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ENDURING OPPOSITION

Romans 8:31-32

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Romans, Lesson 54

Enduring Opposition Romans 8:31-32

A main question that I wrestle with as I study the Bible is, "So what?" What difference is this text supposed to make in my life and in others' lives? Sometimes, that question is difficult to answer. I'm currently reading through 1 Chronicles, which begins with nine chapters of genealogies. Why did God put *that* into Scripture? I can't deal with that here, but when we study the Bible we always need to ask: "So what?"

Paul raises that question in Romans 8:31 with reference to the wonderful truths that he has just unfolded in 8:28-30: "What then shall we say to these things?" Many scholars say that "these things" refers back to everything Paul has written so far in Romans about the gospel of justification by faith alone, and that may be so. But it seems to me that his question in 8:31 refers especially to the great truths that Paul has just enunciated in 8:28-30:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

As we've seen, verses 29-30 explain verse 28. The reason that all things work together for good for God's people is that our salvation from first to last is from the Lord. He originated it before the foundation of the world by choosing to set His love on us and by predestining us to be conformed to the image of His Son. At a point in our lives, He called us and justified us. And He will bring our salvation to completion when we share His glory at His second coming. And this entire process is secure because it isn't ultimately about us, but about Jesus Christ being the firstborn (= having pre-eminence) among many brethren. If God's purpose to glorify His Son is secure, then our salvation is secure.

Paul then especially focuses on these wonderful truths when he asks, "What then shall we say to these things?" His answer is that God is for us, which is proved by the amazing demonstration of His love when He gave His Son to die for us on the cross.

These verses have widespread application to all our needs. But in the context, Paul is especially focused on how we as believers can endure opposition and hardship for the sake of the gospel. Note Paul's repeated questions: "Who is against us?" (8:31); "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" (8:33); "Who is the one who condemns?" (8:34); and, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (8:35). He is applying the truths of 8:28-30 to how we can stand firm in the face of opposition and hardship for the sake of the gospel.

That's a topic that most of us know very little about firsthand. Maybe you've been ridiculed by family or friends or a university professor because of your faith in Christ. Maybe you've been discriminated against at work because you're a Christian. But probably none of us have been thrown into prison or had our homes burned down or our families or our lives threatened or harmed because of our faith. That may soon change, as our religious freedom is under strong attack. Jesus predicted that His message would cause families to be divided against one another and even betray one another to death (Matt. 10:21-22; 34-38). So we need to be prepared to endure opposition so that we stand firm for the gospel. Paul is saying,

To endure opposition, focus on God's great love as seen in
His gift of His own Son.

Sometimes verse 32 is yanked out of context and misapplied: "God promises to freely give us all things! Do you need a nicer house or a new car? Claim it by faith in this verse! Guys, do you want a successful career and a supermodel wife who wants to bear your children and keep house and make delicious meals for you every night? Claim it all by faith!"

But that is *not* what verse 32 promises! The context is, "Do you want to endure faithfully tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword for Jesus' sake (8:35)? God, who loved you so much that He sent His own Son to die for your sins, will give you the grace and strength that you need to bear up under

every trial for the sake of the gospel. God, who has done the most for you by giving His own Son, will help you endure every trial that you go through for Christ's sake. Because of His great love for you, He will bring you safely to glory. Paul applies three great truths to help us persevere:

1. The truth of God's sovereignty in saving us demands a response of worship and total submission.

"What then shall we say to these things?" (8:31a). I get the impression that Paul was stunned and awed by the truths that he has just spelled out in 8:28-30. It's staggering that God chose to save us before we were born, that He called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9), that He justified us apart from any works on our part, and that our future glorification with Him is a done deal (past tense, "glorified")!

So the question is, "What then will *you* say to these things?" Will you say, "Predestination is just a controversial doctrine that doesn't relate to my life"? Or, "That's nice, but it doesn't relate to my advancement in my career"? If you can just shrug off the glorious truths of 8:28-30, something is seriously wrong with your heart before God! Our response should be as Isaac Watts expressed it ("When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"), "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all."

2. The truth that God is for us in the gospel means that we must evaluate all opposition and difficulties in light of God's grace.

"If God is for us, who is against us?" (8:31b). As many commentators point out, "if" does not indicate uncertainty about God's favor. It could legitimately be translated, "Since God is for us, who is against us?" In light of the fact that God foreknew us, predestined us, called us, justified us, and glorified us, we *know* that He *is* for us. And, if God is for us, then who can be against us? To be against us would be to go against God Himself!

Paul is not denying the reality of strong opposition. In 8:35 he mentions tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. In 8:36 he cites Psalm 44:22, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." In Ephesians 6:10-13 he mentions that we are wres-

ting against powerful spiritual forces of darkness in heavenly places. So he does not mean that we do not have any opponents, but rather that anyone who comes against us when we are standing for the truth of the gospel is actually going against God Himself. They may succeed in taking our lives (Matt. 10:28), but God will glorify us and judge those against us who do not repent.

But, how do we *really know* that God is for us? After all, some of the greatest atrocities in history have been justified because the perpetrator thought that God was on his side. Incredibly, Adolf Hitler interpreted the Japanese slaughter of Americans at Pearl Harbor as a sign that God was on his side as he exterminated the Jews (Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer* [Thomas Nelson], pp. 390-391)!

But, on the other side of things, Jacob thought that the difficult circumstances in his life were all against him, which was far from the truth. He needed to know what Joseph knew, that although Jacob's other sons meant these things for evil, God meant them for good (see Gen. 42:36; 50:20). Here are three steps to work through to evaluate your critics:

First, make sure that God is for you. Either God is for you or He is against you. He isn't neutral! And if God is against you, then who can be for you? God is the worst conceivable enemy to have in the entire universe! And if you're not in Christ then you're under God's righteous wrath and headed for eternal judgment (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:5). So make sure that your hope for escaping God's judgment does not lie in your own good works, but only in Christ's death on your behalf. Make sure that you're standing for the gospel.

Second, examine your heart by asking whether God could be using the opponent or critic to get you to deal with some blind spot, shortcoming, or sin. In other words, don't quickly blow off a critic by saying, "God is for me, so this critic is on Satan's side." Even if your opponent is motivated by selfishness or sin, God may be using him to get you to deal with an area in your life that needs attention. I've found that if more than one critic says the same thing, even if their attitude is wrong, I probably need to listen to their criticism.

Third, after you have honestly taken the first two steps, don't take the attacks against you personally. If you're catching flak because you're standing for the truth, first make sure that you are doing so with

gentleness, graciousness, and humility. If to the best of your ability you are, then your critic is probably opposing God and His Word of truth, not you. You're just the messenger. Pray that God will use your gracious, loving response to bring the critic to repentance and faith (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Also, before we leave verse 31, make sure that you apply the truth that *God is for you* to yourself, especially in times of failure, discouragement, or sin. Maybe you had a mean father who constantly put you down and when you messed up, he would backhand you in the face or beat you with a belt. Maybe now you've messed up as a Christian and you're afraid that God is going to act like your dad did. You need to know that God *never* does anything that is against you. He will discipline you, perhaps severely, but it is always out of love so that you might share His holiness (Heb. 12:5-12). God *never* acts in a way to tear you down or reject you. He *always* acts in love, for your good, even when He corrects you.

So the first truth is that God's sovereignty in saving us demands a response of worship and submission. The second truth, that God is for us in the gospel, means that we must evaluate all opposition and difficulties in light of His love and grace.

3. The truth that God has done the greatest thing for us in the sacrifice of His own Son means that He will supply us with all that is needed for life and godliness.

This is the wonderful promise of 8:32: "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?" Paul's happy logic is, "God did the greatest thing imaginable when He gave His own Son for us on the cross. So don't you think that He will graciously give you lesser things that you need?" As I said, this is not a prosperity gospel, where God promises to fulfill your greed or lusts. As verse 36 indicates, you may follow Jesus and get slaughtered!

Rather, verse 32 promises that God will give you the grace that you need to endure opposition and persecution when you stand for the gospel. Beyond that, it also applies in the sense of 2 Peter 1:3, that God "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." The Puritan, John Flavel, put it this way (cited by John Piper, *Future Grace*, [Multnomah Publishers], p. 117): "Surely

if he would not spare this own Son one stroke, one tear, one groan, one sigh, one circumstance of misery, it can never be imagined that ever he should, after this, deny or withhold from his people, for whose sakes all this was suffered, any mercies, any comforts, any privilege, spiritual or temporal, which is good for them." Note first:

- A. God has done the greatest thing imaginable for us by sacrificing His own Son.

The Greek word for "spared" is used in the LXX of Genesis 22:12 (& 16), when God tells Abraham, "I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld ["spared"] your son, your only son, from Me." With Abraham, God intervened at the last moment and provided the ram for the sacrifice, so that Isaac was spared. But that emotional drama was the closest earthly picture that we have of what the Father went through in sending His eternal Son from heaven to bear the horrors of the cross on our behalf. Note four things about Christ's death:

- (1) Christ's death was not ultimately a humanly caused tragedy, but a divinely ordained solution to our sin and guilt.

God delivered over His own Son for us. There is a sense in which Judas delivered up Jesus to die (John 18:5, Greek). Also, the Jewish leaders delivered up Jesus to Pilate (Matt. 27:2). The people of Jerusalem also delivered up Jesus (Acts 3:13). Pilate delivered up Jesus to death (Mark 15:15). Paul also stated that Jesus was "delivered over because of our transgressions" (Rom. 4:25), so *we* delivered Him up to death. Paul says that Jesus "gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20, same Greek word). As Jesus said, He laid down His life on His own initiative (John 10:18).

But behind all of these causes, it was the Father who delivered over His own Son for us all! Isaiah predicted this in his great prophecy when he said that Christ would be "smitten of God" (Isa. 53:4). "The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (53:6). "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief" (53:10). Or, as Peter put it (Acts 2:23), "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." It was God's eternal purpose to glorify Himself by sending

His Son to bear our sins. The cross glorifies God's absolute righteousness and justice, in that He demanded that the penalty for our sin be paid in full. It also glorifies His great love, in that He gave His beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased.

(2) Christ's death was substitutionary.

He gave Jesus "for us all." He died in our place, taking the punishment that we deserved (Isa. 53:4-6, 8, 10). Paul says that God made Him to be sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21). Because Jesus paid the penalty, we can justly be declared righteous at His expense.

(3) Christ's death was particular, personal, and effectual.

God delivered Him over "for us all." Who is the "all" here? In the context, it is those whom God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (8:29-30). It is those whom God is for (8:31). It is "God's elect," whom He justified (8:33). It is those for whom Christ is now interceding (8:34). Note that *all* whom God foreknew, He predestined. *All* whom He predestined, He called. *All* whom He called, He justified. *All* whom He justified, He glorified. No one falls through the cracks.

Christ did not die in the hope that maybe some would decide to respond to His offer and be saved. God is not in heaven, wringing His hands in desperation, saying, "I've done all that I can do. The rest is up to them. Please, someone respond!" Rather, Christ died effectually to save all whom the Father predestined to save. He died so that "of all that [the Father] has given Me, I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39). Or as Jesus prayed just prior to the cross (John 17:1-2), "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life." A few verses later (John 17:9) He prayed, "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours." Jesus laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 14, 15, 26-28). Christ "loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

(4) Christ's death was the supreme demonstration of God's love and grace for us as sinners.

Most modern translations leave out a small Greek particle in 8:32 that the lexicon translates, "who did not spare *even* His own

Son" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Walter Bauer, William Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, & Frederick Danker [University of Chicago Press], 2nd ed., p. 152). "His *own* Son" emphasizes that Jesus is the unique Son of God in a way that we are not and never can be. We are God's adopted sons by the new birth, but Jesus is the eternal Son of God. The Father and the Son enjoyed unbroken love in the Trinity from all eternity (John 17:24).

Thus for the Father to send "even His own Son," and not to spare Him when it came to pouring out on Him the full measure of His wrath for our sakes, shows His great love for us. Parents often spare their children by not inflicting the full punishment on them for some wrong. Judges spare criminals when they impose a light sentence in view of mitigating circumstances. But God did not spare even His own Son, who became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Because Jesus bore God's awful wrath against our sin, we now face no condemnation when we stand before Him (Rom. 8:1). Thus,

B. God will graciously supply us with all that is needed for life and godliness.

Do you see Paul's logic? If God did the unimaginably greatest thing possible for us by not sparing His own Son, then won't He do that which is far less demanding? Again, this doesn't mean that He will give you a mansion, a fancy new car, a supermodel wife, and a successful career. The context deals with enduring opposition for the sake of the gospel. Paul means that when you face opposition or hardship for the sake of the gospel, through Christ God will give you all that you need to conquer overwhelmingly (8:37) as He brings you to share in Christ's glory.

Conclusion

Thus the only reasonable response is that which Paul mentions in Philippians 3:8, to count all other things as loss "in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." I confess that my sufferings for Christ are mere trifles compared with what our brothers and sisters around the world are enduring. I've had to endure some criticism and slander. Big deal! A few have tried to get me fired, but so far no one has tried to kill me.

A recent Vision Beyond Borders newsletter told of a brother in an unnamed, closed Buddhist country in southeast Asia who is

committed to take the gospel to every Buddhist monastery in that country. Several years ago, he and a friend were headed to a village to share the gospel when they offered a ride to a woman walking along the road. She invited them into her home for a meal. After dinner, they showed the Jesus film to her and some neighbors she invited over. Some of the neighbors called the police and this evangelist went to prison for seven months.

After he was released, he excitedly reported, "You'll never guess what God did. He allowed us to go to prison to bring the gospel to the prisoners! We shared the gospel with 180 prisoners, led 20 to faith in Jesus Christ, and baptized 8 in prison." One of the converted prisoners has now led 11 men to Christ in that prison. Later, he was arrested again and had many opportunities to witness, including sharing the gospel with the prison warden. He said that he feels that God has given him a prison ministry.

Where is your ministry? Have you encountered any opposition in it? If you stand for the truth of the gospel, even if you do so with grace and love, you will probably encounter opposition. You can joyfully endure it by focusing on God's love as seen in His giving even His own Son to die for your sins.

Application Questions

1. Why is the context vitally important in determining how to apply these verses? How could they be misapplied?
2. What cautions must we apply when we say that God is for us? What comforts do we forfeit if we do not apply it?
3. What is the practical value of understanding that Christ's atonement was particular, personal, and effectual?
4. Some have "suffered" for the gospel because they were rude or insensitive. How can we make sure that it is not we, but the gospel, that is the cause of offense?

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