

SUFFERING AND THE LOVE OF GOD
ROMANS 8:35-39

We have questions about love. We want to know what love will do. When we are in love (or think we are in love), we will ask questions like:

- ✓ Will the person I love return that love to me?
- ✓ Will the person I love forgive me when I sin against her?
- ✓ Will the person I love be willing to sacrifice for me?
- ✓ Will the person I love meet my needs and longings?

We want to know what love will do *for us*, but we also want to know what love won't do:

- ✓ Will the person I love harm me?
- ✓ Will the person I love keep me secure, or will he put me in precarious positions?

If we ask these kinds of questions about each other, we certainly will also ask those kinds of questions about God and His love. We want to know, "Is God's love safe?" "Are we safe when we are loved by God?"

Near the end of Romans 8, the apostle Paul explained the golden chain of salvation (**vv. 29-30**). Having offered the assurance of that truth, Paul then embarks on a series of questions that relate to that salvation:

- ✓ What shall we say to these things? (v. 31a)
- ✓ If God is for us, who is against us? (v. 31b)
- ✓ How will He not freely also give us all things? (v. 32)
- ✓ Who will bring a charge against God's elect? (v. 33)
- ✓ Who is the one who condemns? (v. 34)
- ✓ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (v. 35)

The first five questions are legal and judicial — what is our legal standing before God? Has God done enough to meet the requirements to save and secure us?

The last question is personal and relational — does God care about us? Does Christ love us and is His love deep enough to hold us and keep us in Himself, no matter what? Are we safe? Paul's conclusion is clear:

WHEN THE BELIEVER IS IN CHRIST AND LOVED BY CHRIST, NOTHING CAN REMOVE HIM FROM THAT LOVE.

As we ask this one last question — Who (or what) will separate us from the love of Christ? — I want to ask five implied questions from these verses:

1. What **CIRCUMSTANCES** Can Separate Us from Christ's Love? (v. 35)
2. Will **MARTYRDOM** Separate Us from Christ's Love? (v. 36)
3. What is Our **POSITION** in Christ? (v. 37)
4. What **POWERS** Can Separate Us from Christ's Love? (vv. 38-39)
5. Of What Are **YOU** Convinced? (vv. 38-39)

1. What CIRCUMSTANCES Can Separate Us from Christ's Love? (v. 35)

- We need to notice several things about the question Paul asks:
 - ✓ When he says **who**, he is not just speaking of people, but he is using the pronoun more broadly to refer to any person or circumstance that might separate us from Christ's love.
 - ✓ When he refers to Christ's love, he is speaking of Christ's love for us, not our love for Christ — in other words, is there any circumstance that would indicate Christ has stopped loving us?
 - ✓ As we prepare to answer the question, we also need to remember what the love of Christ is:
 - There is a general love that God & Christ have for all mankind (e.g., Jn. 3:16)
 - There is a particular love that God & Christ have for those who are adopted into His family (5:6-10; 1 Jn. 4:9-10)
 - I cannot improve on what commentator says about the love Paul has in mind here: "...it is in the 'giving of his Son' 'for us' that God's love is preeminently shown; and God's love for us is not simply an 'emotion' but his gracious action on our behalf." [Moo, 543.]
 - ✓ The word **separate** means "to cause a division," or "to create a space between..." The word is used of Christ's holy separation from sinners (Heb. 7:26) and of the divorce of a marriage (Mt. 19:6).
 - ✓ The way Paul asks the question, he anticipates a negative answer — "No, there is nothing that can divorce our relationship with Christ, once we are in Him."
- What are the kinds of circumstances that sometimes entice us to think Christ's love for us has ended?
 - ✓ **tribulation** = this is a broad term of any kind of trial or pressure. It is hardship from external circumstances (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:11-13).
 - ✓ **distress** = this word is often used in conjunction with "tribulation," and refers to internal pressures. It is the internal anguish we experience with the external pressures. It is the feeling of being "hemmed in" with no place to go.
 - ✓ **persecution** = not only are there external and internal pressures in the world, but there are also people who seek to do us harm — believers are harassed, oppressed, and persecuted (2 Tim. 3:11).
 - ✓ **famine** = some suffering relates to the basics of food and clothing — there is not enough to eat and there is **nakedness**, which likely refers simply to destitution that keeps one from being able to acquire appropriate clothing. There is no money to provide for even the most basic necessities.
 - ✓ **peril** = these are dangers — and as Paul knew, there are many kinds of dangers (2 Cor. 11:26).
 - ✓ **sword** = this refers to violent death and judgment (Heb. 11:34, 37).
 - ✓ As I have noted previously, these are not theoretical ideas to Paul. These are things that *he* has experienced (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-29; 12:10). The only thing he didn't experience in this list was the **sword**, and he would experience that in a few years also (2 Tim. 4:18).
 - ✓ These are realities for the believer, but they do not mean that Christ has stopped loving you.

✓ Instead, they are part of the ***all things*** that God has designed to conform us to Christ (vv. 28-29).

- There is a temptation to play a “He loves me...He loves me not” game with God, based on our circumstances. We believe if our circumstances are easy and pleasant, then God loves us and if we are in hardship that must mean God no longer loves us. My friend, if God has set His love on you, it is no fickle love you have received. It is an eternal and infinite love that is unwavering. Difficult circumstances do not preclude His love for you. Instead, difficult circumstances are an opportunity for you to be drawn to Him and hold close to Him and be held close by Him. The words of William Cowper’s hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” are helpful —

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by *feeble sense*, but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.

- When we evaluate God’s love for us based on our circumstances, we are basing our evaluation on feeble senses; instead we need to base it on the sure Word of God where He promises to keep His beloved (which we will see esp. in vv. 38-39).

2. Will **MARTYRDOM** Separate Us from Christ’s Love? (v. 36)

- In verse 36, Paul quotes **Ps. 44:22**.
 - ✓ The imagery in this verse is powerful — it denotes a slaughterhouse for the worshipper. This is persecution and martyrdom at its worst. The worshipper has not abandoned God, but is humiliated, mocked, suffering, and defeated — and ultimately facing death.
 - ✓ In the Psalm, the psalmist suggests that his persecution is unwarranted; if he had forgotten God and worshipped another god, then God would know, and his inference is that his suffering would be justified as discipline from God (**Ps. 44:20-21**). But he has not forgotten God; in fact, it is because he is a worshipper of God that he is being persecuted and suffering, so he appeals to God to remember and protect him (Ps. 44:23-26).
 - ✓ Paul is using this psalm as a reminder that his suffering (and the persecution of all believers) is not a lack of God’s love. The Israelites (and we) are not being persecuted because God doesn’t love us. He will not hide His face from us (**v. 24**) and He will rise up and redeem us (**v. 26**).
 - ✓ Persecution is a reality for believers (**2 Tim. 3:11-12**), but that does not mean God does not love us.
- If persecution, death, and martyrdom meant the absence of God’s love, then Christ was not loved by His heavenly Father. Christ went as a lamb to the slaughter (**Acts 8:32-33**) and He is supremely loved by the Father (**Rom. 8:34**).

- ✓ We can expect persecution, but that persecution is no indicator of the absence of God's love. It may, in fact, be an indicator of our love for Christ to a dying world (2 Cor. 4:10-12).
- ✓ In persecution, as in all things, we should give thanks for the privilege of testifying to Him and then rest in the power of His love to keep us (Acts 5:40-42).

3. What is Our POSITION in Christ? (v. 37)

- As we've noted, it is tempting to believe when in suffering and persecution that God no longer loves us.
 - ✓ But Paul interjects a strong contrastive in v. 37 — **but**. Suffering is a reality and it feels like defeat, but there is something else going on in the midst of the suffering.
 - ✓ The way Paul uses **but** in this sentence has the sense that he is aware of a secret that his readers aren't. He knows their desperation, but he also knows something else — like Popeye beat up on the ground, who knows his spinach is available, or the superhero who knows the cape underneath his clothes is available. There is an authority and power beyond the trouble that the believer must consider.
 - ✓ **In all these things** — that is, in all the things of suffering mentioned in v. 35. There is a reality to those situations. Believers *are* beat up and bloodied...we waver, weep, and agonize. [Ortlund] Persecutors and Satan do attack. Death comes in untimely ways. We are shunned and rejected. We live alone. But in all those things, and more, we are *not defeated*.
 - ✓ In fact, **we overwhelmingly conquer**. This is the only time this compound word appears in the NT. It is the word "victory" (*nikaō*, "Nike") with the pronoun "above" attached to it. It refers to a glorious victory and a lopsided victory. It is a rout — a complete devastation of the opponent. It is a victory that is beyond a victory.
- We are overwhelming conquerors not because of what we are but because of who Christ is.
 - ✓ Note that Paul says this overwhelming victory comes **through Him who loved us**.
 - ✓ When did Christ love us? He loved us when He chose us, and then when He laid aside the glory of His deity, taking on humanity, and then dying on the cross for us (5:6-10; Col. 2:15; Gal. 2:20).
 - ✓ It is not that we conquer by avoiding the trouble; we conquer because He has secured us by His death and resurrection (6:11ff).
 - ✓ And we overcome by persevering with Christ in the suffering. We prove that we are His and that we are loved by Him because we persevere with Him (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17; 3:12; 12:11; 2 Tim. 4:18).
- If you are in Christ, Satan is defeated, sin and death is defeated, and you are victorious.
 - ✓ Our victory is not *our* victory, but Christ's victory. But if we are in Christ, that victory is accounted to us and we are safe because of Him.
 - ✓ It is "not through any courage, endurance or determination of our own, but through Christ, and not even by our hold on Him but by His hold on us, that we are more than conquerors." [Cranfield]
 - ✓ Be sure of His love for you in your trials, resting in His great act of love on the cross for you.

4. What **POWERS** Can Separate Us from Christ's Love? (vv. 38-39)

- In verse 35 Paul asked what circumstances or people might separate us from Christ's love. Here he emphasizes various powers that might indicate we have been separated from Christ's love. These powers are organized as four pairs and two individual powers.
 - ✓ **Death** and **life** = Death is our enemy and the dreaded separator (e.g., Ps. 6:5; 30:9). But death does not separate us from God's love, but is the fulfillment of His love for us — we groan and long for the transformation that comes through death (8:23-25; Phil. 1:21b). Likewise, life does not distract us from Christ, because life is all about Christ (Phil. 1:21-22; Col. 3:4).
 - ✓ **Angels** and **principalities** = Here he is referring to angels in general and those who have some authority within the angelic realm. These are likely ungodly angels for no heavenly angel would attempt to remove us from God's love for us. Even demonic angels are incapable of subverting God's love for us, since Christ is the ruler of all angelic powers (Col. 2:10, 15).
 - ✓ **Things present and things to come** = No present circumstance in life for which we are fearful and not future situation for which we are anxious will overwhelm God's love. His love wasn't overcome in the past and it won't be in the future either. No present temptation or future sin will overwhelm God's love for the believer. In fact, what is to come for the believer is glorious (vv. 18ff; Eph. 1:21).
 - ✓ **Height and depth** = Things that are high or low. These were astrological terms — things above and below the horizon. They later came to be used of Heaven and Hell (perhaps like Ps. 139:8). There is nothing in the created world — natural or supernatural — that will inhibit God's love for His own.
 - ✓ **Powers** = This is probably another reference to angelic beings; transcendent powers cannot transcend God's infinite power.
 - ✓ **Any other created thing** = In case he has missed anything, Paul uses this term to refer to all other things — there is nothing in creation that can separate the believer from God's love. You're safe.
- Notice why Paul says we are safe:
 - ✓ There is no ability (**able** — "power") of any created thing to **separate** us from God's love. The word **separate** is the same as v. 35 — there is nothing that can divorce us from God, once we are in Christ.
 - ✓ Every power that has any power is all subservient to God's power and God's love. The saving and securing love of God overwhelms every other power.
 - ✓ God's love is victorious because every other power is a finite power because it is a created power. Christ's love wins because His love and power are infinite and eternal and because He is **Lord**. That is, He is sovereign and the Master of all things. Nothing can overcome His love for His people.
 - ✓ Notice also the pronouns in this verse — **separate us...our Lord**. The safety and security spoken of in these verses are only for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you are not a Christian and if you haven't trusted Christ for your salvation, you are not safe.
 - ✓ If you are not a Christian, you must repent of your sin and trust Christ alone for your salvation (4:5).

5. Of What Are YOU Convinced? (vv. 38-39)

- In verse 38, Paul says he is **convinced** of this truth. It means that he is persuaded and compelled.
 - ✓ In fact, it means that he has been previously convinced and he remains convinced.
 - ✓ No circumstance of his life has changed his opinion of God's love for Him.
 - ✓ Notice also that in v. 35 he asked a question, but here he is making a declarative statement. He is taking a stand on the permanence of the love of God. Nothing can remove it from us.
- But there is another aspect to Paul being convinced that is implied throughout this passage.
 - ✓ Paul is also convinced that it is worth staying with God. It is worth persevering in our faith.
 - ✓ Not only are we convinced that God does not lose His love for us, but the implication is that there is no circumstance or trial or pressure or persecution or power that should compel us to wander away from God.
- So here is the question — Paul is convinced about God's love and the value of persevering with Christ — are you also convinced of Christ's love and the priority of remaining with Christ?
 - ✓ Will you remain with Christ only when it *appears* that He loves you? Or will you persist with Him?
 - ✓ There are dreadful things in life — hard things and powerful things. The believer in Christ is the one who continues on with Christ even through those difficulties. Even when life is hard, it's worth enduring if we have Christ (5:3-5). Do you believe that?

CONCLUSION: In C. S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, one of the children in Narnia asks Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about the Lion, Aslan:

"Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe?"

'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

If by safety we mean that we will never have problems and burdens and trials in this life, no then God is not safe, for He *will* use those things to sanctify us and drive us to Him (Rom. 8:28-29). But if by "safe" we mean that we are secure in His love for us and that we can take refuge in Him and find comfort in Him, then, yes, friend, He is immeasurably safe. Our salvation is secure in Him. We are secure in Him. And we are eternally and irrevocably loved by Him, when we are in Christ.

If you are in Christ, you are loved by Christ, secure in Christ, and safe in Christ.

BENEDICTION: Romans 8:37-39