

ROMANS 8 – THREE VIEWS FROM GOD’S EVEREST

ROMANS 8:1-16: A VIEW OF MAN

Before I start, let me just introduce myself to you all briefly. As you know, my name’s Philip, I’m married to Claire, who’s sitting over there, and we have three children. Our children are Rhiane, 22, living in Leeds and working for Christians Against Poverty. Ellie, 21, at home but studying at Hadlow College. Our son, Kenrick, has just set off for China for 6 months on his gap year, having lived 19 years with us, it’s tremendous shock to us all but he seems to be having a great time! I’m really proud of them all.

I’ve been an economist since I left university in 1980, and worked at the Bank of England for 20 years; I’m currently with Brunel University teaching economics and finance. But God has been drawing me into his service since I became a Christian in 1997. I have been preaching at Pembury since 2001, and then in 2007 I passed my degree in Theology at the London School of Theology. Since then I have been ordained as Associate Pastor at Pembury, focusing especially on Pastoral Care, Men’s Ministry, Prayer and Courses. But I know God wants me to move on further to full time ministry, and I expect I will be “settled” in the next year or so in a church somewhere. It’s been a scary but exciting journey. So I hope in the next 6 months that I’m with you, once a month, I can help you all to hear clearly from God word, and that will help you grow as a church.

Many books of the Bible are challenging to us when we read them – both in message and need for concentration! Some have been compared to the Alps, rugged and needing good equipment and training. But Romans is often viewed as something else again. Paul’s masterpiece, it’s often been likened to the Himalayas! In its depth, its majesty, its complexity, it stands head and shoulders even above Paul’s other works, powerful and profound as they are. I originally planned to preach to you right through from Romans 1-8, but after prayerful consideration decided to focus on Romans 8 for two or three sermons only. So why Romans 8? I think it’s fair to say that if Romans is the Himalayas, then 8 is the peak of Everest! The arguments of Chapters 1-7 come to their summary and climax there. It’s bracing, it’s exciting, it’s overwhelming, it’s wild! Here, we are in God’s very presence, we can get an overview of all of nature – and we get a glimpse of heaven itself. Those will be my other topics. But today I’m going to start with verses 1-16, what I call “a view of man”.

How close do you feel mankind in general is to God? And how close do you feel? In Romans’ earlier chapters, Paul powerfully highlights man’s chronic tendency to sin and how it keeps us from God. The wider world is clearly far from him, you need only look at the news to see that. Here’s a few headlines from the BBC website – “Fatal stabbings at Belgian crèche”, “Gerrard denies nightclub assault”, “Jail for £4.2 mn cocaine smuggler”...and...”UN shocked at Gaza destruction”.

Romans tells us why. There is darkness in men’s hearts like the dark valleys at the foot of the Himalayas, where many reside and remain trapped. Mankind in general has denied God and worships other things – despite all the evidence of his creation, his power and his love that surround us. As it tells us in 1:21-23 “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Fully aware of God, men worship idols instead. What are the modern equivalents of the idols Paul is talking about? Plenty; ourselves, our pride, our work, our houses and cars, football, television, celebrities, food, shopping and so on. These things are at the centre of

many people's lives instead of God.

God's response is one of sadness. He does not wish to condemn mankind whom he loves as the crown of his creation. But what can he do if they refuse to put him in his rightful place in their hearts? How can he who is holy live with such sin? As it is written in 1:28, "since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" – that's to depravity and sexual indulgence, to evil and crime, to pride. God just lets them have their will and be separated from him, unsatisfied on this earth and then alas eternally separated from God in hell after his judgement. Are we immune to all this worldliness? There is a risk for us, if we become Sunday Christians, if we divorce our lives in the week from our brief time of holiness on Sunday. If we live like the world, cheating expenses, speeding, putting our work, our pleasure our wealth, first, before God. It's a trap we need to watch out for.

Some become aware of God and what he requires, and try to climb out of those dark valleys by their own efforts, and get close to him that way. This is the way of religious people, who in Paul's time were the Jews seeking to follow God's law, in our time, for example, self-righteous Christians, pointing the finger at others. And yet they too fail to approach God's majesty as Paul tells us in 2:21 "You then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" Like the Pharisees who Jesus condemned, the trap they fall into is one of self-righteousness, they condemn others but commit crimes against God's law themselves. They fail to realize that simply acting in the right way is not enough, the problem is the mind and the heart, especially, the absence of love. The self righteous climb up a foothill of Everest only to slip down again.

Even the convinced Christian, fully aware that the attitude and not just the act are important, can find it hard on the slopes of the mountain, if they become self-reliant. This is what Paul calls relying on the flesh. Paul himself confesses in 7:22-23: "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members." We may be well on the way up the mountain, but there remain pitfalls and crevasses, if we trust in our works and not faith. Again, we can try to do good but our human natures, our bodies, rebel against us and lead us into evil desires. Satan is always setting traps for the unwary. I read recently that many Christian men are addicts of internet pornography. They find it so hard to let go, once they first try it out. Sin crouches at the door, as it did for Cain, and if we let it in it devours us.

The situation seems hopeless, as anyone who takes sin seriously will realize – humanity is all condemned to death, inexorably because God cannot abide sin. And yet we were created by God, we were designed to be with him, to have fellowship with him and to worship him. Mankind is born with a "God shaped hole". But how is it ever possible to be in God's presence, in his holiness and hatred of sin, at the top of the mountain? The answer, I believe is threefold, and it is summarized amazingly in the passage at the start of Chapter 8 that we are going to read: Jesus gets us there, the Holy Spirit keeps us there, and God wants us to be there. Jesus gets us there, the Holy Spirit keeps us there, and God wants us to be there. We get assurance of victory over sin and a settled relationship with God. Let's now read it together:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending

his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Christ gets us there! Recall the first ascent of Everest in 1953. Sir Edmund Hillary got the glory, but we also know he couldn't have got there without Sherpa Tensing, who carried the heavier load for him. Just in the same way, Jesus takes away our burden of sin that keep us from God, and we become pure and blameless before him. We can thrive on top of the mountain, in God's very presence. This is what Paul means when he says "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." We need no longer strive by our own efforts to please God, an impossible task. No, thanks to Christ we go straight up the mountain to God, we "fly on wings like eagles" as Isaiah puts it, thanks to Jesus' help

And how does it happen? Christ's sacrifice on the cross, that we shall celebrate in communion, sets us free from the sin that keep us from God. As Paul puts it: "God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us". Jesus was perfect, the only man who never had to struggle in the dark valleys of sin, the cliffs of self righteousness, the treacherous slopes of self reliance. Identified with us and yet perfect. And he was also God's own son, who could be part of the forgiveness of all mankind. So when he died, our sins were taken away and we finally do what God's law requires, if we put our trust in him. He killed the power of evil that drags us away from God, that pulls us down the mountain. Our relationship with God, lost in Eden, can at last be restored. Can't you feel Paul's excitement? Don't you share it? This is our Gospel! Let's share it with our neighbours, with everyone we meet.

The Holy Spirit keeps us there! The top of Everest is, for humans alone, an unfriendly place. You need goggles to not be blinded by the light. Thick clothes are essential to keep warm. And there can be a need for extra oxygen since the air up there is so thin. We can't get there, let alone remain there, in and of ourselves. But when we accept Jesus' sacrifice, God gives us divine equipment – the Holy Spirit living within us, that makes being in his presence a

comfort and a delight!

This is how Paul puts it. “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace”. When we worship ourselves, when God is not at the centre of our lives, when we rely on our flawed nature to do good then it’s obvious we can’t enter God’s presence. We are not equipped! It’s as if we’re naked in a snowstorm. But when the Spirit lives in us, and we obey his guidance then we can live, truly live, with God. The law is written on our hearts, thanks to him. We may sin occasionally, but we are no longer condemned sinners. And our sin becomes less and less. Our lives become more and more like Christ’s, as we follow the Holy Spirit’s prompting, what is called sanctification.

Paul makes it explicit that when the Spirit is in us this is a promise of life, the very life that Christ received in his resurrection “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” Being with God by the Holy Spirit is not just a one-off, a memory to be treasured of an exalted moment, but a constant joy in his presence, and the promise of eternal life in new and wonderful bodies.

God wants us there! Even if we were brought safely to the top of Everest, and well equipped to be there, we still might slip, and we might even be lonely or afraid. But God the father is there, and he has adopted us as his children. because we have put our faith in his beloved son, and his Spirit lives in us, “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God”. Because we have God’s Spirit dwelling in us, we recognise that God is our father; we are no longer alone and orphaned in the world. lost in the dark valley. We realise that have a loving heavenly father who cares for us at all times. “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.” I can relate to this as I’m just aching for my own son Kenrick , who’s in China, to be here with me and discuss, what he’s been doing make his jokes, get excited about things. It will be a long six months! And God feels like that about us all the time! He loves it when we come to him in prayer and call on him, “and by him we cry, “Abba,Father.” Daddy that means!

Helped, sustained, wanted, by Son, Spirit and Father, we can bask in God’s presence, lost in wonder, love and grace. Some of you though may be thinking , this Everest is all very well but what about my day to day life? How can I keep my house going if I just sit on top of a mountain? And what is God doing about the trouble in my life? I can understand that. Sometimes we do have special times in prayer, maybe in nature when we commune with God and feel his very presence, in needle sharp clarity, a mountain top experience. But God knows we also have daily life and we need him there with us too.

Jesus help is with us for all time. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”. He takes all our burdens, always, throughout our daily lives, even in the supermarket. For he is faithful. The Spirit’s sustaining power inhabits us constantly – as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians “you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you”. We remain sanctified and holy, when the Spirit lives in us, even when all around is dark, like at times of family crises. And God’s fatherly love never ceases –as Romans 8 says “the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Our daddy is always there, in our sickness and tiredness as well as the special, exalted times.

And there’s more. We have a glorious inheritance as children of God, which will be to rule with Jesus over the new heaven and the new earth, which we’ll talk about more next time. But

time is up. Let's sum up. Mankind is hopelessly sinful and unable to approach a holy God. Some just ignore God's existence and the coming judgement, and end up in debauchery and pride. Others may try to do good, but in their own strength. They become self righteous, or at least they fail to match up to God's standards. But there's a divine plan for redemption – Jesus brings us into his presence, the Holy Spirit keeps us there, and God wants us there. That's not just in special moments of closeness but all of our lives, if we live by the Spirit and not the flesh. God's presence is within reach. NT Wright says – this passage in Romans carries the power of the Gospel in its every breath. If the church could hoist this sail and catch this wind, there is no knowing what would happen. And that applies in Yalding too! Thanks be to God!
Amen