

ROMANS Part 77

Chapter 8:35-37

God's love never lapses.



What shall be separating us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Affliction, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 According as it is written that “On Thy account we are being put to death the whole day, We are reckoned as sheep for slaughter.” 37 Nay! in all these we are more than conquering through Him Who loves us.

In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul writes, “Love is never lapsing.” He speaks generally here, personifying love and alluding to what love is, does, and refuses to do. Love never quits. In the 1 Corinthians context, Paul encourages the saints to love with the agape love of God. This is an unconditional love that stops at nothing, not even rejection. It loves because it *is* love, not because an object is worthy or even welcomes such love. In fact, an unworthy object only highlights this love’s rare character. Here at the end of Romans chapter 8, Paul applies agape love to the author of the love Himself: God. If you think that humans execute agape love with verve of spirit, you ought to see the Author Himself in action.

Do you want to see just how great this advertised love of God is? Paul knows that you do. This is why he poses the question: “What shall be separating us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?” He can’t wait to tell you all the things that have no chance of doing that.

Christ Jesus is the channel through which God lavishes His love upon us.

AFFLICTION OR DISTRESS

Can either affliction or distress separate us from the love of God? Forget about it. It is nice to know this because we are afflicted and distressed all day, every day, including weekends. I’m glad that God thought it was imperative to relieve us of the thought that trials could spell divine disfavor. No. These things belong to the human

condition. Who was under more affliction or distress than Christ? Did God hate *Him*? For some of us, getting out of bed is stressful. Simply walking, for some people, is its own affliction. Paul would not have us downplaying any afflictions or distresses. The whole gamut is included here, from grieving over death, biting one's lip, getting out of bed, or entertaining a bad thought.

What is the difference between affliction and distress? Affliction is what happens to you; distress is the reaction to the affliction.



The Greek word translated “affliction” is *thlipsis*. The English element is CONstriction. Constriction is tightness or inward pressure. The phrase “under pressure” describes this Greek word perfectly. We are constantly under time pressures, work pressures, family pressures, health pressures, financial pressures—even atmospheric pressures, for crying out loud. Soda in a can is under pressure. The air in our car tires is pressurized at around forty pounds per square inch. It kind of makes you think that pressure is as common on this planet as air. I will go so far as to say that, if there is air, then there is pressure. Are you breathing? Congratulations, you're afflicted. God knows this and He has taken care in this section of Romans to acknowledge it and comfort us concerning it.

The Greek word translated “distress” is *stenochorea*, the English elements being, CRAMP-SPACE. Picture a woman in labor. Cramping goes along with the groaning mentioned previously in this chapter. Distress is being doubled over in pain due to afflictions. You can be doubled over in pain even while standing straight up.

I've seen it happen. I've experienced it myself. People everywhere live lives of quiet desperation. Ask people how they're doing and most of them will say “great,” or “fine.” They are neither. They're all liars. Are they breathing? Very well then; they're under pressure. Only those who have stopped breathing are delivered of the dual discomforts of affliction and distress. For these fortunate individuals, we conduct funerals.

PERSECUTION

Now we come to specifics. Paul could have stopped with “affliction and distress” and every distasteful thing under the sun would have been covered. But many fine people think that *their* particular affliction is so bad that it must not be included under the umbrella known as “affliction.” I have encountered such people. I can say to someone, “There is no affliction that can separate you from the love of God,” and they respond, “Yes, but what about ...” and then launch into some terrible thing that is admittedly terrible and yet consistent with the human condition. “No trial has taken you except what is human” (1 Corinthians 10:13) is a verse I resort to often. I love this verse. It soothes me like a cool glob of skin moisturizer. Thank God that whatever I'm going through can't honestly be called “weird” because it's human. I want to ask these folks, “Which part of ‘no affliction’ aren't you getting?” But I do not say this, for it would only add another affliction to their already afflicted souls.

“Thank God that whatever I'm going through cannot honestly be called ‘weird’ because it's human.”

Nothing hurts worse than to be hounded by other people with ill intent. Persecution comes in many shapes and sizes—as do rocks. We can be persecuted for our faith, for our mood, for our decisions in life, even for being nice. We can be persecuted for simply existing on the same planet as other more neurotic and hysterical beings. (What other planet do they want me to go to?) We can be persecuted by friends and enemies alike, by family members, by fellow-believers, and certainly by the government. Some people have been persecuted by McDonalds cashiers.

The Greek word translated “persecution” is *dioko*, whose English element is CHASE. How perfect is that? It's

disturbingly apt. It reminds me that we can certainly be persecuted by insects. Have you ever been chased by a mosquito? How about a fly? Some people act like mosquitoes and flies. They buzz, swarm, bite, sting, and never stop chasing you. They pursue with an evil intent. They've got nothing better to do than to vex others. Evil people have too much spare time. They are masters in the ways of mayhem.

FAMINE

Want to lose your zeal for life? Don't eat. Famine sucks. As with persecution, this world serves up starvation in varying amounts and packages. One can be starved for affection as well as for food; I'm not sure which is worse. Both kill. I am treating famine here as an emotional lack of anything—anything at all. Some people starved of money actually revel in it; others launch themselves from 20-story window ledges. Our Lord knew the pangs of hunger, not only in food and finance, but in the realm of human affection. Even some of His closest friends left Him. Did this separate Him from the love of God? As we shall soon see, these things, in the lives of believers, are tokens *of* the love of God.

NAKEDNESS

Some people lack terribly in this world, being bereft even of decent clothing. "What do you have to show for yourself?" is the condemning query of our age. In a world valuing kitsch over character, you are judged by what you own. "The difference between men and boys is the price of their toys," is the stupid saying of an insipid eon. I am struck by how many of the things Paul enumerates in this section of Romans befell Christ. Go down the list. It all happened to Him. Affliction? He walked daily beneath the pressure of saving the world gracefully. Distress? The misunderstandings of His own friends drove Him to the mountains to pray. Persecution? The elites of Israel parsed His every word and plotted His death. Famine? Forty days in the wilderness without food acquainted Him with its perils. Nakedness? The soldiers gambled for His last garment, then crucified Him without it. Danger? Every day of His life, Satan wanted Him dead. Sword? The Roman posse at Gethsemane brandished them in His face; all their strength was in their metal weaponry. So again I ask, "Was Jesus Christ ever separated from the love of God?"

DANGER

As King David famously said in 1 Samuel 20:3, "There is only a step between me and death." I believe that we are living in a time in history where this is truer than it has ever been. David would die of shock were he to even peek around the corner at our world. The tools of our own hands conspire to kill us. We are in danger from electricity, carbon monoxide, radio waves, television waves, microwaves, nuclear power—even from the gasoline we pour into our automobiles. Can any of us escape it? We are imperiled by merely walking, eating and breathing. Death surrounds us in the form of aluminum, asbestos, ozone, oxides, acid rain, corn syrup, aspartame, glutamate, chlorine, ammonia, phenol, formaldehyde, red dye #3, BHT, sodium sulfate, herbicides, pesticides, fluoride, peroxide—no wonder so many people commit suicide. Then there is the threat of



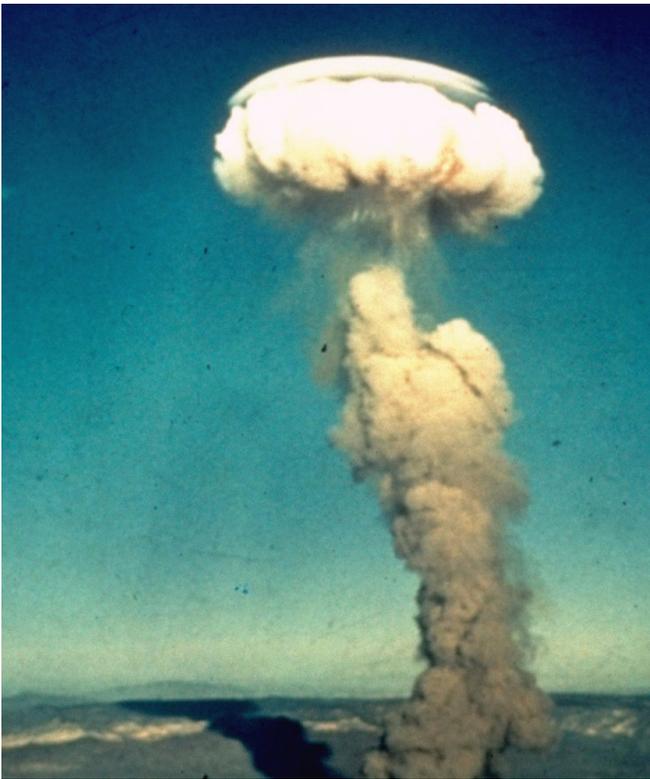
instant death hanging over the heads of those traveling in planes, trains or automobiles—not even pedestrians are safe. I see more death and destruction on American roads and highways in one year than most people of other eras ever saw in a lifetime. Will the sound of sirens ever stop? Yes. The love of God, however, endures forever.

SWORD

The sword speaks symbolically of weaponry owned by governments commissioning armies to kill people and break things. I am talking about war. Today, we of the United States of America can destroy whole cities with a single detonation of a single weapon—as can

several other countries. Many governments today are rogue polities. Had they the means, some of these outlaws would kill us all in an instant. This was never possible before the days of nuclear fission. It was always possible because of the hatred laying dormant in the human heart. $E = mc^2$, yes, but nuke + hatred = big trouble³.

How do you protect yourself from the allegorical sword of mass extinction? You don't. You could carry a weapon, but experiments conducted with even shoulder-launched bazookas have proven them ineffective against atomic explosions. Our protection is Christ, who loves us with the love of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even uranium isotopes. But will not our bodies be destroyed? Possibly, but who cares? God



has new bodies in store for us. These present bodies are decaying and near disappearing anyway; a bomb to the head would only abbreviate the process and in many ways confer blessing. We are to have no cares (Philippians 4:6). Our present concern ought to be basking in the love of God. The love of God is a more powerful force than anything produced by humanity. It is our greatest defense against threat. I love the love of God because of how unstoppable it is. The love of God saved the world, through Christ, at the cross. Let's see plutonium do that.

“For thus God loves the world that He gives His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

Put that in your centrifuge and smoke it.

DELIGHTFUL DISTRESS

I always knew that Paul was a little crazy, but when he says in 2 Corinthians 12:10, “Wherefore I delight in infirmities in outrages, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses,” I am ready to call for a straitjacket. We've got to look at the “wherefore”—the first word of this statement—to see what prompted Paul's surprising declaration. We've got to get Paul out of the nuthouse.

Paul had just recounted his “third heaven” experience, and how he became lifted up over the revelation. To combat pride, the Lord gave Paul a thorn in the flesh. This thorn was so bad that Paul exhorted the Lord three times to remove it. The Lord protested to him saying, in verse nine, “Sufficient for you is My grace, for My power in infirmity is being perfected.” It is *then* that Paul says, “Wherefore I delight in infirmities ... distresses,” and so forth. He delights in distresses so that God's power, not his, might be perfected. Paul came to learn that distresses actually worked for him. Pride, on the other hand, carried him in the opposite direction. Distresses delivered to Paul's doorstep the power of God. This power came forth in the face of Paul's weakness, and it is this power of God that ultimately dispenses the greater blessing. What did Paul's own pride and power provide for him? It made him a miserable, self-righteous Pharisee.

SHEEP FOR SLAUGHTER

According as it is written that “On Thy account we are being put to death the whole day, We are reckoned as sheep for slaughter” (Romans 8:36).

Paul quotes Psalm 44:22, a Davidic psalm written by a man whom God both dignified and disciplined to prepare him to someday run the world from Jerusalem during the Millennium. Paul comforts us here with the old “God-is-in-a-big-fat-hairy-glorious-predictable rut” card. What we are experiencing, as believers, is nothing new. It's a page from God's oldest playbook: *develop the character of slaves to suit them for future, glorious service*. The purpose behind the trials we undergo today is no different than that employed by God for saints of ages past. The odd thing worthy of lament is that such trials afflict good people. That's the point, of course, but also the potential puzzlement.

Good people become better via affliction and distress, yes, but—*Gee, God—did we do something wrong?* Paul taught us earlier that “affliction is producing endurance, yet endurance testedness, yet testedness expectation” (Romans 5:3-4). Expectation of what? Glory. Thus, these trials come “on Thy account,” that is, on the account of Christ. David may have been a little hazy on the details of this as he grouses in verses 17 and 18 of Psalm 44 (this from *The Message*)—

All this came down on us, and we’ve done nothing to deserve it. We never betrayed your Covenant: our hearts were never false, our feet never left Your path. Do we deserve torture in a den of jackals? Or lockup in a black hole?

But as I always say, God is doing this for us, not to us. Paul writes in Philippians 1:29—

For to you it is graciously granted, for Christ’s sake, not only to be believing on Him, but to be suffering for His sake also.

It is for His sake in the dual senses of 1) His discipline brings us to the place of sons and daughters, and 2) when the afflictions and distresses are over, it will delight Him to glorify us and watch our faces light up at the stunning contrast between humiliation and glory.

Here is Paul again in Hebrews 12:5-7—

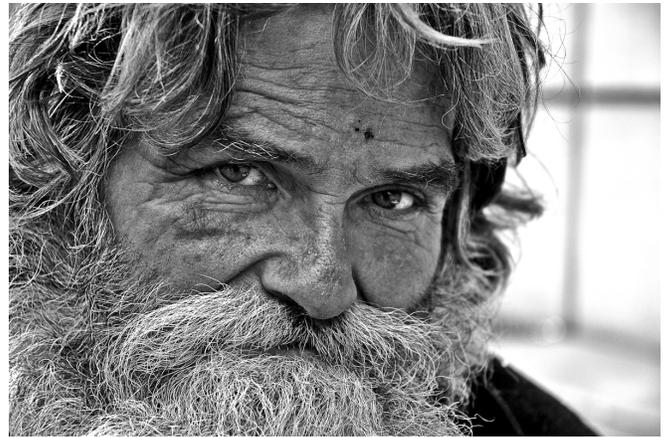
My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord, Nor yet faint when being exposed by Him. For whom the Lord is loving He is disciplining, Yet He is scourging every son to whom He is assenting. For discipline are you enduring. As to sons is God bringing it to you, for what son is there whom the father is not disciplining?

“IN ALL THESE”

“Nay! *in all these we are more than conquering through Him Who loves us*” (Romans 8:37).

Let’s review all the things that have gone before: 1) affliction, 2) distress, 3) persecution, 4) famine, 5) nakedness, 6) danger, and 7) sword. What would happen if you told Kenneth Copeland, or Joyce Meyer, or Benny Hinn, or Joel Osteen, that you were suffering beneath any of these unsightly torments? They would all tell you that there is something wrong with your faith. They would abash you for not “speaking a word” over your situation and getting deliverance.

I will never forget a church service I attended back in 1984 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, while bicycling across the United States from Los Angeles to Ocean City, Maryland. Tulsa is the cradle (and grave) of the “name it/claim it” movement, also known as the Prosperity Doctrine or Word of Faith. I can still hear the preacher that Sunday saying, “If you had enough faith, you could be the best dressed person in Tulsa!” (*He added the exclamation point, not me.*) I distinctly remember thinking to myself, *I wonder what would happen if John the Baptist showed up here in his ratty desert clothes and his breath smelling of locusts? He would be shamed and offered the right foot of fellowship.*



WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FAITH, BROTHER?

Now let us consider the spiritual genius of Paul. Does Paul tell anyone how to get out of these things enumerated above? Does Paul have a formula for deliverance from these shameful circumstances? Were Paul’s circumstances anywhere near those enjoyed by every prosperity minister named above? Would any of them delight in and commend Paul’s official résumé in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 as Paul describes himself having been 1) weary, 2) jailed, 3) beaten, 4) stoned, 5) shipwrecked, 6) lodged in a swamp, and 7) in danger at every turn? Far from it? These men—and good old Joyce Meyer—would look down from their tinted corporate jet windows on the likes of Paul, a man with good spiritual intentions but who was certainly not living up to his potential as a “King’s kid.” Osteen would sign one of his books for Paul (probably, “Your Best Life Now”), hand him a colorful brochure for the 16,800 seat Lakewood



Church in Houston, Texas, and say, “I hope to see you next Sunday, son.”

But what does Paul say in the face of these afflictions and distresses? Does Paul tell any of us how to get out of them? Far from it. When asking the rhetorical question of whether or not any of these things could separate us from the love of God, Paul answers, “Nay! *in* all these we are more than conquering through Him Who loves us” (Romans 8:37).

I have the word “in” underlined so many times in my Bible that it shows through to the next page.

We do not conquer by getting out of these things. That would be the message of modern-day deliverance ministries and “Every-Day-Is-A-Friday” type of “have it now” prosperity gurus. Paul insists that we are conquering *in* all of these things. What a difference between prospering oneself *out* of these things, and conquering *in* them. Our prosperity actually comes from endurance, not escape. This buys us great future glory.

For the mature saint, conquering *in* all these things spells the end of all deliverance ministries. The only deliverance we are looking for is the ultimate deliverance that will loosen the bonds of this mortal flesh in an instant and translate us to immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

Note how Romans 8:37 says that we are not merely conquering but “more than conquering.” How can anyone *more* than conquer? One can rule and reign with Christ. How does such rule come? The same way it came for David, for Paul, and for Christ: not by escaping trial, but by enduring it with the mindset that “affliction is producing endurance, yet endurance testedness, yet testedness expectation” (Romans 5:3-4).

Jesus Christ Himself was perfected for His eonian rule through suffering (Hebrews 2:10-11). We occupy a similar trajectory. Should you become faint along the way, remind yourself of the camaraderie that we share through the bond of the spirit of God making its home in us—

The spirit itself is testifying together with our spirit that we are children of God. Yet if children, enjoyers also of an allotment, enjoyers, indeed, of an allotment from God, yet joint enjoyers of Christ’s allotment, if so be that we are suffering together, that we should be glorified together also. (Romans 8:16-17).

Together, we will not only survive our trials, but conquer because of them. Console one another with these words. —MZ