

The Ballast of God's Love

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[0 : 00] Years ago, I lived on the north shore of Boston, and there are a lot of little beaches up there, and I had a good friend who bought a rubber inflatable raft, and some of us thought it would be a good idea to take this raft to one of those little rocky beaches and to paddle out and see how far out we could get. You see where this is headed, and we all pack into this raft, and we start paddling it out, and we make it past the breakers, and then this strong current grabs a hold of us, and we start moving down the beach, and our paddles are powerless against this current, and then the sky starts to get darker and darker, and a storm hits, and it sounds like we're still in Jeff's Jonah series. A storm hits, and the water gets choppy, and then the big waves start to come in, and before long, we're desperate, and eventually, we capsize, and we're all holding on to this upside-down raft, trying to drag it back toward the shore. Eventually, obviously, we all made it back. Praise God. But we learned a very valuable lesson, and in fact, a whole slew of lessons that day, there were a lot of things that we were obviously lacking, right, including common sense. But one of the main things that we were lacking, and we didn't know this because none of us are very familiar with boating. One of the things we lacked was ballast. Ballast is essential, especially for larger boats, especially sailboats. In order to navigate the open ocean, they need something called ballast, which is essentially weight in the hull. It's in the bottom of the boat that keeps the boat upright, and sometimes that ballast is attached to a keel, and so this is a diagram of one such boat, and you see right here, there's this ballast bulb that, in this case, weighs 8,400 pounds made out of lead. So that's a lot of weight on the bottom of a boat, but it's very important to have that weight because that ballast keeps the boat upright.

So when the currents and the wind and the waves are all working on this boat, the ballast keeps the boat up, and it keeps it from capsizing. It does not matter how nice your boat is. I read a story of back in the 90s. A guy built and custom built a \$650,000 racing vessel that had all the latest technology. He wanted to sail around the world, and then he disappeared a few days after departing, and they eventually found the craft upside down floating in the water, the mast plunging down into the deep, and they noticed right away what the problem was. The ballast had been sheared off.

This is, in fact, the design from that boat, and that piece holding that ballast had just been sheared off, and so without that ballast, that really nice, fancy, high-tech boat flipped right upside down. Ballast is absolutely essential. The reason I'm talking about this is the ballast is also crucial in life. We need a ballast, what we might call spiritual ballast, because life is extremely difficult, and in a swimming pool, you can have a raft like we had, maybe in a nice small pond, but real life isn't lived out in a swimming pool or a pond. Real life is like sailing on the open ocean, and there's currents and big waves and storms and wind, and we need something that keeps us upright and keeps us going forward.

Otherwise, we'll capsize, and if you have something like that in your life, if you have ballast, then you can really face anything, and we all can probably think of people in our lives who are like that.

[4 : 04] They just seem to be able to move through all kinds of tragedies. They know it. They face it. They grieve it, but it doesn't capsize them, and we know other people who maybe face relatively less, and somehow everything seems to be a 10 out of 10 crisis, and they're turned upside down, and the difference likely is that some people tend to have ballast that keeps them right side up. So the question we want to ask this morning is, where do we get that kind of ballast? Where does that come from? And I know we have some kids here, and what we've been doing every week is giving the kids an image to focus on.

You have hopefully some art materials, things you can draw with. This week, I'd love for you, I'll give you two options. One is I want you to draw a beautiful sailboat moving through the water, tall

sails, mast, beautiful sky. You can draw a storm if you want. Option B is that you draw what you would imagine my friends and I looking like in the raft. And bonus points if you get the tears on my cheeks as I was crying out for God to save us. But those are your options for art this morning. The question is, where do we get this ballast from? We're looking at Romans chapter 8. This is the climax of everything that Paul has set up as his entire letter, all eight chapters. And it feels kind of weird for me to have been gone for a few weeks of rest, and then to come back, and then I get to preach this climactic verse. It doesn't feel fair. I feel like I should have earned it to kind of, you know, work through, you know, chapters 5 and 6 and 7 to get to this point. But this is where Paul has been driving his entire letter to get to this climactic section. It climaxes in verse 38 and 39.

And all of this is aimed at really giving us one thing, right? The entire chapter 8 is talking about all the things that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. He's already talked about all the things that Jesus has done, right? And we get to verse 8, and here's all the things the Holy Spirit does. Why does all this matter? What's the end goal? It's so that Paul can give us ultimate assurance, ultimate assurance that no matter what, nothing can separate us from God's love.

Nothing. And that ultimate assurance is the greatest spiritual ballast we will ever find. Because with the weight of that truth sitting in the center of your life, you will always stay upright.

[6 : 33] And once you have it, you can never lose it. And that's what makes it unique. So we're going to look at this passage in more detail, spiritual ballast of this assurance of God's love. Why do we need it?

How do we get it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you this morning that despite whatever challenges we faced, maybe getting here, Lord, packing up, getting our kids dressed, traffic, parking, heat, Lord, whatever might be pulling at our minds, distracting us, things that are vying for our attention, whatever sources of stress or anxiety, we're tamping down, Lord, whatever conflicts we may have been working out as we walked in the door. Lord, we thank you that your spirit is here with us and that you are a God who speaks. And you speak out of a heart of love. And your eternal nature is always to have mercy. So we pray that, Lord, out of your mercy and grace and out of your heart of love, you would speak to your children this morning. We need to hear your voice. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So why do we need this assurance, this ballast? In verse 35, Paul lists some of the realities that we have to face in life. So he says tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword. Let's put this in more modern context. He's talking about outer struggles, circumstantial difficulties, things that we have no control over. He's talking about inner struggles, distress, right? Distress, things like anxiety, depression, loneliness, hopelessness, despair, right?

He says persecution, that's the suffering that you endure, either soft persecution or more hard-edged versions of persecution because of your faith. Famine and nakedness refer to physical vulnerability, our creatureliness, and how easily our sense of safety and comfort can be taken away. Some of us deal with chronic pain and illness. Danger means the fear that we feel in the face of an unknown future. All of the possibilities right around the corner awaiting us tomorrow that we have no control over. And of course, the sword refers to the greatest threat of all, that existential reality looming just outside of the reach of our imagination, but always there, the reality of death that waits for us all. And what Paul is essentially laying out is this fact, life can be extraordinarily challenging. And for those who claim to believe that God loves us, life doesn't often look like God is loving us. It often feels like we are on our own.

That we are cast adrift in the open ocean to fend for ourselves. And so we all have things that we rely on to give us stability and comfort. And whatever that thing is, whatever you rely on to ground you as you're dealing with, dealing with anxiety and stress and vulnerability and fear, depression, whatever you rely on, that is essentially your ballast.

[10 : 10] Right? So what are the things that you cling to when life starts to get hard and when the waves get high? Whatever you look at and you say, as long as I have this, I'll be okay.

Whatever you look at and you say, as long as I don't lose this, I'll be okay. You can take everything else away from me, but as long as I don't lose this, I'll stay upright.

That's your ballast. So a lot of us look for that, especially people who move to a city like D.C. A lot of us are hardworking, ambitious people. So a lot of us, at least some of our ballast comes from our career.

As long as my career is moving forward and I have a stable job and I feel like there's upward mobility and I'm feeling successful relative to my peers, then I'll be okay. Some of us try to find it in

romance, in new relationships, dating relationships we're excited about, people who seem interested in us and affirm us, or maybe in marriage we get married and we think this will be the person who's my ballast.

And now I'll have some grounding, and as long as we're together. Some people find it in their kids. As long as my kids are safe, I can deal with anything as long as my kids are okay.

[11 : 29] Some of us try to find it in making a difference through meaningful pursuits and causes. I'm going to give myself to this thing. I'll sacrifice everything, but as long as I feel a sense of meaning and purpose, then I'll be okay.

That's your ballast. And it's natural, it's normal for us to rely on those things to give us some sense of grounding and worth and stability. For a lot of people, this is maybe worth delving into a little more, for a lot of people, your ballast comes at least in some measure from your health.

From your health. There's a philosopher named Simon Critchley who writes about this, and he writes about the fact that even though religious belief is still fairly strong in the West, I mean, the percentage of people who believe in God, who believe in the supernatural, who believe in the possibility of miracles, still relatively high in the West, but here's what he says.

The deeper truth is that such religious belief, complete with a heavenly afterlife, brings believers little solace in the face of death. Very religious society, but not a lot of comfort drawn from those religious beliefs.

The only priesthood, he says, in which people really believe is the medical profession. And the purpose of their sacramental drugs and technology is to support longevity.

[12 : 47] The sole unquestioned good of contemporary Western life. I thought that was very insightful. The priesthood of the medical profession.

Now, my dad's a doctor. A lot of you work in the medical profession. This isn't anything against the medical profession as a career. Thank God for all of you. It is, though, raising a question about how much stock we put in and how much we prioritize.

Longevity is an unquestioned good. For many people, our ballast does our own health and, to some degree, comfort. As long as I have that, I'm okay.

You may be familiar with the tech entrepreneur, Brian Johnson. Apologies for the photo. It'll make sense in a moment, hopefully. Brian Johnson made his money in tech.

He's sort of, as people like to say, a tech bro. And now he spends \$2 million a year trying to reverse his age to prove, as he has said, to prove that decay is not inevitable.

[13 : 51] In other words, to prove that death is not inevitable. Combating one of the core principles of thermodynamics that we see all through the universe, the law of entropy, he's saying is not inevitable.

Right? And so he has an entire regimen to try to restore his body to that of a teenage boy. He employs a team of 30 doctors and regenerative health experts.

He takes 61 pills a day. He receives plasma infusions, right here, from his 17-year-old son as a part of this.

It's a sort of vampirism in a way. He eats 70 pounds, 70 pounds of brown vegetable mush every month.

He wakes up at 4.30 a.m. every day, and every hour of his day is monitored and regimented according to an algorithm. As one journalist put it, from the photos, these measures certainly seem to be working.

[15 : 01] The 45-year-old tech entrepreneur looks approximately 43. But Johnson represents a growing sense that we have as our technology and science and wealth go up that we can do anything.

And one of the greatest fields yet to be conquered is that sense of the inevitability of death. That one day my health will be sheared off like that ballast was sheared off of that sailboat.

One day Brian Johnson is going to die, and there will be a recognition that while he may have extended some of his years in whatever relative quality of life he has chosen, he will not live forever.

And this illustrates really the biggest problem with most of the things that we rely on to be ballast in our lives. Whether it's your health, or your friends, or your marriage, or your family, or your career, or your security, or your comfort.

At any moment, at any moment, any of these things can be taken away. You are one doctor's visit away.

[16:21] One phone call away. From that thing being sheared off. And you're losing your ballast. So, any of these things, if they become that weight in the whole of our lives, there's a fundamental insecurity that comes along with that.

It's a kind of conditional ballast. And as long as you have it, you're okay. But there's always that nagging voice in the back of your mind that says, I could lose this thing, and then what?

I can't imagine that. So, a lot of times, whatever that is, we build our entire lives around that thing. It becomes a kind of idol that we worship. It becomes our God. So, the ballast that we need has to be something that we can't lose.

It has to be something that can't be taken away, that can't be sheared off no matter what, even in the face of death. And that is the entire point of this passage in Romans chapter 8, that there is only one thing in life that once you have it, it can't ever be taken away, even in death.

And that is the reality, the fact, the ultimate weight and glory of God's love for you. And we're not talking about just the general sense in which, yes, God loves everybody.

[17:51] The highly personal, eternal, covenantal love that God has for you, for his people. If you were to ask your parents, do you love me, Mom? Do you love me, Dad?

Well, we love everybody. That's not what you want to hear. If you ask your spouse, do you love me? Well, I love all people. You want to hear, I love you.

I want you. I've chosen you. God's covenant love. How do we get that? We have to recognize three things that come from this passage.

Number one, we have to recognize there's a reason that we long for this deep down, and it's because this is the reason that God made us. God made us to be loved.

There's a great saint in history that some of you are familiar with, St. Augustine, who wrote the famous book, *The Confessions*, about his life before coming to faith in Jesus and how that happened.

[18:53] And he essentially tells the story of the things that he looked to to be ballast in his life, largely career, ambition, and various forms of hedonistic pursuit.

But he slowly came to see something really profound, that all of these pursuits amounted to a disordered and misguided search for God's love.

He's like, I thought I was running away from God. I thought I was running away from it all. But I realized that in all of my running, the thing that I was really looking for was God's love. You know, there's that quote from the novelist Bruce Marshall.

It's often attributed to people like Chesterton or Lewis, but it really comes from Bruce Marshall. Mid-20th century novelist, the young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously searching for God.

The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God. New York Times published a piece, I think it was last week or the week before, style section.

[19:58] This actor, comedian, Jenny Gorlick, just writes about reality of life in New York, in L.A. She does a stint in L.A. looking for kind of her big break.

She talks about being ghosted by the guy that she's dating and really likes. She talks about being dumped by her best friend who starts to get acting roles and become more successful.

She talks about being passed over again and again and again for gigs that she auditions for. And she talks about the exhaustion of having to constantly audition. Auditioning for romance.

Auditioning for friendships. Auditioning for acting gigs. And she talks about the exhaustion of constantly putting everything out there only to be told, No, you're not the one.

Thanks, next. Over and over and over in every sphere of her life. And at the end of the, you know, there's a lot we could dwell on in that, in that, in that, if we had time, you should read it.

[20:58] But at the end, she says something that really caught my attention. She says, There are thousands of no's. But they say it only takes one yes. Yes. And I'm worth a yes.

She's aware on some level deep down that there is one yes out there. There's one yes that she's really looking for.

There's one yes that really matters. And I'm not sure she would articulate it this way. But as I read it, I thought, This is a person who is yearning for that one ultimate yes.

And I think we all live in search of that one ultimate yes. For someone whose opinion matters in some ultimate way to look at you and say, I want you.

I've chosen you. I'm committing myself to you. You're the one. Right? You have worth. You are cherished.

[22 : 01] You are loved. That one ultimate yes. And as St. Augustine realized in his quest, all of these pursuits in our lives, all of these other sources of ballast are really a quest and a longing for God's love.

As he realizes in his confessions, very famously, you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you, until we have the weight of your love in the whole of our lives. God's made us for himself to know his love and to love him in return. Here's the thing. Until you come to recognize that, your life is not going to make sense. Because everything that you pursue, everything that you go after, there's only two possibilities.

One, you don't get it, and it eludes you. Or maybe the worst possibility, you get it. And then you realize it's not the thing that you thought it was. It doesn't do for you what you thought it would do. You know, I was talking yesterday with some friends about how many celebrities make it and they get famous. And then it crushes them because they realize I've been chasing this for most of my life and now I got it. And it's not the thing.

[23 : 19] It's not the weight in the whole of my life. It's not doing what it was supposed to do. Now what? So the first thing is this is what we were made for. The second thing we have to realize is this is the mission that Jesus came to accomplish for us.

This is why Jesus came. The most important part of the story for St. Augustine was not only his realization about his own heart, that he's been searching for God. More importantly, it was his realization that in spite of the fact that he was running from God, that God had been pursuing him. That God had been orchestrating events in his life to ultimately lead him back around into God's embrace. And, you know, Paul's entire letter to the Romans up to this point says this again and again in different ways.

That on our own, human beings live lives on the run from God. And he says, you know, there are some people who do this in irreligious ways. They leave God behind.

They want to make their own meaning and live how they please. But then there are other people who run from God through their religious devotion. By thinking that through their devotion, through their piety, through their moral excellence, they can somehow aspire to God's standard.

[24 : 35] And he says both are just ways of running from God. And the whole point that he makes is that all of salvation history is the story of God pursuing people who are running from him.

You know, in the lectionary, the Old Testament reading was a confession that comes out of Nehemiah that says what we then hear recapitulated in the psalm that we just read. That in the midst of God's people rebelling against him and complaining to him and having no faith in him and worshiping idols in the wilderness back in the Exodus, God is nevertheless loving them and providing for them and feeding them and nourishing them.

That's the picture of a God who is continually pursuing his people. And this is what Paul says as he builds to this crescendo.

Verses 29 and 30, God looked at you and God said, yes. The ultimate yes. I want you. I want you for myself.

And Paul says he set you apart to be conformed to the image of his son. He called you. He awakened and enlivened your heart. He justified you through the death of his son on the cross.

[25 : 46] And so right now at this very moment, Paul says in verse 34, even as we sit here this morning, Jesus is standing before the father interceding for us. And he's not saying, oh, give him a break.

He's saying all of their running, all of their rebellion has been dealt with. Look, it's right here. It's all been dealt with. There's nothing standing in the way anymore, father.

These are your children. Let them run to you and feel your embrace. All of this reaches a climax then in verses 38 and 39 where Paul says, because of everything that God has done in history, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death.

Not even death. Now, there are some people, we don't have time to really get into this, but there are some people who believe they read certain parts of scripture which seem to indicate this. They

believe that you can lose your salvation.

They believe that you can come to faith and follow Jesus for a while and then maybe you go to college and you take an intro to philosophy class and you sort of, you know, you read some Nietzsche and then you, you know, you're done with it, right?

[27 : 02] And you lose your salvation. I don't believe that. I think that once you come to God and once you belong to him and once you have his love, I think these verses in 38 and 39 are true.

I think that there's nothing that can separate you from the love of God, even you. Even you. So I know there are people who in various ways are, you know, struggling in their faith.

They're deconstructing their faith. There are people who maybe have come to faith at some point and you've walked away from your faith for various reasons. Probably a lot of them are good reasons. Maybe you've been hurt by pastors or hurt by the church or hurt by the things that you see in the culture.

God loves you. God is pursuing you. God will continue to pursue you.

God will continue to pursue you. And nothing will ever separate you from his love. Not even you. Because the thing that makes Christianity different from other religions and traditions is it actually doesn't hinge on our devotion to God.

[28 : 13] It doesn't hinge on our commitment to God. On my best day, my commitment is a fragile, almost futile thing. Our entire faith and relationship with God hinges on his devotion to us.

And when God makes a commitment, he doesn't break it. The third thing that we need to realize, the final thing for this morning, is that the first thing was this is the reason that God made us to love us.

The second is that Jesus came to accomplish everything, everything that might impede our relationship with God. This is the entire reason Jesus came.

Number three, this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. All that Paul says about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in chapter 8 is really aiming at this. These are different ways that the Holy Spirit seals us in God's love.

For those who are Christians, you might hear what I'm saying and think, well, you know, I know God loves me. And yeah, you know, I learned this when I was 8 in Sunday school.

[29 : 24] And I know God loves me. With all due respect, do you? Do you? Because if you really did in the way we're talking about, it would change everything in your life. You know, I'm reminded a pastor tells this story of a 16-year-old girl in his congregation who's depressed and feels a lot of despair and hopelessness.

And he meets to try to encourage her. And he's talking to her, you know, God loves you. And she goes, yeah, I know. I know God loves me. I know Jesus died for my sin. I know I'm going to heaven. But what difference does that make when no boy at school will even talk to me?

And she's articulating, I think, the reality that we all struggle with. I know on some level, right? I know on some level God loves me. But the thing that I really care about is here. Now, that's a very normal thing for a 16-year-old to care.

It's a normal thing for a 36-year-old to care about, 56-year-old to care about. But it illustrates something that Jonathan Edwards talks about. There's a difference between understanding God's love at a conceptual level and really experiencing it, feeling it, feeling the weight of it in the whole of your life.

And this is why we need the Holy Spirit. Even for those of us who have been Christians for decades, it's easy to lose touch with God's love. And this is not something that we can rationalize our way into.

[30 : 42] It is something that the Holy Spirit has to do supernaturally in you. Right? There has to be a spiritual pressing into your heart of the love of God. You know, I've come to realize in my own life, I've come to, you know, I'm 45 and almost 46.

And I've been a Christian for a few decades. And I'm starting to recognize signs in my life when I've really lost hold of God's love. Some of those signs are this. You know, I start to recognize that I'm struggling with a lot more anxiety and stress.

It's pressing on me way more than it normally does. I'm losing sleep. I'm waking up at 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock in the morning, mind whirring with things that are causing stress.

Because obstacles in my life start to seem disproportionately large. I start to look around and it feels like I'm in a valley of insurmountable options.

I start caring a lot more about the approval or disapproval of other people. That starts, like, haunting me. I start to become more defensive. And part of that is because I start to become a lot more critical of myself.

[31 : 52] That voice of critique just starts to amp up. And I recognize from time to time these, you know, I used to think, well, I need to do just some deep breathing. I need to go for a run.

And, you know, I need to talk this out with somebody. And, you know, all of that is helpful, not knocking that. But what I've come to recognize kind of more recently is that actually all of that is directly related to the extent to which God's love has become an abstract concept for me. Where it's no longer the weight holding me upright. It's become this thing that I talk about and teach about and read about. But it's not the thing that keeps me up in the water.

And I've realized that when that happens, there's only one thing I can do. And it's to go to the Holy Spirit and to pray for the Holy Spirit to re-immers me in God's love.

You know, ballast is often controlled by water. It's like a water tank. And you fill that tank with water. And it creates that weight that you need. And it's almost like we need the Holy Spirit to fill that tank with God's love.

[33 : 00] Until it turns us upright again. And so, you know, this summer I spent, I had only one goal for this summer. And it was remember that God loves me.

And I spent time reading and praying and thinking, meditating and hiking and fishing. And all of the things where I feel like I am able to connect with the Spirit. And one of the passages I really read was Romans 8.

Including these verses. So I was amazed actually when I looked at the lectionary. Coming back and realized this is what I'm going to be preaching on this week. Because this is one of those places where we see very clearly the reality of God's love.

And the need for the Holy Spirit to press it into our souls. And God has really answered those prayers. And I stand before you as somebody who I think at least for the time, at least for now, at least for today, I feel grounded and rooted in God's love.

We were with some friends last night cooking out on the deck. And I just felt a sense of God's delight. And for me that is many times a very hard one. And I can sometimes go months or even years in some cases without really feeling that.

[34 : 10] And so it was a delight to experience that. At one point I literally wrote a sentence in my journal. This may seem cheesy to you. It is cheesy.

I don't care. Don't judge me. It works. I wrote this in my journal. For I am sure that blank will never be able to separate me from the love of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I wrote that on one side of my journal. And then I realized that I needed a bigger blank. And so then I just started listing things on the right side of my journal down the column. And I won't tell you what those are. It's between me and God. But there are many things.

That when they start to occupy too much of my time and attention they start to pull me away from God's love. And so I had to write it out because I'm the kind of person I'm very thick headed and I need to actually just write things down and then read what I wrote to get it into myself a little bit.

And so I just wrote it out. And then I went through and I substituted the things one by one into that blank as a way of praying to God. Praying God's word back to himself.

[35 : 17] It was extremely helpful for me. And I began to feel that ballast returning. So imagine what your life would be like if God's love for you was the deepest, truest reality in your life.

How would that change the way you deal with anxiety? How would it change the way you deal with conflict? How would it deal the way you deal with outer criticism or inner criticism? How would it deal with the way you parent or the way you spend your time or your money?

How would it change the way you think about relationships? And whenever I'm tempted to doubt God's love I take a page out of Paul's book. I do what he did.

And I look at the cross. Because unlike the kind of sentimental love that exists in the world, the kind of feel-good sentimentality love that we are so often surrounded by, this is a concrete love that has been acted upon in history.

This is someone who doesn't just say, I feel love for you. This is a being who is love and who has done the most profound act of love imaginable in history for us.

[36 : 30] Paul says in 32, whenever we're tempted to doubt God's love, whenever it starts to become abstract, 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?

A God who did that, there's nothing he won't do for you. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for just what is an amazing reality.

So many of us are tempted to imagine that when you think of us you roll your eyes. That it's tsk, tsk. I've been so patient. And what have they done? That you feel frustration or disappointment. Lord, we see in your word the truth.

Lord, I pray that you have loved us and known us and pursued us across thousands and thousands and thousands of years. The ultimate lover.

[37 : 45] Lord, I pray that through the prayer and the singing, the scripture, the sacraments, we would taste and see and feel and know and experience that love. We pray this in your son's name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.