



Texts in Context

Light in August: Romans 8: 18-39*

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What diabolical frame of mind caused the makers of our lectionary to serve up these magnificent readings from Romans 8 in August? August is a time when people are at the lake, or preoccupied with getting the crop in, or paying weekend visits to friends or family, or getting ready for the real church year to begin in September. It doesn't seem likely that many preachers will tackle these dense, doctrinal pericopes from Romans in August.

Yet, here we have texts where the light of the gospel of Christ shines with preeminent brightness, a brightness which surpasses the hot summer sun of August. Courage and even a little daring are required of a pastor to preach a series of four sermons on these pericopes, a challenge that we commend to you. It will bring you and your hearers into close contact with a portion of Scripture which has been and is the very fountainhead of life for evangelical Christians.

Before we turn to verses 18-39, we need to take brief notice of the first seventeen verses of the chapter. In the clause, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," we have a massive turning in the epistle, a massive turning toward the gospel. In that very first verse the debate about whether Paul's main agenda in Romans is justification by faith or life in Christ is resolved. It is precisely the one who is in Christ who is justified. Life in Christ, as one takes it to heart, means to walk, walk according to the Spirit rather than the flesh. Paul's argument is by no means "only theological" but has everything to do with the Christian life. Just as people are uniquely creatures of the mind, so our minds are now shaped by and fixed on the cruciform existence which is Christ.

At first glance, these August pericopes may seem the same, without sufficient distinctiveness for preaching, like a thundering waterfall covered by mist where there seem to be no particular channels of flow. Look again! While these

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pericopes are held together in a mighty theological argument, they each deal with a particular issue, each capable of being fertile ground for the growth of a good sermon. The first speaks of the "groaning of the creation," the second of the "Spirit and our prayers," the third of our being "called according to his purpose," and the fourth, with a shout unlike any other in the Bible, of Christians being "more than conquerors." There is an agenda for your August preaching which is more than worthy.

Pentecost 8: The Groaning of the Creation, Romans 8: 18-25.

The use of contrast for emphasis is an old scheme and Paul makes bold use of contrast in 8:18. Just as he knew that his readers were being put upon for the sake of their faith, and just as he chose to take their suffering with absolute seriousness, so also Paul contended that their present difficulty only made a darkness against which the brightness of their future glory would shine like the sun. And do not suppose that the glory which Paul promised was ephemeral and idealized when compared with the particular suffering at hand. By no means, for the glory to come is a glory revealed, a glory given, a glory shaped and defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Can the preacher make a simple, hermeneutical identification here, one of those simple identifications which sometimes works but more often does not? Certainly it does not ring true to begin by saying that just as the Roman Christians suffered, so also we suffer. We know that things are not at all the same these days. Ease and a bland acceptability very well typify our churchly experience. Yet, who would deny that there is plenty of suffering in this “present time”? Suffering has no blessing within itself, and the Christian is never exempt from responsibility to and for it. Nevertheless, for Paul, the arena of the world’s suffering was both a sign of the glory that will be ours and the very arena where our Lord is working out that glory.

When Paul moves his already bold argument from verse 18 to verse 19, he becomes audacious in the extreme. On the one hand, any naive sentimentalism we might have about the world is undone. Whatever is meant by the suffering of the creation, whether it is simply life unfulfilled or life raging red in tooth and claw, the creation clearly provides no sure home or clear sign of hope for the sinner. On the other hand, the futility of the entire creation, together with the particular suffering of the Roman Christians, is now made a negative sign of God’s glory which is to be revealed. The whole sad, slumping creation is, for the apostle, nothing but a sign of the glory to come.

That “the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now” (8:22) is, of course, knowledge which is available to all persons. Whether it is the thorns and thistle among the stalks of good grain or the ecological wounds more recently gouged upon the body of the earth, all this groaning can be heard by anyone. But what is not known abroad is that the whole creation, however innocent, was subjected to futility for our sakes, in order that its groaning might be a sign of the glory to be revealed and so that we might have hope for the redemption of the whole creation.

Just as the groaning of the whole creation is a sign of the glory to be, so also our groaning is like that of a woman laboring to bring forth a child. Her

groaning is altogether genuine, even frightening to those who hear. Yet, for her, it is a groaning encouraged by hope for the child that is already coming into the world. And soon, when the child is fully born, the suffering of the mother will be completely taken up into joy.

In his panegyric on hope in 8:24-25, Paul comes close to equating hope with faith, a natural equation in that hope is faith’s disposition toward the future. Society’s hope for the future is by no means guaranteed these days. If the time of my own youth was called an age of anxiety, this age can truly be called an age of hopelessness. One sees it especially in the struggles of the young. As creatures of our age, we go by what we see and the prognosis for the future on

the basis of what we see is not good. Thanks be to God that our hope need not rest on what we see but rather on the action of our savior, which action is made sure and steadfast in our hearing.

While our hope is patient, as patient as that of the seafarer who knows that in the morning the lights of home will appear on the horizon, our hope is by no means resigned. Hope is infectious, a strange and deep optimism which takes all groaning and travail absolutely seriously, and yet rejoices. Let it be said of us Christians in these times that we are known by our hope.

Pentecost 9: The Spirit and Our Prayers, Romans 8:26-27.

In these verses the apostle speaks again of weakness and the spirit but this time within a new frame of reference, that of prayer.

Certainly the subject of weakness is never so sore for preachers as when the matter of prayer comes up. To make the subject of prayer the agenda of a pastor's conference is to ensure a lot of uncomfortable twisting and turning in the seats. Is there sufficient discipline in my prayer life? Do I pray enough for others or mostly for myself? Is there a good measure of praise and thanksgiving in my praying, or am I always asking, asking, asking? We know well enough that prayer is turned in upon ourselves, marked and faulted by weakness and sin.

If Paul knows the dilemma of our praying, he also takes away a hoped-for solution. Our hope may be that once we have reached a certain level of Christian sophistication, a certain facility in our faith, prayer will issue from our lips with purity and ease. We imagine that it might be as facile as a conversation between good friends. But no, says Paul, for the very weakness to which he refers in these verses is the weakness of the cruciform character of the Christian life. Even as we are being "conformed" to the image of the crucified Christ, we will not "know how to pray as we ought" (8:26).

In what way "do we not know how to pray as we ought?" What is the precise nature of this particular problem of prayer? As Roy Harrisville has rightly pointed out,¹ it has to do with the conjunction between prayer and the hope which is described in 8:24-25. How shall we pray for those manifestations of our hope which we have not seen? How shall we give patient articulation to our dim, and often perverse sense of what it might be like to be an adopted child of

¹Roy A. Harrisville, *Romans* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 133.

the Almighty? How shall we be able to capture with our bodily, lip-shaped words what it will be for our bodies to be redeemed? In these matters, even in faith, we are hopelessly out of our depth, and it is only the Spirit's own help that gives shape to our hope. How can we pray for that which we have not seen and thus be patient in our hope? Alas, we cannot! But there is one who helps us in our weakness, one who teaches us to pray as we ought, one who "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (8:26).

What can we say about the "sighs" of the Spirit that are "too deep for words"? Are there mysteries here far beyond our knowing and our preaching? Perhaps so, but at least some things can be said. Certainly the intercession of the Spirit is at the deepest personal level, truly a matter of the heart. It is an intercession even beyond our reasonable selves and the reasonable words by which our prayer must finally be made, an intercession beyond our emotional selves by which our words are shaped and colored. In other words, it is beyond the reason which we cannot often

trust and which cannot comprehend our hope, and it is beyond our feelings which often lie to us and which turn Christian hope in upon the self. There, in the deepest self which is perhaps moved only by a sigh, the Holy Spirit of Christ is sighing to and for us, speaking to God on our behalf. We may be assured that the Spirit's speaking in and for us will grasp our hope and be "according to the will of God" (8:27).

Pentecost 10: Those Called According to His Purpose, Romans 8:28-30.

Roy Harrisville calls this little pericope "the hinge of the epistle,"² a hinge which introduces a new element and culminates the argument, but by no means a hinge which suddenly makes everything clear. Quite the contrary, for here, just at the hinge, the fulcrum, the argument of the apostle becomes terribly dense. It is as though Paul peers into the saving mind and heart of God and sees there a certain foreknowledge, a certain predestination, a certain working out of God's purpose no matter what. Then, because he has had this look into the heart of God in Christ, Paul plainly asserts that "in everything God works for good with those who love him" (8:28).

Certainly the struggling Christians at Rome wondered whether God was absent from them in direct relationship to the depth, the darkness of their struggle. Does not every Christian sometimes wonder that same thing? Yet, in spite of translation problems, 8:28 is clear, "in *everything* God works for good" and in the soaring close to this chapter, we will find that Paul's "everything" covers just that—from the airy height where the angels sing to the deepest depth which is death.

This little pericope is the supreme challenge for a preacher and should you choose to accept it, you would do well to start with 8:29. Whoever starts with 8:28 runs the risk of turning it into conventional wisdom, a capsule encouragement for life, a theological version of the proverbial saying that "in every cloud there's a silver lining." To reduce 8:28 to conventional wisdom would be to do a terrible injustice to Paul's magnificent argument and to rob his good word of its true goodness.

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (8:29)." The God who is at work among us is a God who is in control and who will surely bring about his intended purpose. And make no mistake; while we ought not use the language of causality here, as though God is toppling us like so many dominoes for his own amusement, neither shall we say that God is "letting be what will be." God is known to be active and aggressive in bringing about his saving purpose.

The purpose which God is steadfastly bringing about is conforming us to the "image of his Son," that very son who went down to death between two thieves for our sakes. That is the journey on which the sovereign God is taking us, a cruciform journey for Christ's sake and in Christ's image, where the itinerary is by no means only on the heights but rather in the everyday depths near which we always find ourselves.

Here there is no note of evolutionary optimism, as though some increment of good is always being worked out in spite of appearances. Here there is no shallow comfort that false hopes and dreams, once dashed on the relentless wheel, can yet be appreciated as having had some value and made some contribution. Here there is a sense of civilization's value and necessity, but a clear warning that we must not expect too much of any of society's structures.

Starting with 8:29 and knowing that it is the image of Christ to which we are being conformed also keeps us from reducing 8:28 to the idea that there is a hidden good in all evil, that “every cloud has a silver lining.” Thank God that

²R. Harrisville, *Romans*, 133.

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Paul does not make Christ’s gospel contingent on refusing to take life absolutely seriously. Thank God that this gospel is infinitely wider and deeper than the platitudinous “everything will be all right.” Thank God that Christ’s gospel is not apart from but encompassing of our bitterness and desolation as we stand by the grave of our very dearest. Thank God that Christ is using even the worst that sin, death, and the devil have to give us in order to bring about his steadfast saving purpose.

“And those whom he predestined he also called” (8:30). The work of the sovereign God in Christ is our call, news of what God has set out to accomplish for us. Thus, the news of predestination is precisely the most precious, saving word that in “everything God works for good to those who love him.” That is the description of God’s foreknowledge, the blueprint for Christ’s predestination, the most blessed news for the repentant heart. What you now experience, be it height or depth, will not annul what God intends.

Finally, does this mean that our own actions are of no consequence? On the one hand, it is true that what we do is of no consequence at all, none whatever alongside God’s grand scheme. On the other hand, our actions are of every consequence for *we* are being “conformed to the image of his Son,” to the image of the Jesus of the cross, and there, whether in the depths or on the heights, our hope will shine like a beacon.

Pentecost 11: More Than Conquerors, Romans 8:35-39.

With these verses we have the lyric culmination of Paul’s argument for faith. The pericope, as it is here marked out, begins and ends with the idea of separation, the idea that no one or anything will be able to separate the believer from the love of God in Christ. Faithful praise becomes doxology as Paul’s believing confidence is juxtaposed with his taking absolutely seriously all the potential separation that occurs in life, even the frightening division of death.

It is a shame that verses 31-34 have been left out of the pericope. Marking pericopes out is never easy, at best the result of necessity, but this omission seems particularly unfortunate. The theological rationale for the whole section is established in these verses. God, who “did not spare his own Son” (8:32) is for us. Therefore, “who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (8:33). Clearly the victory offered to faith is not a charade, not “religious” or “spiritual” not an escape, but a sure and certain hope in Christ in the face of both finitude and death.

In 8:35 we see that it is the love of Christ that is to be tested, tested by all those realities in life that threaten to separate the believer from it. Paul’s first deadly list of separating calamities is taken right from a Roman Christian’s worry list: “Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.” Paul is testing the love of God for us far beyond the conventional annoyances of bourgeois existence, far beyond everyday frustrations or some lack of personal fulfillment. “The wolf may be at the door,” your vocational hopes may be shattered by a crisp note, or a beloved child may lie feverish in an antiseptic room; let come what may, says the great apostle, for nothing of a tragic nature can separate you from the love of Christ.

Why would one even read these texts and listen so closely to them if one were not already convinced that these great separating forces will, by and by, come also to us. Paul reminds us again of a curious, wonderful, and at the same time frightening Christian freedom, namely, that we don't have to go around finding crosses. They will come along of their own accord, and plenty soon enough.

Paul heightens the tension beyond what may seem to be theologically bearable by quoting from Psalm 44: "For *thy sake* we are being killed all the day long." The very forces of life which threaten to separate us from God are in God's hands, a part of God's saving purpose. This verse demands our utmost theological attention. The language is not causal, as we often think it to be, nor does it simply refer to the point of view of the believer, as though everything depended on our seeing some "hidden blessing" in our suffering. Even in tribulation, especially in famine, particularly when a child lies feverish in an antiseptic room, we are being molded into the cruciform existence of Christ and are closer to him than ever. Just when the separating forces are greatest is our bond with the savior deepest.

Verse 37: Only now, when Paul has listed all the great tragedies of tearful existence, none of which can separate us from God's love, does he speak of our being conquerors. Only now can we let that victorious word roll over our believing lips, knowing that all the earthly conquests which threaten to separate us from Christ are taken down into the cross and resurrection and there transformed. We are conquerors, make no mistake, but only because our champion has bound us to himself and now bears us along on a triumphant, final journey.

So let us rejoice in our hope, dear Christian friends, let us rejoice with abandon, for just as the depth of death cannot separate us from Christ, neither can the lively, angelic height of our joy.