

Romans: The Promise of Righteousness (part 6 of 6)

If God is for Us, Who can be Against Us?

Romans 8:31-39

Mark Vroegop

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? 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 with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded 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 sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:31–39 (ESV)

At my Christian High School, Tuesday and Friday night home basketball games were electric. The gym was always packed, the pep band was always loud, and the energy was incredible. Basketball was a central part of the culture of our school, and students, alumni, and faculty were always there in droves. To attend a basketball game at Kalamazoo Christian High School was to be a part of something beyond yourself. There was history, culture, and even identity connected to the environment.

Part of that history was what happened at every game between the third and fourth quarter. I can still see it play out in my mind. An old man, who attended every home game, would move to the center of the court, face the home crowd, and lead everyone connected with Kalamazoo Christian High School in the following chant:

*Come Seven, Come Eleven,
Come rickety, ranty, shanty-town.
Who can knock those Christians down?
Nobody. Nobody. Nobody.*

When the chant was finished, the place went nuts. People cheered, hollered, and encouraged the team as the buzzer sounded and the fourth quarter started. It was as though the chant was the battle-cry for our school.

I was sharing that experience with my family some time ago, and one of them asked, "What does 'rickety, ranty, shanty-town' mean? And why 'seven and eleven'?" And I laughed because I had no idea. The crazy thing about the chant is that I'm not sure if anyone really knew what it meant, but it is what we all cheered, and as crazy as it sounds, it was quite motivational.

Now I am sure that my experience is not unique. You could probably tell me about certain words or phrases that you said or cheered. Or you could probably think back to a scene in a movie or a moment in history when a battle-cry was quite memorable. Sometimes those battle cries are silly, but at other times they are really meaningful – even emotional. For instance, if you served in the Marine Corp, to say “Hoorah” is loaded with meaning.

A battle-cry serves as a unifying vision for who we are, what we are going to do, and how we are going to handle adversity. It is a charge to people who might retreat out of fear, discouragement, or a lack of vision.

Our text today is the battle-cry for followers of Jesus in the midst of a world filled with suffering. Romans 8:31-39 is what the saints of God need to hear as they anticipate moments of great difficulty, hardship, or pain. This text is for the graveside and bedside, for test results and when you hear “there’s nothing more we can do,” for persecution and accusations, for opportunities to share your faith and when friends mock you because of your faith, for moments of fear and seasons of uncertainty, and for anything that fits with a broken world.

This text is designed to give us a confidence that is rooted in the character and grace of God so that the followers of Jesus would be courageous, hopeful and unstoppable.

Our Battle-Cry: “God is For Us!”

We have now come to the end of Romans 8, and Paul leaves us with one of the greatest and most hope-filled promises in the Bible. This is the summit of the summit. Everything in Romans 8 was moving us to this point.

Verse 31 is a proposition that is set in the context of two questions, one of which is a rhetorical question designed to have a very obvious answer. Everything that follows is an explanation or an illustration of this main thought expressed in verse 31.

The important truth that is expressed here is as simple as it is profound: God is for us. These four words are loaded with theological, practical, and emotional depth. To say that God is for us means that everything in God’s sovereign plan, his redemptive acts, and the situations in our lives have been and always will be in accordance with His love for us. Whether the problem is our sin or the suffering in the world, there is nothing in our past, our present, or our future that is outside of God’s loving intentions for us. God loves us. He is for us. Everything in Romans 8 was leading us here.

Verse 31 begins by asking a question regarding “what shall we say to these things?” What does Paul have in mind here? I think that there are two contexts. First, it must mean the immediate context of what we studied in verses 18-30 in regards to God’s sovereignty and suffering. Remember that we were told to look at sufferings through the lens of future glory (8:18), to wait with patience (8:25), to be assured of answered prayers (8:26-28), and to rest in God’s plan (8:28). Last week the central question was in regard to who’s will is really most important in your life.

While last week's passage helped us understand the category of God's will, this passage helps us with the heart behind God's will. A biblical view of sovereignty does not result in fatalism when you know that embedded in the sovereignty of God is the deep, deep love of God for His children. Verses 31-39 help us to see that God is a loving as He is sovereign.

Second, the statement about "these things" refers to the rest of Romans 8 and the content of Romans 5-8 as Paul has unpacked for us the beauty of the gospel. Allow me to give you a sampling of what we have covered so far:

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. (Romans 5:1, 18)

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5)

¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:24-25)

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

So every ounce of hope that we are going to hear in this text has theological roots. Every Sunday that we have been in Romans has been a part of building a biblical foundation upon which we live, especially when hard things come our way. That is part of the beauty of what has happened to you as we have walked through Romans. God was using the Word to build a robust understanding of the gospel in your life such that you will think differently when it comes to life's most difficult moments.

Everything that we have studied in Romans is there to demonstrate over and over again that God is for us. Paul has spent so much time building that theological framework because it needs to be very strong and dug deep in light of the suffering on the outside and the self-centeredness within us. The gale force winds of a broken world are violent, and our natural bias is to interpret everything in light of what we can see, what we feel, or what we think is fair.

In order to eclipse the trauma of suffering and the internal narrative of self-focus, you need a robust gospel-centered vision of who God is and what He has done. You need to know and believe that God is for you. You will need to remind hurting people that God is for them. And you will need to rehearse the gospel so that this truth is not just something you know, but also something you feel – even sing.

One of the many ways that music and singing help us is that they serve to link theology with emotion. And you need that combination deeply when you are suffering. Historically, it was not unusual for

martyrs to sing on their way to execution. Michael Horton says “it became so common for martyrs to spend their final time on earth singing God’s praises as they passed by the watching crowds that the authorities resorted to cutting out the martyrs’ tongues before they were escorted to the pyres {a stake for burning}.”¹

To know that God is for us no matter what happens has historically given the church confidence to love risky people, reach resistant tribes, joyfully endure trials, sing while imprisoned, and to be an unstoppable force for God’s kingdom. “God is for us!” is the fuel for missions, ministry, suffering, persecution, and counter-cultural living.

Three Hopeful Implications

So far we have only covered four words! But those words are the basis for everything else in this text, and I think it is the one thing that we really need to hear when we are faced with all kinds of trials or difficulties. Let’s now turn to the rest of the passage and see how Paul provides further color or support for what it means that God is for us.

1. No Opposition

The first implication is very closely tied to the “God is for us!” proposition. Verse 31 says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The effect of God’s favor is that no other favor or disfavor matters. There is no opposition when God is for you.

There is something about power that is being communicated here. God’s favor, love, and grace trump everything because there is no one or nothing greater than God. When God is for you, no one can be against you because there is nothing greater or more powerful than God. This is not a promise of the absence of opposition. Rather, it is a promise regarding the impotence of the opposition. God will vanquish any enemies that present themselves before believers.²

Verse 32 serves to answer this question: “How can believers be assured that no opposition will stand against them?” Paul appeals to the providence of God in and through the crucifixion of Jesus. God was willing to offer His only Son in order to secure the redemption of His people (see Isaiah 53:10). There is no greater or more unimaginable sacrifice than the giving of one’s own son, especially a son who is innocent and undeserving of death. There is no more powerful display of selfless, sovereign love than the cross. There is no more definitive statement about God’s love and His being for us than to offer His only son. And there is not a clearer announcement of the defeat of the devil’s plans than the way that God used the death of Jesus. The cross declares “no opposition.”

But there is another aspect here too. Verse 32 ends with a promise. The hope of no opposition extends even further into the promise of blessing. The text says “how will he not also with him freely give us all things.” If God was willing to sacrifice His son, then surely He will grant them everything along with Son.³ Paul is making his case here from the greater to the lesser. If the sacrifice of Jesus

¹ Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life – Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014), 16.

² Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 458.

³ Ibid.

was so great, then blessing his children, which is a lesser reality, is a sure thing. There is no opposition to harm believers, but there is also nothing that can stop God from blessing believers.

What does it mean that He will graciously give us all things? At one level it certainly is a future hope that is connected to glorification. We will be coheirs with Christ, and we will reign with Him in glory. However, I think there is more to it than just the future.

There is a very interesting cross-reference in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, where Paul uses similar language, but the receiving of the blessings are immediate:

²¹ So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Corinthians 3:21–23)

In context, he is telling the Corinthians not to boast in human beings because “all things are yours.” This means that because of their union with Christ (“you are Christ’s”), they receive everything in life as gifts from God. So whether it is a person, the world, life, death, the present, or the future, all of it is part of their victorious union with Jesus.

Everything becomes a gift for believers because of their union with Jesus. Even death is “for them” because God is able to make it a gift in accordance with His plan. There is nothing in life that has the power to thwart God’s plan, deter His providence, or negate His promise in your life. Why? Because God is for us.

Do you see how important this is? Do you see how liberating this could be? God is not just going to give us all things in the future, but everything that comes is a gift from Him in order to fulfill His gracious plan for our lives. Whether it is hard people or hard providence, it is all a gift. And nothing can thwart this plan. No one can trump this plan. No one can oppose us because God is for us!

2. No Condemnation

The second implication of God being for us relates to our legal standing. Verses 33-34 raise the issue of the potential of charges or condemnations being brought against the children of God. In other words, the underlying problem of our sinfulness surfaces again, either from others or from ourselves.

The primary focus of this passage is the moment of final judgment. The questions about who will bring any charge against God’s elect and who is to condemn them both relate to a person’s final reckoning before a holy God. The image seems to be one of a courtroom, where the fearful possibility exists of someone bringing charges or pronouncing judgment on believers because of their sinfulness. Imagine the devil saying to God, “This man is sinful at his core. His thoughts, his actions, and his words are continually filled with the same rebelliousness for which you condemned me. He is guilty, and he deserves to be judged too!”

However, the hope in this passage is that the verdict in the case of the followers of Jesus has already been rendered. God has already declared His people to be forgiven – “it is God who justifies.” What’s

more, Christ has fully paid for their sin and was raised from the dead, signaling the completion of the work. Jesus' death paid for sin, and His resurrection affirmed that it was accepted by God.

So at this very moment, Jesus is at the right hand of God and interceding for us as evidence that the work of grace was completed and finished. So the devil can say whatever he wants, but the verdict has been rendered, and the debt has been paid. A resurrected Christ is evidence of that!

There is a great moment in the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, where Christian is confronted and assaulted by the foul fiend named Apollyon. He accused Christian of unfaithfulness to God in his journey, and he recounts all of Christian's failings. He charges Christian with not deserving God's grace. To this charge Christian replies:

"All this is true, and much more which you have left out; but the Prince whom I serve and honor is merciful and ready to forgive. Besides, these sins possessed me in your own country; I have groaned under them, been sorry for them, but now have obtained pardon from my Prince."⁴

"God is for us" means that we are not perfect, and yet God is kind and gracious to us because of the finished work of Jesus. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. What's more, Jesus is interceding for us.

This is helpful in a practical way especially when you are suffering, because our natural bias is to assume that if we were better, then these bad circumstances would not happen to us. Difficult circumstances can assault the soul as you begin to be your own accuser. You hardly need the devil to do this work; your own knowledge of your shortcomings can easily do the trick. You can easily spiral downward, either highlighting all the reasons why you are being punished or becoming totally overwhelmed because of all the ways that you failing as your struggle through you pain.

Where do you go when the devil or your flesh accuse you? You have to come back to the promise that "God is for me," and you need to hear verses 33-34 loudly: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? Who is to condemn?" You need to hear Isaiah 50:9 – "Behold, the Lord helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

You see, it does not help to deny that you are guilty. You, the devil, and God all know that you are. Your guilt or innocence is not the issue. It's the verdict that matters! God has declared you forgiven, justified, cleansed, adopted, and loved. And no power in heaven and earth can change that standing because the risen Christ has finished His redemptive work for you.

*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.*

*Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free.*

⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrims Progress*, ed. W. R. Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58-59.

*For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.*

The battle-cry against guilt and despair is "God is for me."

3. No Separation

The third and final implication is the longest. It runs from verses 35-39 as Paul now reaches a crescendo in Romans 8. We have one last final question, and it is the most emotional: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" The question is related to the strength, the commitment, and the durability of Christ's love. Is there anything greater or is there any way for our relationship to be destroyed?

Now apparently Paul wants us to really feel this, because he adds a string of additional words to describe the kinds of events that have been a part of his life and which could communicate that separation from God's love has taken place. He lists tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list but only a sampling to highlight areas of suffering. You could include cancer, an adulterous spouse, family conflict, sexual abuse, job loss, infertility, miscarriages, failed adoptions, loneliness, betrayal of friends, and rejection from your family. Any kind of list merely puts more color on what assaults believers. We live in a broken world with people who hate the gospel. So bad things are bound to happen.

Verse 36 ups the ante. Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 – "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." Not a very encouraging verse, is it? Not a verse you put on a mug and give to your sweetheart for Valentine's Day. The context of Psalm 44 is a lamentation of the fact that the people of God are righteous and faithful, yet they are being persecuted severely. The reason that Paul quotes this Psalm is to connect the suffering of Roman Christians to the historical suffering of God's people. Mockery and suffering are inevitably the lot of Christians.⁵

In other words, the hope of the Christian is not no suffering but no separation. And that is why verse 37 is so strong: "No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." The power of no separation means that the afflictions in life only serve to make believers conquerors through Christ. The bonds of love between God and His children are so strong, and the sovereign purposes of God are so kind that everything can be transformed into mercy. A hurtful word, a harmful person, and a hate-filled devil are not able to extinguish the flame of God's love.

Again in *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian is in the home of the Interpreter, he is given the opportunity to see a fire next to a wall and to see how the devil is working to extinguish it. Yet the fire burns brighter and brighter. Christian is taken behind the wall to see that while the devil is trying to put the fire out with water, Christ is secretly pouring more and more oil on the fire to make it burn even hotter. So the devil's water never outdoes the Master's oil. In other words, God always gives us grace for whatever we face (2 Cor. 9:8).

⁵ Schreiner, 463.

Just to be sure we both understand and feel this text, Paul concludes with a rhetorical flourish that makes hurting believers want to shout! Verses 38-39 sing with beauty and hope.

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38–39 (ESV)

Paul wants us to know that there is not one realm or power or authority or creature or dominion that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. He wants us to feel the weight of a sovereign God who rules over all creation and who loves us with a power that is unbreakable and eternal. He wants us to be sure that the work of redemption in and through Jesus is the most powerful reality in the entire universe. God's love is guaranteed by the character and sovereignty of God. It was purchased by Jesus, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can separate us from that love.

To be in Christ Jesus our Lord is to be always loved. To be in Christ Jesus means that no matter what happens in life or in death, God is always FOR you. And if God is for you, there is nothing that can be against you.

So if you are here today and not a follower of Jesus, I would urge to see the power of what coming to faith in Christ means. Sin causes a separation from God, and this text shows us the beauty and the safety for those who have turned from their sin and put their faith in Jesus. The beauty of the gospel is that God takes our sin and makes us righteous. And He takes our suffering and makes us victorious. Because in Christ Jesus, God is for us.

That also means that if you are a follower of Jesus, maybe you need to be reminded today that in every situation in life and in death, God is for you. Maybe you are anticipating some spiritual challenge or a fearful situation or an opportunity to stand for the gospel, and you need to know your battle cry before you take the biggest risk of your life.

The biblical charge to you, and what you need to know before you risk your reputation, your dreams, your comfort or your life, is this: God is for you!

There is no successful opposition, no eternal condemnation, and no separation from His love. If you are in Christ, you are untouchable. Because the eternal, sovereign, reigning, and redeeming God is for you!

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