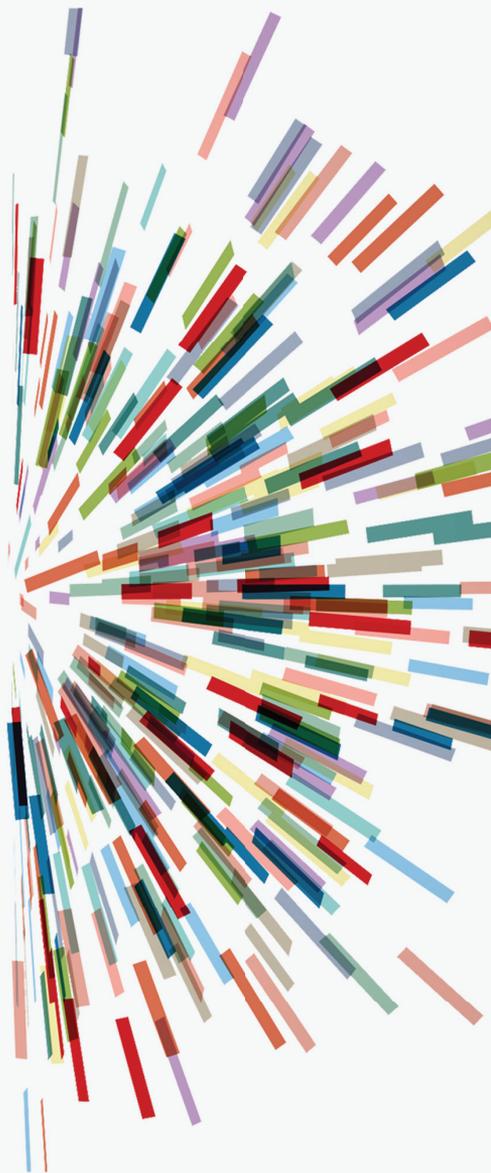


THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

God's Son
Given for You

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



P U B L I S H I N G

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A GLORIOUS STATEMENT OF THE GOSPEL

My seminary education certainly did not prepare me for every situation I would encounter in pastoral life and ministry. It did not prepare me to respond to Christians here in the USA who put their Bibles into my hands and asked me to autograph them! In such situations I am also usually asked to add a Scripture reference. My default text for these circumstances is Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” I have a very personal reason for using this particular text. But the broader reason for doing so is because it is surely one of the most glorious statements of the gospel and of the sovereignty of God’s grace to be found anywhere, even in this great letter. The purpose of this booklet is to identify and expound upon the heart of the gospel as Paul reflects upon it in this verse.

I will begin by briefly setting Romans 8:32 in its context within the epistle. These words occur at the climax of the opening chapters of Romans. Paul speaks about the power and majesty of the gospel and asks, “What then shall we say to these things?” (8:31). As he has climbed this rugged mountain of exposition of truth, power, and the grace of God in Jesus Christ in the opening eight chapters, he is now looking back—perhaps to the whole epistle—and glorying in the triumph and blessing of the gospel.

Earlier on in Romans, Paul boasted in the joy that was his. He rejoiced (or boasted) in the hope of glory (Rom. 5:2), in his sufferings (Rom. 5:3), and even in God himself (Rom. 5:11). But now, as he has so thoroughly expounded the gospel of God’s

grace, he triumphs and exults even more eloquently. In doing so he throws out a series of questions that seem to challenge all creation.

- “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (8:31)
- “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (8:33)
- “Who is to condemn?” (8:34)
- “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:35)

The principle question is, of course, the first one. *If God is for us, who can be against us?* The apostle obviously does not mean that the Christian is free from opposition. Indeed he catalogs the opposition that he himself had experienced—tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword (Rom. 8:35). What he means is that despite whatever opposition may come to us from hell beneath, from the earth around us, from our troubles within us—whatever opposition there may be—there is no opposition that ultimately can stand against the determined, gracious purposes of our sovereign God in Jesus Christ.

As I read these words from Romans 8:31, I often find my mind drifting back to David Ross’s father. David Ross was a childhood friend who lived on the same street in my hometown in Scotland. We used to play soccer together after school. David had the twofold advantage of having a father who left work earlier than all the other fathers on the street and, in addition, a father who earlier in life had been a football—I mean *soccer*—player. If David’s team was down 2–1, 3–1, or 4–1 with five minutes to go before our mothers called us in for supper, he would call on his father! No matter what we did against him, nothing could stand against the power and the skill of his father. If David’s father was with him, it did not matter who was on our side against him.

This is our position. That is what Paul is saying. This is the power of the gospel in which we triumph in Jesus Christ. There is in fact much opposition—we would be liars to deny it; we would be false to the gospel to hide it. But there is no opposition that is able to withstand the irresistible advance of the grace of God in the life of the believer because God is for us. But the million-dollar question for all of us, practically, is: *How do we know that God is for us?*

HOW DO WE KNOW?

One of the most obvious false answers is: “We know God is for us because he has so obviously blessed us in his providences. We can draw the conclusion from the present enjoyments of good things in this world that God is surely for us.”

I am always cautious when I hear a Christian say to someone who has made a major decision in his or her life that seems to work out very well, “Isn’t it like God to do that?” I am cautious because it is also like God to take our best plans, our highest expectations, and in his sovereign, still-gracious purposes, to turn our rocks into sand and our plans into dust so that we may learn to say, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10).

Our ultimate confidence that God is for us cannot be found in our ability to interpret the providences of our own lives or the lives of others. But, according to Romans 8, there is one irrefutable reason for the Christian believer to be utterly convinced that God is for him or her. That reason is that he is the God who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. And if this is the case, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

The cross, the Christ, the gospel, is the reason the Christian believer knows that God is finally and irreversibly for him

or for her. In these words from Romans 8:32, Paul explains this conviction by means of three eloquent statements—first, describing the action of the heavenly Father; second, designating the experience of the incarnate Son; and third, expounding the logic of the Christian gospel. We will now delve into these three segments of this verse in an effort to reflect on the heart of the gospel and, with the help of God’s Spirit, to apply this word to our own minds, hearts, consciences, and situations.

THE ACTION OF THE FATHER

Notice first of all what the apostle has to say about the action of the heavenly Father: *he did not spare his own Son*. If you think about it for a moment, you will sense that this is a profound insight by the apostle Paul. These words, in a sense, belong to the same category in teaching us about the mind of the Father as Philippians 2:5–11 does in teaching us about the mind of the Son. The mind that was in Christ was this: he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, even though he was in the form of God. The mind of the Father, analogously, with a view to the same saving grace, was this: although the Lord Jesus was his Son, and in the very form of God, the Father would not spare him.

Unsparing

The fact that the Father did not spare his Son can be seen to be true simply in terms of the whole course of the incarnation. Paul has already stated that Jesus was not spared entering into, and taking to himself, the likeness of sinful flesh, nor was he spared coming for sin so that sin might be condemned in the flesh (Rom. 8:3–4). The Son was not spared the necessity of entering among us as an embryo utterly dependent

upon the nourishment of his mother. He was not spared the agonies of the wilderness temptation when he was assaulted by the Devil—Son of God though he was. He was not spared the shame of nakedness and the awful humiliation of crucifixion. He was not spared the ignominy of his lifeless body being taken by two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, as a dead weight into the garden tomb. In all this our Lord Jesus, although he was God’s beloved Son, was not spared the absolute helplessness of his humanity in his penal death. The author of Hebrews takes pains to affirm this humanity from which the Son was not spared, writing that the Son, facing the reality of his humanity and impending crucifixion, called out “with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death” (Heb. 5:7).

And yet the apostle is not thinking only in general terms about the way in which the Father did not spare his Son in the incarnation. Here in Romans 8 he seems to be meditating on the Son’s sufferings as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy—specifically the sacrifice of Isaac and Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord.

The Echo of Mount Moriah

The first Old Testament echo of the Father who did not spare his own Son is the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. As Abraham was taking his son up Mount Moriah, in obedience to the Lord’s command to sacrifice him, Isaac asked this question, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). Running through the narrative is the poignant motif that Abraham is being called not to spare, but to sacrifice, the son whom he loves, his only son, the son of God’s promise (Gen. 22:2, 16). In Romans 8, Paul picks up

How can we truly know that God always does what is best for us? Focusing on Romans 8:32, Sinclair Ferguson reminds us what lies at the heart of the gospel. In the atonement, we behold the Father who refused to spare his own Son—and the Son who was obedient in being delivered up on our behalf. If this is the kind of God we have, and if this is what he has already shown us of himself, then we can confidently say he is for us.

“Sinclair Ferguson reaches deep into the Scriptures to disclose the love of the triune God for fallen sinners. This is a wonderful elixir for the soul and should not be missed.” —**J. V. Fesko**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“This is a book that I will give to non-Christian friends as well as seasoned believers. *The Heart of the Gospel* not only informs, but transforms, as it proclaims Christ in his saving office.” —**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology, Westminster Seminary California

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