Questions Jesus Asked  
“Woman, Where Are They?”

August 10/11, 2013
Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)
Questions Jesus Asked: “Woman, Where Are They?”
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Background Notes
Key Scripture Text(s): John 7:53-8:1-11; Revelation 12:10; Romans 8:33-34

The Text (John 8:1-11)
7:53 Then each of them went home, 8:1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11 “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

It’s amazing what people feel free to do and say in church. This week’s main reading tells how some religious leaders debated about a certain “sinner.” Does it really matter that the sinner was a woman or that her sin was adultery? In the minds of her accusers, the woman was a problem that needed to be solved. The main concern was not that she had a problem that needed to be solved so that her life could be put back together again. Not at all. The leadership saw her as the problem for them, a kind of embarrassment besmirching the reputation of pious decent people and that needed “handling.”

Such is the nature of accusation. Courts of law refer to “the accused” as those at risk of conviction. “Don’t accuse me of saying that!” might come from the lips of a public figure facing criticism. The Bible is no stranger to the language of accusation, starting with the first case of “passing the buck in the Garden of Eden” (Genesis 3) where the human male accuses the human female, given him by God, of tempting him with the fruit from the tree. “The woman you gave me …” Sometimes accusation simply hands off responsibility and offers refusal. Whole systems of justice and machinery of commerce put blame-laying and accusation at the center of their ways of judging others and doing business. “It’s your fault!” falls easily from the lips.

In today’s reading (above), an unnamed woman fights for her life with her case hanging by a slender thread, supported only by Jesus. Her story is about accusation gone wild in a society that graded its citizens on the basis of shame and honor. The woman flunked, by some accounts, and only Jesus will take her case. All of which leads us to imagine what slender threads separated people in our lives from the damaging force of accusations, both true and false. In our treatment of others, is accusation our first “go to”? Is it easier to lay blame than to consider the wider implications of doing so? The church is no stranger to this malady, and is often its greatest protector, even if unwittingly. Let’s see what all of this says to us.

The Text in Context
Is the Story Genuine?
If you carefully read the notes accompanying the text in your Bible, you will probably discover that John 7:53-8:11 fails the test of antiquity for inclusion between 7:52 and 8:12. Most of the important Greek manuscript witnesses for the New Testament simply do not have the story at all, while others place the material in a different place. The following are its different locations:

1. Where it is.
3. After John 7:36

Each of these placements are *late* in the manuscript tradition. In the words of Bruce Metzger, textual critic, “The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope [paragraph] of the adulterous is overwhelming”\(^1\) and he supports this judgment with a diversity of manuscripts that support the rest of the New Testament. Further, “the style and vocabulary of the pericope [i.e. paragraph] differ noticeably from the rest of the Fourth Gospel.”\(^2\) Fitting the story into the flow of the material ending at 7:52 and beginning at 8:12 is problematic.

Although the story is likely not from *John*, yet scholars respect it as part of the oral tradition arising from Jesus’ ministry, and suppose that it may have circulated in the Western churches before being added to later manuscripts of the New Testament. Even when it is included in a later manuscripts, the scribes enclosed the story in asterisks, showing their awareness that it was not original. If the story doesn’t belong *here* (between 7:52 and 8:12) and is otherwise not from *John*, there is a possibility based on style and vocabulary, that the material belongs after Luke 21:38 where it complements the surrounding text.

Even if the textual witnesses fail to support an early inclusion in John’s Gospel, we still have the testimony of persons like the historian Eusebius (4th century) who says, “Papias [an early church father, early 2nd century CE] relates another story of a woman who was accused of many sins before the Lord, which is contained in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*…”\(^3\) A fragment of this work may well have circulated as the *Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery*, and later been copied into the location(s) suggested above. Syrian sources from the 2nd century also attest the story’s existence.

The acceptance of the story of Jesus and the woman accused adultery as canonical would need to be based on the idea of ancient historical rootage in the sources for the Gospels and on the usage by the churches as authoritative. Even if the narrative doesn’t belong where it is, we might still embrace the text as a *witness* to the ministry of Jesus, having eyewitness testimony behind it. We might yet ask, “Why would such a really good story be excluded from the sacred canon?” One argument says that the story *seems to condone* the woman’s conduct through the easy forgiveness by Jesus. Others question the historical likelihood that Jews would ever be allowed by the Romans to stone anybody, given the restrictions on capital execution. But these attempts falter on subjective grounds, namely, that the text must be interpreted, and in so doing, Jesus hardly gives the woman a pass! (“Go and sin no more!”).

That said, we acknowledge the independent canonical status of the story, and respect the decision of the Christians scribes to include it (with caveats) with the rest of the Johannine text.

**Attempts to Integrate with the Context**

If we allow the text to remain after 7:52 and before 8:12, then the immediate background for it would be 7:1-52. This is a lengthy and lively debate section where Jesus engages the religious leaders in disputatious discussion about his identity (is he the Messiah) and his work (healing on the Sabbath). The controversy widens to include the general audience (the crowd) who are “divided” over Jesus (7:12, 40-44). All efforts to forcibly silence him fail. Not even the Temple guards are able to proceed with plans to arrest him because they are enamored with his message (7:45-46).

Near the end of John 7, just before this week’s text, we have 7:49 where the religious leaders insult the people: “But this mob that knows nothing of the law — there is a curse on them” (John 7:49); "Are you from Galilee,

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2 Ibid, 220.
3 Hist. III 39:17. The book called here, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, was a source from the 2nd century that once had 2200 lines, but in its entirety is now lost. Church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Cyril of Jerusalem quoted from it, as did Jerome.
too?” (7:52). The particular wing of the Pharisee party in view here looks with disdain on “the mob” as people who are the problem, and in turn, look at Jesus as the problem. Among these rabbis there was an idea of “the people of the land” (‘am hā’āres) in contrast to “students of the wise.” A glimpse of this thinking appears in Jeremiah’s words, “I thought, ‘These are only the poor; they are foolish, for they do not know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God’” (Jeremiah 5:4). Of course, what Jeremiah discovered was that the urban elite in Jerusalem were no better off (5:5)!

Well, if the mob is a problem, then Jesus is also a problem, because the mob listens to him. It’s guilt by association. Only one dissenter, Nicodemus (of chapter 3 fame!) appeals for moderation, probably as a moderate Pharisee. He’s no doubt thinking about texts like these:

16 And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien (Deuteronomy 1:16).

Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness (Exodus 23:1).

And so the words of Nicodemus in 7:50-51:

Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? (John 7:51).

In response, the radical wing of the party argues that Nicodemus is a Galilean (an insult!) and that the people are under a curse. This last term has reference to these texts:

Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out (Deuteronomy 27:26).

You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out (Deuteronomy 28:19).

You rebuke the arrogant, who are cursed and who stray from your commands (Psalm 119:21).

After such an intense exchange, what’s left for the participants to do? What’s left to do when all opportunity for discussion is shut down, and those who hold the power make decisions affecting all, judging all, and speaking for all? “Then each went to his own home.” Just go home! Leave the table. Push back, disengage, and start engaging in huge acts of denial where all rejected options lead to repression of rage — the catalyst for denial and violence. Whatever scribe crafted the words of 7:53 to attach the subsequent text after 7:52 did so cleverly. Jesus himself retires to the Mount of Olives which seems to have become his sanctuary during the last days of his earthly life (Luke 21:37; 22:39), likely a place of prayer.

What follows happens the next day, “at dawn” and “in the temple courts” for “people gathered around him” (8:2). Once more he takes up a teaching stance, “he sat down to teach them.” The scribe attempts to stitch the story back into the flow of chapter 7 with its unfinished business about Jesus and the Pharisees.

The Story: Accusation and Forgiveness

Unable to beat Jesus by verbal argument, the Pharisees in question decided to employ a living argument in the form of a woman. The text says she was “caught in adultery.” The Greek word for “caught” is katalambanō which means “to seize upon, lay hold of, overpower, catch, overtake, come up with, find, arrest, bind, force.” This range of meanings allows for a simple “taking” for the purpose of showing off as an example to a more official arrest on charges of violating Torah.

A more formal meaning is probable, since the woman “is made to stand” (Greek: histēmi, “to cause to stand, to stand”) in the midst. Elsewhere, in Acts 4:7, standing is the standard position for judicial examination. This posture is also coupled with a formal claim that “the woman was caught in the act of adultery” (8:4). The Greek word, autophōros, literally means “self-detected” or “appeared of herself.” There was no need of collaborative testimony, since the adulterous conduct was self-evident: the woman and her lover were obviously seen.

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Stoning for various reasons has sanction in the Torah:

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife— with the wife of his neighbor— both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).

… then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 22:21).

I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. 39 I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. 40 They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords (Ezekiel 16:38).

If we assume that the scribe who inserted 7:53-8:11 into its present location adapted the text to fit the context, then what follows in 7:6 looks very much like the earlier material of 6:6 where the leadership also tried to “trap” Jesus through his words. Their goal was to trap and to accuse. So the first use of the word accuse is in conjunction with the strategy of the Pharisees against Jesus. He was the immediate object of their purported accusation just as was the case with the woman, also the object of their accusation. Attempts to trip up Jesus so that the leadership might have reason to accuse him were commonplace in the Gospel accounts, as is the case here:

The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him (Luke 6:7).

Responding to their declaration of the woman’s guilt, and presumably knowing the Pharisees’ ill-intentions toward himself, Jesus intentionally acts in ways that no doubt annoyed his accusers. He “stoops down” (the posture of a servant) and writes on the ground. The Greek word is katagraphō which means either “write” or “register.” Later, in 8:8, we have the simple word for “write.” The history of interpretation for this part of the text is rich with alternatives, all with the focus of telling what Jesus drew on the ground with his finger. Here are a few:

1. He wrote down the sins of the accusers.
2. He wrote down the sentence he would deliver in 8:7, a common practice of judges in the Roman court system. One parallel case is Daniel 5:24 where a mysterious hand wrote the death-sentence of the king of Babylon.5
3. Jesus acts out the message of Jeremiah 17:13, “Those who turn away from you shall be written on the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.”
4. He is doodling as a way both to irritate the accusers and to vent his own anger at the way they are treating the woman.

Honestly, there is not enough evidence to support completely one view over another, though the idea of Jesus writing the true sentence seen through his own eyes is an attractive proposition (thus, #2).

What Jesus does is to urge his accusers to see the seriousness of their own situation, imagining themselves in the place of the woman, evaluating their own sins. The Torah placed such responsibility on witnesses:

The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterward the hands of all the people (Deuteronomy 17:7).

When the woman’s accusers claim that she was caught in the act, there still remained the truthfulness of the witnesses to test. Jews in Jesus’ day would know the story of Susanna in the additions to the book of Daniel which comprises part of the Old Testament apocryphal material. In that story, false witnesses with powerful vested interests, try to cover up their own sins by accusing an innocent woman. They are eventually outed for their double-dealing. That story illustrates the Torah teaching:

Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty (Exodus 23:7).

What Jesus discerns in the case against the woman is exactly what he experienced from the Pharisees: a rush to judgment contaminated by impure motive. If the Pharisees in question will use another human being to cast aspersions on Jesus and his ministry, what confidence does the audience have that the Pharisees are dealing fairly with the woman? Did they gather evidence properly? Are they reporting it correctly? Or are they, in haste, grabbing a convenient target to make their case against Jesus? Are the Pharisees using another human being as a means and not seeing her as an end? If so, they are violating her integrity every bit as much as any act of illicit sex. They are raping her judicially, and that is enough for Jesus to call out her accusers so that he might call them to account.

As the accusers react to Jesus, the writer of the story takes pains to describe the manner of respondents’ departures.

1. Their departure is “one at a time.”
2. The older ones leave before the others.

Twice in this passage, the writer says that Jesus “straightened up” (Greek: anakuptō, “to lift up the head, with the head high, emerge (as from water”)). 1) Once to address the accusers in 8:7; 2) again to address the accused in 8:10. We might imagine Jesus the Judge, into whose hands God has committed all judgment:

The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him (John 5:22-23).

The act of standing has majesty about it, has solemnity about it. When Jesus stands up in the presence of the accusers, he speaks with the authority of God Himself. Jesus delivers the ruling of God on His throne, issuing righteous sentences, taking up the cause of those who do not have a voice to speak for themselves. He stands up to plead the cause of widows, orphans, and a woman charged with adultery (Isaiah 1:17). No one is allowed to lift a stone in judgment unless Jesus authorizes it. As Luther’s hymn puts it, Jesus is “the right man at our side, the man of God’s own choosing.” When Stephen, the first martyr, is stoned by an angry mob in Acts 7:58, we have his witness, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). Jesus took notice of the injustice against his servant and stands up to receive him. “Son of Man” language applied to Jesus comes from Daniel 7:4, 13 where a mysterious being comes before God and receives the kingdom. By standing up, Jesus assumes the posture of the Son of Man, delivering the righteous sentence of God.

Jesus also assumes this posture when addressing the woman and putting this week’s all-important question to her. In point of fact, the woman herself was already standing in the place of accusation, but all of her accusers had left. What a powerful scene the writer paints for us! All who remain are Jesus and the woman, both standing — both left standing! Everybody else retired from the ring, having given up the fight. Jesus won! The woman, by virtue of Jesus’ faithful witness, stood this time no longer accused.

“Where are your accusers?”
is the main question of our study

When Jesus stands with us, in solidarity with our humanity, we never stand alone. When Jesus stands with us, in the midst of our guilt, we never stand accused: only forgiven. When Jesus stands with us, our accusers leave, for they cannot successfully bring a legal claim against us. And so Jesus hears the woman’s reply: “No one, sir.” They are simple words, filled with gratitude from a person heretofore outflanked, outgunned, and outcast. “No one, sir.” The Greek uses the word Kurios, translated as “Lord.” My guess is the force of the underlying idea in the woman’s mind is more than respect or courtesy. She owes her life to Jesus, and he has handily set her free from a deadly sentence. No, not just “sir” but “Lord” with all the authority and effectiveness that
comes with the name. Jesus was the Lord of her situation, setting at naught the accusation of those bent on her death. She acknowledged that he was Lord.

What, then, does Jesus say to assure her future situation? After all, Jesus doesn’t just rescue the woman in the moment and leave her there. He offers her much more. He also stands as her advocate, the one who takes up her cause and secures a successful and happy verdict as her Judge. “Neither do I condemn you.” The Greek word translated as “condemn” is katakrinō, with the primary meaning, “to give as sentence against; pass sentence; condemn.” Merely escaping an earthly verdict, an earthly sentence, was insufficient for the woman. All that did was to get her off the hook, and Jesus intended far more for her than that.

Beyond the favorable judgment in her favor, Jesus has bigger plans for her. We would say because of Jesus the woman experienced justification — she was put to rights in the eyes of the Judge and before the Court of heaven. Jesus had the authority to grant that to her. But the woman is not released from her sentence because she was sinless. Jesus makes quite clear that behind her was “a life of sin” and that situation was far more dangerous for her than the threat of stoning by the radical Pharisees. After all, there remained the enemy within, who was quite aware of her weaknesses and would continue to exploit them. It’s as if Jesus said to her, “My dear woman, this is today. What about tomorrow?” What about the power of sin to hold her captive and bring her back to this awful place again? From that Jesus invites her to depart, to leave behind “her life of sin.” The operative words are these: “Go now” (Greek: poreuou, “proceed”) — that is, move forward and beyond. For the woman, there is a better way a more complete way of living. It is not the way of lustful desire, but the way of perfect love from the heart, celebrated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: “The more excellent way.” Go, Jesus tells her, and take hold of that way and leave the old way behind.

Mercy and justice are the twin themes of our story this week. From Psalm 85:10 we have the ancient Hebrew poem that tells us how mercy, truth, justice, and peace have all met and kissed. We venture freely the claim that in Jesus of Nazareth mercy and justice have met and kissed, and no one knew that more fully than the woman taken in adultery in John 8!

There is profound wonder in this when we consider Jesus’ words in John 8:46, a few verses later, where he asks his accusers, “Can any of you convict me of sin?” So here is Jesus, without sin, and the woman forgiven of her sins, standing face to face, on level ground, an exquisite foreshadowing of the Gospel and the Cross. From what we can tell, the woman’s trial had not yet been held; she was brought before Jesus so the Pharisees could see how he ruled and then accuse him of some judicial malfeasance. Jesus allows himself the naïve place of accepting the challenge with outcomes that wouldn’t go well either way. Consider:

1. What if Jesus simply favored the woman and set her free? Result: he would violate Torah requirements for adultery and the Pharisees would charge him accordingly.
2. What if Jesus approved her stoning? Result: Rome would be very unhappy about Jesus violating their law.

[The situation parallels Mark 12:13-17 when Jesus faced the dilemma, “Pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Each ruling would get him into difficulty. Jesus refuses to answer the question intended to trick him, and so urges his antagonists to “render” to Caesar and God their respective dues. He doesn’t say what those dues are, but simply asks for a coin that they were carrying with an image on it and then asks whose image it was (Caesar, of course). “You decide,” he tells them. “You carry Caesar’s coin for payment, so you decide how to pay Caesar back.”]

Jesus knows that the woman’s judges were not entirely free of mixed motives. They had mixed motives about Jesus, so why wouldn’t they have mixed motives about the woman? What Jesus isn’t saying, and which no Jew would ever concede, is that judges cannot fairly judge unless there are free of sin. If that were so, no nation could support a fair judiciary — not even today in America or Israel! Rather, Jesus knows that the Pharisees in question belonged to the right-wing of their party — the radical zealots — who claimed to uphold the highest standards of Torah law in order to keep Israel entirely observant. Such persons, however, needed to be sure
they acted honestly from right motives. Had they not, in their zeal, failed to keep before their eyes the purpose of Torah? Should they not have cared about the woman herself and about restoring her? Instead, Jesus knew they acted dishonorably toward her and, thereby, toward Torah itself. They cared about their cause: to get rid of Jesus by discrediting him. Jesus cared about the woman, how she might be rightly restored to the life of the community, forgiven and forward-looking. They would rather hold her up in shame, as a specimen of sin and a pawn in their game against Jesus. Jesus committed himself to restore her honor by unmasking the corrupt motives, so that, one by one, her accusers left. In the end it was the Pharisees, not the woman, who left in shame.

Beasley-Murray comments: “The story is a superb illustration of the dictum of 3:17…”6 which says:

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17).

“Neither do I condemn you…” The word of forgiveness releases the woman to new life. Only after her accusers depart, does Jesus address the woman.

Much about this story uncovers the injustice present in the conduct of the woman’s case. And Jesus is about fixing the problem of injustice! Many ask, “Where was the man in the story?” Where was the woman’s partner in crime? Strangely, if the woman had been single, the man would not have been considered at fault. Men regularly kept women under a variety of circumstances having nothing to do with marriage. Concubines existed in ancient Israel. For a man to have a woman was, just or not, not a crime as long as she didn’t belong to another man. However, women like this one — with “a life of sin” — were entirely susceptible to arrest and conviction. Cultural norms have odd exceptions, and this is one of them. Patriarchal society operated with different rules that favored men over women. Once woman were married, the rules that came into play were about violations of the respective husbands when adultery happened. In those cases both man and woman were liable. In the case of this week’s story, we don’t know for sure if the woman was married or not. Frankly, Jesus didn’t care about her technical status: he cared about her spiritual status and how things would turn out for her. Like his heavenly Father, the status of such a woman was his concern, and he set about the business of making things right again — the true work of a Righteous Judge.

No More Accuser! (Revelation 12:10)

One of the names for humanity’s arch enemy is the accuser, a term taken from a text in the book of Revelation:

And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night (Revelation 12:10).

The word “accuser” is from the Greek katēgōr, based on the root verb “to accuse” (katēgoreō, “to speak against, bring a charge, allege in an accusation, appear as prosecutor”). Within the context of Revelation 12, the one called the “accuser” is also called the “devil” (12:12), “the dragon” (12:13), “the serpent” (12:15), and “Satan” (12:9 — which uses all of these terms). Since Revelation is a book filled with imagery in the form of number and symbol, we should expect to find earlier Jewish material incorporated alongside the newer meanings. Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) texts, such as Job 1 and 2, depict “Satan” as God’s intelligence agent-turned-prosecutor. He belongs to the heavenly council consisting of angelic beings who act as God’s agents in heaven and on earth. Via this reading, Satan is simply doing his job, filing reports on certain human beings. In the case of Job, Satan has suspicions (like any good CIA agent) about him. He alleges that Job is such a good guy because God has showered him with blessings. Take away the blessings and the real Job will appear. Satan thinks the worst about Job, whereas God determines to show otherwise, given the opportunity afforded by Job’s coming trial (suffering). In other words, the Old Testament paints a picture of Satan as the accuser — the fault-finder and cynic. He not only finds fault with Job, he finds fault with God and the way He runs his world.

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What Jesus regularly did in his public ministry was to put the lie to Satan’s accusations. By casting out demons, Jesus put the lie to mental illness. By healing people, Jesus put the lie to the connection between sickness and sin. By forgiving people, like the woman in John 8, Jesus put the lie to the false motives of his critics and her accusers.

What Revelation wants the church to understand is that the birth of a special Son (12:5) and a war in heaven (12:7-8) have resulted in the expulsion of Satan from heaven and from the monotonous accusation of God’s people. Heaven is now free of Satan’s presence on the council. In Revelation 12, the writer draws a clear connection in powerful poetic terms between the birth, the war, and the defeat of Satan. He draws a sharp line between those things and the overcoming of Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the Word of his testimony. Of course, the little drama told here is another way of telling about the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, using language taken from ancient epic tales about defeating evil monsters. So, whatever else might be read into the text at this point, the main idea is that the Gospel of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate defeat of Satan. He doesn’t get to accuse God’s people anymore!

All of this gets rolled up into other texts which connect Jesus to the ministry of advocacy and the silencing of the Great Accuser:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

Through the Spirit, this advocacy extends to all believers everywhere:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you (John 14:16-17 NRSV).

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:26 NRSV).

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf (John 15:26 NRSV).

The translators of the NRSV have carefully chosen the word “Advocate” to render the Greek word, paraklētos, which can also mean “Counselor,” an equally appropriate legal term. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus exercises a new advocacy, counter to the older prosecutorial role of Satan in the book of Job. At the right hand of God, Jesus sends the Spirit from the Father to uphold our case and maintain our cause against the clamorous charges of Satan and his earthly agents. Elsewhere the Spirit advocates for the believer and convicts the world on crucial matters: sin, righteousness, and judgment (see John 16:7-11).

John 8 goes on to uncover the dark designs of the religious rulers who oppose him, and Jesus boldly calls them “children of your father the devil” who are bent on murderous plans against him. No wonder the Pharisees in this week’s story behave badly: they have really bad DNA! But neither the woman nor ourselves are left alone in the struggle with the accuser.

Paul further unpacked this idea when he wrote Romans 8, with special emphasis on clusters of verses in that chapter. We now turn that significant text.

No Condemnation! Freedom Instead: A Few Notes on Romans 8

Charles Wesley began one stanza of his famous hymn “And Can It Be?” with the words “No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him, is mine.” He no doubt had been re-reading Romans 8:1! The word for condemnation is katakrima, and it has to do with God’s final judgment on Sin (see 5:16, 18; 2:1-16). Since Christians are “in Christ Jesus,” they are included in the outcome of his death on the cross where he suffered and died. His death meant that condemnation for Sin had fallen on him, the one who took humankind’s place when he died. Since Jesus put an end to the penalty and power of Sin, we will no longer capitalize that
(words) in these Notes. Sin has become sin: defeated once and for all. Any further role sin has in the Christian’s life is due to conscious choice and not to intractable slavery.

Liberation and immeasurable freedom are the consequences of God’s new verdict in Jesus: “Not guilty!” The doors of the prison swing open and the sentence of death is set aside. Those who are “in Christ” walk into the sunlight of God’s forgiveness and His cleansing from sin — like the woman in John 8. Like their Jewish forbears who marched out of Egypt free persons, so those who obtained the mercy of the cross where the lamb of God died in their place have been set free “from the law of sin and death” (tou nomou tēs hamartias kai tou thanatou). The verb for “set free” is in the aorist tense, implying the decisive nature of this freedom. Just as Pharaoh no longer had jurisdiction over the freed Israelites — his “law” no longer applied outside the borders of Egypt — so also those who enter into the new relationship with God through Jesus Christ belong to a new jurisdiction where a new law holds power over those who are “in Christ.” Paul calls this “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (ho nomos tou pneumatos tēs zōēs en Christō Iēsou). We might accurately refer to the Spirit as “the new law.” Its hallmark is “life” as opposed to “death,” due to the achievement of Jesus on the cross. By defeating sin, Jesus defeated death, sin’s ultimate weapon against human beings.

Something has happened to “Law” (Torah) when it reached its fulfillment in Christ (the Messiah): Torah has been reconnected to God as His living Word spoken through the Spirit. Torah had gotten disconnected from God during the Second Temple period, and had become an end-in-itself, a kind of God-substitute. For devout Pharisees, Torah study and Torah observance could legitimately replace Temple. Yet, as an agent to defeat sin and create righteousness in Jewish lives, Torah-in-itself failed to measure up to the high standard as God’s Word. In Romans 3:2 Paul wrote that Jewish advantage rested with ta logia tou theou: “the words of God” that had been entrusted to Israel. Properly understood, Torah was the persistent witness to the “living word of God” spoken by Him to His people in the midst of their concrete history. However, reduced to an object for study alone, and treated with the same sacredness as God’s own presence, the written word became hard cold letters written in stone (see 2 Corinthians 3:3, 7). Such letters, cut off from the life of the Spirit, actually kill rather than give life (2 Corinthians 3:6) — like the Pharisees wanting to stone the woman in John 8. Torah became an end-in-itself, or, as we have been stating it, “Law-in-itself.” But Law-in-itself had lost its connection to the living God, and so ceased to be the living Word for Israel. Jesus through the Spirit changed all of that by restoring the life to the letter, and allowing Scripture — Old Testament Scripture — to function as the “living words of God” once more, pointing to Jesus the Messiah (again, see Romans 1:2, where Scriptures are the place where the promise of the gospel first appears). Jesus speaks words of life in a culture of death, and so he spoke to the woman in John 8, sending her accusers away.

In what follows we will take a huge leap in Romans 8 and drop down to the last section of Romans 8, verses 31-39, where Paul raises a series of his own questions that remarkably parallel the ideas already developed in this week’s study, growing out of the story of the woman in John 8. Our last text, 8:33, falls within this marvelous treatment by Paul, and we include a brief discussion of the surrounding material in what follows.

The confident cry of Romans 8:1 is simply, “No condemnation,” and the hopeful message of forgiveness and freedom, so that, in the words of the hymn-writer, “He breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prisoner free.” The means for doing this rests with the actions of the loving God who loved sinners — outrageous as that seems — and then pours His love into their hearts extravagantly through the Holy Spirit. Who are we, in light of this radical claim? We are the beloved children of God, given equal standing with one another, and set on the course toward bearing the image of God’s beloved Son. We are the co-heirs with the firstborn Son, who are glorified together for the long-term restoration of all creation.

How strong is this love that binds God to His creatures, even in their sin? Does not the history of Israel leave reason to doubt, especially in light of the exile and Israel’s continuing quest to become one more the fully blessed people of God? What gives Paul reason to think that the new people of God will reach their intended
goal within a renewed creation? Does not Paul give a thousand hostages to fortune in his insistence that all of
this will, indeed, one day come true?

In the closing section of this week’s study, Paul pursues the question of God’s faithfulness through the lens of
His unremitting love. Perhaps the apostle had been reflecting on Isaiah 49:15:

> Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

The word translated as “show compassion” is the Hebrew verb raham which shares its root with the noun for
“womb,” the place where a mother’s child lives until birth. When the word “forget” appears in contexts like
this one, the association is with the covenant. To “remember” or to “forget” in the covenantal sense means to
keep or fail to keep the solemn oath-bound relationship between the great king and his vassals. God applies
covenant to His maternal relationship with Israel, and declares that He will keep covenant always.

As we noted in our introductory outline, four key questions give form to this section. Paul introduces the whole
cluster with an overarching question: What, therefore, shall we say to these things? If any of his audience
remains uncommitted to “the good news bringing righteousness,” the apostle now calls them to make their
decision in light of the overwhelming evidence of Romans 1:1-8:30. He implies, “We must say something; we
cannot say nothing.” The whole world was silenced by the universal verdict of sin:

> Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be
silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God (3:19).

But the world can no longer remain silent in the face of God’s gracious gift of Jesus the Messiah.

1. (8:31-32). “If God is for us, who is against us?”

This question precedes the good news that “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else” (8:32). Nothing withheld. Nothing kept back. The question
parallels, in meaning, Jesus’ words to the woman: “Where are your accusers?” Where in the Old Testament
does that theme find its best expression? Surely in the story of Genesis 22 where Abraham held back nothing
from God, but gave his only promised son to God without condition. In what Jewish scholars call “the binding
(Hebrew: akedah) of Isaac,” Paul sees a typological statement of God’s willingness to offer up His Son. Earlier,
in Romans 4, the apostle tells much of Abraham’s story but omits this detail. He keeps the best for last! If
Abraham’s faith serves as a model for ours, then Abraham’s offering up of Isaac, anticipates the cross as the
supreme act of grace from God to us; “from faith, to faith.”

The idea that God is “for us” reverberates through Paul’s letters, most especially in telling how the death of
Jesus was “for us” (see Romans 5:6-8; 14:15; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 21; Galatians 1:4;
2:20; 3:13; Ephesians 5:2, 25; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14).

That persons stood against the early Christians — and against Paul — is beyond dispute, much as the Pharisees
stood against the woman taken in adultery. The amount of persecution is documented in the biblical record and
in the church history which followed. But Paul’s point is that the charge brought against them did not succeed
in the courtroom of God. Surely the announcement that Jesus is Lord attracted all sorts of inquiry from Lord
Caesar, eventually, but even then, the opposition failed to make its case in the judgment of history. “The blood
of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (Tertullian, 2nd century church father).

2. (8:33). “Who shall bring a charge against us?”

Court is back in session, as Paul raises this second rhetorical question. Whereas the whole world outside of
Christ remained entirely condemned in Romans 2:1-11 and 3:19-20 with no adequate defense, the situation in
8:33 is different. God has rendered his verdict, and has pronounced the liberating words, “Not guilty! Justified!” There’s no point bringing charges into the courtroom of the Judge “whose righteousness has been
fully displayed.”7

7 Wright, Romans, 613.
3. (8:34). “Who shall condemn us?”
Condemnation only matters where a successful guilty verdict has been given by the Judge. No such verdict ever came, because “Christ died, rose, and sits at the right hand of the Judge!” From that privileged place, he turns to God on our behalf. The verb, translated “intercedes”, is entugchanō, used earlier of the Spirit (8:27). Used here in the present tense, the word emphasizes the continual work of Jesus as our great high priest as Hebrews 7:25 explains. Matters of accusation, in the style of Satan against Job (Job 1-2) or Satan against Joshua (Zechariah 3) or Satan against the saints (Revelation 12), have ended with Christ’s ascension. Christ sits to represent the whole people of God in the council of God as God’s faithful Son. His presence with the Father testifies to the acceptance of his sacrifice, even as the resurrection is proof of God’s acceptance of the cross.

4. (8:35-37). “Who shall separate us from God’s love?”
As we enter the environment of Romans 8:35, it’s as if a change in key has taken place in the performance of a massive symphony. From now on the emphasis falls on God’s love and whether anyone can drive a wedge between us and that love. Ancient Israel often faced the specter of losing the covenant blessings. But, as Isaiah 49:15 affirmed, God can never forget his beloved child, the fruit of His womb. So it is with the Christ follower. Much along the lines of Hosea’s prophetic vision where God’s separation from His faithless wife was followed by His wooing of her again and her betrothal to Him in righteousness (Hosea 2:19), so God’s persistence to his newly sealed covenant through Jesus the Messiah is evidence that nothing can separate us from His love.

What follows this query is one of Paul’s famous lists, in which he details possible “things” that might compromise the faith of Christians and create the basis for a break-up in the holy marriage. The list includes: “trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword.” These various forms of hostile and violent attack on the Christian’s commitment fall under the ancient Scripture from Psalm 44:22, “all day long we face death for your sake and are sheep to be slaughtered.” For Paul’s other lists see passages like 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 11:23-29; Colossians 1:24.

Calling the Christian community “conquerors,” Paul uses the verb form hupernikaō which means “to be completely victorious, more than conquerors.” The prefix huper corresponds to the English “hyper” and indicates that which is over and beyond. This assurance derives, not from any natural ability, but from “him who loved us.” Love as the great victor, wearing the victor’s crown, causes us to imagine the Lord Jesus, crowned with thorns, the supreme victor over sin and death. The sufferer’s crown is, in this case, the victor’s crown.

(8:38-39). Nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ.
Then, in a final movement of this great love symphony, the apostle begins, “I am convinced,” from the Greek word peithō, a favorite with Paul, occurring no less than twenty-two times. Unlike the person in Romans 2:19 who was confident only in themselves, Paul’s assurance rests with “the Lord Jesus,” as he affirms in Romans 14:14 (see also Philippians 2:24; 2 Timothy 2:12, and elsewhere). The confidence Paul shows in God’s love stands in stark contrast to any confidence “in the flesh” which is utterly unreliable (Philippians 3:3-4).

What follows is a series of paired opposites, with two exceptions, a literary strategy that emphasizes the universal list of possibilities, both positive and negative:
1. death, life
2. angels, demons
3. present, future
4. any powers
5. height, depth
6. anything else in all creation

-11-
Since creation introduced the comments in 8:19ff, Paul may well think back to the crisis in the natural world, occasioned by the situation of the suffering children of God. Not even creation’s crisis, he may be suggesting, can interfere with God’s overwhelming love for us.

This love has its foundation in “Messiah Jesus our Lord.” Notice the use of “our” to characterize the Christian’s relationship to Jesus. What gives the Christian identity rests with the personal connection to Jesus, “our Lord.”

**Conclusion**

God’s love is the Christian’s greatest promise in the face of accusations. Jesus’ love secured the woman against the threats of death raised by her accusers. Elsewhere, Paul wrote that “the love of Christ passes knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). The sort of assurance God’s love brings lies beyond the rigor of even Paul’s densely woven arguments in *Romans* and falls squarely on the person of God who loves us while we are still sinners (Romans 5:8).

N. T. Wright has framed out another way of looking at this when he writes — playing on Descartes famous dictum — “I am loved, therefore I am.” Renewing human beings requires the embrace of the God who loves us first, as the woman in John 8 discovered. She was loved, and therefore she lived to see another day!

Paul’s words in 8:38 are provocative: not even “death” can separate from God’s redeeming love! Not even the threat of death by stoning if you happen to be a Jewish woman hauled before your leaders, charged with adultery! Some genuinely dark questions lurk around the edges of death, especially with respect to those who die with an ambiguous faith or without knowledge of the gospel or exiled from even the most rudimentary forms of human love. What of them? Some of us have stood before grieving families whose loved one left no clear testimony, and, by all accounts, knew little of the good news. Thankfully, we are not called upon to judge — for we are to “judge nothing before the time” (1 Corinthians 4:15).

In light of God’s redeeming love, the accusers shrink back and sneak away in silence, dropping their stones as they leave. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Who indeed! Into the court of God’s restorative justice walks Jesus to take up our case against the enemies of our soul and against petty accusers who only view us as problems, rather than as people with problems. Imagine the stones of the woman’s accusers marked with individual names; with names like those in Paul’s list: “trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or sword.” Though they will afflict us, to be sure, they will not have the last word in the full stream of God’s justice. May the woman’s reply to Jesus haunt us still: “No one, sir,” she says. Who can separate us from God’s forgiving love? No one, indeed!

Glory to God! Amen.
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of this week’s study, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at http://www.c1naz.org, click on Resources, click the tab Series, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the Background Notes link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the Background Notes at the Information desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. This week’s main text is John 7:53-8:11. While many ancient manuscripts do not contain this passage, yet the church and its leaders still preserved it as part of the New Testament. Read the passage, and then suggest reasons why it has been such a much-loved story. In addition, read the material before and after the text to discover the context. What main themes does Jesus deal with in the wider context that are relevant to the story of the woman taken in adultery?

2. What is the setting for the story, and why do you think the religious leaders choose to act out their drama in that particular location? How important was it that many people were “gathered around Jesus” as he taught them?

3. Discuss the power of accusation as an instrument for social control. What is the real agenda of the religious leaders that makes their actions so disingenuous? Compare Luke 6:7.

4. What role do postures have in this story? Take note of what Jesus is doing as the story unfolds.

5. On what charge are the woman’s accusers holding her responsible? Is there anything peculiar about the way they brought her to Jesus? Explain. Does anything seem “wrong with this picture”? Compare Leviticus 20:10 as possible background material.

6. What protections did the Torah provide for persons charged with capital offenses? See Deuteronomy 17:7; Exodus 23:7. How might Jesus have viewed the methods used for dealing with the woman?

7. Twice Jesus performs a symbolic action. What was that action, and what do you think was its significance? For additional background refer to Daniel 5:24 and Jeremiah 17:13.

8. What big question does Jesus put to the woman, how did she respond, and what was Jesus’ final word on the matter? As we think about the larger questions of accusation and mercy, how does John 3:17 help us understand Jesus’ actions?

9. At the end of the New Testament we encounter Revelation 12:10 where the idea of accuser also appears. Read that passage in the wider context of chapter 12, and then explain the main characters in the story told there. Who is called “the accuser,” what else is he called, and what happens to him ultimately? How are the followers of Jesus to deal with this accuser?

10. Using the follow texts, explain Jesus’ role as our advocate, and then explain the nature of his advocacy on our behalf: 1 John 2:1-2; John 14:16-17; 14:26; 15:7-11, 26.

11. Our final text this week comes from Romans 8, primarily from 8:1, 31-39. How does this chapter begin, and how is its message parallel to the teaching we’ve received from John 8? Explain the word “condemnation” in relationship to the other word “accusation.” How does Jesus deliver us from both? Notice 8:1 as you think about your response.

12. A series of questions dominate Romans 8:31-39. Briefly list them, paying special attention to the question in 8:33-34.

13. Comparing Romans 8 with John 8, how is Jesus “for the woman” in much the same way as “God is for us” in 8:31? Refer to this additional texts that have the phrase “for us/me” in them: Romans 5:6-8; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 21; Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Ephesians 5:2, 25; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14.

14. Explain the central message of 8:33-34, and then draw lines back to the story of the woman taken in adultery in John 8.

15. What accusers does Paul name in Romans 8:31-39, and how should we regard them?

16. Imagine yourself in the woman’s situation, hearing Jesus ask “Woman, where are your accusers?” but also knowing Paul’s teaching in Romans 8. How would you answer Jesus’ question?