

ROMANS 8:1-8  
FREEDOM'S FOUNDATIONS

If being a Christian were like a piece of music, what kind of music would it be? This is not *Desert Island Discs* in which you choose the piece of music that means most to you; this is more about the mood of music. Music captures a mood wonderfully, whether joy or sadness, celebration or mourning; some music just fits some occasions and times; there are times when our mood means we will listen to one style of music today and a different style tomorrow. So being a Christian – what kind of music sums that up? Perhaps it is a great swelling symphony, full of power and confidence, with great themes of celebration? Perhaps it is dance music, which is full of joy. Perhaps it is a quiet piece, in a minor key, that reflects more a mood of quiet introspection, even fear or despair. Perhaps it is a discordant piece that seems to be a clash of styles, or a clash of chords with no melody, and no peace to it. For some people looking in, it might be summed up by Rowan Atkinson playing the keyboard in *Chariots of Fire* music at the Olympic opening ceremony, when he sat a keyboard playing just one note over and over again – for some looking in, being a Christian seems monotonous and boring!

Now I know what you're going to tell me: being a Christian has lots of different moods; there are times when our mood is one of celebration and joy and the music would reflect that; there are other times when our mood is more reflective and we're aware of our weaknesses and faults and the music would reflect that too; there are times when Church life is discordant and the music would need to reflect that mood too. There are undoubtedly times when our Christian mood would be reflected by different kinds of music. What concerns me is that we've lost the music of confidence and celebration from Christianity in Scotland; partly I mean that literally – I come across lots of services where the music, hymns, songs are all in a minor key, with reflective pieces and there is nothing to make my heart soar! I also mean it as a picture: the mood in much of Scottish Christianity at moment is downbeat, disheartened, a struggle, we are aware of fears and failures, the challenges we face and our weakness and there is nothing to make our hearts soar with joy and no reason to celebrate.

Romans 8 is the one chapter in the Bible above most that is full of confidence. If we were to write a piece of music to sum up the spirit of Romans 8 then it would have to be full of swelling chords and powerful music that would reach a triumphant conclusion, celebrating the great affirmations of our faith. Over the next four weeks, we're going to try to understand this sense of confidence that Paul wants to communicate; what are these great affirmations of faith? How do these affirmations of faith meet the challenges of real life and faith in 21st century Scotland?

Chapter 8 marks the end of the first part of Romans; the first part of the letter (chs 1-8) is like a legal argument. Paul is putting together a case: this is what the world is like; this is what we are like as human beings; here is the result of our misdeeds, failures, and our turning away from God. But then "here is what God has done for us and in the world through Jesus" and he tells us of the results and consequences of Christ Jesus' coming into the world. Romans 8 is the last part of that argument: "Here is what it means for us now that God has sent Jesus"; "Because Jesus died and was raised, these things are now true!" The 'confident Christian' is almost a contradiction in terms in Scotland today; here's where our confidence and assurance come from and here are all kinds of reasons why we should walk with a spring in our step!

*"Therefore..." (Romans 8:1)* Here is one of the biggest, simplest, clearest, most life-changing sentences in the whole Bible, yet one of least understood. (I'm not sure that 'understood' is the right word; we understand the words in our heads, but we don't always accept the truth into our hearts.) I was about to have a most curious experience last month: to be a witness in the Sheriff Court in a case about which I knew nothing; someone was arrested by the police hiding in our garden late one Saturday evening while we were quietly watching television in the front room. As it happened, before the case came to trial he changed his plea to 'guilty' and I didn't have to be a witness. I presume he has been sentenced. The Law condemns people who are guilty. That is the natural way of thinking: people do wrong things; they admit it and they are condemned and must pay the price, a jail sentence, a fine, a community order and so on. They are condemned for their wrong-doing! Something in our sense of justice and fair-play that applauds the logic behind that.

Paul has spent three chapters at the beginning of Romans making just that case. His conclusion is: *"therefore..." (Romans 3:20)* This is the end of the first part of his case; every human being has come up short, has failed, has broken the law of God, has rebelled against God, has neglected good things in life. All of these are held by the little word 'sin'. None of us has any claim to be 'righteous', or perfect, to have met that standard; we have all come up short. All of us are guilty. All of us, therefore are condemned! That would be the logic behind our human nature being what it is and us being what we are. But *"Therefore..." (Romans 8:1)* The Gospel turns that logic on its head. Freedom is ours! We are forgiven! If we carry on the court-picture, we walk free, we are released; there is nothing against us. Surely that's not right; it offends our sense of justice and fair-play.

Three little words change all of that. *"In Christ Jesus..."* These words turn the world upside down! *"What the..." (Romans 8:3)* All that the law can do is condemn; even God's law can really only tell us that we've broken it; no-one is righteous by keeping the law because one tiny breach once is enough to kill that idea! But "in Christ Jesus" we are free! There are two things: first of all, Jesus has come into our world and has done something for us. He has come into our world in *"the likeness of sinful man"*; He has lived our life, walked our streets, shared our world, tasted our temptations, been one of us; then He has died our death. The key to that is not just the simple fact that He died, but that when He died He experienced hell on earth. Remember what Jesus cried on the cross: *"My God..." (Mark 15:34)* The perfect Son of God, who knew nothing of sin in His own life, is condemned; the law of God has its condemnation on the sin of the world and Jesus bore the full weight of that condemnation on His cross. Because Jesus died and rose again *"there is..." (Romans 8:1)* That is the gospel; it turns the world upside down; there is forgiveness for us; we admit our mistakes, but God wipes them all away; the slate is clean; there is nothing against us.

Secondly, we are in Christ Jesus by faith. Jesus has done this and we share in the benefits and blessings of the gospel by faith. Faith connects us to Jesus and is the channel by which we receive the blessings of the gospel. Faith gives us *all* the blessings of the gospel; there is no first and second class blessing for some who have more faith or a different experience; simple faith in Jesus gives us every part of the gospel. You can't even tell me that you only have a small faith and because you have a small faith this kind of blessing is not yours yet! Jesus talked about faith the size of a mustard seed opening the doors of the kingdom of heaven to those who believe. Faith connects us to Jesus and the blessings of the gospel; this is for us!

Condemnation breeds fear! Many people in our culture live with a deep-seated fear of failure, inbred in us perhaps because our parents gave us a telling off if we messed up exams; people live in fear of losing their job if they don't make targets that are set for them. Loss of faith for many people means they live with fear of death; this is an unspoken fear most of time, but it is there; you can sense it! This fear is around perhaps because the centre of life is 'me' – in our culture and society, God has been replaced by 'me'; we are centre of our own universe; we are masters of our own destiny; we even want power to decide when to create life and when to die! The problem with that view of life and the universe is that we're all too aware of our own faults and failures; any honest human being knows that we are not perfect and lives with a sense of fear that someone will find us out. Condemnation breeds fear! Failure breeds fear! That is life in the minor key, with fear and anxiety and at its worst, despair.

The Gospel brings freedom. We are set free from fear and dread because *"there is..."* (Romans 8:1) The law of God has no hold over us any more; it still guides our life and how we live and behave but we're forgiven our faults and failures; there is no condemnation. Fear of death has no hold over us any more because God's promise is of heaven. The fear of failure need have no hold on us any more because God does not condemn us for our failures – there is forgiveness. Here is the deepest foundation for freedom ever given to a human being, the freedom to be ourselves, the freedom to love God and love our neighbour; the freedom to live life in step with Spirit of God. Even people who have lived in chains have found this freedom of their spirit. We are free to be ourselves; if our Father forgives and will not condemn us what does it matter what other people think of us? This is never an arrogant boast, but a blessing for a humble faith in Jesus and a blessing to share with others. It is full of grace because this is not something we have done; this is the gift of God to us.

We sang these words: *"no condemnation now I dread; Jesus and all in Him is mine."* (hymn 396 v.5) How do we sing these words? Do we mutter them? Do we sing them, but with a quizzical look on our face because we're not entirely sure what they mean? Do we sing them, but we're convinced they don't apply to us? They were all right for Charles Wesley, but his faith is stratospheric compare dot mine? But tell your smile; here's the truth – in Christ Jesus and because he has died and is raised and because of your faith, they do apply to you and to me and to all of us and to every believer. The music of the Christian faith in Romans 8 is the great swelling symphony of confidence and assurance and joy and delight at what God has done for us and the blessings that God has given us and if it is great here at the start, it is going to get even bigger and even greater by the time we reach the end of the chapter in 3 weeks time!

We look at ourselves, we see the struggle – we want to believe, but we're not sure we get faith right; we want to live life well, but we know we make a mess and get things wrong; we know ourselves and we don't trust ourselves to get anything much right at times. There is no confidence there! But when we look at ourselves, we're looking in the wrong direction. Look at Jesus; look at what He has done; look at the cross and the empty tomb; see the grace that is in his heart for us, grace that loves us when don't deserve it; look at all of that and take that to heart. Tell your heart and your mind that there is no condemnation; tell your heart and your mind that God forgives and has forgiven; tell your heart and your mind that you need not be afraid; tell your heart and your mind that you are free! I put it like that deliberately because that is exactly what we need to do; we know what the words mean, but we don't somehow think that these words belong to us. Look at Jesus and let the symphony of praise and delight swell in your heart; go out with a spring in your step; see what God in His grace has given you!