

Romans 8:31-39 Five unanswerable questions!

Introduction

Romans 8:31-39 is a summary conclusion to everything Paul has written in the earlier sections of this letter. It is a volcanic eruption not of death and destruction but praise and adoration of the glorious God who has accomplished all that He has planned for us -in Christ. No wonder many Christians have chosen this chapter as one of their favourites in the whole of the Bible. It is an incredible statement of our blessings in Christ as a result of all that He has done for us. In Romans 8:31-34 Paul wants his hearers and readers to know that the impossibility of any charges against a believer being upheld before God; then in Romans 8:35-39 he asserts the impossibility of anything separating us from the love of God. There are times maybe that time is now for someone here today, when we need to hear this being spelt out. Our faith is firmly anchored in Christ. It is based supremely on the incredible love of God for us who has invested everything required to save a people to have fellowship with Him; to provide the resources for us that we might have the quality of life here on earth, despite its hardships and trials, that enable us to be the men and women He has called us to be. These verses are worth returning to and meditating on time and again through both the good times and the tough ones.

We need to remind ourselves that these words in this chapter were written in the first instance to a Christian community that within less than a decade would experience the 'killing fields', when the sadistic Emperor Nero used them as the scapegoat for all the evils and wrongs his government had committed against the population, torturing and killing many of them in the most brutal ways, even for Romans. Human torches set alight at night to light the streets of Rome after their clothes had been soaked in oil as they suffered horribly painful deaths, yet their numbers did not diminish overall-after an initial fall. The Christian community not only survived, but in time proved the truthfulness of these words of Paul, of the ultimate triumph of God in and through the gospel in the lives of His people. Following the five undeniable affirmations of Romans 8:29-30 where the apostle had stated our absolute security in Christ as Christians, from eternity to eternity, the implications of this message are celebrated in this triumphal celebration of the goodness and grace of God; Now Paul hurls into space these five rhetorical questions! On the surface they are a challenge to anyone to disprove the truth of what he has written. However, Paul knows that if what he has written in the preceding chapters of this letter is true then no-one or no thing can frustrate the purposes of God for those whom God has foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified! In life or in death we are more than conquerors in Christ. It is no accident that at the vast majority of Christian funerals some of these words are read as a reminder that God's purposes and plans are not frustrated by the last enemy death; we have a faith grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus and because He lives we shall also.

1. Question 1: What, then, shall we say in response to these things? (Romans 8:31)

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

The first question Paul raises is not quite what we might expect at first glance. *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?* (Romans 8:31) Our immediate answer is lots of people or circumstances we could mention! In this very passage in Romans 8:35 Paul gives a list of some of the circumstances being experienced by Christians in the Roman world, possibly even in the lives of some of his hearers. In another letter II Corinthians, written to Christians in the Greek city of Corinth roughly a year later

than this letter was penned, Paul outlined some of the hardships he had faced in recent years. Listen to these words of autobiography which I think may lie behind his choice of words in the list in Romans 8:35: *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.* ²⁷ *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked* (II Corinthians 11: 23b-27). Therefore, Paul is not asking a naïve question from the vantage point of a life of ease and without a care in the world. He is living with incredible pressures and enduring hardship to a degree beyond most of our life experiences. These outward challenges he mentions here are all very real. There will always be people who for a variety of reasons actively oppose or even persecute Christians for their faith in the world. Paul himself in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth stated: *...there are many who oppose me* (I Corinthians 16:9b). Living in the UK we are untypical of the world Christian family in not experiencing this kind of difficulty! So this is one ‘adversary’ who is against us. In addition, our own sinful desires may encourage us to go against God’s ways. Paul has graphically described his own struggles with indwelling sin in Romans 7:14-25. A person who has written these words knows he has an ‘adversary within’. *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.* ¹⁵ *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.* ¹⁶ *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.* ¹⁷ *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.* ¹⁸ *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing* (Romans 7:14-19)

So he is not denying this factor either. Furthermore, death is described as an enemy in the New Testament in I Corinthians 15:25-26: ²⁵ *For He [Jesus] must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.* ²⁶ *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.* In the letter to the Hebrews the writer explains further that Jesus: *shared in their [our] humanity so that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil...* (Hebrews 2:14) John the apostle in his first letter also draws attention to the battles with the enemies highlighted above –the world, the sinful nature and the devil (I John 2:14-17).

Now that we are clear what Paul is not saying! What is it he wants to communicate to us that is aimed at encouraging us as Christians? The clue is in the first word of the question *If God is for us, who can be against us?* The NIV renders it as *if*. However, *since* would be a better translation: *Since God is with us...* that is if God has done what Paul has mentioned in Romans 8:28-30 then it does not matter how fierce are our enemies –and they can be fierce with Communist regimes behind the Iron Curtain or Islamic ones in the Middle East, for example. They cannot ultimately prevail. Our confidence is not in ourselves or in our natural abilities or anything else we can offer, but supremely in God who is all sufficient to accomplish what He has purposed to achieve. Therefore, for all eternity we can rely on God’s resources and face the future ‘not with grim resolution, but in joyous elation’ [L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 335]. Therefore, we will experience the heartache of illness, bereavement, relationship difficulties; employment struggles and a whole lot more. Yet we do not go through these trials on our own. God assures us of that in many biblical passages of which these words from Isaiah 43:1b-3a NIV) are a precious example. Where God says to us: *“Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.* ² *When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume*

you.³ *For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.* All the powers of hell may do their worst –and sometimes the child of God experiences the worst of the storms, but God will always bring us through to the other side. It is not a question of claiming ‘God is on our side’ rather that through Jesus we are now on His side following where He leads and directs our paths.

2. **Question 2: How will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?** (Romans 8:32)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?*

If I was to ask you all individually the question: do you believe God will provide all that we need to live for Him? I would expect the verbal answer to be ‘yes’, maybe with varying degrees of certainty in expressing the answer! It is again very important to be clear what Paul is saying and what he is not saying in this second question. Paul has certainly made this point, in a later letter from prison to the Church in Philippi, Greece. He wrote: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:19). This verse also gives us a clear hint that the apostle is not advocating a prosperity theology, for example, that might claim that God guarantees a life of material comfort to all His faithful servants. That interpretation of the Gospel is a distorted and false one. God promises to provide all our needs not all our wants –the difference between the two is substantial!

On what basis can we be certain that God will be so generous in providing what we need to live for Him in this life? Paul’s answer is very clear and specific and expected. *He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all...* (Romans 8:32) Our minds naturally turn back to Genesis 22 where God asked Abraham if he was willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac. Genesis 22:1-2: *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ² Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you.’* In that context Abraham is an old man and his son is in full strength as an adult. The aged father could not have bound his son on the altar without his consent [L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 335]. The point God was making in that cultural context was that unlike all the Canaanite religions that predominated in the region He did not want Abraham to sacrifice his son. ‘...I swear by Myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed Me’ (Genesis 22:16-18). Yet God was willing to make a greater sacrifice in sending Jesus to die in our place on the cross. A few years ago a couple I know told me that the husband had been in poor health but was now much better because his wife had donated a kidney to him as both his had failed –that was a mark of love. In the 1990s from California an even more remarkable story concerned two young people deeply in love, but both in poor health. One of them died as a result of their health problems, but donated their heart so that their girlfriend or boyfriend, I cannot remember which way round it was, could have the transplant they needed. To the day they died the grateful recipient could not forget such a sacrifice. Octavius Winslow, a prominent Congregational minister in England in the Nineteen Century wrote: ‘Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas for money; not Pilate for fear; not the Jews for envy; -but the Father for love’ (O. Winslow, *No Condemnation in Christ Jesus*, p. 361). Paul with great confidence and assurance declares that we can have confidence in God because having sacrificed His very best for us He cannot fail to give lesser things that we need. When we see

the cross it is: ‘the guarantee of the continuing, unfailing generosity of God’ [J. Stott, *Romans*, p. 255]. What an encouragement this blessing is for us!

3. Question 3: Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? (Romans 8:33)

³³ *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.*

The next two questions are raised imagining a court of law and some one imaginary bringing some hypothetical charges against us concerning the way we have lived our lives as Christians. His point is that no prosecution could succeed because Jesus through His sacrifice has put us into a place of right standing before God. In addition, II Corinthians 5:10 reminds us that Jesus is the one who will judge people when we leave this life. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* Paul has already stated at the start of this chapter in Romans 8:1-2: *Therefore, there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.* No wonder we can rejoice in the peace and assurance this brings. Satan (literally ‘the accuser’) seeks to discredit us before God as he did with Joshua the High Priest, of the Jewish community in Jerusalem after they returned from exile in Babylon 500 years before the time of Jesus. In the prophet Zechariah’s vision this is what he saw: *Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, **and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.** ²The Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’ ³Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. ⁴The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you’ (Zechariah 3:1-4). In the vision the dirty clothes symbolised his sin and the clean clothes God’s righteousness. The message was clear –the person God has justified will never be condemned no matter how hard any accuser tries! Other people will have criticism of each one of us at times because none of us are perfect or infallible! But God will vindicate us. It is possible that Paul was thinking of Isaiah’s message where he spoke of God in this way in Isaiah 50:8-9: *He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! ⁹It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me?* At times our conscience will challenge us and say we are not good enough to follow Jesus; maybe someone else may make this point? Our answer can be very short and simple. I was never good enough to be saved. Jesus died in the place of those who were not good enough to earn their salvation. God accepted me then, now and in the future because Jesus is good enough! Hallelujah*

4. Question 4: Who then is the one who condemns? (Romans 8:34)

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.*

The answer to the previous question would be good enough, but there is even more good news here. (i) Jesus died in our place Not only did Jesus die as our sin-bearer, substitute and Saviour, He is even now praying for us in heaven. In theory our sins were worthy of condemnation, but the penalty for all my sins, past present and future has already been paid for in full by Jesus. In Romans 8:3-4 Paul declared: *For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so **He condemned sin in the flesh,** ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us...* (ii) God the Father raised Jesus from the dead Father Son and Holy Spirit were involved at every stage together in the work of saving God’s people.

Romans 4:25 states: *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* There is no case left for us to answer if Jesus is our Lord and Saviour! (iii) Jesus is now in the place of honour ...*is at the right hand of God...* Paul makes a number of other references to Jesus' current position. In his prayer recorded in Ephesians 1 he used these words speaking of God's: *incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength* ²⁰ *He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,* ²¹ *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked...* (Ephesians 1:19-21a). Because we are united with Christ through His sacrifice for us, the apostle went further in words in Colossians 3:1 which he used as a motivation to urge his readers to live holy God-centred lives. Paul wrote: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* This scene is a picture of triumph and confidence as Jesus is represented as waiting for the moment when God the Father invites Him to return to earth as our coming King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). In the meantime what is Jesus doing? (iv) Jesus prays for us ...*and is also interceding for us.* How can we be certain that we will persevere in our faith to the end? Hebrews 7:25 states: *Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* What happens if I seriously mess up my life – will Jesus turn His back on me and say he or she is too much trouble? I John 2:1-2 reminds and assures us: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* ² *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* Someone might say that this safeguard allows them to sin with impunity. No it doesn't! Paul has already dealt with that in Romans 6:1-2: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?* ² *By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?* In other words, the person who would articulate such sentiments has never been saved at all if they think so lightly of the cost to Jesus of dying for us on the cross. But the child of God, conscious of our short-comings, who admit we have failed to live up to His holy standards, yet Paul assures us, our heavenly Father loves us so much that no effort has been spared to save us and to keep us safe in His family throughout both time and eternity.

5. Question 5: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Romans 8:35-39)

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.'* ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* 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 (Romans 8:31-39).*

The crescendo moment in the piece of music has been reached as Paul launches into his final question in Romans 8: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* He gives a list of things which are very real problems in the world in which we live. *Trouble, hardship or persecution* are all commonly experienced in this ungodly world. People in countries like (South) Sudan and Syria, for example, are particularly bad, but an alarmingly high number of countries in the world are less than desirable places of residence compared to life in this country. Yet God's people live in all these countries and depend day by day on the sufficiency of the grace of God. Paul then lists *famine or nakedness* a picture of absolute destitution with no food or clothing. How often do we hear of disasters around the world where people lose everything they owned in some disaster or other? Yet with the help of relief agencies and generous donations from ordinary people like us, together with funding and other logistical support

from various Governments it is remarkable how quickly people can begin to rebuild their lives. Paul then lists: *...or danger or sword?* This is a reference to violence whether by criminal hands or martyrdom for our faith at the hands of persecuting authorities. As Paul reflects on these worst-case scenarios his mind turns to the words of a Psalm: *As it is written: 'For Your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered* (Psalm 44:22). In its context the Jewish people were being persecuted for their faith in a foreign land, totally vulnerable as no human agency was there to render assistance in their hour of need –so they have only one option to cry out to the Lord for help. In less than a decade's time Christians in Rome will be in that very situation crying to God for assistance in the face of Emperor Nero's savagery against them in the city. Even in all these situations of desperate need Paul is convinced that God's people can come through them with God's help. *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us* (Romans 8:37). As a result of this recognition of the extraordinary love of God for us in Jesus –nothing in life or death; nothing in the heavenly realms or on earth; nothing in the present nor the future; absolutely nothing at all *will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:39). Hallelujah for that!

During the Korean War (1950-1953) there was a brutal fight between the Communist forces on the side of North Korea and the Western nations led by the USA supporting the South Korean regime. In the later stages of the war the southern armies captured many thousands of prisoners of war. These camps were unruly places as the northern soldiers resented their imprisonment. An American Presbyterian minister Harold Voekel, who had been serving as a missionary in Korea prior to the war was drafted as a South Korean Army chaplain assigned to the Prisoner of War camps. He was fluent on Korean. His strategy in the midst of such open hatred was to focus on the love of God. On the first visit to each camp he taught them a song: 'Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; They are weak but He is strong. Yes Jesus loves me (x3) The Bible tells me so'. Then on his second visit he shared about Jesus who loved Koreans; over several months he kept up this strategy until suddenly thousands of these men committed their lives to Christ. When the war finally ended it caused a problem because so many had been converted and refused to go back north as it would have meant execution at the hands of the Communist regime. They continued living in South Korea and continued in their faith as free men in the post war years [J.M. Boice, *Romans*, vol.2, p. 988]. There is no greater message than the love of God in Christ. Paul concluded his section of the letter with these words: *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* 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* (Romans 8:37-39). May this be the experience of each one of us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.