

Fourth, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. And fifth, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Paul does not end this section with his fifth point. He goes back to his fourth point that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, and he repeats it with even greater emphasis than before. He wants to end the section with this favorite theme of his, which is a key to the Christian's response to suffering: the love of God.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38–39).

Suffering is not a pleasant word—but love is. If there is love in our hearts we can experience beauty amidst the ugliness of suffering. The beauty of the Spirit-filled life is that there is such love which helps us face suffering. In Romans 5:5 (TEB), Paul said that "God's love has flooded our inmost heart." When love floods our inmost heart, it washes away the bitterness that may have come into our lives because of suffering.

To be filled with the Spirit is to have a love relationship with God. Nothing brings true radiance to a person's life as much as love does. And we are people who have been loved. People may have been wicked to us, but God's love is greater than man's wickedness. The pain of that wickedness may remain, but love takes away the bitterness of it. Amidst the pain, we are radiant.

In the early centuries when Christians were severely persecuted, a martyr was smiling as he was being burned at the stake. His persecutor was annoyed by his smile and asked him what there was to be smiling about. He replied, "I saw the glory of God and was glad." The pain of the flames, the anger of the opponents of the gospel, had not separated him from the love of Christ.

Paul begins and ends this discussion of suffering by talking about the primacy of our relationship with Christ. In verse 17, he said we share in Christ's suffering, which is an affirmation of the fellowship of suffering. He ends by saying that nothing can separate us from our love relationship with Christ. This implies that when trials come our way, we should make it our first priority to cultivate our love relationship with God. We must look for a solution for the problem, but that is not what's most important. Our priority is to maintain our love relationship with God.

Psalms 42 begins with the words, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." This is the heart cry of a person who is suffering. He has lost the sense of God's presence and now he prays to God to give him the joy that he once knew. It is a Psalm that shows the struggle of a sufferer who feels that God is far away. But it also shows the determination of the psalmist to get back to a warm relationship of love with God. In the same way, we, too, must seek first to deepen our relationship with God when we encounter difficulties.

Someone once asked Charles Spurgeon, "What persuasion are you of?" I suppose they expected a philosophical or intellectual answer. Today this would mean something like, "Are you a Calvinist or an Arminian—charismatic or a non-charismatic?" Spurgeon's response was: "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." That was the most important thing about Spurgeon. He was a person who was loved by God. And that is the most important thing about us too!

We may be called to suffer, but we are loved. And because we are loved, we are radiant.

## BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 9–15

# How Can They Hear?

David Penman

## How, and Through Whom, Will They Hear the Message? (Romans 10:14–17)

For eight full mind-stretching chapters, the apostle Paul outlined the plan God had established for the redemption and salvation of humanity. He repeatedly makes it clear: Those who put their faith in Jesus the Messiah will be justified before God and given the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to live a good and holy life. His language is complex, and the ideas are difficult, but there is no doubting their intention. Those who are in Christ, who accept and follow him, are the true people of God. Those who don't, whether Jew or Gentile, are *not* the people of God. This is painful, but the message and emphasis of Scripture is unequivocal on this point.

This great theological argument comes to a triumphant conclusion in Romans 8:35–39:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Following the dramatic and exultant expressions of his own previous words, it is almost as if Paul is suddenly reminded of what he has been repeating for eight chapters about the glory, the wonder, the indescribable joy of recognition, and the potential adoption of all humankind into God's special precious family. Suddenly, he comes back to earth!

Alexander Whyte once wrote in response to this passage: "What will it be to *be* there?" Then suddenly and solemnly, he added, "And what will it be *not* to be there?"

"What if you are not there?" or, in the context of the passage, "What of the Jews?" Paul had already begun to face the implications of this question earlier, especially in chapters 3 and 4, but now he must do so again and at length, so there is no misunderstanding.

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A shadow continues to emerge in this letter to the Romans. What about the Jews, to whom the indescribable gift was first offered? What of God's purpose and plan for them? In the light of all that has been said and written, where do they now fit into the kingdom? As one writer has said:

They were Paul's own people, his own flesh and blood. More than that, they were God's own people. Everything that could have been done to prepare them for their supreme privilege, he had done for them. Out of Egypt, God had called his own (Hosea 11:1); his glory had gone before them in the pillars of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21); he had made his covenants with them, and given them the Law, the temple worship, and the prophetic promises. He had raised up Christ himself as one of themselves (Romans 9:4-5); yet they had rejected him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him (John 1:12). No wonder Paul was wracked with grief and ceaseless pain (9:2), willing to suffer a curse if his brethren might be saved (9:3). And if it was bad for Paul, what must it have been like for God, as the Gentile world accepted the gospel, and the Jews turned it down?

The story is now well known. In this Congress few, if any, would doubt or reject the clear teaching of the apostle of God, that the true children of God are those according to the Spirit and not the flesh (2:28-29). Abraham is our father, because we are children of that righteousness which comes through faith (4:13).

We, my dear friends, are the Israel of God. We are the fulfillment of the promises of God. We are those who, by faith, can move mountains! We stand justified, not by works, not by evangelical faith, not even by the Lausanne Covenant, but by the grace and mercy of our God—freely, generously, and lavishly poured upon us so we might be among the adopted children of God.

What then of the Jews? The text is stark in its clarity:

It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring (9:8). It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy (v. 16). As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my beloved one' who is not my loved one" (v. 25). What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith (v. 30).

It is abundantly clear that those who are in Christ are the Israel of God, whether they are of Jewish descent or not. Those who by faith have accepted the Messiah are members of the messianic community. They are the people of Jesus, the Israel of God, the true descendants of Abraham. We need to do everything in our power to lovingly and sensitively share this Jesus with all those who do not know him, whether Jew or Gentile.

These words imply a warning. It is the same warning given to his people long ago:

You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins (Amos 3:2).

As the inheritors of the promises, as the recipients of the privileges, as those upon whom his abundant mercy has been lavished—great will be our judgment if we continue in our sin, fail to obey his commands, and ignore the injustices borne by the peoples of the world for whom Jesus died.

In this context, consider Romans 10:9-13:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

I want to focus on three emphases in the questions asked in the verses which follow:

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15)

### The Recurring Use of the Word *They*

The emphasis is overwhelming. In these two brief verses, "they" are mentioned at least seven times. It is an all-embracing term, from which there is no exclusion.

Who are these multitudes mentioned here? At the Congress on World Evangelism (COWE) in Thailand, in 1976, we identified them as the three billion people made up of over seventeen hundred separate people groups. On a global scale, they can be described as the world of Islam, the world of Hinduism, the world of Marxism, and so on. Locally, for many of us, they are the recently formed community groups of our complex multicultural societies.

During that conference in Pattaya, several of us traveled to the Thai/Kampuchean border to spend a weekend at the Kam Put refugee camp near Thap Sal. It was a moving time for me, not just because of the terrible suffering of those beautiful people, but also because of the physical, emotional, and spiritual progress they had made since their arrival in their temporary homes in Thailand. These are part of the "they" of the passage.

I will never forget my first visit to Dacca in Bangladesh. There seemed to be people everywhere. "Wall to wall people," someone once said to me, reflecting every dimension of human hope, endurance and despair. These too are the "they" mentioned in Romans 10.

Some years ago, my daughter, Christine, and I traveled from Addis Ababa to the Tigray provincial town of Mekelle in Ethiopia. More than a hundred thousand refugees encircled the town in three vast feeding centers. On the day we arrived, 146 people had died from hunger, cold and disease. It was a terrible experience, which defies meaningful description. In one small medical tent we discovered several rows of critically ill people. Christine and I stood awkwardly in the midst of that dramatic little group, not knowing what to do or what to say. In fact, on reflection, words would have been an intrusion. Our attention was drawn to a couple lying in the corner, on either side of their desperately ill baby. We felt so helpless, and as we turned to go, the woman looked up from where she was lying, and with a tremendous effort raised her hand from across her body and indicated she knew we were there. It was almost as if she understood how we felt, and wanted to tell us that she was pleased that we had come. The Lord Jesus died not only for us, but also for such people in every corner of our needy world.

The decade my family spent working among Muslim peoples in West Asia and the Middle East continues to affect and influence my ministry profoundly. The whole area touches my heart and brings tears to my eyes every day. Not just because of a spiritual lostness, real though it is, but because of their overwhelming social and emotional needs as well.

I have made a point in recent years to make regular visits to Iran and have been fortunate enough to have remarkable access to every level of that society. Though time does not allow me to share this fascinating and dramatic story, these are also a part of the “they” intended by the apostle.

*I find it increasingly difficult to explain the gospel and its implications apart from the need to love individual people and to respond practically and meaningfully to their heartfelt, expressed needs.* As we face the enormous task of world evangelization, it is easy to turn to the “responsive,” or to stress the priority of salvation-oriented evangelism, and unintentionally end up washing our hands of pressing physical needs and hard, oppressive regimes wherever they may be found. The “they” of our passage are found in such as these.

In another context, I knew of a Christian congregation in the Middle East which was so unwilling to accept a new Muslim convert that when he came forward for communion first in the line, no one else in the church would then touch the cup from which he had drunk. The “they” of our passage includes even such as these.

It embraces the rich and poor on the streets of Bangkok, the free and the oppressed in the countries of Latin America, the illiterate and the well-educated in the continent of Africa, the insensitive affluent and the neglected religious minorities of Australia, and even those who are trapped within the bounds of their own religious prejudices and attitudes.

The “they,” therefore, is all-inclusive. It is no surprise to discover this theme throughout the Scriptures (emphasis added):

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (Romans 1:16).

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (John 3:16).

## The Recurring Use of the Word *How*

This passage also repeatedly asks the question, “How?”:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14–15).

There are a multitude of possible answers, but we will look at just two:

1. *Through sending.* One of the most remarkable developments in evangelism during the past decade has been the growth of the African, Asian, and Latin American missionary movements. According to one estimate, there have been forty thousand missionaries from five hundred missionary societies sent from these countries over the past twenty-five years.

In Australia we have a great deal to learn from this. I am convinced the answer to world evangelization lies not in an increased technological or communications efficiency, but in the sacrificial response in word and deed of each local congregation to the needs of those around them and far away.

I do not believe any local congregation, no matter what its situation, can

afford to deprive itself of the encouragement and nourishment that comes by sending missionaries and reading about missionaries beyond their church walls.

2. *Through suffering.* I know of no other pattern for missions (evangelism and service) than that of the Cross. As we partake of the Incarnation, we shall inevitably be drawn into our Lord’s lifestyle and share in his sufferings through his people.

On the last evening of our visit to Ethiopia, members of the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) hosted a dinner to say farewell. I sat next to the leader of the Mennonite community. I had read in Michael Bourdeaux’s Keston News Service of the suffering of the evangelical churches in Ethiopia. In this special moment, I was able to clarify and fill in the details under the protection of this public place.

During the previous months, two thousand churches had been closed and more than two hundred pastors had been imprisoned or had disappeared without trace. The facts were distressing, but the strength and faith of my new friend provided a lasting memory. Their witness is a shining example to all their people. Their answer to the “how” in our passage is through suffering.

During my time in the Middle East, I visited Saudi Arabia several times. I will never forget the quiet steadfastness of the handful of faithful secret believers who risked their lives to meet with me in clandestine sessions. I have information that they are still holding these meetings.

I am inclined to believe the church which does not know something of the meaning of suffering cannot authenticate its evangelism—either at home or overseas. This is the point where so many of us find the challenge beyond us. We have become comfortable, soft, and utterly ineffectual.

## The Emphasis on the *Message*

We are to bring “good news” (v. 15), the Good News that liberates, enlivens, and transforms not only the heart but the circumstances, and brings hope.

Frequently, this message is received through proclamation, as in Cairo, when Pope Shenouda (who is now free after years of confinement) preaches powerfully and effectively to thousands every week. No one should doubt that this message is primarily found in the proclamation of the saving, substitutionary love of Jesus—in his dying for our sins on the cross so we might be set free.

Any dichotomy between proclamation and the activity which godly compassion demands is false and is a denial of the Good News. The message we offer brings the potential for wholeness in every part of life. Christians cannot allow a false division to continue in their proclamation of a message that saves, and a life that transforms.

May the Lord Jesus help us to respond sensitively and humbly to the enormous numbers of people who are without Christ in our world today, by grappling seriously with the “how” (through sending and suffering), and by the sharing of our amazing message of Good News. “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of peace with God and bring glad tidings of good things.” In other words, how welcome are those who come [or who go] preaching God’s Good News! (Romans 10:15, TLB).