

## If God Is For Us

Romans 8:28-39

In these verses, Paul comes to the pinnacle of the argument that he has been making in the first half of his letter to the Romans. In the next chapter, his focus will change somewhat. It could be argued that these verses are not only the culmination of this letter, but are the culmination of Paul's entire life and ministry. In order to understand their full meaning, we have to go back and remind ourselves of where Paul is coming from.

At the same time, we need to realize that understanding Paul's purpose in this letter is a daunting task. One of the greatest biblical scholars of our time – N.T. Wright – has said that “anyone who claims to understand Romans fully is, almost by definition, mistaken.”<sup>1</sup> One of the biggest challenges is that we tend to look at the world from an individual perspective. In Paul's time, people tended to have a more collective point of view. In other words, their identity came more from their community than from their own independent person.

One of the biggest results of this difference of perspective is that, because Paul and his contemporaries were a lot less concerned with the individual, they were less introspective than we tend to be. Rather than spending a lot of time looking within themselves, they tended to look outward – at the bigger picture. That doesn't mean that Paul was unconcerned about a “personal relationship with God.” It just means that he saw this relationship as part of something larger – namely, he saw it as part of God's purpose in setting the world right.

This perspective makes a significant difference in how we understand Paul's primary purpose in writing this letter. Verses 16 and 17 of chapter one are some of the best known verses in this letter and many see them as a statement of Paul's message in Romans: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes:

first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Notice how many of Paul's key words are included in those verses – “gospel, salvation, believe, righteousness, faith” -- these are words that will play a central role as the letter unfolds. But the perspective that shaped Paul's thinking has a big impact on how we understand these words. Several years ago, a scholar named Thomas Long made the case that when we hear Paul say, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel,” our more introspective way of thinking causes us to interpret him as saying something like, “I have now arrived at the point in my faith struggle that I am not embarrassed to bear witness publicly to Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> When I was a teenager, I understood Paul's statement to mean that I should not be ashamed to share my faith with my friends. It was a time when young people were wearing buttons with all kinds of messages on them – the peace sign, for example. So, I decided that I needed to wear buttons to school that affirmed my Christian walk. One of them, for example, had the word “WOW” in capital letters running vertically. It was an acrostic. In smaller letters, it said, “Way Out With Jesus.” [It was a 70's thing. You kind of had to be there.]

More than any other, it was this verse – Romans 1:16 – that motivated me to do that. I did not want to be ashamed of the Gospel. And, to be honest, that decision was significant for me. It helped me to have an impact for Christ on a lot of my friends. So it wasn't an invalid way of reading the verse. But it probably missed the point that Paul was making. His thinking had been shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament. And he was probably drawing here on some Old Testament passages – like Psalm 25:2 which says, “O God, in you I trust. Do not let me be put to shame” and Isaiah 50:7-8 which says, “I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.” That

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10, p. 395.

means that Paul is not speaking here of private embarrassment but of public shame. He is saying something like, “I have given myself to what God is doing in the world, and I am persuaded that God will not put me to shame – He will not hang me out to dry.”

I. But that raises a question. “What risks was Paul facing that could have resulted in his being put to shame?” After all, if he raises the possibility, there must have been something behind it. It turns out that, from the whole of Paul’s writing, there were two things that raised the possibility of shame for Paul. The first was his health. If God had called him to be an “apostle to the Gentiles” – to traipse across the entire Roman world in the service of the Gospel – then why was he afflicted with what he refers to in 2 Corinthians 12 as a “thorn in the flesh?” A sick apostle was not a good advertisement for the cause of Christ. Three times, Paul says, he had raised the issue with God – asking that he be healed. “You got me into this missionary business. Is it too much to ask that I be healthy enough to do the job you called me to do, or do you intend to expose me to shame?” After the third of these times of pleading, he finally came to understand that “when I am weak, God’s power is seen more clearly through me.”

Some of us may be able to relate. Some of you have told me how you are struggling with health challenges you are facing. Others have told me how they are struggling with the health challenges I am going through. Why doesn’t God heal? If we are living for Him and we have given ourselves to doing His work, don’t our health issues undermine our message? Will we ultimately be put to shame?

The other issue that raised the possibility of shame for Paul was the lack of response to the Gospel on the part of his fellow Israelites. How could it be that, while his mission to the Gentiles was receiving a spectacular response,

his Jewish brothers and sisters were rejecting the Gospel? Didn’t that discredit his whole life and ministry?

Once again, we may identify with Paul. We may have followed Jesus our entire lives and used whatever influence we have to help others come to know Him. We may have seen many respond to the message. And yet, some of those closest to us may have rejected the message. Does that not open us to the possibility of being ashamed?

The bottom line for Paul – really the question to which he can be understood to be responding in this entire letter to the Romans – is this – “Can God be trusted to set things right?”

II. This is the issue that motivated Paul in writing this letter. His response rested on one thing – the righteousness of God. “I will not be put to shame by the gospel . . . for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:17). Paul has bet his whole life on the righteousness of God. And what is the righteousness of God? The righteousness of God is not just something God *is*. It is mainly what God *does*.<sup>3</sup> As this letter progresses, we see the marvelous scope of God’s righteousness. Among other things, we are told that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). In other words, Abraham trusted that God would do what He had promised to do and that trust that God would not put him to shame was the lens through which God viewed Abraham.

The ultimate embodiment of God’s righteousness was, of course, Jesus. It was through Jesus’ righteous life – a life that was defined by His absolute obedience and trust that God would not put Him to shame but would ultimately vindicate Him by raising Him from the dead – it was through Jesus – “through the obedience of the one man,” as Paul says it in Romans 5:19, “[that] the many will be made righteous.”

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, “Preaching Romans Today,” *Interpretation*, July, 2004, pp. 265-275. Much of this sermon is drawn from Long’s insights and I have borrowed liberally from his language.

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<sup>3</sup> Long, p. 272.

But it didn't stop there. Paul goes on to say that God will ultimately set things right in the groaning creation. A couple of weeks ago, we pointed to the fact that in chapter 8, Paul says that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). On the human level, Paul had no doubt that the righteousness of God means that He will triumph over sin and death. In Jesus' death and resurrection, He has already done so.

III. We've taken more time than usual this morning to set the stage so that we can fully appreciate what Paul is saying in our text for today. In the final verses of chapter 8, the apostle is finally ready to lay out the implications of his argument up to this point. As you read through the letter, it would be easy to think that Paul is in purely "scholarly theologian" mode. It may not seem very practical. But now we see how deeply Paul's theology connected with his everyday life.

There are four implications that we can identify here. First, Paul was convinced that, in all things, God works for the good of those who love him. (Romans 8:20-21). In the verses just before this, Paul had been talking about all of the challenges he and the people to whom he was writing faced – "our present sufferings, our deteriorating and dying bodies, our weakness, our difficulty in knowing how to pray." On the surface, it would seem that these things hinder God's purpose for our lives. But, Paul says, this is not the case. In fact, everything that seems to frustrate God's purpose will ultimately be found to advance it.

Paul isn't saying that everything works out on its own – that if we'll be patient, everything will fall into place. Instead, he is saying that nothing can ultimately frustrate the purposes of God and that He will weave the suffering and the setbacks that we experience into the accomplishment of His will.

In verse 31, Paul asks, "What then shall we say in response to all these things?" What "things" is he referring to? Is he talking about the "sufferings" he has been talking about in the previous verses? Or does he have something

bigger in mind? Is he referring to the case he has been making in the entire letter up to this point? It's impossible to argue absolutely for either possibility. But what Paul says in the rest of chapter 8 does fit his premise back in chapter one. "I will not be put to shame by the Gospel . . . [because] if God is for us, who can be against us?"

When Paul uses the word "if" there, he is not implying that there is any question that God is for us. The verse could just as accurately be translated, "Since God is for us." When Paul looked back on everything God had done – especially what He had done in giving His only Son to die for us – it was inconceivable that God would abandon Him now. "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?" (Rom. 8:32).

Paul was writing to people who were facing their own challenges. He knew it was possible that they could look at their problems and their adversity and conclude that God was not on their side – that He was against them. He knew the temptation to think that God was withholding from them. In response, Paul says, "No! There can be no doubt that God is for us." And that knowledge meant more than any obstacle they might be facing.

In verse 35, Paul lists some things that had the potential to defeat him. These were things that could humiliate him – that could shame him. Interestingly, all but one of them were things that Paul himself had already experienced. "Trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness and danger had all made their appearance in Paul's life. Only "the sword" remained – and tradition tells us that Paul eventually experienced that as well. In other words, he was martyred for his faith.

If you take a quick count, you'll see that there are seven things to which Paul refers. That's significant. In the Bible, seven is the number of completeness. So, Paul is indicating that *whatever* he or the Christians to whom he was writing faced, they were still more than conquerors through the One who loved them. Think about that. As we said, one of the things Paul had listed was

“the sword.” So, he’s saying that not even death could overcome God’s purpose to make everything right. Even if he was *killed*, he would not be put to shame by the Gospel.

About ten years ago, there was a movie called “Big Fish.” It was a collection of fantastic tales set in a small southern town. Like many small southern towns, this one had a haunted house that was inhabited by an old woman. She had one good eye and one blind eye. Local legend had it that if you gazed into the woman’s blind eye you would be carried into the future and you would see your dying day – you would see how you would ultimately die. In an early scene, three boys on a dare venture onto the old woman’s property. Suddenly, she appears in the doorway, glaring at them. All of the boys are transfixed and, sure enough, when they look into the woman’s eye, they see pictures of their own deaths.

For two of the boys, it is a terrifying experience. But the third boy, who grows up to be the hero of the story, has a different experience. When he looks into the woman’s eye, his face lights up with a look of delighted surprise. “So,” he says in wonder, “*that’s* how it ends!” For the rest of the movie, he is fearless and confident in the face of trouble. No matter what kind of distress happens to him, no matter what crisis enters his life, he is unshaken. He has seen the future, and he knows. “This isn’t how it ends,” he says.

I know. It’s just a movie. But Paul, in writing to the Romans, invites us to a similar confidence. What shall we say in response to these things? What shall we say in response to our suffering – whether it’s physical or emotional or relational? What shall we say when it feels like we’ve been left hanging by our circumstances – when we may even feel that God has abandoned us? What about trouble and hardship and persecution and famine and nakedness and danger and sword and all the other things that appear to threaten our lives and our faith. What shall we say? We say, “We know this isn’t how it ends.”

Because we know how it ends – because we are confident that God is for us – we are emboldened to live in a way that seems foolish to the world

looking on. Several Roman Christians during the first century sold themselves into slavery to finance the support of Christian brothers and sisters. Sold themselves into slavery? How could they place themselves in a situation that brought such shame? They did it because they were betting everything on the righteousness of God and they were confident, when the full story was told, that they would not be put to shame by the gospel.

“For I am convinced,” Paul concludes, “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.”