

5. In one brief statement Paul has effectively shown that Jesus Christ is the point of convergence for all the great kingdom themes of the Old Testament – all the Law, Prophets, and Writings testify of Him.

- He is the Son of David appointed to build God’s house; the Son concerning whom God promised that He would establish His throne and kingdom forever.
- Because He is the root and branch of David, Jesus is also the Servant of Yahweh; the faithful witness upon whom the Spirit rests; the vicarious sin-bearer through whose sacrifice Yahweh has fulfilled His promise to establish righteousness in the earth and bring about the renewal of all things.

Therefore, He is also the promised King-Priest; the Branch who reigns as a priest upon His throne. It is in this overarching gospel truth that Paul found the focal point of His exultation in this passage (8:31-39), and the reason must not be missed: Jesus’ enthronement testifies to the fact that He has made full satisfaction and purification of sin (cf. Acts 2:22-36; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28; Ephesians 1:18-23; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-3). He has triumphed over sin and death, and has therefore been exalted to the right hand of the throne of God. And as God’s installed King, Jesus has all authority over all things in heaven and earth – all things are in subjection under His feet. From this position of supreme power and authority He mediates the fruit of His atonement on behalf of His own. *Christ’s sovereign majesty stands upon the efficacy of His self-sacrifice, and it is that efficacy that He pleads for His saints as sovereign King.*

Moreover, this sacrifice and intercession are not dispassionate, mechanical exercises; they are the expression of *undying love*. God’s foreknowledge and predestination of His own speak of His eternal love for them (Ephesians 1:3-6), and the promise and coming of the Son certify that love (John 3:16). The giving of His Son was the supreme expression of the Father’s love, and the Son’s willing self-sacrifice testified that He shares His Father’s devoted commitment to His image-bearers (John 13:1, 15:9-13). In love the Father poured out His wrath on His Son, and in love the Son bore the sin and punishment due His own. And now, having been raised, glorified, and enthroned in heaven, will not the triumphant, redeeming love of the King-Priest and His Father persevere in triumph to the consummation of all things?

*“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (8:35)*

- a. As he did in the preceding two passages, Paul introduced this final sub-context with an overarching question. But whereas the previous two such questions (8:31, 33) were more impersonal and doctrinal, this last one is pointedly and intimately *relational*. Paul observed at the outset that God is “for” the believer, as demonstrated in His giving of His Son, but here he enters into the very heart of God. Underlying and motivating the triune God’s redemptive intention and activity is His love for His image-bearers and His determination to see them realize the purpose for which He created them.

At bottom, then, the reason that the believer's hope cannot disappoint is that it has its source, substance, and security in God's self-proclaimed love for him. The love of God is where Paul began his discourse on Christian hope (5:5), and in bringing his argument to its apex he fittingly returned to his starting point. Whatever else may be argued in defense of the sure hope held out in the gospel, God's sovereign, triumphant love is the first and last word.

In view of all that he has revealed in his epistle so far, Paul's rhetorical question really needs no answer. Nevertheless, he was unwilling to leave it there. As he has done twice before, Paul here responded to his question with another question. And following his previous pattern, this second question serves to punctuate and advance its predecessor. Paul knew full well the answer to his primary question, and, given his instruction to them, he had every reason to believe the same thing of his Roman readers. The answer wasn't in doubt, but he wanted to drive it home by compelling his readers to give conscious consideration to the sorts of things that could be imagined to imperil Christ's love. Two observations follow:

- 1) The first thing to note is that this list is representative of Paul's own experience as a Christian and apostle (ref. 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10). This is important, for it brings unimpeachable credibility to Paul's assertion regarding Christ's love. It is one thing to *claim* that nothing can separate a Christian from Christ's commitment and constant care; it is something else altogether to have personally *experienced* that truth. But Paul was such a man; in all his affliction he had known Christ's abiding and nurturing love, and his Lord would stand with him until the very end (2 Timothy 4:14ff). And though he had not yet experienced death, Paul knew that even that last enemy would only bring him closer to his Savior (cf. Philippians 1:19-24; 2 Timothy 4:6-8).
- 2) Secondly, Paul's list expresses a general ascending pattern, moving from common difficulties to death itself.
  - He began with *tribulation* and *distress*, both of which speak of affliction, oppression, or trouble. But while the former concerns troubles that are imposed on a person from outside of himself, the latter commonly indicates inward turmoil or agony. Paul knew both all too well (2 Corinthians 1:1-2:13, 7:5, 11:23-30, etc.).
  - From there he moved to *persecution*, which heightens tribulation and distress by adding to them the sense of constancy. Persecution connotes *pursuit*; it entails purposeful, dogged oppression from which one cannot escape. Again, this was a characteristic of Paul's life and ministry from the point of his conversion (Acts 9:1-25). Opposition and oppression met him everywhere he went, and even when he would flee from it his persecutors would often pursue him (cf. Acts 13:14-14:19, 17:1-13, 23:1-22, etc.).

- The next two items in Paul's list – *famine* and *nakedness* – pertain to the sorts of hardships that are innate to life in a cursed creation. They are not always present in a person's life, but they are always threatening. This is the reason that human labor in this world has its primary focus on meeting basic physical needs; people are constrained to give their lives to the constant pursuit and acquisition of food, drink, and covering (Matthew 6:25-32).
  - The final two (*peril* and *sword*) pertain specifically to bodily harm. The first one is concerned with the imminent threat of such harm, while the second refers to its ultimate expression, namely death.
- b. By constructing this summarizing list, Paul's intention was to substantiate his claim that nothing that a person can experience – no matter how agonizing, severe, or permanent – can separate him from Christ's love. But in what sense was Paul envisioning this idea of *separation*? His verb has the fundamental sense of a cutting off or splitting action that serves to divide something or to separate two conjoined or closely associated entities. Accordingly, it is used in the Bible to signify ideas as diverse as physical departure, marital divorce, and spiritual consecration (cf. Matthew 19:6; Act 1:4, 18:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:10-15; Hebrews 7:26). Considered in context, there are two possibilities for its meaning here:
- 1) The first is that Paul was speaking of the *interposition* of something between the believer and Christ's love for him. In this way, he did not mean to indicate that Jesus' love could come to an end, but that something could potentially become an effective barrier to the Christian's sense and reception of that love and its working in his life.
  - 2) The second option is that Paul was in fact addressing the matter of the *cessation* of Christ's love. If this was his meaning, his question to the Romans was this: What can cause Christ to cease loving us?

Commentators differ, but in the end both understandings are appropriate to Paul's statement. For if the first view is correct, Paul was emphasizing *divine sovereignty*: nothing is able to interpose itself and hinder or stop the effectual working of Christ's love in the lives of His people. If Paul intended the second meaning, then he was focusing on the *immutability of the divine nature and character*: nothing can reduce or end Christ's committed love for His own. Both emphases are equally biblical, fundamental to the gospel, and well-suited to Paul's contextual argument. For this reason it is best to include both ideas.

6. In verses 8:36-37 Paul moved from stating his assertion to substantiating it with the Scripture's own teaching: "*Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'* But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us."

- a. Paul here cited the twenty-second verse of Psalm 44, and the question immediately arises as to his reason for introducing this passage into his argument. In other words, how does this verse apply and contribute to the point Paul was trying to make?
- 1) The first thing to observe is that this psalm has as its central theme the *petition to God for deliverance*.
  - 2) Secondly, overarching the psalmist's petition is his awareness of God's past dealings with His covenant people. He began by acknowledging that God delivered His people from their bondage in Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan just as He had promised the patriarchs (vv. 1-3). But he also recognized that this deliverance and triumphal inheritance of Canaan did not come through Israel's prowess or military power, but in accordance with God's covenant favor and the exercise of His power.
  - 3) In view of His past covenant faithfulness to Israel, the psalmist has great confidence to petition God to arise again on behalf of His people and deliver them from their affliction (vv. 4-8).
  - 4) It is important to note that, in context, this affliction is attributed to the hand of God Himself. The psalmist insists that He is the One who has delivered Israel over to subjugation and the scorn of their enemies (vv. 9-16). This has led some commentators to date this psalm to the period of the Babylonian captivity, although others have associated it with other earlier events in Israel's history.
  - 5) But most such tragic episodes in Israel's national life cannot be associated with this psalm. The reason is that Israel's national calamities were most often the direct consequence of the nation's rebellion and covenant unfaithfulness, and no such situation is present here. In fact, just the opposite is true: these difficulties are set in a historical context of Israel's abiding faithfulness to God. And so, even while the psalmist was lamenting Israel's plight and ascribing it to God's hand, he was also insisting that it was not a matter of righteous judgment against them. Yahweh had "*crushed them in a place of jackals and covered them with the shadow of death,*" though their hearts "*had not turned back,*" they had not "*forgotten the name of their God,*" nor had they "*dealt falsely with His covenant*" (vv.17-19).
  - 6) This truth was not hidden from God; He knew His people remained faithful to Him, and yet He had brought adversity and affliction upon them (vv. 20-21). To the psalmist, this could only mean one thing: *it was for His sake that they were suffering, and not as an act of divine retribution or rejection* (v. 22).

- 7) This being the case, the psalmist had great confidence to petition God for deliverance and restoration. Israel was not being oppressed and afflicted as an act of righteous judgment against them; rather, the nation's hardship existed in the context of God's abiding lovingkindness and good intention (vv. 23-26).
- b. Psalm 44 focuses on the matter of the oppression and suffering of God's people in the midst of His committed love for them, *and the high point of this theme is the psalmist's own conclusion that such affliction is for the Lord's sake* (v. 22). From this it is readily evident why Paul cited this particular verse of this particular psalm; it gets right to the heart of what he was communicating to the Romans.

Israel's history as a nation is the record of God's triumph. By His own sovereign power in faithfulness to His covenant promise He had made Israel into a great people, delivered them from slavery, carried them into the land of promise and given them victory over all their enemies. In spite of their continual unbelief and weakness, God had made Israel a triumphant kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:1-6). And now, in the recognition of these great historical truths, the psalmist could look on the nation's present affliction and know that Israel's faithful, devoted God had not forsaken them or rejected His covenant, *even though it appeared that He had done so*.

And yet Israel's covenant life with God was only typological: it merely predicted and portrayed the true covenant son – the true Israel in whom Israel and the nations of the earth would be made kings and priests to God. God's faithfulness to Israel served to reinforce and advance His promise that He would one day fulfill His covenant oath to Abraham. The God who had sworn to Abraham to establish and bless his seed had kept His word with respect to Abraham's *physical* offspring; how much more would He do so with Abraham's *spiritual* offspring – the true heirs of the promise who are joined to the true Son of the promise (Galatians 3:1-29).

**Thus the confident hope of the Israelite psalmist finds its own fulfillment in the hope of Christ's people.** The writer of Psalm 44 knew that Yahweh's favor and covenant faithfulness were not in jeopardy because His people were enduring hardship; *rather, their affliction was the expression of His lovingkindness in that it facilitated their trusting dependence upon Him and the ultimate triumph of His power and grace*. It was for the sake of His glory that they were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Despite their present suffering and the appearance that He had rejected and forgotten them, Yahweh would indeed rise up and redeem His people for the sake of His lovingkindness (v. 26). The psalmist's petition did not fall on deaf ears, as God repeatedly delivered Israel from oppression and affliction. But all of these acts of deliverance were only preparatory and prophetic.

The ultimate triumph of God's grace and manifestation of His love came in His redeeming work in the Lord Jesus Christ. As the true Israel, He was preeminently the faithful covenant son who, for Yahweh's namesake, was appointed as a lamb for slaughter. *Christ is the embodiment of the Israel portrayed in the psalm:* He is the afflicted and oppressed son who felt forsaken by God, though He had not forgotten His Father or dealt falsely with His covenant. He is the Son who put His confidence in His God and His lovingkindness and trusted in His deliverance.

But precisely because He suffered as the blameless **sin-bearer**, *through their union with Him Christ's people have also been rendered the faithful covenant sons portrayed in the psalm.* Paul understood this truth, and this is why he could take Psalm 44 and apply it in his discussion with the Romans. It is also the reason that this citation makes such a powerful contribution to his argument.

*God's committed lovingkindness is the property of Christians, not because they are themselves faithful sons whose "steps have not deviated from God's way," but because they are joined by His love to the Son who is faithful. In love they have been made sharers in the One who is the fulfillment of Psalm 44. And if God's love has so joined them and made them faithful sons in Him, **how much more, now being such sons, will the love of the Father and Son not depart from them.***

Therefore, if the typological sons (Israel) could ascribe past, present, and future victory to their faithful God (cf. again 44:1-8), much more could Paul insist that the saints of Jesus Christ "*overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us*" (8:37). Israel's victories were physical and temporal; the saints' victory is spiritual and eternal. Israel triumphed over opposing nations; Christ's saints triumph over sin, death, and hell. And so, far from separating him from the love of the Savior, the believer's present afflictions and hardships are providential instruments of His love. *The things that appear to prevail to the detriment of the Christian's soul actually serve the triumph and perfection of the soul.*

7. In view of these things, Paul's summary proclamation takes on profound significance: "*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (8:38-39).

The Christian's triumph pertains to all the things that tangibly touch his life (8:35), but also to the natural, spiritual, and temporal forces that he cannot perceive with his senses. Paul's insistence that believers "*overwhelmingly conquer*" is a declaration of comprehensive victory; their conquest extends to "*angels, principalities, and powers,*" and even "*things to come*" (1 John 2:12-14, 5:1-5; Revelation 5:1-10, 12:1-11, 20:6). It is a comprehensive victory because it is Christ's victory on their behalf (ref. again 8:37; Ephesians 1:18-23). This is the glory of the gospel, and the reason it supplies a hope that cannot disappoint. It cannot fail because it finds its source, substance, and power in the transcendent and invincible love of God; the love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.