

## LOVE THAT NEVER LEAVES

### Fear of separation

Fear of being separated from whom or what you value seems endemic to human life. As children we fear being separated from our parents or from a cherished blanket or toy. As adults, we're not that different. We're afraid to lose relationships, jobs or possessions. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8:31-39 addresses these kinds of fears by speaking of the love of God, from which we cannot be separated.

His methodology features a series of rhetorical questions challenging the standing of believers before God. For Paul, the answers are so obvious that he doesn't bother giving any of them, at least until the end.

Romans 5:1-11 and 8:31-39 provide the frame for chapters 5-8, which feature the assurance that believers have in Christ. The Romans 8 passage expands upon Romans 5:11, the last verse of the opening frame: "And not only this, be we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." Romans 8:31-39 is celebratory if nothing else.

Romans 8:31-39:

<sup>31</sup>What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; <sup>34</sup>who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

<sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>Just as it is written,

**"FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG;  
WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."**

<sup>37</sup>But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### Who is against us?

Having laid out the gospel in Romans 1-8, Paul reflects on "these things"—the things of the gospel—in verses 31-39. Having scaled the mountain, he is now in a mood to celebrate. Shall we join him?

In response to the gospel, Paul in verses 31b-32 asks two rhetorical questions that get to the heart of the matter. Paul has demonstrated, most emphatically, that God is "for us." If this is the case, who can be against us? Paul, of course, is not saying that no one or nothing is ever against us but that it doesn't matter who is against us if God is for us.

Those who are against us will not be able to change either God's disposition toward us or his plans for us.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence for this is God's treatment of his Son. God demonstrated that he is "for us" in that he did not spare his son but delivered him over "for us all."<sup>2</sup> God is like Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son. He is unlike Abraham, who didn't have to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:2, 10-13). God provided a ram for Abraham but nothing for himself. Abraham named the place "The Lord Will Provide," and the narrator noted, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided" (Genesis 22:16). Only when we come to Golgotha, the hill on Mount Zion where God's Son was crucified, do we understand the full import of the Abraham-Isaac story. God, through the Abraham and Christ stories, is telling us: "I will not require you to sacrifice your sons and daughters. I will only require it of myself."

God delivered over his Son to crucifixion in order to defeat our greatest enemy, sin, and unite us with Christ. He did so for an eternal, not temporary, purpose: to "freely give us all things." As those who have been united with Christ, we are heirs with him, and we will receive the things of the new creation (Romans 8:17). If God did the hard and excruciating part, delivering over his Son at great cost to himself, he is sure to do the easy and delightful part, granting us the new creation.<sup>3</sup> "God spared his Son no pain that he might spare his saints no pleasure."<sup>4</sup>

God is a giver. He gives liberally, not grudgingly. He is preparing a "lavish banquet for all peoples," complete with "aged wine" and "choice pieces with marrow" (Isaiah 25:6). If he does not give us what we want when we want it, it's not because he doesn't love us. On the contrary: It's because he does love us. He knows, better than we, what we need and when we need it.

### **Who will charge us?**

Those who are against us may want to bring a charge against us or condemn us. No charge against us will stand, because God, as judge, justifies us. In view of our faith response to the gospel, he has declared us to be in the right, to be his people.

Only God has the power to condemn us, but "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). God condemned sin in the flesh of his Son: He judged it, he passed sentence against it and he brought its reign to an end. Therefore, Christ is the answer to the question regarding condemnation. Christ died so that we could be free from sin, and he was raised so that we could live for God, ultimately in the new creation with resurrection bodies like his. Having been raised and vindicated as the Messiah, Christ shares the throne of God at his right hand.

Christ, like the Spirit, intercedes for us (Romans 8:26). Paul defined the Spirit's intercession, but he says nothing more about Christ's intercession. He would not have us believe, however, that Christ is perpetually asking the Father to forgive us. We have already been "sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). Through his offering on the cross, Christ has already "interceded for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). The writer of Hebrews says that Christ continues to intercede for his followers to draw near to God (Hebrews 7:25). He is our man in heaven. Christ's ongoing intercession on our behalf, whatever form it takes, provides additional assurance that we are free from condemnation. Just like God, Christ is "for us."<sup>5</sup>

Opponents of Jesus attempted to trip him up by bringing to him a woman who had been caught in adultery. They disgraced her and deemed her worthy of death. They brought charges against her and asked Jesus for a ruling. The story is recorded in John 8:1-11:

*But when they persisted in asking him, he straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and he was left alone, and the woman, where she had been, in the midst. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" And she said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way; from now on sin no more."*

All sorts of charges may be brought against us in the earthly courtrooms of our lives. But in the heavenly courtroom, our opponents "will all wear out like a garment" (Isaiah 50:9). The only one left standing will be our Lord, who will say, "Where are they? Did no one condemn you?" And we will answer, "No one Lord." And he will say, "Neither do I condemn you. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

### **Who will separate us?**

The security of our future with God is bound up with God's love for us in Christ, as evidenced by his intercession for us. Paul's next question is therefore, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul brings forth some formidable candidates, all of which involve suffering. Paul has already made the point that present suffering is integral to future glory (Romans 8:17-30). Nevertheless, suffering is often interpreted by people as a sign of God's displeasure. If God loves me, the argument goes, I wouldn't be suffering. Paul disabuses us of such a notion in verse 36 by alluding to Psalm 44:22.

In Psalm 44, the psalmist laments the defeats of Israel at the hands of pagans and pleads for the Lord's intervention based on his faithfulness. The Israelites are crushed even though they have taken up the cause of the Lord. Suffering for the sake of following the Lord came with the territory then. It comes with the territory now. Far from being a sign of God's displeasure, it's a sign that we belong to him. If our enemies, be they human or spiritual, consider us "sheep to be slaughtered," we join the Servant of the Lord, who was "like a lamb that is led to slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). As followers of Christ, we embody his sufferings. The body of Christ, constituting his followers, draws upon it the pain of the world that the world might be redeemed through Christ.

Two related conclusions emerge: 1) God loves us. 2) Our suffering is for his sake. Both conclusions help us assume a biblical posture toward suffering. Well, of course, if it's for him, the one who loves us, yes, we'll endure suffering.

If as the Lord's sheep we must "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," the Lord is with us, and goodness and loyal love will follow us all the days of our lives (Psalm 23:4, 6). He who vindicates us is near (Isaiah 50:8). He will, in faithfulness to his promises, vindicate us by resurrecting us from the dead to enjoy him and the new creation.

Paul can therefore say that we will be overwhelmingly victorious “in all these things”: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword and the like. God causes “all things,” including suffering, “to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). We are “more than conquerors,” as the New International Version puts it. We not only defeat our enemies, we subjugate them. They become our servants. We actually benefit from that which would have destroyed us. Our enemies turn out to be pawns. God, in his love for us, seen particularly in Christ and experienced through the Holy Spirit, guarantees that we will emerge victorious in the resurrection. Moreover, our certain future and the present ministry of the Spirit give us every reason to live as conquerors even now, in the middle of suffering.

So, back to the question: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” The first list of candidates constituted physical threats. The second list constitutes the forces behind the threats. Death? It’s been defeated. Life? It belongs to God. Wicked human or demonic rulers? Sin and those who perpetrate it have been defeated, along with death. Time and space? They both belong to God. Any other created thing? It’s in the domain of the Creator.

Although the answers to Paul’s rhetorical questions in this passage are obvious, he doesn’t literally offer an answer until verses 38-39. Now, having made the case for the unbreakable bond between the love of God and the people of God, he answers a question in an emphatic way. He is “convinced” that no one and no thing “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Neither suffering nor the forces behind it can drive a wedge between God and his love for us. The final case for assurance for a future with God rests with the love of God. Paul rests his case.

Two of Jesus’ followers had apparent cause to believe that they had been separated from the love of God in Christ when Christ was crucified. Death, however, could not separate Thomas and Peter from their Lord, who was raised from the dead. Even after the resurrection, Thomas was plagued by doubt and Peter by failure. Yet doubt and failure proved no match for the love of God when Jesus came to restore his followers (John 20:26-29, John 21). Our issues, whatever they are, are no match for the overpowering love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## **Unshakable love**

So what do we do with the fear of being separated from what we value? Some live in denial. Others hold onto things as tightly as possible, lest they slip from their grasp. Still others, having been suffered loss, take measures to prevent future disappointment. The characters in “Gone with the Wind” all lost a way of life. Scarlett O’Hara, as a hedge against the future, then determined that “money is the most important thing in the world,” and she went about acquiring it, even by ignoble means.<sup>6</sup> No matter what kind of measures you take, however, one day you will be separated from life itself—at least life as you know it. Anything and everything, it seems, can be taken from us.

Everything, that is, except the love of God. The love of God in Christ Jesus is the great exception, and a glorious exception it is—because if we can’t be separated from the love of God, in the end it doesn’t matter what we can be separated from. If we can’t lose the love of God, then he will “freely give us all things.” Everything of value that we lose will come back to us in enhanced way in the new creation. God “will wipe away every

tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

In the end, the only tragedy is being separated from the love of God. If you are in Christ Jesus, it won't happen. The only rock-solid truth upon which to base your life—the love of God—cannot be shaken. The question then becomes: Is the love of God the truth on which you are basing your life? The answer, for most believers is, “Well, yes, sort of.” Only when other gods fail us do we turn to the love of God with abandon. Not to worry: He's waiting for us. When we lose what we value above the love of God, we're more likely to grow in appreciation for what we will never lose.

In my early 20s, I lost a relationship that I valued above my relationship with God. I had just moved to a new city. Devastated, and having nowhere else to turn, I turned to God. When I turned, he was there like he was never there before. Or was he always there and I hadn't paid much attention, because I was distracted by other interests? Yes, I think it was because I was distracted. God's love for me, at a time of devastating loss, provided the impetus for a decisive turning point in my life, one that reoriented me toward him.

If we cannot be separated from the only thing that matters, we can hold everything else loosely. We don't have to live in fear of loss. We don't have to live acquisitively. We don't have to live obsessively. We can let go of everything if we must. David Wilcox sings poetically of living life without holding onto life:

*I have drifted down a ways along the shoreline,  
I just watched these ropes give way  
where they were tied.  
I could have reached out quick when the ropes first slipped, if I had tried,  
but I was wondering  
where the wind was trying to take me  
overnight, if I never did resist, and  
what strange breezes make a sailor want to  
let it come to this,  
with lines untied, slipping through my fist.  
It is downhill all the way to the ocean,  
so of course the river always wants to flow.  
The river's been here longer,  
it's older and stronger and knows where to go,  
and I was wondering where the river's  
trying to take me  
overnight, if I never did resist, and  
what strange breezes make a sailor want to  
let it come to this,  
with lines untied, slipping through my fist.<sup>7</sup>*

If you hold onto life, you choke it. If you release it, you live in freedom.

Because we know deep down that everything else except the love of God can be taken from us, we may be prone to fear that our place in the kingdom of God is also at risk. Even if we're more or less convinced of a distant future, we may feel less certain about the present or the near future. If these matters weren't of concern, Paul would have no need to address them.

If we believe that Jesus is Lord and at times feel shaky about God's love for us or our future with him, what's making us feel that way? Perhaps possible threats from Paul's list make our list. Certainly, evil demonic forces would have us believe that we can be separated from the love of God. The gospel challenges all rival rulers, earthly as well as spiritual. They don't go down without a fight. Demons are well capable of influencing our thinking. They would bring charges against us. They would influence others to bring charges against us. They would influence us to bring charges against ourselves. I have to fight a tendency to believe that any performance less than brilliant is going to cost me.

Although we may feel that something can separate us from the love of God, it's important to remember that nothing can. It's important to hold up those dark feelings to the light of Romans 8:31-39 and renew our minds, as so many before us have done. If God seems absent, as if the spiritual landscape of our lives is as dry as a desert, we must remind ourselves that such a condition provides a setting for the formation of God's people, from Moses to David to Jesus himself.

When all is said and done, we can do no better than rest our case—and our lives—where Paul rests it: with the unshakable love of God. What we feel about God's love for us is unreliable. On the other hand, what the scriptures tell us about God's love for us is rock-solid truth. If we plant our lives in the assurance of God's love for us, our faith will grow.

### **The best you can do**

The fear of what we may lose is best addressed by the assurance of what we can't lose. If you're in Christ Jesus, you cannot be separated from the love of God. Here, then, is something you can count on in the bright light of the day and the dark hours of the night.

Two years ago I took a weeklong class in Menlo Park taught by a visiting scholar. His approach was scholarly, not pastoral or emotional. As a pastor who benefits from biblical scholarship, I appreciated it. But when he completed Romans 8, he stopped interpreting in order to render the briefest of comments on Romans 8:38-39. Noting that nothing is able to "separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord," he leaned forward against the lectern and said, with just a twinge of emotion, "And you can't do better than that!"

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<sup>1</sup> David expressed a similar sentiment in Psalm 56:9, in which he expressed confidence that his enemies would "turn back" and that "God is for me."

<sup>2</sup> When Paul says that God delivered over his Son "for us all," he is thinking, as throughout Romans, of the Jews and Gentiles who are part of the church in Rome. The gospel is not just for the Gentiles or just for the Jews, nor is it for the Gentiles and Jews in isolation of each other (Romans 1:16).

<sup>3</sup> In verses 31-32 Paul echoes Romans 5:8-9 as he rounds out the section that spans Romans 5-8.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Unsparing Pain, Unsparing Pleasure*, © 1991, 1998 John Piper.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul in verses 33-34 no doubt has in mind Isaiah's third "Servant Song." The four Servant Songs speak in advance of Christ, who fulfills the "Servant of the Lord" role marked out for Israel. In Isaiah 50:8-9, the Servant confidently asks, "Who will contend with Me?" "Who has a case against Me?" and "Who is he who condemns Me?" The vocation of Israel becomes the vocation of Christ, who shares his vocation with his followers, so that we may share his security. Those who would condemn us "will all wear out like a garment" (Isaiah 50:9).

<sup>6</sup> *Gone With The Wind*, © 2006 Turner Classic Movies, Time Warner Co.

<sup>7</sup> David Wilcox, *Slipping Through My Fist*, © 1999 Midnight Ocean Bonfire Music (ASCAP)/Cindy Lou My Dear (ASCAP) Goldheart.