

GOD'S DECISIVE ACT — "CONDEMNED SIN IN THE FLESH" (ROM. 8:1-4) — #1

By Walton Weaver

The eighth chapter of Romans is noted especially for its strong language of triumph, and most students of Scripture have greatly admired its sublimity. William Hodge says, "For fervor and strength of expression, for rapidity and vigor of argument, for richness in doctrine, for revelation of high and precious mysteries, and for a noble evaluation of sentiments, which pervades the whole, and bursts out at the end with irrepressible ardor, there are few passages equal to it, even in the sacred oracles, and certainly none out of them."

No Condemnation In Christ

The keynote of the chapter is stated in the first verse: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The terms "in Christ Jesus" bring to our minds *how* it is that there is no longer any condemnation. It is not simply because we have been baptized into Christ and added to His church, but because we are in vital union with Christ. To be "in Christ Jesus" is to be in Him like a branch is in the true Vine (Jno. 15:1ff.), or a limb in the body with Christ as its head (Eph. 4:14-16; 1 Cor. 12:13-31). Such relation between the branch and the Vine and the limb and the Head provides the vital link which gives life to the branch and the member. This vital union means that we "do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (cf. vs. 4).

The word "now" in this verse is used to contrast the present with the past. What had been true before is not true now. Before Christ came there was condemnation, NOW there is no condemnation "in Christ Jesus." Why had there been condemnation under the law? Was the law not designed to give life or deliverance? Paul had answered "yes" to this question when he said, "and this commandment which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me" (Rom. 7:10). There was a righteousness according to law, but no Jew, even though he sought it in this way, ever arrived at it. "Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works" (Rom. 9:30-32). Faith is the only way to justification. To seek justification by "works" is to seek justification by perfect works because this is what righteousness by law means. Paul had elsewhere said, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.' Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.' However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM'" (Gal. 3:10-12). To seek justification through works is but to meet failure because the only way it can be attained is through faith. Paul came to feel a deep sense of failure on his own part under the law. Years later, he showed the secret of his new-found confidence: "not having a righteousness

of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:9).

Paul had shown in Romans seven that the reason he stood condemned under the law was that sin had found occasion through the commandment to produce sin in him (Rom. 7:8, 11). The law worked through the medium of the flesh, and using the flesh as its medium it had brought him "into bondage to sin" (Rom. 7:14). The weakness was not in the commandment which was designed to give life, and was holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:10, 12), but instead brought death; the weakness was in Paul, but particularly "in my flesh," he says, "because the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not" (Rom. 7:18). There was a "different law in the members of [his] body, waging war against the law of [his] mind" (Rom. 7:23). This "different law" was the law of sin. This "law" has been called by some a *rule* or *principle*; others prefer the word *force* or *power*.

As a man who wanted to be righteous under the law Paul faced two problems: 1) sin as a ruling principle in his life with no hope of being freed from this power, and 2) recognizing his utter failure under law, under the same law he found no provision by which he might stand justified before God through forgiveness (cf. Heb. 10:1-4). Paul and all others under the law had miserably failed to arrive at a righteousness of their own derived from the law, and as a result of sin they stood condemned by the law with no hope of deliverance. He begins the eighth chapter with this wonderful note of encouragement, "There is therefore NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

A New-Found Freedom

The reason for the wonderful truth announced in the first verse is that now the ground for condemnation has been removed. This is stated next: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Rom. 8:2). "For" sets forth the reason why there is no condemnation in Christ. A new freedom has been given which delivers us from the law of sin and death. "The law of sin and of death" from which we have been set free is not the law of Moses. It is the "law in the members of my body" of Rom. 7:23, which is the principle or rule of sin in us. This issues forth into spiritual death (Rom. 7:24), thus, it is called "the law of sin and of death." Sin and death are personified as powers which control us.

Paul does not mean simply that we have been justified or freed from sin. He means also that as Christians we have been freed from the law or power of sin in our members. As a carry-over from the first four chapters of the epistle the thought of justification is no doubt yet in his mind, but the position of this chapter in the book, as well as an exegesis of the passage itself, stands opposed to limiting these statements to that subject alone. Here he speaks specifically about freedom from "the law of sin and death" which he has shown in the previous chapter held him captive. In this immediate context it is subjection to THIS "law" that brings one into condemnation, so we would take the reference to "no condemnation" in

verse one in a broad sense to mean continuance in a state of justification.

The thing that has made us free from this "law of sin and death" is "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." The latter law has superceded the former law, and we have been liberated from the one by the other. Just as the word "law" means power or force in the one case, the same word also means power or force in the other case. One "law" has been overthrown or destroyed by another "law." The second law is "the law of the SPIRIT of life," in which statement the reference is no doubt to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives "life," so that it is by the power of the Spirit that our freedom from "the law of sin and death" has been effected. Through this "law of the Spirit of life" we are enabled to freely adopt and obey God's law. This language reminds one of Paul's statement that "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). This statement is made in a context where he has been contrasting the two covenants. The ministry of the Spirit through the new covenant inspires a service that is rendered freely and lovingly. This is service that is far superior to that rendered under the old dispensation. New incentives are provided through the gospel which were not incorporated into the law. The gospel as God's power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16) is the basis of freedom from sin's guilt (justification), but it is equally the basis of freedom from sin's power so that we might serve righteousness. This point has already been thoroughly developed by Paul in the sixth chapter. "In Christ Jesus" shows that this new kind of life is made possible through our vital union with Christ.

The Weakness Of The Law

Paul now moves on to describe the method of the liberation he has just described in the second verse. But he does not get directly to it. He first describes for us what should be viewed as a basic weakness in the law: "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh . . ." (Rom. 8:3a). He does not mean that the law itself was faulty. He had already conceded that the law "is holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). But there was something that the law could not do, and this he says was due to a WEAKNESS on the part of the law, i.e., "weak as IT [the law] was." What the law COULD NOT DO (literally, the impossibility of the law) is explained in the principle sentence which follows. That sentence is given in apposition to this part of the verse.

What was the weakness of the law? Whatever it was it was due to "the flesh." What does he mean by "the flesh"? He means the same thing he has meant by this term in chapter seven and the other two times he uses it in this same verse. R. L. Whiteside, in his comments on Romans 7:18, describes "the flesh" as "the animal part of man, . . . a bundle of appetites and passions, which lead to sin only when they have enlisted the mind to plan and execute methods of self-gratification in an unlawful way." So, with this understanding of "flesh," how was the law weakened by the flesh? Stated another way, we might ask, through WHOSE flesh, and HOW was the law weakened THROUGH their flesh? Obviously, the flesh is the flesh of those who were under the law. But how was the law weakened "through" their flesh? The flesh was the *medium* through which the law attempted to accomplish its

work, but it was a "weak" medium, and Paul says the law shared in this weakness. In view of Paul's discussion in the previous chapter, we may say that the flesh was a weak medium because it did not produce the willing obedience necessary so that one would not be held in bondage to sin.

In chapter seven Paul has described himself as desiring in his mind to obey the law of God, but then he found himself not carrying through in willing obedience. He was hindered by the flesh from rendering the obedience he desired to render to the law of God. The very "life" the law was designed to produce (Rom. 7:10) was not produced in him because the law itself proved to be "weak through the flesh," i.e. because the flesh as the medium of the law was weak, the law was not willingly kept.

Some brethren are not willing to concede that the flesh is weak because they cannot think of weakness apart from a sinful and depraved nature. But by "weak . . . flesh" Paul does not mean sinful nature. "Flesh" in itself is neither morally good nor morally evil. When Paul says in Romans 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh," he does not mean that his flesh is sinful. He had just said in verse seventeen that "sin . . . dwells in me," and by "me" he means flesh. Sin *dwelt* in his flesh. But how was this? Lard says,

in it (Paul's statement, *ww*) sin is obviously personified, and viewed as obviously having its abode in the flesh, and as operating through it as an agent or instrument. This, more simply put, signifies that those influences, whether personal or otherwise, which induce sin, act, at first, and mainly, on the flesh, and through it cause the *me* that wills to sin. It is thus that sin dwells in the flesh and works evil.

The "flesh" is the weaker side of our nature (cf. Jesus' statement, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," Matt. 26:41 — sounds like Paul in Romans seven, doesn't it!), but it is not itself sinful. That it is weak is demonstrated by the fact that sin most often enters our lives through the flesh. But no one, to my knowledge, has ever said that man is in bondage to sin *only through the flesh*.

Bryan Vinson, Sr., in speaking of the reason why the law of Moses could not free us from the law of sin and death, said, it "is one of weakness; it was, however, a weakness identified with the flesh. This weakness of the flesh is the condition that rendered them so liable to sin." I wonder why it is that when some brethren quote from brother Vinson here they quote the first part of this statement without quoting the last sentence, and then pick up their quotation again with the next sentence in his commentary? Are they afraid of this brother's statement that the "weakness of the flesh is the condition that rendered them so liable to sin"? If so, they should not be quoting him as lending support to their view. Brother Vinson clearly understood that this part of verse three shows that the flesh is weak because it is through the flesh that we are "rendered so liable to sin." In his comments on

Romans 10:4-5, he also said, "The weakness of the law was in the weakness of the flesh of those under it, a weakness displayed in the fact none kept it perfectly."