

LESSONS FROM ROMANS 8

FROM HERE
TO
Eternity

Assurance in the face
of sin and suffering

RAY GALEA



matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

From Here to Eternity

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This book is dedicated to my longest-standing
Christian friends,
Phil and Anne Gilchrist and Kimberly and
Stephen Sawyer,
whose fellowship and friendship I count as one
of God's precious gifts to me.

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Foreword

You're about to encounter the combination of Ray Galea and Romans 8. And I couldn't be happier for you, because it's a combination that changed my life.

In the mid-1990s, a group of friends—one guy in particular—patiently and persistently invited me to return to the church where I had grown up. I'd abandoned the church and run away from God as a teenager, but my friend didn't give up on me. Nor did God.

In September 1997, I finally relented and came back to church for the first time in about five years. Over the next few months, God used the faithful weekly preaching from the Bible—along with the godly example of church members plus several conversations with friends (praise God for late-night trips to McDonald's)—to soften my heart to the truth. But he used Romans 8 and Ray Galea to bring it all together and close the deal.

In January 1998, a group of young adults from my church went away to a Bible teaching convention a couple of hours outside Sydney. Though I was ready to commit to a weekend away, I really didn't know what I was getting myself in for. But that weekend ended up being a turning point in my life.

Ray Galea was a speaker at that conference, and his four

talks came from a single chapter of the Bible: Romans 8. I had no idea who Ray was, and I had only the barest inkling of the treasures that awaited me in Romans. In fact, when I first saw the weekend's program, I vaguely remember thinking, "Four talks from just one chapter of the Bible—really?!?"

Little did I know.

By the end of that weekend, everything had changed. As I listened to Ray preach from Romans 8, I saw reality as I had never seen it before. I caught a glimpse of God's sweeping plans for the universe and for history, and how I fitted into those plans. I heard about the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people, and learned that life now will be about continuing to struggle with sin, continuing to deal with suffering as we long for the glory that awaits us. I heard that nothing in all creation could derail what God is doing or separate me from his love. I understood—in my heart and my soul, not just in my head—that Jesus Christ stands at the centre of it all, and that it was his death and resurrection that enabled me to be reconciled to God, to escape the condemnation that I deserve. I finally knew that I needed to stop running from God, and bow the knee to Jesus. So I did.

I ended that weekend a changed man, having put my trust in Jesus as my Saviour for the first time, resolving to follow Jesus as Lord from then on. But that was just the beginning.

About 18 months later, I attended another conference where Ray was speaking. I thought he might be encouraged to hear my story, so I approached him after his talk and told him about how I'd become a Christian as I listened to him preach from Romans 8. As I shared my story, Ray listened, smiled gently, then said just one thing to me: "Spend the rest of your life praising God for it!"

As I've tried to follow Ray's simple, pitch-perfect advice, it turns out that the truths I heard on that fateful weekend in 1998 are the same truths that have sustained me through the ups-and-downs of the last two decades. And there are very few places in Scripture that illuminate those truths more powerfully and clearly than Romans 8. Time and time again, I've returned to the place where it all began—this majestic and glorious chapter, quite possibly the greatest chapter in all of Scripture. Every time I read it, new treasures emerge. I sometimes feel as though I've barely scratched the surface.

All of that explains why I love this book, and why I'm thrilled that you're reading it.

They say the Grand Canyon is one of those rare natural wonders that never disappoints, no matter how high your expectations or how many times you've already seen it. Romans 8 is like that. No matter how many times you've read these words, no matter what riches you might expect or how long and hard you've pondered these realities, this is one chapter that will never disappoint. It will continue to yield new treasures, if you're willing to dig deep. The effort we put into Romans 8 will be repaid to us a hundredfold.

In an age where more and more of us possess the attention span of an amnesiac goldfish, flitting from one distraction to the next at breakneck speed, *From Here to Eternity* is a book to help you stop and linger in a place that deserves our undivided, sustained attention. And just like a good tour guide helps you to make the most of a spectacular natural wonder, so Ray's insights, practical wisdom, and passion for the glory of God serve as the ideal guide to the life-changing and faith-sustaining truths of this most wondrous chapter.

This book is a treasure for living the Christian life, no

matter how long you've been walking with Jesus. May your life be changed as mine was, and is, by Romans 8.

Geoff Robson

Introduction

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

—John Wesley, referring to his experience on
Aldersgate Street

Josephine was the Lebanese mother of one of the young men at my church. As her husband’s coffin was being lowered into the ground, she kept crying out a single phrase in Arabic. I asked an Arabic-speaking friend what she was saying. He told me she was saying, “I’m so jealous, I’m so jealous, I’m so jealous”.

Josephine was so sure that God would keep his promises,

1 Percy Livingstone Parker (ed.), *The Heart of John Wesley’s Journal*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2008, p. 66. Wesley describes going “very unwillingly” to a society that met on Aldersgate Street, where he heard a reading from Martin Luther’s preface to the epistle to the Romans.

and so certain that her husband was with Christ, that she was left with a proper jealousy, craving to be where he was. This was more than just a grieving widow wishing her own life would end, and it was anything but wishful thinking. It was a sure and certain hope.



It is far too common to find born-again Christians who see eternity with God as uncertain. Perhaps this is your burden. You walk the Christian life as if it were an emotional roller coaster where every sin puts you out of God's love, and every good work pulls you back in. You're only as confident as your last good deed. You may even have learnt to talk the talk when it comes to assurance—others might hear you utter words of confidence and assume you're like those Welsh Christians in the early 20th-century revivals who were known as 'The Assured Ones'—but deep down you are filled with haunting doubts that steal your joy and cripple your service. Maybe you feel like the girl plucking the petals from a daisy, rehearsing the same words to herself over and over: "He loves me, he loves me not; he loves me, he loves me not."

But did you know that it's important to God not only that he saves you through his Son, the Lord Jesus, but also **that you know you are saved?** God wants you to *know* that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

Assurance is one of the most precious and important gifts that any Christian can possess. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, often regarded as one of the great preachers of the 20th century, highlights what is at stake when assurance is missing:

We should all be concerned about our assurance of salvation, because if we lack assurance we lack joy, and if we lack joy our life is probably of a poor quality. ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’ (Nehemiah 8:10).²

The reality is, however, that we all live with a degree of doubt. Unlike ‘disbelief’, which belongs to the non-Christian, doubts find their place in the corners of all our hearts to some extent.

I invited members of my church to share their doubts. Some are listed below, and they are typical of the range of issues that afflict Christians:

- I’m 30, I grew up in a Christian home, and I often wonder: is this my faith, or my parents’ faith?
- I read that there is no condemnation for those in Christ, but I feel rejected by God.
- I live with constant pain, and I find it hard to experience God’s saving love.
- I live with the constant fear of deceiving myself that I am really a child of God.
- How many times will God forgive my repeated sin? I fear there must be a limit!
- I think to myself, “Unless my faith is perfect (minus any doubt), then it can’t be true faith”.
- If my works are evidence for my faith then how many works are required, and of what type?
- I fear that I may have put my faith in my works and not in Jesus.

² D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, vol. 7, *The Sons of God: Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1974, p. 16.

- When I compare myself with other Christians, I don't have their joy or respond to trials with the same maturity.
- Is Jesus really God, or are the Jehovah's Witnesses right?
- Is the Bible really God's word, given how the New Testament canon was formed?

And the list goes on and on...

Based on these reflections, there are at least three categories of doubts that Christians experience:

- Some are unsure that the Bible's teaching is true (e.g. the Bible may say it, but did Jesus really rise from the dead?).
- Some doubt whether they have a correct understanding of the Bible's teaching (e.g. does the Bible really say that Jesus is God?).
- Still others know that Christianity is true, but they remain unsure whether they are included in God's saving purposes (e.g. am I really forgiven? Has God chosen me?).

Romans 8 will especially speak to a number of doubts within the second and third categories.

Does it matter if we don't experience assurance? It's worth stating that the experience of assurance of salvation is not the same as the salvation itself. Rather, assurance is a blessing that flows out from the gospel of our Lord Jesus. For example, you can be a genuine Christian and be poorly taught, or you may battle with mental health issues. There are many reasons you may be a Christian and yet not experience much certainty around your status in Christ. However, this is not God's intention for his people.

Romans 8 is the most extraordinary chapter in the Bible, in part because it wants to drown us in a sea of certainty. The apostle Paul opens the chapter with a stunning truth: “there is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). None! Then as the chapter concludes, Paul declares that *nothing in all creation* “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39).

Many years ago, while our family was driving along a coastal road, my then four-year-old son James piped up from the back seat: “Dad, why don’t we just drive over the cliff? That way we can die and go straight to heaven.” While I had to remind him that only God has the right to say when we come home, there was a confident, childlike trust that saw death in Christ as a gateway into the arms of God himself. My son was experiencing the assurance that he was entitled to as a child of God. Even at that age, he knew that being with God in heaven would be far better than life in this broken world. In essence, he simply wanted to reduce the gap between now and then.

But like it or not, life is lived in the here-and-now. We live from here to eternity.³ Our life in Christ is lived in this age—where we are justified, and where we eagerly await the glory that lies ahead. But between those two certainties, we are confronted with two realities in this age: sin and suffering.

Our experience of sin and suffering can undermine our

3 I first came across the expression ‘from here to eternity’ as the title of the classic 1953 film. The title was originally drawn from Rudyard Kipling’s 1892 poem *Gentlemen-Rankers*, about British soldiers who had lost their way and were “Damned from here to Eternity”. How different that is from the theme of Romans 8, which is all about us being saved from here to eternity. No matter how badly we may have lost our way, God can save us!

hope and our assurance. In 1654, the Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote:

Most Christians live between fears and hopes, and hang, as it were, between heaven and hell. Sometimes they hope that their state is good, at other times they fear that their state is bad: now they hope that all is well, and that it shall go well with them forever; [then] they fear that they shall perish by the hand of such a corruption, or by the prevalence of such or such a temptation... They are like a ship in a storm, tossed here and there.⁴

As we will see in Romans 8, the apostle Paul seeks to reassure us of the *certainty* of our hope in the face of pain and recurring sin.

In a sense this has never been more important, given that life expectancy in the Western world has improved dramatically. In Australia, “boys and girls born in 2013-2015 can expect to live around 33 and 34 years longer respectively [than those born just over a century earlier]”.⁵ There is now an extra 30+ years on the table for many of us (God willing). A longer life brings more opportunities to glorify God, but it also brings more challenges to overcome. And that means an extra 30+ years of remaining content, staying faithful to your spouse, managing your temper, enduring pain, staying passionate for Christ, and generally being other-person

4 Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth: A Treatise on Christian Assurance*, Banner of Truth, London, 1961 (originally published 1654), p. 11.

5 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Life expectancy’, AIHW, Canberra, 2016 (viewed 1 June 2017): www.aihw.gov.au/deaths/life-expectancy.

centred. It means 30+ years of opportunity for some kind of sin or some kind of suffering—those two constant companions, those two never-ending hurdles in our lives in this age—to derail our walk with Jesus.

If life is lived from here to eternity, it is a long ‘here’.

This is where Romans 8 comes in.

In the first section of this book, we will look at how God works to overcome not just the *penalty* of sin, but also the controlling *power* of sin. God will not allow our sinful weakness to rob us of our place in glory. In short, God’s gifts of his Son and the indwelling presence of his Spirit mean that obedience is not only possible; it is assumed and expected. By emphasizing this great reality, Paul puts to rest any accusation that the good news concerning Jesus is a licence to sin. Rather, God *will* change us; he will do what the law on its own could never do. Yet as we live out our new life in Christ, each Christian still faces an ongoing battle with sin and the ‘sinful nature’. But this battle takes place from ‘within the family’, with God as our Father being for us, not against us.

At the end of each chapter in part I, as an example of how we might engage in this struggle with sin, I will reflect on my personal struggle with anger and how the truths taught in Romans 8 have helped me in my lifelong battle with my temper.

In the second section of the book, we will shift our focus to the topic of suffering. We’ll see that the hardships of this life are actually part of God’s plan in this fallen creation, not a denial of his love. Suffering is a necessary element in allowing us to reach maturity in Christ. At the end of each chapter in part II, I have invited a number of people

who have battled and are battling with suffering to tell their stories and to reflect on how they have been sustained by the truths revealed in Romans 8.

If you'd appreciate some help getting oriented to the whole of Romans before you jump into chapter 8, I've included a summary of Romans 1-7 at the end of this book (see appendix B). You can also find the full text of Romans 8 printed in appendix A; I recommend reading it in one go before we start our step-by-step journey through the chapter.

In Romans 8, Paul doesn't pretend that life is a bed of roses. He maintains a healthy realism about the Christian life, and makes clear that God expects his people to groan in a broken world with a quota of pain. An ongoing battle with sin is also expected. There is no promise of an unachievable perfectionism this side of glory, no promise of heaven on earth. I am not forced to pretend that my life is one endless victory after another. But neither am I left with a pessimistic Christianity where I am always filled with doubt, always defeated by sin, never making progress. Throughout Romans 8, Paul emphatically and repeatedly affirms that neither sin nor suffering will drive a wedge between the love of Christ and us. Too often, Christians misread recurring sin and ongoing suffering, and in so doing they allow their walk with Jesus to be hijacked.

Throughout the journey of this life, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ not only wants to save his people; he wants us to **know** that we are saved. May you come to know this, and so much more, as you study Romans 8.