

**“God is For Us”**

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Romans 8:26-39

**26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. **27** And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

**28** We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. **29** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

**31** What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? **32** He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

**33** Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.

**34** Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

**35** Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

**36** As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

**37** No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

**38** For I am convinced 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.

## THE ROAD TO PERDITION

These past few weeks Paul, in his letter to Romans, has told us that we have a sin problem. God's good world has been corrupted and even our best efforts to do the right thing end up in failure.

Paul uses himself as an example.

He wanted to obey God's law.

But, when he looked back over his life he realized that he had failed.

The things he should have been doing were the things that he didn't do. And the things that he shouldn't have been doing were the things that he did.

How could a person like Paul find himself in such a predicament?

He sincerely wanted to follow God's law.

But, he didn't do it.

Paul's road to perdition had been paved with good intentions.

And this is true for us as well.

Good intentions are not enough.

Sin is so entrenched in our world that even our best efforts are doomed to failure.

So, what hope do we have?

That was the question Paul asked in a very emotional way. He asked, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Paul was dead in sin.

Sin had taken such a hold in Paul's life that he didn't know right from wrong.

He was blinded by his own self-righteous attitudes.

## DIVINE INTERVENTION

There was only one solution to this problem.

Paul needed Divine intervention.

And that's exactly what happened.

It happened first on the road to Damascus.

But, Paul also seems to suggest that this Divine intervention continued throughout the his life.

From time to time even the great apostle Paul had to be reminded that only the grace of God could save him. Even the best of intentions could be corrupted by sin.

Only the power of the Spirit, would enable him to live in a different way.

We experience this same spiritual tug of war.

Even our best intentions are corrupted by sin.

We too are on the road to perdition.

But God intervenes.

Christ meets us on that fateful road and turns us in a new direction.

We are saved by God's grace.

This is our personal connection with the resurrection.

What we could not do on our own, God in Christ has done for us.

We are raised to new life; we become a new creation by the power of God's grace.

It is this that gives us hope.

Instead of focusing on all the ways that we have failed, we focus on the power of God's amazing grace.

## IMAGES OF STRUGGLE AND GLORY

Forgiveness becomes more than just a theoretical concept.

It becomes a lived reality.

What is this life like?

Last week we talked about several images from Paul's letter that describe the life of grace.

It's like having all our debts forgiven.

It's like being adopted by loving parents.

It's like inheriting a great fortune.

But, you'll remember that we inherit more than glory of Christ.

We also inherit his suffering.

The spiritual tug of war in our life intensifies when we become disciples of Christ.

We are in the world but not of the world.

We are the pioneers of the kingdom of God, and as such we challenge the ways of the world.

We challenge business as usual.

This brings us conflict and suffering.

This suffering is reflected not only in our personal lives but also in creation itself.

Paul said it is like the pains that accompany childbirth.

Waiting for the birth of a child is a combination of joy and fear. It is, at the same time, a period of struggle and hope.

Well, our struggle to be a part of God's kingdom, to be a part of this new creation in the world comes with the same kind of joy and fear.

We strive to see beyond the horizon.

We crane our neck to see the joy that comes in God's morning.

But, it is still a struggle.

## GROANS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

In today's lesson we learn that this spiritual struggle is also reflected in our prayers, and the Divine response to our prayers.

Paul wrote, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs (or groans) too deep for words."

This suggests to me that the groans of the believer who is struggling to keep the faith are acknowledged and expressed by the Spirit. When the world closes in around us and we don't know what to do or say ... even to God ... the Spirit takes over and prays for us.

God is not detached from our suffering and our longing for a new day.

That heartfelt longing is expressed perfectly by the Spirit. God knows the desires of our heart.

But, God does more than just give us our heart's desire.

God gives us what we really need.

"... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

Sometimes we are tempted to believe that our lives and our world are out of control.

The conflict between the ways of the world and God's ways is so intense that we lose hope.

In those moments we need the assurance that God is on our side, that God will give us what we need when we need it.

That's what the rest of our lesson for today is all about.

How can we believe in the kingdom that comes when it looks like evil is winning on every front?

What promises can we cling to?

## ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD

First, we cling to the promise that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Don't misunderstand this promise.  
It's doesn't promise us a rose garden.  
It doesn't promise a life without suffering and conflict.

But, it does suggest that the long arc of history is bending toward the Kingdom of God.  
In the end grace will triumph over evil.

Of course, the first indicator of that is the cross.  
What men and women meant for evil God used for good.

The cross became an opportunity for undeserved forgiveness and the promise of life eternal.

This is our primary example of all things ... even terrible things ... working together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

But, Paul is telling us that the effects of resurrection are still with us.

What began with the cross and the resurrection is still changing things today.

Paul wrote, “*We know* that all things work together for good ...”

We know?  
How do we know?

This knowledge come from two sources:  
the Bible and our own personal history.

There will be times when we feel discouraged.  
There will be times when we feel that the world is on the road to perdition.

There will be times when we feel like our life is on the road to perdition.

When that happens, Paul suggests that we should take a deep breath, step back and look back.

There are several examples in the Bible that tell the story of God's providential care.

One of my favorites is the story of Joseph in the Old Testament.

You'll remember that Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. But, through the grace of God Joseph not only survived he rose to a place of prominence in Egypt.

During a time of famine Joseph's father and his brothers were forced to seek shelter in Egypt.

And Joseph was able to care for his long lost family in that foreign land.

But, when their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were afraid that Joseph would take revenge. Joseph's reassurance is a classic statement of the providence of God. He said,

"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

As Joseph looked back over his life he knew that all things had worked together for good because of God's call, God's purpose.

A review of our own life often reveals this same sense of Divine purpose.

We see the hand of God in the twists and turns, the ups and the downs, the successes and the failures. We see how God brought about good in our life even when we ourselves or those around us were doing the wrong thing.

When we think about it, we remember that our lives of a believer are a testament to the grace of God. There is purpose and providential promise in our story as well.

We know this, but sometimes we need to be reminded.

Our life is not just one thing after another.

Our life has a purpose, God's purpose.

This emphasis is meant to reassure us.

## PREDESTINED

In the next verse Paul emphasizes the providential care of God even more strongly. He writes,

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.” (29)

Remember what we've learned up to this point.

Despite our sinful ways, God has graciously adopted us into the family.

So, are we in the family on probation so to speak?

Will we remain in the family only as long as we do the right thing?

No we are not in God's family because we have earned the right.

We are in the family because God knew us before we were born, God loved us,

and now God is determined to make us into the people we are called to be.

He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son.

To say it another way, God wants all of us to be chips off the old block.

And that means becoming more and more like Christ.

Predestining us to be more like Christ doesn't take away our freedom.

It makes us truly free.

Predestining us to be more like Christ doesn't take away our humanity.

It makes us truly human.

Think about the analogy that is implied by this verse.

Good parents love their child even before that child is born. They make plans for that child from the very beginning.

And as that child grows and develops good parents do what is necessary to guide that child.

They try to make sure, in so far as possible, that the child will live a healthy and happy life.

They try to give that child every advantage.

They comfort the child when he or she is troubled.

They take the child to the doctor on a regular basis.

Perhaps they put money aside in a college fund.

They spend countless hours at baseball practice or dance lessons

... or whatever that child wants to do.

There are hundreds of things that we are happy to do for our children.

Why?

Why do we do this?

We are trying to predestine our child's future.

We are trying to make sure that our child will be all they can be.

We do all these things out of love.

We want the best for our family.

In an even greater way, God in Christ makes plans for us.

God has loved us before we were even born.

And now God calls us to be all that we can be ... all that we are destined to be.

But, there's a big difference between our heavenly Father and our earthly parents.

We cannot guarantee the future of our children.

As much as we try to predestine their happiness, to stack the deck in their favor sometimes our efforts are just not good enough.

Almost everyone has a story of child who didn't take advantage of their parents' loving care

... the so-called “black sheep” in the family who squanders opportunity after opportunity.

The result is sad for the child and for the parents.  
They both feel a sense of failure.

## GOD’S STEADFAST LOVE

But, the love of God does not fail.  
It perseveres and continues to offer hope and forgiveness throughout our life.

One of my favorite verses from the Old Testament emphasizes this love.

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22)

This love that does not quit on us is celebrated in one of our most beloved hymns,  
“Great is Thy Faithfulness”.

And it’s also celebrated in a hymn that we will sing this morning after the sermon, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go”.

Our love does not come with any guarantees.  
In the final analysis we cannot predestine the success of the ones we love.

But, that is not true with God’s love.

We read in the next verse,

“And those whom he predestined he also called;  
and those whom he called he also justified;  
and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

From cradle to grave the love of God is with us.

Sometimes in the struggles of life we doubt the call of God.

We doubt that our sins are forgiven.  
We doubt the hope of eternity.  
We doubt that one day good will overcome evil.

But, Paul tells us that when all is said and done our doubts will not have the final say.

After all, ... "if God is for us, who can be against us?"  
No one.

The doctrine of Predestination teaches us that God is indeed for us.

God has a love for us that will not let us go.

God is not out to get us.  
God is out to save us.

I know that my best efforts to love often fail.  
My life is filled with regret and guilt.  
I have not lived up the love I have received and the opportunities I have been given.

And that's true not only of me.  
That's true of you also.  
You may try to hide it.  
But, in your heart of hearts you know it's a fact.

Our love is temporary.  
Our love is imperfect.

In contrast God's love is steadfast.  
When all are against us, God is for us.

In love God reminds us that no matter what, we are still a part of the family.

This love calls us to follow Him, to take a leap of faith in a difficult and dangerous world.

## WHO WILL SEPARATE US?

We can take that leap of faith because we are assured that no matter what happens to us

... it is not enough to separate us from God's love.

Paul wrote, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

(In Paul's day this was not a theoretical question. They did indeed face these difficulties and more.)

Paul wrote that in all these things we are "more than conquerors through him who loved us".

In other words, just as God conquered sin and death on the cross of Christ so the grace and glory of God will one day overcome the suffering that we experience.

When all is said and done, the love of God will rule supreme in our lives and in the world.

When all is said and done, we will affirm with the apostle Paul that

"neither life, nor death, nor anything else in creation"

... will "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (37-39)

## SOLIDARITY INSTEAD OF SOLUTIONS

But, we need to be careful about how we use this passage. When we quote this Scripture to someone who is suffering, it can actually increase their pain.

This past week I read about a former megachurch preacher, Rob Bell. He now has a different ministry.

He travels around the country speaking to people who feel out of touch with the traditional church. In particular he talks about how we misunderstand and misinterpret the Bible.

Before one of his services in Atlanta, he held a question and answer session.

A young man raised his hand and told Bell that he was struggling with his faith.

He and his wife were waiting for the birth of a child, but a doctor recently told him that the baby probably wouldn't survive.

He asked, "Am I wrong for being angry with God?"

An uneasy silence came upon the crowd.

Bell didn't answer the man's question or offer the usual preacher platitudes.

Instead, he told the man that he had some tough times ahead.

(Bell spoke from personal experience.

He was driven from the evangelical world because he was willing to express his own doubts.

He lost his church and many of his friends.)

Bell said that he couldn't give the man any easy answers. But, he did tell him to avoid people who try to comfort him by quoting Scriptures like Romans 8:28.

Paul's assurance about all things "working together for good" rings hollow when your world is falling apart. Telling a person in pain that this terrible loss was somehow part of God's mysterious plan is not a good idea.

In fact it can be very destructive.

Instead, Bell told the man to seek out people who can offer him "solidarity" instead of "solutions." He needed people who would be willing to walk with him during this difficult time.

Bell concluded by saying, "All the best to you.

I'll be coming to Atlanta in the years ahead.

I hope we can meet again and I find that things are better for you."

The man nodded in appreciation.

Rob Bell told this man to stay away from those folks who want to quote Romans 8:28, but I also think Rob Bell's response to this man was actually informed by that verse and this passage.

The promise of our passage for today is that God walks with us in good times and bad.

The promise of our passage is that a better day is coming.

But, this passage does not offer easy answers to the suffering that we experience this day.

The hope lies in the future.

So what do we do today?

We walk with those who suffer.

We don't offer pat answers ... not from Scripture or from anywhere else.

We offer ourselves because we trust in the steadfast love of God.

Stephen Ministers have been trained to understand this.

When a heart is broken, the best we can do is be there and listen.

This kind of ministry requires the *care giver* to trust completely in the love of God.

Romans 8 is always in the background whenever effective pastoral care is done.

How can we know the steadfast love of God?

We know that love when it becomes human.

That's what the incarnation is all about.

God was in Christ.

And Christ is in us.

May God give us the faith to stand in solidarity with those who suffer.

AMEN.