

Scripture Reading for May 30th 2021

Romans 8:22-39 (NTE)

²² Let me explain. We know that the entire creation is groaning together, and going through labour pains together, up until the present time. ²³ Not only so: we too, we who have the first fruits of the Spirit's life within us, are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body. ²⁴ We were saved, you see, in hope. But hope isn't hope if you can see it! Who hopes for what they can see? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it eagerly – but also patiently.

²⁶ In the same way, too, the Spirit comes alongside and helps us in our weakness. We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but that same Spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words.

²⁷ And the Searcher of Hearts knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will.

²⁸ We know, in fact, that God works all things together for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ Those he foreknew, you see, he also marked out in advance to be shaped according to the model of the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn of a large family. ³⁰ And those he marked out in advance, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² God, after all, did not spare his own Son; he gave him up for us all! How then will he not, with him, freely give all things to us?

³³ Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who declares them in the right. ³⁴ Who is going to condemn? It is the Messiah, Jesus, who has died, or rather has been raised; who is at God's right hand, and who also prays on our behalf! ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the Messiah's love? Suffering, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "Because of you we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep destined for slaughter."¹

³⁷ No: in all these things we are completely victorious through the One who loved us. ³⁸ I am persuaded, you see, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor the present, nor the future, nor powers,

³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in King Jesus our Lord.

¹ Ps 44:22.

Sermon: The Trinitarian God is for Us!

Last week, Pentecost Sunday, I spoke on “Life in the Spirit” from the first part of Romans 8.² Today is Trinity Sunday and it’s appropriate that I continue with what Paul says next because, as we will see, he paints a picture of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working together as *co-partners*, as a *team*. As you know, the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible,³ but this traditional doctrine does, I believe, represent the *trajectory* of Scripture. God as Trinity is not, after all, something we can prove; it’s part of our *confessional* statement of faith⁴ and saying it reminds us that there will always be an element of mystery to God.⁵ Nevertheless, when we look at Romans 8 together with other New Testament texts, we can begin to see why the Church’s understanding of God became trinitarian. I simply ask you to be mindful of trinitarian hints within this majestic passage concerning the vast extent of divine love.

You’ll remember that Paul begins Romans 8 with a great affirmation, “There is now *no condemnation* for those in Christ Jesus.”⁶ He goes on to say that we also have the Spirit of God within us,⁷ and because our identity is now “in Christ,” we are co-heirs with Jesus. All this is awesome news! But, as Paul and his readers knew, at present we experience *suffering*. He saw this as an inevitable consequence of evil powers⁸ in the world that are resisting God and God’s ways – or, in the language of the Gospel writers, that oppose the kingdom of God. Paul saw these oppositional forces in various different ways. One example is in people and institutional systems that overtly oppose God for ideological reasons, such as the Roman Empire itself. This resulted in suffering simply for being a Christian and Paul frequently writes that, in such circumstances, we are sharing in the suffering of Christ.⁹ This has always struck me as a bit weird or pretentious, but makes sense from this wider perspective. And let’s not forget that Jesus himself said, “Take up your cross and follow me.”¹⁰ However, Paul, whose worldview was shaped by the Adam and Eve story,¹¹ *also* saw the consequence of sin’s power as infecting and corrupting the natural order and that this was the root cause of disease, decay, and even death itself.¹² That means we *all* experience the suffering, including cancer and COVID, as a consequence of a broken [or fallen] world.¹³ But Paul was utterly convinced that God had raised Jesus from the dead and he interpreted

² Rom 8:1-17, see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Life-in-the-Spirit.pdf> .

³ “Trinity” was a term invented by Tertullian (ca. 160–225 CE). Nevertheless, the work of the triune

⁴ In other words, it is a *communal* statement that begins, “We believe . . .”

⁵ Nevertheless, there are good number of biblical passages that that have Father, Son, and Spirit mentioned in close proximity and so provide the seeds of this doctrine: 2 Cor 13:13; Matt 28:18–20; 1 Cor 12:4–6; 2 Cor 1:21–22; 1 Pet 1:2; Eph 4:4–6; Rev 1:4–5.

⁶ Rom 8:1 – see [2].

⁷ Rom 8:9, 11.

⁸ See [1] where I discuss the power of the “flesh” and “Sin.”

⁹ See Rom 8:17; Phil 3:10; 2 Cor 1:6; see also 1 Pet 4:13.

¹⁰ Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27; Matt 10:38; 16:24–26; see also John 16:33.

¹¹ See Gen 2:4-3:34; esp. 3:17. This is evident in Rom 5:12-21.

¹² Regardless as to whether this is (scientifically/physically) true or not; this is Paul’s *theological* perspective.

¹³ Natural evils include: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts, and volcanoes, cancer, parasites, sickness, genetic deformities, etc. See Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018). Note such suffering is irrespective of one’s faith position or worldview; it’s universal.

that [paradigmatic] event as demonstrating that death itself – the ultimate enemy, the anti-creation – as having been *definitively* overcome. In the language of Narnia, the resurrection was a sign that the long, dark winter was coming to an end and spring was on its way. Paul therefore understood that all those “in Christ” would, at the end of time, *also* be given new, incorruptible bodies because we are *co-heirs* with Messiah Jesus.¹⁴ Furthermore, since the resurrection involved physicality, and because the Jewish worldview was wholistic, Paul understood that the broken, physical creation itself was also to be renewed,¹⁵ and that the resurrection body of Jesus was the first fruit of the new creation, along with the Holy Spirit’s presence now being within us.¹⁶ Paul therefore understood the Spirit’s presence as a promise, or seal, as well as a preview of greater things to come.¹⁷

This background context helps explain what Paul says next: “For we know that all creation has been *groaning* as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also *groan*, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we *long* for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait *with eager hope* for the day when God will give *us* our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us.”¹⁸ But for the moment, since we trust in God’s trustworthiness, we live in patient, confident hope.¹⁹ At the same time, because our physical bodies are part of the natural order, we *groan* along with creation and say along with the psalmist, “How long, Lord, how long?”²⁰ And in this weakened, in-between state,²¹ when we don’t know *how*²² to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit within us comes to our aid and *groans* too.

Paul then provides some encouraging news, and it’s the first aspect of the divine partnership or teamwork I mentioned at the beginning. Paul writes that God, “the Searcher of Hearts knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit pleads for God’s people according to God’s will.”²³ What this means is that our prayers are *co-prayers* with the Holy Spirit and are *always* heard and understood by God, the Heart Searcher! God the Father and the Holy Spirit are *team* players, and the Spirit within us is *advocating for us* before God.²⁴ While the Spirit does not take over our responsibility to pray, the Spirit

¹⁴ Rom 8:21; Phil 3:20–21; I Cor 15; see also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf>.

¹⁵ The language of Gen 3 is of “curse” (alongside blessing), and in Rom 5 of Jesus as the new/last Adam.

¹⁶ One could also see the miracles of Jesus as signs of that new reality (the kingdom of God) breaking in.

¹⁷ See Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14. In the context of Acts 2, the Spirit’s presence is also seen as a fulfilment of Joel 2:28-32.

¹⁸ Rom 8:22-23, NLB.

¹⁹ Rom 8:24-25.

²⁰ Ps 13:1; 6:2; see also Hab 1:2.

²¹ The use of the word “weakness” in this context is a reference to our present state of not yet being *fully* redeemed, i.e., an inaugurated eschatology—the “now and not-yet” reign of God (See Wright, “Romans,” 598). Robert Jewett expresses the same sentiment: “Our weakness refers to the believer’s vulnerable position of being caught between two ages, knowing enough of the coming age to yearn for it (along with the rest of creation) but continuing to be assaulted by the principalities and powers of the old age of the flesh” (Jewett, *Romans*, 522).

²² Rom 8:26 (NRSV – note NIV has “what,” not “how”). Moreover, the Greek word for “helps” is strong, as in “concrete aid,” or the one who actively takes the brunt of the load that we cannot carry alone.

²³ Rom 8:27. See also 1 Cor 2:10.

²⁴ This role is consistent with that of an “advocate” (*paraclete*); but even in John’s Gospel, the author’s usage of that term has the Spirit’s work directed *towards* humankind rather than oriented to the Father (See in John 14:16, 26; 15:26, 16:7).

is always ready and willing to come to our assistance. This is comforting news, especially in the context of suffering. The Christian *never* prays alone. (And while this is not explicitly Trinitarian thinking, one can see how it can be very easily adapted to that.) For Christians who are waiting in patience and living in hope – perhaps a fading hope that’s being overwhelmed by hardship,²⁵ this is a bold affirmation as to the *effectiveness* of prayer. God is at work bringing good out of evil, even as we wait for the final renewal of all things.

It is in this context, then, that Paul continues: “God makes²⁶ all things work together for good with those who love God.”²⁷ Remember, in Romans 8, *God* is the subject,²⁸ and God *will* accomplish the redemption and restoration of all things, including creation. God is active in the world, partnering not only with those who have his Spirit abiding in them, but through nature’s coincidences *and* unwitting others to ultimately being about God’s purposes. We are to be reassured by that, along with the knowledge that our heart-searching God knows the mind of the Spirit, our Advocate.

Paul, working towards a crescendo, then says: “If God is for us, *who* is against us?”²⁹ The image appears to shift to a courtroom drama depicting the final judgement. Paul’s question, which he then answers, is simply that if God himself is on our side, then we need *not* fear the threat of *any* accuser or prosecutor. After all, Paul says, God did not *withhold* the sending of his own precious Son; God gave him up *for* us all, and that alone demonstrates that God is on *our* side.³⁰ That being the case, it makes no sense that God would be against those who are “in Christ”? “Who, then,” continues Paul, “Will bring a charge *against* God’s chosen ones?”³¹ After all, it is *God* who has declared them to be in the right - or acquitted!”³² Of all the inconceivable hypotheses, the least plausible one is that Jesus the Messiah could condemn us given that he died and was raised *on our behalf*. Yes, God has now placed Jesus in the place of executive power at his right hand, but Jesus *won’t* be accusing us – instead he is our Advocate praying and interceding to God *for* us!³³ Not only is Jesus *also* a team player with God the Father – but *both* of them are on *our* side! As Paul said at the very beginning of the chapter, “There is now *no condemnation* for those who are “in Christ.”³⁴

²⁵ See Rom 8:25.

²⁶ W. Barclay translates this “intermingles” (p131); F. F. Bruce likes the NEB which as the *Spirit* as the subject here, not God (p166).

²⁷ Rom 8: 28; see *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol 3, p281 (see also NTE). (Add at the end, “in whom the Spirit is operating” (Wright, p600).

²⁸ Not “all things” (nor the Spirit – see [25]).

²⁹ Rom 8:31b. This echoes Isa 50:8-9.

³⁰ This too can be easily seen in trinitarian terms.

³¹ The reference to “chosen ones” picks the predestination thought in Rom 8:28-30 and *includes* non-Jews.

³² Rom 8:33. This “right” is both a vindication, a judicial verdict, and a restored relationship.

³³ Rom 8:34b, see also Heb 7:22-28; 1 John 2:1. There are other passages that indicate that God has delegated Jesus as the eschatological *judge* (see also the traditional creeds), and it is therefore at least plausible that he *could* condemn us. That Jesus *would* condemn those “in Christ” is rejected by Paul; it’s incoherent. (See also Ps 110:1; Mark 12:36.)

³⁴ Rom 8:1.

Given that logical progression concerning potential accusers, Paul then asks another question: “*Who* then shall separate us from the Messiah’s love?”³⁵ What about our sufferings? Some people blame God in their sufferings and even think they are sign of God’s disfavor, that God is punishing them for something they did, or that God no longer loves them. Those whose understanding of divine sovereignty is of God being in *total* control of *all* events often come to such a negative conclusion - understandably so, since they think God is a micromanager. But that is *not* the case! And, dare I say, that is *not* how Paul sees things. He then lists a string of hardships all of which he himself has experienced: persecution, hunger, poverty and destitution, physical danger and even death threats.³⁶ None of those things mean that Jesus no longer loves us, says Paul. Such things can happen, but *never* think they are judgments or punishments from God or a sign that God has rejected or abandoned us. That is the wrong conclusion; God is *for* us!³⁷ Paul would say that despite all such suffering, we – like the risen and glorified Jesus – will be vindicated on the day of judgement because our identity is to be found “in Christ” and he loves us and advocates for us - along with the Holy Spirit.

Paul then concludes with one of his best-loved affirmations of faith; he says: “I am *convinced* that *nothing* can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, *nothing* in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³⁸ This is a powerful and profound proclamation that we are to absorb into every pore of our being. Paul has earlier acknowledged the power of “Sin” (with a capital “S”) or the “flesh” that opposes God and God’s ways, but because of the death’s defeat in the resurrection he knows that God’s power is far superior. Nothing in all creation – no one and no power – can ever separate us from love of God that is revealed in Jesus, the Messiah. Whatever we are facing in life, hold on firm to this good news. For exhausted marathon runners partway through life’ race, this message is to cheer us on to the finish line – remembering that Spirit also helps us in our weakness.

Paul has painted a large canvas with broad brush strokes so that we can see our place in God’s overall map for history. I don’t believe in predestination, as such, but I do believe in *partnership*. If we were to zoom down on the canvas to where we are situated, we would see that it is incomplete. There is more detail to be added. We make a contribution to that picture by our choices and actions. Paul says that God the Father is partnering with the Holy Spirit and with the risen and glorified Messiah. And the latter two are advocating for those “in Christ” before the Father. They are rooting for us!³⁹ God the Father is

³⁵ Rom 8:35. (In trinitarian terms, the Messiah’s love mirrors God the Father’s love! See also Rom 8:39b.)

³⁶ See 2 Cor 4:7-15; 11:23-33; Col 1:24.

³⁷ N. T. Wright puts it this way: “The suffering of Christians was to be taken up into the ongoing purposes of God, not to add to the unique achievements of Jesus the Messiah but to embody it in the world.” (NIBC, vol X, p614)

³⁸ Rom 8:38-39.

³⁹ The believer, then, has *two* intercessors: the ascended Jesus who intercedes in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and the Spirit who intercedes while resident within believers. They are working together to bring us into the Father’s presence.

also for us! The question is are *we* partnering with the Spirit, the Son, and the Father? If we are, then however our contribution to God's canvas turns out, whether it's significant or minor, whether it's in the background or foreground, we can be confident that God will take all those efforts – including our sufferings - and work it into something good and beautiful, and in ways that we can't imagine or foresee.

If your prayers today are ones of anguish and silent groans; be reassured that the Holy Spirit co-prays with you and God knows the mind of the Spirit and therefore hears your prayers. If you are bewildered in your suffering, be reassured that God is not punishing you or has abandoned you. Suffering happens. If you feel unforgiven by God, be assured that there is no condemnation for those "in Christ." If you feel unloved and unlovable by God, think again. No thing and no one can separate you from God's love. Never forget: God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is for you, and inviting you and me to be part of the divine dance. Amen. Let us pray.