

God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem *Paul's Letter to the Romans*

The Christian's Identity: God is Absolutely For Us! *Romans 8:26 – 39*

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Introduction: The Shack

There's a recent book called *The Shack* that tries to help us understand how to deal with pain and grief from a Christian perspective. There's a guy named Mack who, as we learn, was physically beaten by his alcoholic father. When Mack becomes an adult, he becomes a husband and father of five children. But he loses his youngest daughter in a tragic kidnapping and murder in a shack in an Oregon forest. Years later, though the great sadness is still there, one day he gets a letter from God asking him to meet him in that shack. So he goes. And God the Father appears at first like a large black woman. Surprising, but what do you expect? An old white man with a beard? Is that any more true? It was because Mack needed to receive the Father in a particular way. Jesus is a Middle Eastern man who appears to be of Arab descent. And the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman. What Mack is struck by immediately is how the three of them relate to each other, talking and laughing. No one dominates the conversation. They affirm each other. They listen to each other as if they were old friends and yet as if each word was new, appreciating each other as if they were seeing each other truly for the first time. There is a love within God, between the Father, Son, and Spirit and in the three relationships there. God has within Himself love that He offers to us in relationship and partnership, because God never coerces. And God's love transforms Mack as Mack basks in the presence of this God and relies on this God more and more. As a result, Mack becomes a gentler man. He is able to grieve openly for his daughter. He sees how he was not the husband he thought he was, and is more humble. He becomes a forgiving person, forgiving his father and even forgives his daughter's murderer. In other words, Mack shows more and more of Jesus' character. The tightness in him gives way to the love of God. And Mack learns that Jesus is God's way of healing humanity and healing the world, loving humanity and loving the world.

The thread that runs through this passage is unquestionably the love of God for humanity. Look at the most frequently repeated phrase or idea in these verses. It is 'for us.' God is for us. In v.26, the Spirit intercedes for us. In v.27, Christ intercedes for the saints, that is, us. In v.28, God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, that is, for us. In v.31, Paul asks pointedly, If God is for us, who is against us? In v.32, God delivered Christ up for us. Then in v.34, we learn that Christ intercedes for us. That is the main thought in these 14 verses. God is overwhelmingly for us.

Relevance:

Yet it is easy to think that God is not *for us*, that God is simply *for Himself*. Why would we think that? Well, at times, we do suffer great losses: the loss of a loved one, the breakdown of a friendship, our parents go through hard times, or we struggle with how much injustice and innocent suffering there is in this world. During those times, we might conclude that God is partly evil, since the world contains evil. God must either have caused it or allows it, but uses it for some purpose of His own. Consider the clichés that people of faith sometimes say: God is in control, God has His own reasons that we'll understand later, God is perfectly just so don't challenge Him, no one can complain because it's GOD after all. Yet is that how we're supposed to handle pain and suffering in this world? Let me say up front: I don't think that God is 'in control' in the sense that He causes everything, because otherwise He would be partly evil and just using human beings for some other purpose. I don't even think that God *allows* evil, because that would mean the same thing. I don't think that God pushes people around like pawns in some cosmic chess game. And I don't think He has some other purpose than to simply transform human beings through Jesus into the new humanity He always intended us to be. There is no higher goal in God's heart than for fallen humanity to become His new humanity through Jesus. His purpose is not 'His glory' in some other sense, and certainly not an arbitrary sense of how He can use power for whatever He wants. God is for us. He is for humanity. And that is demonstrated by what each Person of the Triune God is doing right now.

In v.26 – 27, we find the love of the Holy Spirit. In v.28 – 33, we find the love of God the Father. Then in v.34 – 37, we find the love of God the Son. In fact, we're going to see three specific aspects of God's love: His understanding love, His advocating love, and His transforming love. And in all these ways of loving us, God's goal

is to make us more truly human, according to His definition, which was embodied in the one truly human man, Jesus.

The Understanding Love of the Spirit: v.26 – 27

Let's look at the Spirit. For Christians, the Spirit of Jesus lives in us, and is helping us, rooting for us, and praying for us to be more fully God's new humanity, even while we are asleep. 'And in the same way, the Spirit also helps our weaknesses, for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with us with groanings too deep for words.' The Spirit is like your mom when you were a toddler and she took you to the doctor. You just sat there and cried, but she interpreted you to the doctor. Sometimes we don't know how to grow spiritually because we don't know what it means to be God's new humanity connected to Jesus. 'We do not know how to pray as we should.' Isn't that the truth? Sometimes you pray for an A on a test, but if the professor is grading on a bell curve, you might as well pray for someone else to just get really low scores – it's the same thing. You don't know how to pray. Thank God the Spirit is praying something else for you. Communication is the first essential ingredient to good relationship, and this is where the Spirit helps us first. Likewise, sometimes you pray, 'Father, I want revenge on that guy, because what's most important is how I feel!' But the Spirit of Jesus is praying, 'Father, help this person forgive, because what's most important is showing the love of Jesus.' Sometimes you pray, 'Father, I wish You would make that person notice me and fall in love with me.' The Spirit might be praying, 'Father, help this beloved child learn about real love.'

Illus: This understanding love of the Spirit reminds me of how Anne Mansfield Sullivan loved Helen Keller. In fact, Anne Sullivan is one of my favorite heroes of all time. Anne came from the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, having never herself completely recovered from an eye infection that left her half-blind, to the home of Helen Keller in Alabama. Helen Keller was seven years old, without sight and hearing because of an illness that befell her at age two. No one knew what was going through Helen's mind. No one was able to help her. But Anne learned, and Anne was able to help. Anne had heard of this poor child, and she came to teach her, to help her communicate, but above all, to love her. For three hard years, Anne worked with Helen's sense of touch, teaching her to read and write in Braille. It was a difficult, painstaking experience day after day. Yet Anne had unbending dedication. She INTERCEDED with Helen to learn. She INTERCEDED with others on Helen's behalf. In three years, Helen learned Braille. By sixteen, Helen could speak well enough to go to prep school. Eventually, she graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College in 1904. Anne's contribution to Helen's life was immense. Listen to what Helen Keller later wrote about Anne: 'Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was. 'Light! Give me light!' was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour...I felt approaching footsteps. I stretched out my hand as I supposed to my mother. Someone took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me.' That is one of the greatest pictures I know of the role of the Spirit of Jesus in our lives. He comes into our life. He understands our needs and he loves us so deeply he enters into our every thought, our every feeling. He prays on our behalf, groaning for us to become like Jesus, when we have no idea how to communicate.

This means to practical things for us. First, we can trust that God, by the Spirit, is in us helping us communicate what most needs to be communicated. Communication is important in all relationships, and with God most of all. It is amazing, then, that God helps us communicate with him. We don't even know how to communicate what's going on deep within us. He knows, then, how to best pray for us because he is with us every step of the way, day after day. That leads me to the second point. Second, we can listen for the voice of the Spirit in us, even as a way of knowing our true selves better. We are not just getting lost in subjectivity. The Spirit of Jesus in the believer is the objective person and objective voice who speaks for us.

Now why is the Spirit doing this? Because it is God's will. Paul points out, 'because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.' The word 'intercedes' means 'to appeal for the sake of someone else, to petition on someone else's behalf.' That is the role of the Spirit. Just as the true creation is groaning with the impact of decay and death, so the Spirit of Jesus is groaning in us with the impact of decay and death in our bodies. But if the Spirit is our advocate, does that mean that God is a distant father that needs to be reminded to pay you attention, or a hostile judge that needs to be reminded to be merciful and appeased from time to time? NO! That is absolutely not what that means, and Paul clears that up right away.

The Transforming Love of the Father: v.28 – 32

Here is the incredible verse Romans 8:28, and we shift from the Spirit to the Father: ‘And we know that God [the Father] causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.’ Let’s first make very sure we understand what Paul is saying. First of all, who does this apply to? Look at the double identification Paul throws in there: ‘to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.’ That’s us if we believe in Christ.

Secondly, he is not saying that God causes all things. Yes, God is involved in history and He answers prayer, but we are not at liberty to say that He has caused your parents’ divorce to test you, or that He caused your car to break down to test you. And it’s not that He *allows* human evil to happen either. I know that some of you use that language. Let me explain why I don’t think it’s appropriate: If you were choosing to date someone that I didn’t think it was a good idea to, would I not allow you to date that person? No: I can’t turn you into a robot and not allow you to date. It’s still your choice I would be totally against it and make my opinion clear. So saying that I am ‘allowing’ or ‘not allowing’ it is an inappropriate way to describe our relationship. Similarly, God does not ‘allow’ human evil to happen, because that assumes He could turn human beings into robots, and just chooses not to on every occasion. But He cannot do that because He loves human beings and wants our voluntary partnership. So He is not ‘allowing’ human evil, He is completely against it. He is doing everything He can – within His love – to undo it.

But how? Well, at the start of v.28, Paul says, ‘And we know.’ What we know is this. Paul is saying that God causes all things to work for our good. Now ‘all things’ does indeed mean all circumstances, all relationships, and even all hardships. But how does God cause all these things to work for our good? What is ‘good?’ What does it mean to be ‘called according to his purpose?’ We can simply look at v.29: ‘to become conformed to the image of His Son.’ That is ‘good’ from God’s perspective. Good is not comfortable external circumstances. Good is Christ’s internal character shining even in the midst of bad circumstances.¹

Now why does God do this? The reason God does this is contained in the latter half of v.29: ‘that he [Jesus] might be the first-born among many brethren.’ Here is another clear statement of our identity as Christians. We are younger brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ in God’s royal family. God’s intent in history is to build a great family, a new humanity that is centered on Jesus and connected to him. God does not have a higher goal than that. Look at the great planning of God. In verse 29, Paul began a series of verbs and he describes our relationship with God from start to finish. ‘For whom He foreknew, He also predestined, and whom He predestined, these He also called, and whom He called, these He also justified, and whom He justified, these He also glorified.’ There are five verbs there: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Now here is where some good meaty discussion happens. What exactly do these words like predestine mean?

To foreknow means ‘to know before, to take note of, to fix a regard on.’ What does this tell us? When God created everything, He foreknew all of it, including you and me. He knew He would love us, because love is His nature. So He predestined us...to what? It is not simply ‘to heaven.’ It is ‘to have the character of Jesus.’ Predestination is always hard to understand, but in this case, predestination works as follows: The Father takes the Son on the one hand, and us on the other, and He says, ‘I will slowly conform them to the image of my Son.’ Because the character of Jesus is God’s destination for where He’s taking people, therefore it is predestined. Then there is the calling, when Jesus says to us, ‘Come follow me,’ and that process of transforming love begins. Implied after God’s call is our acceptance. Then there is justification, the declaration of innocence because God changes our identity. Then the last term is glorified. In our case, the glorification we go through is both present and future. We are being glorified now, as Christ lives his life out through us. If you’ve ever wondered what it means to be open, transparent, or beautiful, this is it. It’s to reveal Christ. That process of glorification, or revealing, will find its completion in the renewal of heaven and earth, when we will be radiant, like a crystal chandelier throwing light in a million places.²

¹ We studied this in Romans 5:1-11 when Paul said we are empowered with the hope of glory, Christ in us, even in times of hardship. Romans 5:12 all the way through chapter 8 have been a long proof of why that passage is true, starting with us reigning in life with Christ, to our new identity, to the Spirit living in us.

² To illustrate this entire process, consider the dynamic of adoption again, because the context of this passage is God the Father adopting us by inviting us into Jesus His Son. First, the adopting father makes an independent decision apart from the son to adopt the son into his family (the foreknowing). His purpose in doing this is that he might conform the son to the character, quality, and destiny of that family (predestination). He

Illus: Let me tell you what this has meant for me. In my early life, I felt like I had nothing to say. Part of the reason was because I didn't have much purpose. Part of the reason was because communication was so difficult in my family. My dad would come home from work and not say much, unless it was to complain and yell at my mom, who sometimes yelled back. There was no safety so I grew up very quiet and stoic, bottling things up inside. There was one incident I remember where my parents said something very painful to me: At a swim meet where I did badly. I was already really mad with myself, but to make things worse, when we were driving home, my parents turned towards me in the car and said, 'Mako, do you know how much we're paying to keep you swimming?' That was one of the most painful things I can ever remember. From that point on, I buckled down and tried to make sure I'd never hear that again. I became even more sarcastic. I stopped opening up about myself. I had the vague impression, 'If there is a god, then he is cursing me.' Then my junior year of high school, I heard Jesus call me to be new in him, and I responded with a yes. When I was in college, three very godly older friends found me and mentored me. I got to listen to the Jesus in them talking with me, counseling me about my friends and my family, and loving me. I realized God actually uses conversations! I also learned about turning my pain over to Jesus and letting him work through it, softening the hard places in my heart. Eventually, Jesus changed me. I was shy, sarcastic, and stoic before. But I started to care about people and relationships. I've had the chance to mentor many young men and women over the last fifteen years, some from broken families and very unique personal problems. Two of those people are getting married this weekend: one of my housemates, Matt, and his fiancé Candice. Because we've been doing their pre-marital counseling, they asked my wife and me if we would speak at their wedding! What an honor!! God turned me around 180 degrees. That is how His transforming love transforms us into the likeness of Christ. Even incidents that are very painful work for our good because He intercepts them and transforms them.

So when God says He loves you, and then He calls you to do these difficult and challenging things, it's not because He is using you. It's because He is loving you. In the movie *The Lord of the Rings*, there is the scene where Saruman is captured in his tower of Isengard. Saruman then stands on top of his tower and tries to place distrust between Gandalf, Aragorn, and the others. He says that Gandalf is foolish for thinking that Aragorn will ever sit upon the throne of Gondor, foolish for sending the hobbit on a fatal mission, and that Gandalf only uses those whom he purports to love. Sometimes we feel that way about God. When God calls us to love others who are hard for us, or care for non-Christians on campus, or move into the inner city, or take a courageous stand for justice and mercy, or give your money away, He is not doing it because He uses those whom He purports to love. Yes, He does it because He loves others, but He does it through us because He loves us. It's good for us. That is why He is not using human beings as pawns in some game to get more glory or whatever. That's why we do evangelism and social justice. It's just part of sharing in the character of Jesus.

Illus: Isaiah, Sarah, talk about Global Poverty Impact

For you, what might this mean? I don't know what most of you are going through. Yet if you're going through hard times, let God intercept them and transform them. The very thing that hurts you and breaks your heart, God will use to give you life. We don't always know how. But we always know why. Because it is good for us to be conformed into the image of Christ. God will help you intercept and transform difficult things in your life because He helped His Son Jesus deal with difficult things in his life. Your responsibility is to simply yield to the Spirit of Jesus in you. There is no other way to live the Christian life, or see reality.

This gives us great insight into life and ministry. Was Paul focused on simply bringing people to church? No. He wanted to reproduce Jesus Christ in as many people as he knew. The point of being a Christian is not so you can attend meetings on Tuesday and Sunday and take a casual interest in the Bible. It is to be totally open to having the life of Jesus Christ pour out through you, no holds barred!

then issues a formal invitation to that son (the calling). The son then responds to the call, and if the response is positive, then the father goes through the legal procedure necessary to adopt him (justification). Finally, the adoption is legally done, so the son is brought into a new home, and he has privileges and responsibilities commensurate with his new status, and he grows into them (partial glorification now). But the son also awaits the grand party where he will be presented by his new father before all his friends and new family, bearing a new family name, wearing a new family ring, and having a new father who loved him and wanted him specifically and individually (glorification eternally). The reason I illustrate this process this way is because Paul has relied so much on the metaphor of Roman adoption in the past two sections. The key point here is that we glorify God by being conformed to the image of the natural-born Son who already is in the house, Jesus Christ.

To prove how unshakable God's embrace of love is, Paul then asks a series of four WHO questions. The first is in v.31, 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?' That is a good question. God might be in our corner, but who is against us? What about Satan? Notice that throughout our entire book of Romans, Satan is not mentioned once. He shows up as a footnote in chapter 16:20. You know what that says? 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.' That is how much Satan can get in the way of God's love for us. He's just a footnote.

The Advocating Love of the Son: v.33 – 34

But the main person he wonders about is Jesus. What about Jesus? Where is Jesus right now? What is he doing? You might have thought if there is one person who might have one small word of complaint, it'd be Jesus. Jesus served us, taught us, sacrificed everything for us, gave his life for us, was tortured and beaten for us, and was killed by us. That person puts up with all our ingratitude, all our betrayal, and all our forgetfulness. Jesus Christ might have one small word of complaint. HE DOESN'T. Instead, he is our second advocate and is totally on our side. He's cheering for us! Look at verse 34: 'Christ Jesus is he who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.' Here we get an insight into what Jesus Christ is doing right now, as we speak. He is at the right hand of God, which is the position of privilege and power in the throne of heaven. And he is interceding, which again means 'pleading on behalf of, appealing on behalf of.' Why is he doing this? Because he is for us! 'Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is he who died, who was raised.' In other words, Christ died and rose for us! He killed the fallen humanity he took on, and was raised to become a new human being and offer it back to us by his Spirit. For Jesus to stand at the right hand of God and complain about us would be to undermine his own incredible act!! There is a man standing in the presence of God right now, who in fact contains the presence of God. But it's not so that Jesus could say, 'Ok, I'm here. We have one human being, that's enough.' It's so that Jesus could bring as many other human beings as possible with him. That's why Jesus doesn't condemn! He doesn't separate himself from us when we make mistakes and fumble in sin. He is our friend in high places. So Jesus is 'for us' that he's probably saying to God, 'Come on, love them even more!' Jesus has not one word of complaint against us. He is for us.

Now it's interesting that Paul looks at this possibility in this way, because nowadays we tend to think, subconsciously perhaps, that the Father has accusations against us, and that Jesus defangs the Father by absorbing a certain amount of the Father's anger.

Illus: my personal journey

Verse 34 completes the picture of the Trinity. God the Spirit is our first advocate, being in us and knowing our needs. God the Son is our second advocate, being at the right hand of God and having direct access to His ear. That is one great legal team we've got!! And God the Father is our transforming benefactor, who gives all things to us freely. Each person of the Godhead is FOR US.

Is there an aspect of God that is against us? No! Now that is important because

And the fact that God is fundamentally a Trinity and not a Singularity means that the Christian God is relational. Muslims insist that Allah is a Singularity, so it is impossible to say that Allah is by nature relational or that Allah is by nature loving. But the Christian God is a community of love in God's self.

Illus: how being in a great community changes us

Conclusion

Now the final WHO question is in v.35: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' Then Paul personalizes certain life threatening terrors. 'Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?' That was Paul's own life experience. ³⁶Just as it is written, 'For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Why does Paul go through this exhaustive list? Because each one of us has the tendency to feel loved by God when others love us, and not feel loved when others do not love us. We feel loved by God if life goes our way, and not loved when it doesn't. If we think that way, then

we never come to God when we need love the most, and when He wants to love us the most. Paul wants us to know that WE ARE LOVED. Why is this so important? Because once you know you're loved, you won't go running around trying to earn it.

I want to close our entire time together by sharing this: I need God's love. I am one of the neediest people I know. I don't like to admit that, but occasionally there are times when I come face to face once again with my need. If you remember nothing else about our time together, or remember only one thing about me, please remember this one thing. I need God's love more than anything else. And I want to encourage you to know God and His love better than you know your friends, better than you know your schoolwork, better than you know how to get from your bed to the bathroom in the dark. Let His love undergird your life and be your foundation. He understands. He is on your side. And He transforms you from within.