

Nothing Shall Separate Us

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[0 : 0 0] Shall we pray? Lord, thank you for your word and for this wonderful book of Romans that we've been walking our way through over these past few weeks.

! And as we come to this passage that Deb's just read for us, a real mountain top. Help us to grasp the implications of what you have written for us.

That we might walk out of here as we've already been singing and praying today, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love. Help us to know what that love is and help us to put that in the context of all that's going on in our lives. And may that give us hope.

So Holy Spirit, we continue to speak to us, we pray. Amen. Amen. I wonder if you are going through anything tough at the moment.

It's probably a silly question because I know that at many different levels there are difficulties in life. And those difficulties can make us feel like God has abandoned us. He's forgotten us.

[1 : 1 7] Or perhaps even we might start concluding, well, is there some way in which he's punishing us for these things that are going on in my life? Now, as we've walked our way through Romans, we heard that the Apostle Paul, who writes this letter to the Christians in Rome, he, if you remember right at the beginning, and if you weren't here, don't worry, he attributes much of our suffering to this power that's at work in the world, the power of sin.

And if you remember, and if you don't, don't worry, he paints this picture of a sort of downward spiral that's created by godlessness and wickedness.

And that downward spiral, a bit like a tornado, sweeps everything into its grasp. And so we both become victims to it, and we also start contributing to some of the damage, death, and destruction that it causes.

And as Liz amazingly prayed already today, we experience these as wolves on a global scale, whether it's war, whether it's the climate crisis, whether it's the effects of greed and poverty, or perhaps more personally, we experience something of it in illnesses, broken relationships, perhaps even the death of a loved one.

God, where are you? Why should you allow such things to happen? Now, I'm not going to pretend that in 20 minutes' time you're going to come up with, I'm going to give you all the answers that seal and make such complex and difficult questions, mysterious questions in many ways, all straightforward and simple, you know, sealed up.

[3 : 1 1] You're going to walk away, no problem. However, I do believe that with the help of this passage in Romans 8, it will help us all experience, frame the way that those experiences are interpreted.

Because what it does is it talks about our suffering in the light of biblical hope. And I think that will lead us to leave here all feeling more hopeful.

So let's talk about this word hope. Now, we often use this word hope in sort of common English in the same way that we might use the word luck, don't we?

Oh, I hope I hope I win the lottery or I hope the weather gets cooler or something like that. There's this strong element of sort of probability or chance in the way that we use the word hope.

But in the Bible, the word hope is much more solid. It is what is promised by God, even if we can't see it yet.

[4 : 1 7] In fact, in the middle of the passage that we just heard read, Paul says that if we can see it, then actually we're not talking about hope anymore. But hope is waiting for something that is coming, yet we don't have fully yet.

So what is it that Christians hope for? What is it that God promises that we are waiting for? Something that is going to happen, but we don't yet see fully.

Now, I'm about to say something that might feel quite controversial to many of you. So I'm warning you here. Because for generations, particularly in the Christian West, we've bought into a narrative about future hope that actually does not do full justice to what the Bible says more fully about what God has in store for us.

Okay, I'll summarise it. You can take a gasp breath when I say that's not the hope. Okay, and then I'll explore it. Okay, so for many, the hope of a Christian is that my soul will be taken to heaven when I die.

Now, I'm saying that is not a very good description of Christian hope. A few shock faces. At best, that is a half-truth.

[5 : 35] At worst, that is a serious distortion of the hope that God actually gives us. And so unless we realign ourselves or are prepared to realign ourselves to relearn what we're actually hoping for, passages like Romans actually don't make any sense.

And it very much limits our sense on what our life on earth is actually about, including our sufferings. So, let me try and explain what true biblical hope is.

And as we have that hope in our lives, if that's the thing we're looking forward to, we are much more likely to experience peace and to be able to persevere in this life, to suffer well, if you like.

So, let me have a go at summarising what I think biblical hope is. The hope of a Christian is that God is coming in his full glory to dwell with us in a restored, in a redeemed creation.

Christian hope is heaven coming to earth. It's the hope of a renewed earth where there will be no more pain, no more sin, no more death.

[6 : 52] Now, do you notice straight away how that is different from this idea that after death, we're looking forward to this sort of disembodied existence on a cloud with our hearts?

Now, I'm being very pejorative, but that's what is often sketched out, that actually that's the hope we've got, that we're somehow going to be this sort of ephemeral beings who are away from the earth and away from our bodies.

But God, actually the hope is that God will come to be with us. Our bodies will be resurrected along, as it were, with the whole of creation, with the whole earth.

And that the whole of creation will experience the glory of God in its fullness and be able to live in perfect harmony. Now, it's a picture of the Bible, actually, if you read through it with that in mind, actually paints all the way through.

So, for example, in the prophecies of many of the prophets in the Old Testament, particularly thinking of Isaiah, it gives this prophecy of a day when the wolf will live with the lamb, when the infant will lie with the cobra, and, quote, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

[8 : 05] So that's what the prophet Isaiah is kind of looking forward to. And, you know, he doesn't yet know how it will be fulfilled in any sense. And then right through, if you care to read it with that future hope in mind, you get to the book of Revelation, of course, where famously, right at the end, there's this picture of the new Jerusalem, the home of the temple.

If you remember, the temple is the dwelling place of God, coming down to re-establish God's throne on earth. His bride, the bridegroom, coming to be with the bride on earth.

New heaven, new earth. That is the picture of, the final picture of hope that the final pages of the Bible present with us. Now, I'm not going to pretend that I know, you know, I know exactly how that's all going to work out.

It's very much a sort of, you get this sort of picture, a sketch of what might, how it might work out. But you've got to see that that is completely different to this idea that our disembodied souls will be with God to live with him forever, somewhere.

Now, if that is surprising to you, and that's just blown your mind, well, I won't apologize, but I recognize that is a big thing. I'm not going to answer all your questions about that now. Now, I've been reading this book, which summarizes it beautifully, by Tom Wright.

[9 : 25] It's called God's Homecoming. And his kind of thesis in this is that actually many of us, including himself, has been sort of, has the wrong picture of God's hope. And actually what we're looking forward to is God's Homecoming.

So, Tom Wright, God's Homecoming, I'm sure you can Google it and get it from an ethically sourced bookstore and to read that for you. But I will answer one question because I know, sort of partially, there's a big question for me that comes out of this.

Vicar, if going to heaven isn't the goal, what does happen when we die? That's a pretty key question. Well, again, the Bible is clear that when we do die and we are in the Lord, we go to be with Jesus.

That is true. And somehow that our spirit is united to be with his, to be with him. But that is actually only a temporary state.

That's the difference here. That is a temporary state because one day we know that Jesus will return and complete the task of bringing resurrection not only to our bodies, but to the whole of creation.

[10:32] We pray the prayer, don't we? Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. It's that kind of hope that we're praying towards. If that's not quite clear, the best analogy I've heard is actually one using a very sort of modern computer technology analogy.

When we die, somehow our software is somehow uploaded into the server. The server of God, I should say. But our future hope is for that software, with viruses removed, I should add, is downloaded into new, renewed hardware here on earth when all of creation is rebooted.

That is the end of my technical knowledge of computing, but I hope that makes sense. And that might reframe for you this idea of what we're hoping for.

Now, as I say, you've got loads of questions, I'm sure, but I think if you have that in mind about what our future hope is and you read this chapter of Romans, God's coming home, he's coming home, he's coming, God is coming home.

It's all about glory, isn't it? God's homecoming. We sing about it because we're hoping for glory. God's glorious homecoming. And that is going to make a lot more sense of our experience and also our purpose in our lives now.

[11:55] Okay, so I've given you the framework. Let's get into it now. Because first of all, it changes how we consider our sufferings. Let me read again chapter 8, verses 18 to 19.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

What does he mean by that? Well, the children of God to be revealed, that is for those who have the Holy Spirit to become fully the people God has destined us to be in resurrection life.

Currently, we are frustrated along with all of creation because we're in this kind of bondage, as I say, this spiral, this bondage to decay.

But the hope is that one day we will be liberated from that bondage, from that decay, and brought into freedom and into the full glory of God.

[12:55] not to escape the earth, to go to heaven, but with earth, our hope is to be released from all these pains and let the glory of God be fully revealed in us and around us.

Now, that's our future hope. And in fact, Paul gives us the ultimate picture, a much better one than some computer analogy, about what his suffering is like in this world with this future hope in mind. It's childbirth. So, verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Now, it's always good as a man to speak about childbirth. I understand it can be a little uncomfortable. But the pains, sometimes even excruciating, are leading to something. They're leading to new birth. And each of us experience part of being the whole creation that is in these birth pangs.

[14:00] Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, this is verse 23, by the way, grown inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

So, you might remember from last week, when we were looking at the beginning of this chapter, that the central role of the Spirit of God is to unite us with God in such a way that we are free from the slavery of sin and are made children of God.

The Spirit of God makes us into the family of God. And we are, as Paul said last week, we are adopted into sonship. Now, if you remember from last week, that's a technical term that Romans would have been very familiar with, and it describes a process of rich Romans adopting a male heir in order to, if they didn't have their own children, a male heir to inherit all their stuff and their power, their whole estate.

And Paul uses that here because that adoption, which you were given, as it were, the first deposit of, is going to come full as we inherit the kingdom of God in the future homecoming of God.

So whether we are male or female, young or old, Jew or Gentile, this adoption to sonship is ours if we believe in Jesus. And that full inheritance will come fully when Jesus returns and the whole of creation is renewed.

[15 : 31] And until then, we have received, we've only received a sort of down payment, a deposit, if you like, enough that it connects us to that future hope and to know that the rest is coming.

So as we experience suffering and that temptation to think, oh my goodness, has God just abandoned me? Our spirit, united with God's spirit in us, groans in longing for the future and the freedom that has been promised to us for all of God's creation.

For in this hope we were saved. God has brought us into this hope to be saved. So Christianity isn't just the saving of individual souls to take us from this nasty earth or even from our nasty bodies, if we want to call it that.

No, the hope in which we are saved by Jesus encompasses the whole of creation. and it means that we and the environment in which we live is somehow caught up in this process of redemption. And yes, of course, we can enjoy some really beautiful bits of it now, but it is blighted and it is also, it is nothing compared to the glory that is to be revealed.

[16 : 52] So if you enjoy the beautiful views around Clevedon and they give you that sense of, ah, well just imagine how much more we will experience God's glory and beauty in the future.

And if we're experiencing really bad stuff and we're thinking, oh, this is like hell on earth, well that will be eliminated from our experience in the future.

And just a little aside, but quite an important one because if that is what God's salvation is about, if it's about the redemption of the whole of creation, actually the care of God's creation needs to be part of our mission as God's children.

And there's a whole sermon series and, you know, strategy to think about as a church, but the care of creation is part of what God is doing. It's not a side hustle, it's not unimportant, but it actually expresses our future hope.

But also, as well as our mission, this idea of the hope that we have, it also gives us a very powerful way of understanding what prayer is and is about.

[18 : 05] I wonder how many of you have been in those situations when you're calling out to God in prayer and it feels like you are calling out to the ether, you know, to a distant God somewhere up there far away looking down from us and that's our experience of prayer.

I know that has been mined from time to time and that's okay. But this passage shows us that we're far more connected than that. When we come to believe and trust in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and King, as we've already said, we are given something of His Spirit.

and His Spirit comes to live, comes to dwell in us in a mysterious way that I don't think many people are able to explain. His Spirit joins with our Spirit.

And not only does that, as it were, the two spirits talking to one another, you know, God's Spirit testifies to our Spirit that we are children of God. You are part of the family now.

You can call out Abba Father. You are a child of God. Not only does God's Spirit testify to us about that, but listen to this in verse 26. In the same way, the Spirit, God's Spirit, helps us in our weakness.

[19 : 26] We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

Let me try and unpack that dense couple of sentences. As the whole of creation groans for that future freedom, so does God's Spirit within us call to our spirit to go forward with that hope.

And even if we can't put words to it, even if it's incredibly dark for us and pain-numbing, we are able to pray because God is interceding for us and with us in our spirits.

We are connected. God is intimately involved in it all, folks. He's not out there beckoning us up to some distant heaven. No, He is already dwelling with us and calling from us this longing, this hope, that we know it's not always going to be like this.

He's so close. And He is reminding us that even though it's dark now or can be a dark valley where we walk in, there is a future ahead which is pain-free, where there is no more tears, no more death, no more pain.

[20 : 56] And He wants to reassure us that it will not always be those things in our lives, won't always be experienced. And because He's intimately involved with our lives and He's also

amazingly wrapped up in every aspect of creation, all of history is somehow being used for His purposes.

He is sovereign is what the Bible calls that. He promises, that gives us an assurance that He's using all things to lead us towards that future glory.

And these amazing verses, which I hope are even more highlighted by what we've just been thinking about, just take these words to heart. And we know, this is verse 28, and we know that in all things, 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, and those He called, He also justified.

And those He justified, He also glorified. So that glorified is that sense of knowing the glory of God in our lives now, but one day knowing the full glory of God around us and in us.

[22 : 28] And that means, brothers and sisters, that whether it's the good, the bad, or the ugly, for those in Christ Jesus, every aspect, everything, is being used by God for good in this process that is moving the whole creation towards its salvation, the glorification of all things, as it were.

So when we suffer now, brothers and sisters, as so many of you are, it isn't God's rejection of us. It is somehow, and in only a way that God can understand, being used for His purposes, even for your good.

Now that's sometimes a difficult thing to believe, and it's for your good because of what, in light of what is to come. And even death, therefore, becomes a gateway into eternity, waiting for that full freedom.

That is something of the impact that having that future hope can have for us. promise. How can we be sure of that? Because I'm sure if you're going through stuff right now, this kind of promise doesn't necessarily make it feel okay, and I grant that.

Okay, this isn't supposed to be, oh, it's all okay kind of thinking, but it does frame it in a very rich and a very true and a very real hope that I think does change things.

[24 : 05] But how can we trust that? Because this is about faith in the end. We have to believe what God is telling us. Because experience may tell us otherwise. The way the world, the media, frames the suffering that is going on does not tell the story.

It's not about human progress leading towards some sort of utopia. It's neither is it a depressing spiral where this is all just going to lead into hell. No, God has taken, he has chosen to come, and this is where we find our anchor.

We must think of Jesus. Think of Jesus' own suffering and death. Because as he suffered, even through the personal betrayal and relational pains that he faced through that, as he lie on the cross as a victim of injustice, he was facing as it were all the forces of evil you can imagine.

The most ferocious wolves as Liz illustrated. He's becoming forsaken by God and it's the worst kind of death you could die physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Now, if something that horrendous, Jesus' death, if that can lead to something far more glorious as we know it did, to his resurrection, to his ascension, and to his reign in heaven, if that can happen with Jesus, can't God also use our sufferings for something amazing?

[25 : 47] Or to quote Paul, verse 31, 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, that is Jesus, graciously give us all things?

If we live our lives through the lens of Jesus, i.e. if we understand our lives by what Jesus has done and does for us, if we are in him, if we are attached to his life, death, resurrection, then there's ultimately nothing that can defeat us.

Can anyone charge us or pick us up for our track record? No. Jesus has justified us. Beginning of Romans 8. Can anyone accuse us or condemn us?

No. Jesus died and rose again and so now he intercedes for us. He whispers in the father's ear, that one there, she's ours, I died for her, I love her.

He's doing that all the time. Nothing can change God's love for us. He won't love you any less, or in fact, any more, because of anything you do or don't do or have done or won't do.

[27 : 13] His love is for you because he's shown that in Jesus. And so as I come into land, let me just read these final verses. And you can feel Paul just kind of feeling the impact of all this theology

that he's written.

and feel the impact and the assurance it gives him and those he writes to. 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's written, for your sake we face death all day long. we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

So Paul is experiencing serious suffering. No, verse 37, 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, nor the height or 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.

[28 : 25] So far from suffering making us failures in the kingdom of God, because our spirit is linked to the spirit of Christ, just as his sufferings created something glorious, created salvation, created this future hope, meant that he was the sort of firstborn, the first sample of what is to come.

We attach ourselves to him, folks, nothing can separate us from what is ahead, because nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Thank you, Father God, that nothing can separate us from your love, that you have defeated those most ferocious of wolves, and you've given us the armour of your spirit, love, righteousness, peace, that will allow us to step in to this week ahead with renewed hope, hope of a future that you will and you are bringing about, again, through your son Jesus.

thank you, Holy Spirit, that you will go with us into this week. Would you keep reminding us of the hope that you've given us and the love that is ours because we are your children.

Amen.