

Exploring Romans. Part II.

Part II of Exploring Romans deals with the central chapters of the letter, Romans 5–8. This introduction repeats much of the introduction to Part I as well as offering a brief recap on the material covered in Part I.

Paul's letter to the Romans is his most influential work. He wrote it not to church communities which he founded, but to churches in Rome which he hoped to visit. He wrote it at a time when he was still a controversial figure. He planned to visit the churches in Rome on his way to Spain, which he never reached. It was important to him that he explain himself and his gospel and answer his critics. We are blessed with having the result in which he sets out what he preaches and why.

Paul features large in the New Testament. Luke spends much of his history of the early church in Acts writing about Paul as its main hero. There are seven of Paul's letters and in addition a number of others written by admirers in his name, altogether thirteen, in other words half the New Testament's twenty-six books. And of the rest, the Acts of the Apostles gives most of its attention to Paul.

In addition, Paul's seven letters stem from the 50's CE, just a little over two decades after Jesus, in contrast to the gospels, of which the first, Mark, was written in the early 70's. Luke, who wrote Acts in the 80's, draws on stories and anecdotes about Paul. It appears, in addition, that he sometimes accompanied Paul. In his somewhat idealised account, he portrays Paul as a hero and as generally much more harmonious with other leaders in the early church than we know from his letters that he actually was. We are fortunate to be able supplement the letters with Luke's information and sometimes correct the latter in the light of them, such as where there are differences about the number of times Paul revisited Jerusalem and about his theology.

Paul's letters were written not to be included in a permanent body of sacred writings, but in response to specific situations. This gives them a sense of immediacy. They are dealing with concrete issues. When we read them with that in mind, they come alive. In these studies we are rereading Romans in that light. As an explanation of what he preaches and why, it is more abstract than his other letters, but even then, we can detect that when he writes he has concrete criticism and concerns in mind.

Part I looked at Paul's overall purpose and concern in writing Romans and his strategies for winning over his audience. That included starting on common ground both in his initial greeting which signals key themes, and in his citing homosexual orientation and behaviour as a manifestation of the depravity of the wider world. We then noted how Paul switched back to his hearers reminding them that they, too, were sinners, and so had no basis for seeing themselves as superior and especially for despising Gentiles. In Romans 4 he then argues that believing Gentiles too are Abraham's children on the basis that both he and they have come to be right with God not on the basis of keeping the Law but on the basis of faith and submission to God's generosity.

I have broken the studies into 3 parts of 4 sessions each. The units follow the sequence of the letter, and are best tackled sequentially, but they are prepared in a way that each part can also stand alone and be used independently of the others. There are four sessions in this Part II of exploring Romans:

1. Sin as more than Sins (Romans 5)
2. Nourish New Beginnings (Roman 6)
3. Commandments are not Enough (Romans 7)
4. No Condemnation! (Romans 8)

Each study asks you to read a passage or passages from Romans, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

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Sin as More than Sins Romans 5

In the opening chapters Paul has reminded those who would be listening to his letter being read in Rome's congregations that Gentiles and Jews equally need God and relate to God on the same basis, namely faith, just as Abraham did. This means both are children of Abraham by faith. Now in chapter 5 Paul changes gear. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1). That sums up what he had been saying to this point but is also a new beginning. For there are still issues, which Paul must address.

They include: why not now insist that Gentiles keep the Law and commandments, including undergoing circumcision? What follows from being justified by faith: a free for all? Doing whatever you like? Isn't this just a recipe for sin? Look at what happened in Corinth where people went off the rails!

Paul begins with what he sees as the heart of the matter in all such discussions. We are justified by faith. Or, in other terms, we have been brought into a right relationship with God by believing and accepting God's offer. Everything will flow from that, starting with peace. He will go on later to speak of people having been God's enemies: "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (5:10). Through Jesus, his life and his death, God's generosity was proclaimed. God offers a restored relationship, reconciliation. This entails forgiveness but it is much bigger than that. It is oneness and peace.

"Peace with God" is not the same as "peace of mind", something valuable in itself. Many religions teach people how to have "peace of mind" through meditation, relaxation exercises, breathing, helping people calm themselves, lower their blood pressure, be still. Paul is speaking about something different, not just peace, but peace with God. Oneness with God may be relaxing or it may be challenging, calling us to reach out to others in love and sometimes to take risks, which may cause stress and tension or even suffering. For Jesus it meant a cross.



Paul spells out a little more what this peace with God means. It means access to grace, a word for God's ongoing generosity, and it means having confidence and hope. God who cares will always be there. Our end will also be with God. That, Paul points out, enables us sometimes to put up with suffering and challenging situations. He brings it back to God's love. When Paul writes about God's personal connection with the believer, he often speaks about God's Spirit. For Paul the mark or fruit of God's Spirit is love. God is love and God in us produces love.

One of Paul's most famous passages is 1 Corinthians 13, where he makes it very clear: love matters most. Love is the sign of being one, being at peace with God.

Paul celebrates God's love as shown in Christ. In a kind of shorthand, he focuses on Christ's death, depicted in sacrificial terms. His death was for us, as also his life was for us, to demonstrate God's generous offer of a restored relationship to all. At the climax of these wonderfully positive statements about love Paul is ready to move on. He writes: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (5:10). He is shifting attention from the past, Christ's death, to the future: being saved by his life. That will enable him to address the issue: so what happens now? Do people just do as they like?

What follows in 5:12–21 has been one of the most influential passages Paul ever wrote. It is profoundly important even though it rests on assumptions we no longer share. They include that all human beings are descended from the couple Adam and Eve who lived (based on biblical genealogies) about 6000 years ago. Paul's claim that sin both originated with them and was passed on to humanity through them has proved most controversial. Did he mean, in our terms, that sin is in our DNA? Are newborn babies already sinners? Such reflections led to the doctrine of original sin, which did in fact make such claims.

What can we take from Paul's comments? The major insight is that sin is about more than sins. Sin is like a disease, an infection, which can be transmitted from generation to generation down through the years. Paul talks of sin as a power which reigns rather than as something we inherit genetically. We would understand that power and its negative influence psychologically. Through the fallibility of parenting (and early environments like schooling) we can pass on damaging attitudes and behaviours. Deprivation of adequate love and care can have serious affects.

Sin is a state of not being healthy in spirit and not being right with God and with yourself, which can then show itself in sinful actions. Paul is saying: sin is much bigger than sins. Sin affects people far beyond the impact of when they sin as individuals. We pass on its impact from generation to generation. It is not enough to deal with sins through commandments or even through forgiveness. You need to deal with the root causes. John the Baptist and Jesus spoke in terms of needing to look not just at sins, the bad fruit, but at the sick tree which produces them.

The destructive potency of the absence of love is there, whether the resultant behaviours are counted as sins against commandments or not. Paul speaks of it as a form of death reigning from Adam to Moses, thus long before Moses received the ten commandments. For its day, this is a profound analysis of the human condition and still is. It makes talk just of sins and forgiveness sound rather superficial. A big understanding of sin as a dynamic and of its effects calls for an equally big understanding of salvation.

Paul is gearing up to address the critique that his talk of getting right with God not based on keeping the commandments is a recipe for disaster. Quite the contrary, restoring people to a right relationship with God and so to an ongoing relationship of love undoes the impacts and power of sin. Where such loves begins to take hold, sin begins to be disempowered. It no longer reigns. In Paul's terms, Adam's impact is undone. Jesus is like a new Adam, a new beginning. "For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (5:19).

Sin as a negative power and influence has significant impact. It is big. Sometimes it expresses itself in structures and systems, including where people in them are very good. Wherever love is diminished

or undermined, we recognise sin, whether in ourselves or our community or in politics. It needs to be undone. What undoes it, Paul argues, is the love which he sees supremely manifested in Jesus' life and death. Openness to being loved and to being loving makes all the difference.

There is much more to be said. Paul must spell it out. He does so in the following chapters, as we shall see. The impact of such love is that people not only live in a way that meets the demands of the commandments; they far exceed them. Paul's claim is not something foreign to his Jewish faith, as his critics alleged. It is central to the faith of Israel. Paul will also use psychological arguments of his day to explain his view. We benefit from psychological insights of our own day in recognising that what Paul says makes sense: creating a loving environment changes people much more effectively than telling them off and threatening them with punishment. The best parenting operates with Paul's principles about what drives behaviour and enables good mental health.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why does Paul focus on sin rather than sins?
3. What does it mean to have a big understanding of sin and so a big understanding of salvation today – for our thinking and our practice?

Nourish New Beginnings

Romans 6

Paul's critics are never far from his mind as he approaches the Romans. We see that in the opening verse of Romans 6: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" He had reported something similar back in Romans 3: "And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), 'Let us do evil so that good may come'?" (3:8). The underlying issue is: if getting right with God is not about keeping the commandments but simply believing in God's grace and forgiveness, doesn't that mean that sin does not matter? That simply will not work!

Paul began to give an answer already in Romans 5 when he identified the problem of sin as a power, a system, and something much bigger than sins. There he identified the solution as opening oneself to an alternative power system: God's love. Here, in Romans 6, he develops it in a new way by talking about baptism. As Paul explains it, baptism represent our entry into Christ's experience. As he died, so we die, and as he rose to new life, we rise to new life. So new life begins.

Paul assumes a number of things which we can easily miss or misunderstand. In his world there were rites in some religions where people went through a ritual where they identified with a figure in the past just like in baptism. They symbolically died and came to life. We may be sure that some of those listening to his letter in Rome would have been familiar with such practices. Baptism could be described as baptism in the name of Christ. Sometimes, however, it was described as baptism into Christ.



It may sound strange to talk about being baptised into someone until we realise that Paul is talking about the sphere of Christ's power and influence. Sometimes he speaks about the body of Christ and imagines it as like a huge body into which we are incorporated. For Paul, Christ, or as he sometimes puts it, the Spirit of Christ, is a sphere of power which we enter when we come to faith. He sees it as the matching alternative sphere of power to the power sphere of sin.

His language is sometimes loose. He can speak of the power sphere of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of God. Put simply, he is talking about the power sphere of God, God's influence, God's love.

Baptism, then, symbolises our immersing ourselves in God's life, especially as revealed to us in Christ. We become thereby part of Christ's living power and influence, the body of Christ. In these early stages it was primarily adults coming to faith who allowed themselves to be immersed, baptised in this way. In later centuries as more and more families joined the church and children were born, the church went on to baptise infants and children, symbolising that they were being

brought into the sphere of influence of Christ. There was always the assumption that one day they would have to make up their own minds whether to stay or leave that sphere, the church. There was nothing magical about baptism, though inevitably some people began to see it as magical.

If we come back to Paul's concerns, we can see how his reference to baptism fits his argument. In coming to faith, we declare ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. We symbolically die and rise. That means we embark upon a new beginning. Does that mean we now do as we like and carry on sinning? Of course not. We have put to death our old self caught up in sin, declared ourselves dead to sin. Now love rules.

Paul stays with the image of baptism for a little to highlight another of its aspects. As Christ died and rose, so we will one day rise from the dead. That is his hope for the future. His main focus, however, is our change in the here and now. "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (6:6).

This sounds good, but it does not automatically follow that when people come to faith everything will suddenly change. Paul is realistic. The change is not automatic, but it creates a new possibility. It plants a new seed, but that seed will need nurturing. Paul puts it this way: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11). It is not that the power sphere of sin suddenly disappears. It is rather that we have entered a new power sphere which helps us no longer to be dominated by the sin power sphere.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (6:12–13).

That brings Paul back to the issues of the Law and commandments: "What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (6:15). He then employs the daring image of slavery. Don't let yourselves be enslaved to sin. Let yourselves be enslaved to love, to goodness, instead! He is using the language of power.

This could simply sound like taking on a new set of rules, the rules of being good and loving. That is not how Paul sees it. Elsewhere he explains that the experience of taking on board that we are loved by God, frees us from not only our guilt but also from our preoccupation with ourselves, and so produces the possibility of a new lifestyle. Being loved makes loving others possible. In Galatians he spoke of love as the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23). There is a dynamic process at work when people take love on board. They, themselves, become loving people. They come to life. That is God's gift to them. Not to take love on board and to stay in the sphere of sin is remain in the sphere of death.

Does it really work like that? Most people would recognise that it does. If you deal with the guilt and security issues which people have, they will find peace, with themselves and with God, and they will be more free to be caring and loving people, themselves. It has been one of Paul's greatest gifts to make this clear. Opening oneself to being loved is more likely to be effective in bringing about change in people than demanding that they keep rules and commandments. It is a process, however, which needs nurturing and working at. Being Christian is to engage in that process through prayer

and reflection, letting love nurture us from the roots up and letting it then come to bud and flower in our lives.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Does Paul assume everything changes at conversion?
3. Do you think we can use baptism as a symbol the way Paul does or are we trapped into treating it as just a dying tradition of “having the kids done”?

Commandments are not Enough Romans 7

In the last two chapters Paul has been offering profound insight into what really changes people. It is not laws and commandments. It is being in a loving relationship, first and foremost with God, and then consequently also with oneself and others. That still left a question hanging in the air: why then the Law and the commandments. His fundamentalist critics would put it this way: how can you dispense with God's Word in this way!?

Paul, rather daringly, uses marriage as a model. People whose partners have died are free to remarry. That was the law and not at all controversial. What Paul does with it, however, would certainly have raised hackles: "In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God" (7:4). The marriage to the Law has ceased for the believer. Now a new marriage is possible. Paul plays with the marriage imagery also when he speaks about bearing fruit. By fruit he means the fruit of love and goodness. Paul makes the extraordinary claim that we needed to be rescued from that marriage to the Law because it had negative effects. We now have new life made possible by the Spirit.

Paul was very aware that this was likely to raise the hackles of some, so he spends the rest of the chapter explaining his claims. To begin with, he dismisses the allegation that some would have made that Paul was saying the Law is sin. Not at all, he argues. The Law helps us see what sin is. But then he goes on to point out that the Law also indirectly alerts us to the possibility of sin, including sins we might never have thought of doing. Paul is speaking not primarily about sins but about sin as a power or influence. He is arguing that the drive to sin can be activated by the commandments. They identify a way of sinning we might never have thought of.

Paul is alluding indirectly to the story of the garden of Eden. Being told not to take of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden stimulated awareness that this was a possibility. Paul is assuming that something is already operating in people's minds which seizes the opportunity. He often describes this as our fleshly selves, as "the flesh". By that he does not mean our physical bodies because he often identifies characteristics of "the flesh" as harbouring very abstract voices, such as greed, envy, and hatred. Being in "the flesh" according to Paul means being in a state where you are not God-centred but self-centred. That is a state of sin and being subject to its power. Paul is therefore able to say: "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12).



A Greek theatre where tragedies were performed

The problem is not the Law but us, our sinful self. When our sinful self engages with the Law, problems arise with the result that we find ourselves in a worse mess than before. We might think that the Law will help, but, Paul argues, it does not help at all.

To explain further, Paul, employs an element of the popular psychology of his day. At least since Euripides, the great Greek writer of tragedies in the fifth century BCE, philosophers reflected on people's moral failure and confusion.

Again, he emphasises that he is not saying the Law is sin. He can even speak of delighting in the Law of God in his inner self, while being in this terrible mess of ending up acting contrary to the Law. Role playing this state of affairs, he declares: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24).

His answer comes immediately: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25). In the next chapter he will say more about why the believer need not be stuck in such captivity. He has needed to draw attention to it, however, because it is part of his defence of the position he takes about the Law. He no longer thinks trying to keep the Law and the commandments is the way to live and the way to be right with God. If anything, he argues, it can get us into an awful mess.

We need to see what Paul is doing and why. It is not so, that everyone experiences the kind of tragic moral failure he talks about when they try to live by the commandments. It will, however, be true of some. More importantly, Paul is arguing that real change in people’s lives is not brought about by giving them rules and commands. People best change their behaviour when they change their attitudes and change their view of themselves. Helping people know they are loved, giving them love, and assuring them of God’s love, puts them at peace and removes their need to act in ways that serve themselves at the expense of others. We see this in children. We see it also in adults.

Paul has to ward off misunderstandings. He does not mean the Law and the commandments are somehow bad. It is just that depending primarily on them to effect change does not really work or, we might say, does not work well.



Paul would also not deny that some elements of Law are essential for the protection of others, especially laws against things like theft and murder and we could add many more. They put up a fence and say: don’t go there! Stop! For the same reason we need rules of the road. We need laws to protect people and to protect the environment. Even these laws are however most effective when we treat them not with reluctance as things we have to do for fear of punishment, but as part of what we see as ways to care for ourselves and others. It is having love as our fundamental attitude that best keeps us and others safe, not a sense that we must keep rules – or else!

Paul’s deep insights about what helps people change and what makes for healthy living do not mean he never addresses specific issues about behaviour. Usually, he ends most of his letters with instructions about behaviour. He does so, however, not to add rules but to help people to see the implications of being loving. Sometimes we need that. The more we open ourselves to love and loving, the more we will behave accordingly, but that is not something which happens overnight. It is an ongoing process. The more we are freed from fears about ourselves, the more we are free to respond healthily and helpfully towards others. Sometimes we also need better information about how to express the love and compassion we embrace. For example, we need to know where best to direct our generosity in giving aid: not just handing out money but helping people develop the capacity and skills to help themselves.

The Law might tell us what the fruit should look like, but you won't get far by trying to make them up and hanging them on the tree. The tree needs manure, pruning, and care if it is to blossom and bear fruit.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Does Paul reject the Law?
3. In what ways do you think Paul's arguments might help us look at issues of behaviour today and what might some of these issues be?

No Condemnation! **Romans 8**

Paul has been defending his gospel and himself against charges that his message that God welcomes both Jew and Gentile on the same basis of generous love was a betrayal of biblical heritage and a recipe for moral disaster. He has sought to answer his critics by pointing out that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners, and that telling people that all they need to do is keep the commandments, the Law, does not work. And, in addition, he has just mounted the argument that, such is the human condition, trying to live by the Law ties people up in knots. They become stuck in sin and death, at least morally.

In Romans 8, Paul sums up his argument from the previous chapter. People who embrace his gospel do not face God's condemnation. On the contrary, they are conforming to what God wants. In his succinct summary he states: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (8:2). His use of the word "law" here could be referring to the biblical Law and so be contrasting two ways of seeing it. Or, as is more likely, he is talking about two principles or patterns: one leads to life; one leads to death. The outcome is the same, which we see as we read on.

"God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do". This picks up what Paul was saying in the previous chapter. Good as the Law is, it is impotent to stop the system of sin in us. If we have a mindset which Paul designates as "flesh", that is, focused on ourselves and on self-indulgence, including at the expense of others, just trying to keep the commandments will not work. We need to change our mindset.

The good news which Paul proclaims is that God sent Jesus to help us deal with the sin problems and to show us a way to change our mindset. The purpose of his coming was so that "the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (8:4). This is an extraordinary claim. We end up fulfilling what the Law commands and more not by trying harder, but by undergoing a more radical change, a change of mindset. We learn to walk according to the Spirit not according to the flesh.

Again, it is important to understand what he means by "flesh". He is not talking about meat, as though he means our physical bodies. Misread as a reference to human bodies, it was misunderstood by some in the course of history as meaning that our natural desires (food, sex, etc.) are evil and if we want to be spiritual people, we should suppress our bodies. Rather, living according to the flesh means having a mindset focused on ourselves, which will keep undermining our best intentions.

Walking according to the Spirit is the opposite. "Spirit" (*pneuma* in Greek) also meant wind and breath, which comes into English in words like pneumonia. Talking about God by using the same word used for breath was a way of talking about God as close and intimate. Paul always associates the Spirit with love. Letting love, God's love, be our life breath changes our mindset. It not only relieves our guilt through forgiveness but deals with our fears, and more, motivates our actions also to be loving, the fruit of the Spirit. When we walk in the Spirit, and so live and breathe love, God's

love, we not only fulfil the intention of the commandments, we go far beyond them. We become loving people, not people trying to adhere to commandments.



Jesus' baptism - Ravenna

Paul goes on to say that this is God's desire for us, to live and walk by the Spirit. It works. It settles minds in peace and produces behaviours often spontaneously generated by love. Paul goes on to draw on language which was associated with the moment of conversion. Like at Jesus' baptism, in the process of people's coming to faith and submitting to baptism, the Spirit descends on people and gains entry into their lives and so they become God's daughters and sons by adoption. Their response is to address God as a parent, saying "Abba", the Hebrew language way of saying "dad".

Paul is playing with the notion that we become in effect members of God's family and so will share all the blessings of the family, now and in the future. For Paul, that means that one day we will be rid of having to live constantly in the tension between surrendering to the sin system or opening ourselves to the Spirit/love system.

It is important to see that Paul does not assume that the sin system disappears and temptation ceases in this life. Slavery to the sin system always beckons. This means that those who walk in the Spirit need to watch where they put their feet. As long we are living in this world where sin is alive and well, we need to keep focused on love and not let the sin system's agenda distract us.

Life can be hard. Paul was very aware of that. He was not only harassed by Christians who hated his stance, and occasionally by civil authorities for causing unrest. He also reports a disability which plagued him, a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7), which has left scholars guessing ever since what it might have been – we simply do not know. Some apparently looked down on his struggles on the basis that, as they thought, anyone approved of by God would never have such troubles. How false!

Paul links the Spirit to hope and suggests that sometimes we cannot put into words what God's Spirit moves us to yearn for with regard to the future. Hope is sometimes a yearning for which words fail. Paul even widens his scope to include creation itself. It yearns for renewal. Paul would have had no idea that our generation would immediately think of yearning for change in relation to climate. Hope, like love, is an energy which drives us forward and enables us to believe that there really can be positive outcomes whatever hand life deals us: all things can work together for good.

Before his final words about hope, Paul celebrates the sense of being loved and chosen, using language which in many ways defies logic. When partners in love declare that they were meant for each other from the beginning of time, they are speaking similar language to Paul. They are not making scientific statements to be taken literally. They give expression to wonder. Similarly, here, Paul declares that God foreknew and predestined those whom he called and has made his family. If

we turn this from being a celebratory declaration to being a doctrine, we can end up with terrible conclusions, such as that God decided to destine some people to respond to the gospel and destined others not to do so and will then punish the latter for not doing so.

The verses 8:31–39 are also celebratory statements about love and hope. If the God of love is for us, we have nothing to fear. Paul uses the image of the courts when he imagines people acting as prosecutors wanting to accuse us and then has Jesus stepping in as our advocate before God. The assumption is: God is for us. The fact that we may now have to endure hardship is not evidence of our guilt or unworthiness, anymore that it was in the case of Jesus. We more than win our case (“more than conquerors”!) because of God’s love.

Paul’s rhetorical flourish to conclude this chapter is more than just fine words. It gives expression to the foundation of Paul’s faith: God and God as loving. Some focused on laws and commandments. Others, on might and miracles, magic to go through life unscathed and always satisfied. Paul focuses on oneness with God, the God of love. That undermines vestiges of discrimination against gentiles or people doing it tough. Elsewhere, Paul holds up the cross as his model. Oneness with God, whatever may befall, is the meaning of life.

There is no condemnation from God the judge if you live like this, walking according to the Spirit. And, certainly, Paul would want those listening to realise, therefore also no condemnation for embracing Paul’s gospel of God’s love.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What does Paul mean when he speaks of “flesh” and “Spirit”?
3. What is your experience of people making claims about the benefits and protections which their faith gives them and how do you assess such claims?