

Faith That Thinks Its Emotions

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[0 : 00] Preaching a sermon on the text that's before us today may at first seem like an abrupt departure from the tact we have been sailing these past few weeks, but I trust you'll soon realize that it is not, that it is a necessary exercise to keep us on course.

For in this text, the Apostle Paul, the apostle of the heart set free, models for us the spiritual discipline which enables us to stay on tack when the stormy winds and waves seek to threaten our spiritual equilibrium.

Our text today is Romans 8, 31 to 39, without doubt one of the most powerful texts of Scripture. If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of God's Word?

What then shall we say to all these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect?

[1 : 19] God is the one who justifies. Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died. Yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Lord, just as it is written, for Thy sake we are being put to death all day long.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen? Amen? Amen? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you inspired these questions in the mind and then on, in the mind of the Apostle Paul and then on paper.

And we pray now that by your mercy and grace you would cause them to come off the paper again and into our minds and hearts as never before.

[2 : 43] For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. You may be seated. What then shall we say to these things?

These things, these struggles and stresses of life in this age, these things that throw us off balance emotionally, this suffering of the present age as Paul calls it earlier in Romans 8, what then shall we say to these things?

Early this century, a Christian psychologist by the name of James Allen wrote a book entitled, *As a Man Thinketh*. And the thesis of the book was this.

A man is a Man is literally what he thinks. The author of the book of Proverbs.

The author of the book of Proverbs who centuries ago said, as a man thinks within himself, so he is.

[3 : 51] As a woman reasons within herself, so he is. As a woman reasons within her soul, so she is. Dr. Allen's insights have been taken a man's insights. Dr. Allen's insights have been taken a step further by Dr. Arch Hart, who was the former dean of the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary.

In his helpful book, *Feeling Free*, Dr. Hart writes this, people feel what they think. People feel what they think.

Their emotions are the complete sum of their thoughts. Now, Dr. Hart and those who follow him are not anti-emotions.

They are not ivory tower theologians who never feel. It's just that they are wanting us to understand that our emotional responses to life emerge from our thinking about life.

The popular idea is that our feelings are but the natural consequences of the events that occur in our lives.

[4 : 54] The popular idea could be expressed with the simple formula, E leads to F. That should have come on. Lorian, help me. There they are.

Right? Did I get that right? Okay. The simple formula that E leads to F. That an activating event automatically leads to a consequent feeling.

Now, if this is the case, if events simply lead to feelings or emotions, why is it that two people who experience the same event have two different emotional responses?

During the rainy season in Manila, Why, when the thunder clapped that loudly, did I stand in awe and wonder, but the children cried and ran for Mommy's lap?

Why, when the earth shook so violently in January of 1994, did some people calmly go about the work of cleaning up, while others were immobilized for days, weeks, even months?

[6 : 07] Something more than E leads to F must be going on here. Dr. Hart, following Dr. Allen, argues that between the E and the F, between the activating event and the consequent feeling, there is a B.

There's a belief system. And what gives rise to the emotions is not the event, but what we believe about the event, what we think about the event.

The more accurate equation, then, is that E, the activating event, plus B, the belief system, leads to F, the consequent feeling. It is the intermediate belief system that gives meaning to the event, and the emotion is the consequence of the meaning and not the event.

The most important implication of all of this, says Dr. Hart, is that our emotional reactions to life are not a permanent part of our personality, thank God, but rather they emerge out of the way we see ourselves, the way we see God, the way we see others.

Our beliefs, our ideas, our attitudes, determine our emotional reactions in pretty much the same way as a rudder determines the direction a boat will go. True, the wind, our environment, and the ocean currents, our biology, have something to say about the direction we go, but they can only interact with our rudders, with our beliefs to produce the final outcome.

[7 : 39] If our rudders are used properly, they can, in fact, be used to transform the negative influences of the wind and the current to our advantage. It all takes a little effort and time, but slowly but surely it becomes a natural response.

The equation is E plus B leads to the feeling. Let me try to be a bit more precise here. In trying to understand our responses to life, it's helpful to distinguish, as Dr. Larry Crabb does, between two categories of emotions.

One category is the pleasant-unpleasant. The other is the constructive-destructive. Now, God has made us reactive beings. A slap produces pain.

A warm caress makes us feel good. If there were no pain following the slap and no pleasure from the embrace, something is wrong, because our bodies are not reacting, then, to the natural stimuli. So it is correct to say that E leads to F in that pleasant events usually generate pleasant emotions and unpleasant events usually generate unpleasant feelings.

[8 : 49] But here, then, is the crux. Does the pleasant or unpleasant emotion then move in a constructive or destructive way? Does the pain of the slap lead to anger and bitterness or does it lead to sorrow and sympathy?

Does the warmth of the caress lead to affection and affirmation or does it lead to lust? Events do trigger the first category of emotions, pleasant and unpleasant.

But it is the intermediate belief system, the meaning we give to those events, that then determine the second category of emotions, the constructive or destructive emotions. Now, the Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius understood this centuries ago.

He said, if you are pained, if you are disturbed by an external thing, it is not the thing that disturbs you, but your judgment about it. Now, my judgment about it may be right.

It may be fully rational, and I ought to be pained and disturbed. But my judgment about it may be wrong. Now, I think the Apostle Paul, understood all this. I think that the Apostle Paul is not only the church's greatest theologian, he's the church's greatest psychologist.

[10 : 04] And he's the greatest psychologist because he was first a great theologian. In Romans 31 to 39, Paul models for us how to build up the B, the belief system, so that we can respond to the events in our lives with constructive emotions.

What then shall we say to these things? What then shall we say to these things? In this passage, Paul is practicing what he preaches in Romans 12 to, be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Now, the key word in this text is the word in verse 38, I am convinced. I am convinced. The Greek word has the root meaning of to weigh.

The Apostle Paul is saying to us, look, friends, I have thought this through carefully. I've worked it through. I've weighed it on the scales, and the scales tip in this direction.

And he calls us then to go through this same process. He calls us to face the concrete, objective, real facts of life on this planet, but to do so in light of the equally concrete, equally objective, equally real facts of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and priestly reign of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 32] He lifts up before us in this passage the real troubles, the real and relentless pressures, the real demands, the real disappointments, the real dangers we face in this world, and then right alongside it, he asks us to lift up the real facts that took place in the early 30s of the first century when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, buried in a borrowed tomb, but emerged alive again.

Stand them up against each other. What then shall we say to these things? He's doing that because our emotional response to these things is not the direct consequence of these things, but it is the consequence of what we believe about these things, and in particular, what we believe about the place the living God has in these things.

In this passage, Paul is calling us to the most practical discipline of Christian living, doing theology, letting the events of the gospel determine how we are going to respond to the events of life.

Now, Paul does this in this passage by posing four rhetorical questions. I personally think that the Apostle Paul asked himself these questions again and again.

From this passage, I get the picture of Paul walking around, having this conversation going on in his mind, a running dialogue, responding to what was happening around him by talking to himself using these four questions.

[13 : 07] And as he did, the belief system was being built up, slowly but surely changed, so that his response to these things was changing.

Are you with me? What I'd like to do with the rest of the time I have this morning then is lead us in a little practice exercise. I invite you now to take yourself in hand and to ask yourself these four rhetorical questions one at a time.

I'm not suggesting that this exercise is going to lead to any change in our circumstances.

Gospelized thinking, as I call it, may not affect any change in the circumstances you and I face today, but this discipline will help us determine whether or not our responses to our circumstances are constructive or destructive.

What then shall we say to these things? Question one, if God is for us, who is against us? In the face of the very real opposition in life, about which we feel either anger or hurt or fear, Paul challenged us to ask, if God is for us, who is against us?

That phrase, God is for us, is a neat summary of the whole message of the book of Romans and thereby a summary of the gospel. For the gospel events, the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ loudly declare forever, God is for us.

[14 : 42] Karl Barth, great theologian of this century, encouraged people to regularly say this phrase out loud and to say it four times, emphasizing a different word each time.

God is for us. God is for us. God is for us. God is for us.

God is for us. God is for us. You want to do it with me? We'll do it four times and emphasize each one of those words. Ready? God is for us. God is for us.

God is for us. God is for us. Now, if the living God, who is the creator and redeemer of the earth, is for us, who can possibly be against us?

Well, I'll tell you who. There's a lot of who's against us. There are biological who's, viruses and bacteria. There are meteorological who's, hurricanes and droughts.

[15 : 51] There are geological who's, earthquakes and volcanoes. There are human who's, terrorists and thieves, arsonists and assassins. And there are spiritual who's against us.

Paul refers in this text to angels and principalities and powers, what he refers to in Ephesians as the powers out of the pit of hell, out of the forces of darkness.

Jesus refers to that one he calls Satan, the evil one, who is against us. He tells us that there is a personal power of evil that is out to destroy all the creative works of God.

Peter says he prowls like a lion looking for someone to devour. If God is for us, who is against us? Paul is not suggesting that simply because I know God is for me in Jesus Christ, no one will come against me.

What he is calling us to do is think. What, who, can finally stand against God? Can any human power stand against God?

[16:53] Can any demonic power stand against God? Can any economic or political or military power if God is for us, who can finally prevail against us?

Paul tells us, think, you've got to take yourself in hand and think, reason it out. The cross and empty tomb declared that God has met all the foes and won. Jesus Christ has defeated all of the opposition and he's done so in an apparently weak way.

at the cross he has dethroned all the powers of evil. Our fear of the opposition is not due to the opposition.

Our fear of the opposition is due to what we believe about the opposition. If God is for us, who can possibly stand against us? Question two.

He who did not spare his own son but delivered him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things? Here Paul is helping us deal with this fear we have of losing out on the goodness of life.

[18:05] The fear we have that we're going to lose out on God's best. When things seem to be falling apart Paul calls us to ask what do the gospel events say?

At the cross the living God has given us God's most precious possession. He has given us the son. God did not hold him back but he delivered him up for us all. Since God has done the unspeakably great and costly thing may we not be certain that he will do the lesser thing for us?

If God has given us the greatest gift to meet our greatest need will he not give the lesser gifts to meet our lesser needs? Imagine that you were in great need and the only way that that need would be met is if Sharon and I handed over one of our children to death.

If Sharon and I loved you enough to hand one of our children over to death do you not think that we would give you everything else we had to? Because everything else is nothing compared to my child.

If God has handed over his son can we not count on God to hand over everything else with him? Well what do you think?

[19:25] What do you think? It will determine the quality of our lives. The question gets at the bottom line issue we face all the way along in the Christian journey.

The issue is can we trust God to take care of us if we go all out in discipleship? If I really obeyed him if I went with his call upon my life will I have enough to take care of my family?

Think says Paul work it out argue against your fear what does the cross say? I am the one who gave freely the very best I am the one who gave you myself because I have handed over my son you can count on me to give you with him my peace and my power and my wisdom because I have handed over my son to you you can count on me to give him with you my rest and my patience and my love and my kingdom now how can I know that tomorrow morning how can I know that on Tuesday afternoon because the circumstances will say so because my feelings will say so no because the gospel events say so when I begin to doubt the generosity and faithfulness of God Paul tells me to go back to the cross stand beneath the cross and ask he did not spare his own son but freely gave him up for us will he not with him freely give us all things will he not well what do you say something's holding us back what is it could it be the sense that God only freely gives things to those who are consistently good question three who will bring a charge against

God's elect God is the one who justifies who is the one who condemns do you ever do something about which you feel so badly that you wonder if you are after all redeemed am I the only one who's going to answer that yes do you ever do something that makes you think and wonder whether or not you really are saved your pride is so great your greed so strong your lust so rampant your selfishness so deep that you begin to fear losing your place in the family of God you confess your sin you go through all the things we're told to do and yet you feel unacceptable to God ever happen to you the guilt and shame just won't go away what are we to do in those times we are to think says Paul we are to stand those feelings up against the gospel who will bring a charge against

God's elect God is the one who justifies who is the one to condemn the question brings us back to the cross there the holy one freely justifies us there the holy one freely acquits and forgives us there the judge of the entire universe hands down the verdict pardoned in full and here's the crucial fact to

remember about that it's a verdict based not on what I have done or not done with my life it's a verdict based on what Jesus Christ has done with his life now think says Paul who is in the position to reverse God's verdict who in your life is in the position of reversing the verdict of the judge of the universe now as a matter of fact there are lots of people who think they are in that position in our lives there are a lot of people who would like to throw it all back at us and the evil one would like to do that the book of Revelation calls him the accuser of the brethren day and night bringing accusation before God but who are humans verdicts compared to

[23 : 34] God's verdicts what's Satan's verdict compared to God's verdict are you with me reason with your feelings says Paul is there anyone in all the universe who can make an accusation against you and make it stick well as a matter of fact there is someone there is someone who can do that who is he Jesus Christ by virtue of his unique status by virtue of his sinless life Jesus Christ has the authority to judge and condemn me I must grasp that before I can understand the gospel he has the right and authority to do that but what what does verse 34 say Christ Jesus died yes was raised from the dead sits at the right hand of God and intercedes for us

J.B. Phillips in his translation rightly takes that little phrase for us and connects it with all four verbs about Jesus Christ Christ died for us Christ rose for us Christ reigns in power for us Christ prays for us you see what that text is saying the only person in the universe who has the right to condemn me died for me rose for me reigns in power for me and prays for me who is there who can condemn me in light of that these verbs create a picture in my mind it's a picture of me being in a courtroom all kinds of people bring accusation against me they tell the judge the sins that I have done and the evil one comes in and tells all the sins the people didn't see and after they've all had their say Jesus who is sitting on the bench in front of me turns to them turns to me and says how do you plead and I say guilty my lord and he says well said my son and then he turns to the accusers and reminds them that he the judge of judges died on the cross for me that he took upon himself the punishment the sins they're pointing out deserve and then looking at them but pointing at me he says case closed pardon in full yet there are those times when even after going through that scene

I still wrestle with that shame and guilt even after owning my sin and hearing that verdict why why do I do you experience that why is that that we continue that way it's because we will not forgive ourselves we will not forgive ourselves which is to say that in that moment we have dared to usurp the position of Jesus Christ in not forgiving ourselves after Jesus Christ has forgiven us are we not in that moment setting ourselves up as a higher tribunal than he in those moments I sense the Lord saying to me who do you think you are Daryl who do you think you are now knock it off get off the bench yes you blew it but I've forgiven you now move on tremendous emotional release comes from asking that simple question who can bring a charge against God's elect

God is the one who justifies who is there to condemn well what do you think something's still holding us back could it be that bad things happen to us and then we conclude that after all we're not accepted by God question four who shall separate us from the love of Christ here Paul is touching that fear that we have that something is going to happen in our lives that's going to take us out of the range of God's blessing the question touches this fear of being left alone oh I know that one fear of being left alone so Paul asks who or what can possibly separate you from companionship with Jesus Christ now at this part of the text Paul is at his realistic best he surveys the scene and he recognizes some very real threats he says there's tribulation distress persecution famine nakedness peril sword

J.B. Phillips again puts that in a more contemporary idiom when he says trouble pain persecution lack of clothes and food danger to life and limb the threat of force of arms when we find ourselves up against those things does it mean we've been cut off from the presence of Christ it may feel that way but where is the feeling coming from is it coming from the event or from my belief about the event you see the fact the fact of the matter is tribulation distress persecution just may be the result of Christ's companionship the first word in Paul's list is the word tribulation which in Greek is *flipsis* now *flipsis* is a technical word in the New Testament vocabulary *flipsis* refers to the turmoil that results from the kingdom of God invading and overturning the kingdoms of the world you can get that picture the kingdom coming in into these kingdoms and turmoil starts to happen this is the word *flipsis* *flipsis* is what takes place along the intersection where the kingdom of light breaks into the kingdom of darkness being caught in that kind of *flipsis* being caught in that kind of pressure that kind of crushing pressure may feel like we've been cut off from Christ but the fact is just the opposite the same is true of distress and persecution

[29 : 45] Paul experienced first hand all these things he lists here and if you read the record you discover that Paul experienced all these things because of the companionship of Jesus Christ not because he was separate from Christ James Dunn in his commentary on Romans says all these things that Paul lists are evidence of union with Christ this explains verse 36 I've heard Romans 8 in this section read many different times and people neatly skip over verse 36 in verse 36 Paul quotes from Psalm 44 for thy sake we are being put to death all day long we are being considered as sheep to be slaughtered for thy sake it's because we belong to Christ that we're experiencing those things now think says Paul can those things then separate you from Christ only if you don't understand where they came from can they no they're the sign of having union with the crucified one they're the very things

Jesus experienced and was he cut off from his father's love at that time the more we keep asking that question the more we come to agree with Paul when he says in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us in all these things we are more than conquerors note that little preposition in not out of all these things not apart from all these things not above all these things not beyond all these things but in all these things we are more than conquerors wow because of the other preposition through we conquer in all these things through him who is with us in all these things another commentator says we are conquerors not through any courage or any endurance or any determination of our own we are conquerors through Christ and not even by our hold on him but by his hold on us what then shall we say to all these things

Paul is teaching us here to build up the belief system to take ourselves in hand and to talk to ourselves to preach to ourselves the truths of the gospel that lead us to the God of the gospel this discipline may not change our circumstances it may not change the pleasant or unpleasant emotions we have in response to the circumstances but the discipline will help us move in emotionally constructive ways for constructive and destructive emotions do not come from the circumstance but from what we believe about the circumstance take all you know about the circumstance and then take all you know about the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ who is in the circumstance stand them up together and see what happens as a result of asking himself these questions over and over again

Paul came to a deep and abiding confidence that nothing could separate him from Christ and his love I'm convinced he says I've waited out I've waited on the scales I'm convinced that neither death nor life I have no problem with the death part I know death won't separate me I fear life I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor power nor height nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord the love that will not let us go became the rudder of Paul's boat boat by which he was able to turn the winds and the waves to his advantage what then do we say to these things this morning I say come come gather at the table where the crucified risen lover of our lives in the midst of all these things gives us himself