

The Steadfast Love of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 August 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is a letter from Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 28 through 39, as printed in your liturgy.

And we know that God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified. What then shall we say in response to these things?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

[1 : 14] Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died, more than that who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, for your sake we face death all day long.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Lord, this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. This is our final sermon in the Epistle to the Romans.

And it's not final like forever, but it is the final for now. And hopefully we'll come back to it again at some other point. But when we started this sermon series at Easter, I likened it to climbing Mount Everest.

[2 : 35] And some of you remember that. We said we were living down here at sea level and sitting on our couches as it were and thinking to ourselves, man, how hard can it be to really climb up to the top of Mount Everest?

And I was a little worried, you know, like I'm not sure about myself and I'm not sure about you. Do we have the lungs, right? The lung capacity to handle the rare air up at this altitude.

And do our legs have the strength to climb up to the heights of revelation and ascend up all the way up to the truths and the wisdom and the insight that are there in this letter.

But I want to say this morning, congratulations. You made it to base camp. You made it to camp one, camp two, camp three, and camp four. And today we're going to make our final ascent up to the summit.

You guys ready to ascend? I don't know about the journey for you, but if nothing else, this letter has served to encourage and to strengthen the faith of your pastor.

[3 : 39] And this is really the heart of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. When we look at his life and the Acts of the Apostles, we get to verse or chapter 14 in Acts and it says that he came to Galatia in Turkey.

And there it says he was strengthening the disciples, encouraging them to remain true to the faith. And then we flip over a few chapters. Acts 17, he comes to a city called Thessalonica in Greece

and it says that Paul reasoned with them out of the scriptures.

And it goes on in Acts 20 and Paul himself says in Ephesus in Turkey, he says, I did not hesitate to proclaim to you the whole will of God, the whole counsel of God.

And then finally, when Paul arrives as a prisoner in Rome in Acts 28, it says that Paul witnessed to them from morning to night, explaining to them about the kingdom of God and from the law of Moses and the prophets, he tried to persuade them about Jesus Christ.

Now, here in this epistle to the Romans, we have a digest of what Paul was saying. In all those cities of the Mediterranean basin, what Paul was trying to communicate throughout the Roman Empire, when he's going around evangelizing, sharing the good news of God, making disciples, strengthening them and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

[5 : 03] Romans is a summary of all the content of Paul's preaching and his teaching in all those years. And so if you want to sit at the feet of one of the most seminal minds of the first century or any century, this is the place to do it.

And I encourage you after we're done today, keep studying, keep meditating, keep memorizing different parts of this great letter to the Romans, particularly Romans chapter 8.

Right? This is one of the most comforting passages in the whole range of Scripture. As we've seen, Paul is providing us with the full assurance, an absolute certainty of our ultimate, final, and complete salvation and deliverance from everything that sin and evil has ever done to us.

So, how does God bring Romans 1 to 8 to its grand climax? Well, I think here in this text, Paul is telling us that the gospel gives us unshakable convictions, undeniable affirmations, and unthinkable questions.

The gospel gives us unshakable convictions, undeniable affirmations, and unthinkable questions.

And I want to start here with how the gospel gives us some unshakable convictions.

[6 : 27] Verse 28 says that we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who've been called according to his purpose. This is one of the best known verses in the whole Bible, and it begins with, we know.

Now, there are many things that Christians do not know. Right? There are many mysteries and many paradoxes in God's world and in God's Word that we just don't know.

They're inscrutable to us. They're hidden from us. They're known only to God. And a Christian is somebody who gets very comfortable saying, I don't know. I don't know because I'm not the creator. I'm just a mere little creature. But there are some things that I do know. And the reason I know these things is not because I'm more rational or more intuitive than anyone else.

It's just that God in his grace has revealed some knowledge to me through the scriptures and through his spirit. Paul says we know. And what do we know?

[7 : 29] He says we know, first of all, that God works and that God is working. Some of us might be prone to complain and say, gosh, why doesn't God do something?

But friends, God is doing something. God is doing something, but he's just not let you in on it. Because all of us are on a need-to-know basis.

But God is ceaselessly and energetically at work on behalf of his people, on behalf of his church. And Paul goes on and he says, God, we know that God works and he works for the good because God is good.

God in his person is good and all of his works are an expression of his goodness. And we know, Paul says, that God is working and he works for the good.

And he's working for the good of those who love him. Those who love him. He does not say that God works for the good of everyone. God works for the good of all people.

[8 : 30] Paul here introduces a distinction and a limit. He says, it's only for the people that have been specified. And why is this limitation so important to acknowledge?

Because the Bible teaches that there's only one real division in the human race. And you can trace that division from the very beginning.

Genesis 3.15, the mother promise that talks about the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. You can trace that all the way to Romans 5 where Paul talks about the division between those who are in Adam and those who are in Jesus Christ.

He says, we are on one side or the other of that dividing line. And all the other distinctions that we can make among ourselves are finally irrelevant in light of that division.

Because the scriptures tell us and they reveal to us that God is actually, all things actually do not work together for the good of those who will not surrender to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

[9 : 35] That's kind of the hard truth of the gospel, right, that we've seen in Romans 1.18. It says, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who are suppressing the truth about God in their wickedness.

People might appear prosperous and happy to us. The sun might be shining upon them. But the terrible truth is that we're all under the just judgment of God, right?

Republican or Democrat, Jew, Gentile, male, female, rich, poor. It doesn't matter. And that's why Christians have always been so, so eager to share the good news, right?

We say to people, if you would just turn away from yourself and you would turn to Jesus Christ and you would respond to his love by loving him back, you could have this great comfort and this great consolation with us that you're no longer in Adam.

And therefore, under the reign of condemnation and sin and death. But now you're in Jesus Christ and therefore you're under the reign of justification and righteousness in life.

[10 : 47] That is the glorious difference between those who've been apprehended by the love of God and love God back and those who have not. We can know with a certainty that God is working for our good.

And Paul adds on to that. He says, we know that God is working for the Christian's good according to what? According to God's purpose. Life is not this random mess that it appears to be.

But God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have an eternal purpose, an eternal plan of salvation.

This is so important because if you look out at history or you read the news or you look at your own life, you might think that God is just experimenting.

And in his experiments, he's failing. He's iterating. He's modifying. He's readjusting. But friends, God does not operate with a plan B.

He doesn't have a plan C, D, E, F, or G. God has an eternal purpose of salvation that he decided and that he has decreed the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together before the foundation of the world.

[12 : 01] And when God decides that he's going to do something, God performs it. Now, we were with a pastor yesterday who was teaching us and he would kind of expect when he'd say something, the people would kind of say something back, you know.

So I want to give you permission to just blink, you know, nod, let me know that this message is being received. God is not like us, right?

We start things, we propose schemes and we start schemes and then what do we do? We give up or we keep going but somebody comes along and we're stopped by another person.

But God is God. And when God wills something, when God resolves to do anything in his purpose and his plan, it's virtually done. And if God's purpose could be prevented or could be frustrated, it would mean that there is something or someone in this universe that's stronger than God.

But that's inconceivable. It's inconceivable that the purpose of God would not be carried out, that God would somehow fail, that the dark powers arrayed against God would be triumphant over him.

[13 : 17] And that is why you as a Christian can be sure that God is overruling and overriding everything for his purpose, which is your ultimate good and your salvation.

Amen. There we go. And then Paul adds one other little layer here. He says, we know that God works for the Christian's good in accordance with his saving purpose in what?

All things. In everything. God is not just taking the good, but he's taking especially the bad. All the things that discourage and dishearten and dispirit you.

All your trials and troubles and tribulations. All your illnesses and accidents and disappointments and sins and failures. And by his grace, he's overruling it all in such a way that will turn out for your eternal good and your eternal benefit.

This does not say that God is working only the good things in our lives and he's working those things just for our comfort right now. This says that God is taking especially those horrific things, those suffering things in your life, and he's working even those things for your ultimate and highest and eternal good, which is your completed salvation.

[14 : 35] And we don't always understand how God is working for our good. But we believe that he is. We know, Paul says.

We know. So the gospel gives us some unshakable convictions. But more than that, it gives us some undeniable affirmations. And the apostle Paul is now going to turn after verse 28 and give us a complete summary of God's purpose of salvation from beginning to end. And he gives us these five links in this unbreakable chain of salvation that he has forged for us. And I want you to listen out for these five things, starting in verse 29.

Five words.

The central word is that God called. And the two before that are that God foreknew and he predestined those he calls. And the two after that are that God justified and he glorified those he calls.

[15 : 49] This is the glorious eternal purpose of God. It consists of these five steps, these five links. The first pair is that God foreknew and he predestined.

And that refers to what God has decided about us. And the second pair is that God justified and he glorified, which refers to what God has done to us.

And the connective link between these pairs is that God has called us. What does all this mean? What is the impact and what are the consequences for our lives? Well, let's start with God foreknew.

Those God foreknew. This is not God's general knowledge of all that will ever happen, which of course he has. But this is God's specific initiative and action and movement toward the people that he has foreordained and foreloved in his eternal purpose to save.

He set his heart upon us in eternity past. He put his affections on us before the foundation of the world to bring salvation to us, Paul says. He foreknew us.

[16 : 55] And it says those he foreknew, he also predestined, which is a word that means to designate before, to elect, to choose, to mark a certain number of people out and to map out for them a particular destiny of salvation.

The reason we thank God for our conversion, right? The reason we pray to God and cry out to him to bring others to himself is because we believe that salvation doesn't belong to us.

Right? Salvation belongs to the Lord. It's his to give. And so Paul says those he foreknew and those he predestined. And then he says those God predestined, he also called.

God historically applies his eternal foreknowledge and predestination by calling us outwardly through the message of the gospel, which is why it's so important to preach the gospel.

And God also calls us inwardly by giving us his grace to respond with the obedience of faith to that message of the gospel. That's what calling is all about.

[18 : 06] And the scriptures say this is important because all of us are biologically alive. Right? All of us are biologically existing. But the scriptures tell us that we're spiritually dead.

We're non-responsive to God. It tells us that we would never want to know God or believe God or love God if we were left to ourselves. And so the only explanation for why any of us have faith in God or love God is because he called us.

He stepped in and he apprehended us and grabbed hold of us. And when God calls us, he comes and he convicts us of our sin. He calls us to see our utter need for him, our helplessness and hopelessness apart from him.

He calls us to see that we're under condemnation. That the righteousness that we've produced for ourselves is just filthy rags in the eyes of God.

And we can offer nothing. We can add nothing to our own salvation. And when he calls us, he calls us to not only see those things, he calls us to see the wonderful person of his son, Jesus.

[19 : 18] The eternal and divine son of God. He calls us to see the meaning of his work on the cross as our substitute, our stand-in to atone for our sins.

He calls us to see God's mighty power in raising him from the dead. And that's what a Christian is, is somebody who's been called. And you stand amazed that you're even here this morning. How in the world did I end up here? I don't know, but I've just been called. Those he called, he says, he also justified. And this is a great theme of this whole letter that we've explored.

Justification by faith only. That God in his grace has put our sin on Jesus Christ. So that our condemnation and our judgment came down on him at his cross.

But it doesn't end with that. It says that God took the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is a perfect righteousness. And he's placed it on us. So that when God looks at us, he looks at us as if we never sinned or had ever even been a sinner.

[20 : 23] Those he justified, Paul says, he also glorified. And notice he says it in the past tense. He's also glorified.

Not will glorify, he has glorified. This is in the mind of God already done for the people of God. It's a completed action. Our glorification is just as sure and certain as our justification.

And what does that mean? It means that we are going to be delivered finally and completely from every conceivable effect of evil. And as Paul says in verse 29, that we're going to be conformed to the image of God's son.

Wow. Do you understand what that means? That means that in our glorified state, Christ, who is supremely glorious, is going to share his glory with us.

And that his inward form and his inward likeness down in the very depths of his being is going to be ours. So that we, it says, will be little brothers and little sisters of the son of God, perfectly conformed to his glorified humanity, reigning with him, seated on a throne with him, kings and queens and lords of creation with him, sharing in his glory forever and ever.

[21 : 52] Amen. The five links.

And it will be ultimately triumphant. And this is what the gospel gives us. It gives us unshakable convictions. And it gives us undeniable affirmations.

And finally, the gospel gives us some unthinkable questions. I love how the apostle just ends and brings us to a climax with just a bunch of questions.

He says in verse 31, what then shall we say in response to all these things that we just said? In light of these convictions, in light of these affirmations, how shall we conclude?

And Paul begins to raise some questions because he's a pastor and he's anticipating the objections and the difficulties that are going to come up in the hearts and minds of the people of God.

[23 : 10] And the first question he asks, he says, hey, you know, is there any conceivable power that could rise up and prevent our arriving at the ultimate goal of our glorification?

And so Paul says in verse 31, if God is for us, who can be against us? And that if there is not an if of doubt.

It's an if of certainty. We know that God is for us. But we also know that there are many, many things arrayed against us.

Right? As Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6, he says, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but our struggle is actually against the principalities and powers, against the rulers of this dark world and against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Paul says, when those powers come after you, and they will come after us and they are going to continue to come after God's church, he says, when those powers come after you, those powers are nothing.

[24 : 15] They're nothing compared to the power of Almighty God, the omnipotent one, the creator and sustainer and controller. Of all things, the Lord of all who reigns, he is on our side.

And he's fighting for us against whatever's fighting against us. Well, Paul says, well, okay.

But is there any danger in God's love to us somehow undergoing a lessening, somehow undergoing a waning or a weakening, or God's love toward us somehow ceasing altogether?

And so Paul says in verse 32, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things? He says there's none other than the only begotten and only beloved son of God, the one who is with God from all eternity, the sharer of the divine nature of God with the Holy Spirit, the one whom God loved with an infinite intensity.

That one, that one is the one that the Father did not spare. That one is the one that the Father gave up to the cross for us, and that is a love beyond measure.

[25 : 39] It's a love beyond degree. And so he says if God has already done the greatest thing that love could possibly ever do, then how could God conceivably fail and refuse to do anything less for us?

If he's already given us the costliest of gifts, then how could God not lavish upon us all the lesser gifts that are needed to bring his people to their ultimate glorification?

Paul says, okay, well, wait a minute. Here's another question. Could someone conceivably come in and introduce some kind of new evidence and make a case to convict us and to bring us to final condemnation?

And Paul says in verse 33, who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then can condemn? No one. Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who

was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

The judicial declaration has already been made. The pronouncement of acquittal has already been given. You have already been cleared by God himself of every charge against you.

[27 : 02] And when you are forgetting that or you're wondering whether or not that's true, Paul says, look to your mediator, Jesus Christ. Because God condemned our sins in Jesus.

And on the cross, Jesus cried out, it is finished. The work of salvation is done and accomplished for you. And God came and he raised Jesus up to life to prove the efficacy of his death for you.

And then he not only raised him up, but he seated him at the highest place, on the greatest throne in the universe. And there he is ruling at the right hand of God as your heavenly advocate.

So that even if the devil himself should rise up and should go before God and try to accuse me or condemn me or accuse you and condemn you, Jesus will rise up.

Jesus will rise up and he'll say, get out of court. You have no case. You have no case. Well, Paul's trying to make it clear that maybe God won't falter.

[28 : 17] Maybe God won't fail. But what if we do? What if we falter and what if we fail? Because of our weaknesses, as we go through trials and troubles and tribulations, what will happen if we fail?

And so Paul says in verse 35, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

We could probably add to that list an innumerable number of things that would come against us.

And Paul is not asking, can our love to Jesus stand up in all these tests?

What he's asking is, can Jesus' love to us stand in all these tests? That's why he says in verse 37, In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And I love Paul's language in the Greek. He says a Christian is someone who's hyper-victorious. A Christian is someone who's a super-conqueror. And why is that?

[29 : 20] It's not because of the strength of our love to Jesus. It's quite the opposite. My salvation does not depend on my frail grasp of him.

No, my salvation depends on the risen and living Lord and his incredibly strong grasp of me.

Paul's taken every question that could possibly come up in our heads and in our hearts. And he's just demolished them. Right? They're unthinkable questions.

And then Paul says at the very end, he says, You know what? I'm convinced. I'm persuaded. I've come to a settled conclusion that is beyond any doubt whatsoever.

And what is Paul convinced of? He's not convinced that his circumstances are going to improve.

Right? Because Paul is going to come in just a few years' time to this imperial city in Rome.

[30 : 24] And the emperor Nero is going to be there. And he's going to be thrown into jail. And eventually the emperor is going to remove Paul's head. So he's not convinced that things are going to get better.

At least in this life. But what is he convinced of? He says, Neither the crisis of death, whether it's by natural causes or by beheading.

Nor the calamities of life, whether it's imprisonment or persecution for the name of Christ or whatever it may be. Neither superhuman agencies of good and evil.

Nothing in time, the present or the future. Nothing in space, height, nor depth. Nothing in the world of matter. No powers beyond the world of matter. Nothing, however hard it might try.

Can separate me, Paul says. And can separate us, the people of God, from the love of God. In Christ Jesus, our Lord. And friends, that love has been supremely displayed for us on the cross of Jesus Christ.

[31 : 52] That love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. That love is a love that's called us out to love him for who he is and what he's done.

And that love is steadfastly committed to bringing us, with all of God's people, safe home to glory in the end.

And, you know, with the Apostle Paul, I'm persuaded. I'm convinced. And my question is, are you persuaded?

Are you convinced? Let me no more my comfort draw from my frail grasp of thee.

In this alone rejoice with awe thy mighty grasp of me. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[32 : 55] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. i■ime'