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Romans 8 in context

In January 2000, my family and I moved to central London. I knew London slightly already. I knew the British Museum, St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London. I knew Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey. I could get from one mainline railway station to another. I could find my way to the really important places such as Lord's Cricket Ground. So I wasn't entirely clueless. But until I lived there, I didn't know how all these places joined up, or how to get to and fro between them. Travelling by the Underground, as I usually did, gives you no sense of geography. Underground trains are a bit like the wind in John chapter 3: you hear the sound they make, but you can't tell where they come from or where they go to.

But once we went to live there, I relished making the connections. I used to walk miles, discovering how it all fitted together. And I marvelled at how the London taxi-drivers knew their way in the vast and complex system. They scorn GPS systems. They become living, breathing maps. They train by spending two years walking round everywhere, memorizing, taking notes, figuring out the one-way systems and short cuts, until it becomes second nature. Brain scans have shown that taxi-drivers' brains actually change shape through that process. The hippocampus enlarges as spatial awareness is enhanced.

Many Christians feel about Paul's letter to the Romans like I used to feel about London. I suspect that most people who pick up a book such as the present one know at least a few

key passages. Obvious ones might include Romans 3.23 ('all sinned, and fell short of God's glory'); 5.1 (in the well-known King James Version, this reads 'being justified by faith, we have peace with God'); and 8.28, which is normally though wrongly translated as 'all things work together for good to those who love God'. Most, I hope, will know 8.39, which the late Queen Elizabeth II valued so highly that she commissioned a musical setting of it to be premiered at her own funeral: 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in the Messiah Jesus our Lord.' I would like to think that many practising Christians know 12.2, Paul's command to 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds'. Many will be aware that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith is rooted in Romans 3. Many may recall that there is a centuries-old puzzle about whether Romans 7 refers to the Christian or the non-Christian, struggling with sin. And so on.

But how many, I wonder, know how these key passages join up? Or do we, as it were, travel by Underground, from one detached verse or passage to the next? How many of us could find our way to and fro above ground, on foot? If a younger Christian, perhaps a friend from church, came and said, 'I've been reading Romans, and I can't make head nor tail of it', how many would know where to begin?

Part of the reason for studying Romans intensively, as we will be doing in this book (focusing on its extraordinary central chapter), rather than just glancing at it and taking it for granted, is that the church as a whole needs, if I can put it this way, biblical taxi-drivers: people who have spent serious time walking around, street by street, learning key buildings and landmarks and knowing how to get to them, or past them to somewhere else. The church, not least for the sake of its mission to the world, urgently needs leaders, both clergy and lay, who fall in love with the great city we call scripture, and want to get to know it much better and to help others find

their way wisely around it. We need people whose minds and hearts have been transformed by this amazing book. We need people whose biblical hippocampi have been enlarged, whose theological spatial awareness has been heightened. It's one thing to say, as many do, that we believe in 'the inspiration and authority of scripture.' That can be like saying, simply, 'Oh, I've got a city map in the car, so I'll find my way.' No self-respecting London taxi-driver would be content with that.

One of the fascinating things about Paul's letter to the Romans is that it is not only a vital part of scripture in its own right. It offers guidance on reading all the rest as well, Old and New Testaments alike. It doesn't cover everything, but it covers a lot. And, within Romans, chapter 8, by common consent, is one of the most spectacular pieces of early Christian writing. It is the very heart of Romans – and, with that, it has a claim to be near the heart of what the Bible, and Christianity itself, is all about.

The overall thrust of chapter 8 is clear, but its detailed argument is complex. It weaves a dense but wonderful tapestry of major biblical and theological themes. Romans 8 is about God the father; about Christology; about the spirit; about Jesus' Messiahship, cross, resurrection and ascension; it's about salvation, resurrection, redemption and adoption (which, by the way, are not just vague ways of saying the same thing); it's about suffering and glory and prayer and love. It's about holiness and hope. It's about the call to become genuine human beings through being filled with God's own life. It holds together the various categories theologians have sometimes sketched, such as 'covenant' and 'apocalyptic', or indeed 'justification' and 'being in Christ'. Romans 8 draws together Genesis and Exodus, the Psalms and Isaiah. And from the high peak of Romans 8 we can gaze ahead and glimpse the final chapters of Revelation as well.

Romans 8 is all these things because it is the climactic argument for what preachers call **assurance**: the conviction that ‘nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love in Messiah Jesus our Lord’. But this assurance comes as the climax of the actual argument Paul has carefully constructed. It is not simply a detached aspirational dream. What’s more, the argument Paul has constructed does not map well on to the normal topics that preachers, teachers and theologians have imagined since the Middle Ages, and especially since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Rest assured: everything the Reformers were anxious to safeguard is here. But (as many devout scholars have recognized over the last generation or so) the argument belongs within a larger framework, somewhat different from the set of mediaeval questions that the Reformers were addressing. Recognizing this shift is, in fact, part of following the Reformers’ own insights, that scripture itself must arbitrate over all traditions, our own included. (This is more complicated than it sounds; I have spelled out what I think it means in my book *Scripture and the Authority of God*.) Problems arise when one particular strand of church teaching or tradition labels itself as ‘biblical’, but without necessarily getting to the heart of what the Bible actually says. That, I fear, has often happened, not least in relation to the reading of Romans. The task of each generation of scripture students, I believe, ought to be to go deeper still into the God-given text itself and allow it to speak afresh.

All this means, as we shall see, that we need to pay special and careful attention to what precisely Paul is saying here. One way or another, this chapter is a city that every follower of Jesus ought to get to know. Those with whom you share in group Bible studies, or one-to-one fellowship sessions, those to whom you preach or with whom you minister, need you to get to know it. So my aim in this short but intensive study is to

introduce the key landmarks, and the roads and footpaths that link them up.

For the moment, we're going to take a helicopter-view, getting an overall picture of the terrain. Once we've done that, we will be going down on the street, notebook in hand, walking verse by verse through Romans 8 until, please God, our spiritual and theological hippocampi have indeed grown to meet the challenge. My hope is that this will sharpen readers' taste for the detailed study of scripture which should be a lifelong delight, branching out from Romans 8 to the letter as a whole, and from there to the whole larger city of which Romans itself is one central part.

As we begin this journey, I need to issue **three 'trigger warnings'**. They are closely linked, but it may help to set them out as separate items.

First, Romans has regularly been read as a book whose primary, or even sole, topic is 'me and my salvation'. Many readers will be familiar with the old idea of the 'Romans Road', as used by many evangelists and counsellors to get people to follow a particular narrative through which they may be led to faith. The narrative in question goes like this:

- 1 I'm a sinner, deserving God's wrath;
- 2 Jesus died for my sins;
- 3 I believe in Jesus;
- 4 I will go to heaven.

Now let me be clear: I would much rather people believed that narrative than that they were atheists. But – rather as with the taxi-drivers who learn early on that the way across town is more complicated and interesting than they might at first have thought – the actual Romans Road is much bigger than, and significantly different from, that scheme.

The problem Paul is addressing, you see, is not just human sin and the danger of eternal punishment. The problem is the crisis of the whole cosmos, within which human beings were from the start designed to play a vital role. Here in chapter 8, at the climax of the letter so far, Paul says that the whole creation will be rescued from its groaning, sorrow and chaos when humans are raised from the dead to take proper charge of it. Salvation is not just God's gift *to* his people, it is God's gift *through* his people. That theme has regularly been ignored – with drastic results. So the first warning is that Romans tells a bigger story, a somewhat different story from the one many have been taught.

This leads to the **second trigger warning**, which makes a more specific point. For hundreds of years, Christians have told their story with a key element missing. The key element in question is the calling and subsequent story of Israel. Not long ago I saw a book in which the author made a great deal out of saying that we need to understand the *story* of scripture. Yes indeed, I thought – but when I looked inside the book the story I found there went like this:

- 1 God made the world;
- 2 humans sinned;
- 3 God sent Jesus;
- 4 that's OK then.

(This is, as you will see, quite like the 'Romans Road' narrative we just glanced at.) But telling the *biblical* story like that leaves a big hole in the middle: what about God's call of Israel? What about the long story from (if you like) Abraham to John the Baptist? What's happened to the Old Testament – which Paul insists is foundational for the gospel (Romans 1.2; 1 Corinthians 15.3–6)?

At that point, a great many Christians, through many generations and across many traditions, have said, in effect: ‘Well, God had a first shot at rescuing people, giving them the law and all that – but it didn’t work. So he had to scrap that plan and try quite a different way, pushing the Israel plan to one side and sending Jesus instead. Or, if you like, pushing the “law” plan to one side and looking for “faith” instead.’ Some theologians still try to force through that kind of story. But this ends up reducing the Old Testament to a book of distant ‘types’, ‘figures’ and oblique detached prophecies. They then naturally have to distort the New Testament as well to fit – since the New Testament itself picks up the main Old Testament themes and celebrates their fulfilment, not their abrogation.

People do indeed sometimes imagine that if the New Testament were focused on the Jewish people and their hopes, its message would become irrelevant for gentiles from that day to this (including, of course, most Christians). Whole schemes of thought, of interpretation of Paul in particular, have been built up on that supposition. But if we want to understand Paul we can’t be content with such an idea. The way Paul saw things (as we shall see more fully in a moment), God’s purpose for Israel always was the focal point, and the intended means, of God’s purpose for the whole world. God’s plan to put the world right began with the call of Abraham, and focused on the covenant which God made with him. And when Abraham’s people sinned, as God knew they would (since they were themselves children of Adam and Eve), God *did not scrap the plan*. He didn’t change his mind. The covenant required a faithful Israelite, and that is what God provided in the person of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah. This line of thought is, in fact, basic to the first four chapters of Romans, though you wouldn’t know it from many expositions.

You see – and this will be important as we go forward into chapter 8 of Romans – the word *Christos* is not just a proper name. It means ‘the anointed one’, the Messiah who sums up Israel’s vocation and destiny in himself. Jesus accomplishes, dramatically, shockingly, apocalyptically even, what the covenant with Israel has all along intended to achieve. So we mustn’t be surprised that the story of Israel is woven into Paul’s story of salvation all through, not least in Romans 8. This may make some things more complicated than many readers are used to. But that’s like what happens when you walk the actual streets and lanes of London instead of avoiding them by using the Underground. Things become a lot more complicated, but you are much more likely to understand how the city actually works. When we factor the ‘Israel’ dimension back into Romans, we begin to grasp the larger story of salvation in its entirety. We get to see the plan of God from start to finish.

So, with a deep breath, to the **third trigger warning**, which is again linked with the previous two. We have got our story of salvation upside down. Ever since the early Middle Ages at least, most Christians have supposed that the point of the Christian gospel was to enable saved human ‘souls’ to go up to ‘heaven.’¹ We’ve read Romans, not least Romans 8, in that way: when Paul says, at the climax of the chapter (verse 30), ‘those he justified, them he also glorified’, we have assumed that this means ‘Justified sinners will go to heaven.’

But that isn’t what ‘glorified’ meant for Paul. He never once mentions ‘going to heaven’, here or elsewhere.² The eternal security of God’s people in the New Testament has

1 See Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and wealth in early western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

2 On the meaning of 2 Cor. 5.1–5, Phil. 3.20 and similar texts, see my *RSG* and *SH* (acronyms used for my published works are listed in the Bibliography).

to do, not with their supposed disembodied post-mortem bliss, but with their resurrection from the dead into the rescued and renewed creation where they will have a truly human role to play. The story the Bible tells – Old and New Testaments alike – is about God creating a world in which he intends to come and live with his human creatures. The Bible ends, after all, not with saved souls going up to heaven but with the new Jerusalem coming down to earth, so that ‘the dwelling of God is with humans’ (Revelation 21.3). God’s ‘glory’ comes to dwell in the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, in the Temple in 1 Kings 8, and now in Jesus himself and, by the spirit, in Jesus’ followers. This gives them the ‘glory’ spoken of in Psalm 8, which is the restored human authority over the world. Paul says exactly that in, for instance, Romans 5.17, anticipating the larger exposition of chapter 8. The reason why God rescues humans from sin and death is so that they can take their proper place in the renewal of creation, the new world in which he will himself come to live, to be at home.

Thus, here in Romans 8, we see the incarnation of God’s son, and the indwelling of God’s spirit, dealing with sin and leading people to the promised inheritance. But the ‘inheritance’ of which Paul speaks here isn’t ‘heaven’. To repeat, ‘heaven’ is not mentioned in this chapter. The Messiah’s ‘inheritance’, shared with all his people, is the whole redeemed creation, with forgiven sinners raised from the dead to share in ruling that new world.

This third point, in particular, will take some getting used to. But it makes much better sense of Romans 8 than the normal reading. And once you allow it to settle down in your reading of the whole Bible, it will make more sense overall than you could imagine. And with that, we need to begin our deep dive into the text of Romans 8.

Romans 8: the shape and theme

If, then, you flew slowly over Romans in a helicopter, what would you see as you passed above chapter 8? What are its main districts and buildings, and how do they link up?

It's comparatively easy to sketch the main divisions within the chapter – and that's always a good thing to start with, even if first impressions need to be modified later on. Verses 1 to 11 form a decisive and celebratory introduction. At the other end, verses 31 to 39 are, obviously, a decisive and celebratory conclusion. Those two great statements then frame the long middle passage, verses 12 to 30. Within that section, there is a clear transition at verse 17: verses 12 to 16 focus on the spirit and sonship, and verses 18 to 27 speak of suffering and glory. This all leads to the triumphant conclusion of verses 29 and 30, a conclusion not just to chapter 8 but to the whole of Romans so far: 'Those he foreordained, he also called; those he called he also justified; those he justified he also glorified.' This gives to verses 31 to 39 the feel of a musical coda, celebrating where we've now got to in high rhetorical style. So the main divisions are verses 1 to 11; verses 12 to 17; then, with 17 functioning as a bridge, verses 17 to 30; and then verses 31 to 39.

So what are these sections all about? As I said, Romans 8 is the chapter of *assurance*. From the dramatic opening ('there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Messiah Jesus') to the triumphant conclusion ('nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love in the Messiah Jesus') the chapter is designed to say to anxious Christians, and especially to Christians suffering and/or being persecuted, that their ultimate future salvation (rescue from death itself in the new creation) is rock-solid secure. It is guaranteed by the work of the Messiah himself (his death, resurrection, ascension and

continuing intercession) and by the work of the holy spirit, leading Jesus' people in the path of holiness and enabling them to share in God's rescuing work through the prayer which, inspired by the spirit, arises from the midst of suffering.³

This all works at several levels. The little communities of Jesus-followers, not least in Rome itself, were regularly under threat. They often suffered violence or deprivation because they flouted social, cultural and not least religious norms. Within ten years of the Christians in Rome hearing this letter, Nero was making them scapegoats for the great fire of AD 64. Romans 8 is almost like a prophetic warning, coupled with the assurance: suffering is coming, but God's unbreakable love will hold you tight. But of course the argument functions at the broader, more general level. Followers of Jesus often find themselves becoming anxious that, even though they have believed in Jesus and been baptized, they still face the final judgment of which Paul had spoken in Romans chapter 2, and some might suppose that this could still go against them. Paul assures them that the verdict is already known in advance. 'It is God who justifies,' he writes; 'so who is to condemn?'

So the three main sections of the chapter balance out. Verses 1–11: there is no condemnation – because of the Messiah's death and the spirit's life-giving power. Verses 12–19: there is no condemnation – because nothing can separate us from God's love displayed in the death, resurrection and ascension of his son. In between, verses 20–30 explain that the spirit provides not only the assurance of sonship and inheritance, even when we are caught up in the groaning of all creation, but also the present mode of the God-given human vocation. By the spirit, redeemed humans have a decisive role to play

³ The reason why I write 'spirit' rather than 'Spirit' is explained in the Preface.

within God's purposes. Thus in verses 1 to 11, and 31 to 39, Paul appeals to the *objective reality* of the death, resurrection and ascension of the son and the gift of the spirit. And in verses 12 to 30 he displays the *subjective reality* of the work of the spirit, conforming believers to the image, and especially to the death, of the son, and thereby giving humans the dignity – the 'glory'! – of God's image-bearers, sharing in his project of new creation.

This is of course an oversimplification. That's inevitable at this stage. We will be filling in the details later on. But it gives us a sense of how the whole chapter works. God's salvation – that is, the ultimate rescue from death itself into new bodily life in the new creation – is assured because of the work of the son and the spirit, both *for* us and *in* us. And also, not least – though this is regularly forgotten – *through* us: through our sharing in the Messiah's sufferings and in the groaning of the spirit, which play a vital role in God's overall purposes. Romans 8 provides a dramatically Trinitarian view of salvation and the human calling.

That calling, then, is focused here on verses 12 to 30. Those who are 'in the Messiah,' assured of God's unbreakable love, are called in the present time to be the place where, and the means by which, his glory is paradoxically revealed, in action, in the world. The assurance we are given in the whole chapter is needed not simply because we might worry about our final state, but because we are called specifically to go through the dark valley of suffering, one way or another, as part of the same overall divine purpose. As Paul says in verse 18, we share the sufferings of the Messiah in order that we may be glorified with him. We will explore that in considerably more detail later on. If Romans 8 is the heart of Romans, this passage about suffering and prayer is the dark but vital heart of the chapter.

Romans 8 within Romans as a whole

Once we see how Romans 8 works as a whole, we can get at least an outline sense of how these themes draw together many strands of thought from the letter so far. Romans is like a symphony in four movements, each with its own integrity but also with multiple links to the other parts. It is full of interlocking lines of thought, not least through its complex invoking of scripture. The four movements are clear: chapters 1–4, then 5–8, then 9–11, then 12–16.

The argument is cumulative, so that our passage, chapter 8, is the conclusion to its own ‘movement’, chapters 5–8, and also to the whole first half of the letter, chapters 1–8. With that, it also forms the platform for the second half of the book. Our chapter is thus not a free-standing discussion of a detached topic. It means what it means within the larger flow of the letter. But it nevertheless has its own integrity, its own particular point to make, and that is what we are studying here.

Romans is above all a letter about *God*. That may sound obvious, but actually the Greek word for ‘God’, *theos*, occurs far more, in proportion to the letter as a whole, than anywhere else in Paul or indeed the rest of the New Testament. It would be well worth following this up in more detail, working through the different things Paul says here about God and how they all hang together – a task for which Romans 8 provides plenty of help. Paul then takes a deep breath before launching into the theme of God’s faithfulness in chapters 9–11 and the God of hope in chapters 12–16, both of which are vital themes for the Roman church – and ourselves, to this day – to work through.

In particular, chapter 8 brings into sharp focus the theme Paul stated in 1.16–17: the gospel of God reveals God’s **righteousness**. Here we face a well-known problem. The Greek word which used to be translated ‘righteousness’, *dikaiosynē*,

carries a complex range of interlocking meanings, which the English term doesn't convey in today's world. Paul, as so often, follows scripture closely, and in his Greek Bible the word *dikaiosynē* and its cognates regularly translated the Hebrew *tsedaqah* and its cognates. The irony, for us, is that many people now assume that God's 'justice' and God's 'love' are radically different (supposing, for instance, that God's justice would make him punish us but that his love would find a way not to do so after all); whereas in the Old Testament the two go closely together. When the Bible speaks of God's justice, it is talking about the creator's utter determination, faced with his creation in a mess, to put it all right. When it speaks of God's love, it is talking about the creator entering into a 'covenant', a close personal relationship, with his people – *as the means by which he will put the world right*. Paul draws on this combined meaning, explaining throughout this letter how God has been faithful to his covenant and how that covenant faithfulness is the means by which he is putting the world right. That is what the divine love was bound to intend, and what, as Paul here explains, he has done in the central gospel events. We might sum this up in Johannine language: God so loved his world that he determined to put it right. And, again as in John, so in Paul: the way God has done and is doing this is through Jesus and the spirit – as the decisive accomplishment towards which, as we see in retrospect like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the whole story of Israel had been pointing.

All this enables us to understand the famous doctrine of justification, which Paul lays out in Romans. It isn't just about sinners discovering that they can be personally 'put right with God' and thus go to heaven. Personal reconciliation with God remains central, but it is itself part of the larger project which Romans 8 brings gloriously into focus in its picture of the renewal of all creation. Here's how it works.

God has promised in scripture (not least in Isaiah and the Psalms) to put the whole world right. Through the gospel (the events concerning Jesus, and their announcement in the power of the holy spirit) he puts humans right – *so that they can be part of his putting-right project for the world*. God always intended to work in his world *through* his image-bearing creatures, and this now comes into clear focus. That's why the assurance of ultimate salvation, which is what Romans 8 is all about, *contains within itself* that stunning passage of *vocation* in verses 12 to 30, which describes how, by the spirit, we are drawn into the suffering of the Messiah and, through that, into the paradoxically glorious task of praying to God the father at the place where the world is in pain.

So Romans 8, celebrating God's unshakeable love, at one level completes the whole letter so far, explaining more about how justification works out. But at another level it completes the more specific train of thought that began in chapter 5, which is about *the way in which justified humans are called to be shaped by, and to share in, God's ongoing work of new creation*. Paul's shorthand for this – to say it again – is 'glory'. Redeemed humans, like the Temple, are to be filled with the divine glory, and thereby to be set in authority over the world as the genuine humans they are becoming. Being 'glorified' means, simultaneously, being filled with God's own personal presence and power by the spirit, and being enabled to exercise the vocation of genuine, image-bearing human beings. 'Conformed to the image of the son' is how Paul sums this up in verse 29. This theme of 'glory', anticipated in Romans 2.7, 10, then stated firmly at 5.2, returns powerfully in chapter 8, binding the whole section together.

The call to be genuine human beings – to be 'glorified' in the two senses I just mentioned – has often been played down or even ignored. The powerful theme of God's saving and

transforming grace, which sweeps through Romans like a rushing mighty wind, has sometimes led readers to suppose that we humans remain passive throughout the story of salvation. Romans 8 has often been read in that way: we are assured of salvation, the spirit enables us to live in God's way, and God will see us through any intermediate suffering. But that misses out the vital middle stage – that those who are declared to be in the right, to be God's people, are *the renewed humans*, the people God had in mind when creating his image-bearing creatures in the first place, the people who now, in the present age, have a decisive role to play in the coming to birth of the new creation. As we saw, God always intended to work in the world *through* human beings: that's part of the point of the 'image' in Genesis 1.26. That purpose, gloriously fulfilled in the ultimate Image, the man Jesus himself, is now shared with his people by the spirit.

This is all anticipated in the vocation of Israel itself. As I have explained elsewhere, and as many ancient Jewish readers of scripture had long realized, God called Abraham to undo the sin of Adam. Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and multiply and look after God's garden; Abraham and Sarah are promised that God will make them fruitful (despite their old age) and give them a land (despite their presently being wandering nomads). This promise of the land had already been extended, in the Psalms and Isaiah particularly, to include the whole world – as Paul says in Romans 4.13. And the promises about the family had already been similarly extended to include all the other nations. Paul believed – and explained in detail in several places – that all these promises had come true in Israel's Messiah, the Jesus of Nazareth whose public declaration as 'son of God', through his resurrection, was the very heart of the gospel (Romans 1.3–5). Jesus is thus the rightful *kyrios*, 'lord', of the whole world. This remains a *Jewish* and *biblical* idea – that Israel's Messiah would be the rightful lord of

the world. It didn't need 'translating' into non-Jewish terms to be relevant – uncomfortably relevant, of course! – to the world which already had other 'lords,' Caesar in particular.

Those great biblical promises might have seemed, up to the time of Jesus, to have failed. Deuteronomy had warned that Israel would rebel against God and suffer the consequences, namely the decimation of the people and exile from the land. That is part of the point of Romans 7: Israel, left to itself, appears to have failed, and with that the promises themselves are called into question. But in Romans 8, Paul picks up what he had already said in 5.12–21: those who are 'in Christ,' part of the Messiah's renewed people, will 'reign in life' (5.17). They will receive the 'inheritance' of the new creation. They will be the ones through whom God's purposes for his world, to be put into effect through obedient humans, will come true at last. *And that vocation begins here and now, albeit in the paradoxical form of sharing the Messiah's suffering and intercession.*

In order to prepare the way for our detailed study of Romans 8 itself, we need to stand back and look at these large themes, which draw together, in this remarkable chapter, a good deal of biblical theology as a whole. Reversing the move with which we began, we need to look back from the individual streets and lanes and remind ourselves of the larger city to which they belong.

New creation, new image, new covenant

The city in question – the plan of the creator God as set out in Israel's scriptures and then by the early Christians – is **new creation**, with *renewed humans* looking after it. The whole chapter of Romans 8 offers, as we've said, the *assurance* of ultimate salvation. But salvation means rescue; the rescue in question is rescue from death and all that leads to it; rescue

from death means *bodily resurrection*; and Paul declares that the resurrection of God's people is itself to be the means of the whole creation being saved from its slavery to decay. Humans were made to be God's agents within his world; that is part of what it means to be made in God's image. Until humans can take up this role, the world will remain unredeemed. Thus, the resurrection of God's people is what the whole world is waiting for (8.19–21). We are saved, not *from* the world but *for* the world.

This human vocation – to be the renewed people of God, through whom creation will be given its long-awaited freedom – has already become a reality through the work of the Messiah and the spirit. The 'glory' promised to humans in Psalm 8 ('crowned with glory and honour, with all things under their feet') has already been realized in Jesus. It now constitutes a key element in the present human vocation.

This theme comes as a surprise to people who have long been used to reading Romans 8 somewhat differently. As we saw, in the popular imagination Romans 8 is about God's people going safely to heaven at last. Correcting this oversimplification isn't simply a matter of adding a second stage to post-mortem existence, with the resurrection as 'life *after* "life after death"'. That is vital, but we need to fill in the picture by considering the *purpose* at which this rescue is aimed. We are to be rescued from sin, and from death itself, so that, as the book of Revelation insists, we can be the 'royal priesthood', God's image-bearing vicegerents, interceding for the world and ruling wisely over it as humans were always meant to do.⁴ That will be the moment when, and the means by which, creation itself will be liberated from its slavery to decay, to gain the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified. And at the heart of Romans 8, we discover that this genuinely

⁴ See Rev. 1.6; 5.10; 20.6.

human vocation begins already in the present, manifesting itself paradoxically in the prayer that arises out of suffering.

To put it another way, God made humans in his own image so that they could reflect God's wisdom and life-giving rule into his creation. For that, they need to be raised from the dead to take up their ruling responsibilities in the new creation. The problem of sin isn't just that we become guilty and deserve God's wrath. It is that we fail to be effective God-reflectors, with the consequence that God's good creation falls into corruption and decay. Paul is not a Platonist. To leave this world and go to 'heaven' – the standard Platonic hope of his day, and of ours too! – would be to deny the ultimate goodness of creation itself. No. Creation itself is to be redeemed; and the means to that redemption is the rescue and re-embodiment of human beings. And if, as Paul has argued in Romans 6, baptized and believing Christians are already resurrection-people, enlivened by the holy spirit, then this work has already begun. What this means in practice takes us to the heart of Romans 8, particularly verses 18 to 30.

But if the major theme underlying Romans 8 is therefore God's promised new creation (with humans being rescued from sin and death to play a vital role within it), we should remind ourselves that in scripture new *creation* is always the result of the new *covenant*. Israel's scriptures, not least in the way some of Paul's contemporaries were understanding them, looked beyond the disaster of the exile in Babylon to a time of rescue and renewal. Classic texts such as Isaiah 40–55 pointed the way: God would return to Jerusalem (Isaiah chapters 40 and 52), dealing with the sins of his people (chapter 53), thereby renewing the covenant (chapter 54) and finally all creation (chapter 55). The back story and template for all such rescue and renewal remained the story of the exodus – the story which, ever since Jesus' own choice of Passover as the moment

for his decisive kingdom-bringing work, remained central to early Christian understanding. Romans 8 is a central example of that ‘new exodus’ theme in early Christian reflection.

Here’s how it works. The book of Exodus sets out dramatically God’s rescue of Israel from slavery, his giving of the law (Torah) on Mount Sinai, and his coming to dwell gloriously in their midst in the newly constructed Tabernacle. As has sometimes been pointed out, the making, and divine filling, of the Tabernacle is really the climax of the whole Genesis–Exodus story. It’s like a new creation: a micro-world where God wants to come and dwell. This is why God rescued his people from Egypt, because he could not come and dwell in that land of idols. And this is why he gave the people the law: not, as so often in Christian imagination, to give them a ladder of good works to climb up to heaven, but to make them into the people in whose midst he might indeed come and live.

This whole complex Exodus story answers, in principle, the two questions left hanging at the end of Genesis. Genesis tells the story of God’s good and purposeful creation, entrusted to the image-bearing humans to manage; of how God’s image-bearers went wrong, dragging the good creation back towards chaos; and of how God responded by establishing his covenant with Abraham. But, at the end of Genesis, Abraham’s family are in exile in Egypt – an exile which will descend into slavery before God steps in to reverse it. Exodus answers the immediate covenantal question: God rescues Abraham’s family from slavery and leads them towards the promised land. But the second, underlying question looks past the covenant to God’s purposes for creation as a whole. *God will put right the problem of Genesis 3–11 by coming to dwell with his human creatures and thereby rescuing and renewing his whole creation.* When the Tabernacle is constructed, and God comes to dwell in it (Exodus 40), this is the sign and foretaste of the new

creation itself, the world which God intends to fill with his glorious presence (Isaiah 11.9). The people of the renewed *covenant* are thus called to be, in their Torah-directed and Tabernacle-focused life, the small working model of new *creation*. God gives Israel the Torah to prepare for his coming to dwell in their midst. God then does indeed dwell in their midst as the sign of his intention to fill all creation with his glorious presence. These Exodus-based themes are vital for understanding Romans 8.

To see how this works, think in more detail through the earlier parts of Paul's letter to Rome. In Romans 3.21—4.25, Paul argued that God had been faithful to the covenant promises made to Abraham. He had fulfilled those promises by calling into being, through the Messiah, a worldwide family whose sins were forgiven. So he can now argue, in chapters 5—8 as a whole but particularly in chapter 8, that the new exodus is under way *as the means by which the new genesis is to be achieved*.

This shows where many readers have gone wrong. Much Christian tradition has assumed that the exodus-language is, at best, a distant pointer to the theme of rescuing humans *from* the world (by taking them to 'heaven'). That is not how the scriptural narrative works – the narrative that Paul is following through. Paul believed that Jesus had accomplished the true, ultimate exodus. God had come to dwell in the midst of his people, in and as a true image-bearing human, in order *both* to renew the covenant *and* thereby to renew the whole creation. And God was now dwelling, by his spirit, in the hearts and lives of his people, to implement exactly this project. God promised Abraham, says Paul, that he would inherit not just the promised land but the whole world (4.13). That promise is reinforced in scripture through the promises made to the Messiah, in Psalm 2 and elsewhere, promises of a worldwide

rule. That is the basis for the church's mission, which is the purpose of its whole life. Thus through this new exodus, the work of Messiah and spirit, God renews the covenant, rescuing humans in order that creation itself may be rescued and restored. That is the logic of Romans 1—8.

After all, as I have said before and argued in detail elsewhere, in Genesis, and in much subsequent Jewish thought, the purpose of the covenant itself always was the renewal of creation. *God called Abraham to undo the sin of Adam and its effects.* God commanded Adam, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and look after the garden.' But he then promised Abraham, 'I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and give you the land of Canaan.' That's what is then accomplished through the exodus – God rescuing Israel from slavery, leading them to the promised inheritance by his indwelling presence. But Canaan was just a first stage, a forward-looking signpost. The whole world is now in view. That is then spelled out in Romans 8.18–28: creation itself will be redeemed. *And redeemed humans will be in charge of it.* That – and not 'going to heaven' – is the vocation of the Messiah's people.

Reflect for a moment on the role of human beings within this plan – something Christians today don't often talk much about, but which the early Christians took for granted. In Romans 5.17, and then in chapter 8, those who receive the gift of covenant membership *will reign in life.* That is the human vocation, the image-bearing vocation, highlighted then in Romans 8.18–30. We are, says Paul in 8.29, to be 'conformed to the image of God's son, so that he might be the firstborn among a large family'. Paul is resonating with Psalm 8, which celebrates the human vocation to be 'crowned with glory and honour' with all things put under their feet – the vocation fulfilled in Jesus *and now shared with Jesus' people.* To recapitulate what we said earlier about justification, God

has promised to put the whole world right, and through the gospel he puts men and women right so that they can be, here and now and also hereafter, part of his putting-right project for the world. Justification and justice go closely together.

But the present ‘reign’ or ‘rule’ or ‘glory’ of God’s rescued people is paradoxical. It involves suffering. The intercession which God’s people offer in their capacity as the Royal Priesthood – the intercession that stands at the climax of chapter 8 – is prayer in the dark, where faithful and God-loving people are praying for they know not what. If we think of the present Christian life as being shaped by the eschatological principle of ‘now and not yet’ – something that is *already* true and something that is *not yet* true – then the prayer of which Paul speaks in 8.26–7 joins together the ‘already’ truth, that God is working his purpose in the world *through* his spirit-filled people, and the ‘not yet’ truth that we, filled with the spirit to pray ‘Abba, father’, *do not yet know how to pray as we ought*, and have to rely on the spirit deep within us to intercede with inarticulate groanings.

Let’s probe a little further into this idea of new exodus in Romans 5–8. It’s all too easy for us to ‘hear’ a passage like this, about the spirit, sonship, inheritance and so on, in terms simply of ‘me and my salvation’ or ‘me and my spirituality’. But that’s like walking round an art gallery wearing tinted spectacles so that you can only see one or two colours. You need the whole biblical picture – not simply as an ‘illustration’ of our salvation or spirituality, but as its necessary depth and meaning.

Think how the exodus story works, and watch how Paul retrieves it. Exodus, as we saw, has three moments: liberation from slavery, the giving of Torah on Sinai, and the coming of the divine glory to dwell in the Tabernacle, to lead the people to their inheritance. Paul follows this sequence. In Romans 6

the enslaved sinners come through the water of baptism into the Messiah and find freedom. Then the Israelites come to Sinai, where they are given the Torah – which promises life but warns of death. In Romans 7, Paul describes the coming of the law and its sad effects, all the way to exile. But then God deals with the people's sin, and comes in person to dwell within them in the Tabernacle. In Romans 8, Paul explains that what Torah could not do, God has done in the Messiah's death and the gift of the spirit. The spirit now dwells within Jesus' people, as in the wilderness Tabernacle, to give them the life the law had promised.

The glorious divine presence, given in Exodus 40, then leads the people of Israel to their promised inheritance, even though at various points they are tempted to go back to Egypt. In the same way, Paul declares (8.12–17) that the spirit is leading Jesus' followers to their inheritance, which (to say it again because it's so easy to flick back into 'normal' understandings!) is not 'heaven' but rather the whole renewed creation – and he therefore warns against any tendency to go back to slavery. The point is that *the whole world is now God's holy land*. Spirit-led Jesus-followers are to bring God's healing love to his world through their own sharing in the way of the cross, their suffering and their prayer. That is the dark heart of the passage, in 8.18–27, which we will get to in due course. This too echoes the exodus: the groaning of all creation, *and* of the church, *and then even* of the spirit, echoes the 'groaning' of the Israelites in their slavery, with God hearing, remembering the covenant and taking action.

Romans 8: true humanity, true divinity

Romans 8 thus holds out before us a rich vision of what it means to be human, and an even richer vision of who God

himself really is. We will see this more fully as we go on, but it may be helpful to state it briefly here in advance.

Start with the astonishing double meaning of ‘glorification.’ ‘Glory’ here, as often in Paul, really means ‘dignity’ or ‘worth’ – the ‘worth’ being the vocation to be a genuine human being. But this glory is of course God’s own glory. Just as the glorious divine presence indwelt the Tabernacle, to lead the people to their inheritance, so the spirit truly indwells God’s people, making them already people of ‘glory’ even if (as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4) this often seems deeply paradoxical. On the other hand, renewed humans receive the ‘glory’ of which Psalm 8 speaks: the human vocation is to be ‘crowned with glory and honour’ (the promise Paul had held out already in Romans 2.7–10) so as to rule God’s renewed creation on his behalf. The ‘glory’ is therefore *both* the living presence of God within us *and* the genuine God-reflecting humanness that results. And of course this is no accident. This is what humans were made for, to find their own fulfilment in being God-reflectors. Irenaeus was right: the glory of God is a human fully alive, and truly human life consists in the vision of God.

The spirit thus constitutes Jesus’ followers, corporately and individually, as *Temple-people*, places where God comes to dwell, points of overlap between heaven and earth. The wilderness Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple were signposts pointing ahead to the renewal of all creation. So now, because of Jesus and the spirit, Jesus’ followers are called to be that kind of signpost, small working models of new creation, and hence active agents in the *present* renewal which anticipates God’s ultimate new creation. In Romans 8, this means holiness and hope, suffering and prayer – not to undermine assurance and celebration, but to show how they work out in practice.

Within this framework of new creation and new covenant, then, in which humans are renewed to be genuine image-bearers

within God's world, we find, looming up like a vast mountain out of the mist of exegetical detail, one of the greatest ever statements, from any period of theological history, of what became known as the doctrine of the Trinity. The father sends the son and the spirit to do 'what the law could not do', and to lead Jesus' followers to their inheritance. In the present time, the spirit groans within the inarticulate prayer of the church and of all creation – and God the father listens and knows the mind of the spirit. The church is thereby conformed to the image of the son. This is all about God's love, the Messiah's love, and – by the spirit – our love for God in return. That's what 'covenant' is all about. Paul does not, of course, use the word 'Trinity'. But this chapter embodies, in rich argument, appeal and celebration, the truth which later acquired that label.

Welcome, then, to the astonishing and multi-layered world of Romans 8. This is the very heart of the letter. New creation; new covenant; genuine humanness; the loving triune God. This is the city we are now going to explore, street by street. If studied prayerfully and carefully, this chapter will enlarge our minds and hearts, so that we can both enjoy the place for ourselves and, as and when we are called, become sure guides to lead others also into its life-giving secrets.