is why Paul was not ashamed of it.

8:39—"for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, the things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is the love of God that the religions of the world seek to gain. To curry the favor of the gods, whoever they might be, has been the underlying objective of billions of lives. Untold effort has been expended toward it.

The gospel speaks of that love in a very different way. The love of God cannot be stirred up nor does it need to be. It is already in continuous full bloom, so much so that God is the One seeking out from among humanity those upon whom He can freely lavish His love. For those who been called by Him and have responded to Him there is nothing which can trump the love that He has for them.

The list of examples that Paul gives covers things, beings, personal forces, and impersonal forces. Some have suggested that a person themselves can separate themselves from the love of God. We must acknowledge that with this statement Paul is addressing those who believe, who by that act of faith have confirmed God's call of them. These are eternally secure, and that is who Paul is speaking of here when he speaks of "us." It is absolutely against Paul's words to believe that Satan (an Angel), can so influence the will of a person (a created thing), so that they can thwart God's will for them. It would mean that Satan could snatch someone from Christ's hand, someone He has supposedly predestined. There is no room in Paul's thought for such a thing to come about.

This verse is a fitting summary of praise. It is a climax to a chapter which began with the thought that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Paul himself was convinced of the truth of the statement, and he was inspired to write it by the Holy Spirit. It is written so that we would know who we are in Christ and the overwhelming security that we have in things related to the kingdom of heaven. Life would be cruel to Paul's readers and to Paul. They would not see in one another's earthly lives a lot of reward to be gained by following Christ. Faith in a different sort of inheritance was what they were called to, and Paul assures them and us that this will not elude their grasp.