

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Romans 8:38-39, English Standard Version.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's Grace: Ultimate Power.

I had an aunt named Loretta, my mother's sister, who had Rheumatic Fever as a child, and it damaged her heart valves. She had three children, despite being too weak to walk. Her husband worked for IBM and his job required him to travel. He deeply loved her, and he worried about her, but she was confident and tough. To protect her while he was gone, he bought her a pet ocelot. Yes, a wild animal that he had obtained as a kitten in South America: he gave it to her as a surprise gift one day. When I was twelve, and it was full grown, weighing about 35 pounds, I rolled around in their backyard with it. My father was a retired Marine and he thought it was just fine that I was playing with a full-grown ocelot that was born in the wild and still had all its teeth and claws. My uncle liked to collect coins and had a valuable collection. It happened to have been written up in the local paper, and sure enough, one night a few weeks later, while he was overseas

on business, a man broke into the house to steal it. He woke up my aunt, who got into her wheelchair and went into the dim living room to see what was going on. The man, who was standing near the front door, leveled a gun at her and demanded that she hand over the coin collection. I'll get back to my aunt Loretta.

I'd like to look at a passage from the 8th chapter of Romans. This is a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome. Most of his letters are written to churches that he had established, and the purpose of his letters was usually to give spiritual and emotional support, and to explain basic Christian principles to the people of these new churches. Sometimes, he's trying to correct bad influence in a church, such as a pastor teaching twisted Christianity, perhaps something more closely resembling paganism, or he has learned that a congregation is not behaving in a loving fashion. It's important to keep in mind that most early Christians were not Jews – and indeed, most of the Christians in Rome were not Jews – and they were typically converts from pagan faiths and it could take time to get them to embrace the teachings of Jesus. But Paul did not establish the church in Rome, although he mentions in the letter that he hopes to visit the church someday. It's an unusual letter in another sense. It is very comprehensive in its theological teachings. This letter, which is by far the longest of Paul's letters in the New Testament, is widely considered to be the defining document on the doctrines

that we follow as Christians. If you are a Christian, the letter to the Romans tells you what it is that you believe. Paul makes a compelling and extremely emotional argument for the salvation offered by Jesus Christ and how it is that we can emulate Jesus in our lives. Several famous people have had spiritual awakenings and discovered the love of God, by reading about the teachings of Jesus Christ in this letter. This includes Saint Augustine, the great Christian philosopher of the fifth century. It also includes John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.

The passage I want to look at has to do with an important theme that appears in this letter written to the members of the fledgling church in Rome:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Paul is telling us that we are saved only by believing in God, and that we do not have to rack up a body of good works while we are on Earth in order to spend

eternity with God. This is a major theological issue that has been debated hotly over the centuries. Are we justified by good works or simply by faith? There are those who argue that the Bible states that salvation must be earned, but Paul makes it clear that we are saved simply by believing. But Paul doesn't say that we believers can just go off and do anything we please. Later, in Romans, he says:

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

If we believe in God and truly have faith in Jesus Christ, good works will come naturally. Paul tells us that God wants us to be like his son, to show the same love for our fellow humans that Jesus shows. Once we believe, once we have unconditional love for, and trust in God, we will find ourselves becoming more Christ-like. It will simply happen.

Yet Paul is saying something even stronger than this. Why do we, as Christians, naturally reflect the love that Jesus showed for humanity? And why is it not necessary to perform specific acts in order to earn God's forgiving grace? The answer is that through Jesus Christ, God has done something that no set of

laws can do. Remember that under the Old Covenant, the one God presented to the Israelites through the mouth of Moses, God promised 1. his blessing to the Israelites, 2. that the Israelites would have many descendants, and 3. that the Israelites would have their own land – but all of this comes only if they continue to believe in, trust, and follow the laws of the one, true God. And remember that now, with the New Covenant, which Jesus mediates between us and God, there is something far more important than that old contract. Through Jesus, God has given us something that can overcome sin. This is grace, which consists of unearned, freely given forgiveness and love. This grace is more powerful than the law. It is more powerful than the Old Covenant. And because it can overcome evil, we are saved simply through faith. This is why we don't have to worry about performing good deeds to be saved. It is also why we naturally want to live the way Jesus lived. Through the New Covenant, which is based on the mediation of Jesus Christ and not on law, we have a power inside of us that is far greater than evil.

It can be hard to feel God's grace within us. We see many horrible things going on in this world - and it can break our spirit. We can become withdrawn. We must remind ourselves constantly that there is a presence in this world - and within us - that is far greater than all of those terrible things we see happening.

Here is another way of looking at it. We can be assured that God will never turn away from us. Nothing can shake God's love for us. There is nothing we can do that cannot be forgiven. God's love for us - as expressed in the grace that he gives us and that acts within us every day - will outlive the existence of this world. Nothing is more powerful than God's grace. Nothing. And it's ours.

To Paul, and to us, God isn't some distant being that we can only fuzzily understand. There isn't a set of laws that control our interactions with God, or our ability to reach God with prayer, or our ability to be forgiven, or our ability to one day spend eternity with God. The Old Covenant of the Old Testament was important. It is how God introduced himself to the world. But the New Covenant was created through the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ, and it isn't based on some bargain we have made with God, where he does his thing, and we must do ours in return. The Old Covenant was the story of a people, the Israelites, and their contract with God. The New Covenant is the story of one person – Jesus Christ – and his personal relationship with each of us. The New Covenant gives us a gift from God that is infinitely more powerful than the law. God's love for us is the ultimate form of security.

Let me try an analogy. Remember my aunt, with a heart that was too weak to allow her to walk, with three children in her house that she had to protect, and

with a man leveling a gun at her? She was going to hand over the coin collection, of course. And as people who have seen the dangers of putting personal information out on the web, we know that perhaps it was foolish to advertise the coin collection in the local paper. However, there was someone who loved her very much, a creature she had raised from a kitten brought to the U.S. by her husband several years before. My aunt loved that animal dearly and it spent most of its waking hours at her side. As it turns out, that cat, whose name I have to admit I don't remember, liked to sleep on the top of an easy chair that sat near the front door. When the man broke in through the front door, that ocelot was awakened. It didn't know what was going on. But it knew that this person whom it loved more than anything else in all of existence, was under threat. That ocelot felt the fear in my aunt's heart. That ocelot also realized that this fear was directed at that thing in the robber's hand. That cat's love for my aunt was like God's love for us: total and unquestioning. Nothing was more important to that cat than my aunt. No evil could walk into that living room and confound that ocelot's love for Aunt Loretta. That ocelot leapt off that chair with the mission of getting rid of whatever it was in that man's hand that was scaring my aunt so badly. Before she could hand over that coin collection, before she could even say anything, her pet ocelot had bitten off this man's forearm.

I remember being about fourteen years-old and my father answering the phone when Loretta's husband called some days later. Now, my father was a kind man, a gentle man and a gentleman. But he was an ex-Marine. He was a sniper in World War II. I remember him asking, "So, what did the cat do to the guy?", and then after hearing what happened, my dad laughed. "That was a smart idea," said my dad, "giving her that cat." My uncle had left a protector in the house. With Jesus, God has left a protector in our lives.

God will always stay in our lives. God will never have anything more important than us. That is the result of God's unearned grace within us.

What's strange, though, is that we tend to not live with a daily, conscious knowledge of God's grace within us. As a result, we don't make use of what grace can do for us. Consider this, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

We see that we can be transformed by God's grace. Paul went from someone who had actively chased down believers for persecution to someone who led the effort to build the Church in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. All we must do is be open to the power of God's grace. It took something very shocking

to get Paul's attention: a visitation of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. If we wait until something that major happens to us, we are likely to live our lives out without ever taking full advantage of God's transformative grace. That transformation can truly change our perspective in life.

This is from Titus, a letter written to a Gentile led to the faith by Paul:

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Titus, along with First and Second Timothy, are the three so-called Pastoral letters. All three letters claim, in their text, to have been written by Paul, but his authorship is far from universally accepted. They are called pastoral letters because, unlike other letters attributed to Paul, they were written to individual pastors, not to churches. If Paul did write them, he would have had to have done so very late in life. Timothy and Titus were second generation Christians. The purpose of these letters was to give pastors like Timothy and Titus advice on how to spread the word to a third generation of Christians. Importantly, many of those in the church were children of Christians – and not raw converts themselves. Timothy and Titus represented the first generation of a challenge

that faced the church for two millennia after this, and is so critically important today, and that is how to keep passing on the faith from generation to generation.

The author, Paul, or some other church elder honoring Paul by writing in his name and in order to give authority to his letter – but not to trick anyone – tells these young pastors, these evangelists, just what God’s grace can do for them. If we let grace run its full course within us, we can live not for this world, but for the Kingdom of God. We can do what Jesus came to the Earth to instill within us, and that is a desire to live for the good things we can do, and not simply for ourselves. That is the heart of the transformation that grace allows: rejecting the goals and aspirations that society pushes on us, and instead: First, to be walking in the Kingdom of God every day, and second, before we do or say anything, asking ourselves if it is what a Christian should truly be saying or doing. We can be different beings. We can be changed in a deep, fundamental fashion. We can free ourselves from our superficial, temporary attachments to money, to human made stuff, to societal power, to the approval of those more powerful than us – and to care only about what we do for each other and what God thinks about what we do. Grace, if we allow it, can make us Christians who truly honor the fact that we are made in the image of God. Indeed, God’s grace can be for us the ultimate power in the cosmos.