

Our Great Assurance

Romans 8:31–39

Most of you probably don't know this, but there is a thing called the *Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index*. It was developed to establish official statistics on the state of well-being of individuals and communities in the United States. Through their research they can rank states and communities based on their emotional, physical, economical and other well-being factors. You probably have at least seen articles like the "10 Happiest Cities" or something like that, right? Those come from this kind of research. (By the way, in case you are wondering, in the 2014 study, the most recent study to be published, Kansas ranked 32. Ouch!)

In 2009, a psychology professor at Harvard, Daniel Gilbert wrote an op-ed piece in the New York Times about this research. At the time of course the US was just starting to come out of what was called the Great Recession. In the article he made observations that at the time Americans were smiling less and worrying more. Happiness was down and sadness was up. The obvious explanation of course was the recession, but he made the observation that most middle-class Americans in 2009 had more luxury goods and food and money than their grandparents ever did and yet their grandparents didn't live with "an unremitting funk."

At the end of the article he summed up his conclusion on why he believed people were feeling worse when in fact they still had it better than many of their predecessors. He said: "It isn't a matter of insufficient funds. It's a matter of insufficient certainty." Doubts about the future, strongly impact one's sense of well-being.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0DEFD71630F932A15756C0A96F9C8B63>

I think Gilbert is absolutely right. Insufficient certainty affects our well-being. And I would suggest that insufficient certainty about our standing with God, about our future spiritually, is one of the factors that has the greatest affect on our sense of well-being. Well-being in this life is ultimately not about money, or stuff, or the absence of difficulties; it is tied to having assurance about the stability of our relationship to God. What kind of certainty do you have about your relationship with God?

If there is one thing that Paul is trying to do in the book of Romans, it is to move us from any kind of insufficient certainty to absolute assurance about our standing with God. In the passage that we are looking at today in Romans 8:31-39, Paul communicates a couple of reasons why we can have great assurance about our relationship with God. My hope is that we would all let these truths sink deep within our hearts and that we would live out of the great assurance that Paul communicates here about our standing with God.

The first thing Paul says is that there is no charge against us that can stand. In verses 31-34, Paul uses legal/courtroom kind of language to make the point.

I. No Charge Against Us Can Stand (31-34)

Paul says:

³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*

The NIV says, "What, then, shall we say in response to these things." In light of things he has taught in Romans what shall we say in response? Now, *these things*, would certainly include what he has just talked about in 8:28-30 (i.e. God working things out for our good, being predestined to be conformed to his Son, being justified, the assurance of future glorification), but it is also possible that *these things* looks back to all of the blessings of which he has spoken in chapters 5-8.

All that Paul has taught in Romans 5-8 about what God has done for the believer through Christ is evidence that *God is for us*. And if *God is for us*, then who is there that could possibly be *against us*? Paul is not saying that believers will not have opponents. But he is saying is that in light of the truth that *God is for us*, it doesn't matter. No one can ultimately oppose us if *God is for us*.

If you have trusted in Jesus, God is for you! The One true God, the Creator God, Who possesses all power and wisdom and might, Who loves us, is for you. This is what Paul has demonstrated in the theology he has been teaching. God is for you. And if this God is for you then who can be against you? This is a powerful truth that can give us great assurance.

In verse 32 Paul describes how God has most clearly demonstrated that He is for us. Paul says:

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?*

That God *delivered* [Jesus] *over for us all* is the greatest evidence that God is for us. To *spare* means "to prevent or to cause someone not to be troubled." God did not *spare His own Son* from trouble. Rather, He *delivered Him over for us all*. Paul is emphasizing the Father's initiative to send His Son to the cross. He did this *for us all*.

And since God did the greatest thing in delivering over his Son to be crucified *how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* It is inconceivable that God would withhold other things we need when He has already given us the greatest thing. The question is, what are the, *all things*? It seems likely that Paul means that God will give us everything we need to bring about the fullness of our salvation, but as well he may also mean that God will give us all that is necessary spiritually, and even materially, on our path to our final salvation (Moo). God will *freely give* us these things. They are not earned. They are gifts of His grace.

In verse 33, Paul continues with the courtroom language to amplify the point of verse 31. He says:

³³ *Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies;*

The verb, *will bring a charge*, is in the future tense suggesting that Paul is thinking of the day of final judgment. Who will be able to show up in the heavenly courtroom on that day and get the charge, "guilty" to stick against one of God's elect? No one! Because *God is the one who justifies*. As we have seen in Romans to be justified means to be declared to have a right standing before God. On the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross God declares us to be righteous. And that verdict forever stands.

Do we have an enemy who accuses us? Yes. Revelation 12:10 says that the devil accuses us before God day and night. And as we struggle with sin in the life, our sin sometimes calls out to us and says, "guilty." Sometimes we can be tempted to believe that Satan is right. Sometimes we can feel that we stand guilty and unworthy before God because of our sin. But on the final day no charge will be brought against you that can stick, because God has justified you. And what is true on that day is true of you every day until that day.

Now, as Paul goes on in verse 34, he develops this idea a bit more. He asks:

³⁴ *who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

The implied answer to the question is that no one can condemn a believer in light of what Jesus has done. He *died* for us. Through His death he removed our guilt and made our justification possible. He was *raised* giving us new life. He ascended to heaven where he is now at *the right hand of God* – a position of power. And in that position he *intercedes for us*. In the heavenly courtroom where all of these things are determined, we have an advocate with the Father. Jesus, our great High Priest, lives forever to make intercession for us (e.g. Heb. 7:24-25). No one can condemn the believer. We are absolutely secure because of Jesus.

We have great assurance. God is for us. He has demonstrated this truth through Christ. And because God is for us, no one can be against us. No charge against us will stand. No one can condemn us. God is for us. God is for YOU!

This week I spent some time reflecting on whether or not I believe this. Without a doubt, in my head I believe it is true. But what do I believe when I fail or when I sin or when I don't live like I should? Do I believe it then in my heart? Do you? Paul is saying that God is for you not based on your performance and perfect obedience; He is for you always because of Christ. No charge against you will stand. This is our great assurance.

Now, as we come to verse 35, Paul moves away from the legal/courtroom kind of language of charges and condemnation and justification and intercession to more relational language. In these next five verses he focuses on the assurance that nothing can separate a believer from the love of God.

II. Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love (35-39)

³⁵ *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

The, *who*, at the start of the verse can refer to any possible opponent either personal or impersonal. Is there any opponent that can separate us from the love of Christ? Paul lists seven things here some of which the Roman believers had experienced at some level. In the not too distant future they would experience all of these things with the Roman persecution under Nero. Paul had experienced all of these things at this point in his life except the sword (e.g. 2 Cor. 11:23f) and so he speaks from personal experience and he affirms that none of these things can separate us from God's love.

Sometimes when we are in the midst of suffering these kinds of things, we can tend to think that God has abandoned us. We think, "If God loved me He wouldn't let this happen to me. He wouldn't let me go through this kind of suffering." Or, we think, "He wouldn't let someone I love go through something like this." And we can be tempted to doubt His love for us. We can tend to think that if God really loves us it will mean an easier life and freedom from suffering, but the Scriptures do not make this promise. In fact, in verse 36, Paul cites Psalm 44:22 as a reminder that suffering is part of the story for those who follow God.

³⁶ *Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."*

Jesus experienced the most severe suffering in his crucifixion and yet through it all the Father didn't stop loving him. If we think that because God loves us we won't suffer, we really don't understand the Scriptures. God's love does not spare us from such things; but it does sustain us through them.

In verse 37 Paul goes on to say that not only do such things not separate us from God's love . . .

³⁷ *But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.*

All these things refers to the list in verse 35. Not only do experiences of tribulation or persecution or famine or peril or other such things not separate us from Christ's love, *we overwhelmingly conquer* in such things. The idea is that we win a great victory.

This doesn't mean that we will escape all of these things. In fact, so often these days we hear of Christians being persecuted and some even being killed for their faith. It doesn't look like they are winning a great victory, right? But they do because none of these things, not even death, can separate them from God's love. We can only rightly understand this idea of overwhelmingly conquering from the vantage point of eternity when all is summed up in Christ.

Now, I don't think that Paul intends for us to understand *overwhelmingly conquer[ing]* as something that only has to do with the future; it is for the here and now too. But it isn't about escaping suffering as much as it is in going through suffering and difficulties, yet never being separated from the love of God.

Paul says we do this *through Him who loved us*. *Loved us* is past tense. It looks back to the cross. At the cross God's love was most clearly demonstrated and it is that event that gives us assurance of God's continuing love even when we suffer.

Paul wraps up this section by giving a very personal testimony about such assurance. He says:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

Paul is *convinced* that nothing is able to separate a believer from the love of God. A love that he says is *in Christ Jesus our Lord*. In the giving of His Son, God most clearly expressed His love for us. And, only in Christ can we connect to the love of God.

Paul lists things here, mostly in pairs, which cannot separate. Neither *death nor life* can separate from God's love. *Death* could mean martyrdom, but it is probably any kind of death. And there is nothing in *life* that can separate us. Regardless of our state of existence be it death or life, it cannot separate us from God's love.

He next speaks of spiritual beings – *angels* and *principalities*. It is very likely that he uses these two terms to indicate that no spiritual beings whether good or evil can separate one from the love of God.

Then he makes reference to time – *things present* and *things to come*. There is nothing in our present circumstances nor can there be in future circumstances that will separate us from the love of God.

Powers is the one of the terms that isn't matched with another. This is probably another reference to hostile spiritual beings.

Next he says *nor height, nor depth*. This is probably the hardest pairing to figure out. These are terms that can refer to the celestial space above or below the horizon and derivatively then to celestial beings or spiritual beings. But Paul elsewhere uses these

terms in a “spatial” sense. It may be that he is speaking of the entire universe and even heaven and hell sort of like when the psalmist said, “*If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there*” (Ps. 139:8). I tend to think it is a spatial reference because he has already clearly mentioned spiritual beings.

Lest Paul miss any other possible thing he says *nor any other created thing* will be able to separate us from God’s love. Nothing in the whole created realm can separate us from the love of God.

Now, a question that is asked of this passage is can an individual make a deliberate choice to be separated from God’s love? Clearly, Paul is teaching that nothing external to the believer can separate him or her from the love of God, but can we make a choice to separate ourselves from God’s love? Some believe that Paul is only speaking of things external to a believer here and that, yes, it is possible to make a choice to separate ourselves from the love of God.

But I think the most natural way to understand Paul’s statement that no created thing *shall be able to separate us from the love of God* would include the individual. I think this is consistent with what Paul says in 8:29-30 about God’s actions in predestining us to be conformed to the image of His Son and calling us and justifying us and glorifying us. And personally, I think this view has the strongest support in the rest of Scripture.

And so I believe that Paul is saying that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate the believer from God’s love; not things external to you and not even yourself. Your failures can’t. Your sin can’t. Satan can’t. Nothing in all the created world is able to separate you from the love of God! This is our great assurance.

I come back to a question I asked earlier: What kind of certainty do you have about your relationship with God? Do you feel the weight of what Paul is communicating here? If you have trust Jesus, Paul wants you to be absolutely confident about your relationship with God. God is for you. And because He is for you, no charge against you will stand. And God loves you. And nothing, nothing, nothing will ever be able to separate you from His love. Your relationship with God is secure. This is our great assurance.