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Romans 8:35-39

I. God's Eternal and Unconditional Love

A. Who Shall separate us from the love of Christ

In this passage we find the last of the five rhetorical questions Paul has asked. We find our answer in the steadfastness of God's *agape* love. The Greek word here for *agape* means a selfless, unconditional, and sacrificial love that is given freely, without expectation of return. It is the highest form of love and characterized by patience, kindness, and a commitment to the well-being of others, even enemies.

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What Paul is describing here is the love of God for humanity and the kind of love that believers are called to show to one another and the world. Notice here that Paul didn't say, "who shall separate us from our love for Christ?" That would mean that our love for him can be hindered by all the things listed here. However, Christ's love for us will never be separated from us. Therefore, no matter how many times we run from Him or allow circumstances to cause our love for Him to fade, we can be assured in our heart that His love for us is constant and unconditional and never fades.

The love of which he speaks in this passage is the love of God the creator, anchored, of course in Jesus. All the things that might go badly wrong for us and the forces that come against us that Paul lists here, would be enough to shake most people's confidence in God's protection for us. But the gospel itself, the message about Jesus crucified, risen, ascended, and interceding, holds us in that place despite everything: God's love in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord. He is always faithful and trustworthy.

These last five verses start and end with God's love. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" is answered by the expanded statement in verse 39; nothing in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord.

B. The Roman Culture

We need to understand the first century beliefs of the Romans. Many in that day believed that the city of Rome had a secret name. Nobody was supposed to talk about it in the city, its secret being revealed, might be exposed to hostile attack. There is good evidence that many not only assumed that Rome had a secret name, but believed the name in question was in fact 'Rome' backwards. Rome in Latin is *Roma*; so, spelled backwards, it is *Amor*, the Latin for 'love.'

The Romans believed that they were descended from Aeneas, who escaped from the sack of Troy, as in Virgil's epic, "The Aeneid." Aeneas was supposedly the son of Venus, the love-goddess. So it's very possible that Paul, in the height of his theological teachings, writing to people who were fluent in both Greek and Latin, would want to teach the true meaning of Love, *agape* in Greek, *Amor* in Latin, not as the secret name of the pagan city, but as the deepest truth about the creator God.

Paul opens this letter speaking about God's gospel, the 'good news.' The 'good news' was a word associated at the time with the achievements of Caesar Augustus, hailed as the son of the 'divine' Julius, the *kyrios*, the Lord. But *this* good news is the real thing; and it has come about through the real 'son of God,' Jesus, who through his resurrection has been marked out as son of God and Lord of the whole world.

Whereas the imperial rhetoric of the day spoke regularly about Caesar providing 'rescue,' 'salvation,' 'justice' and 'peace.' Paul declares that in the gospel of Jesus God's genuine justice has been revealed, bringing genuine salvation and resulting in genuine peace. Here at the culmination of the first half of the letter, Paul focuses on the ultimate reality: not Rome, not *Amor* in Latin, but the unconquerable, unbreakable love of the one true God.

No wonder the rulers and authorities of Paul's day struck back in every way they could. So the first thing to consider about Paul's highlighting of 'love' is the head-on clash with Roman ideology.

C. How To Interpret These Troubles

Paul lists in 35b the physical dangers and threats that he himself had met - or, in the case of the sword, was expecting to meet - and which his hearers might well be going to face soon, if they were not doing so already. Suffering, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword is quite a list.

The first two items, 'suffering' and 'hardship,' are broad terms. Suffering indicates physical pain, the second social and cultural challenges such as loss of job or home. Then there is persecution. Paul had experienced plenty of it, and he could now see it coming from a mile away heading for the community in Rome. Famine, the next one, happened in Paul's world from time to time, as in the mid 40's when Paul was in Antioch, or slightly later when he was writing to Corinth.

Here in our part of the world, as westerners, have more or less never known real food shortages, though plenty of people in our world experience them all the time. All it takes is for a war to disrupt the normal supply lines, or for one or two vital harvests to fail. 'Nakedness,' the next one on the list, is probably where one might end up after a shipwreck or public beating; that probably goes with 'danger,' as in II Corinthians 2:11 where Paul lists the multiple and often humiliating hazards of his travels.

Facing the 'sword' in this case means being killed, not randomly in battle, but deliberately by an official executioner. The Greek word here for sword is *machaira* and refers to the short sword used for executions rather than the longer sword *xiphos* used in military operations.

Many in Paul's day would have said, without hesitating, that they were signs that God, or the gods, were angry. You must have done something terribly wrong. People sometimes say that kind of thing today, reciting the prophet Amos or Deuteronomy, to believe the sins people must have committed are causing the bad things that are now happening to them. But, Paul takes a different view.

In vs. 36 he quotes Psalm 44:22, warding off and redirecting any suggestion that these troubles might be a sign of divine displeasure.

22 Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Psalm 44:22

As Paul indicated in verses 17 and 18, Israel and now the followers of Jesus, are *sharing in the sufferings of the Messiah*. The 'on your account,' he quotes here is vital. It is 'because of ,you' says the psalmist boldly, with Paul now repeating him, that we find ourselves 'as sheep destined for slaughter.' Paul has chosen this text specifically because it insists that these sufferings, far from being a sign of heaven-sent anger, are actually the outworking of the *purpose* we have already seen in verses 18-27.

What's more, this verse closely says the same thing as the plight of the Servant as set out in the Septuagint of Isaiah 53:7, quoted in Psalm 44:22. It is in Isaiah 53:7, we find the Servant being led like a lamb to the slaughter. The sufferings to which Paul has referred are therefore to be seen as *the messianic afflictions*. They are not just 'difficult things to get through.'

As in verses 17-18, they are part of the redemptive vocations, callings, to be embraced, so that the love of the Messiah and the prayer of the spirit may be made known in the dark places of the earth, This is where the wounds of Jesus meet the wounds of the world. Easy-going preaching and teaching sometimes lull Christians into supposing that we can avoid being caught up in this, but it is what Jesus himself said would happen to those who decided to follow him.

D. More Than Conquerors

But in the darkness, the groaning, doesn't have the last word. Verse 37 begins with the 'but' - in other words, don't let all that stuff dominate your thinking! *In all these things* we are super-conquerors, Greek word *hypernikomen*. In a military context, this word could describe a victory that was not just the usual kind, not just an ordinary victory, but one where the enemy has been completely wiped out.

37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

What Paul is saying here is not just that the Christians can 'rise above it,' but that through our participation in the Servant-work, in the messianic sufferings, we are called not just to 'come through all right in the end,' but to be the means by which the pain and anger of the world may itself be overcome.

That is what our own darkness, struggles and prayerful groaning will have been all about. Jesus didn't just conquer his sufferings by holding out and praying for his torturers, He conquered earth itself by dying as his supreme act of love. We are called to be super-conquerors 'through the one who loved us.' We have this promise in Philippians 4:13 that tells us we can do all things through Christ who gives us His strength. We have strength for everything in the One who gives us power

13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

The answer of living amid life's difficulties is simple: trusting God in such a way that we can say, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." This doesn't mean that God will bless whatever we do; it must be understood within the context of the letter, with its emphasis on obedience to God and service to God and others. We need to see it is 'through Christ' who gives us the power to do what we are called to do. In John 15:5 Jesus said, apart from him we can do nothing. Strength to cope as its going on.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Paul has been showing throughout Romans 8, the victory that Christ has already supplied to every born-again believer. We can conclude from this text that we are more than conquerors because Jesus has won the war for us. Therefore, through Christ all we are doing in the Christian walk is enforcing the victory that has already been supplied to us, which makes us more than conquerors. More than conquerors in Strong's is *hupernikao*. The word describes one who is super victorious, who wins more than an ordinary victory, but who is overpowering in achieving abundant victory. This is not the language of conceit, but of confidence. Christ's love conquered death, and because of His love, we are *hupernikao*!

E. The Power of God's Love

Paul was fully persuaded as he begins in verse 38; as some would say 'Paul has done the math,' he has figured it out and goes on in verse 39 to identify anything and everything that may try to come against us in any way will not succeed to separate us from the love of God.

38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is how Paul described his walk with God. He was fully persuaded about the love of Christ for him, and once we realize how much God loves us, we will be fully persuaded like Paul. There are many things we can learn from the life of Paul, but having this revelation is greatly needed to walk in victory. There is nothing that will ever change God's mind about us.

He has listed seven possible attacks or disasters in verse 35, he now lists ten sources from which such attacks might come; and he declares that none of them can come between the believer and the love of God in Messiah Jesus. He has listed these ten mostly in pairs, except for the word 'power,' and ending with the phrase, 'any other creature.' This is basically covering all the bases equivalent to saying 'north, south, east, and west.'

As we look at these we know 'death and life' are the two basic states we might be in. 'Angels and rulers' are the actual powers of heaven and earth.' 'Present and future' are the two time zones we face. God has already dealt with the past, present and future, but still must be applied to our lives. 'Powers' might be any other forces left over after 'angels and rulers.' 'Height and depth' probably is referring to the expanse of the world in which we live.

When Paul says ‘any other creature,’ he is talking about part of the world *made* by God; whereas the gospel is about the incarnate love *of the creator himself*. It is possible, of course, that these elements of creation, in themselves or they might be taken over and used by powers, in the dark domain, darker than themselves, and might try to separate us from the divine and messianic love, now or in the future.

That is part of the ‘groaning of creation,’ the-out-of fellowship of God’s good creation which is part of the long history of human idolatry and injustice he speaks of in Romans 1:18.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Romans 8:19-25, speaking of creation being rescued from its slavery to decay, being contingent upon God’s people being raised from the dead, is the ultimate answer to that problem, and also to any intermediate problems that may arise from the ‘creatures’ as they still are.

Paul himself has experienced the ways in which the powers of the present age try to separate us from God’s love. Paul talks about the trouble he suffered in Ephesus in II Corinthians 1:3-11. If that is what these forces are trying to do, they will fail. Nothing can or will separate us from that love. If Paul stresses the importance of the persuasion he has in all this, we too must be persuaded, because of *the resurrection of the crucified son of God*.

It is the resurrection that declares the cross was a victory, *the* victory. It is the resurrection the creator God declared publicly that the crucified and risen Jesus really was his son, Israel’s Messiah and the world’s savior.

F. Conclusion

Paul opens up this letter to the Romans declaring the gospel of God, and teaching the covenant faithfulness of God, which is why the gospel is God’s power for salvation. Paul has made known that yes, humans have failed, through idolatry and injustice, in their vocation, calling, to be image-bearers, God-reflectors within creation. Israel too, has failed, as the prophetic pointed out, leaving all humankind with nothing to say in their own defense.

But, God remained faithful, coming in the person of the Messiah as the one faithful Israelite, to offer to God the obedience which was Israel’s vocation but in which, as scripture has testified, Israel had failed. The result is the creation, through the gospel, of the single Jew-plus-gentile family of forgiven sinners, through Jesus, are part of the Abrahamic family.

Chapter 8 brings it all together, justification leads to glory, through suffering and hope, sustained by the spirit-given love of God; this is itself rooted in God's action of utter self-giving love in the Messiah. The victorious covenant love of God is far more than a religious feeling or a generalized 'sense of the transcendent,' or any of the similar things that preachers sometimes say.

When Paul speaks of 'assurance,' of 'being persuaded,' he isn't suggesting that, in order to believe it, you have to ignore uncomfortable realities. His conviction, his persuasion, his assurance, all follow from the central 'good news' event of the Resurrection itself. If God really did raise Jesus the Messiah from the dead, and we know he did, then everything follows. Paul's doctrine in a nutshell, '*nothing else in all creation can separate us from God's love in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord!*' This is the lens we must look through when we see all the chaos and troubles in this world and what we experience in our daily lives.

WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH JESUS!