

# The Believer's Joy and Security

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## Summer School

*January 18-21, 2010*

### Session 4: More than Conquerors (Romans 8: 28-39)

Our survey of Romans 8 has, I hope, given us a fresh insight into, and a renewed confidence in God and His promises, purposes and plans for us and His whole creation. Let me quote John Stott as we move to these final 12 verses:

*The steadfastness of God's love (28-39)*

*In the last twelve verses of Romans 8 the apostle soars to sublime heights unequalled elsewhere in the New Testament. Having described the chief privileges of justified believers – peace with God (5:1-11), union with Christ (5:12-6:23), freedom from the law (7:1-25) and life in the Spirit (8:1-27) – his great Spirit-directed mind now sweeps over the whole plan and purpose of God from a past eternity to an eternity still to come, from the divine foreknowledge and predestination to the divine love from which absolutely nothing will ever be able to separate us.*

*To be sure, at present we experience sufferings and groans, but we are sustained in the midst of them by the hope of glory. So far it is only a 'hope', because it is still future, unseen and unrealized, but it is not on that account uncertain. On the contrary, our Christian hope is solidly grounded on the unwavering love of God. So the burden of Paul's climax is the eternal security of God's people, on account of the eternal unchangeability of God's purpose, which is itself due to the eternal steadfastness of God's love.*

*These tremendous truths the apostle declares three times over, although from three different perspectives. He begins with five unshakeable convictions (28) about God working all things together for the good of his people. He continues with five undeniable affirmations (29-30) regarding the successive stages of God's saving purpose from eternity to eternity. And he concludes with five unanswerable questions (31-39), in which he challenges anybody to contradict the convictions and the affirmation which he has just expressed. (BST 246)*

There are things we don't know as in v26 how to pray, and as in Deuteronomy 29:29 God's mind on everything, but there are revealed truths upon which we can stake our lives. We see this in v22 in regard to creation and v28 in regard to God's lovingly providential care (in the face of things we don't understand). We come then to the great 8:28 which is so well known. Stott: "*on it believers of every age and place have stayed their minds. It has been likened to a pillow on which to rest our weary heads*" (246)

## Romans 8:28-39

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 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? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that 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.*

Five convictions are found in these verses that are so essential for a joyful balanced and decided discipleship, one that can cope with reality.

1. *God works.* God is holy and above us but He stoops to meet us. We have seen this in Christ (v3b) and through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us (v15). We are not deists but theists, not those who rejoice in and rely upon the finished work of Christ on the cross only, but also upon the convicting and ongoing controlling work of the Holy Spirit within. Without the cross there would be no salvation and without the Spirit no way of receiving salvation. The AV rendering "all things work together for good" is not as clear as "in all things God works for the good..." It is God who is not only in control but lovingly so, that brings us encouragement. We do not understand "all things" or why they are taking place or what they mean, but we do understand God and that His purpose is good.

2. *God works in all things for our good.* When the grief of death is still very real, or the pain of being deserted, or the anguish of loneliness caused by our stand for Jesus, this truth is precious, it may be all that we can understand, our firm foundation..."for the good" "the good" of God's glory, "my good"...needs to ring in our ears. Exactly what "the good" is, is spelt out in 8:29; our being conformed to the likeness of Jesus. (see also e.g. 1Peter 2:23 cf His call in regard to enemies Matthew 5:44)

3. *In all things God works for good.* These will include the sufferings of v17 and the groaning of v23 along with the troubles of v35 and things cosmic and mundane of vv38-39. Andres Nygren writes "thus all that is negative in this life is seen to have a positive purpose in the execution of God's eternal plan" (BST 247). This is neither a heartless stoicism ('what will be, will be') nor a thoughtless sentimentality ('she'll be right mate', 'it'll turn out alright in the end', 'don't worry, be happy' and 'every cloud has a silver lining') but rather, it affirms that not only is God mindful of our circumstances/frailties etc., but that He is working through them for our good. We are assured that, to quote Stott (247) "nothing is beyond the overruling, overriding scope of God's providence."

4. *This promise is* (like 8:1 for those in Christ Jesus) *only for "those who love Him."* This is not a generalised optimism for all, but is linked to Christ and our salvation through Him.

5. *Those who love God are described as “those who have been called according to His purpose.”* Our love for God is preceded by God’s love for us. This humbling truth, found throughout scripture is made clear by Jesus in Matthew 11:27, John 6:37. This will be spelt out in vv29-30.

This 8:28 truth is seen in the OT. Of note are Joseph (Genesis 50:20), the exiles after destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29:11) and of course, Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 2:23-24)

Is there any greater knowledge than this? Is there any better assurance that delivers us

- confidence in face of persecution?
- assurance in face of disappointment?
- perseverance in face of problems?

I think not. Once again all this is experimental, progressive and observable, providing

- o Our Christian fellows with strengthening example (why young Christians need older and survive best amongst older Christians)
- o Our non Christian peers with a God trusting witness

But there is more to fill our minds and hearts, more reasons for rejoicing in God’s love (29-30) There are 5 undeniable affirmations according to Stott. Christian believers **are foreknown** which commonly means knowing in advance but in Hebrew thought meant ‘a personal relationship of care and affection’ close to love, watched over (Psalm 1:6) **are predestined**. This means ‘to decide upon beforehand’. So our real and obvious decision for Christ was preceded by God’s decision before time to choose us (not on the basis of His foreknowledge – He knows everyone – but on His loving purpose and plan e.g. Eph 1:4-5) Stott quotes CJ Vaughan who puts it so succinctly

*“Everyone who is eventually saved can only ascribe his salvation, from the first step to the last, to God’s favour and act. Human merit must be excluded: and this can only be by tracing back the work far beyond the obedience which evidences, or even the faith which appropriates salvation; even to an act of spontaneous favour on the part of that God who foresees and foreordains from eternity all his works. (SBT 250)*

PW Barnett translates predestination as pre-identified (marked out), noting that predestination carries a ‘lot of freight’. This predestination, never for boasting but always for humility and praise, is always for the purpose of holiness. Election is not simply to salvation, but “to holiness of life” notes F Foulkes and is spelt out here in v29b in the noblest possible way, “to be conformed to the likeness of His Son”, with the greatest incentive to church life and witness (e.g. Eph 5:21) and our glorious destiny, viz. the firstborn among many brothers.

Packer puts it like this:

“I will not work my soul to save  
For that my Lord has done  
But I will work like any slave  
For love of God’s dear Son” (Rediscovering Holiness 70)

**“...are also called”** This is the effective work of the Holy Spirit enabling us to respond to the general gospel call. It happens in time, to which we respond with repentance and faith. We thank God for it in ourselves and others. We pray for it earnestly and preach, gossip, share the gospel since that is God’s appointed means of calling people.

**“he also justified”** This is the consequence of our trusting Christ. Spelt out in Romans 5:1 (cf 8:1) it is *judicial* and *accounting* where righteousness is credited to our account (4:3, 7-8)

**“...he also glorified”** This yet future blessing is in the present tense i.e. it is as sure as the other 4 links in this golden chain which all happened in the past; the first two in eternity and the next two in time.

What assurance and confidence this brings the believer. Article 17/39 describes predestination **to life** *“as full of sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort to godly persons”* (AAPB 630) It humbles us, disarming us of any pretension, merit or deserving, yet it means our lives are secure and fully ordered by his loving hand and purposes.

It promotes Christ-likeness by our loving response to His rich mercy. RM McCheyne puts it so well:

Chosen not for good in me  
Wakened up from wrath to flee  
Hidden in the Saviour’s side,  
By the Spirit sanctified  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show  
By my love, how much I owe

We might ask ‘Where is our sanctification’ in this golden chain of 8:30? It is assumed and defined in v29 *“to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.”* Could there be anything loftier than this which is a necessary preliminary to our glorification? FF Bruce says that *“sanctification is glory begun; glory is sanctification consummated”* (168) This golden chain begins in eternity and ends in eternity. The believer is secure in Christ as the chain is unbreakable. James Denney writes that *“the tense in the last word (‘he also glorified’) is amazing. It is the most daring anticipation of faith that even the NT contains”* (Stott 253)

Since Paul is a wise pastor who knows our frailty, Satan’s design to deflect/deceive us and the pressure of a sinful world, he adds to these affirmations three convictions/three answers to three questions that take us back into God’s gracious love for us in Christ 8:31-38 *“what then shall we say to this”?* NIV *“What is there left to say?”* (JBP) or *“what can we add?”* (JB)

Stott comments:

*“The apostle’s answer to his own question is to ask five more questions, to which there is no answer. He hurls them into space, as it were, in a spirit of bold defiance. He challenges anybody and everybody, in heaven, earth or hell, to answer them and to deny the truth which they contain. But there is no answer. For no-one and nothing can harm the people whom God has foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified.”* (BST 254)

The love of God made known to us so clearly in the gospel, both through Christ and His death (5:8) and the presence of the Holy Spirit (5:5) is spoken of in memorable tones. As usual, sublime theology flows out of tough circumstances

- for suffering hurts and we are frail
- for Satan’s doubt-sowing work is real

Barnett paints the picture well:

*“It is likely that Paul’s readers in Rome had become demoralised under persecution. Oppression and rejection bring doubt and spiritual insecurity. ‘Perhaps unconquerable spiritual forces are against us. Perhaps God himself has it in for us and is against us.’ Paul’s words here are powerfully reassuring and they point us to Christ as the pledge of God’s goodness and care, and also to his resolute determination to glorify those he ‘foreknew’.* (Romans 203)

Stott suggest 5 questions, Barnett 3. I will take 3. It amounts to the same thing and takes us to the unassailable conviction of 8:38-39

**Q1 If God is for us, who can be against us? (31-32)**

- Sometimes as Christians it can feel like everyone is.
- Often as church workers we can experience opposition from outside and/or meanness and laziness from within.
- As witnesses to Jesus, it can be lonely.

So to answer the question; many may be against us but God is always for us. Evidence v32 God's giving Jesus up for us. It has been noted that the same word used here of God is used in the gospels of Judas, the priest and Pilate who handed Jesus over to death (Stott 255) Yet 8:28 is true of Jesus and us. Octavius Winslow captures the God centredness of Jesus' death: *"Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy, but the Father; for love"*.

We are wise Christians to find strength in our weakness, hope in our doubts, answers in our questioning by going to these two great truths

- Christ on the cross as God's demonstration of love
- 8:28 affirming God's loving sovereignty over us for good in and through all things.

Having done this for us, will He not continue to be gracious to us and give us all things needful (cf Luke 11:9-13, Romans 5:10-11)? Sometimes we have to argue ourselves into faithfulness (and speak clearly to each other). These two truths are foundational – believe them, pray them in, rejoice in them. I am who I am because of God's love in Christ; I'm where I am because of God's sovereignty. Both truths (atonement through propitiation, and God's sovereignty) are under attack today.

## **Q2 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? 8:33-34**

Satan will, our own doubting conscience will, critics will ('you think you're a Christian?'). It won't be God, since He has already declared us 'not guilty', i.e. justified (v33 and chapters 4-5). It won't be Jesus, whose work is complete (John 19:30), whose resurrection and ascension and current intercessory work are all evidence, not of his condemnation but gracious acceptance, not of our guilt but His grace and mercy, not of our sin but His desire and provision to provide access and assurance in His presence. This truth has been captured so well firstly by John Murray:

*"the Children of God have two divine intercessors – Christ as their intercessor in the court of Heaven...while the Holy Spirit is their intercessor in the theatre of their own hearts."* (quoted in Stott 244)

And so wonderfully in song by Charitie L Bancroft in 1863,

1 Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong and perfect plea.  
A great high Priest whose Name is Love  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

4 Because the sinless Saviour died  
My sinful soul is counted free.  
For God the just is satisfied  
To look on Him and pardon me.

2 My name is graven on His hands,  
My name is written on His heart.  
I know that while in heaven He stands  
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

5 Behold Him there the risen Lamb,  
My perfect spotless righteousness,  
The great unchangeable I AM,  
King of glory and of grace,

3 When Satan tempts me to despair  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look and see Him there  
Who made an end of all my sin.

6 One with Himself I cannot die.  
My soul is purchased by His blood,  
My life is hid with Christ on high,  
With Christ my Saviour and my God!

Far from giving the believer licence for sin, or an excuse to downplay sin's seriousness, here we have a gracious provision and an example of 8:28 where even our sin serves God's glorious goal of glorifying Christ (and thwarting Satan). Our sin properly dealt with (i.e. confessed and then replaced

cf 1 John 1:8-9) will always take us to God through Christ as dear children. “No prosecution can proceed” against those who are in Christ, since He is our intercessor, High Priest (Hebrews) and advocate on high (1 John 2:2). This is our assurance, which is totally destroyed when we speak of the mediation of others, including priests, Mary or saints. NB the biblical word “saints” is but a shorthand way of describing all Christians e.g. Eph 1: 1)

### **Q3 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (vv35-39)**

In the words of Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones “*We are climbing a grand staircase here ‘because its answer takes us into the very throne room of Heaven, but more to the very heart of God and His eternal love to us.’* Far from head in the clouds, the very question earths us into

- Our frailty and fears
- Our groaning as Christians
- The frustration and futility
- The persecutions of believers

David Secombe helps us -

*When we think about this possibility our spirits quail, for we are set about with fearsome giants. The weakest link in the chain which binds us to our salvation is undoubtedly our own faith. Those who have progressed far in the Christian life and in self-knowledge are painfully aware of this. What Christian has not asked what would become of his or her faith if this or that were to happen: hunger, torture, cold, drowning, fire, loneliness, ridicule, violence. In our heart we know if we were confronted with our worst fear we would crumble. Knowing our weakness our doubts are justified.*

Then Paul mentions some of the possible ways we Christians might be separated from Christ 35b-36. They are common problems for Christians (Hebrews 11, Paul’s ministry e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, 2 Cor 4:7-12, 2 Cor 6:3-10, 2 Cor 11:23-12:10) and in the OT to God’s faithful v36 quoting Psalm 44:22

Notice *who* (v35) not *what*. It is Satan who uses all circumstances (the adverse and the good e.g. wealth, pleasure) to cause us to either think that Christ has abandoned us OR gives us thoughts (some fuelled by others) of separating ourselves from Christ or His people. But no, they are not signs of His displeasure rather signs of our allegiance (remember Matthew 5:11-12). They are indeed opportunities of growth and ways of witnessing.

But it is not *we* alone who are “more than conquerors” (v37) i.e. – hyper conquerors/super conquerors, but only “*through Him* who loved us” that is, Jesus.

Barnett reminds us of our dependence upon Christ and our Father’s loving purpose:

*“It is not at all our strength or inner resources that enable perseverance in the face of these things. This conquering is a further demonstration of the absolute, implacable and invincible determination of God to glorify those he foreknew before the creation of the cosmos (vv 28-30).*

*So (vv 38-39) Paul brings this section to its passionate end:” with his confident assertion, “**I am convinced...**” A conviction born of and matured out of his conversion, his conflicts, his road testing of God’s promises in the rough and tumble of decided discipleship. This confidence is not for the half hearted, closed lipped, safety first, charity-begins-at-home, smorgasbord or designer disciples but for those who are *in* Christ and *for* Christ. David Secombe outlines how each of the ‘neithers’ contribute to the whole. That unshattering conviction that nothing at all can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*“**Death** with its fears and loneliness and pain will not separate us from Christ. Nor will **life**, be it mined with affluence and the temptations of triviality, or beset with trouble and failure. Spiritual powers and forces (**angels and demonic rulers**), which impinge upon us more than we know, are impotent to destroy the believers’ bond with Christ. The **present** cannot separate us from Christ (some experience their struggle now), nor the **future** (who does not fear what the future may bring?).*

**Height nor depth** will not succeed either, be they the highest and lowest powers of the angelic creation, or the heights of elation and joy and the depths of depression and despair. Will insanity or depression or senile dementia separate us from the love of God? No, says Paul, there is nothing in all creation which will separate us from this love. (DTD 158)

Here is our real security:

- as sons and daughters of God
- as believers and disciples of Jesus
- as temples of the Holy Spirit

But we do not remain passive, instead we:

- Feed our minds on spiritual truths (v5ff) e.g. we don't flirt with the demonic
- We recognise our obligation to cooperate with the Holy Spirit (v12ff)
- We nurture our relationship with our dear Father (v15ff)
- We rejoice even in sufferings, knowing that God's gracious purpose is to grow us to be like His Son (v18ff)

All this is God's generous provision through the scriptures of keeping us safe and on track by assuring us of His gracious love, a real love that deals with our real sin and guilt (8:1) and helps us to make sense of an unloving world by relentlessly taking us back to Jesus and His death for us (3:32-34). See 15:5-6

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?  
We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;  
Fastened to the rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!  
Priscilla Owen

Priscilla Owen's question remains since there will always be storms in life, but so does her answer, which is the same as the apostle's.

Decided discipleship is worth it, despite difficulties and disappointments since in Seccombe's words "*the one who loved us now stands guard over us*". Satan has been defeated (the empty tomb), our sin dealt with (the cross) our future secured and in the present, we are not alone (adopted children indwelt by the Holy Spirit)

*Conclusion:*

- Are you lonely because of obedience to Christ? You are not alone or unnoticed
- Are you sick and in pain? You are loved and safe in God's hands
- Have you been disappointed with life, family or church? You need never be disappointed with God. Remember His golden chain of v29
- Do you have nagging doubts that a life of service, quiet prayer and generosity may have gone unnoticed? You are an adopted child and heir of God. Verse 29 is sure and certain.
- Is your struggle with sin all too hard and disappointing? Remember the Spirit's presence. Keep on looking to Jesus.
- Are the world and its pleasures too tempting? Remember it is going nowhere and is under judgement. Remember your inheritance and God's promises 8:17
- Are you slow to witness for fear of rejection? God knows you and loves you dearly

We started with **no condemnation** and finished with **no separation** and in the middle can be confident that despite the struggles of living in a groaning world, there is **no defeat**.

An old German commentator Spener said that “if the bible was a ring, and the book of Romans its precious stone, chapter 8 would be the sparkling point of the jewel.” (Boice 782) Admiring it afresh with you has confirmed my conviction that the truths we’ve seen are indeed precious and forever attractive and alluring; just what we need to live confidently, humbly, joyfully, and always for our risen and gracious Saviour.

All this is wonderfully captured by George Matteson in his moving hymn:

*O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee,  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.*

*O light that followest all my way,  
I yield my flickering torch to thee,  
My heart restores its borrowed ray,  
That in thy sunshine’s blaze its day  
May brighter, fairer be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee,  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from thee,  
I lay in dust life’s glory dead,  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.*

Peter Brain January 2010