

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 1 – 2005-2007

Eternal Security for the Believer as seen in Romans 8:1-13

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The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally or finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (XVII.1). The doctrine of eternal security is one of the important doctrines to which Reformed Christians subscribe; because of our standing before God, in Christ, through the Spirit, we have security in our salvation today, and we have certainty that we will persevere in that same salvation until the end. However, it is also a difficult doctrine for a couple reasons; for our purposes the main reason is the mystery of how we are justified by grace alone, but we also are required to do good works. Justification and sanctification do not exist apart from one another, but how they work together is in some way a mystery to our human minds. The purpose of this essay is to examine Romans 8:1-13 as a basis for the security of the believer. This purpose will be accomplished through a brief examination of the verses and a broader discussion of some of the more important themes that arise, such as the role of the Spirit, the work of Christ, and the relationship between justification and sanctification. In the end, this essay will show that through the death and resurrection of Christ and the believer’s subsequent union with Christ, evidenced by the indwelling by the Spirit, the Christian can progress in their sanctification and be secure in their present salvation forever.

Before you can understand where Paul is going, you have to understand from where he has come. After introducing his epistle,

Paul discusses justification by faith. He then moves to discuss the effects of justification on the believer's life. He discusses the freedom from the law that the Christian now has in Christ, and the relation of the life of the Christian to the life of the Spirit. In the typical outline of Romans, Romans 8 is found in "the sanctification section" of Romans, which begins in chapter 6; it is in chapter 6 that Paul breaks from discussing justification, the Adam/Christ parallel, ect., and moves to a new subject, the fruit of justification. This discussion continues through chapter 7 and 8 with Paul spending most of that time discussing the law and the new view of the law available to Christians. As it concludes the sanctification section Paul's argument reaches its conclusion. Having been justified, we are untied to Christ and because of our status in Christ we are controlled by the Spirit, we are able to live the Christian life out from under condemnation, and we can be secure in our status. With this great truth proclaimed by Paul Romans 8 is perhaps one of the most important chapters of Paul's epistle. Fitzmyer argues, "it [Romans 8] forms a certain peak in Paul's whole discussion, because it seeks to bring to reality of the new aeon and of the new life that human beings can now lead in union with Christ through his Spirit."¹ After Paul argues this, he turns his attention to the outworking of justification and the assurance of justification, the result of being "in Christ." He reasserts the triumphant conclusion of Romans 5:12-21, the great passage comparing Adam and Christ: that for those who are "in Christ" eternal life replaced the condemnation and death that were theirs from Adam.² Paul in many ways grounds the foundation of justification and its assurance in the work of the Spirit in sanctification.

The opening words of Romans 8 are familiar to many, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..." Not only do these great words set the stage for the rest of Paul's argument; it also connects back to all Paul has been arguing in his letter. With this assurance Paul begins to weave together themes from the previous two chapters into a developed argument; an argument for the assurance of eternal life that believers have in Christ. Throughout this

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 481.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1996), 471.

section Paul traces the results for those who are in Christ. He does this primarily by drawing a dichotomy between a life controlled by the flesh and a life controlled by the Spirit. Paul establishes that the Spirit is the controlling factor in the Christian's life; since this is the case there is life forever. Our resurrection and possession of the life giving Spirit is assured because of the resurrection of Christ, and through the Spirit we are united to Christ and secure in our striving for sanctification and in our assurance of salvation. At the end of the last chapter Paul asked, "Who will deliver me from the body of death?"³ Here Paul begins to answer it: Christ rescues the believer, removing their condemnation, and gives them the Spirit that they may live a life free from the power of sin. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Christ will – and it will be forever.

"There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). With the conjunction, "therefore," Paul is clearly connecting this to what has come before. The Greek conjunction would imply an emphatic conclusion; "based on all that has come before, be assured of this..." This one verse sets the stage for Paul's entire argument; for those who have been born again into Christ there is no penalty for, so they can be secure in that promise of life. Through his death Christ has paid the penalty for sins and thus led Christians into a fullness of life in the Spirit. "The 'no condemnation' that heads this paragraph is grounded in the reality of the believer's transfer from death to life."⁴ The grammar of the passage indicates that this is a permanent passing into life.⁵ Paul is not saying, "there is no condemnation now...but in the future maybe..." but, instead, "there is not now nor will there ever again be any condemnation..." Paul is also not saying that the Christian still does not in one sense still deserve condemnation. Rather, what Paul is saying is that the believer is no longer under condemnation in that they will not be exposed to condemnation, for as you can probably attest in your own life there are still many things which deserve condemnation.⁶ Though we still deserve condemnation it is removed.

³ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 480.

⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 472.

⁵ The use of οὐδε.ν, an emphatic negation in the Greek allows for the sense that the condemnation is gone forever (Moo, *Romans*, 473).

⁶ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1835), 249.

Condemnation is in many ways a forensic term. Thus, those who no longer have condemnation have had a judicial verdict rendered in their favor. They have been declared free from condemnation because of the work of Christ and their status in him.⁷ Christ took on our sins and fulfilled the law and so he is no longer under condemnation, this is the significance of being “in Christ,” for those who are in Christ gain his status of no longer being under condemnation.⁸ There has been a positional change in status for the believer. Thus, to be “in Christ” means “to live as someone freed from sin, death, self, and the law, and consequently from wrath.”⁹ Paul could have in many ways stopped here. Knowing the power of God Christians can be certain that because of their union with Christ they are secure in him and thus will never again be under condemnation. Paul, however, does not stop here, but moves on to discuss the work of the Spirit in sanctification and in bringing eternal security.¹⁰ Indeed, it is this verse that supplies the assurance of what is promised in verse 1.¹¹ But is this enough? Can someone just say there is no condemnation and leave it there? In this world people want more security and may ask, “But why is there no condemnation?” Paul goes about answering this question beginning in verse 2 by discussing the life of one controlled by the Spirit of God.

Paul writes, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:2-3). In verses 2-3 Paul provides some of the ground for the assurance of life and removal of condemnation. He begins a dichotomy between the flesh and the Spirit which he continues through verse 13. It is here that the heart of Paul’s argument becomes clear, much of his argument is grounded on the work of the Spirit, and because of this focus on the Spirit Romans 8

⁷ Moo notes father that “in him” and “for us” are also judicial terms (*Romans*, 473).

⁸ Michael Horton, “Classical Calvinism,” *Four Views on Eternal Security* (ed. J. Matthew Pinson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26.

⁹ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 482.

¹⁰ In many ways because of the workings of all three members of the Trinity in the life and security of the Christian it could be said that eternal security is anchored in the covenant of redemption (Horton, “Classical Calvinism,” 34-35).

¹¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1968), 275.

could be called, “the chapter of the Holy Spirit.” To this point in his epistle Paul has only mentioned the Spirit three times, but in chapter eight he mentions the Spirit nineteen times. It is easy to see where Paul grounds assurance and sanctification. However, even more than that he is laying the foundation for assurance that one who possesses the Spirit can have. What Paul wants his readers to understand in these verses is the basis for the Spirit in the believer’s life, and the Spirit control of his life. Knowing that the work of Christ is perfect and complete assurance is possible because of the work of Christ, union with Christ, and work of the Holy Spirit.¹² Moo writes, “The Spirit’s liberating work takes place only within the situation created by Christ.”¹³ What Paul is saying is that through the work of Jesus Christ and the working of the Spirit the believer, the one who has been united to Christ, is free from the law and from death. The Christian is also free from the law, and being free from the law he is under the control of the Spirit, the very instrument by which he has security. The Christian, being free from death, has life forever.

Apart from brining life, the Spirit is an important agent in redemption and in the life of everyone who is in Christ. Paul also speaks about the Holy Spirit as “life in its very essence.” The Spirit also “imparts life, both physical and spiritual.” That the Spirit imparts life can be seen as early as the Creation of the world (Gen 1:1). The Spirit also sustains life. The Spirit is the distinguishing mark of the Christian, signaling the defeat of sin and the imparting of life.¹⁴ The Spirit also serves an important function as regards our union with Christ. Hodge says that the test of union with Christ is the presence of the Spirit.¹⁵ The Spirit also serves to nurture our union with Christ.¹⁶ “Union with Christ is offered to those in whom the Spirit dwells. It is a reciprocal indwelling mediated by the Spirit common to the Head and his members.”¹⁷ The Spirit also carries on the works of Christ by “calling, gathering, transforming persons into likeness to

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1996), 547-48.

¹³ Moo, *Romans*, 477.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1987), 301.

¹⁵ Hodge, *Romans*, 257-58.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.

¹⁷ Thomas Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Peabody: Prince Press, 1992), 206.

Christ, communicating them the benefits of redemption.”¹⁸ “In union with Christ Christians come under the ‘law’ of the Spirit that gives life.”¹⁹ The Spirit is vital to the life of the believer, and vital in providing eternal security in salvation; this is why Paul focuses on the Spirit in Romans 8.

The work of the Spirit is grounded upon the work of Christ. Through the work of Christ our sin and death was removed, and life was imparted through the giving of the Spirit. The law of the flesh was fulfilled by Christ, both actively and passively, so that we may receive the law of the Spirit. And because the believer has been given the Spirit he is now able to walk according to the Spirit; Paul develops this theology of living in the assurance of the Spirit in verses 5-12 where he offers some obligations to those who are in Christ and who have the Spirit. The work of Christ also provides a basis for assurance, for as Christ was raised from the dead, so those who are in Christ are raised from the dead, and if this is the case there is certainty of life. The Holy Spirit seals life, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit “can neither be invalidated or wiped out.”²⁰

In the middle section of the passage Paul develops a theology of life where he draws the dichotomy between the flesh and the Spirit. In many ways these verses do not farther the security of those who are in Christ, but they do provide an important argument to show the Christian the difference between those who are in the Spirit and those who do not have the Spirit. And in this way they provide security for the Christian. Paul is developing a contrast of two kinds of life. What these verses can do however is serve as a check for the believer. He can examine his life and see, based on what Paul says, if it is controlled by the Spirit or by flesh. Now, it is important to note that this is not the final answer, for there are many times when a true believer may be in a period where he thinks his life is being controlled by the flesh, when in reality though he is still controlled by the Spirit he is in a period of temptation where he is giving into sin. It is for this reason that Reformed theology does not believe that assurance is a necessity for faith or salvation; one saved you have assurance, but if for one reason or another you loose that assurance in your mind you

¹⁸ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 207.

¹⁹ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 482.

²⁰ Canons of the Synod of Dort, V.8.

do not loose your salvation. The Confession notes, “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it” (18.3). However, the Confession continues to exhort the believer to attain that assurance and to make their calling and election sure (18.3); see also 2 Peter 1:10.

What Paul does in Romans 8:5-8, which is in some way a break from his argument about assurance, is explain to the Roman Christians how their life is, or should be, different since it is controlled by the Spirit. There is assurance offered as Paul shows the unbreakable connection between Spirit and life, and between flesh and death. Also, in setting up the dichotomy Paul shows why a life lived after the flesh must lead to death; the life controlled by the flesh is controlled by the nature of the first Adam. And though with regeneration, union with Christ and indwelling by the Spirit the believer does not completely cease sin, he ceases to be one controlled by sin, he becomes one controlled by the Spirit and this is life. That is true would seem to provide some assurance. Paul however picks up the major obligation for those who have no condemnation in verse 12. However, he first finishes his argument from vv. 1-3. He has to finish the argument showing that believers can have eternal security in their justification.

In verse 9 a change comes, signaled by the word, “but.” After drawing a distinction between the flesh and the Spirit Paul moves back to assurance. Beginning in verse 9 Paul draws his main argument to a close, offering the final security for the believer of his new status in Christ. Paul stops talking in generic terms, “the ones...” and again speaks directly to the church in Rome, “You...” He tells them that they are controlled by the Spirit, and thus they belong to Christ. And if they belong to Christ in this life, they will belong to Christ forever. Romans 8:9-11 draws the final parallel and provide the basis for assurance of salvation.

Romans 8:9 shows the status of the believer in the Spirit. It is a positional status that was acquired from him because of Christ.²¹ And because of this status everything that Paul says of the believer is true for the Roman Christians, and is also true for us. Christians are in

²¹ Moo, *Romans*, 489-90.

Christ, indwelt by the Spirit and are thus controlled by the Spirit. This is no Gnosticism. Paul is not saying that the body is bad, but that the “flesh”/“the world” which controls the person rather than the Spirit is that which Christians must themselves. Paul is also not saying that because Christians are in Christ there is some spiritual aspect to their existence, and they are no longer in the world. “They [Roman Christians] live this bodily life as all people do. But they are not bound to it, not characterized by it. They do not belong to it.”²² Christians still have a body, indeed the body is good. And Christians still have some temptations from the flesh, but they are not controlled by them. Christians are Spirit controlled people because of their union with Christ.

In Romans 8:10 Paul provides the Christian with an even stronger assurance of life. Admittedly because of everyone’s connection to Adam they are bound to die in the body, but because of Christ the Christian does not die in Spirit. Hendriksen writes, “Not only is it true that because of sin the body of each of you is bound to die, but it is also true that because you are justified you can be assured of the fact that the Spirit, who is Life and life’s Author, is dwelling within you.”²³ However, as much assurance as all the proceeding verses provide many will still ask for more. In verse 11 the questions are finally put to rest as the ultimate assurance is given. The point of the argument is reached in verse 11, “that the presence of the indwelling Spirit guarantees our future resurrection.”²⁴ Combined with verse 10, verse 11 brings out the truth that the life which is characterized by the indwelling of the Spirit of God is necessarily a life which breathes the promise of resurrection and of eternal life.²⁵

The ultimate assurance for the Christian, and the ultimate basis for his eternal security us the death and resurrection of Christ. “Through his death Christ brought it about that we no longer need fear death. Through his death he secured for us the grace that the Holy Spirit is given us, and that the wisdom of the flesh is removed

²² Morris, *Romans*, 307.

²³ William Hendriksen, *Romans* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 252.

²⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 552.

²⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (vol. 1; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 372.

from us.”²⁶ Even though we will die mortally the Spirit still has power. “The Spirit’s life-giving power is not circumscribed by the mortality of the body but overcomes and transforms that mortality into the immortality of eternal life in resurrected body.”²⁷ And through his resurrection we have the basis for life; “again he touches the point of the resurrection, since this was the most encouraging hope to the hearer, and gave him a security from what had happened unto Christ.”²⁸ As Heidelberg Catechism question 45 asks, “What benefit do we receive from the resurrection of Christ?” It answers, “the resurrection of Christ is to be a sure pledge of our blessed resurrection.” Hodge summarizes this well,

Because God has raised up Christ, there as ground of confidence that he would raise his people up also. Two ideas may be included in this part of the verse: first, that the very possession of that Spirit, which is the source of life, is a pledge and security that our bodies shall raise again; because it would be unseemly that anything thus honored by the Spirit, should remain under the domain of death; and secondly, that the resurrection of Christ secures the resurrection of those that are his.²⁹

The ultimate Christian security is grounded in the work of Christ and the resurrecting work of the Holy Spirit, “for the Spirit is the manifestation of God’s presence and life-giving power in the world.”³⁰ This work is applied to us by the Holy Spirit who changes the orientation of our life. But Paul does not stop here.

Contra so much in modern evangelicalism today the Gospel is not antinomian. It is not, “there is no condemnation...you can have eternal security...now do what ever you want.” Justification is good enough, but it is not enough. Sanctification must exist alongside of justification. We should not be satisfied simply saying, “I am saved, let me get on with my life.” Peter calls on the Christian to “be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you” (2 Pet 1:10). We cannot simply call Jesus Savior, without too calling

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (trans. J.T. Mueller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1954), 103.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 493.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, XIII (ANF, 11:436).

²⁹ Hodge, *Romans*, 260.

³⁰ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 491.

him Lord. The Spirit gives us newness of life and also allows us to walk in life.³¹

It almost seems as though in Romans 8:12 Paul is saying that our assurance depends on us, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” But what Paul is saying is that for one who has been indwelt with the Spirit, their life must necessarily change. Paul in Romans 8:12-13 gives believers an obligation for living. You cannot be secure if your life is not changed. Some think that we should take vv. 12-13 as the beginning of a new topic (i.e., Cranfield, Dunn, Murray) while others interpret it as a continuation of vv. 1-11, as the consequences of the indwelling of the Spirit (i.e., Moo, Fitzmyer). Though he separates this as a separate thought Murray does see the importance of what Paul says in his larger argument. Murray writes,

It is true that a believer sins; he may fall into grievous sin and backslide for lengthy periods. But it is also true that a believer cannot abandon himself to sin; he cannot come under the dominion of sin; he cannot be guilty of certain kinds of unfaithfulness. And therefore it is utterly wrong to say that a believer is secure quite irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness.³²

Though Christians do sin, they are not controlled by sin. And they can be assured that in their sin they will not be cut off the vine if they were truly, salvifically grafted onto the vine.

The indwelling presence of God, the Spirit, puts us under an obligation for how we live. “God’s new people must serve in the new way of the Spirit.”³³ Jesus says, “you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Though the flesh is still present, but Christians are not controlled by it.³⁴ Christians are rather slaves to righteousness. Earlier in Romans Paul writes, “...that you were once slaves to sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:17-18). Christians, since they are controlled by the Spirit are called

³¹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 552.

³² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 154.

³³ Fee, *God’s Empowering*, 555.

³⁴ Morris, *Romans*, 311.

to live in a certain way. They have an obligation for living. They have an obligation to persevere in the faith, having the security that God will preserve. In their commentary on the confession Gerstner and Kelly write, “if one asks why the doctrine is called the perseverance rather than the preservation of believers, it is no doubt because believers do the persevering while God does the preserving. But, if God did not preserve, they would not persevere.”³⁵ Our security is based in God, through the work of the Son, and the work of the Spirit, but we must live out our obligations for these benefits to be seen. Hodge writes,

The benefits of Christ’s death are experienced only by those who walk not after the flesh. The gospel is not antinomian. Those only are justified who are also sanctified. Holiness is the fruit and evidence of reconciliation with God. There is no condemnation to those who walk after the Spirit; and the righteousness of the law is fulfilled by those who walk after the Spirit.³⁶

There is assurance, but there is a condition. As the Apostle says, we are under an obligation. Murray writes, “the apostle is careful to impart to believers the assurance which belongs to them as those who are ‘in the Spirit’ and are therefore under the direction and control of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless he is likewise careful to lay down the condition upon which this assurance may be entertained.”³⁷ You cannot have justification without sanctification. As James writes in his epistle, “faith without works is dead” (see James 2:14-26). Hendriksen writes, “Justification and sanctification always go together.”³⁸ Indeed, justification guarantees sanctification.³⁹

We must mortify sin in our bodies. “The believer’s once-for-all death to the law of sin does not free him from the necessity of mortifying since in his members; it makes it necessary and possible for him to do so.”⁴⁰ Mortification is not left to us alone however. “Human activity in the process of sanctification is clearly necessary; but that activity is never apart from, not finally distinct from, the

³⁵ John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *A Guide – The Westminster Confession of Faith – A Commentary* (Signal Mountain: Summertown Texts, 1992), 86.

³⁶ Hodge, *Romans*, 255.

³⁷ Murray, *Romans*, 287.

³⁸ Hendriksen, *Romans*, 245.

³⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The New Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 190.

⁴⁰ Quoting Murray, Moo, *Romans*, 494.

activity of God's Spirit."⁴¹ For the mortification of sin is achieved through the Spirit as well. John Owen, in his work on mortification writes, "The Holy Spirit is the only sufficient means for the work of mortification. All other ways are futile without Him."⁴² However, sanctification is still real to us. It is not simply the Holy Spirit acting, though it originates in him, but something is happening at the core of the being of a Christian. Deidun writes that the Christian imperative "demands the Christian's continuing 'yes' to an activity which does not originate in himself, but which is nevertheless already real and actual in the core of his being."⁴³

This is in many ways one of the difficult questions of Reformed theology. "Paul insists that what God has done for us in Christ is the sole and final grounds for our eternal life at the same time he insists on the indispensability of holy living as the precondition for attaining that life."⁴⁴ Justification saves us. We are not saved by our works, but we must do them. Faith is not just a mental ascent, but involves perseverance in the faith. "Salvation is not only justification, but sanctification as well. Sanctification, too, is a work of God. But it always presumes a regenerate heart, pledged to serve Christ."⁴⁵ Perseverance "does not mean that every one who professes faith in Christ and who is accepted as a believer in the fellowship of the saints is secure for eternity and may entertain the assurance of eternal salvation."⁴⁶ For "those and those alone, who by the Spirit, put to death the disgraceful deeds of the body, are able to rejoice in the fact that they are being led by the Spirit, and therefore will truly live."⁴⁷

In conclusion, in Romans 8:1-13 Paul offers the reader assurance that because of the believers status in Christ, because of the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit, he can live a full Christian life, a life controlled by the Spirit, and he can be eternally secure in his eternal election. Because of the world of Christ condemnation has been removed, and the Christian is free from the law of the flesh and free to

⁴¹ Moo, *Romans*, 496.

⁴² John Owen, *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge to Personal Godliness* (ed. James M. Houston; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1983), 161.

⁴³ Cited in, Moo, *Romans*, 496.

⁴⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 495.

⁴⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 24, n. 10.

⁴⁶ Murray, *Redemption*, 151.

⁴⁷ Hendriksen, *Romans*, 255.

live a life striving toward sanctification as he follows the law of the Spirit. The Great Judge has rendered the verdict: “there is now therefore no condemnation, not now, not ever ... because of the work of my Son you are free ... be secure.”

Thanks be to God.