

God's Response to Our Doubts

February 7, 2010 - Romans 8:31-39

Romans 8:31-39 (ESV)

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“It’s not that bad Dad. You should come with us.” My children invited me on a roller coaster at Marine Land in Niagara Falls, last summer. They had just come off this coaster and assured me it would fine for me to join them. I was feeling pretty good and thought “it doesn’t look too bad.” It’s flat for the most part and just goes up and down the mountain. So I agreed and made my way in with them. “Are you guys sure this will be okay for me? You know I don’t like going upside down.” “Oh, it’s not bad. Not bad Dad.”

My first clue that it was bad idea should have come at the entrance way to the ride. I mean what is that? Some sort of creature with a huge mouth. We got down to the entry point for the cars. Doubt is building in my mind. We start ascending the hill. I’m trying to calm myself by commenting on the beautiful flowers beside the tracks. Then we get to the top of the hill and start this free fall. The cars begin circling round and round. “Not good for my stomach. Not good!”

Did my children support me in my distress? Oh, no they laugh away at my misfortune. So we go trucking around and come out through some tunnel to face not one but two upside down loops. I hate going upside down. So while all the young people are screaming and doing the guttural thing, I’m having my inner ear totally disoriented. And just as we come out of the first loop, we go right up a second time. “Yah, really tame guys.”

The coaster arrives back at the embarking zone. The young people get off laughing. I begin the middle age stumble down the walkway. For the next half hour I wonder “will my breakfast stay down?” Why do we come to places like this? Why do we build places like this? So friends in a similar age bracket to mine, I learned that when you doubt your children’s accuracy about the intensity of a ride, listen to those doubts. Then remind yourself you’re not 16. People aren’t wearing long hair, open shirts and gold chains anymore.

Doubt is hesitation, uncertainty, reservation, misgiving, distrust and disbelief. We can doubt our children’s ride report or teeth brushing report or hand washing claim. We might doubt someone’s word or a salesperson’s promise. There might be times we even doubt God. You might doubt God for some reason today. You may doubt whether or not He is really for you. You may doubt if He’ll come through. Or you may doubt His love for you.

Doubts about God come in several ways. *The devil and his forces* like to seed doubt about God. He likes to whisper and sow seeds of doubt in our spirit about God’s goodness or love. The devil looks for opportunities to scatter seeds of doubt in our lives.

Philosophical Doubts can cause us to hesitate with respect to God. We may doubt God’s existence. We can’t see how Science and the Bible can both be true. We may wonder if Christianity is founded on solid evidence or if it’s just one of many irrational faiths that weak people turn to.

Emotions or Circumstances may cause doubts about God when bad times come. Maybe you face tough circumstances; a difficult diagnosis; an exhausting week. You may see little or no hope at work or in your marriage or at school. You wonder “where is God in all this?”

Other Christian’s Behavior or a bad experience with a Church can lead to doubts about God. Maybe some church or Christian mistreated you. Or at least that’s how you see it. You wonder “if that’s what Christians are like, maybe God is like that too.”

Whatever the source or circumstance, doubts about God can arise in our minds and hearts. When that happens, where can we turn? Well, our text today reveals we can (we must) turn to the very One we doubt in times of doubt. Today we’re going to see how God answers our doubts.

Last week in our Roman's study, we saw the ultimate medal podium – our glorious inheritance in Christ. We learned that inheritance includes God Himself, the renewed earth and our resurrection bodies. We also learned that there will be some tough training on the way just like Olympic athletes endure. But God does not leave His children alone in their tough training. He provided the Holy Spirit to help us when we don't know what to pray. And God brings good out of tough circumstances. He showed His commitment to us by His work on our behalf before time began when He foreknew and predestined us. So when we grasp these realities we can look at our sufferings and see they're not even worth comparing with our glorious inheritance.

Yet there are times when we get demoralized or lose heart. Persecution, oppression, rejection, conflict and exhaustion can bring doubt and insecurity. So Paul concludes this part of his letter with God's answer to our doubts. We're going to first examine the doubts and God's answers. Then we'll respond to them. If you doubt God today, I pray He speaks to your doubts so you will leave this place renewed and sure in Him. If you don't doubt God today, I invite you to take notes so you can go to them and this passage when doubts do come.

God's answers to our doubts

Doubt #1 - Is God for me? (8:31-32)

Sometimes everything in life seems to work against us. Or maybe you're in a time where you see misery or bad stuff all around. In those times we may wonder "is God for us?"

The first two verses of this passage reveal the answer. *Yes. God demonstrated His commitment to us by not sparing His own Son.* God showed He's on our side by giving up His Son for us. Verses 31 and 32 again. "What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things."

God is for us.

Now when I first read verse 31, I didn't get his second question. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Lots of people and forces! The devil, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, indwelling sin and our enemies oppose us. But they cannot ultimately defeat us. They cannot withstand us when "God is for us". They can't stop Him and His determination to see us through and deliver us to our glorious inheritance.

But those are easy words to write or say. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” What proof do we have that He’s for us? The cross! He did not spare His own Son. He gave Him (Jesus) up for us all. God demonstrated His commitment to us by not withholding His own Son but sacrificing Him on our behalf.

Commentators see a connection here to Abraham’s almost sacrifice of his son Isaac. God commanded Abraham to commit an unthinkable act – sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham spent three agonizing days in a journey to the place of sacrifice. He takes his son up Mount Moriah (which is now covered by the Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem. His young son even asks “Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Abraham declares “the Lord will provide.” Then Abraham binds his son. He raises the knife to slay him. Then the Lord intervenes. In Genesis 22:12, He says to Abraham “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.”

God saw Abraham’s great commitment to Him. God affirmed the evidence of Abraham’s love because he did not withhold even his son from God. But God gave Abraham’s son back before death actually came. God didn’t get the same blessing when He demonstrated His love for us. His Son died. But in that act of not sparing His own Son, God demonstrates His great commitment to us.

Paul puts this into perspective in the last part of verse 32. In not sparing His Son, God has already done the most difficult part of showing He’s for us. So if He did that, He will certainly be for us through our lives and into eternity. 2 Kings 6:16 – Do not be afraid for those who are with us are more than them; Psalm 118:6 – The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? 1 John 4:4 – Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

God is Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Comforter, Shelter, the God who saves; the God who sees. Our Savior, stronghold, strength. An ever present help in trouble; a shelter from the storm, a shade from the heat. He did not hold back His one and only Son. He was for you then and He continues to be for you today.

Doubt #2 Will God come through for me on Sentencing Day? (8:33-34)

Answer – Yes, God will come through because no one can successfully convict us of guilt. Yes, God will come through on that day because no one can change the promised verdict. Why? God has already looked after paying for our guilt.

Paul puts us into a courtroom to deal with this doubt. You and I sit as the defendants. Someone, perhaps Satan,¹ comes along to demand a guilty verdict because of our sins. He may list all our sins and then point to God's law proving that such sins are worthy of a guilty verdict. But then our defense lawyer rises. Verse 33 – Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Remember Justification – an instant legal act where God declares those who trust in Christ forgiven and in right standing before Him. He could declare us not guilty because Jesus paid the penalty for our guilt on the cross. So Jesus declares “this one is justified. No charge will stand.”

But He doesn't just stand to defend us in Paul's picture. In verse 34, Paul reveals Jesus speaks for us today. “Christ Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” Because Christ lives and has ascended, he is able to intercede for us as our High Priest in the very presence of God. Yes, He will come through on Sentencing Day for us.

But most of us are not concerned about this doubt today. How many of you woke up today and wondered will God actually come through for me when I die or on Judgment Day? I would suspect we didn't think about this. Why? Because many of us rarely think about eternity. We talked about this in our small group last week. Why do we have so little concern for eternal things in this culture? We concluded that one major reason is because life is pretty good here. We can do a lot, get a lot and enjoy a lot. So why would we want to go anywhere else?

Many of us live such blessed lives now that we might think very little about eternal things. But then someone young dies; a soldier gets killed in Afghanistan; an earthquake hits Haiti; a mother just outside of Edmonton is suspected of drowning her two young boys. Eternity is suddenly not so far removed. The reality of end of life questions come right into our face.

¹ For an example of Satan's accusation in a courtroom scene, see Zechariah 3:1-5.

On the day we die, where will we end up? Will we really be okay? Will God truly forgive? Or will that skeleton in our closet come out to change the verdict? Will Satan find that unconfessed sin to successfully accuse us? If you're a Christian, the answer is no. Satan won't successfully accuse. Yes, God will come through because He's already justified us.

Doubt #3 Does God love us/me? (8:35-39) Answer – Yes, in fact nothing can ever separate you from God's love. Do the events or circumstances of my life right now prove God has abandoned me? No. No matter how difficult or discouraging things get, God still loves you and is with you.

“Well that's easy for you to say Tom. You don't know what I'm going through right now. It's easy for Paul to write. He probably wrote this while sipping lattes with his friends in Starbucks enjoying the cushy life.”

Verse 35 – Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or the sword?” Whose life do you think he's talking about there? His! Paul goes into personal testimony mode. All this stuff happened to him and more. Check out 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 for a quick summary of his sufferings. Yet even through all this, he remained convinced that God's love remained with Him. In fact, he reminds in verse 36, that this is normal fare for the Christian life to endure difficulties.

He quotes Psalm 44:22 to show that it is no new thing for the Lord's people to face great perils. Remarkably, Paul will prove prophetic in writing verse 35. In just 10 or 12 years, the great Nero persecution on Christians in Rome will begin. Paul will lose his own life during Nero's reign. But for the Christian, death is not the end and cannot separate us from God's love.

So verse 37 – So in all these things we are more than conquerors. We super-conquer not because we're so powerful and capable. We conquer “through Him who loved us”. God gives His children the supernatural strength to come through these trials and persevere in faith until we die. We have seen already that God takes those trials to build that perseverance in faith and hope in Him. So that instead of conquering us, we conquer them because God uses them to further us toward our inheritance.

Then comes verses 38-39 where Paul brings the first half of this letter to its climax. “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor

depth nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Physical death, the troubles of life, angels and rulers opposed to us, things now and things in the future, things above in the universe and things below maybe in Hell, nor the powers of evil or this dark world – nothing in all creation which is the entire universe can separate us from His love.

God answers three major doubts about His children. Now how can we apply His answers when we have doubts?

To start you must **Identify the source of your doubt**. Is it philosophical, circumstantial, some bad experience or some of the devil's whispers?

I have experienced doubt in all three levels. During my university years I faced Philosophical doubts. Friends had all sorts of questions about the Bible that I couldn't answer. They adopted a different interpretation that I couldn't rebut. Professors presented convincing sounding arguments against Christianity. So I really struggled with questions – why do I believe this? Is it because its part of my family heritage? Are my friends right? Is the whole thing just one of many religious ideas? The more I dug, the more I discovered the solid foundation and answers that could be found to their questions.

I experienced doubt because of circumstances. During times of serious illness or great difficulty, it felt a little like God abandoned. During those times I had to learn to fight back in my mind against some of those thoughts. And I needed to recognize that some doubt was a manifestation of my physical condition.

I have experienced some doubts because of other Christians. During one of our most difficult times in ministry, we found it more refreshing to hang out with non-Christians or very young Christians. It was a very disillusioning time. But disillusionment can be a very good thing. If we're living with an illusion, we're not living in reality.

I had the illusion that Christians hardly sin or behave badly. That time shattered that illusion! We Christians sin. That's out on the table. We like to project that we have it all together when it comes to our walk with God. But we don't. Christians fail and disappoint.

But we must not project our doubts and disappointments with others onto God. In fact, tough times with other Christians or a church can remind us why Christ came. Those who hurt us need grace. We also need grace.

So try to identify the source of your doubts. If we can get a handle on the source of our doubts about God, then don't just wallow in them.

Turn first to God

Turn to the one you doubt. But how do we do that? I remember talking with someone who seriously doubted God and His existence. He said something like "if God would only show me a miracle or speak to me then I would believe." Don't we sometimes wish God would speak to us directly, out loud like He did with Adam or Moses?

But God still speaks. It's just the medium has changed. Seventeenth century Pastor John Owen wrote, "The spoken voice reaches the ears through a communicating medium of the air in which it was formed." In other words, when God spoke out loud to Adam and Moses, His voice came through the air to their ears.

God may still use an audible voice, but the fact that His mind has been committed to writing does not mean we no longer hear God's Word. Instead of through the air, it comes through writing.

Owen declares, "Once the mind of God had been reduced to writing, each mortal and individual man to whom the Scriptures may come, has God speaking to them no less directly than if he were hearing God speaking with His own voice to them."

So, when we turn to God through His Word, we receive His encouragement and promises.

And remember the primary source of doubt about God? The devil! Jesus demonstrated during his temptations that using God's Word causes the devil to flee. Charlie Mallic is an Associate Pastor in Tomball, Texas. When he's not evangelizing at Starbucks, he is a scuba instructor for a local dive shop. He writes, "without the Word, we are sitting ducks for all sorts of trouble. If it is true that the devil roams about like a lion seeking to devour whenever he will and that the only weapon we are given is the Word of God, then without the Word we are truly vulnerable."

Then he writes, “Without a raft of revelation to sail me through this sea of doubt, there is no distilling ought-ness from is-ness. We are adrift in this sea of doubt, seeking and never finding, grabbing hold of whatever promises a remedy, even if it’s just a temporary distraction from the pain upstairs that makes our eyeballs ache.”

Fight your doubts with God’s promises. That means we need to know some of God’s promises. Listen to God’s Word. “Never will I leave you or forsake you.” “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.” “Have I not commanded you, be strong and courageous. Do not be discouraged and do not be afraid. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go!” So in turning to God, we turn to His Word.

Turn to the Holy Spirit again and again for His help. Revisit Romans 8. Let God assure you with all these resources. Constantly ask the Holy Spirit for His help.

Turn to Other Christians

Turn to other Christians to raise the doubts. Now that might seem a little odd. Shouldn’t we hide our doubts from other Christians? They might condemn us or disown us. No! We must openly express our doubts to other believers. We need to do that so that others can encourage us or help us. If we express our doubts to skeptics they will just confirm our doubts. But other Christians who can hear a doubt without condemning can be a tremendous gift. Gather others around to encourage and pray for you when doubt threatens.

Turn to other Christians for answers to your doubts. Christian friends can help. We pastors can help. There are tremendous resources in books and on web that address all kinds of questions about the faith. Turn to them. God can work through His people to help you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Pastor who resisted Hitler and was eventually executed for his faith writes about the importance of other Christians for assurance in times of doubt, “It is in others that I can grasp in concrete form the church community and its Lord as the guarantor of my confidence in God’s grace. The fact that others assure me of God’s grace makes the church community real for me; it rules out any danger or hope

that I might have fallen prey to an illusion. The confidence of faith arises not only out of solitude, but also out of the assembly.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer – “Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church”

God answers His people’s doubts. He is for us. He will come through in the end. We will never be separated from His love.

If you don’t know Christ however, these assurances are not yours. But God has provided a way for you to receive His great salvation. That’s what Romans is all about, the gospel. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (including you and me) but all who believe are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” How could a holy God justly forgive you? He put forward His own Son as a sacrifice bearing God’s wrath that we deserved to the end. That happened on the cross. Jesus came into history as God’s Son. He really existed and died and was raised from the dead. They’ve never found His body. Christianity is founded on this truth. Though there are things that we might not like about the church or the Bible or Christians or even God, we found our belief on the truth of these claims; not our preferences or likes.

All who trust Christ by faith will receive justification, adoption, eternal life, the great inheritance of God Himself, and the renewed earth and our resurrection bodies to live in it and with Him. For those who trust Him, there is therefore, now, no condemnation on the last day or even now. Sufferings will be part of your life and the Christian life. But God won’t leave you alone in them. He provides all the resources Romans 8 describes. He can be for you and protect you from accusation on the Last Day and an inseparable love.

If you come to Him – turn away from your old life and put your dependence and trust wholly on Christ our Lord. Is God calling and the Holy Spirit moving in anyone here right now to receive Christ?

Christian, God is for you. God will come through for you on the Day. You will never be separated from the Love of God.