

Paul writes to the church, asking, “*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*” back in Romans 7. To grasp Romans 8, we have to back up and consider this question that Paul finds essential to answer. He ends chapter 7 with what sounds like a personal admission of his own sinfulness. “*For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing*” (7:19). The final passage of chapter 7 sort of redeems the person of Paul in many people’s eyes. To be so brutally honest, to admit to his own failings, to confess his own wrestling with sin in his own body and life, makes him more human, more like us. And we can sympathize. More than that, we can feel a little bit, or maybe feel a lot, better about our own inadequacies. If Paul the Apostle struggles with sin, we begin to think our struggles aren’t so bad.

Except I don’t think that’s why Paul ended chapter 7 in this way. He wasn’t going for solidarity with us poor sinners. He might not have been talking about himself at all. Most of the letter to the Romans is written in a dialogue style, where Paul takes on a sort of dual persona to debate and argue and present his ideas. So, this might have been a technique that he was using to wrap up the first section of the epistle and introduce the second section.

Still, Paul wasn’t averse to using his own life to make his point. And he was well aware of his own shortcomings. So, why not allow this moment of personal privilege—or personal shame—to set up what he intends to say next? Phillips Brooks (pastor and writer of ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’) famously said that “preaching is bringing truth through personality.” So, here is Paul bringing the Romans truth through the personality of his own life.

Except that this isn’t only about Paul. It is about Paul as a representative of all of us. It is about the human condition—a human condition of ultimate helplessness to bring about our salvation. Or, in Paul’s words, to rescue us from this body of death. And the point is that we don’t have to rescue ourselves. We

have been rescued already. “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

Did you hear that? Let’s take a moment to soak in the grace and freedom of this verse. Let’s revel in it, as Paul does, before attempting to understand it. Do you realize how countercultural this faith thing is? I have caught myself nodding along and mumbling, “Thank you, Jesus,” without really grasping the depth of the gift, the radical nature of God’s grace. Our culture is a “can-do” culture, with a “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” kind of belief. To begin with the proclamation that there is something we can’t do, is to swim against that stream. To admit that we are helpless in the face of our own sin is an embarrassment in the climate of our culture. We demand rights! We don’t admit failures. Yet, that is the crux of Paul’s argument. To skip over this makes everything that follows empty and powerless. It is only by diving into the depths of Paul’s plea, “*Who will rescue me...?*” that we can begin to experience the glory of what Christ has done for us, and in us.

And what is that? How do we describe this gift? “*No condemnation*” is how Paul describes it. No judgment. Pure freedom, freed from a law whose only purpose was to burden and to condemn. The freedom to live. Really live! That’s the gift. Yes, it is eternal life, but eternal life begins now, in the freedom of the grace of Christ Jesus, the Resurrected One. And this Christ Jesus will “*give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you*” (8:11), meaning, we don’t have to wait, meaning this isn’t just about someday pie in the sky by and by, but about today. Here and now. The gift is ours.

Are there any conditions? Well, yes; to live this life, to claim this freedom, there is an invitation to which we need to respond. “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation,*” writes Paul, “*for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” “In Christ Jesus.” What might Paul mean by that little preposition, “in”? Well, keep reading. He contrasts “*in the flesh*” with “*in the Spirit.*” Now, we have to be careful here. Flesh doesn’t mean flesh; it doesn’t mean just bodily things. Paul doesn’t argue that bodies are bad and anything done in or with the body is to be

avoided. Many have gone astray with this interpretation. Yes, when he names “*sin in the flesh*” he speaks mainly of the mind, and not the body, and he later cautions against sins like idolatry. Paul wouldn’t argue that bodies are bad if he wants to argue that this gift of life comes through our mortal bodies!

Perhaps one way to translate this duality would be to talk about self-directed and spirit-directed. Living guided only by one’s self leads to death, Paul argues, but living life guided by the Spirit is to know the fullness of life. Living by the Spirit takes at the outset, Paul says, a surrender of self. It takes an admission that we are powerless in the face of our own sin. Too often, we want faith to use it to get what we want, as an add on, as a “spiritual boost,” as commentator Blair Alison Pogue calls it (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol.3, p. 231). Faith is something “extra” to get us over the hump.

But we *are* the hump. The very thing that needs to be moved out of the way for the Spirit to take up residence in us, so that we can be “in Christ” is *ourselves*. Notice Paul first says, “*in Christ Jesus*,” not Christ in us. We are subsumed in Christ; it is Christ’s will that guides us. Then, he speaks about Christ “*in us*.”

One of our biggest fears is that somehow we will be less of ourselves when we surrender to Christ. But, in fact, the opposite is true. We become more of ourselves. This is what Paul means when he says, “*he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies*” (v. 11). We are more fully ourselves when we set our minds on the things of the Spirit. That’s the invitation. Set your mind on Christ. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit. Then live “*in the realm of the Spirit*” (v. 9) every single day that you live.

In January of this year ABC News ran a story with the following headline: **DNA evidence exonerates New York City man for 1985 sex assault.** After spending a full 25-year sentence in prison for a crime he did not commit, a Bronx, New York, man was exonerated by the first prosecutorial conviction review unit on the East Coast. Rafael Ruiz was convicted in 1985 for sexually assaulting a woman in East Harlem. Ruiz, then 25, was sentenced to 25 years in

prison and was released on parole in 2009 after serving the entire stint. Now, at the age of 60, Ruiz had his felony conviction wiped off his criminal record after newly tested DNA from the victim's sex assault kit found by the Innocence Project and the Manhattan District Attorney Office's Conviction Integrity Program excluded him from the 35 year old case.

"We were pleased to be joined in today's motion by the Innocence Project and I'm grateful for their continued partnership," said Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance in a statement. Ruiz's conviction was based on the description of a man named "Ronnie" who fit the victim's description of her attacker. "I was thinking about my freedom the entire time I was sitting [in prison]," Ruiz told WABC after the judge tossed the conviction. According to the Innocence Project, the real alleged assailant lived across the hall from Ruiz's brother and had a history of violence against women. Since 1958, over 2,500 wrongful convictions have been overturned in the United States, according to The National Registry of Exonerations. Of the thousands of exoneration cases, 735 were overturned because of mistaken witness identification, according to data from the National Registry of Exonerations.

Thinking of innocence, in his truly remarkable statement Paul tells us that an Innocence Project for us was established when Jesus came, lived, died and rose from the dead: "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" The Innocence Project, founded in 1992, came to the rescue of Rafael Ruiz. That organization seeks to exonerate the wrongly convicted through DNA testing and prevent future injustice. But there is a BIG difference here that we should not miss.

The difference is that they work on behalf of *innocent* men and women. The work accomplished by Jesus Christ was on behalf of *guilty* people—like us—who are condemned no more. "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Jesus has rescued us! Amen.