

ROMANS Part 78

Chapter 8:38-39

The threat of death and life.



For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor messengers, nor sovereignties, nor the present, nor what is impending, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

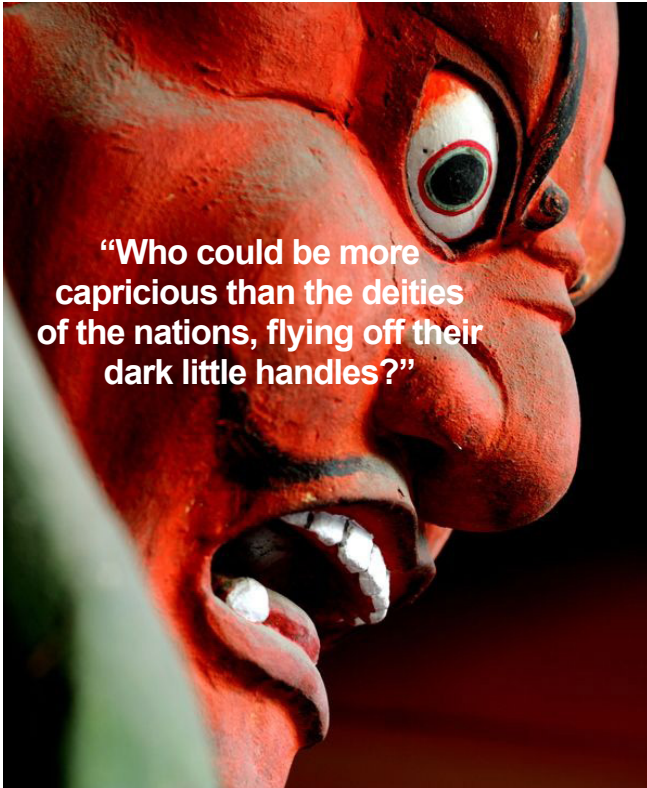
The last nine verses of Romans chapter eight address the fear of the possibility of losing every blessing that we have gained from the previous five chapters. There is no way this could happen. The reason it could never happen, Paul explains, is because

the only One able to indict us is the One justifying us, and the only one able to condemn us is the One Who died and has been roused for our sakes and Who enters a plea of “Not Guilty” for us at God’s right hand. In light of these realities, Paul is persuaded that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He is persuaded, not by wishful thinking, but by every aforementioned fact combined with the sureness of the promises of a dependable, loving God. The indelible truth of all he has written in Romans up to this point (justification, conciliation, and so forth), convinces Paul that nothing in God’s creation could foul God’s affection for us.

Naturally, there are doubting Thomases in the audience who shout down from the mezzanine, “Yes, but what about ...”

“DEATH OR LIFE”

“No,” says Paul. “Neither death nor life.” First of all, if I had been Paul, I would have been just slightly offended that my previous insistence (speaking now of verse 35) was not good enough. In a tiff of irritation, I may have shouted up to the mezzanine, “Was the list of verse 35 not enough for you? Shall I repeat all of the things that I already said could in no way separate us from the love of God?” But it is as though Paul anticipates the further questioning. He probably already knows that some people entertain more doubts than they do house guests. Perhaps Paul understands how unbelievable such truths as those enumerated in the previous chapters must sound to people who have considered themselves “on probation” their entire lives, subject to the whims of associates, family members, employers, or the law. We all know that human beings can be fickle, unreliable, temperamental, unfaithful. This is not to mention the false gods that those of the nations worshiped. Who could be more capricious



than the strange, irritable deities of the nations, flying off their dark little handles at the slightest offense? Why should this so-called true God be any different than the people He creates or the competing deities swarming about His universe? The main problem, I think, is that the blessings enumerated in the previous sections of Romans seem too good to be true. Such an errant thought inspires and animates Paul’s pen in this section.

Admittedly, the blessings we have in Christ encounter deeper and darker opposition in verses 38 and 39 than the obstacles facing them in verse 35. For how much deeper and darker is death than distress? How much more powerful and potentially pernicious are celestial sovereignties over earthly swords? Nakedness is by no means to be desired, but what about the lowest depths of earth? Paul now brings out “the big boys” and tests them against the love of God.

DEATH

Death cannot separate us from the love of God. Even though death is non-existence and therefore unawareness (“the dead know not anything”—Ecclesiastes 9:5), God somehow keeps us. He knows us. He knows our spirits. When we sleep, are our families unaware of us? Does an eight-hour repose remove us completely from anyone’s mind? Of course not. Neither does God lose track of us or forget His love for us as we repose in death. He safeguards our spirits.

Where are our lives recorded? It is possible that every detail of our lives is etched upon our particular spirits, and that these spirits—though unconscious without a body—are held near and dear to God in anticipation of the day of resurrection, when He returns each spirit to a new body. If these lives are not etched upon *individual* spirits, they are still somehow preserved and held in anticipation of resurrection. But let’s explore this “individual spirit” line of thought.

To return a dead person to life would be like removing the hard drive of a computer—the brains of the computer—and putting it into a new casing and then hooking up that hard drive to a new monitor. In this analogy, the hard drive is the spirit, the computer casing is the body, and the monitor is the soul. It doesn’t matter what computer casing one uses, or what monitor one links to; all the information is in the hard drive. The casing can be anything, the monitor can be anything. Neither one of these things holds the information. They are but means for the display of the information. And yet without the casing and the monitor, the hard drive is nothing to look at on its own. It does not speak; it does not talk; it does not display. It does nothing; it knows nothing. Thus also death. There is no consciousness to the human spirit apart from a body. The soul (that is, sensation), is the result of a spirit being joined (or re-joined) to a body.

Whether God etches our lives onto our individual spirits or holds this information somewhere else, our Father watches over us. Just as He guards our lives as we lie upon our beds each night, thus also does He watch over us during the “sleep” of death—neither literal nor figurative disrupts His constant care. God loses nothing. His love cannot be derailed. It never sleeps.

When our Lord died upon the cross, He uttered the timeless profundity: “Father, into Your hands am I committing My spirit” (Luke 23:46). Jesus Christ knew that He was dying. He knew that the dead did not know anything. He knew that He would very soon no longer exist. For the duration of His oblivion, He trusted God to watch over the spirit upon which His life had been written. His faithfulness was rewarded when God roused Him from the extinction of death. God blew Jesus’ spirit back into His body, and Jesus awoke with the same memories He had, and the same awareness of Who He was. The love of God does not stop when we stop. God’s keeping power survives even the grave, then happily greets us again on the day of resurrection.

Death cannot separate us from the love of God.

LIFE

How could life possibly separate us from the love of God? Perhaps we should put “life” in quotation marks here. Many people live lives that are not really life at all, but more like animated deaths. In Luke 8:14, our Lord said concerning the seed that fell upon the thorns—

Now that falling among the thorns, these are those who hear and, by worries and riches, and by the gratifications of life, going on, stifle, and are bringing nothing to maturity.

Life, to many, is commensurate with “the gratifications of life.” Life separates them from God in that it captures their interests and harnesses their passions more so than “the invisible Being in the sky.” In the latter stages of a life lived for Christ, Paul was abandoned by Demas who, “loving the current eon, forsook me” (2 Timothy 4:10). In this gospel of the grace of God, however, not even Demas could work himself out of God’s favor, or disqualify himself from membership in Christ’s body. Paul says in another place that “whether we may be watching or drowsing, we will be living at the same time together with Him” (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Demas may have disappointed Paul—he obviously did—but the radiant smile of God’s favor remained upon that man. Even in his agitation, Paul knew that God would never forsake Demas.

I think Demas knew it, too.

No, neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God. But what about angels? What about powerful celestial beings such as Satan? What about the many terrible mistakes we have made in the past? What about the mistakes we may make in the future? What about every trial and sorrow besetting us *now*? What about *every* force in both heaven and earth, both soulish and spiritual, that could potentially drive us far from God’s love and care? What about the highest pinnacle of bliss and the lowest pit of despair? Can any of these things separate us from the love of God?

To be continued next week! —MZ

SPEAKING OF LIFE AND DEATH

Like the apostle Paul, I like to boast of my weaknesses. You have heard me mention my trusty 1999 Ford Contour over the years, as it has taken me thousands of miles around the country to many different fellowships. The car was originally owned by my dad, who bought it in 2000. When my dad died in 2003, my mom got the car. When she died in 2007, I bought it from the estate and have been driv-

ing it ever since. This hard-working girl blazed the trail on the ZenderTour of October, 2007, taking me over 5,500 miles for 18 meetings in 13 states in 30 days. While driving between meetings in Orlando and Birmingham last fall, the odometer turned over to 200,000 miles. I was proud of my girl! That was then, this is now. Last night while I was away, a hit-and-run driver struck my car while it was legally parked in front of my lodging here in Fort Lauderdale. Thank God I was not in it. The damage was unbelievable, as not only did the driver-side tire come off, but the axle snapped. The officer on call told me that this car was so rusted underneath from 17 years of Ohio winters that not only was the frame ready to go, but the axle itself was compromised—explaining why it had snapped so easily. The man said, “Whoever hit you may have done you a great favor. If you had taken a hit like this while driving, you might not be here.” While I was intending to drive this car until the snatching away, God clearly has other plans. ■

