

Romans 8:31-39: The triumph of God

Many of us will be familiar with this passage from funeral services. Although it is a very suitable reading for a funeral service for a believer, we should not separate the passage from its context. The previous passage ended on a note of confident assurance and to round off the whole section Paul writes what is almost a song of salvation, forming a triumphant passage at the heart of the letter, though, in this case it is likely that Paul's frantic dictation has assumed a hymn-like quality rather than his quoting from a hymn already known. The theme of 'no condemnation' (Romans 8:1) is still in Paul's mind and if God does not condemn, no one else can condemn either. To make his point Paul asks a series of what we would call 'rhetorical questions'.

In one of my churches some years ago I had a fellow who always sat near to the front. When I asked what I thought was a rhetorical question, he always answered it quite loudly. You would have thought that at random he stood a 50:50 chance of getting the answer right. I don't know, therefore, how he managed to get the answer wrong on almost every occasion. The end product was that I soon stopped using rhetorical questions. However, proper rhetorical questions are really something more than that. They are not simply questions without an answer – they are questions that help us realise the force of the argument. To make his point, Paul will ask a succession of important questions. 'What shall we say in response to this?' A question designed to make us think about what he has just said. If God is for us, who can be against us? Will he not graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? Who is he that condemns? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? If we did not have the questions, we would not be able to meditate and ponder on the true significance of the answers, both the ones that Paul leaves us to work out for ourselves and the ones that he gives us.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

(Romans 8:31)

'In response to this' could simply mean the previous section but this question is going to bring the whole of the first half of Romans to a conclusion. There is an unmistakable note of triumph, 'if God is for us, who can be against us?' This confidence is rooted in Paul's strong belief in one God, who has acted in Christ and by the Spirit. It is not simply that his 'god' is for his people but that God, the one and only God, is for his people. In one sense, the answer to the question might simply be, 'no one', but what Paul is really saying is compared with the authority and might of the one true God, even if the whole world were against his people such opposition would be insignificant. In the final judgment God's will is done.

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

(Romans 8:32)

In the phrase, 'he who did not spare his own Son,' Paul does not miss the fact that God's judgment has been executed at great cost to God himself, for none other than God's own Son could take away the sin of the world and provide reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19). Fallen mankind's sin has to be dealt with and God deals with it by giving up his own Son as a sacrifice (Romans 3:25; 8:3). The Son was not an unwilling victim (Galatians 2:20) and the Father was not an unwilling donor. Paul is clear that this is for 'all', meaning both Jew and Gentile. There is a clear echo of the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:16), where Abraham did not withhold his only son. Paul did not make any mention of Abraham and Isaac in Chapter 4 but instead alludes to the passage here, showing that the real significance of the story is not the faithfulness of Abraham (the patriarch of devout Jews) but the faithfulness of God. If God has given Christ (the greatest gift) he is not likely to withhold any lesser gifts, rather he will give all things, the fullness of salvation.

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.

(Romans 8:33)

The word Paul uses, 'charges', is a legal word referring to the formal process of prosecution. The 'elect of God' are those whom God has chosen. The answer to the question, 'who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?' must be, 'No one'. In Jewish thought, it was often Satan who was the accuser (Zechariah 3:1-2). Any such charge would be futile for it is God who justifies (Gk *dikaiōn*, δικαιῶν). This word has the sense of God's continued action (cf. Isaiah 50:8-9).

Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

(Romans 8:34)

It is clear that only God, as eternal judge, could give the sentence of condemnation but Paul affirms that Christ has been given a share in God's role as judge. By his death, Christ has secured the removal of sin and guilt and, by his resurrection, Christ has opened the way to new life (1 Corinthians 15:20-22) and is able to give that new life to those who trust in him for salvation. His exaltation to the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1) is a place of special honour and power. The inference is that the one at the position of greatest influence is a more powerful and favoured advocate for the believer than any one accuser or adversary (Hebrews 4:4-16; 7:25), not least because of his sacrificial death.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

(Romans 8:35)

Paul often interchanges the love of God and the love of Christ (Romans 8:39), emphasising that they are, in effect, one and the same. The simple answer to Paul's question is 'nothing' but Paul wants the reader to grasp the full impact of what he is saying and so, like a good preacher, gives a list – a rather formidable list – of things that might separate the believer from the love of Christ before he reaches his own magnificent conclusion. It would be a mistake to think that this list is exhaustive or that each individual word has its own distinct meaning. Douglas Moo is a tutor at Wheaton College, near Chicago, Illinois. He uses as an example the English expression 'sick and tired'. In the expression, 'sick and tired', we do not normally mean that we are both 'sick' and 'tired' rather the two words work together to convey a single idea. In actual fact the example that Dr Moo uses, 'If I say I am "sick and tired" of the hot weather' caused me to search for him on the internet to see where such an example might be imaginable (Moo, 2000:286). The words 'trouble', perhaps better translated 'tribulation' (*ESV*, Gk *thlipsis*, θλιψις) and 'hardship', perhaps better translated 'distress' (*ESV*, Gk *stenochōria*, στενοχωρία), suggest that Paul has the fearsome tribulation of the end time in view. He often uses these two words together to convey that idea (cf. Romans 2:9; 2 Corinthians 6:4). 'Persecution' (Gk *diōgmos*, διωγμος) always has the sense of persecution for religious reasons. Famine is a feature of the last days (cf. Mark 13:8) and lack of food and clothing are a typical description of human deprivation. The words, 'danger' or 'sword', imply war or a violent death – perhaps Paul has his own circumstances in mind (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27; 12:10) – but as Christ passed through such sufferings so his love reaches back to those who are still caught up in these tribulations so that he can sustain and bring his people to be where he is.

As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

(Romans 8:36)

The quotation (Psalm 44:22) would have been familiar because the rabbis used it to refer to the martyrs of the Maccabean and Hadrian times but Paul might also have had other Old Testament prophecies in mind (Zechariah 11:4, 7; Isaiah 53:7). The contrast is that whereas as the Maccabean martyrs died for the sake of God's laws, Christ, and being in Christ, expresses the special relationship between God and his people. Nevertheless, suffering has always been the lot of the godly and the New Testament believers could trace their sufferings back to Christ and rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer for his name (cf. Acts 5:41).

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

(Romans 8:37)

'More than conquerors' (Gk *hypernikōmen*, υπερνικωμεν) expresses the overwhelming victory that is the believer's in Christ. The translation goes all the way back to the Geneva Bible (1557). Paul likes putting the prefix 'hyper' before words. In Christ, believers are 'hyper-victors' because, in whatever circumstances a believer might be, whatever a believer might face, the love of Christ is more than a match, even for the

worst that can happen. Consequently, there is nothing that the believer needs to fear. The past tense, 'through him who loved us', does not mean that Christ has stopped, rather it takes the believer back to the time when Christ's love was tested to its limits but did not fail, even at the cross. For at the cross, he overcame sin and death and by his glorious resurrection gives the believer the one ground of hope that stands firm even when all else trembles and shakes and collapses into ruin.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38-39)

Paul's conviction is based primarily on God's love in Christ, as displayed through his death upon the cross and the subsequent triumph of his resurrection. Paul puts 'life and death' together in a pair because in one sense that covers every possible situation. Death has been dealt with through Christ's death on the cross, so that death holds no fear for or power over the believer. The believer may have trials and tribulations in this life but nothing in life can overwhelm the believer. 'Angels' and 'demons' (more accurately 'rulers', Gk *archai*, ἀρχαί) are another pair, not meant to be read separately but together expressing heavenly beings.

I think what we need here is a sense of Christian balance. With regard to angels, I want to affirm that I believe in angels but I do not expect to see them on every street corner. As an aside, perhaps I should say that although angel-worship seems to have been a problem at Colosse, I am not aware of Christians falling into that trap today. However, I think that some Christians have fallen into the trap of an undue emphasis on 'supernatural manifestations' and experiences. This is a trap I think is best avoided, especially by emotional and impressionable people. To return to angels, when I was minister at Mitcham, Surrey, after the morning service – and I do wish that from the beginning that I had kept a notebook of what people say to me after the services – a woman said to me, 'I saw two angels stood one either side of you in the pulpit'. I immediately put her down as a 'nutter' not because she said she had seen two angels but because she was nowhere near frightened enough to have done so and, therefore, I concluded that she was unbalanced. The same caution needs to be exercised with the evil-supernatural. C. S. Lewis remarked that we either tend to ignore Satan and his minions or give them far too much credit. Probably, both as a reaction to the scepticism of the first part of the last century and as a spin-off of the charismatic movement's proper emphasis on the divine supernatural, some Christians have been giving Satan and his minions rather too much credit. While evangelical Christians rightly emphasise 'spiritual warfare' some Christians have sincerely and yet bizarrely been holding prayer meetings in the toilets to exorcise them from territorial spirits. I would have thought that they were better to pray in the chapel and use *Domestos* in the lavatories.

Paul moves from the spiritual dimension to the temporal dimension. Neither these (angels nor powers), nor the present nor the future, nor any other type of heavenly powers (Gk *dynameis*, δυναμεις) hold any fear for the believer. Paul probably borrows an expression from astronomy. The whole sweep of the heavens, the highest point in the sky reached by any heavenly body and the lowest point of the planet's course are not greater than the heights or depths of the love or power of God. The same applies to any astrological powers. It may be the case that Christians today are not particularly worried about astrological powers. That said, in the world of the New Testament many people believed that human destiny was controlled by astrological powers. I try hard to drive around with my eyes open and discover that our so-called 'post-modern world' must be more receptive to this kind of thinking that I realised. In my area a shabby street where we would not think of trying to open a Christian shop has a 'psychic shop'. I regularly pass notices advertising psychic fairs and clairvoyance evenings and my well-worn quip about the clairvoyance evening being cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances is beginning to wear a bit thin. Celebrity astrologers are given airtime on national television and radio broadcasts. All kinds of fortune telling are pretty commonplace in our society. In fact, I have concluded that about the only thing that is not acceptable in the media is a robust, evangelical Christian faith that unashamedly and unequivocally declares, 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

If Paul has missed anything out he simply adds, 'nor anything else in all creation'. Nothing in all creation can separate the believer from God's love 'in Christ Jesus our Lord'. God's covenanted love in Christ embraces all who believe, both Jew and Gentile. The chapter began with the message of 'no condemnation' and ends with the message of 'no separation' (Carson, 1994:1139).

One of the things I have tried to do in this series of five studies is to show the value of consecutive Bible reading. We might have done better on Romans 8 if we had made our way through Romans 1-7 but at least we have had a sustained attempt at Romans 8. One of the biggest mistakes we can make in reading the Bible is to read paragraphs in isolation from one another (Bible reading notes, Sunday school classes and even sermons do this). The biblical authors meant their books to be read as books (though there are exceptions, e.g. Psalms) and to follow their reasoning.

For me, there was no greater Methodist in the last half of the twentieth century than Dr Donald English. Although people do not believe me when I say this, I was personally responsible for his being the only minister since Methodist union to be President of the Methodist Conference twice. I attended the Methodist Conference at Westminster, London, in 1988 and when I saw the list of people who had been nominated as President, I did not find on it anyone to my particular liking. I asked a colleague, Dr Peter Graves, if anyone could be President of the Methodist Conference twice. He said he did not know of any reason why that should not happen and so I said, 'well, then, I'm putting down Donald English,' who had been President in 1978. Those around me agreed that they would do the same and Donald English appeared on the list with 11 votes. The next year (1989), I was not at the Methodist Conference in Leicester but Donald English's name was bottom of the list of presidential candidates. In those days,

10 or more votes were required for your name to appear on the list. I think Donald English was absent from the session of conference where the voting took place and discovered to his surprise that he had been designated President for 1990 in his absence.

In November 2000, I got slightly lost in Oxfordshire and suddenly realised that I was in the village of Shipton-under-Wychwood. Stopping at the Parish Church, I realised that in all probability, Donald English, who had been my tutor at Wesley College and whom I always (I hope not presumptuously) counted as a friend, would have been buried there, after what many of us considered his all too early death in 1998. About one month after my own Father had died in 1989, Donald English came to my church at Mitcham. I had chosen this hymn, which Donald English said that he and his wife always sang to the tune, *Anchor*, at particularly difficult times in their life. I was therefore not surprised that the last line of the hymn's fifth verse is his epitaph. Translated from the German of Johann Rothe (1688-1755), *Ich habe nun den Grund gefunden*, John Wesley produced a rather free translation of the hymn and published it in his *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740) with the remarkable title 'Redemption Found' (Haley, 2005:13). Each verse mentions 'mercy' but verse five concludes, 'Father, thy mercy never dies'.

Now I have found the ground wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain -
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heav'n and earth are fled away.

Father, thine everlasting grace
Our scanty thought surpasses far,
Thy heart still melts with tenderness,
Thy arms of love still open are
Returning sinners to receive,
That mercy they may taste and live.

O Love, thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in thee!
Covered is my unrighteousness,
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,
While Jesu's blood through earth and skies
'Mercy, free, boundless mercy!' cries.

With faith I plunge me in this sea,
Here is my hope, my joy, my rest;
Hither, when hell assails, I flee,
I look into my Saviour's breast;
Away, sad doubt and anxious fear!
Mercy is all that's written there.

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies -
Father, thy mercy never dies!

Fixed on this ground will I remain,
Though my heart fail and flesh decay;
This anchor shall my soul sustain,
When earth's foundations melt away;
Mercy's full power I then shall prove,
Loved with an everlasting love.

(*HP* 684, Now I have found the ground)

Abbreviations

ESV	<i>Holy Bible, English Standard Version</i>
HP	<i>Hymns and Psalms</i>
KJV	<i>Holy Bible, King James Version (Authorised Version)</i>
NIV	<i>Holy Bible, New International Version</i>

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