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THE TRIUMPH OF GOD'S LOVE

Romans 8:35-39

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October 30, 2011
Romans, Lesson 56

The Triumph of God's Love Romans 8:35-39

Our text, which is the summit of Romans 1-8, and perhaps the summit of the entire Bible, extols the eternal, unchangeable, unfathomable (Eph. 3:19), life-transforming love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. James Boice (*Romans: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], 2:983) uses the analogy of a mountain climber, tied to his guide with a rope. Though the route is treacherous and he often slips, he doesn't fall to his death because of the rope. Christ is our guide who never slips and the rope that ties us securely to Him is His great love for us, as seen in the cross.

No truth will transform your life more than God's gracious love for you in Christ. To the extent that you understand it, feel it, and live daily with a deep sense of its reality, you will live in victory over temptation and sin and be able joyfully to persevere through trials. And so Paul brings us onto the summit of God's love by asking and answering his sixth and seventh rhetorical questions:

- (1) "What then shall we say to these things?" (8:31a)
- (2) "If God is for us, who is against us?" (8:31b)
- (3) "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?" (8:32)
- (4) "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" (8:33a)
- (5) "God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?" (8:33b-34a)
- (6) "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (8:35a)
- (7) "Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (8:35b)

Then Paul cites Psalm 44:22 to show that enduring trials and even death for Christ's sake is nothing new for God's people: "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Then he boldly affirms (8:37),

“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.” He concludes (8:38-39) with his firm conviction that absolutely nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” To sum up:

God’s great love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord enables us to be more than conquerors through every trial for His sake.

As I mentioned in a previous message, Paul is not writing these wonderful truths so that we can feel more secure as we pursue the American dream. Rather, he was writing to those who were suffering hardship, persecution, and even martyrdom because of their commitment to Christ and the gospel. Paul is equipping us with the knowledge that we need not only to *persevere* through trials for Christ’s sake, but to *overwhelmingly conquer* in all these difficulties.

Paul was not writing as a speculative theologian. His words here serve as a mini-biography, in that he had already suffered all of these trials (2 Cor. 11:23-29), except the sword (which he later would add to his résumé!). While we may not have to face martyrdom, we will face many trials and death, if Christ does not return. So we need to understand and apply Paul’s words about how God’s love enables us to be more than conquerors through every trial that we face for His sake. Four thoughts:

1. God’s great love for us is not diminished or terminated by our failures, shortcomings, or sins, because it goes back to God’s choice of us before the foundation of the world.

As we’ve seen, in the context Paul roots our salvation in God’s loving choice of us according to His plan before He made the world (see also, Eph. 1:4-5). At a point in our lives, He called us according to His purpose to conform us to the image of His Son, so that He would have the preeminence (8:28-29). In fact, He loved us so much that He delivered up His own Son for us on the cross (8:32). Since God did all of this for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8), His love for us is not conditioned on our worthiness or our performance. We can’t earn or deserve His love. Rather, it stems from His very nature, “for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

But, perhaps you’re wondering about Jesus’ words (John 14:21), “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Fa-

ther, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." That sounds as if God's love is conditioned by our love for Him. How does that harmonize with God's unconditional love for us while we were yet sinners?

Both John and Paul are clear that God's love for us as sinners is at the root of why He sent Christ to die for us: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son...." (John 3:16). "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

But in John 14, Jesus is teaching those who already have responded to God's love that a close relationship with God is reciprocal. Our obedience to Christ reflects our love for Him. And we will only experience the love of the Father and the Son as we obey Him. But when we as believers fall into sin, God's eternal, unchanging love that sought us and bought us out of the slave market of sin is our safety net of security. If He saved us while we were yet sinners, knowing full well that we would sin after He saved us, then we can trust that He will not cast us off as His children, even when we disobey. He will discipline us as a loving Father (Heb. 12:5-11), but our sin will not cause Him to diminish His love for us. This is one practical value of the doctrine of election.

2. God's great love for us is not threatened or undermined by all sorts of adversity, including martyrdom.

Verse 35 assumes that there are enemies that will try to separate us from the love of Christ. Paul may use the personal pronoun, *who*, to parallel his earlier questions (8:31b, 33, 34). Or, he may be personifying the trials that he goes on to enumerate, which seem like personal enemies trying to separate us from God's love. As Satan did with Job, he uses terrible trials to try to get us to doubt God's love. But Paul is showing that no matter how difficult the trial, even to the point of martyrdom, God's love for us is a rock solid foundation. Whatever the trial, by faith, not by feelings, we must come back to God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's look at Paul's list: First, he mentions *tribulation*, a general word for difficult trials. It has the nuance of pressure from without.

Jesus used this word when He said (John 16:33), "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." Paul used it when he taught new believers (Acts 14:22), "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

Distress has the nuance of a narrow or confined place. It may point to the inward feelings that we battle when we go through tribulations. R. C. Trench (*Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 202) illustrates *tribulation* by an old English method of execution, where a prisoner had increasingly heavy weights placed on his chest until he was crushed to death. He illustrates *distress* by another ancient form of punishment, where prisoners were put into cages or cells where they did not have room to stand, sit, or lie at full length. We have already encountered both words in Romans 2:9, where Paul describes the eternal punishment of the wicked as "tribulation and distress." But in our text he is saying that believers often suffer trials from without or within because of Christ.

Persecution literally means to pursue someone to harm him. It refers to the verbal or physical abuse that we suffer because of Christ. Jesus said (Matt. 5:11-12), "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Paul promised (2 Tim. 3:12), "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." While God has so far spared most of us in America from physical persecution for our faith, that is not so with thousands of our brothers and sisters in other countries who are being tortured and killed for their faith. We may yet see the same here.

Famine and *nakedness* both point to extreme poverty and deprivation, especially (in this context) because of our commitment to Christ. In some countries, if you're a Christian you can't get a job to provide for your family's basic needs. And in some places, famine is a reality that believers suffer. Again, it could happen here.

Peril means "danger." Paul uses this word eight times in 2 Corinthians 11:26 to describe the many dangers that he had faced in his labors for Christ. *Sword* refers to execution or death, which Paul finally suffered for his faith. The quote from Psalm 44:22 (8:36)

shows that it is for the Lord's sake that His people suffer martyrdom. The world just considers believers as "sheep to be slaughtered." And it shows, as I said, that such suffering is nothing new. God's people have experienced it down through the centuries.

Thus it is *not* correct to think that because you're a child of God, He will protect you from trials. You may think, "But I was serving the Lord! Why didn't He protect me?" But read the Bible and read church history. In His sovereign purpose, God often allows His faithful servants to be persecuted unto death. He even has a specific number of martyrs who must die before He brings final judgment on the wicked (Rev. 6:10-11)! Those who teach that if you have enough faith God will heal all your diseases and give you a pile of money to live in luxury are false teachers. By faith God delivers some, but by the same faith, others are destitute or tortured or sawn in two (Heb. 11:33-39).

As if his list in 8:35 were not enough, Paul adds a series of contrasts to reinforce his conviction that absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love (8:38-39): "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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." As J. I. Packer points out (*Knowing God* [IVP], pp. 251-252), Paul here is countering our fears.

First, *neither death nor life* can separate us from God's love. If Christ has saved you, *death* ushers you into His presence (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8). While we do not receive our resurrection bodies until Christ returns (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:50-54), the moment we die our spirits go to be with the Lord. There is no such thing as "soul sleep." As Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

At first, it may seem strange that Paul says that *life* cannot separate us from God's love. But life can be a bigger threat than death. In the parable of the sower (Luke 8:14), Jesus identifies the thorny ground as "the worries and riches and pleasures of this life," which choke out the word so that it does not bear fruit. Paul laments the desertion of Demas, who "loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). C. H. Spurgeon commented on our text (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 42:558), "I am not so much

afraid of dying as I am of sinning; that is ten times worse than death." But as God's children, if we fall into sin or worldliness, His love will discipline and restore us. Life cannot permanently separate us from God's love.

Then Paul mentions neither *angels*, nor *principalities*. Some argue that *angels* here must refer to fallen angels, since the holy angels would never try to separate us from God's love. But I think they miss the point. Paul is citing extreme contrasts to show that absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love. In Galatians 1:8, Paul says that even if an angel from heaven preaches a gospel contrary to the gospel that Paul had preached, he is to be accursed. It's not possible that an angel from heaven would do that, but Paul is stating an extreme hypothetical situation to make his point. So in our text, he is saying that there are no spiritual powers, good or bad, that could possibly separate us from God's love.

Neither *things present*, nor *things to come*, could refer either to our present circumstances as contrasted with things that will happen to us before we die. Or, it could refer to things in the present age as contrasted with the age to come. But either way, Paul is referring to everything that can possibly happen to us. No bad circumstance now or in the future can separate us from God's great love.

The King James Version follows a textual variant that moves *powers* from the end of verse 38 to join it with *angels* and *principalities*, but it seems to be a copyist's attempt to arrange the terms in a more logical order. The best manuscripts put it at the end of the verse. *Powers* most likely refers to spiritual powers, not to miracles. It's not clear why Paul felt the need to add it, since he's already mentioned *angels* and *principalities*, or why he put it by itself at the end of the verse, when he groups everything else in pairs.

Neither *height nor depth* has been variously explained, but it probably means that nothing in heaven or in hell can separate us from God's love (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T. & T. Clark], 1:443). Or, it may have a spatial connotation: However high or low you go, you can't get away from God's love (see Ps. 139). It's everywhere!

Then, as if Paul were afraid that he had missed something, he throws in a catch-all: *nor any other created thing*. He is saying, "Name

anything that you can conceive of. God will work it together for good for His saints, and so it cannot separate us from His love.”

But, all of the terrible things that Paul has listed certainly don't *feel* like God's love when they happen to us. So how can we *really* know that these terrible trials cannot separate us from His love? To make it personal, how can *I* know that He loves *me* when I go through horrible suffering or perhaps even face martyrdom?

3. God's great love for us is supremely demonstrated in Christ Jesus our Lord, who gave Himself for us on the cross.

Paul points us to the cross in two ways. First, in 8:37 he says that “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.” He uses the aorist (past) tense, not the present. This points us back to the greatest demonstration of love ever given, where the Father delivered over His beloved Son on our behalf (John 3:16). Second, in 8:39 Paul says that the love of God “is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The cross shows the love of the Son of God, who willingly laid down His life for us (John 10:18; 15:13).

William R. Newell (*Romans Verse by Verse* [Moody Press], p. 344) has an interesting insight on Paul's use of the past tense. He says that the devil hates this “past tense gospel,” because the word of the cross is the power of God. Then he adds (*italics his*), “Let a preacher be continually saying, ‘God loves you, Christ loves you,’ and he and his congregation will by and by be losing sight both of their sinnerhood and of the substitutionary atonement of the cross, where the love of God and of Christ was *once for all* and *supremely* set forth,—and in *righteous* display!”

You will not experience God's great love until you come as a guilty sinner to the cross and trust in God's provision for your sin in the death of His Son. Or, to put it another way, you will not know God's great love unless Jesus Christ is *your* Lord. There is no group plan of salvation that you can get by joining the church or growing up in a Christian family. It must be personal for you, as it was for Paul, who wrote, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Thus God's great love for us is not diminished or terminated by our failures, shortcomings, or sins, since it is rooted in God's

choice of us before the foundation of the world. His love is not threatened or undermined by the worst adversities or trials imaginable. The greatest proof of His love was at the cross. Finally,

4. God's great love for us will be consummated in heaven, but we should experience it now as the foundation for victory as we face trials for His sake.

I'm focusing here on 8:37, "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." Throughout eternity, we will discover "the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). But we begin to taste His grace and love now through the cross. And to the extent that we know the love of Christ at the cross now, we not only can persevere through trials, but *overwhelmingly conquer* in them.

Several fine expositors suggest numerous ways in which we are more than conquerors in Christ (Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 13:283-285; Boice, 2:992-997; Newell, pp. 343-344. I can't develop these without a separate message.) But I'll just mention one insight from Alexander Maclaren (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], on Rom. 8:37, p. 206), who asks, "Has the world helped me to lay hold of Christ? Then I have conquered it. Has the world loosened my grasp upon Him? Then it has conquered me." He adds (p. 207), "The worst of all afflictions is a wasted affliction, and they are all wasted unless they teach us more of the reality and the blessedness of the love of Jesus Christ."

So the way to conquer overwhelmingly is to stay focused on God's great love as seen in the cross of Christ, who suffered and died so that you can live with Him in heaven forever.

Conclusion

In *Knowing God* (p. 115), Dr. Packer applies his chapter, "The Love of God," by asking some convicting questions:

Why do I ever grumble and show discontent and resentment at the circumstances in which God has placed me?

Why am I ever distrustful, fearful, or depressed?

Why do I ever allow myself to grow cool, formal, and half-hearted in the service of the God who loves me so?

Why do I ever allow my loyalties to be divided, so that God has not all my heart?

... Could an observer learn from the quality and degree of love that I show to others—my wife ... husband ... family ... neighbors ... people at church ... people at work—anything at all about the greatness of God’s love to me?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* [Baker], p. 219) wrote, “Indeed, our chief defect as Christians is that we fail to realize Christ’s love to us.” He added (p. 223), “How important it is that we should meditate upon this love and contemplate it! It is because we fail to do so that we tend to think at times that He has forgotten us, or that He has left us.”

To grow in God’s love, I would encourage you to do three things: (1) Meditate often on the cross, where God demonstrated “His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). (2) Read the Bible, especially the Psalms, to see how God’s saints processed their trials through the grid of God’s love. (3) Read Christian biographies, especially missionary biographies, to see how God’s people have more than conquered through Christ’s love as they have suffered for the gospel. May we all overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us!

Application Questions

1. Love causes me to protect my family from every possible hurt or danger. If God is love, then why doesn’t He do this for us?
2. A skeptic asks, “How can a God of love allow innocent children to suffer?” How would you respond biblically and evangelistically?
3. We must recognize the depths of our sin to appreciate the heights of God’s love. How does this undermine the current popular emphasis on “self-esteem”?
4. Why is the “health and wealth” teaching so patently false and damaging? What Scriptures refute it?

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