

Eternal Security and the Saving Love of God

An Exposition of Romans 8:31-39¹

Stephen Voorwinde

Introduction

The relationship between the eternal security of the believer and the saving love of God is nowhere stated more compellingly than in Romans 8:31-39. This is Scripture's *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints or the eternal security of the believer:

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? **If God is for us, who can be against us?** 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? ³³ **Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?** It is God who justifies. ³⁴ **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. 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.²

These verses are dominated by four controlling *who?* questions, which in turn determine the structure of the passage:

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague John Peet (1940-2005). Before he went to be with the Lord, John was the pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of Cobden, Victoria, Australia. As he struggled with cancer during the last year of his life John drew great comfort from this passage, which was also the text for my sermon at his funeral on 28 January, 2005.

² Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

1. “If God is for us, *who* can be against us?” (v. 31).
2. “*Who* will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen?” (v. 33).
3. “*Who* is the he that condemns?” (v. 34)
4. “*Who* shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35).

Questions 1-3 are legal or forensic in nature, while the fourth question is relational. In v. 35 the language of law makes way for the language of love. Hence the passage divides neatly into two constituent parts:

- (a) The legal section (vv. 31-34). Here the language of the law court is most prominent, namely “delivered (for sentencing)” (v. 32), “bring a charge against”, “justifies” (v. 33), “condemns” and “intercedes” (v. 34).
- (b) The relational section (vv. 35-39). These verses are embraced by a neat inclusio of love – “the love of Christ” (v. 35) and “the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39). It is from this love that the elect are declared to be inseparable, no matter what natural or supernatural forces may be arrayed against them (vv. 35, 38, 39).³

The transition from a legal to a relational emphasis in these verses becomes more comprehensible in the light of Paul’s earlier emphasis on adoption (vv. 14-17). Here Paul draws an illustration from a practice that was common in the Roman world. Under Roman law adoption involved a legal transaction by which the adoptee was released from his natural father’s legal authority (or *potestas*) and was then transferred to the *potestas* of the adoptive father.⁴ A son who was thus adopted received all the rights of the new family and became heir to his adoptive father’s estate.⁵ If his new

³ Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 458: “Most scholars divide the verses into five sections (vv. 31a, 31b-32, 33-34, 35-37, 38-39) . . . A more persuasive analysis splits the text into two sections (vv. 31-34 and 35-39) in which the first part has a judicial emphasis and the second focuses on love.” Thus also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 538: “I think it is simplest and most natural to divide the paragraph into two parts: vv. 31-34 and vv. 35-39. The first is dominated by judicial imagery . . . In vv. 35-39, Paul expands the picture by adding to our assurance for the ‘last day’ assurance for all the days in between.”

⁴ David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 64.

⁵ See M. Cary et al., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), 7: “The classical form of adoption gave to the adopted the position of a *filius familias* in the new family with all its duties and rights, especially in regard to

father had natural sons, the adoptee was treated as their equal. “The debts of his old life were cancelled,” writes David Williams, “and no claim could be made against him in the courts on that account. In the eyes of the law, he was no longer the person he had been. He was a new man.”⁶ This practice has obvious parallels to the adoption of the believer into the family of God. Paul develops this metaphor most fully in Rom 8:12-17. As Williams further explains:

There was a time when we were under the *potestas* of sin (Paul has argued this, although not in these terms, in the earlier chapters), but God, in his mercy, has made us God’s children by adoption. The past has no claim on us now. Our adoptive Father, on the other hand, has an absolute claim (e.g., we have no right to our assets; they are rightfully his). The past is no more; our debts have been cancelled; a new life has begun. We are heirs, Paul declares, “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (v. 17).⁷

The background of Paul’s thinking in a practice that would have been well known to his Roman readers explains his easy transition from legal to relational language in vv. 31-39. Because all the legal requirements for the believers’ adoption into God’s family have been met, God is able to lavish his love upon his children without let or hindrance. Because we are God’s very own through the process of adoption, no counter-claims can be lodged against us. Our opponents have had their day in court and none of their accusations will stand. Nothing from our past life can be held against us. Just as under Roman law the adoptee’s old life was left behind, so for the believer his adoption into God’s family brings with it a new legal status. As a son of God nothing can come between him and the love of his adoptive Father. It is only within this strongly legal-relational context that the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer can be fully appreciated.

Important as this feature of Paul’s immediately preceding argument is for understanding of the doctrine of eternal security, verses 31-38 can be more deeply understood in the light of the overall context. Precisely how these verses fit into Paul’s overall argument has been a matter of some dispute among scholars. Yet it is imperative that this matter be resolved if we are to adequately examine the meaning of the passage before us.

inheritance. . . He received his adoptive father’s name and rank: a plebeian adopted by a patrician became a patrician and vice versa.”

⁶ Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 64.

⁷ Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 65.

The Question of Context

The passage opens with a crucial question: “What then shall we say to *these things*?” (v. 31 NASB). But what precisely is the antecedent to *these things*? The question is pivotal. How far back is Paul reaching into his earlier argument? In our paragraph Paul is clearly drawing an argument to a close. But precisely what argument is it? It is obvious that *these things* should include the teaching of vv. 28-30, which embraces God’s providence and his eternal purpose. Yet these doctrines are not stated *de novo* in these verses, but are firmly anchored in Paul’s earlier discussion. But how far back does this discussion go, and to what argument is Paul now giving such a resounding conclusion? On this point there seem to be two major schools of thought:

- (a) There are those who hold that Rom 8:31-39 forms an inclusio with 5:1-11, as both passages, according to Thomas Schreiner, “feature the confidence that comes from the hope of believers.” Moreover, “Paul reflects back on 5:1-8:30 and considers the greatness of what God has accomplished on behalf of believers.”⁸ This inclusio does not exclude the fact that in these verses Paul is also bringing chapter 8 to a climax. The point is more fully developed by Douglas Moo:

... the similarity between the language and contents of this passage and Rom. 5 suggests that this paragraph, while responding immediately to what Paul has been saying in chap. 8, and especially 8:18-30, is intended to cap Paul’s many-sided discussion of Christian assurance in chaps. 5-8 as a whole. Thus, we hear again, as in 5:1-11, of the love of God in Christ for us and the assurance that that brings to us; of the certainty of final vindication because of the justifying verdict of God; and of how these great forces render ultimately impotent and unimportant the tribulations of this life.⁹

⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 456.

⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 538; cf. A. H. Snyman, “Style and Rhetorical Situation of Romans 8:31-39,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 218-231. Snyman seeks to make the same point on the basis of rhetorical criticism: “However it gets argued, most commentators and scholars agree that Rom 8. 31-39 forms the concluding (perorative) section of the unit chapters 5-8. The (elite) audience, as one type of implied reader, has gone through the argument of Rom 5-8, an argument of which much is quasi-logical and convincing. In Rom 8. 31-39 as concluding (perorative) section, Paul is no longer seeking to convince his audience, but now – in this

While this view has an obvious appeal because of the symmetry that it uncovers in Paul's argument, there is a more convincing alternative. The phrase *these things* has an even further reach than either Moo or Schreiner seems willing to allow.

- (b) There is a loud chorus of commentators who believe that *these things* points not only *to* the immediately preceding context (especially vv. 18-30) but *through* that context to Paul's entire argument up to this point. Leon Morris, for example, makes a bold claim: "The whole [of vv. 31-39] should be seen as the conclusion and summing up not only of the immediately preceding section, but of the whole of the letter up to this point."¹⁰ Charles Hodge has argued the same case with equal emphasis: "The conclusion of the chapter is a recapitulation of all his former arguments, or rather the reduction of them to one, which comprehends them all in their fullest force; God IS FOR US."¹¹

James Dunn has likewise argued that our passage serves to sum up Paul's whole argument in Romans 1-8. "What shall we then say to these things?" (v. 31) evokes the following comments:

The question obviously introduces a conclusion, certainly to the final section 8:18-30; but since 8:18-30 is itself the climactic conclusion of the whole sequence of chap. 6-8 (matching the role of 5:12-21 in the section 1:18-5:21 ...), the ταῦτα ["these things"] can be taken to refer to the whole developed line of argument in chaps. 6-8; and since 8:18-30 effectively rounds off the argument so far (1:18-8:30) it is not going too far (despite Wilckens, n. 767)

peroration – he makes a final appeal which is based on the elite audience's agreement and aims at evoking a full and emotionally charged consent to the shared affirmation. The emotional, affective impact of the passage is a well-established fact, recognized by all commentators" (227). Snyman's argument that our passage is a conclusion to chapters 5-8 depends on the rather dubious assumption that 4:23-25 is a peroration of the same order as 8:31-39 and 11:33-36. Nevertheless, he has correctly highlighted the affective nature of these verses. Paul is making an emotive appeal based on his earlier argument. Such an appeal at the end of an argument conforms to Greek rhetorical practice.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 334.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 [reproduction of the revised edition of 1886]), 287.

to refer the ταῦτα to the whole (cf. Cranfield). NEB catches the mood well, “With all this in mind, what are we to say?”¹²

Although some of the more recent commentators view our passage as the conclusion only of Paul’s argument in chapters 5-8, there is much to be said for these verses being a rousing appeal to Paul’s readers to personally appropriate all of his teaching up to this point. He is passionately urging his readers – whatever their circumstances – to make his gospel of God’s love their own. As such this passage occupies a central position in the epistle as a whole and has a climactic place in the mainstream of Paul’s overall argument.

The Broader Context

In the exordium (1:1-7) Paul introduces himself to his readers in terms of his gospel. The heart of this gospel was the message of justification by faith, a doctrine for which Paul argues strenuously in chapters 1-5. All human beings, whether Jews or Gentiles, lack the righteousness that God requires (1:18-3:20). Therefore their only hope lies in God providing that righteousness through Christ by means of the propitiation in his blood (3:21-5:21). Hence the only way that people can be right with God is through faith in Christ. But before Paul applies that doctrine to life in 12:1ff., he addresses two major objections that might be raised against it.

Objection 1:

If salvation is by faith, rather than by works, doesn’t that lead to a careless (and perhaps even lawless) way of life? This objection is stated quite explicitly at the beginning of chapter six: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (6:1). Paul gives the short answer in the very next verse: “By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” This short answer is then unpacked in the remainder of chapters six to eight:

(a) We died to sin by being raised with Christ to newness of life (chapter 6).

¹² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary; vol. 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), 499.

- (b) We also died to the law which merely succeeds in identifying and diagnosing our sin, not in overcoming it (chapter 7).
- (c) We live in the newness of resurrection life by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (chapter 8).

In chapters 6-8, therefore, Paul demonstrates the transforming power of God's righteousness. Justification leads to sanctification.

Objection 2:

The second major objection to Paul's teaching is met in chapters nine to eleven: If the message of justification by faith is true, and if it demonstrates God's justice, then why was it rejected by those for whom it was originally intended? If, by and large, the gospel was rejected by Israel, how can it demonstrate the justice of God? If Israel fails to believe, how can the gospel be "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16)?¹³ Have not Paul's own missionary journeys disproved the principle of Jewish priority? And – most seriously – haven't God's purposes failed, if Israel remains in unbelief?

Objection 1 seems to have been raised by Paul's opponents (3:7, 8). The second objection also deeply affected the apostle himself. For him Jewish unbelief was a very personal and heart-rending issue (9:1-5). "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," he writes. As Paul pens these words, his emotions are deeply stirred. He then addresses the turmoil of his own soul by way of a clear and cogent argument. At the outset he states the proposition that he is about to defend: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (9:6). In the chapters that follow he both explains and develops this claim, and supports it from Scripture.

Hence Romans 8:31-39 comes at a crucial juncture in Paul's overall argument. He has just answered one major objection and is about to tackle

¹³ Cf. Mark Harding, "The Salvation of Israel and the Logic of Romans 11:11-36," *Australian Biblical Review* 46 (1998): 57: "Paul's argument in 1:18-8:39 has cast a shadow over his claim that the gospel is for Jew first since it is clear that the Jews have largely insisted on keeping the Torah when confronted by gospel preaching. They need to be persuaded that Paul's message is to be believed, and that it comprises God's diagnosis and prescription for the Jew first. It is therefore totally expected that Paul, having declared at the outset that this is the case, should open the issue to a large-scale discussion as to why Israel has not been persuaded and what her destiny might be."

a second. In this passage he not only draws his entire earlier argument to a close, he also lays the groundwork for meeting the second major objection raised against his doctrine of justification by faith. If no one can bring any charge against God's elect because God is the one who justifies (v. 32), then what will become of God's elect in the Old Testament, the chosen nation of Israel? We have seen how God deals with his adopted sons, but now what about his "natural" sons?¹⁴ How does God propose to deal with his ancient covenant people? As Schreiner explains:

Israel was God's chosen people and the only one foreknown among the nations (Amos 3:2), and yet now the church is said to be foreknown and chosen by God (Rom. 8:29-30). Yahweh had promised never to forsake Israel (Deut. 31:6), yet now this promise is extended to the church (Rom. 8:38-39; cf. also Heb. 13:5). With the application of so many OT promises to the church in chapters 5-8, the relationship of Israel to God's saving plan cries out for resolution, and Paul turns to that question next.¹⁵

The place that our passage occupies in this epistle is therefore pivotal. It brings Paul's earlier argument to both its logical conclusion and climactic crescendo. Clearly his argument peaks at this point. As a compelling preacher Paul drives home the point of his argument with force. He also sets the stage for meeting the second major objection to his gospel. More modestly, he is also drawing chapter 8 to a fitting close.

The Narrower Context

In chapter 8 Paul is still answering the objection raised in 6:1: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?" In chapter 6 he has begun to answer this question by appealing to the new life that the believer has in Christ. Not only has such a person been united to Christ in his resurrection (vv. 3-15), he has thereby also become a slave to righteousness (vv. 15-23). Yet this new slavery does not mean bondage to the law (7:1-6). Rather the believer has died to the law. As Paul further explains in 7:6, "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not

¹⁴ The language of adoption /sonship remains prominent throughout chapter 9. See vv. 4, 7-9, 26-27.

¹⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 467. Dealing with the question of Israel is of course beyond the scope of this article. The interested reader is referred to my essay, "Rethinking Israel: An Exposition of Romans 11:25-27," *Vox Reformata* 68 (2003): 4-48.

in the old way of the written code.” This verse proves to be a watershed for the chapters that follow. *The old way of the written code* is graphically described in the remainder of chapter 7. There Paul depicts the man who in his struggle against sin calls upon the law as his ally, and the outcome is ignominious defeat. Then Paul describes the better way – *the new way of the Spirit*. This is the subject of chapter 8.

Those who live according to the Spirit are those in whom the righteous requirements of the law are fully met (8:4). Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set them free from the law of sin and death (v. 2). They therefore have set their minds on what the Spirit desires (v. 5). Their minds are controlled by the Spirit, resulting in life and peace (v. 6). Hence God will give life to their mortal bodies through the Spirit who lives in them (v. 11). Those who by the Spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body will live (v. 13). It is in this context that believers are first called “sons of God” (v. 14) and “children of God” (vv. 16-17) in Romans. They are defined as “those who are led by the Spirit of God” (v. 14). It is here that Paul’s adoption theology comes to its finest flower:

¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.¹⁶ And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*”¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.¹⁷¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

The glorious inheritance that God’s sons will enjoy is nothing less than the new creation (vv. 18-25). The old order in which they still live is pregnant with the new. The convulsions now observed in the created order are compared to the pains of a woman in labour. The creation’s groans are “a symphony of sighs”¹⁸ shared by the sons of God (v. 23), and even by the

¹⁶ The Greek word used here is *υιοθεσία* and means “appointment or acceptance as a son, adoption.” “The Spirit received by the believers . . . allows them to experience the new father-son relationship” (*EDNT* 3: 381).

¹⁷ According to Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 65, in this verse “he still has the metaphor of adoption in mind. The *mancipatio* was carried out in the presence of witnesses, to ensure that the legality of the adoption could be established beyond doubt by reference to one or more of the witnesses.”

¹⁸ Cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (translated by John R. de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 490: “He (Paul) hears in the whole creation a groaning for redemption, which has the character of an eager longing of

Spirit himself (v. 26). As the sons still share in the futility of the creation the Spirit helps them in their weakness and joins in their sighs. These are not the sighs of desperation but of hope (v. 24). The object of this hope is variously described as “the revelation of the sons of God” (v. 19), “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (v. 21), and “our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23).

From v. 23 in particular it is clear that the adoption of believers as children of God is intimately related to the resurrection of their bodies on the last day. It is then that they will be perfectly conformed to the likeness of the Son of God, who through the process of adoption has become their elder brother (v. 29). This process began when God sent “his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (v. 3; cf. v. 32). The process is complete with the glorification of the children of God (v. 30), when finally the adopted sons will resemble the natural Son (v. 29), and will share in his inheritance (v. 17). All of this is the work of the Spirit who transforms them into the likeness of Christ through sanctification in this life, and who will perfect that transformation through the resurrection on the last day (v. 11). It is therefore not surprising that in this chapter all the references to God’s sons and children (vv. 15, 16, 17, 19, 21) and to their adoption (vv. 15, 23) are “embraced” by the references to his Son that precede and follow (vv. 3, 29, 32). God’s gift of his Son as a sin offering is the basis for their adoption,¹⁹ while their conformity into his likeness is its goal.

The new way of the Spirit is the subject of the chapter in which our passage stands. He is the Spirit of adoption who transforms the sons of God into the image of the Son of God. This transformation does not happen immediately, but the Spirit brings it about progressively through the process of sanctification. He will finally bring his work to completion through the resurrection of the body on the last day. What he has begun in sanctification he will complete in glorification. This is the assurance which our passage so eloquently celebrates. Nothing will come between God and his children. The work which he has begun he will most certainly bring to completion. Come what may, those who are his children now can rest assured that they will be his children forever.

the creature subjected to death and perishableness, of being already in travail, reaching out in pain toward a new birth”.

¹⁹ Cf. *TDNT* 8: 399: “Institution by God is set forth as the only ground of sonship ... It is the all-transforming act of the Son that changes bondage into sonship. Eph. 1:5 backs this with a reference to God’s foreordination which rules out all the boasting of man with his natural or acquired qualities.”

It is against this background that Paul asks his four defiant questions:

Question 1: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (v. 31)

If the question that precedes this question (“What, then, shall we say in response to this?”) refers back to all that Paul has been saying up to this point, then it can be said that God is “for us” in the grandest possible way. Cranfield is surely correct when he claims that the words “God is for us” are “a concise summary of the gospel.”²⁰ This said, however, the immediate context highlights three specific ways in which it can be said that “God is for us”:

- (a) God is for us in the way he providentially arranges the circumstances of our lives. The way things turn out for us shows that God is for us. Even difficult circumstances that are beyond our control demonstrate this. Paul makes this clear in v. 28: “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.” This claim is little short of astounding. In the lives of the children of God everything works out for their ultimate good. As John Murray has pointed out:

“All things” may not be restricted, though undoubtedly the things contemplated are particularly those that fall within the compass of believers’ experience, especially suffering and adversity.... Many of the things comprised are evil in themselves and it is the marvel of God’s wisdom and grace that they, when taken in concert with the whole, are made to work for good.²¹

- (b) God is for us in his eternal purpose. Paul spells this out in vv. 29-30: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined he also called, and those he called he also justified, and those he justified he also glorified.” This is the golden

²⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 1: 435. The preposition ὑπέρ with the genitive case, which is used here, is a construction found throughout Romans to convey some key gospel truths: Christ died *for us* (5:6-8; cf. 14:15), Christ and the Spirit intercede *for us* (8:26-27, 34), and God gave up his Son *for us all* (8:32).

²¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:314.

chain of God's purpose that runs from eternity to eternity. In this chain there are no weak links. It is not broken by cancer or pain, nor even by death. Nothing in all the world - not "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword" (v. 35) - can thwart the eternal purpose that God has for his children.

- (c) God is for us in his timely providence and in his eternal purpose, but Paul marshals one more piece of evidence to show beyond the shadow of a doubt that God is on our side. He gave us his Son. "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?" (v. 32). Clearly God "gave up" his Son in the sense of v. 3, "by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." This is a remarkable choice of language. The verb "give up" (παραδίδωμι) was precisely the word commonly used in the Gospels for the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, both in his passion predictions and in the passion account itself (e.g. Mark 9:31; 10:33; 14:10, 11; 15:1, 10, 15).²² But behind all the plots and intrigues of men Paul sees the mighty hand of God. At this point John Murray quotes the memorable words of Octavius Winslow: "Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy; - but the Father, for love!"²³ God "did not spare his own Son" is an echo of Gen. 22:16 (LXX). Abraham did not spare Isaac, and yet the lad's life was saved. At Calvary God went farther than Abraham ever had to go. He "gave up" his Son to death. The nature of that death was clearly a vicarious death – "for us all." He died on our behalf and in our place (cf. 5:6-8; 14:15).

If God is for us in his timely providence, his eternal purpose and the gift of his Son, then – asks Paul – "who can be against us?" Although the expected answer to this rhetorical question should be a strong negative, the immediate context would suggest that all kinds of hostile forces could rise up and oppose us (vv. 35-39). Paul is not denying that even the most violent and even deadly adversaries could be against us. He is fully aware of the realities of this present evil age, but the context in which he asks his

²² Perhaps this was not the only reason for Paul's choice of this verb. As Dunn, *Romans* 1:500-501, observes: "The active form of the verb differs from the passive in 4:25, and though the active is the more regular Christian formulation, at this point it serves to answer the triple παρέδωκεν of 1:24, 26, 28, thus strengthening the impression that 8:31-39 is intended to round off the whole argument thus far ... God's handing over his Son in grace answers his handing over his creatures in wrath."

²³ Murray, *Romans* 1:324.

defiant questions is heavily eschatological and forensic in character. Therefore it is clear that he is thinking of Judgement Day. When God is for us, then ultimately no adversary will be of any account. On the Day when it matters most there will be no one to oppose us. This same eschatological thrust is present in Paul's next defiant question:

Question 2: *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?*²⁴ (v. 33)

The chosen or the elect are the sons/children of God who were introduced in vv. 14-17. They are also those who have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified (vv. 29-30). Paul again asks his rhetorical question in demonstrably legal terms.²⁵ From a purely earthly point of view it could again be said that all kinds of charges might be levelled against God's elect. Paul himself was probably the prime example. Time after time he is arraigned before magistrates and other legal officials. Accusations were made against him by both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the verb that is used here is found again in the New Testament only in Acts (19:38; 23:28-29; 26:2, 7), and in every case Paul is the one against whom the charges are levelled. So he of all people should have known that the elect can have charges brought against them! This background information throws Paul's point into bold relief. He is again thinking eschatologically. Once more he has Judgement Day in mind. Schreiner has summarized Paul's meaning well:

The main point of the verse is clear. Believers can face the day of judgement with confidence, for those whom God has chosen as his own will certainly not be accused on the day of judgement. God has declared them to be right in his sight, and thus those who would accuse believers will not successfully establish their case.²⁶

The reason for this happy outcome for the believer is clearly stated in the second half of the verse: "It is God who justifies." Here Paul is harking back to his earlier discussion, particularly in chapters 3-5, where he has so painstakingly established the doctrine of justification by faith. In those

²⁴ The tone of Paul's question is accurately captured by Dunn's comment in *Romans* 1:510: "Like a court officer seeking out witnesses for the prosecution, Paul challenges the whole galaxy of created beings of all ages." A similar question is found in Isa 50:8-9.

²⁵ The legal meaning of the verb ἐγκαλέω is beyond doubt. It means "accuse, bring charges against someone" (BAGD) or "accuse, blame" (EDNT).

²⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 462.

chapters the verb “justify” occurs eleven times. The key conclusion that Paul reaches in this context is that “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1). Clearly this is a blessing that believers in Christ already enjoy. Already they have been justified. Already they have peace with God. This is an eschatological blessing come early. Hence Paul can later argue that those whom God justified, he also glorified (8:30). This means that those whom God has already justified will also receive a “not guilty” verdict at the final judgement. There is an unbreakable link between justification and glorification.

This being the case, we need to view with some caution the claim by Sanday and Headlam that the called or the elect are “not those who are destined for final salvation, but those who are ‘summoned’ or ‘selected’ for the privilege of serving God and carrying out His will.”²⁷ Paul is not telling his readers - so the argument runs - that their glory is assured. Rather his use of the term *elect* “only shows that they are in the right way to reach it. At least no external power can bar them from it; if they lose it they will do so by their own fault.”²⁸ This claim vividly articulates the crux of the matter. If, as the context suggests, the *elect* are indeed the children of God (vv.14-17) in whom God’s eternal purpose comes to personal realization (vv. 29-30), then it needs to be said that Sanday and Headlam’s definition of the *elect* is deficient. They have indeed been chosen “for the privilege of serving God and carrying out His will,” but the point is that they have been chosen to far higher privileges as well. These privileges will reach their pinnacle with the acquittal and vindication of the elect on Judgement Day. Not only are they “in the right way” to reach glory, they are *destined* to reach it. Nothing will deter them, not even “their own fault.” Those who have been justified by faith have peace with God (5:1) precisely because their eternal destiny is secure. This security has a firm anchorage – “it is God who justifies.” The conclusion reached by Charles Hodge is therefore to be preferred over that of Sanday and Headlam:

This passage . . . proves that those who are elect, and whose election has become recognised,²⁹ are in a state in which they are free from condemnation. No one can lay anything to their charge.

²⁷ William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (The International Critical Commentary; fifth edition; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), 220.

²⁸ Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 221.

²⁹ Their election has become recognized through their sanctified lives, or their life in the Spirit, which has been Paul’s focus particularly in 8:1-17.

The demands of justice as regards them have been satisfied. This is not true of those who have been chosen merely to church privileges. There is an election, therefore, unto grace and salvation. The elect are safe. This is the grand theme of this jubilant chapter.³⁰

The eternal security of the believer is thus intimately bound up with the doctrine of justification by faith. Those who have been justified by faith will most certainly be acquitted on the Last Day. In the words, “it is God who justifies,” Paul sums up much of what he has been saying throughout the epistle. In his earlier argument he has been laying the foundation for this assertion. The basis for the believer’s assurance is ultimately to be found precisely at this point. God justifies. As the supreme judge he declares the claims of justice satisfied. He makes this declaration because of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (3:25). Because the demands of divine justice have been satisfied, God is both “just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (3:26). Once justified, always justified. The declaration made on the basis of the propitiatory work of Christ stands forever. Christ’s propitiation (which removes God’s wrath, cf. 1:18) is the legal grounds for our justification. With this as its anchorage our eternal destiny could not be more secure.

Question 3: *Who is he that condemns?* (v. 34)

This is another rhetorical - and at the same time defiant - question. Again the question is not asked in a vacuum, but comes at the end of a well developed argument. Because of the sin of our forefather Adam, and because of the imputation of that sin to his descendants, all of humanity is *under condemnation* (5:16-18). God, however, dealt with that sin. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, he *condemned* sin in the flesh (8:3). Therefore, “just as the result of one trespass was *condemnation* for all men, so the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (5:18). This being the case, Paul can begin chapter 8 on the highest and most triumphant of notes: “Therefore, there is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). Now towards the end of that same chapter he is able to ask equally triumphantly: “Who is he that *condemns?*”

The remainder of v. 34 does not answer the question, but states the reason for its triumphant tone: “Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was

³⁰ Hodge, *Romans*, 289.

raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”³¹ Paul’s confidence in asking the question as he does lies in what Christ has done and continues to do for us. This is not a baseless triumphalism, but is securely founded on four redemptive facts. The first two facts that Paul selects indicate that he is briefly recapitulating his earlier argument at this point:

- (a) *Jesus died*: Paul has already portrayed the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (3:25; 4:25; 5:6-8, 10). This has far-reaching legal implications. As Charles Hodge explains: “By his death, as an atonement for our sins, all ground of condemnation is removed. The death of Christ could not be a proof that the believer cannot be condemned, unless his death removed the ground of condemnation; and it could not remove the ground of condemnation, unless it satisfied the demands of justice.”³²
- (b) *Jesus was raised to life*: If Jesus’ death was an atoning sacrifice that paid for our sins, his resurrection shows that God accepted that payment. As John Stott observes: “It is not just that he rose, although this is affirmed in the New Testament, but that he was raised by the Father, who thus demonstrated his acceptance of the sacrifice of his Son as the only satisfactory basis for our justification.”³³ In linking Jesus’ death and resurrection with the justification of believers, Paul is echoing his summary of an earlier argument: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (4:25).
- (c) *Jesus is at the right hand of God*: Because of his death and resurrection he has been exalted to a position of supreme power, and he holds sway over heaven and earth. Although this thought does not receive much emphasis in Paul (occurring again only in Eph. 1:20 and Col. 3:1), there is a clear allusion to Psalm 110:1, which is one of the most frequently quoted verses in the New Testament. Jesus’ session at the right hand of the Father is stressed repeatedly in the early chapters of Acts (2:25, 33, 34; 5:31; 7:55-56). Because Jesus is at the Father’s right hand in his capacity as the crucified and risen one, humanity is represented in the highest place, at the very throne of God. Our (legal) representative could not be in a more exalted position.

³¹ In some English translations this statement is treated as a question, i.e. “Is it Christ Jesus, who died . . . ?” Thus JB, LB, RSV. While this is possible grammatically, it hardly seems to be Paul’s intention. He is providing the basis for his confidence rather than asking further questions.

³² Hodge, *Romans*, 289.

³³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (The Bible Speaks Today; London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 256-257.

(d) *Jesus intercedes for us*: With legal representation in the highest places we can also rest assured that Jesus is pleading our case. Once again the terminology is heavily legal in character.³⁴ Christ is the intercessor who appears for the believer at the heavenly court. As such his activity appears to complement that of the Spirit who intercedes for us in our hearts (vv. 26-27). With the references to Jesus' death and resurrection Paul has recapitulated highlights of his earlier argument, but now when he refers to Jesus' intercession at the right hand of God he is introducing a genuinely new element. The connection between the two references would, however, appear to be clear enough. Paul is connecting Jesus' past redemptive activity (his death and resurrection) and his present activity (his intercession at the right hand of God). The former provides the basis for the latter (cf. Heb. 7:23-25). Hence Jesus is pictured as pleading our case before God (cf. 1 John 2:1-2). He is our Advocate before the Judge. He pleads our case on the basis of his death and resurrection. This is a truth calculated to inspire believers with the highest sense of security and confidence.

While the terminology in vv. 31-34 has been consistently legal in nature, in v. 35 the language of law makes way for the language of love. We have already explored the background for this shift and found this to be a natural transition in the light of adoption practices that were common in Paul's day. Once the legal requirements had been met, the adoptive father could lavish all his love on his adopted children. It is to this boundless love of God that Paul now gives his attention in the remaining verses.

Question 4: *Who*³⁵ shall separate us from the love of Christ³⁶? (v. 35).

³⁴ The verb ἐντυγχάνω, which is here generally translated 'intercede', is used in Acts 25:24 in a strictly legal sense. There Festus tells Agrippa about Paul: "The whole Jewish community has *petitioned* me about him ..." H. Balz further explains that this word "belongs primarily to the conceptual world of the ruler's court ... where accusations against another and where requests on behalf of another are made with the hope of receiving a hearing (see also Bauernfeind 243). The narrower theological usage of the verbs in Romans 8 and Hebrews 7 take on their meaning from this background" (EDNT 1:461).

³⁵ In view of the list that follows it seems a little curious that Paul asks *who*? rather than *what*? Morris, *Romans*, 338, suggests that "perhaps this is no more than a recognition of the fact that the nouns he lists are all masculine or feminine; there are no neuters."

³⁶ Some ancient manuscripts read "the love of God (in Christ)", but this is clearly a scribal accommodation to v. 39 and is not adopted by any major English translation.

In this transition from the language of law to the language of love we detect Paul's conviction that "Christ's role in heaven is not merely as representative of his people on earth before the eternal Judge. He is also able to reach out and sustain his people still on earth. His love enfolds them as a power which hostile and untoward circumstances cannot disrupt or prevent."³⁷ When Paul enlarges the above question it is clear that he is speaking from personal experience: "Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" From Paul's earlier letters there is ample evidence to suggest that he is speaking autobiographically (see especially 2 Cor. 6:4; 11:23-27; 12:10). The only affliction in this list that he had not experienced was the sword!

If Paul is indeed speaking from his own experience he hastens to add that his experience is not unique. He quotes from Psalm 44:22 to show that such suffering has strong scriptural precedent: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."³⁸ This is a typical "righteous sufferer" Psalm where the Psalmists are not suffering because they had broken the covenant by forgetting Yahweh or turning to other gods (vv. 17-22). Instead, they were suffering for the Lord's sake and because of their loyalty to him.³⁹ Paul's verbatim quote from this Psalm therefore demonstrates to his readers that the adversities of which he had spoken in the previous verse had always been the lot of God's people.⁴⁰ Should such affliction come his readers' way, "it is not as though something strange or absurd is happening to them. It is *as it is written*."⁴¹

At such times, "the affliction can become so sustained and all-oppressive that there seems no end to it ('all the day') and death an everyday commonplace ('as sheep for slaughter')."⁴² This was precisely the kind of tribulation that would befall Paul's Roman readers within a decade of their

³⁷ Dunn, *Romans* 1:511.

³⁸ Apart from a minor stylistic variation (from ἔνεκα to ἐνεκεν), this quotation is in agreement with the LXX, which in turn accords with the Hebrew of the Masoretic text. Somewhat surprisingly Moo refers to this quotation as "something of an interruption in the flow of thought" (*Romans*, 543). This misses the point of the citation, which is to support the claim implied in the last question, namely that affliction by the ungodly has often been the experience of God's children. Paul, being a wise pastor, seems to think that this assumption needs scriptural backing.

³⁹ Thus Stott, *Romans*, 257.

⁴⁰ See Murray, *Romans* 1:331; cf, Cranfield 1:440.

⁴¹ Herman Ridderbos, *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament: Aan de Romeinen* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 201 [author's translation].

⁴² Dunn, *Romans* 1:512.

receiving this epistle. Many of the troubles that Paul listed in v. 35 came upon them during Nero's murderous pogrom that followed the great fire of Rome in the summer of 64AD. The Roman historian Tacitus writes that Nero made local Christians the scapegoats for the fire and punished them with "the utmost refinements of cruelty." He then spells out these punishments in some detail. Even though Tacitus loathed Christians, he cannot conceal his pity for their cruel fate:

First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer or mounted on his car. Hence in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.⁴³

In the face of such atrocities, to which he himself eventually also fell victim, Paul can confidently declare that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). Because these events fall within the mysterious providence of God (v. 28) they are more than conquered. For not only are they endured, they also work together for our good. Hence "they swell the glory of our victory."⁴⁴ This triumph is not ascribed to the will or strength of the believers but to the love of Christ.⁴⁵ In the case of the Roman believers their noble victory in the face of state-sanctioned terrorism has been celebrated in early Christian literature. Writing towards the end of the first century Clement of Rome recorded their victory for posterity:

To these men who lived holy lives [i.e. the apostles Peter and Paul] there was joined a vast multitude of the elect who, having suffered many torments and tortures, set an illustrious example among us. Because of jealousy women were persecuted as Danaids and Dircae, suffering in this way terrible and unholy tortures, but they

⁴³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44, in John Jackson (trans.), *The Annals* (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1962), 283, 285.

⁴⁴ Hodge, *Romans*, 291.

⁴⁵ Thus Schreiner, *Romans*, 464.

safely reached the goal in the race of faith, and received a noble reward, their physical weakness notwithstanding.⁴⁶

Clement has left us a ringing testimony to the truth of Paul's assertion that even in the most trying circumstances Christians can be super-victorious through the love of Christ. Although it is unlikely that when Paul penned these words in 57AD he was intending to be prophetic, nevertheless his words providentially foretold the kinds of trials that the Christians in Rome could expect. There is little doubt that they derived immense fortitude from his message. Even the worst tortures that Nero could inflict did not separate them from the love of Christ. The veracity of Paul's claims was soon to be proven by his own readers in the most dramatic possible way.

In vv. 38-39 Paul raises the stakes even higher. He goes beyond such external circumstances and physical extremities as trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword. He now transcends the kinds of sufferings that he and the Old Testament saints had already experienced and also the sufferings that his readers were soon to experience. In expressing his settled conviction about the love of God he brings chapter 8, and with it his whole argument up to this point, to a crowning crescendo: "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."

Paul ends on a note of the deepest personal conviction.⁴⁷ His opening words express utmost certainty. For Paul this is no passing whim, but an assured fact that does not allow even the shadow of a doubt. Dunn's comment on these verses is superb: "The sweep of his faith is truly majestic. No longer simply situations of stress and suffering within life, but the boundary situations of life and beyond life, the powers that determine

⁴⁶ 1 Clement 6:1-2, in Michael W. Holmes (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings* (second edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35. In a footnote Holmes explains the reference to Danaids and Dircae: ". . . in ancient mythology the daughters of Danaus were given as prizes to the winners of a race; thus it is likely that this is a reference to Christian women being raped prior to being martyred. Dirce was tied to the horns of a bull and then dragged to death."

⁴⁷ "I am convinced" translates πέπεισμαι, the perfect tense conveying the notion of a settled conviction. It carries the connotation, "I have become and I remain convinced" (Stott, *Romans*, 258).

eternal destiny, all fall under his gaze, with no different result: *nothing* can loose the embrace of God's love in Christ."⁴⁸

For the most part Paul neatly pairs these mammoth forces that might be opposed to us. Not the greatest existential realities ("neither death nor life"), not the most powerful supernatural forces ("neither angels nor demons"), nothing in the realms of time ("neither the present nor the future") or space ("neither height nor depth") can come between the believer and the love of God. The only items in the sequence that are not paired are "powers" and "anything else in all creation." By these terms Paul clearly intends to cover every possible eventuality. Nothing natural or supernatural can stand between us and the love of God. This list far surpasses that of v. 35, perhaps identifying the cosmic forces that lie behind our earthly troubles. Be that as it may, Paul's list is so comprehensive that no possible exception can be mounted against the conviction that he articulates so eloquently. Nothing, but nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

Paul's assertion is even more emphatic when it is seen as the close of the inclusio commenced in v. 35. There he had asked, "Who shall separate us from *the love of Christ*?" Here he states that nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from *the love of God* that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." He therefore begins with the love of Christ and ends with the love of God. Is this significant? Is there a difference? The only earlier references to the love of God in Romans are in chapter 5, where "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (v. 5) and where, moreover, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). The only other specific reference to the love of Christ in Romans is within the inclusio formed by vv. 35-39. With a probable reference to Christ's death Paul declares that "in all these things we are more than conquerors *through him who loved us*" (v. 37). Divine love in Romans therefore comes to its most focused expression in the gift of the Spirit and in the death of Christ. This makes Paul's logic all the more compelling. How could God abandon those in whom he has made such a huge investment? How could he withhold his love from those to whom he has given his Spirit and for whom Christ died? This is "the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Not only can God's children not be separated from this love, these loves cannot be separated from one another. Essentially the love of God and the love of Christ are one. The love of the Father is preeminently the love that gave the Son, and the love

⁴⁸ Dunn, *Romans* 1:512-513.

of Christ is preeminently that he gave himself.⁴⁹ In such love the believer is eternally secure.

Conclusion

In all the writings of Paul the verses we have been considering stand unsurpassed in their beauty and majesty. They are also unmatched in the powerful conviction that they so vigorously express. Charles Hodge has crisply summed up their central message:

How wonderful, how glorious, how secure is the gospel! Those who are in Christ Jesus are as secure as the love of God, the merit, power, and intercession of Christ can make them. They are hedged around with mercy. They are enclosed in the arms of everlasting love.⁵⁰

These verses leave us with the blessed assurance that those who are God's adopted children now will be his children forever. Those who have been justified by faith in Christ will also be acquitted at the final judgement. The chain of God's purpose, that extends from his foreknowledge to our glorification, is ultimately unbreakable. It is a chain that not even the child of God can break. Those whom the Father has adopted and loved through the death of his Son and the gift of his Spirit will be his own for all eternity. As Schreiner has pointed out:

Some scholars have argued that although nothing in creation can separate one from the love of God, people can themselves choose to depart from God and thereby fall outside the scope of the saving love of God. This interpretation should be rejected. As we have seen, Rom. 8:28-30 constitutes an unbreakable process. All those who are foreknown end up being glorified. No possibility is extended that some of those who are justified may not be glorified. The category of the justified is inseparable from the category of the glorified. . . . Those whom God has chosen before history began will surely persevere and attain to glorification.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Thus Murray, *Romans* 1:334.

⁵⁰ Hodge, *Romans*, 293.

⁵¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 466.

In closing we return to Paul's ringing rhetorical questions that resound throughout this passage. With them he has defied every creature in time and space, whether natural or supernatural, benevolent or malevolent:

"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

"Who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen?"

"Who is the he that condemns?"

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

There is only one rousing answer to all of these questions: *Nothing and nobody!* Paul allows for no exceptions. In the saving love of God every true believer in Christ is eternally secure.

Soli Deo gloria!