

Interpret Everything in Light of the Cross

Romans 8:31-39 (NIV)

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response 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, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered 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 convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You lost your job even though you were a faithful employee. Your best friend ghosted you though you had always made a point of being there for them. Your marriage is becoming more fractured and miserable despite all the counseling you’ve done, books you’ve read, advice you’ve received and put into practice. Despite decades of prayer for a godly spouse and remaining chaste, you’re still single. Prayers every morning and every night for your health to improve along with the formation of new exercise and diet habits and still your health is getting worse. People coming to our church leave even after you gave them as much time and energy you could as you continued to try to connect them to Christ, answer their questions, provide fellowship for them. Despite doing multiple devotions every day, various Bible studies during the week, and being in church every Sunday, your faith seems shakier than ever. What shall we say in response to these things?

The Christians in Rome were searching how to answer that same question. They were suffering. Depending on the exact year Paul wrote this letter to them, they very well could have been living under the reign of Emperor Nero, a ruler who had no problem blaming the problems of his empire on this upstart religious group called Christians. Nero inspired his citizens to persecute the Christians, throw them in prison, behead them, crucify them, feed them to the lions, use them as living human lanterns as they were lit on fire. Roman Christians experienced trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. But they hadn’t done wrong things that would merit such awfulness. What were they to say in response to all this suffering put on them?

You know that frustration too, don’t you? You’ve done the right thing and in response you were treated badly. And it makes you wonder: Shouldn’t I have a good life, a happy life, for being a good Christian? Shouldn’t God protect me from all this stuff? Is he not listening to my prayers? Is he not actually on my side? “What, then, shall we say in response to these things?” (verse 31a)

As Paul is thinking of the Roman Christians and how they are trying to cope with their suffering, he tells them to interpret everything that is happening to them in light of the cross. “What, then, shall we say in response 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, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (verses 31-32)

When things aren’t going right, we analyze why that is happening. This is good and right to do, but what are our conclusions? Do I think that God is holding out on me with my prayers? Does he want me to perform some act of penance or get my life in order before he’ll act on my behalf?

Interpret those thoughts in light of the cross. Does God make you get right with him before he listens to you, takes care of you? The cross shows us that God acted first. He took on our sin on himself and crucified it there. He suffered so that he would treat us mercifully, treat us better than we deserve. He suffered without obligation or desire that we would pay him back. He already did everything necessary to make us right with him. We know this because of his perfect life lived for us and sacrificed for us on the cross. God is for us!

So, why is he not giving me these good things? Why am I suffering? Did I actually neglect a responsibility at work? Was I not there for my friend in need? Have I been the problem in my marriage? Do I not know how to foster a relationship? Am I missing something with my health, not telling the doctors the right thing to get the right treatment? Did I fail those church members in meeting their needs with God? Have I not studied the right things from God’s Word? We want to figure out who’s to blame to gain control of this situation, to stop the suffering, often looking to ourselves to figure this out, to be the ultimate source of interpretation.

And then Satan whispers accusations in your ear: “You are the problem, the reason you suffer. You weren’t a faithful employee. You were the bad friend. You are a bad husband, a bad wife. You aren’t relationship material. You didn’t do enough for your health. You are a bad pastor, bad church member. You are not faithful enough to God. You didn’t pray hard enough. This is why you suffer.”

What shall we say in response to Satan’s accusations? Again, interpret them in light of the cross. “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.” (verses 33-34a) Because God is for us, not sparing his own Son but gave him up for us all and made us right by him, loved by him, accepted by him, then you tell Satan to go to hell! You call him out for what he is: a liar! Satan, your accusations mean nothing because I have been cleared of all charged by the life and death of Jesus. More than that, interpreting my life in light of the cross means that Jesus was faithful in his work even when I am not. Jesus didn’t neglect his friends for me. He was perfect in all his relationships for me. He did not waver in his faith so that his solid faith is credited to me. His prayer life never waned for me. He always was the good shepherd, the good pastor, for me. So, shut up, Satan! You can’t bring any charges against me because God is for me, gave up his Son for me.

But why am I still suffering as my prayers are not being answered? Interpret this in light of the cross. If God doesn’t answer my prayers in the way that I want them to be answered, I can look at the cross and know that God does not withhold any good thing from me. He already has given me the best he can give. So I know he’s not holding out on me.

My father-in-law exemplified this truth to me very early in my relationship with Wendy. Pete owned a 25th anniversary Corvette. I’d never driven one. One day he offered to let me drive it. I said, “Are you sure?” And he said something like, “I’m trusting you with my daughter. This is just a car.” He had already entrusted me with someone so much more precious than any earthly possession. This car, as nice as it is, is nothing comparatively. Why would he withhold a little thing after giving me such a big thing?

God is the same. He’s not powerless to answer your prayers, nor is he reluctant to do so. We know that because he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. More than that, we have every assurance that God is answering our prayers. “Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (verse 34b) God’s Son is in that position of power and authority, ruling all things for us. That’s what it means that he’s sitting at the right hand of God. From there, he’s also interceding for us, praying for us, making it clear that there is no reason that God would refuse our prayers.

Interpreting the answers to my prayers in light of the cross means that there must be another reason why he’s not answering my prayers in the way I want him to. And I may not know the reason. In fact, I may not even be able to comprehend the reason. But even without knowing the reason, I know that God does not withhold good things from me. Just the opposite. He showers good things on me every day without fail. I know this because he did not spare his own Son for me. Interpreting my seemingly unanswered prayers in light of the cross means God must have something better for me than what I asked for.

We also interpret all our suffering in light of the cross. Our suffering is not because God isn’t powerful enough to stop it. It’s not because God doesn’t love you. It’s not because you aren’t right with God. We suffer because we live in a sinful world, and we sin. Suffering is ultimately our fault, even when we are not the direct cause. But God did not leave us to our own devices. He did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all so that we are loved, forgiven, made right with God, so that evil does get vanquished, that suffering one day ends.

Do I then let suffering separate me from God, as if he is not good enough or powerful enough to stop it? “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (verses 37-39) In the light of the cross, we are more than conquerors. Christ has already overcome our sins. He will get us through our suffering because the Almighty loves us and is powerful enough to save us. He spares no expense on us, nor will he ever.

When we face trials and temptations, and there’s trouble everywhere, we will never be discouraged as we interpret everything in light of the cross. God did not spare what is most dear to him for our sake, and he never will. Jesus living and dying for us and rising from the dead stands as his eternal and enduring love for us that nothing can take away or separate us from it. This is what we see in light of the cross. This is why we interpret all that happens to us in his light. Amen.