

Romans **8:31-39**

Introduction

Primarily speaking to a Gentile audience, Paul made the point in the previous section of this chapter that suffering is neither evidence of God's unfaithfulness nor evidence of their failure to please God. In fact, suffering is a part of God's redemptive purposes. It is through the suffering of Jesus that redemption was accomplished. The state of futility to which God subjected creation points to a time in the future when God will complete His work of redemption. The activity of the Spirit of God within the Christ-follower is only a first fruit of what is yet to come. However, the fact that God's work is not yet complete causes both creation and Christ-followers to groan with a longing for its completion. Waiting with patience for God's promises to be fully accomplished is possible because of the confident expectation we have in God's faithfulness.

In 8:28-30, Paul turned to a discussion focused on God's intentions for Israel. The Gentile Christ-followers in Rome needed to understand that God had called Israel with the purpose of blessing the world through them, had predetermined plans to transform them into the image of Jesus, and had purposed to make them covenant partners just as He had the Gentiles. This is designed to help set up the discussion of chapter 9-15 that addresses how the Gentile Christ-followers should respond to suffering they are or will be experiencing from Jews.

This section begins with the question, "What then are we to say about these things?" It is designed to wrap up what has been said about God's covenant faithfulness in redeeming the cosmos. The point will be that there is nothing that will cause God to quit loving His creation. Paul's purpose includes a desire to secure the willingness of his readers to live out what he will say in chapters 9-11 knowing they are secure in God.

God's Unconquerable Love: 8:31-39

Paul runs through a series of four rhetorical questions to solidify his teaching on the unquestioned faithfulness and the unconquerable love of God. This first question is, "If God is for us, who is against us?" The answer that does not need to be stated is, "No one of any significance." It may be that we are too quick to pass by the statement, "for us." God is not just for Himself. He is for his creation. No more evidence needs to be given than the fact that God handed over His own Son for our benefit. The phrase "did not withhold His own Son" is very similar to the LXX reading of Genesis 22:16 that talks about Abraham not withholding Isaac from sacrifice. This was a very important event in Judaism. To the Jew, this text defined the depth of Abraham's faithfulness that had been stated in Genesis 15:6. It was believed, this act of faith gave Abraham grounds for boasting. The readers probably expected Paul to mention this even in chapter four when he talked about Abraham, but he saved it for this discussion. Paul turned the tables on those who would boast in the faithfulness of Abraham and used the same language to speak of the faithfulness of God. When God gave Jesus, He showed that he was willing to give everything else to His children. This goes back to creation and God's intentions for humanity to rule over His creation (Gen. 1:26-30; Psalm 8:5-6).

The second question is, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?” The answer again, “No one of any significance.” “Elect” is one of those concepts that was core to Israel’s self understanding (1 Chron. 16:13; Pss. 88:4; Isa. 43:20). In His faithfulness, God has made Israel covenant partners (“justifies”). “Justifies” is in a tense that speaks of a present reality that is also ongoing and sustaining. Thus pointing to final vindication at the end of the age.

The third question is, “who is to condemn?” The death and resurrection of Jesus took care of the problem of sin and death and secured the status of covenant partner with God. Jesus’ exaltation to the right hand of God completed His journey and served as the first of many to travel that same journey. Jesus’ role in bringing about the completion of God’s redemption continues through His ongoing intercession on behalf of God’s children. Intercession was attributed to angels in Jewish thought (1 Enoch 13:4; 14:4-7). It is not angels, but God’s Son who is intercessor for God’s children. Being seated at the right hand of God goes back to Psalm 110. Being at the right hand is a declaration of Jesus’ power. Israel’s kings were appointed by God and were God’s vice-regents on earth. According to Dunn (pg. 504), Jews had speculated that some of their heroes like Adam, Enoch, and Melchizedek had been exalted to thrones in heaven. Paul proclaims that the one who has been so exalted is Jesus.

The fourth question is, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” The word order here seems to put emphasis on “us,” which is making the point that Christ-followers are united with Christ. Paul listed a number of formidable foes that might be used in an attempt to separate the Christ-follower from Jesus’ love. Paul had personally experienced most of these. All of these potential foes create the tension that is a part of living in the already/not yet time while waiting for the completion of God’s redemptive work.

Verse 36 is a quote from psalm 44:22. One reason for using this quote is to show that suffering is not uncommon for God’s people. Those about whom Psalm 44 speaks were wondering if their suffering was evidence that God had rejected them. There may also be been some significance in Paul’s use of this text in that the Jews used it when speaking of the martyrs of the Maccabean revolt who suffered as a result of the domination of the Seleucid Empire over Judea in the second century B.C.E. The Maccabees were praised for having died for the sake of the law (2 Macc. 7:9-11). Part of the struggle Paul addressed in Romans was the mistaken view that the Nationalistic Jewish teacher had toward the law. Jesus did not die for the sake of the law. He died for the glory of the Father and the redemption of the cosmos. Christ-followers are not to die for the law. But they are called on to sacrifice for each other. Although this text speaks of persecution from outside of Israel, it may be significant to note that righteous Jews often suffered at the hands of unrighteous Jews (Zech. 11). The suffering that the Gentiles either were or would be facing was from Jews who believed in God but were either still rejecting Jesus as Messiah or believed Jesus to be Messiah but were still holding on to the theology of the Nationalistic Jewish teacher that has been discussed in this study. Such suffering is not uncommon and it should never be seen as evidence that God or Christ had withdrawn their love.

The ability to face the distresses that following Christ brings is not something we are able to deal with by our own power. We are more than conquerors only through the

power of the one who loved us, Jesus. Paul has a firm settled conviction that nothing can separate Christ-followers from His love.

Except for “powers” at the end of verse 39 and “anything else in all creation” the list in verses 38 and 39 are in pairs. Death has been evidence of the power of Sin. The faithfulness of God and the love of Jesus have taken fear and condemnation out of Sin and death. “Life” here is most likely speaking of life in the here and now where we still live in a world that continues to operate according to the age of Adam. The word translated “rulers” (NRSV) or “demons” (NIV) can speak of either heavenly beings or earthly rulers. Both Dunn and Cranfield see this words as speaking of heavenly powers. Scripture does speak of heavenly powers or rulers who are the power behind the activities of earthly governments (Deut. 32:8; Dan. 10:13). If this is Paul’s intent then he is speaking of a wide range of spiritual powers that oppose the purposes of God. Then Paul includes the scope of time in the list. The word translated “powers” at the end of verse 38 is not the same word as “ruler” earlier in the verse. This word does speak of supernatural beings, which might cause someone to conclude that the earlier word in verse 38 is earthly rulers. The words “height” or “depth” probably refer to the spheres above and below the earth. A passage that might apply is Psalm 139:8. The last item listed covers everything that might have been left out of Paul’s list of things that are under the control of the creator. Whether we know for sure what some of these terms refer to, Paul was making the point that nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love.

Conclusion

Earlier in this chapter Paul reminded his readers that at times being partners with God brings distress. Such experiences are not an indication that God has withdrawn His love or His acceptance. These final verses in chapter eight are designed to give the church in Rome assurance that nothing can cause God to withdraw His redemptive love. Even in the midst of distress, their covenant partner status with God was secure because of His love.

It was very important for Paul’s original readers to understand the depth of God’s love because they were being called upon to persevere in their distress just as Jesus persevered in His suffering. It will become clear in chapters 9-11 that Paul was calling upon his Gentile readers to persevere in their suffering for the sake of the Jew, the source of their distress. The Gentile’s thought their status with God was evidence God had rejected the Jew. God had not rejected the Jew, even though they were rejecting the Messiah. As will be shown, God was using the Gentile to make the Jews jealous in order to save them.

Romans
8:31-39

1. In one sentence summarize these verses.
2. Placing these verses in the context of 8:17-30, what is the general situation to which Paul was applying the verses of this text?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being “completely,” how much do you in your everyday life trust what Paul has said in these verses? Explain your response.
4. In what areas of your life is it most difficult to trust what Paul says here?
5. In what ways would a deeper trust in Paul’s description of the way God looks at you change how you live your life? Explain your response.