



# ROMANS Part 134

Chapter 15:30-33

## Paul fears for his life.



**Now I am entreating you, brethren, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the spirit, to struggle together with me in prayers to God for me, 31 that I should be rescued from the stubborn in Judea, and my dispensation for Jerusalem may be becoming**

**well received by the saints, 32 that I may be coming to you with joy through the will of God, and I should be resting together with you. 33 Now the God of peace be with all of you! Amen!**

So many juicy tidbits present themselves here for comment. First of all, Paul does not order people to do things; he entreats. He's not saying, nor would he say, "Do this or else." Otherwise, the sense would be akin to law, as in, "Thou shalt struggle together with me in prayers to God, or else"—as well as law-like consequences (the "or else" part) for failing to obey, namely: "Well, you screwed up, therefore, thou shalt be stoned, and your memory erased among your people, and your children cursed unto six generations." As with all of Paul's exhortations, this is a pep talk, not a harangue. It is certainly not the Mosaic law done up in sheep's clothing.

Since God is sovereign over all and He knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10), and since Paul knows that God is operating all things according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11), why in the world would Paul then exhort people to struggle together with him in prayers? Isn't prayer the exercise of those attempting to change God's mind or bend His will to theirs? One of the most frequent questions I'm asked is as follows: "Martin, since God is in control of everything and everything is already planned out beforehand, then why even pray?"

From fielding questions for twenty-four years now, I can tell you that the number one topic that confuses the saints concerns the absolute versus the relative perspective, especially as pertaining to prayer.

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

First, a definition of terms: the absolute perspective considers the ultimate cause of all things, which is God;



this viewpoint does not relate to other people or to oneself; it only considers the Deity and His control of everything. The relative perspective, on the other hand, considers immediate issues as they relate (“relative”) to other people and to oneself; God is still sovereign, He is simply (and necessarily) on the back burner of the mind, operating all things behind the curtain.

I compare these two viewpoints to a person watching a play. As one watches a play, one is wondrously, willingly and necessarily unconscious of the fact that the people on stage are actors, that there is a director offstage, and that everyone is reading off a script. This is not why one goes to a play—to think of these behind-the-scenes mechanics. One casts oneself into the action. But if the play becomes troubling, one can always mentally extract oneself from it and remind oneself of the ultimate reality (the absolute viewpoint), which is, *It’s only a play*. Many people do this while watching disturbing movies. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase, “It’s only a movie.”

### THE TRAP OF FATALISM

Nearly everyone I know in the faith is convinced of the sovereignty of God, but some make the absolute viewpoint the filter through which they consider relative happenings, and become fatalistic. Yes, we should always keep in mind

that God is sovereign in our everyday lives, but confusing absolute with relative viewpoints causes us to say strange and unhelpful things.”

A fellow-believer recently told me, “There are no wrong decisions.” Absolutely speaking, this is true. Everything that happens is meant to happen. So in the sense of the sovereignty of God, surely there are no wrong decisions. In this light, even the decision to crucify Jesus Christ was a right decision. All the priests and the Roman soldiers did “the right thing.” But, relative to righteous actions, did these individuals do the right thing? Hell no! Who, on the scene, would have called the condemnation of the innocent Christ a right decision? Not even Peter did that. Not even Jesus Himself did it. In the midst of the events of everyday life (which is most of life), as we attempt to guide ourselves and our fellow humans onto right paths, it is a mistake to speak of the absolute viewpoint. Can you imagine?

“Cindy, I’m thinking about murdering my three-year old in her sleep tonight. I’m just tired of mothering her. Plus, I want to go out with some new men, and Ashley is *really* cramping my style. So I think I’m just going to get drunk tonight and quietly slit her throat. She’ll never know what hit her. What do you think?”

“Well, Jill, God is sovereign and there are no wrong decisions.”



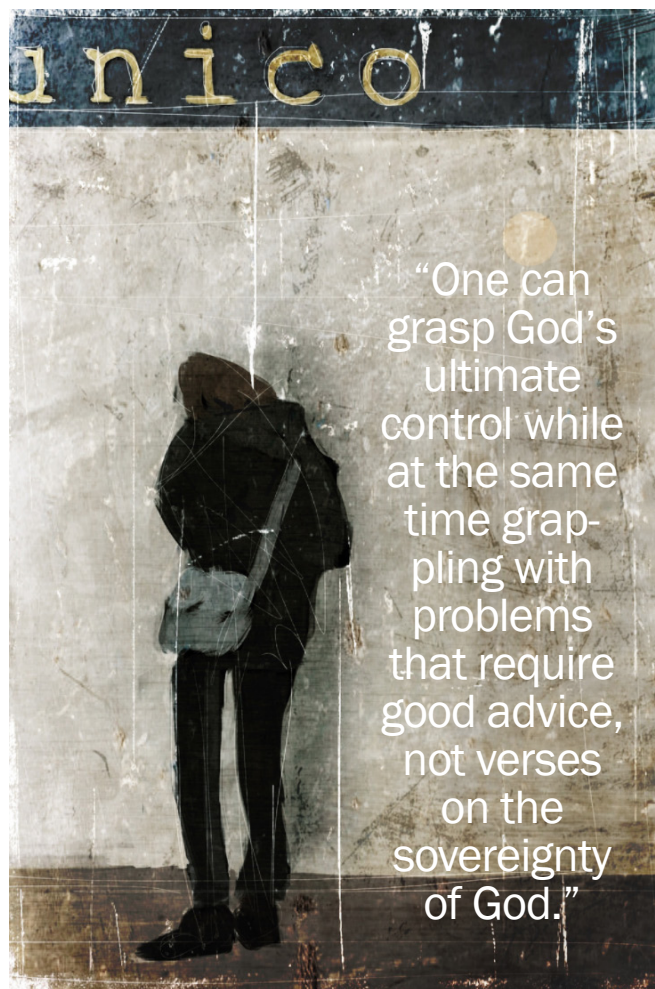
Yikes! And yet I hear this kind of crap all the time, at least in theory. The mistake here is to impose the absolute viewpoint upon situations that should clearly be worked out relative to the people we're trying to help, even if these people do clearly grasp the absolute sovereignty of God. One can grasp God's ultimate control while at the same time grappling with problems that require good advice, not verses on the sovereignty of God. A man in the Niagara river rushing towards the Falls does not need someone calling out to him that God is in control and that Jesus Christ holds the keys of death and hades. The guy is living in the relative world, not the absolute (as are all of us), and at the moment, he's relating to a freaking waterfall. He needs a rope, not a Bible verse. One can explain the absolute viewpoint to him later, while he's drying out, after using relative means to save him from drowning.

### BLESSED IGNORANCE

Concerning the previous example of a mother killing her child, is it possible that God has decreed before times eonian that this woman is to murder her three-year old daughter? Yes. Are we, who are wisely kept ignorant of the future by God, to then assume that we know what God has planned or, worse, to infer from this ignorance that what we do today simply doesn't matter because "God has everything already planned out anyway"? To think such thoughts is folly. It is dangerous. It is rank fatalism. The best remedy against such a mistaken mindset is to read Paul, who spends much energy exhorting, entreating, advising and acting as though, gee, we really don't know what exactly the sovereign God has planned next, and we should all exhort one another to do our best and to make good decisions.

"MARTIN, I THINK IN THE ABSOLUTE."  
WELL, YOU'RE WRONG ALREADY.

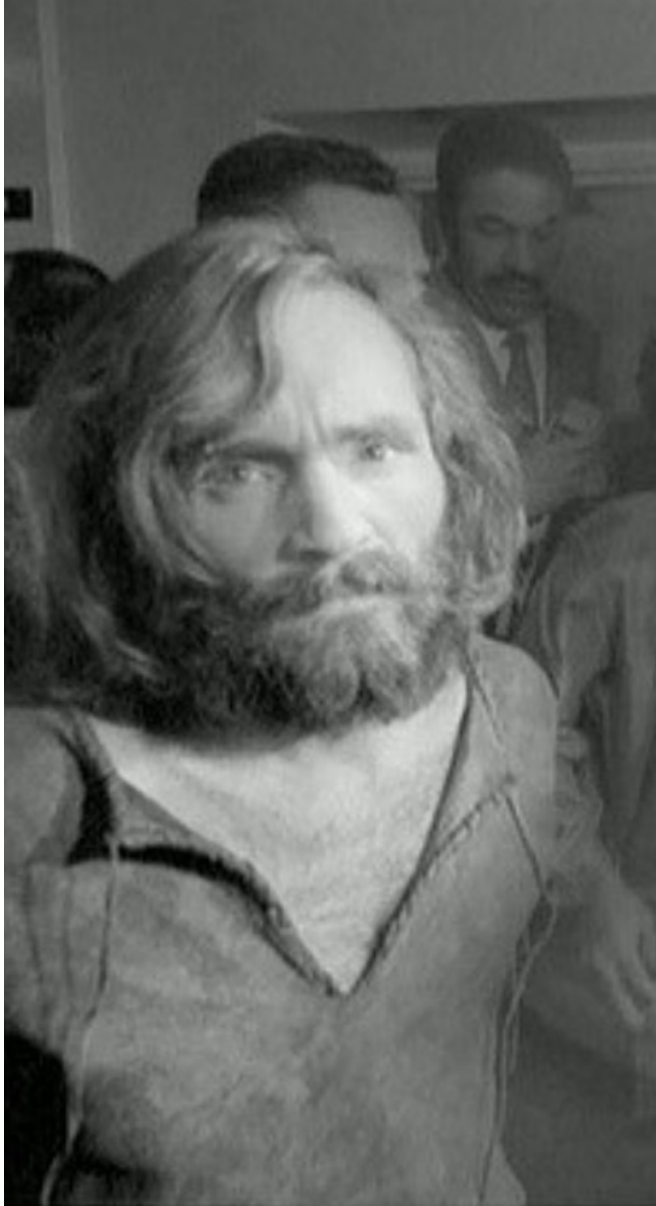
The saints are so confused about the absolute and relative perspectives that I once had a guy tell me, "Martin, I never think in the relative. Everything is absolute to me." I pointed out to this brother that his mere use of the pronoun "I" proved that he thought and lived in the relative all the time, as he must. He constantly related himself to the immediate world—as he should—with the use of the world's most popular personal pronoun. If this man truly did think only in the absolute, then he would never distinguish himself—using any personal pronoun whatsoever—from other people.



This brother knows that God does everything, but he also knows that God works through people who are ignorant of His second-by-second intentions. But he sometimes forgets this second part and injects absolute truth into relative situations, saying ridiculous things like, "It doesn't matter what I do because God is in control."

### DISTINGUISHING THINGS THAT DIFFER

"Absolute/relative," in conversation, is an "either/or" proposition. Even though both viewpoints can and do apply to the same event, one can only sanely discuss one viewpoint at a time. But the mistake that believers constantly make is switching channels between the absolute and relative viewpoints willy-nilly, to no purpose, without even being aware that they're doing it. Such people will say things like, "Be careful," and "You can't make a wrong decision" in the same sentence. This is like telling a mother, "Everything is fine, but your son was just struck and killed by a drunk driver." Such



a “comforter” has created a Frankenstein of the absolute (“everything is fine”) and the relative (“your son is dead”) perspectives, destroying any chance of workable sense or practical help.

If something tragic ever happened to a loved one of mine, I would want others relating (relative perspective) to *me*. What I would want to hear is, “This is awful. Oh, my God. How terrible. I can’t believe this happened. You must feel crushed. The person who did this should go to jail.” What I *don’t* want to hear is, “This is good, Martin. *Everything* is good. God wanted this to happen. This is the best thing. Praise God. The person who did this made a right decision. This is of God and God does everything right.”

No! No! *Relate* to me, for Christ’s sake. Save the absolute viewpoint for times of reflection before I strangle you.

## PLEA TO THE SAINTS

I beg of you, let us *please* save the absolute viewpoint for mature times of reflection. When dealing with others and ourselves in this very hands-on, tactile, difficult world, where none of us knows what will happen next, and where all of us want to do the right things, may we *please* speak relative truth to one another—as does our apostle in 99.9% of his writings—as we *relate* to one another and to our immediate world.

Remember this as well: the relative viewpoint is not a falsehood. The relative viewpoint is not a lie. It is merely an assessment of things as they transpire “on the ground,” or “on the stage.” It is a truthful description of events and a reaction to events *as they are happening* without, for the moment, considering the source. When a reporter on the scene at Pharaoh’s famous meeting with Moses, for instance, reported in the Egyptian Times, “Ladies and gentleman, I watched intently as Pharaoh hardened his heart,” he was telling the truth. This is what happened on the stage, to the reporter’s view: Pharaoh hardened his heart. That *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart (this was the reason that Pharaoh hardened his heart) was also true, but the announcement of *that* fact would have entailed another viewpoint, one to which the reporter was not privy.

The absolute and the relative viewpoints are both true. They are two ways of looking at the same event. To appreciate each of them is wisdom. To mix and confuse them is the utmost folly.

## “AUTHOR, AUTHOR”

I think I may have shared this before, but another brother criticized me for putting my name on my books as the author. He thought I was being prideful. “But that’s my name,” I said to this brother. The brother said, “But all is of God. God made you write this book.” I scratched my head. “Yes, but I still wrote it. *I* wrote it, as compared to *you* writing it. Relating me to you, for instance, I wrote the book and you didn’t. What do you want me to do? Write down *God* as the author? ‘*The First Idiot in Heaven*—by God’?”

I couldn’t win with this guy. If I put the author of my book as “God,” even this guy would say, “Who the hell do you think you are?” If I put my own name on it (which I did, of course), then the guy thinks I’m bragging, as though the mere presence of my name on a book would be a tacit admission, by me, that I wrote the book completely apart from divine influence.



Honestly. Sometimes I feel like the only sane guy in the room. Am I the only one who can appreciate these two viewpoints, while at the same time distinguishing between them?

### BELIEVING VS. ACTING

They key to these disparate yet homogenous perspectives is to believe in the absolute but act in the relative. We believe that all is of God—because it is—but we act as though everything depends on us, because God has wisely made us ignorant of His absolute will. He has done this so that we may be exercised in faith to do right things and to learn by experience.

For some reason, it's easy for me to toggle between the absolutely and relative viewpoints at will. I can easily put each in its place without cross-wiring them and disgorging them simultaneously. A favorite guideline of mine is: *Use the relative viewpoint before something happens, and the absolute viewpoint after.* Otherwise, we'll be driving up to stop signs, saying ridiculous things to ourselves such as, *I won't be able to stop at this sign unless God causes me to; so I'll just wait for God to cause me to stop.* It is absolutely true that God must cause us to stop, but it's quite unhelpful to think this in the moment. In the moment, one is to say to oneself: *I better stop at this stop sign or I may die or kill someone else.* It is only *after* we stop at the sign and somebody rams us from behind— or we inadvertently run the stop sign and hit another vehicle—when we can rightly tell ourselves, “Well, that *had* to happen.”

The absolute viewpoint is a comfort *after* something happens (sometimes *way* after, in the case of tragedies), not before. Before something—anything—happens, God exercises our faith and wisdom through the gift of ignorance, that is, of not knowing what the next moment holds. It is at this juncture, *before* an event occurs, that we all try to do right things. It is at this juncture, *before* an event occurs, that wrong decisions are most certainly possible.

I bring this up because of Paul's call for prayer in Romans 15:30, and not only prayer, but his request of the saints to “*struggle* together with me in prayers to God for me.” We'll look at Paul's specific request in a moment, but for now let's analyze and understand the request for prayer itself.

### WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is the act of making one's request known to God (Philippians 4:6). That's it. It's that simple. It's telling God what we would like to happen. There's nothing wrong with this. In fact, everything is right with it. Paul wants us to do it. It is God Himself telling us, through Paul, to do it. Such prayer does not necessarily get us what we want. Some might say that it rarely does. What it does do—every time—is relieve us of burden. It's a psychological exercise; we've placed our requests on God's shoulders and in His ears, and now we can go our way in peace, knowing that God is “on it.”

Of course, Paul assumes that the saints are smart enough and mature enough to realize that God does not give us everything that we ask for. How could He? As ignorant humans, we often ask astray of a plan that was set in stone before the eons began (Isaiah 46:10), and so—obviously—no one can possibly alter such a plan. If anyone could, then God wouldn't be God. Instead, he'd



be constantly attempting to make sense of events as they unfold, sorting desperately through everyone's requests—this guy's praying for it to rain; this guy's praying for it not to—while wondering how he got himself into such a fix. (He gave everyone a free will, that's how.) If this were the case (it's not), then Isaiah 46:10 would not be true. Since Isaiah 46:10 *is* true, then the nightmarish scenario of a desperate, floundering Deity is false.

The apostle John writes in 1 John 5:14—



And this is the boldness which we have toward Him, that if we should be requesting anything according to His will, He is hearing us.

God is always hearing us, of course, but the sense here is that God is hearing us *to do what we request*, only if we request “according to His will.” Isn’t this obvious?

Apparently not.

1 John 5:14 is John’s tacit admission that the entirety of the eonian times has been set in stone—I’m talking about every detail of every single thing—so that there is no way anyone *could* alter a single detail of the eonian times, no, not even if such a person formed his fellow prayer warriors into a prayer circle, held hands and broke a sweat.

## A SIGN OF THE TIMES

I saw a stupid church sign (sorry for the redundancy) here in my neighborhood in Ft. Lauderdale that said, “P.U.S.H.—Pray Until Something Happens.” The only thing that’s going to happen for any poor soul taking this sign seriously is that he or she will collapse from

exhaustion and frustration. The premise of the message is that God can be pushed around. He can’t. I have a better church sign: G.I.C.B.C.N.—God’s Intention Can’t Be Changed Numbnuts.

## PAUL FEARS FOR HIS LIFE

Paul wants people struggling with him in prayer. For what? He’s a little scared. I’m serious. Paul is wrestling with a Jesus Christ/Gethsemane-type dread. His struggle is not in the prayer, but in his concern that he could be assassinated at any moment. Paul is not a fatalist. He knows that he’s been chosen by Christ to do stuff, but he also knows that stuff happens and that literally thousands of powerful and influential Jews hate him and want him dead. (Paul believes in the absolute, but lives in the relative world.) His request for prayer is four-fold, beginning with the most pressing matter: his very life. Here are his requests for prayer, in the order presented:

1) that I should be rescued from the stubborn in Judea, 2) that my dispensation for Jerusalem may be becoming well received by the saints, 3) that I may be coming to you with joy through the will of God, and 4) that I should be resting together with you.

Obviously, numbers 2, 3 and 4 cannot happen unless number 1 happens. Because if number 1 doesn’t happen, then Paul will die. Paul will be murdered; assassinated. The stubborn of Judea hated Paul. They considered Paul a usurper who threatened their dearest traditions. These were not common criminals, but believers in Jesus Christ—most of them. At the same time, however, they were zealous for the law and therefore zealously against the man whom they considered to be dismantling that law. Acts 21:20-21—

Besides, they said to him, “You are beholding, brother, how many tens of thousands there are among the Jews who have believed, and all are inherently zealous for the law? Now they were instructed concerning you that you teach all the Jews among the nations apostasy from Moses, telling them not to be circumcising their children, nor yet to be walking in the customs.

Numbers 1 and 2 are related because, even though Paul wants to take a generous contribution to Jerusalem to relieve the starving saints there, some of the saints themselves may have been turned against him in his absence; turned by the troublemakers. The troublemakers of Judea would not have hesitated to spread lies about Paul, to convince even his friends that the apostle was a turncoat, a





radical, a narcissist, a rogue and a terrible friend, and that he should be removed from polite society.

This is what Paul means by “struggle with me in prayer.” The struggle is not with the prayer itself; Paul doesn’t want the saints sweating and grunting as though trying to pass a recalcitrant stool. Rather, the struggle is with the specter of death and the curtailing of his work. The struggle is, perhaps, in the battle between the absolute and the relative viewpoints.

**“That I may be coming to you with joy through the will of God, and I should be resting together with you. 33 Now the God of peace be with all of you! Amen!” (Romans 15:32-33).**

Paul is not a masochist. He wants to be happy. He hopes that the will of God is for him to come to the Romans with joy, but he’s not sure that this is God’s will. Paul, with us, lives in a bubble of ignorance. It is this bubble of ignorance that keeps us hard up against God in faith, looking constantly above for sustenance and the will to go on. Paul is tired. He wants to rest. This is one of the most touching passages of Scripture—

“That I should be resting together with you.” Paul and the Romans are going to relax; this is the plan. They will sit back and drink beer together, breathe deeply and stare at one another, marveling that such a faith as theirs thrives in a world capital.

A fruit of the spirit is peace. “Now may the God of peace be with all of you! Amen!” The peace of God is supernatural, thriving precisely where one would suppose it impossible. Such peace flies in the face of even disquietude, for one can be at peace with not being at peace. Perhaps this is the secret to happiness, after all: to rest in the assurance that we pass this way but once, that we are imperfect, and that God has given us one another for comfort along the way.

No wonder Paul could end this chapter with the word “Amen.”

So be it, Lord Jesus. —MZ

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