

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus – Romans 1:8. That is the biblical revelation before us today. Where does a statement like that come from? What was the writer thinking? It is an astonishing statement.

The condemnation he had in mind can only mean divine judgment on the sins of Man. But he says **there is now no condemnation**. Something has intervened. A great peril has given way to a great peace. He says Jesus Christ made that happen. Christ intervened in such a way as to satisfy the justice of God. He doesn't say here how Christ did that, but he does say that what Christ did applies to **those who are in Christ Jesus**.

In Christ Jesus! Isn't that an unusual way to say it? What does that mean? The only way I can make sense of it is like this. If I say, "I'm in business," I mean that I am governed by the requirements of my business. If I say, "I'm in danger," I mean that I am governed by the danger I face. If I say, "I am in Christ Jesus," I mean that I am governed by Christ Jesus.

Where did those thoughts come from? Where did the apostle get the idea that God has condemned humanity for their sin? How did he come to think that Christ had deflected that condemnation? How did he say a person comes to be governed by Christ and escape the righteous condemnation of God? These are astonishing thoughts. Are they relevant today? Do we still need to be concerned with divine judgment? Is it still important to believe that Jesus did more than dispense moral advice?

I have piled one question on top of the other. I feel the growing weight of those questions. I gladly bear the growing weight of those questions. In confusing times like ours, it is important to come back to the foundation of Christianity and reaffirm that we in our generation also want to build on that foundation and not on another. So, I ask again: Do we still need to be concerned with divine judgment? Yes. Is it still important to believe that Jesus did more than dispense moral advice? Yes. Do we believe that **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**? Yes. But why? Where do these thoughts come from?

Good Friday

It all goes back to Good Friday. They didn't call it Good Friday when it happened. It didn't look like a good day at all. It looked like a very bad day. Secular power and religious pride combined to make it the worst kind of day for Jesus of Nazareth. It looked for all the world like He had become another just another statistic.

He had made a splash all right: enthusiastic crowds, memorable stories, public spectacles that challenged the status quo, loyal followers, and the promise of better days to come. It all came to a thudding halt with the execution of Jesus by crucifixion, that particularly vivid way Rome had of saying to Jesus and anyone else who cared to notice that they were in charge, and they could do with you anything they wanted, and there wasn't a thing you could do about it. The loyal followers and the enthusiastic crowds didn't lift a finger in protest. It was over. Done. That's where the story should have ended.

It did not end there. Jesus came back to life permanently on the First Day of the Week. Then came one of those facts that we almost never notice, but it bears witness to the unique nature of Christianity. Jesus, raised from the dead with an indestructible body that had unprecedented physical powers, did not use those powers to pursue a political course of action. His followers hoped He would. They asked Him, "**Lord, are you at**

this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” – Acts 1:6. They still had political ambitions. Don’t waste a good resurrection! Let’s show those guys in Jerusalem and Rome who’s in charge once for all.

That didn’t happen. In a few hours Jesus was gone, promising only that He would come back when they least expected Him. How were they to make sense of it all? Their world was upside down. They knew what they had experienced with Jesus, but they also knew they had missed everything that mattered. They had to go back over everything in light of the resurrection. Above all, they had to rethink the meaning of Jesus’ death.

Was it unjust? Certainly. Is injustice all there was to it? Certainly not! In fact, that’s not even the main thing. Was it cruel? Certainly. But the New Testament writings downplay that. The gospels say plainly in less than three minutes what it took Mel Gibson two hours to show in X-rated detail.

The apostles had lived through two events within 72 hours that jerked them around like a dog with a wet towel. As they talked and thought and prayed and remembered and talked and thought and prayed and remembered some more, the meaning of the death of Christ came into focus in their collective understanding.

We are not privy to their doubts, debates, and discussions. The only thing we have is what they wrote, which endures and shows no sign of losing its hold on the imagination of people the world over. From what they wrote we can discern two lines of interpretation by which they expressed the meaning of the death of Christ and because of which we call that Friday a very Good Friday indeed.

Good Friday Interpreted

The first line of interpretation came to them from their biology and their religion. All the apostles were Jews. All the first Christians were Jews. They came readymade with 1500 years of history. Above all, they came with 1500 years of religious sacrifices.

Central to Jewish religious life was the Exodus. Their great prophet-leader, Moses, went toe to toe with the Pharaoh of Egypt, calling on him to let the people of Israel go. It was all to no avail until the Death Angel visited the firstborn of every living thing in Egypt, including the Pharaoh’s firstborn son. But the Death Angel passed over the firstborn of the children of Israel. He passed over them, because the children of Israel had sacrificed their lambs and sprinkled their blood on the doorposts of their houses.

Also central to Jewish religious life was the temple. It was the dwelling place of God on earth. Central to the temple was sacrifice. Central to sacrifice was blood, and the central act of worship was the Day of Atonement. On that one day alone, the High Priest took blood from the slain animal, entered the central room of the temple, which was called the Holy of Holies, and sprinkled the blood on the place of atonement. By that act the High Priest atoned for the sins of the nation for the preceding year.

The apostles made the connection. Their nation’s long history of sacrifice had prepared them to understand the death of Jesus. Jesus was God’s Lamb. Didn’t John the Baptist call Jesus **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?** – John 1:29.

A second line of interpretation came to them through the words of the Lord Himself. Looking back, no doubt chagrined and ashamed, they remembered how persistently Jesus had talked about the necessity of His death. Peter rebuked Him for saying it. The disciples didn’t understand and were afraid to ask Him about it. They blew it off and began to talk of the political power and glory that awaited them. Talk of

rejection, suffering, and death did not square with the Messiah they envisioned Him to be and wanted Him to be.

But that's how He talked. **He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.** – Mark 8:31. And one time (Mark 10:45), in a statement that is the key to the meaning of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus introduced them to the meaning of His coming death. **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.** If He had stopped there, He would have just been dispensing good moral advice. He did not stop there. **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.**

Then came the Resurrection, and it took the sting out of the cruelty, the injustice, and the death itself the day Christ died. Then came the Resurrection, and it cleansed their vision, so they could grasp the meaning of His death as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and also as a ransom to **rescue us from the present evil age** – Galatians 1:4 – and deliver us **from the coming wrath** – 1 Thessalonians 1:10. The meaning of His death was beginning to take shape throughout the young Church.

Reconciliation with God

Then came the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, whom we know as Paul the Apostle. In him Christ had captured a man whose devotion, courage, and intellect prepared him to grasp the full meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ. He defined Christianity for the ages. His defining contribution was the letter to the Romans.

Romans has put the human conversation for all time in a new and permanent context. Paul went back to his Jewish roots in Genesis. Adam stood at the beginning of human creation, and from his failure had come sin and death. Paul saw that Christ stands at the beginning of a new, human creation, and from his success will come a new heaven and a new earth with a renewed humanity. In one of his great lines he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17: **if anyone is in Christ** (there's that unusual phrase again), **he is a new creation the old has gone, the new has come!**

If you want to hold in your heart the nucleus of Romans, you need to know from memory Romans 5:10: **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** In that verse the apostle fashioned a tiny net of four words that captures and holds the entire meaning of Romans one and two: **we were God's enemies.** That meaning raises the question that poses an existential threat to every person who has ever lived: Am I God's enemy? Does God say I am His enemy? Romans one and two say you are. That's why we are at risk of divine condemnation.

Another tiny net of words in that verse catches and holds the entire meaning of Romans three and four: **we were reconciled to him through the death of his son.** That meaning raises the question that poses an existential hope for every person who has ever lived: Does Christ reconcile me to God? Does God say Christ reconciles me to God? Romans three and four say He does. That's why we say that Christ has deflected the divine judgment on human sin.

Central to reconciliation is the faith in Christ of fallen, fearful, and frail people – like us. What faith are we talking about? Romans 10:9: **If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** Your faith in Jesus is how you come to be **in Christ Jesus**, to

be governed by Christ.

And look at the results of that faith. Romans 5:1: **Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

The last five words of verse 11 define that peace: **we have now received reconciliation.**

There is something here I don't want you to miss. The word *peace* in this passage is not about feelings; it is about relationship and status. Peaceful feelings come and go for Christians, as for everyone else. Our new status with God doesn't change. We have been reconciled and restored to friendship with God through Christ.

The love of God confirms the permanence of our new status with God. Verse eight: **God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** If God did that for us while we were His enemies, now that we are His friends, nothing can separate us from His love. You can bet the farm on it. And that, my companions on the spiritual journey, is the historical process and the personal conviction that gave rise to the biblical revelation before us today. **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**

At Rest in the Everlasting Arms

Can I be sure? I keep doing the same lousy things over and over. The streak of lawlessness in my soul isn't going away anytime soon. How long can God tolerate that? Don't these continued irruptions of lawlessness jeopardize our friendship with God?

The great apostle himself had some bad moments about that. **For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.** "I thought the Law of God was on my side, because I thought I was blameless. I thought I was **a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants** (Romans 2:19-20), but I was wrong, and the Law of God did it to me. The Law of God turned on me and exposed me as a lawbreaker. It discredited me in my own eyes and in the eyes of God. My moment of self-knowledge was a kind of death."

It's possible to be a follower of Christ and feel far, far from God. In moments like that your little story needs again to find its place in God's big story. In moments like that you need to do what some of our spiritual fathers called "kneeling at the foot of the cross." Go back to your spiritual roots. Go back to Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Remember Romans 5:10, Romans 5:8, Romans 5:1, and Romans 8:1: **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**

Our restored friendship with God is not a friendship between equals. But our great Friend in Heaven is a Friend who comforts us, when we are at our lowest. Don't be afraid. Jesus is Victor. Hold on to Christ. Hold on to His Church, which is a tangible way of holding on to Christ. Be at peace. **There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**