

"WHY THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS"

(Romans 8:31-39)

(Frank Theilman)

This passage shows why the gospel is good news. The gospel is the announcement that in Christ God has acted so decisively and powerfully to save his people that no force seeking their harm can ultimately prevail. The sweep of the gospel's saving power is broad, as Paul shows with his opening question of defiance, "Who is against us?" (8:31a). He focuses in the passage, however, on two enemies in particular: sin and suffering.

Assurance of Deliverance from Sin

First, with regard to sin Paul repeats the essence of his argument from 5:1-8:30. God has delivered his own Son over to death on behalf of believers, and since his gracious generosity toward them has taken such a dramatic form already, it is clear that he intends to give them everything that enables them to flourish as human beings—the "all things" of 8:39. Human beings in their state of rebellion against God are their own worst enemy (1:18-32), and this rebellion is universal (2:1-3:20; 5:12-21). The good news of the gospel, however, is that this enemy no longer affects God's relationship with his people. At God's own initiative he has refused to pour out his wrath on them, has reconciled them to himself, and has entered a loving relationship with them. Anyone who doubts this has only to look at the cross of Christ and the love displayed there to see that God has overcome this enemy for his people (5:8; 8:35, 39). There is no charge left to bring against them, and there is no condemnation for them (8:33).

In case someone wonders whether sins committed after their initial justification might separate them from God's love, Paul answers that Christ not only died but was raised and seated at God's right hand. From this place of sympathy (he died, just as we do), victory (he conquered death, just as we will), and power (he reigns with God the Father), his continuing work on behalf of believers assures that they remain free from condemnation (8:34). For anyone who has accepted in faith Paul's description of sin's devastating consequences for all humanity (1:18-3:20; 5:12-21) and his bleak portrayal of sin's tight grip on even the most well-intentioned human being (7:5, 13-25), this assurance of Christ's love should come as good news indeed.

God's Compassion for His Suffering People

Second, Paul concludes that suffering, and especially persecution, cannot separate believers from God's love in Christ Jesus. Since the commitment of believers to the gospel involves turning away from the idolatrous and unloving behavior Paul has described in 1:18-3:20 at the same time that the unbelieving world continues within it, faithfulness to the gospel also sometimes involves suffering the pain of marginalization and mistreatment from the unbelieving world (cf. 12:14, 17). The earliest Christians, including Paul, were familiar with this experience. By the time Paul wrote Romans, John the Baptist had lost his head, Jesus had been crucified, Peter, John, and other apostles had been arrested, a mob had murdered Stephen, the pre-Christian Paul had "dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3), John's



brother James had been killed (Acts 12:2), and the post-conversion Paul had experienced every trial he lists in Romans 8:35 except execution by the sword.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit the suffering of which Paul speaks in this passage to persecution. Not all the tribulation, distress, famine, lack of clothing, danger, and death that Christians experience is a result of faithfulness to Christ. A careful look at Psalm 44 reveals that there too God's people were suffering despite their righteousness, not because of it. They have simply experienced defeat in battle, and nothing in the psalm indicates that this suffering was anything other than what millions before and since have experienced because of war. When believers suffer, whether for their faith or not, they sometimes ask like the psalmist, "O Lord. . . why do you hide your face?" (Ps 44:23-24).

In this passage Paul delivers the good news that God has not hidden his face from his people when they suffer. His face is found in the face of the crucified Jesus Christ. In the crucified Jesus Christ, who died because of his love for God's people (and Christ's love is also God's love), Christians can take confidence and courage that their suffering does not mean God has failed to care for them or to show up at the time of their distress. They were united with Christ in his death when they heard and believed the gospel (Eph 1:13), and their union with him in his suffering and death continues in the present (Rom 6:6; cf. 2 Cor 4:10; Gal 2:20; Phil 3:10). This union is, among other things, fellowship with the one "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

The living Christ who is seated in victory at God's right hand, interceding for his people (8:34), is at the same time the Christ with whose suffering believers are united (Rom 8:17). John depicts this victorious Christ at God's right hand as a lamb who has been slain and who therefore still bears the marks of his suffering on behalf of God's people (Rev 5:6). The marks of Christ's suffering, still there in his victorious, glorified existence, stand as a permanent reminder of his love for God's people and of God's identification with them in the midst of hardship.

This is the sense in which believers "win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us" (8:37). Their union with Christ in his death not only ensures their union with him in his immortal, incorruptible state of victory and glory (8:17) but also of his love for them even as they experience the tribulation and distress of life in a world alienated from its creator.

In Summary: The Good News That God Is Love

The gospel, then, is good news because it is a message of God's gracious reconciliation of himself to his human creation despite their sin and because, in the gospel, human beings discover that their creator is not unconcerned about their plight within a world wracked by suffering. In sum, the gospel is the good news that the only and all-powerful creator of the universe is, more than anything else, a God of love and that he has put his love into action on behalf of his human creatures. He has done this through the death, resurrection, and present authority of his Son Jesus Christ.