

Romans 8:31-39: A Fresh Look

Preface:

Well, friends. I am, as always, honored to be speaking to you all this morning.

I thought I'd talk about love this morning, because, you know: What else is there to talk about, I guess? I mean, I was going to talk about hellfire, especially since you wouldn't see me for a couple of weeks, but Carolyn talked me down.

I'm kidding. So. Love. And if love, Romans 8:31-39.

And you know, when it comes to Romans, this book of Paul's, there are parts that we've got memorized, and there are parts that we never ever notice. Today's passage leans leans toward the "got memorized" side of the scale.

There are some interesting things that we'll talk. I'll note a basic problem, which is that our reaction to this passage from Paul is often to ask questions, rather than receive what Paul says as good news, root our identity and life-mission in it, and live with power and peace. So we'll talk about that.

And we'll race through today's passage, too, just to make sure that we cover all our bases. But I probably will gloss over some things that we might wish I spent more time on, and I probably will spend more time talking about things that we might wish I glossed over.

In the end, though, we're going to let what's most important

to Paul in today's passage be, I hope, what's most important to us.

So. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Running Through: v31:

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

Out the gate, Paul forces us into reality. In light of "these things," he asks us, What should we say?

And "these things" are the sum total of a long argument Paul has been making up to now in Romans about the way sin has been finally, finally dealt with, and now in Christ--as Jews and Gentiles, all trapped by sin and death, gather together under the Messiah, as we submit to the Messiah's leadership and care over our lives as the Lord of all that Jesus is--we can live without the effects of death.

See; our typical theology, it's all about getting out of hell, and floating around like laid-back hippies in a heaven that bears a passing resemblance to the earth we know. We touched on that a lot as we talked about Revelation. Because Paul's theology—and the New Testament's—is actually all about undoing death--both in our bodies, and in creation itself. And God has undone it. All the biggest promises that Israel ever had have begun and right now--right now, Paul says to the Roman Church--"at the present time," it's coming true. And you can tell God's promises are coming true because all this mess of people have God's

Holy Spirit living in them!

These are the things that should astonish us. Death's reach was overextended, and it gave up its own ghost when Jesus gave us the Holy Ghost. We'll all be resurrected; God's Kingdom will come; Creation itself will be renewed and looks forward to it with longing. We've got God's own Spirit alive in us. We can say no to sin. Death will crash on our shores, and be undone.

What can we say? What is there to say. God is for us! Who's got veto power over God?

Running Through: v32:

And I can imagine some of us are, like, "If you're going verse-by-verse, this isn't really a "run through," so much as a "waiting-for-a-bus-through." I will speed up though, I promise.

But this is important. Paul keeps writing. "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, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Let's start by pointing out this: We spend most of our lives fighting the decay of death, right? We fight weight gain or weight loss. We fight the appearance of getting old, whether changing our skin, or changing our clothes, changing our gadgets or cars.

We strain against death, and whole industries--or maybe

every industry, except the ones that profit most when people are killed, arms dealers and casket companies, I guess--but every other industry appeals to the promise that this or that thing they hold out to us will make the few short years we get longer, or easier, or more beautiful, or more meaningful.

The rub is this: Death is unstoppable. It's unstoppable. Death eats at everything.

Except that Jesus beat it. And if Jesus beat it, there is nothing, nothing, in the world that is more valuable than him. If industry could grind him up and put him in an supplement, they would--the Church has done a similar thing, now and then, when we've been at our worst.

But the fact is, immortality is worth a lot, if you could find a way to buy it. It's worth so much, only God can afford it, really. And the best part is, there's no DRM when it comes to resurrection, God passes out copies of what Jesus has been through to anyone who wants them, as long as they'll live like God is God, of course. In fact, Immortality is worth God himself; because of course, Jesus was God, right? "In the flesh," as we say. This is what Jesus' death was worth, it was worth everything, in that it undid death.

God decided not to intervene in death's plan, decided not to spare Jesus the death that sin worked in him, so that we all of us might get the benefits that Jesus got, might be vaccinated against Death's last word. This is Romans 5, 6, 7, and 8 till now.

And if God--and Jesus was in on this plan, we know it from

the gospels, even though he didn't look forward to his death anymore than you or I would--if God mortgaged all His triune equity on this for us, he's not going to hold out on giving us the less expensive stuff, even if that stuff is priceless in real dollar terms. Stuff like peace and pleasure, hope and mercy, a sense of place and purpose, joy and self-control and the faith family tree.

These are costume jewelry, reproductions, compared to resurrection: That said, they're rare in many, many places in our lives and the world, and money can't buy love.

And this is the point Paul wants us to get: No one can sneak their way in between God and us. No one can separate us from God's love. And if the fear of death results in all sorts of terrible things: wars and hate and deception and distrust, taking sides and despising whoever is across the line, then the security of God's Love for us drives out all fear, and can--should--lead to more good things than we could list.

And Paul wants us to see what God has done so that we can live in the sure knowledge that God is for us. And he just keeps going with it:

Running Through: v33-34:

We're up to two verses now!

33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. 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.

God is for us, no one can be against us.

God has declared us faithful; no one can declare us faithless.

When Paul says “it is God who justifies” he means something by it; he means that it’s God who declares that we’re in right relationship with him, it’s God who says that we’re faithful to him. And who has a bigger voice than God? His is the only perspective that matters. He’s the one who gets to say whether we’re okay or not.

If we like law-court scenes, then there’s this: If the devil, the accuser, Satan--who loves to prosecute everyone, and watch them be condemned--should bring a charge against us...well, our lawyer is better, in fact, our lawyer is God the son, Jesus the Messiah, the one who disbarred the devil, who disallows any charge to be brought against us. He’s the judge’s favorite, he’s our older brother, who won’t ever fail us; we’re family. We’re doubly, trebly, cared for. We can see more of this intercessory language in Hebrews and in John’s letter, and remember the promise of Isaiah 53, that the “suffering servant...bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (References pointed out to me by Wright, *Romans*, NIB, 613).

Paul doesn’t say “God is against us, but don’t worry, because Jesus is distracting him, you sneak on into Heaven before he looks over here. Go. Now. Not now. Now. Go.” Jesus is at God’s right hand; Jesus *is* God, remember. God the Father and God the Son aren’t “good cop/bad cop.” Paul’s point here is that we know people in high places: we know a person in the highest place. In case you were

worrying--which you shouldn't be--but just in case you are: don't. You know a guy.

Three more verses! We're flying folks!

Running Through: v35-37:

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." [j] 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

So: God is for us, no one can be against us. God has declared us faithful; no one can declare us faithless. The Love of Christ clings to us, and nothing can tear it from us.

Hardship, Trouble, Persecution, Famine, Nakedness, Danger, Sword. This is all the stuff that can happen in this life, right? Loss and Conflict, Pains and Pressures; if death can't cut us off from God, neither can the very real, very real--but temporary--troubles and trouble-makers.

Remember: these are light and momentary afflictions; but we look forward to an eternal hope, the renewing of our bodies. We look forward to "an eternal glory that far outweighs" the troubles of this life. If only we can persist in that love, cling to it through the troubles of this life, persist in that love that won't leave us no matter how needy and dysfunctional and desperate we become--that they'll give way to Love's cash-out, which is renewed bodies in a

renewed world.

This, by the way, is the “hope for unseen things,” it’s the hope for a body like Christ’s resurrected body; undecaying, unbroken, untouched by troubles, and eternal in an eternal world. And we know that the Holy Spirit is not only the sign to us that God will make good on his resurrection promises but also the one who reminds us of God's love for us--because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

We’ve just got to persist. We’ve got to move through this hard present, and stay the course for the good that’s coming our way.

I would mention this, too: We spiritualize this list here, make “famine” and “sword” metaphors. But for the Roman Church, and for Christians this morning in other places all throughout the world, these are things that are happening to them--not as incidentals to their faith, but on account of it--persecution and faith-based harassment is still real. And our brothers and sisters, our co-heirs, need just as reminded--maybe more than us--that this life’s troubles can’t steal from them Christ’s love.

Running Through: v35-37: Psalm 44

But Paul is doing more here, than just encouraging us; he shows his cards when he quotes from Psalm 44.

It’s a psalm that starts with this reminder that God’s the one who takes care of his people. The Psalmist talks about how God’s the one who still cares for his people, “In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name

forever.” He goes on, though, to talk about how abandoned he feels, how abandoned the people of God seem to be, how God is basically giving up his people into their enemies hands, and doesn’t God see this? Why won’t God act? And it ends, with this sad sort of question. This is the end of Psalm 44:

“Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Wake up, don’t cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.”

This is the way the Psalmist ends. Rise up--resurrect--come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

Paul’s quoting Psalm 44 on purpose; it’s not the only thing he can remember at the time. He’s reminding us that we will not sink down to the dust; our bodies will not cling to the ground; Christ has risen up and come to our help, and we will be redeemed for the sake of God’s steadfast love. All this is a certainty; the end of the psalm has finally come true in what Jesus has done.

We may face death all day long, we may be considered by others as sheep to be slaughtered--remember, there are sufferings in this present time because of our faith, but while we suffer with Christ, as Christ did, in our faithfulness to God, we know that God’s Promises will come true for us, too.

But when Paul says, “as it is written,” in verse 36, and

quotes this psalm, he's reminding us that the old ending of that Psalm isn't true for us. Hope will not disappoint us.

In all the troubles of life we're more than conquerors through him who loved us--and he says "loved us," in the past tense, to remind us of Jesus' great act of love, which was taking death on the chin, "laying down his life for his friends."

We are conquerors; we are over-comers, we are the ones who make it through the troubles of life and more than just "make it through," come out more than we were before them--both now, because of all the Spirit's works in us--and permanently, when death finally dies and God rules a resurrected world full of resurrected folk.

And "what can we say" in light of what God's done? In light of who we are in Christ? Apparently a lot, because Paul keeps saying stuff. And it's good stuff:

Shhh. Listen.

Running Through: v35-37:

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 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.

Let's get something out of the way, here:

What Paul is writing here is worship. It's praise. It's wonder and awe. It's the stuff that comes out of a heart that realizes the love of God. No space, no sort of existence, no spiritual being--good or bad--not now, not what's coming, not the "powers that be"--whether those are governments, corporations, institutions, or any of the spiritual beings that stand behind them, no distance--because its force, it's pull isn't weakened by distance or intervening materials--nothing in all creation, nothing, nothing, nothing will be able to separate us from the Love of God that is in Jesus the Messiah, our Lord.

What would the church, and each of us who make it up, be like if this were the truth that ran through our heads all day, beat with our hearts? What courage would we live with? What freedom would we move with? What power? We would never become beholden to politicians or personalities who promise us power. We'd never become beholden to our lusts and our lies. We'd be free to stand up for Christ and those Jesus stood up for. We'd walk in the power of suffering service.

And Paul is not here discussing the role that free will plays in our choices, he isn't making some great point by leaving out "the past," when he talks about "the present and the future." He isn't saying "once saved, always saved" or speaking to an "eternal security" question or outlining the limits of our freedom or doing all sorts of things we try to make him do in this passage.

He's not doing that. He's just not; if you want Paul to talk about that stuff, look somewhere else. Paul lets us know in plenty of other places that we alone, if we want to take it

up, have the power to shake God's hand off our shoulder and run away into danger and darkness. But he's not laying out "theology of salvation" stuff here, even though we want him to be.

What he's saying is this--what we ignore because it seems uninteresting or because we'd rather talk about "really important things"--as if there could be anything more important--what he's pointing out, which language can barely give words to, is this:

God loves us. God loves us. God loves us. And he's loved us all along, his creation, his people; he's been working all along to figure out a way to genuinely get us back, and it's a done deal, now, because resurrection is a'comin'. God loves us!

And nothing you can point to can make it so that God will turn on you and condemn you. God is not fickle, God is not a liar, not waiting to trick you into trusting Him: God is for us. God has justified us. Jesus'--the Messiah's--love for us, can't be snatched away, lost like keys or glasses or a cell phone. We are known and loved by God: Jesus proves it! He is God's great big "yes!" to humanity and to all the promises Abraham was ever made.

God loves us, and we can't forget it. The trickier part than forgetting, though, even in this present moment, even though many of us have lived with this God for a long, long time, is believing that God loves us in the first place.

What do you need to be convinced as Paul was convinced?

We are not sinners in the hands of an angry God; we are children riding the shoulders of a loving Father, taught by a wise Brother, sung to by a soothing Spirit, and our Father will never betray us, abandon us, separate us from His love, or put us in a danger that is bigger than Him.

I am convinced Paul doesn't want us to let this passage be anything other than it is, which is a reminder that you don't have to worry about God's end of this eternal-life, counted-faithful, sin-dealt-with deal. He's done everything He said He would, and will still do more than we could ask for or imagine. He will come through. God's love will be proven faithful when Jesus returns, when resurrection breaks out like hives, and we stand upright fully and finally with God-- but that's such a firm promise, and God has been so faithful in working it out thus far, that we can live right now, in the powerful, comforting, assurance that it's all going to become real.

Rejoice in God's faithfulness, Rest in God's goodness. "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."

Conclusion:

So, "what shall we say" about today's passage?

We might want to just point out a couple of things we should be careful of doing.

Conclusion: Against Confusion

We probably want to be careful--although none of us need to worry about this, I'm sure--about taking this passage, and twisting the powerful security and assurance it can give us when we realize how deeply God is committed to loving us, into some sort of license to do whatever we want, or some misguided belief that whatever we want must be what God wants.

We don't want to confuse "God is for us" with "God is for whatever agenda I am for." We don't want to turn "nothing can separate us from the love of God" into "nothing can separate me from my intention to do whatever I want, because God has got my back."

God does have our backs, and God has purposes for all of us together and each of us on our own, but we have to carefully, and in community, examine whether what we want for ourselves is what God wants for us.

We people are always in danger of labeling our desires as the Lord's, and pursuing them with compassionless intensity.

Conclusion: Against Blindness

And we also probably want to be careful--although, again, I'm not worried about any of you doing this, I'm worried about Smoky Row, right? We probably want to be careful about mistaking the fact that God loves us as some sort of promise that we'll never experience trouble, pain, sorrow, fear, or anger in this world.

And I mean this: Life will be hard for you, Christian: Hard because life is hard, death had a good run, Adam's

transgression has stained the world, and the devil and his ilk are making a mess of things.

But it will be harder for you than it would be if you were not a Christian, because God seeks to use us to mop up the messes that are all over the place, to clean up the stains. We're part of God's work, now; We're children of God, and as we eagerly await the resurrection, look forward to bodies that are free from the mess that we've lived with--we have a work to do. It's part of why we have the Holy Spirit among us; that we can be the blessing to the nations that Abraham was told he--and his children--would become. But that work makes us antagonists of many things this world honors.

It is always a shame, and it happens all the time, when Christians think that because nothing can tear God's personal love and capable commitment away from us, then life will no longer be difficult. Nothing is worse on a soul than unmet expectations. We're in luck, though, or something better than it: Our expectation that God will always be faithful to us, will always love us--it's one that will never go unmet.

I was considering that this is maybe particularly true for you all, not because you're weak in your faith, but exactly because you're so strong in it. It seems sometimes like its those of greatest faith who are most surprised by unexpected trouble. We always face a temptation to believe that with great faith comes little trouble, and yet every biblical example we have shows that with great faithfulness comes great trouble--and deeper resources and power from the God who sustains and nurtures us.

Conclusion: The Best Use

And maybe the best use of this passage would be--and I choose my words carefully here--to damn our introspective guilt, and live in the confidence that comes from the love of the Lord. We need to take our worries about whether we're pleasing or not to God, and our concerns about how guilty we feel, and send them to Hell where they belong. Cut them off.

If God is the one saying that we're cool, that I'm faithful, then no one else can say we're not. No one else's opinion matters. This frees us to act with God as our place of reference, and be kind and loving no matter what.

We think it's ridiculous when Paul says elsewhere that "It's a small thing if you or anyone else judges me; I don't even judge myself" because that's God's task, not his. But if we could live with that sort of freedom among other people, that sort of security that God will be God--but he loves me always--then no one could stop the good the church would do, and injustice, and oppression would cease wherever we showed up.

Normally I'd qualify myself, mention how we still need to examine ourselves, avoid pride, blah blah blah. What I hope for you all and myself is that we know that God loves us, and we live like it. I hope that we might, for a moment, take some breaks from the never-ending contemporary Christian call to constant self-examination, and just rest in the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let your guilt and your worry be condemned. Because it's not your place to separate yourself from the love of God.

Why shake off your parents hand, when they come to hold you in love? If there's stuff you and God need to work out, okay: that I understand. But God is about the business of working through things with us. God is in the business of healing us, of helping us, of teaching us--to love well, and trust well: both Him and others.

God wants us to be able to live so empowered and safe in His love for us that no suffering stops us from loving him and his creation, his people. He wants us to care so little about our self-preservation and how thin or attractive or smart we look or seem in front of Him and others, that we radically--and naturally--lean into him like a wind, and go where he sends us.

God has big plans for you, but they are always obscured when we turn from his love, and instead turn over every single stone in our hearts, trying to find something to confess and meddle in.

I was thinking of the Cuyahoga river, up in Cleveland. I think of it a lot. A weird amount. It burned, you know; my mother-in-law talks about it now and then. It burned, and flared off the pollution that filled it. We need God's love to do that, now and then; flare-ups can be useful, we come to God with guilt and worry and find release. Those can be nice times.

But even today, a thing we don't want to do with the Cuyahoga is dig too deep at the river bottom. There's muck there that's poisonous, that shouldn't be dredged up, that should stay covered by layers and layers of sand...and we're trained a little bit, by the church, to constantly find fault in ourselves if we're Christians, to constantly agonize over how

much we miss the mark, to constantly look inside ourselves, and try to cultivate some sort of “wretch-like” feeling, instead of resting in the firm truth that we are conquerors-- or even more than these.

And I say this cautiously because some of us might need the opposite at this point in our spiritual formation, some of us need to stir up our souls a little bit, some of us may need to deal with old wounds, and sometimes bones that were broken and healed incorrectly do need re-broken and reset: but most of us, frankly, need to just wade into the Living Water that flows above and around us, and let the river bottom be.

When Paul says “I don’t know about anything that anyone has against me.” He’s reminding us that if we find out something that we need to attend to, attend to it. But people of God: every day has its own troubles, and it’s just as faulty to constantly note our shortcomings, and make every day filled with troubles that it shouldn’t contain, as it is to never note them and pretend the world’s already been renewed.

The spirit of freedom is one of joy, not introspective agony over all the “shoulds” a day presents us with, nor a constant worry that at any moment God might bail on us, really find us out, and we had better pile up something, anything, to get Him to stay. Let’s not act like our own prosecuting attorney, when our defender has given us keys to the Judge’s office and every jail cell.

God loves you. God loves you. Nothing can tear God’s love away from you. The power that holds all things together is

on your side, and wants to bring you joy and pleasure, and a mission that will change your world--along with the real, bigger one you live in. God looks at us and sees his children, tosses us into the air and points us out to his friends as people he's really, really proud of. And as we grow older, it's getting easier and easier for those around us to see the family resemblance, to look at our Father and our elder Brother, then turn to us, and say, "I can really tell you're related."

We are safe from all harm, no condemnation is bigger than the approval we've been given, nothing in all creation can separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We are loved by God, and in light of this love, what else is there? Neither promotion nor new car, great marriage nor smart child, excellent work nor a fine figure; none of it matters. You are loved by God, and it can't be taken from you.

Before we are anything else, underneath everything else, you and I are God's children, chosen, called, empowered, and loved more deeply than words can express. This is who we are. We are empowered to live out all that God could dream of us; and our God does more than we can ask or imagine.

Let's live like it, and look on in joy as Hell withers and fades because of our trust.