

What Shall We Say?

In the name of him who gave himself to make us God's own treasured possession, dear friends in Christ: Yes, and speaking of treasured possessions, one of Christianity's most highly prized treasures is the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome. It's different than his other letters to churches in various places like in Corinth or Galatia or Ephesus. In those letters, Paul wrote to congregations that he had founded. He knew the people there and had catechized them himself. He taught them the Christian faith. So, when he wrote to them, it was to encourage them, answer questions that had come up since he left, and usually to make a few corrections in things they had misunderstood or were doing wrong. Ah, but when Paul wrote to the church at Rome he was writing mostly to strangers. He had not been to Rome, nor had any other of the Apostles. The church there was founded by lay people who had been introduced to the faith somewhere else and then had relocated to Rome, sought out other faithful transplants like themselves, and begun worshipping together and witnessing Christ to their neighbors. The point being they had no pastoral direction and supervision, no one thoroughly trained in the Christian faith who could then teach others – especially new converts. And remember at this point there was no written New Testament, no catechism, no Sunday school materials to refer to ... I mean, if you were a comparatively new convert yourself, where would you even begin to teach the faith to somebody else without any resources or direction?

That's what Paul's letter to the Romans is. In the first eight chapters the Apostle sets forth the glorious nuts and bolts truths of the Christian faith in a clear, concise, and systematic way so that anyone can understand it. It's the stuff Paul taught wherever went but he didn't write down because he didn't need to. He was there telling them. For the Romans, he had to write it down. And we can be thoroughly grateful that he did.

He begins with the hard facts of the human condition: how all people are sinners under the curse of God's wrath and righteous condemnation. The Law of God that defines his standard for righteousness and promises life to those who obey it is no help because no one does. No one is able. So, instead of helping the Law serves only to condemn. But it does help in one way. It shows us where we stand in the court of divine justice: guilty as charged and without excuse. There is no hope of saving ourselves.

Having slammed that door shut, locked it, and thrown away the key, Paul opens another. God in his loving kindness has given us an entirely different way to stand before him in righteousness *apart* from the Law. It's through faith in Jesus Christ who perfectly kept the whole Law of God and then set forth his life as an offering of atonement for our sin when he was crucified and killed. The Lord accepted this sacrifice and set his seal of approval on it by raising Jesus from the dead. The Lord now reckons those who trust in Jesus righteous in his sight, thus granting them life and salvation.

Paul lays this foundation in the first three chapters of his letter to the Romans. In chapters four through seven he builds on it. He shows that this was God's plan all along, and how even the Old Testament saints were reckoned righteous by faith in the Savior to come. He explains how God has given us Baptism to unite us to Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, and how by it he gives us new life through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. He goes on to describe the daily struggle with sin, how our two natures – the old sinful and the new life in the Spirit – are at war with each other, and how we long to be free once and for all of the old flesh that drags us down. But that is precisely the hope we have in Christ. Despite what we see going on in the world around us, despite our own ongoing internal struggle against sin,

despite the assaults of Satan and the persecution of worldly powers the Day is surely coming when we will be raised permanently from this body of death and inherit the eternal kingdom as the righteous sons and daughters of God.

Today's reading from Romans is the spectacular conclusion to Paul's explanation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the verbal equivalent of the final crescendo of a great symphony. "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good." This is an amazing statement that deserves our full attention. But first we must ask who are those who love God? When he was laying down the Law Paul made it clear that no one does. We are all the enemies of God – or rather, we *were* his enemies. Those who have heard the Gospel, have received the Spirit, and have come to faith in Jesus have also been born anew. Our new nature does love God. We love because he first loved us. And that means that for us all things do work together for good. There are no accidents, no haphazard random events; nothing happens that God isn't using for your ultimate good. Mind you, that doesn't mean you're going to enjoy everything that happens. When you take your toddler to the doctor for shots the kid won't like it; but it's for the child's good. Likewise when tragedy strikes you won't be happy; but somehow in the infinite wisdom of God it's serving his good purpose for you.

And it's not like the Lord is just making things up as he goes along. His plan for you was in place long before the creation of the universe. Paul lays it out as he explains what we call the order of salvation. "For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son". Let's pull that apart. First God's foreknowledge of you: it's not simply that he knew as a fact that you'd be conceived and born one day. No, he actually knew you as a person. Like he says to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you". You weren't aware of the relationship, but the Lord was. And knowing you as a person he predestined you, that is, he chose you to be one whom he would bring to perfection, so that you will one day be as sinless and pure as Jesus himself.

"Those whom he predestined he also called". God chose you in Christ from eternity past, but he called you by the Gospel in time. He made sure that his Word and Spirit came to you calling you to faith in Jesus. For most of us it happened first at our baptisms. And he continues to call you by his Word and Spirit to keep you in the faith and to sanctify you.

"Those whom he called he also justified". That's the justification by grace through faith in Jesus by which you stand before God righteous in his sight.

"And those whom he justified he also glorified". You *don't* see *that* yet, but God does. Just as he knew you from eternity past long before you came into being, he also sees you standing with the saints in glory. We're still on the timeline, but he's not. He sees you in glory now, and the time will come when you will see it too.

In view of these mindboggling truths laid down one after another in rapid succession Paul asks, "What then shall we say about these things?" The wondrous truths of God's great plan of salvation demand a response from us. And Paul gives us those responses. First, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" That "if", by the way, isn't in question. God *is* for us. He proved it by sending his Son to save us by dying for our sins against God. If he does that for his enemies, what can we expect from him now that we are his friends?

Paul then asks, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" He answers, "It is God who justifies." You've got to picture a court room scene. You're on trial. Satan the prosecutor is laying out the case against you, your long list of sins. But God is the Judge. *He* determines guilt or innocence. And he sees you innocent through your faith in Jesus. When

Satan is done reading the charges the Judge smacks down the gavel and rules in your case: "Not guilty on all charges. Case dismissed."

Paul's next question: "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 is interceding for us." It's another detail in the court room scene. As Satan is reading the charges Jesus is sitting next to his Father whispering in his ear. As each charge is read out he says, "Yeah, it's covered. I died for that one too." It almost makes you feel sorry for Satan (well, not quite); but he's a lawyer who can never win a case against a believing child of God.

Paul's last question in response to all these things is "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Because Satan can't win against you in the courtroom, he'll come at you like he did against Job: with tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. But as with Job, Satan still can't win. Paul says that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And nothing the enemy does, no, not anything in all creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, the final question is what shall we say to these things? We have the answer. For all eternity we shall say "Thank you" to our God who loves us. We shall say "Praise the Lord for his love endures forever." And in Jesus' name we shall say "Amen!"

Soli Deo Gloria!