

Blessed Assurance

Our second Scripture reading is Romans 8:31-39, which are the concluding verses of one of the most beloved chapters in the entire Bible. Paul has been contrasting the victorious life we have in the Holy Spirit with the futility of living by the law of the Old Covenant through human effort. In these final verses in the chapter he leads us to a grand statement of the absolute assurance we have of the faithful love of God and our blessed hope and assurance.

Follow as I read:

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted 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, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

One of the most prolific Christian hymn writers of all time was Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), who wrote over 8,000 hymns and gospel songs during the 19th and early 20th Century. Due to a malpractice by a physician when she was a six-week-old baby, Fanny was totally blinded. But her blindness led her to an unusually deep faith relationship with Christ and the development of her unusually gifted hymn-writing. One of her best known hymns is Blessed Assurance.

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

Refrain:

*This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.*

*Perfect submission, perfect delight!
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.*

*Perfect submission, all is at rest!
I in my Savior am happy and blessed,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.*

This assurance Fanny wrote about is the same kind of assurance the Apostle Paul wrote about, and is the privilege of every child of God. The first century was a time of turmoil and overt suffering for many Christ followers. Paul writes to encourage them that their lives, future and eternity are completely secure in Christ Jesus. In these last verses of Romans 8, Paul “soars to sublime heights unequalled elsewhere in the New Testament” (Stott). He’s assured believers that a faithful, sovereign God will sustain them through suffering by their hope of final glory that is grounded in God’s unwavering love. He assures us that we can trust God is working everything for the good of his people (28), gives undeniable affirmations about God’s saving purpose (29-30), and now posits five unanswerable questions for those who might challenge his words of promise for God’s people (31-39).

The first question is, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (31b).

Possibly the first reaction of Paul’s readers would be, “Are you kidding? Everybody’s against us—Roman government persecutors, the Jewish religious establishment, my employer, perhaps my slave master, even former friends and members of my own family who’ve rejected me since I became a follower of Christ. They’re all against me.”

Others who’ve managed to escape overt persecution might say, “Life itself seems against me, with my poor health, financial straits, the deep loneliness that followed the loss of my spouse, and my own emotional illness and instability that stems from the trauma of my childhood. A lot is against me,” many might say in response to Paul’s hypothetical question.

Yet Paul is in fact saying, “Who and what *of any consequence* can be against us? And, what does it matter anyway?” Like an overwhelmingly favored sports team, the response is, “We’re going to win for certain. Defeat’s not even a possibility for us.”

My father was my childhood hero, and I always felt safe in his presence, even though I’m sure he didn’t always feel as safe as I did in some situations. It didn’t matter how

big the bully down the street, or who was stealing our bicycles out of our garage, I knew my dad, who was a big man and former football player, and even had been the bouncer in his dad's pool hall, could handle anybody.

This is the meaning of our text. No one and nothing poses any real threat to us because our God is bigger, stronger and smarter than anything or anyone who might threaten us. Alone, we're frail, weak and vulnerable, but God is always with us and for us, so it's immaterial who's against us.

Paul's next question is, "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

This question also might have been met with some incredulity. "We've asked God for a lot of things he hasn't given us," is a likely response. Again we can go to childhood, when we asked things of our parents we didn't receive because they were inappropriate, unrealistic, unhealthy or ill-advised in one way or another. But Paul assures us that our heavenly Father and God of all power and wealth will supply every need of ours—not every want or desire (Phil. 4:19). In fact, Peter writes, "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3a). And Paul argues this promise from the greater to the lesser: Our Father has already given us his greatest gift, his Son, who suffered the cross for us. So, we can trust he'll give us everything else we need for a life that honors him.

(When I read these promises, and those of Jesus himself who promises to meet all of our needs [Matt. 6:25-34], I realize that he meets our needs through the generous and faithful giving of his people, the church [2 Cor.8&9]).

Jan and I reacted to the awarding of the obscenely exorbitant contracts to NBA stars like Stephen Curry and James Harden. We fantasized about what we would do with hundreds of millions of dollars toward the purchase houses anywhere we wanted to live. For Jan, each of our earthly mansions would have to be on a waterfront, either on an ocean, lake, river or stream. But we concluded that none of these, and no amount of wealth, would guarantee our happiness, and certainly not our joy and peace. It would certainly increase our need to be faithful stewards, putting such wealth to Kingdom use.

Paul says the gift of a Savior and eternal life is all the contract and guarantee we need to have assurance that God will supply our every need.

Next, Paul asks, "Who will bring any charge against God's elect?"

The reader, who possibly has been on trial for his commitment to Christ, imagines being in a heavenly courtroom, where no doubt our primary accuser, the devil himself, will take the stand against us. "Satan will accuse us," the reader replies to Paul's question. Satan has sought our destruction since the Garden of Eden, and he brings our every sin before the Father, which is the picture we have of him accusing Job before the Father. But in the heavenly courtroom, we have an advocate, says John, "Jesus Christ the righteous"...who is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn. 2:1-2). Whatever our sins, past, present and future, are erased from Satan's charge against us. All Jesus needs to

do to answer the accuser's charges against us is to hold out his nail-scarred hands as a reminder that he has, through his death, eliminated all charges that could ever be brought against us.

We're all familiar with the OJ Simpson case, whereby he was likely guilty of a double murder, but in the famous court case, was acquitted of his crime. Later, he was arrested and imprisoned for another crime, for which he was imprisoned for a number of years. But only recently, his case was brought before a judge who released him early from his imprisonment, saying he had served ample time for his lesser crime.

It may seem unjust, as one sportscaster protested, that a man who possibly and perhaps likely committed a double murder, will soon be a free man because the judge pronounced him free, saying he had served enough time for his lesser crime. And though we are not likely overt murderers, we'll all be guilty before holy God. But Jesus has rescued us and defended us and the Father has pronounced us who trust in Christ as free and no longer guilty, whatever our sins. They, like OJ's crimes, can never be held against us. There's nothing we can do to pay for our sins. Jesus has paid it all.

Paul asks yet another unanswerable question, "Who is to condemn?"

Likely, many of Paul's readers were facing condemnation, from government and other authorities, even members of their own families, and maybe even were beginning to condemn themselves. They, no doubt, felt very alone in their condemnation. Paul says that the crucified and risen Christ is at the Father's right hand, always interceding for us. Jesus prays for us and is at the Father's side, speaking in our behalf, even when we condemn ourselves. Condemnation is a deep-rooted emotion that like begins at childhood. Well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning parents instill us with self-condemnation and a picture of God, who'll "get us" if we're not good, if we don't do what our parents say. And so we condemn ourselves because we don't feel we can ever measure up or be good enough to please God. We certainly didn't please our parents!

Paul begins this 8th chapter, after showing the inadequacy of our spiritual performance to try to please God, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). Religious laws can't condemn us, and even we can't condemn ourselves, no matter how guilty we may feel for not measuring up. We can never perform at a high enough level to earn God's favor. He doesn't expect us to. He gave us his Son to earn all the merits we need to please God. God is pleased with us, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us. So, self-condemnation is futile, as John says. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. He knows all about us, and yet by his love and grace he sets us free from self-condemnation (1 Jn. 3:20).

How often have you said, even after your spouse lovingly forgave you, "I just can't forgive myself"? It's not about what you think and feel. God is the highest authority, and he's pronounced you, "Not guilty."

My Old Testament professor, Clyde Francisco, had preached about God's love despite our sins, and after his sermon a lady spoke with him in confidence, saying "I know God's forgiven me. I just can't forgive myself." As only this good professor would dare

to say, "Lady, your problem is you don't know Hebrew!" Of course she didn't and I didn't know much either when he told our class this story. He continued, "Lady, the Hebrew word for "forgive" means literally "to lift off of" someone. God has lifted all your guilt for all sin from off of you, and not forgiving yourself is absolutely futile and is an insult to a loving, forgiving God."

Paul "climbs to the top" of the mountain of God's assurance with this final unanswerable question: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"

As we noted last Sunday from Genesis 22, Jacob didn't climb his ladder to meet God. God came to him, reaching down to him in grace. Paul would agree that we, like Jacob, are God's chosen children, objects of his initiated love. But now that he has reached us and made us his being-redeemed, being-recreated children, we are to climb up to the top of the assurance of our salvation. We have absolute assurance that nothing in heaven, earth or hell can ever separate us from God's love, not in this life or in death or in the next life in eternity. Just about every category of possible threat is listed in our closing verses. *The Message* paraphrases the list of possible threats to our security, and says "not even the worst sins listed in Scripture" can drive a wedge between us and Christ's love. Even when I was angrily shaking my fist at God he was still holding me in his love.

How important are these verses, in a world and time where and when things are so uncertain! As one wag said, about the only thing certain anymore is death and taxes. But not even death itself is a threat. The last enemy we'll face has been defeated by Christ's death and resurrection. This 8th chapter of Romans is a favorite of those with a strong Calvinistic bent, and is used in their argument for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. But, as John Stott rightly says, these verses on our assurance are more about the perseverance of God with his saints. Our assurance is based on God's faithful love that will not let us go, for time and eternity.

None of us can fully understand the ways of God. And often we're bewildered, perplexed and disappointed with God. There are times when we don't feel like we have a firm hold on God, and even times when we're angry with God and want to run away from God. But we can be assured, whatever our feelings and emotions, that he is always holding onto us.

Didn't Jesus himself promise us as our Good Shepherd he and the Father would keep us and no one can snatch us out of his all-powerful, faithful hand (Jn. 10:28).

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! By faith, *he is ours!*