

The Comfort of the Cross: Romans 8:31–39 and the Religious Problem of Evil

Jared Twigg

Abstract: Romans 8:31–39 reveals a critical part of the biblical answer to the suffering Christian who feels abandoned by God. Although a believer may logically understand God’s all-powerful and all-loving nature, personal suffering can leave the believer feeling as though God does not care. However, when a believer comprehends the depth of God’s love as demonstrated at the cross, he can feel comforted knowing that the God who loves the believer enough to give his own Son will never abandon him. Paul highlights this truth through a combination of compelling rhetorical devices and skillful structuring of the text, notably the often-overlooked chiasm in Romans 8:35–39. These elements of Paul’s writing, when properly understood, allow greater access to the comfort he points to in the cross.

Keywords: Problem of Evil, Romans, Chiastic Structure, Psalm 44, Suffering

Introduction

Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman identify what they suggest is the greatest challenge laid against Christianity by unbelievers: “Ask ten non-Christians at random to give two objections to the Christian faith, and very likely nine of them will mention what is known as the problem of evil: How is it that there is evil in the world created by an all-powerful and all-loving God?”²

Jared Twigg is a Ph.D. student in Old Testament Studies at Baptist Bible Seminary at Clarks Summit, PA. Jared may be reached at jared.twigg@my.clarkssummitu.edu.

² Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 43. Though Boa and Bowman claim this question appears as only one of six major questions facing apologetics, they

The occurrence of inexplicable and seemingly preventable evils appears to disprove the existence of the Christian God by creating a logical quandary that presents an obstacle to faith. This struggle is often viewed as intellectual in nature, a logical problem attempting to affirm two ideas that appear mutually exclusive. Christians, recognizing such biblical doctrines as man's sin nature and creation's corruption, may seem impervious to the doubt-fueling power of this "problem of evil." They possess a very logical answer to a very logically oriented problem. However, the power of the believer's logical answers appears to wane when the question of suffering becomes personal to him. Though "having all the answers," a Christian personally experiencing pain and suffering faces tremendous emotional struggles, sometimes resulting in serious questions regarding God's nature and character.

But why is this so? If there are good explanations for why evil exists—if the biblical answers to the problem of evil allow one to logically maintain belief in a good God—why, then, do the logical solutions to the problem of evil often fail to help the Christian facing personal suffering? Why does a reminder of creation's curse seem to do so little to soothe the grief of a believer who has lost a loved one? Why does a reminder of the fall fail to dull the pain of a Christian finding himself the victim of another's sin nature?

"The" Problem of Evil

It is because the specific problem of evil the suffering Christian is facing is not a *logical* problem requiring an explanation: it is an *emotional* problem requiring comfort. That is to say, the problem of evil is multi-faceted. This observation about the multi-faceted nature of the problem of evil is a central focus of the thought-provoking volume by John Feinberg entitled *The Many Faces of Evil*. As a man quite capable of reciting the biblical truths addressing the *logical* problem of evil, Feinberg discovered the multi-faceted

suggest, "This is probably the number one objection to the Christian faith." The other challenging questions by unbelievers that are highlighted in their volume include: "Why should we believe in the Bible?" "Don't all religions lead to God?" "How do we know that God exists?" "Aren't the miracles of the Bible spiritual myths or legends and not literal fact?" and "Why should I believe what Christians claim about Jesus?" (ibid., 42–44).

nature of “the” problem of evil when his wife received an unexpected and devastating medical diagnosis. In his volume, Feinberg recalls how this painful event moved him to a more nuanced view of “the” problem of evil:

I came to what for me was a very significant realization. All my study and all the intellectual answers were of little help because the religious problem of evil [Feinberg’s term for the problem of evil when suffering becomes personal] isn’t primarily an *intellectual* problem. Instead, it is fundamentally an *emotional* problem!³

The so-called “religious problem of evil” takes place on a personal level. While the logical problem can be abstract and distant, the religious problem is concrete and near, resulting from one’s own personal experience with suffering. As Feinberg helpfully explains, the religious problem of evil “arises from a particular instance of suffering and evil that someone is actually experiencing. Faced with such affliction, the sufferer finds it hard to reconcile what is happening with his beliefs about God’s love and power.”⁴ In other words, the religious problem of evil is not when a person questions belief in God’s existence in light of the existence of evil (i.e., the logical problem of evil); the religious problem of evil is when a person is faced with the emotional aftermath of personally experiencing some sort of evil in his own life. This emotional aftermath can come in the form of grief, confusion, despair, resentment, anger, a sense of abandonment, and a host of other emotional responses as the believer struggles with the pain that comes from facing personal suffering.

However, just as Scripture provides intellectual answers to the *logical* problem of evil, Scripture also sufficiently provides comforting reassurance to those facing the more personal *religious* problem of evil. This is an important observation to make: biblical truths addressing the logical problem of evil will do little for the

³ John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 454 (emphasis added).

⁴ Feinberg, *Many Faces of Evil*, 21.

Christian dealing with the religious problem. Scripture responds to the logical problem of evil by offering the theological resources necessary to provide an *explanation*; Scripture responds to the religious problem of evil by offering the theological resources necessary to bring *comfort*. This article explores one key text's contribution to the comfort Scripture offers suffering Christians facing the religious problem of evil. Romans 8:31–39 offers comfort to believers by exploring fresh perspectives on their suffering that are made possible by the cross.

Romans 8:31–39 and the Religious Problem of Evil

Suggesting that Romans 8:31–39 contributes to the biblical solution to the religious problem of evil may come as a surprise. It is natural to simply view this passage as Paul's concluding thoughts on his grand exposition of the gospel of Christ. Of course, Paul himself makes it clear that the thoughts of 8:31–39 are part of the preceding discussion of the gospel. In the opening verse of this unit (8:31), Paul uses the demonstrative "these things" (ταῦτα) in a rhetorical question ("What shall we then say to these things?") to logically connect 8:31–39 to the gospel exposition coming before. While commentators readily recognize this logical connection between 8:31–39 and the preceding context, the question of just how much of the preceding exposition Paul has in mind when referring to "these things" in 8:31 has produced some debate. As Moo points out, some have seen the pronoun as referring only to the immediately preceding verses (perhaps 8:28 or 8:29–30) while others suggest that ταῦτα reaches back to the beginning of the letter.⁵ Moo himself takes a position between these two extremes, suggesting that the language and content of 8:31–39 are so similar to that of 5:1–11 that these final verses of chapter eight therefore represent Paul's conclusion of the section of his argument spanning 5:1–8:39.⁶ Schreiner agrees, suggesting that

⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 537–538.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 538. Specifically, Moo points to the themes of "the love of God in Christ for us and the assurance that that brings to us; of the certainty of final vindication because of the justifying verdict of God; and of how these great forces render ultimately impotent and unimportant the tribulations of

the similar language between chapters five and eight forms an *inclusio* in Paul's argumentation.⁷ Seeing Paul's "these things" of 8:31 as a more sweeping reference, Dunn suggests "8:31–39 serves to sum up the *whole argument* to this point."⁸ He continues, "It is not simply that there are a number of echoes and verbal allusions to the earlier chapters ... but vv 31–34 in effect bring us back to the point reached at the beginning of chap. 3: there the heavenly trial scene with God's faithfulness to Israel having to be defended; here the same trial scene with God's faithfulness to his own being celebrated."⁹ The interconnectedness of Paul's logical movements from the opening of the letter up through chapter eight supports Dunn's more inclusive identification of the referent for ταῦτα. The "these things" of 8:31 are, therefore, the "gospel things" Paul has been discussing from 1:16 onward. Seeing Romans 8:31–39 as the conclusion to Paul's grand exposition of the gospel from 1:16–8:30, therefore, is an accurate reading of the logical progression of Paul's letter up to this point.

However, while Romans 8:31–39 does indeed continue Paul's focus on the theme of the gospel, it also focuses on the additional subject of the religious problem of evil. Throughout most of chapter eight, Paul continually makes reference to the subject of evil and the

this life." There is no doubt that strong thematic ties exist between chapters 5 and 8.

⁷ Thomas S. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 458. Even if the argument presented by Moo and Schreiner could provide certainty that Paul considers 8:31–39 as specifically concluding the segment begun in chapter five, the very fact that chapter five begins with the inferential conjunction οὖν indicates that the division between 4:25 and 5:1 is soft at best. Demonstrating this unbroken flow of thought between chapters four and five, Dunn comments that 5:1 "is clearly Paul's recapitulation of the exegetical conclusion, reached in 4:22, and its extension to all who believe, in 4:23–24" (James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*. WBC, 38A [Dallas: Word, 1988], 262). In other words, chapter five is so integrally connected to what precedes it that the conclusion in chapter eight still obtains some level of logical connection with chapters 1–4, even if 5–8 is seen as a distinct unit.

⁸ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 499 (emphasis added).

⁹ Ibid.

suffering resulting from it.¹⁰ Paul addresses how the believer suffers with Christ (8:17), how Christian suffering does not compare with the hope of future glory (8:18), how the Fall subjected the world to suffering-producing corruption (8:20), how the believer suffers while anticipating the future redemption of his body (8:23), how the Spirit aids the believer in his suffering (8:26), and how God uses all of the believer's experiences, including suffering, to conform him to the image of Christ (8:28–30). While Romans 8 continues Paul's thematic emphasis on the Gospel of Christ, the chapter also thoroughly explores the theme of suffering (i.e., the problem of evil).

The theme of suffering so prevalent in Romans 8 is carried through to the final unit of the chapter, the passage being examined

¹⁰ It has been suggested that Paul's focus on the problem of evil in Romans does not begin in chapter eight but instead permeates his discussion of the gospel from a much earlier point in the letter. Erwin Ochskenmeier, in his thesis entitled "Mal, Souffrance et Justice de Dieu selon Romains 1–3: Étude Exégétique et Théologique," (*Tyndale Bulletin* 59, no. 1[2008]: 153–154) seeks to demonstrate that the problem of evil pervades the whole of Paul's letter to the Romans. Ochskenmeier correctly observes that "through the centuries, many who have dealt with the issue of evil and suffering have at some point interacted with the Epistle to the Romans (Augustine, Leibnitz, Moltmann, Ricœur, etc.). But such dialogue is often limited to parts of the Epistle after Romans 4" (Ochskenmeier, "Mal, Souffrance," 153). This limitation, argues Ochskenmeier, is a mistake as evil and suffering are introduced from the very outset of the book's argument (*ibid.*, 154). It is quite possible that the neglect of the problem of evil in the early chapters of Romans is due to the tendency to oversimplify the problem of evil. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the problem of evil is complex and presents *several different* problems, not just one. It could be that a consistent failure to recognize this complexity has prohibited readers of Romans from seeing just how prominent the problem of evil is within this letter. At first glance, for example, the problem of moral evil (evil committed by mankind) is strikingly prominent in the opening chapters of Romans, whereas the problem of natural evil (evil resulting from creation's curse) does not receive Paul's attention until chapter eight. To truly discover all that the Bible addresses regarding "the" problem of evil, Feinberg's observations regarding the multi-faceted nature of "the" problem of evil must first be recognized.

in this article, Romans 8:31–39. That suffering is still on Paul’s mind in this final section of the chapter is evident by the second rhetorical question opening the passage: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (εἰ ὁ θεὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, τίς καθ’ ἡμῶν;). Paul’s raising the possibility of an adversary, one who is “against believers,” indicates that his focus on the problem of evil continues. As the passage progresses, this continued focus on suffering and the problem of evil becomes even more evident through Paul’s vivid vocabulary. Words like θλίψις (“affliction”), στενοχωρία (“distress”), διωγμός (“persecution”), λιμός (“hunger”), γυμνότης (“nakedness”), κίνδυνος (“danger”), μάχαιρα (“sword”), and θάνατος (“death”) indicate that 8:31–39 serves as more than just Paul’s concluding thoughts on the subject of the Gospel of Christ—Paul wants to talk about the problem of evil too.

The question then arises, how is the subject of Christian suffering a fitting conclusion to Paul’s exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How do these topics of the Gospel and suffering relate? Addressing suffering in the conclusion of his Gospel exposition hints at Paul’s anticipation of a question facing the believer confronted with the religious problem of evil: “If I am the object of God’s love, what am I to make of the suffering that fills my life?” Having just expounded on God’s loving provision for man’s salvation, Paul focuses his conclusion on addressing this glaring paradox between his theological claims and his readers’ practical experience. Rather than soften his theological claims, Paul reiterates them, demonstrating a crucial connection between Christ’s death on the cross and the Christian’s suffering. As Seifrid points out, “The structure of [Paul’s] argument shows, the gospel speaks *especially* to believers in their sufferings” (emphasis added).¹¹ Far from creating an intellectual problem for the believer (“If God loves me, then what of suffering?”), it is the cross event, specifically, that provides the emotional resources necessary to confront the religious problem of evil brought on by personal suffering.

¹¹ Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 633.

The emotional comfort offered by Paul in Romans 8:31–39 centers on his affirmation of the believer’s security resulting from Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross. Paul’s exposition of the gospel here culminates in the assurance the believer can enjoy regarding his relationship with God. This, of course, is a necessary comfort since suffering confronts the believer with the religious problem of evil and can raise questions in his mind regarding his standing with God (e.g., the question noted above, “If I am the object of God’s love, what am I to make of the suffering that fills my life?”). Scholars consistently recognize the comforting theme of the believer’s security—a security resulting from the cross—as the thematic focus of this textual unit. Moo calls Romans 8:31–39 a “beautiful . . . celebration of the believer’s security in Christ”¹² while Hullinger extends this point, claiming that the Christian’s security is the entire chapter’s “great theme.”¹³ Bruce summarizes the passage as affirming that “nothing can come between [God’s people] and his love—not all the trials and afflictions which they have experienced or may yet experience.”¹⁴ And Dunn, more poetically, says Paul “sustains the crescendo [of 8:26–30] in a purple passage of praise that what God has already done in and through Christ has established a bond of love which cannot be broken.”¹⁵ Security, inseparability, and an unbreakable bond are just some of the ways scholars have described this paragraph where Paul offers comfort to the suffering believer on account of the cross.

As mentioned above, Romans 8:31–39 offers comfort to believers by exploring fresh perspectives on their suffering that are made possible by the Cross. First, Paul explains that the cross provides objective evidence that God does not withhold any good thing from believers (8:31–32). Second, the cross gives believers confidence that despite suffering in this life their future is secure

¹² Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 537.

¹³ Jerry M. Hullinger, *New Testament Life & Belief: A Study of History, Culture, & Meaning* (Winston-Salem, NC: Piedmont International U, 2014), 361.

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 169.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 497.

(8:33–34). And third, the cross assures believers that seasons of suffering are not indicators of God’s abandonment (8:35–39). Each of these perspectives will be explored in turn.

God Does not Withhold any Good from Believers (8:31–32)

Paul first comforts believers experiencing suffering by reminding them that God’s gift of his own Son provides objective evidence that God does not withhold his goodness from believers. This comforting truth is an elaboration on Paul’s basic point in 8:31–39 that “God is for the believer” (8:31b). This “for-ness” is proven in the cross which itself demonstrates the amazing extent of God’s “for-ness.” Paul helps his readers understand that God has already demonstrated his limitless love by giving his own Son. Thus, if God has already given the supreme gift of his own Son, will he withhold any other (lesser) good thing from believers? This comforting question is raised in the opening two verses, Romans 8:31–32.

The overarching point of Romans 8:31–39 is introduced in the form of a compound question: “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Τί οὖν ἐποῦμεν πρὸς ταῦτα; εἰ ὁ θεὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, τίς καθ’ ἡμῶν;). The first half of this question transitions the argument of Romans 1–8 to a conclusion. Paul uses the deliberative future verb ἐποῦμεν to ask his reader what else, considering the beauty of the Gospel just expounded (1:16–8:30), needs to be said regarding the gospel of Christ.¹⁶ The second half of this compound question explains Paul’s logic: what else needs to be said since “God is for us” (ὁ θεὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν)? With this compound question, Paul transitions his exposition of the gospel to this concluding unit and introduces the unit’s primary thought: since God is for us, no one can succeed against us.

¹⁶ The deliberative future, according to Wallace, “asks a question that implies some doubt about the response. . . . The force of such questions is one of ‘oughtness’—that is, possibility, desirability, or necessity” (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 570). Necessity seems to be in view here. Once the fact of God’s “for-ness” is established, what more really needs to be said to demonstrate the believer’s security?

Paul's affirmation that "God is for us" is not mere theological optimism; rather, Paul's comforting thought finds grounding in the objective evidence offered in the historical event of the Cross. Having stated plainly "God is for us," Paul moves to explain the basis for this assertion in the following verse (8:32). The entirety of verses 32–34 might be considered as elaborations on this basic point that God is "for the believer." Though Paul's use of asyndeton¹⁷ throughout the paragraph allows for several possible descriptions of his flow of thought, the basic logical sequence of ideas is as follows:

¹⁷ Asyndeton, of course, is the rhetorical device whereby an author moves from sentence to sentence without including conjunctions explicitly stating the logical relationships between his thoughts. Commenting on Paul's use of this device in 8:31–39, Moo suggests the asyndeton lends the text "a solemn and elevated style" (Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 539). Wallace confirms the use of asyndeton to produce such stylistic effect: "Asyndeton is a vivid stylistic feature that occurs often for emphasis, solemnity, or rhetorical value" (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 658). Bullinger adds, "When the figure *Asyndeton* is used, we are not detained over the separate statements, and asked to consider each in detail, but we are hurried on over the various matters that are mentioned, as though they were of no account, in comparison with the great climax to which they lead up, and which alone we are thus asked by this figure to emphasize" (E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], 137). Bullinger's point may apply here. It is possible that to demonstrate the force of his point, Paul attempts to make an overwhelming case in 8:31–34 as he leads up to the climax of 35–39 where he exclaims that believers are "more than conquerors" and "nothing can separate them from God's love."

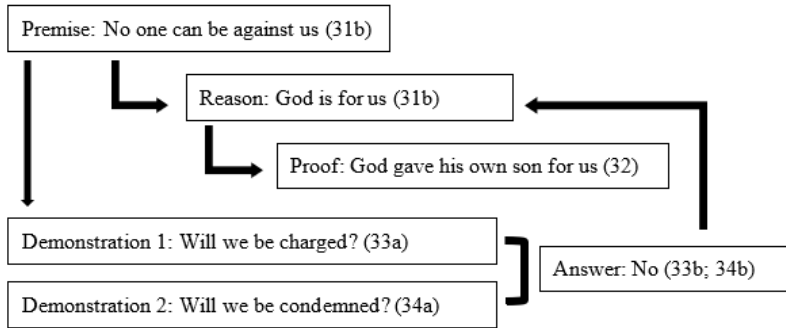


Chart 1: Logical Flow of Romans 8:31b–34¹⁸

No matter the specifics in the logical connections among Paul’s statements, it is certain that the Cross obtains a position of centrality in this passage of Scripture. It is this Cross event—an objective historical reality—that Paul points to as the basis of his confident assertion that “God is for us” and therefore no one can be “against us.”

Paul does not simply provide objective proof of God’s disposition toward believers; he seeks to demonstrate emphatically the *extent* of God’s commitment to believers. To what extent is “God *for* us?” Paul answers this question with another question. Paraphrased, Paul asks, “Will the God that gave us the supreme gift of his own Son withhold any lesser good thing from us?” Paul opens the rhetorical question with a relative clause describing the identity of the God who is *for* us. He is the God “who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (8:32a). Paul makes certain that the supremeness of the gift is not lost on his reader. Not only does he place emphasis on the gift by the fronting of the direct object “his own Son” (τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ¹⁹), but

¹⁸ For an alternative explanation of the logical flow of the text, see Schreiner, 456–457. In his analysis, Schreiner divides the text into two main sections, 8:31–32 and 8:33–39. In the first section, 8:32 is seen as the evidence of the truthfulness of 8:31 (paralleling the logical scheme presented in this paper). In the second section, Schreiner sees the three questions of 8:33, 8:34, and 8:35 as presenting the implications of Paul’s main thesis, ὁ θεὸς ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998]).

¹⁹ The genitive case of the direct object is not grammatically significant. It is merely the result of the lexical conditioning of its

he also describes Christ in emphatically personal language (i.e., “his own” along with the familial reference “son”) highlighting the intensely personal nature and supremacy of God’s gift *for* man.²⁰ The translation of the phrase τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ οὐκ ἐφείσατο offered by BDAG captures the emphatic tone: God “did not spare his very own son.”²¹

Rather than spare his very own Son (note Paul’s use of the emphatic disjunctive ἀλλά), God “delivered him up for us all.” The fronting of the prepositional phrase “for us” (ὕπερ ἡμῶν) reminds the reader that Paul has not left his main topic of God being “for us” introduced in the previous verse (8:31). He instead reinforces that claim by grounding God’s “for-ness” in the objective proof of the cross. If efficiency of communication were Paul’s only concern, the clause has now become needlessly long. For Paul to first explain what God did not do (“spare his own Son”) only to immediately move on to what he did do (“deliver him up”) is unnecessarily verbose (i.e., if God “spared not his own Son,” then clearly, He “delivered him up”). But efficiency of verbiage gives way to Paul’s prioritization of rhetorical effect. By starting with the negation (“spared not”), Paul forces his reader to consider what God could have but did not ultimately do. The effect is to bring greater emphasis to God’s willful choice, his “delivering up,” as it is juxtaposed to the alternative he acted against, his “sparing.” As sublime as this thought may be, however, it ultimately functions merely to support Paul’s grander point: having given us the supreme gift of his Son, “how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (πῶς οὐχὶ καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα ἡμῖν χαρίσεται;). It is not the sacrificial death of Jesus that becomes central to Paul’s thought but the *implication* of that supreme

governing verb φείδομαι (cf. Acts 20:29; Rom 11:21 (2x); 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:23; 2 Pet 2:4; 2 Pet 2:5).

²⁰ Moo sees the qualifier ἰδίου as serving to distinguish Christ from his other children, believers, alluded to in 8:14–16. “Calling Christ God’s ‘own’ Son distinguishes him from those many ‘adopted’ sons that have come into God’s family by faith” (Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 540).

²¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 467.

gift that he asks the reader to consider.²² If God willingly “delivered up” the supreme gift of “his own Son,” then what does this say about his disposition toward the believer?

In a greater-to-lessor argument, evocative of the rabbinical interpretation strategy of “light and heavy” (קל וחומר), Paul declares that God’s willingness to graciously give (χαρίζομαι) his own Son implies that it would be utterly absurd to assume that God would then keep any lesser good thing back from believers. To assume otherwise would be to completely misunderstand (or thoughtlessly fail to consider) the supreme value of the Son to the Father.

Paul’s question—“How shall he not with him also freely give us all things?”—has produced some debate among scholars. Specifically, differences arise regarding the identification of the referent of Paul’s “all things” (τὰ πάντα). Scholars do agree, based on the context as well as the governing verb χαρίζεται, that τὰ πάντα refers to *good* things. However, different views emerge when attempts are made to identify the more specific nature of what good things Paul has in mind. Dunn interprets the term as solely referring to an eschatological reality. Noting that Paul’s use of the phrase τὰ πάντα typically refers to all of creation, Dunn concludes,

What seems to be envisaged is a sharing in Christ’s lordship ... over ‘the all’ ... Christ again being understood as the one who fulfills God’s mandate for man (Ps 8:6), but precisely as the head of a new humanity who share his sonship and his devolved authority. The χαρίζεται is therefore a genuine future, looking to the final completion of God’s original purpose in making man.”²³

Moo allows for the possibility of Dunn’s interpretation but ultimately adopts a more inclusive approach: “Certainly Paul’s focus is on those things necessary for our salvation; but, as with ‘the good’ in v. 28, we should not restrict the meaning to salvation as such but include all

²² This interpretation is reinforced by Paul’s use of an implied conditional clause. In Wallace’s taxonomy, the implied conditional statement of 8:32 falls under the evidence-inference category (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 683). Pragmatically, in such a construction, the author submits the evidence *in order to move to* the inference. In other words, the inference, not the evidence, is of primary importance.

²³ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 502.

those blessings—spiritual and material—that we require on the path toward that final salvation.”²⁴ However, it is possible that both of these attempts to identify Paul’s τὰ πάντα obscure the point. Though Moo’s more inclusive interpretation is closer to what Paul intends to convey, both he and Dunn weaken Paul’s point with the unnecessary quest to specify what Paul has left unspecified.

The emphasis on a concrete identification of what Paul means by “all things” distracts from Paul’s *rhetorical* point. Paul is not trying to tell his readers what they might also get in addition to Christ; rather, his point is to draw attention to the *implications* of what God has *already given* in Christ. In other words, Paul’s primary point is not to identify what God will give believers along with giving his Son; Paul’s primary point is to emphasize the fact that God’s giving his own Son is demonstrable evidence that no good thing will be withheld from believers. Borrowing an English idiom helps communicate Paul’s rhetorical point: “Seeing God has already given

²⁴ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 541. Like Moo, Schreiner takes the inclusive approach but offers two interesting arguments to support this interpretation. While Schreiner does not disagree with those who see an eschatological significance to the τὰ πάντα of verse 32, he suggests it is better to view the phrase as all-inclusive. Schreiner cites two reasons for his conclusion (Schreiner, *Romans*, 460–461). His first reason comes from the repetition of the phrase in the surrounding context (vv. 28 and 37). Schreiner suggests that to understand the τὰ πάντα of verse 32, one must look at Paul’s intended scope of the same phrase in these surrounding verses. Schreiner notes the all-encompassing nature of these uses: “The good experienced [v. 28] is ultimately eschatological, but all things experienced in this age—including sufferings per the emphasis from 8:17–18 [and, of course, the idea of suffering is paralleled in vv. 35 and 37]—are for the benefit of believers” (ibid., 461). Schreiner’s second reason comes from another of Paul’s letters where a parallel is made between the τὰ πάντα of 8:32 and the same phrase in 1 Corinthians 3:21–23 where Paul tells the Corinthians, “All things are yours.” Schreiner bases his connection primarily on the repetition of several key words between the two texts: life, death, things present, and things to come. Noting the similarities, Schreiner essentially concludes that Paul articulates basically the same thought in both passages. And, since τὰ πάντα is not limited to the eschatological in the Corinthians context, Schreiner concludes that no such limitation should be applied in the Romans context either.

us his very own Son, is any other lesser good gift off the table?” Mounce seems closest to maintaining emphasis on this rhetorical point: “Since God did not spare his own Son but delivered him over to death for us all, will he not along with this gracious gift also lavish upon us everything else he has to give?”²⁵ Mounce comes closer than Moo (despite their similarities) in that his minimalist interpretation allows Paul’s rhetoric to carry its full weight. Unpacking the particulars of τὰ πάντα is of little importance to this rhetorical point. God has already given what might have been considered too precious to give; since that gift was not withheld, cannot the believer, along with that supreme gift, expect all other good things?

Grasping Paul’s point has the power to radically change the believer’s perspective on suffering and offers a significant contribution to the comfort offered in Scripture to those personally experiencing some evil in their lives (i.e., experiencing the “religious problem of evil”). While it is tempting in moments of pain and suffering to question God’s love, Paul’s reminder should give the believer great pause. When considering the fresh perspective made possible by the cross, is it fair to question God’s love, even in times of suffering? Seasons of suffering are sometimes viewed as God withholding some good thing from the believer. What if the believer’s definition of “good,” sometimes clouded as it is by his limited perspective, has strayed from God’s definition of “good”? For, returning to Paul’s point, is it not absurd to believe that the God who has already given his very own Son would choose to withhold some other lesser good from his children? Recognizing this fresh perspective comforts the believer with the reassurance that God withholds no genuine good from his own. The supreme gift of his own Son is proof.

Despite Suffering in this Life, the Believer’s Future is Secure (8:33–34)

Paul’s second comforting perspective on suffering, appearing in 8:33–34, is a reminder that no matter the believer’s experiences in

²⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scripture NIV Text*, NAC 27 (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 190.

this life, his future is secure on account of the cross. In these verses, Paul moves his readers to consider their ultimate security in Christ demonstrated at the final judgment. That Paul's questions in 8:33–34 refer to the final judgment is regularly recognized by scholars. Dunn, for example, confidently asserts, "Clearly envisaged [in Paul's questions posed in 8:33–34] is the final judgment scene at the close of history."²⁶ Likewise, Schreiner agrees noting that both of Paul's questions in these two verses look forward to the eschatological judgment day.²⁷ In exploring the believer's ultimate security, Paul raises then answers two questions: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?" (8:33) and "Who is he that condemneth?" (8:34). Through the repetition of two key prepositions, *κατά* (8:33) and *ὑπέρ* (8:34), Paul reminds his readers that he is continuing to elaborate on his original premise in 8:31: "If God be for (*ὑπέρ*) us, who can be against (*κατά*) us?" Thus, Paul seeks to comfort believers by demonstrating the ultimate significance of the cross at the final judgment. While the cross does not spare believers from experiencing the evils of life on earth, the more pressing and ultimate concern of eternal suffering poses no threat on account of Christ's work on the cross.

To comfort believers with the reminder of their ultimate security, Paul invites his readers to view the final judgment through the lens of the cross. Because of the fresh perspective offered by the cross, the various parties present in the final judgment scene presented in 8:33–34—God, the believer, and Christ—take on new identities. These new identities are explored by Paul in order to comfort believers with a vivid reminder of their security at the final judgment.

Paul's first question (and its subsequent answer) focuses on the identities of both God and believers: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth." This first question demonstrates the believer's security against any possible charges leveled against him at the final judgment. Paul's question emphasizes this ultimate security of the believer in two ways: through his designation of believers as "the elect of God," and through his emphasis on God as the one who "justifies." When the identities of

²⁶ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 502.

²⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 462.

both the accused and the Judge are considered, the impossibility of successful charges against the believer and the believer's ultimate security become evident.

First, Paul identifies the accused—believers—as “God’s elect” (ἐκλεκτῶν θεοῦ), a group whose final destiny is already secure. Moo correctly notes that Paul’s identification of the defendants as the “elect” intentionally refers back to the so-called “golden chain” of 8:28–30 where the elect are guaranteed future glorification. Thus, Moo observes, “This manner of designating Christians [as the “elect of God”] in the question itself is the only answer required.”²⁸ When considering the identity of the accused—“God’s elect”—the absurdity that charges against these defendants would ever hold becomes clear. Paul demonstrates the believers’ security in the final judgment with a reminder of who they are. The fact that the accused are not merely “the elect” but are “God’s elect” is especially significant seeing that it is God who sits as Judge.

Having drawn attention to the defendants’ identity as “God’s elect,” Paul continues his demonstration of the believers’ security by reminding them of the identity of the Judge. While Moo’s observation, noted above, is correct—that the wording of Paul’s question offers its own answer—Paul nonetheless goes on to plainly state that answer for his readers: the one presiding over the trial—God himself—is “the one who justifies.” Paul essentially asks, “Who can successfully bring charges against the believer if the Judge presiding over the case has already justified the accused?” The answer, of course, is obvious. The judge has declared the defendant righteous; no one can successfully bring charges against God’s elect.

While Paul’s first question demonstrating the believer’s security in the final judgment emphasized the identities of the defendants (“God’s elect”) and the Judge (“God that justifieth”), the second question demonstrating the believer’s security in the final judgment focuses on the identity of the defendants’ advocate—the exalted Christ. Paul asks, “Who is he that condemneth (ὁ κατακρινὼν)?” Though this question differs slightly from the previous question,

²⁸ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 542. For an alternative explanation of the significance of the designation ἐκλεκτῶν θεοῦ, see Dunn’s exposition which views the term as Paul’s attempt to establish continuity between Israel and the Church (Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 502–503).

Paul's vocabulary in both 8:33 and 8:34 indicates that the two questions are strongly related. Paul has not here moved on to a different point. This has been observed by Moo, who sees 8:33 and 8:34 as a single basic thought. Because "'condemn' [κατακρινῶν] and 'justify' [δικαιῶν] are natural contrasts," Moo suggests Paul's question in 8:34 should "be seen as an additional rhetorical response to the statement in v. 33b that it is God who justifies."²⁹ In other words, the answer to Paul's question in 8:34 elaborates on his answer to the question posed in 8:33. Paul uses the question of 8:34 ("Who is he that condemneth?") to focus on Christ's role in the security of the believer. God indeed justifies (8:33), but he does so on account of the believer's exalted advocate (8:34). Having discussed two parties in this final court room scene—God and believers—Paul now moves on to the third and final party: the exalted Christ.

Paul describes Christ's role in the believer's security by emphasizing his post-resurrection ministry of intercession carried out from his exalted place at God's right hand (8:34b). While Paul focuses on Christ's death for believers in 8:32, his focus here shifts to the fact that Christ is now a living advocate for believers. As Seifrid observes, "Paul here [in 8:34b] continues the thought of 8:32, where he describes the God who 'delivered up' his 'very own son.' While there [8:32] he speaks of Christ's death, here he lays emphasis on Christ's resurrection: 'who died, *rather* [μᾶλλον δὲ] who was raised'" (emphasis added).³⁰ Thus, as Paul discusses Christ's role in this future courtroom scene, strong emphasis is placed on the fact that this is the Christ who now lives. If a believer can find comfort in Christ's death, as Paul argued in 8:32, the believer must also know that he can find comfort in Christ's life as well (8:34).

The clauses making up 8:34b move in a progression that culminates in Paul's highlighting Christ's role in this final courtroom scene. Moo correctly observes this progression: "The enumeration of actions [listed in 8:34] accomplished by, and through, Christ occurs in ascending order, with the emphasis falling on the last in the series."³¹ In other words, 8:34b explains that not only has Christ died, but he has also risen; and not only has he risen, but he has also been

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Seifrid, "Romans," 635.

³¹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 542.

exalted; and not only has he been exalted, but from his exalted position he now advocates to God “for us” (note, once again, the repeated prepositional phrase emphasizing the point of the passage: “God is *for us*,” cf. 8:31).

When discussing Christ’s role in the courtroom, Paul carefully notes the power of the believer’s advocate by describing him as being “at the right hand of God.” This phrase “at God’s right hand” is more about Jesus’ identity than his location. This becomes clear when recognizing the OT significance of the phrase as it pertains to the Messiah. As Moo has observed, the reference to God’s δεξιᾱ, echoing the language of Psalm 110, “indicates that Jesus has been elevated to the position of ‘vice-regent’ in God’s governance of the universe.”³² It is this vice-regent who approaches the Father on behalf of believers. There could be no higher advocate and the implications are tremendous. Not only does δεξιᾱ point to the position of power held by Christ, but the very fact that God himself exalted Christ to this position also carries strong implications for the success of his advocacy. God’s exaltation of the advocate bodes well for the accused. Dunn notes the point well: “The success of [Christ’s] advocacy over that of any challenge is assured, since his resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand was God’s own doing, the mark of God’s own authorization and approval of those he represents.”³³ Thus, this final courtroom scene must not be misconstrued as God reluctantly hearing the appeals of an interceding Christ—God himself elevated Christ to the position from which he now advocates on the believer’s behalf. With an advocate like this, there is no chance charges against the believer will succeed. There is no chance the believer will be condemned.

The cross thus offers comfort by speaking to the believer’s ultimate concern. While seasons of pain and suffering come and go over the believer’s time on earth, his final security is never in question. At the final judgment, because of the cross, no charge will stand (8:33), and no condemnation will occur (8:33). Paul demonstrates this ultimate security through powerful reminders of the identities of those present in this final courtroom scene: the

³² Ibid., 542–543.

³³ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 511.

defendants are “God’s elect,” the Judge is “the one who justifies,” and the advocate intercedes from his exalted position at “God’s right hand.” This reminder of the believer’s final security puts suffering into perspective. As Paul wrote earlier in the chapter, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time *are not worthy to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (8:18) (emphasis added). Amid seasons of pain that come and go in the believer’s life, there is the possibility of a transcendent peace that comes from the assurance of the believer’s final security. This is yet another comforting perspective on suffering enabled by Christ’s work on the cross.

Seasons of Suffering are not Indicators of God’s Abandonment (Rom 8:35–39)

Having discussed in 8:33–34 the comfort offered by the cross regarding the believer’s final judgment, Paul shifts his attention in 8:35–39 to his readers’ more immediate concern—the suffering in this life and its potential to produce uncertainty. Here, Paul anticipates the possible question from his reader: “If I truly am secure in my relationship with God, what am I to make of the suffering I continue to experience in this life?” Moo observes this shift in Paul’s focus:

In vv. 35–39, Paul expands the picture [of judicial vindication discussed in the preceding verses] by adding to our assurance for the ‘last day’ assurance for all the days in between. Not only is the believer guaranteed ultimate vindication; he or she is also promised victory over all the forces of *this* world. And the basis for this many-faceted assurance is the love of God for us in Christ.³⁴

In making this shift, Paul now demonstrates the comfort offered by the cross in how it addresses the uncertainty that sometimes results from suffering.³⁵

³⁴ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 538–539.

³⁵ Regarding the nature of the shift between 8:31–34 and 8:35–39, Schreiner sees it as a simple shift in imagery where a new figure, a relational figure, is used in 8:35–39 to buttress the very same point illustrated with the legal figure used in 8:31–34. He writes, “Verses 35–39 employ the relational language of love rather than the forensic terminology of the law court (as in vv. 33–34), but they make the same essential

Paul's primary point in 8:35–39 is to comfort the believer by reminding him to align his perception of his suffering with the reality of the cross. Experiencing inexplicable suffering can cause the believer to wrongly perceive that he has been abandoned by God. Feinberg powerfully attests to the temptation the believer faces to entertain notions of divine abandonment in the midst of personal suffering: “The deeper fear and pain is that God is no longer there. It doesn’t matter how much you have sensed God’s presence in your life before. [In a moment of personal suffering], he seems absent. And when you know that he is the only one who can do anything about your problem, it is especially painful to sense his absence.”³⁶ However, when viewing suffering from the perspective of the cross, the believer can know that his “sense” of God’s absence is indeed only a “sense” and does not reflect his reality. This is the comfort Paul offers in 8:35–39.

The Structure of Romans 8:35–39

To see that Paul here intends to confront perception with reality, it helps to first observe the structural device Paul uses to make this point. Though commentators consistently fail to identify its structure, Romans 8:35–39 appears as a chiasm containing three sets of antithetically paired statements—A B C C’ B’ A’—which are illustrated in the chart below. The lack of commentators identifying this chiasm should rightly bring scrutiny to this claim. However, there is significant evidence supporting the observation that Paul’s pairing of the lines making up 8:35–39 is intentional. The verbatim lexical repetition between lines A and A’, the grammatical parallels between lines B and B’, the complementary nature of the contents of both the A A’ and B B’ pairs (i.e., question raised, question answered), and the fact that Paul uses chiasmus to structure the concluding lines of the

point.... The God who is for us will see to it that we are never severed from his love” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 459). Moo’s observation is more helpful: while 31–34 affirm the believer’s security in the eschaton, 35–39 affirm his security over and against the adverse circumstances and powers faced in the human experience.

³⁶ Feinberg, *Many Faces of Evil*, 451.

second major literary unit of this letter, chapters 9–11,³⁷ are all factors indicating that Paul here uses this special structuring device to help make his point. It is when this device is identified that Paul’s main point—that the believer’s perception does not always match his reality—can be clearly identified and properly understood.

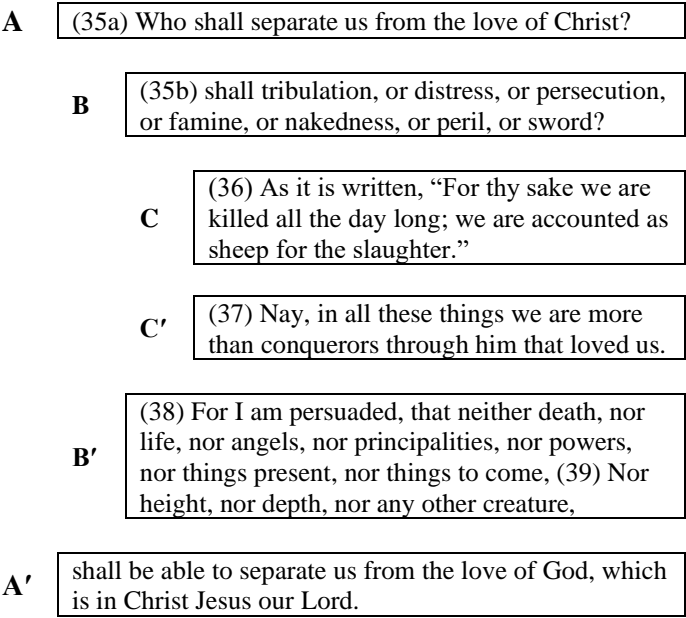


Chart 2: Chiastic Structure of Romans 8:35–39

Identification of the chiastic structure housing 8:35–39 helps the reader to identify Paul’s main point by drawing attention to the

³⁷ Just as chiasmus is used here by Paul to close the major unit of chapters 1–8, Paul uses chiasmus again to close his next major structural unit, chapters 9–11. The chiasm at the end of chapter eleven, identified by Lund, occurs in 11:33–35 (cf. N. W. Lund, “The Presence of Chiasm in the New Testament,” *The Journal of Religion* 10, no. 1 [1930]: 74–93]). Here, Lund identifies an A B C D D’ C’ B’ A’ structure with the three attributes of 11:33a (riches, wisdom, and knowledge) being paired with their corresponding questions in 11:34, 35. The focal point of this chiasm consists of the two clauses in 11:33b focusing on God’s “judgments” and “ways.”

centrally paired statements, C C'. Scholars generally agree that when chiasmus is employed, the structure's central statements identify the primary focus of the textual unit. As Man observes, "The presence of either a single central or of two complementary central elements in the structure ... generally [highlights] the major thrust of the passage encompassed by the chiasm."³⁸ In the case of 8:35–39, this observation by Man would place Paul's emphasis on the paired statements labeled C C' in the chart above. Thus, verses 36–37 should be seen as providing the focal point of 8:35–39 because of their central position within the chiasm. In these paired statements, Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 (C) then immediately follows with a statement of his own (C'). These paired statements, connected by the strong disjunctive ἀλλά (consistently rendered in English translations with the negative "no"), thus form the crux of the entire subunit. Identifying the chiastic structure of 8:35–39 helps to identify the main point appearing in 8:36–37.

In addition to highlighting Paul's primary point, the use of chiasmus also aids the reader in better understanding the point being made. Because each statement in the chiasm appears as part of a pair, the meaning of each statement must be understood by examining it along with its paired line (e.g., A is considered alongside A', etc.). Again, as Man notes, chiasmus includes "the presence of complementary pairs of elements, in which each member of a pair can elucidate the other member and together form a *composite meaning*" (emphasis added).³⁹ Thus, identifying the chiastic structure housing 8:35–39 not only helps to identify the main point of the text (8:36–37), but it also helps the reader to better understand that point by recognizing the importance of discovering the composite meaning of the centrally paired statements C and C'. The meaning of 8:37 (C') must be understood in light of its relationship with 8:36 (C).

Slaughtered Conquerors?

Noting the characteristics of chiasmus helps, then, to explain the seemingly odd pairing of 8:36–37. The A A' pairing makes sense:

³⁸ Ronald E. Man, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, no. 562 (April 1984): 147–148.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

Paul asks a question (8:35) then answers the question (8:39b). The B B' pairing makes sense: Paul makes a list (8:35b) then negates a complementary list (8:38, 39a). The central pairing (C C'), however, is less straightforward. Paul quotes a psalm lamenting the inexplicable defeat and subsequent suffering of God's people (8:36) and then follows with the seemingly contradictory claim of Christian victory (8:37). In 8:36, Paul's quotation of Psalm 44 characterizes believers "as sheep for the slaughter"; however, in 8:37, Paul claims believers are "more than conquerors"? This jarring change of tone leads Stewart to ask, "How can believers be put to death as slaughtered lambs *and* be 'more than conquerors'?"⁴⁰ Some commentators avoid the question and merely paraphrase the text—that believers are conquerors even in the midst of their afflictions.⁴¹ But such a claim demands further explanation as it fails to explain the paradox of "slaughtered conquerors." One can begin to address Stewart's question by considering Man's observation noted above: to properly understand the author's intended meaning, the nature of the relationship between the paired lines of the chiasm must be properly examined. When considered *together*, the "composite meaning" of the paired statements comes to light as the nature of the relationship between the lines is discovered.

The relationship between the A B C and C' B' A' pairs of the 8:35–39 chiasm is one of contrast. The contrastive relationship between the paired statements is made clear by Paul's use of the disjunctive ἀλλὰ (translated "Nay" in the AV) to introduce the second half of the chiastic structure. While chiasms can pair together statements that are basically synonymous (i.e., A is synonymous with A', B is synonymous with B', etc.), the chiasm of 8:35–39 follows a

⁴⁰ Tyler A. Stewart, "The Cry of Victory: A Cruciform Reading of Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 39 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 211; see also Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 544. Moo offers some speculation that the verb's νηπ- prefix possibly suggests a return to the theme of 8:28 by indicating "that believers not only 'conquer' such adversities; under the providential hand of God, they even work toward our 'good'" (ibid.).

different pattern where chiasmus is used to pair statements *antithetical* to each other. In both types of chiastic structures, synonymous and antithetical, the interpretive key is to consider how the author's pairing of the statements contributes to his point. Again, as Man observes, "The elements paired off with each other in a chiastic structure may be parallel either in a synonymous or an antithetical way, and the placing of such elements opposite each other in the structure serves to *strengthen* the comparison or the contrast"⁴² (emphasis added). Applying this insight to the chiasm in 8:35–39, the expositor can observe that Paul seeks to strengthen his primary point—found in the centrally paired statements of 8:36–37—through contrast.⁴³ Thus, if the statements of 8:36 and 8:37 appear to conflict with one another, that is because this is precisely Paul's goal. To make his point that believers are "more than conquerors" (8:37), Paul first readily acknowledges that the believer's *perception*, based on the believer's own experiences of suffering, stands in stark contrast to this theological *reality* (see Chart 3 below).

EXP ERIE NTI	A	(35a) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
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⁴² Man, "Value of Chiasm," 148 (emphasis added).

⁴³ Lund, an early pioneer in the study of chiasmus within the New Testament, also recognizes the chiasm's use of demonstrating a shift in ideas suggesting this is a "feature which is prominent in chiastic arrangements" (Lund, N. W. "The Presence of Chiasmus in the New Testament," *The Journal of Religion* 10, no. 1 [January 1930]: 85). He describes this common form of structuring as "a sudden shift from one idea to its opposite when the center [of the chiasm] is reached" (Lund, 85). That the chiasm of Romans 8:35–39 incorporates a dramatic shift from the first half to the second is demonstrated by several grammatical and lexical features within the text. The first half of the chiasmus of 8:35–39 focuses on uncertainty. Then, the center of the chiasm marks the "sudden shift" toward a triumphant tone in the text.

THEOLOGICAL REALITY	B	(35b) <i>shall</i> tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
	C	(36) As it is written, “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”
	C’	(37) Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.
	B’	(38) For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, (39) Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature,
	A’	shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Chart 3: Antithetical Pairings in Ro. 8:35–39

The Perception of Abandonment

The primary point of the antithetical pairing of the statements in 8:36 and 8:37 is to demonstrate that the believer’s perception of God in the midst of suffering does not always match the reality of the situation. To make this point, Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 (MT 44:23), a lament by an OT saint distraught over his own experiences of inexplicable suffering. The psalmist graphically describes his plight, likening himself and others within the covenant community to lambs being led to the slaughter. In the midst of his suffering, the psalmist found himself feeling abandoned by God.

Commentators’ explanations of the significance of Paul’s quotation of Psalm 44:22 vary greatly (if the question is even

addressed at all).⁴⁴ At one extreme, the quotation is viewed as basically superfluous to the argument, a digression from Paul's otherwise logically ordered statements. This position finds representation in Moo, who calls the appearance of the psalm "something of an interruption in the flow of thought," though Moo ultimately concludes that Paul's interruption is by design "for he is constantly concerned to show that the sufferings experienced by Christians should occasion no surprise."⁴⁵ However, Moo's view is not common, and others see Paul as in some way supporting his acknowledgement in 8:35 of the suffering experienced by believers. Cranfield views the quotation as Paul's attempt to contextualize Christian sufferings as "nothing new or unexpected, but have all along been characteristic of the life of God's people."⁴⁶ And Dunn views the quotation as stressing that suffering, mentioned in some of its various concrete forms in 8:35, is endless ("all the day") and typical of the human experience (his explanation of the figurative phrase "as sheep for slaughter").⁴⁷ This sampling from scholarship demonstrates the variety of ways in which commentators have addressed the significance of Paul's OT citation. However, these explanations do not seem to fully explore the significance of the quotation's original context.

Psalm 44 records the agonizing prayer of a suffering saint confused by God's apparent indifference toward his situation. The psalm can be divided into four stanzas. The psalm begins with a stanza reflecting on God's gracious intervention on behalf of Israel's forefathers (Stanza 1, 44:1–8). The optimistic faith-filled language of the opening stanza turns bleak, however, as the psalm sharply changes to a description of God's apparent abandonment of his people (stanza 2, 44:9–16). Israel is suffering, and God seems far away. God's apparent abandonment, claims the psalmist, cannot be the result of punishment because Israel has been obedient to God

⁴⁴ Bruce, for example, merely describes the contents of the psalm making no attempt to explain its significance within Paul's flow of thought (*Letter of Paul*, 170).

⁴⁵ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 543–544.

⁴⁶ Cranfield, *Shorter Commentary*, 211.

⁴⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 512.

(stanza 3, 44:17–22). And so, the psalmist makes one final shift as he articulates his request for God to change his behavior toward his people from neglect to intervention on their behalf (stanza 4, 44:23–26). Psalm 44:22, then, appears as the final verse of stanza 3, a stanza that explores the innocence of the suffering author, his confusion over his suffering, and the perceived indifference of God toward that suffering. Any explanation of the significance of Paul’s quotation must take this context into consideration: Paul is quoting the cry of a saint who perceives that his suffering is the result of inexplicable divine abandonment.

It is possible that the variety of views regarding Paul’s quotation of this psalm is due, in part, to some ambiguity regarding the prepositional phrase that opens the first line of the verse. The opening prepositional phrase, *לְכַלֵּי*, could be taken as denoting cause (“because of you”) or perhaps advantage (“on behalf of, for the sake of, for you”).⁴⁸ If it is interpreted as in some sense denoting advantage, then the sense here is that Israel’s persecutors (the heathen nations?) were the ones “leading them to the slaughter” (an interpretation that may accord well with stanza 3’s focus on Israel’s righteous behavior, e.g., 44:17–18, 20–21). However, as Goldingay correctly points out, no verses in the psalm indicate that Israel’s plight was caused by persecution, but the psalmist does affirm that “they [the Israelites] are being killed because of God, because of God’s action (vv. 9–14) and/or because God ignores their plight.”⁴⁹ It does not appear to much matter, therefore, whether the prepositional phrase introducing Psalm 44:22 (MT 44:23) indicates cause or advantage. The underlying premise of Psalm 44 is that the psalmist feels abandoned to inexplicable suffering (cf. stanzas 2 and 3). Whether the suffering was due to God’s direct cause (surely insinuated in the poem’s second stanza) or because God failed to intervene when Israel’s enemies “killed them all day long” (cf. 44:10; MT 44:11), the psalmist was certain God was not acting on Israel’s behalf. He was asleep (44:23; MT 44:24) and Israel’s inexplicable suffering was perceived as a strong indicator that God was not acting according to his “covenant

⁴⁸ Cf. Ronald J. Williams, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed, revised by John C. Beckman (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007), § 291, 295.

⁴⁹ John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, vol. 2 of *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 47.

faithfulness” (תִּשְׁתָּ).⁵⁰ In short, in light of his inexplicable suffering, the psalmist perceived that God had abandoned his people Israel.

It is this abandonment, perceived by the psalmist in his suffering, that Paul assures will not take place in God’s relationship with the Christians to whom he writes. While the Christian experiencing inexplicable suffering may, like the author of Psalm 44, perceive God’s abandonment, this is only ever a perception—a feeling—and does not reflect reality. Christians have entered an unbreakable relationship with God based on Christ’s work on the cross. And it is the unbreakable nature of the relationship that Paul reinforces when assuring readers that nothing can “separate” (χωρίζω) them from the love of God in Christ (8:35, 39).⁵¹ Stewart notes the relational nature of this verb: “In both the Gospels and Paul, χωρίζω refers to severing the most intimate of human relationships in ‘divorce’.... Thus, when describing ‘separation’ from Christ’s love, Paul is describing a broken relationship.”⁵² It is this breaking of the relationship that Paul assures his readers can never take place. Though the believer may feel abandoned in the face of suffering (just as the psalmist had felt abandoned by God), nothing has changed in the Son-giving God’s disposition toward him (just as God’s covenant with the psalmist’s community was still in full effect despite the suffering they faced).

To be clear, Paul does not promise that there will never be *feelings* of abandonment. Paul’s quotation of the lament psalm makes this perfectly clear. Israel was in a relationship with God and had every reason to think, based on the covenant, that if they were right with him, he would intervene on their behalf when a threat would arise. But they *were* right with him and yet he seemed nowhere to be found. Craigie summarizes the psalmist’s situation well:

The real sense of perplexity finally emerges explicitly in vv 18–23 [stanza 3, the stanza affirming Israel’s innocence]. If the king and the

⁵⁰ The psalmist concludes his prayer with this plea: “Arise for our help, and redeem us for thy mercies’ [תִּשְׁתָּ] sake” (Ps 4:26; MT 44:27).

⁵¹ In addition to his use of the word χωρίζω, Schreiner suggests that the repeated use of the word ἀγάπη (vv. 35, 39 and the cognate verbal form in v. 37) also gives a strong relational emphasis to the subunit (Schreiner, *Romans*, 459).

⁵² Stewart, “Cry of Victory,” 43.

nation had failed miserably in their covenant obligations to God, then at least their defeat in battle would be explicable. But they had not been unfaithful; they had maintained their integrity in the covenant relationship.... According to their understanding of the covenant theology, God should have been with them and given them victory; instead he had crushed them.⁵³

It was their inexplicable suffering that made them feel separated from God. The psalm, however, does not affirm that the apparent separation, seemingly evidenced by Israel's suffering, was the actual situation; the psalm merely records the author's *perception* of the situation—God *felt* far away. Reading the psalm in the larger context of scripture shows a discord between the psalmist's perception and the theological reality. God's faithfulness to his covenant remained even though the psalmist felt abandoned. At this point, the relevance of Paul's quotation of Psalm 44 in his passage affirming the believer's security in Christ should be quite clear: Paul here acknowledges, through the concrete illustration of the psalmist's lament, that suffering can lead to perceptions of a sort of separation from God's love.

Just as the psalmist's perception did not match the reality of his situation, so Paul encourages his readers with the same thought. The feeling of God's abandonment, prompted by the experience of undeserved suffering, does not accurately reflect the spiritual reality. Observing the juxtaposition of the lament with Paul's confident reassurance thus demonstrates the value of interpreting the paired thoughts of the chiastic structure together. One can more clearly see that while Paul is certainly responding to the question and list of 8:35,⁵⁴ the primary point of the C C' pair is to contrast the *perception* of abandonment (8:36) against the *reality* of victory (8:37). It may feel as though affliction is evidence of God's absence or uninterest (C; 8:36), but (ἀλλ') this feeling does not reflect reality because υπερνικῶμεν διὰ τοῦ ἀγαπήσαντος ἡμᾶς (C'; 8:37). It is at this point, 8:37, that the major antithetical shift, marked by the disjunctive ἀλλ',

⁵³ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 334.

⁵⁴ Schreiner takes this position (*Romans*, 464).

occurs in the chiasm. Paul moves from uncertainty and despair resulting from faulty perception (8:35–36) to the triumph and confidence of the theological reality so emphatically declared in the climactic word ὑπερνικῶμεν.

The Reality of Victory

What exactly does Paul mean when he claims that believers are “more than conquerors”? It is all good and well to suggest that 8:36 reflects the believer’s perception in times of suffering while 8:37 reflects his reality. But the fact remains that Paul has already acknowledged the very real (religious) problem of Christian suffering (cf. 8:35). There will be, according to Paul, seasons of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword. To revisit Stewart’s question, in what meaningful way could a people afflicted with such problems be said to be “prevailing completely”?⁵⁵

Commentators have offered various explanations for Paul’s claim of victory. Mounce suggests that the victory Paul claims refers to the believer’s Christ-empowered ability to endure the trials of life. He writes, “It is the love of Christ that supports and enables the believer to face adversity and to conquer it. Christians ... are victors who have found from experience that God is ever present in their trials and that the love of Christ will empower them to overcome all the obstacles of life.”⁵⁶ Dunn’s view offers a similar interpretation: “Christ’s love enables the believer to transcend [the experience of evil in this life] even when toiling in the thick of it. In all these eventualities and circumstances, even in the midst of them ..., Paul and his readers were conscious of a love which enabled them to rise above and triumph over them all.”⁵⁷ The definition that Dunn and Mounce seem to offer is that believers are victorious over afflictions in this life as they, through meditation on Christ’s love, patiently endure their suffering. However, it appears Paul has something more objective in mind.

The meaning of ὑπερνικῶμεν must be understood in light of three key phrases from the surrounding context. The first key phrase is “in all these things” (ἐν τούτοις πᾶσιν) which opens 8:37. Regarding the

⁵⁵ This gloss for ὑπερνικῶμεν is offered in BDAG (1034).

⁵⁶ Mounce, *Romans*, 191.

⁵⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 512.

syntax of the dative τούτοις governed by the ἐν preposition, Bruce suggests the possibility that the phrase is to be taken as a Hebraism best translated “despite all these things” or perhaps “for all that.”⁵⁸ Both Dunn and Cranfield conclude that the dative here indicates sphere, thus warranting the translation, “in (the midst of) all these things.”⁵⁹ Whether the verse should be read “despite all these things” or “in the midst of all these things,” it is clear that “the things” Paul references are the various sufferings listed in 8:35b. Thus, when Paul claims the believers are “more than conquerors,” the conquering relates directly to the experiences of suffering believers. This becomes especially helpful to note when one considers what these enemies seek to accomplish: separating the believer from the love of Christ (8:35a). The victory, then, is victory over any and all attempts at “separating.”

Before moving on to the second key phrase, it is important to note the nature of Paul’s question in 8:35. Paul does not mean that the “things” listed in 8:35 or 8:38–39 in and of themselves could separate the believer from Christ’s love. Neither Paul nor his readers thought that “nakedness” or perhaps “the sword” could have any sort of effect on their standing with God. Instead, the real question Paul seems to be addressing is whether these things *indicate* the believers have in some way been separated from Christ’s love. This interpretation fits well with Paul’s quotation of Psalm 44 (8:36) where the psalmist perceived God’s abandonment on account of his personal suffering. The psalmist did not think that the suffering separated him from God; he thought that the suffering *indicated* his separation from God. Taken this way, Paul’s question in 8:35 becomes a classic formulation of the religious problem of evil: “Does my ‘nakedness’ or my being afflicted by ‘the sword’ indicate God’s abandonment?”

The second key phrase helping to explain in what sense suffering believers are ὑπερνικῶμεν is “through him that loved us” (διὰ τοῦ ἀγαπήσαντος ἡμῶς). This prepositional phrase expresses agency: it is Christ that brings about the believer’s victory experienced amid suffering. Paul’s use of the participle ἀγαπήσαντος to designate Christ is significant, as Rogers and Rogers observe, the substantive

⁵⁸ Bruce, *Letter of Paul*, 171.

⁵⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 506.

participle is here used “to emphasize a particular trait.”⁶⁰ In this case, it is specifically the trait of Christ’s love for believers that has made them “more than conquerors.” Christ’s love is a reference to more than just Christ’s disposition toward believers: it is a reference to how that disposition materialized through the concrete action of his substitutionary death on the cross. Thus, whatever Paul means by “more than conquerors,” it is a victory produced by Christ’s death on the cross, an act of his sacrificial love for believers.

The third key phrase contributing to a proper understanding of Paul’s claim that ὑπερνικῶμεν is the explanatory clause that begins 8:38, “For I am persuaded” (πέπεισμαι γὰρ). The explanatory “for” (γὰρ) provides Paul’s *reason* for his claim of Christian victory. Believers are victorious because they are secure from the threat of separation: “For I am persuaded *that* [nothing] *shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*”, 8:38–39). What persuaded Paul of the believer’s security and hence victory over the threat of separation? It was God’s love displayed on the Cross. As noted above, Moo states the point very well: “In vv. 35–39, Paul expands the picture [of judicial vindication discussed in the preceding verses] by adding to our assurance for the ‘last day’ assurance for all the days in between. Not only is the believer guaranteed ultimate vindication; he or she is also promised victory over all the forces of this world. *And the basis for this many-faceted assurance is the love of God for us in Christ*” (emphasis added).⁶¹ Dunn concurs noting that Paul’s persuasion “is based primarily on God’s love in Christ...as displayed especially on the cross...and subsequent triumph.”⁶² Observing the three phrases discussed in the preceding paragraphs leaves readers with the following thought: Paul was able to confidently declare believers victorious over “all these things” that threatened separation from God because “he was persuaded of” the believers’ security, a persuasion that came from observing the great act of love displayed on the Cross by “him that loved us.”

⁶⁰ Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 332.

⁶¹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 538–539.

⁶² Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 506.

What, then, does Paul mean when he triumphantly claims ὑπερνικῶμεν? He means that even in the midst of suffering, we remain the objects of God's love. Though suffering may cause the believer to temporarily perceive that he has been separated from the love of God, this is only in his perception. The theological reality tells a different story. How could Paul be so sure that personal experiences of suffering did not indicate God's abandonment? Paul's certainty came from the cross. When he began to feel like the author of Psalm 44, that he was experiencing inexplicable suffering and God seemed absent, Paul looked to the objective evidence of God's love manifestly demonstrated through the Cross of Christ to remind himself that his perception of God's abandonment did not match his reality.

In Romans 8:35–39, Paul offers this third and final comfort regarding the religious problem of evil that is made possible by the cross: while personal experiences of evil may be painful, they do not indicate divine abandonment. When this is less than clear to the suffering believer, he can look to the cross and say with Paul, "I am persuaded that [nothing] shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus my Lord."

Conclusion

While many Christians can offer some form of an explanation as to how the reality of evil does not undermine their belief in an all-good and all-powerful God, they will still struggle when the experience of evil becomes personal. At that point, what is needed is comfort, not an explanation. As Feinberg, reflecting on his own struggle with personal suffering, observes,

People wrestling with evil as I was don't need an intellectual discourse on how to justify God's ways to man in light of what's happening. That's what is needed to solve the abstract theological/philosophical [i.e., logical] problem of evil.... [The religious problem of evil] on the other hand, is a problem about how someone experiencing affliction can find it in himself to live with this God who doesn't stop it."⁶³

⁶³ Feinberg, *Many Faces of Evil*, 454.

Touching on this same observation, Plantinga observes, “Such a problem [i.e., a problem falling into the category of the religious problem of evil] calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.”⁶⁴ Just as Scripture provides the resources necessary to address the logical problem of evil, so Scripture also sufficiently provides the resources necessary to offer pastoral comfort to those dealing with the emotional aftermath of a personal experience with pain and suffering. One such passage contributing to Scripture’s comfort for Christians facing suffering is Paul’s conclusion to his exposition of the gospel, Romans 8:31–39. In this text, Paul assures believers that God withholds no good from them, that God has secured their future, and that God has not nor ever will abandon them. Each of these perspectives, Paul makes clear, is possible because of the cross. It is the cross that provides this source of comfort, this pastoral care, in response to the inevitable confrontations Christians will face with the religious problem of evil.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, quoted in Feinberg, *Many Faces of Evil*, 447.