

LOVE THAT NEVER LEAVES

SERIES: BOUND FOR GLORY



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Romans 8:31-39
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Romans 8:31-39

I've watched sports since I was a kid (although I'm not watching sports now, of course), and I can't begin to count how many times I've heard an athlete, in a moment of triumph after winning a championship, declare, "They can't take this one from me."

What do you hear in those words? The athletes are hinting that other things that they valued had been taken from them. They're also hinting that they're afraid other things that they value will be taken from them. They seem driven to achieve something that, from their perspective, they can't lose. For such athletes, it seems, victory is a hedge against fear of loss.

Fear of loss seems endemic to human life. As children we fear being separated from our parent—or from a cherished blanket or toy. As adults, we're not that different. We're afraid to lose relationships, jobs, possessions, youth, health, power or status.

What are you afraid of losing?

Romans 8:31-39 addresses fear of loss. The apostle Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions challenging the standing of believers before God. For Paul, the answers are so obvious that he doesn't bother answering any of them, at least until the end.

Romans 5:1-11 and 8:31-39, which feature the assurance that believers have in Christ, provide the frame for Romans 5-8. The Romans 8 passage expands upon Romans 5:11, the last verse of the opening frame: "More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." Romans 8:31-39 is celebratory if nothing else.

God did not spare his Son

Romans 8:31-32:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who

did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

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 31-32 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, who is all-powerful and all-loving, is for us.

Who is against you? It doesn't matter. Those who are against us will not be able to change either God's disposition toward us or his plans for us.¹ 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."²

God is like Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son. He is unlike Abraham, who didn't 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, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided" (Genesis 22:14).

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." Sin is that horrendous that it such a sacrifice is required.

God gives us everything

God delivered over his Son to crucifixion in order to defeat sin and unite us with Christ. He did so for an eternal, not temporary, purpose: to "graciously 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). Quite literally, God will give us everything.

If God did the excruciating part, delivering over his Son at great cost to himself, he is sure to do the delightful part, granting us the new creation.³ “God spared his Son no pain that he might spare his saints no pleasure.”⁴

God is a giver. He gives liberally, not grudgingly. He is preparing a “feast of rich food,” complete with “well-aged wine” and “rich food full of 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 know, what we need and when we need it.

God is for us, and he proves he’s for us by giving his Son, which means that he will give us the new creation. God will give us the new creation for all eternity, and whatever else we might consider valuable, nothing is more valuable than that.

Moreover, the new creation, depicted in Revelation 21-22, looks very much like the pre-fall first creation, depicted in Genesis 1-2. Furthermore, the new creation enhances the first creation, inasmuch as the depiction in the last two chapters of the Scriptures eclipses the depiction in the first two chapters.

Everything that you lose, or at the very least everything you value about what you lose, will not only be restored to you, it will also be restored to you in an enhanced way. What is good about our experience of this creation foreshadows the new creation, and the new creation fulfills what was most valuable about our experience of this creation.

Like the best of earth

John Prine, the legendary singer-songwriter, died of COVID-19 on April 7. The last song on his last album was titled “When I Get to Heaven.” In the song, Prine envisions heaven being very much like the best of earth. Although some of what he wants to do when he gets to heaven is not at all what I would want to do (“I’m gonna smoke a cigarette that’s nine miles long”), he’s on the right theological track.

Prine’s son, Jody, said, “He was able to imagine what heaven would be like just by imagining the parts of his life that he loved. Because for him, heaven was not that different from his regular life. And that’s incredible.”⁵

We can go further than that, however, because life in the new creation will not simply be the best parts of life in this creation, it will also be more than that.

But can we lose the new creation? Let’s face it: if we lose the new creation, all is lost—literally. We would lose “all things.” What about condemnation?

The threat of condemnation

Romans 8:33-34:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for 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 therefore 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 would not have us believe 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). 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 for us, whatever form it takes, provides additional assurance that we are free from condemnation. Just like God, Christ is “for us.”⁶

Who will bring a charge against you? It doesn’t matter. Who will condemn you? It doesn’t matter.

If God were to condemn us, then we lose the new creation. But if we believe in Christ, he doesn't condemn us, no matter who would bring a charge against us, no matter who would condemn us. Even if we bring a charge against ourselves and condemn ourselves, God doesn't condemn us. In fact, God justifies us: he declares us to be his people, and Christ intercedes for us.

Just before he died at the age of eighty-two, John Newton, the former slave trader who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," told a friend, "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

Can we lose the new creation? No, because God justifies us. What about suffering?

The threat of suffering

Romans 8:35-36:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

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 shall 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 loved 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 he pleads for the Lord's intervention. 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 Christ, the Servant of the Lord, who was "like a lamb that is led to the

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.

Here's what we can do: Every time we suffer, remind ourselves that we belong to God. Remind ourselves that for those who believe in Christ, suffering is a sign that we belong to God. Thank you, Lord, for the sign. Thank you, Lord, that we belong to you. Thank you, Lord, that will spend eternity with you.

Painful but essential

We know that suffering is a sign that we belong to God because of what it has done for us.

Marlena Graves, who grew up poor in a house plagued by mental illness, writes:

Growing up, I begged God (what seems like thousands of times) to take the cup of suffering from me, but mostly he didn't. Instead, he used my pain and difficulties, my desert experiences, to transform me—which in turn alleviated much suffering. As I grew up in the desert, God grew my soul. And although I realize that the suffering I've endured is nothing compared to the suffering of countless millions, I've learned painful but essential lessons that I couldn't have learned anywhere else but in the midst of God-haunted suffering.⁷

Can we lose the new creation? No, because suffering is a sign that we belong to God. What about all the unseen forces at work in our world?

The threat of unseen forces

Romans 8:37-39:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul can therefore say that we are more than conquerors “in all these things”: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, and the like. God causes “all things,” including suffering, to “work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

We are “more than conquerors.” We not only defeat our enemies, we also 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 shall separate us from the love of Christ?” The first list of candidates constituted physical threats. The second list constitutes the mysterious 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 “sure” that no one and no thing “will be able to separate us from the love of God 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 of a future with God rests with the love of God. Paul rests his case.

Is something going to get us?

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.

There is this fear that with all these mysterious forces at play in the world, something’s going to get us, sooner or later. We know, but we try not to know, that we could be struck down at any moment by any of a thousand maladies. Maybe it’s a virus. Maybe it’s punishing economic forces. The worst that a virus or economic forces can do, however, is kill us.

Frederick Nietzsche said, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Well, we can do better than that. Believers in Jesus Christ can say, “Even that which *does* kill us makes us stronger,” because that which kills us sends us to Christ and ultimately to the new creation.

Can we lose the new creation? No, because we are more than conquerors.

Confidence in what you cannot lose

Condemnation, suffering, and any force known or unknown cannot take new creation from us. God justifies us, suffering is a sign that we belong to God, and we are more than conquerors.

Can we lose the new creation? Absolutely not! At the end of the day, 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.

Fear of what you can lose is best addressed by confidence in what you cannot lose. And what you cannot lose is priceless. If you believe in Christ, you cannot lose the new creation: God will graciously give you everything.

God will wipe away every tear that’s been shed for all that’s been lost (Revelation 21:4). In fact, everything

that you lose, or at the very least everything that you value about what you lose, will not only be restored to you, it will also be restored to you in an enhanced way.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way: “What would it be to taste at the fountainhead that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating? Yet that, I believe, is what lies before us. The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy.”⁸

Indeed, we’re drinking at the lower reaches now. In the new creation, we’ll be drinking at the fountainhead—the fountainhead of joy.

What are you afraid of losing? Fear not! In this creation awesome things will happen. Awful things will happen. Do not be afraid.

What shall we say to these things?

Paul asks the question, “What then shall we say to these things?”

In Romans 8, Paul is trying to show us how great it is to know Christ, both now and into forever. Do I understand how great it is? No. It seems to me that at best, with the Spirit’s help, I appreciate some of it some of the time. I know there’s so much more to knowing Christ than what I’m appreciating now—which in a strange way, gives me hope. If I’m only scratching the surface, so the speak, then there’s so much more to scratch. There’s so much more to appreciate.

So I’ll keep scratching, knowing that one fine day, I’ll look into my Savior’s eyes. I wonder: What *then* shall I say to these things?

Some years ago, I took a weeklong class on Romans taught by a world-renowned scholar, I. Howard Marshall of Scotland. His approach was scholarly, not pastoral. 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 in Christ Jesus our Lord,” the old professor leaned forward against the lectern, peered out at us, and

declared, with just a twinge of emotion, “And you can’t do better than that!”

Indeed, if nothing can separate us from the love of God, then we’re bound for glory!

Endnotes

- ¹ 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.”
- ² 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).
- ³ In verses 31-32 Paul echoes Romans 5:8-9 as he rounds out the section that spans Romans 5-8.
- ⁴ John Piper, *Unsparing Pain, Unsparing Pleasure* (1991, 1998).
- ⁵ Patrick Doyle, “John Prine: The Last Days and Beautiful Life of an American Original,” *Rolling Stone* (April 13, 2020).
- ⁶ 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 is my adversary?” and “. . . who is he who will declare me guilty?” 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 wear out like a garment” (Isaiah 50:9).
- ⁷ Marlena Graves, *A Beautiful Disaster: Finding Hope in the Midst of Brokenness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos press, 2014), 6.
- ⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 14.