

(16) Life with suffering, life with confidence

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] Our reading this morning is Romans 8, verse 31 to 39, page 1138 in the Church Bible. What then shall we say 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 with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died.

More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all day long.

[1 : 0 5] We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

Walter, thanks very much indeed for reading. Please do keep Romans chapter 8 open. We've already prayed.

Now let me say that the aim of this final section of Romans chapter 8 is to give us confidence. God wants you to leave this morning confident that if you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, he will get you to heaven.

For those of us who aren't yet Christians, while in a sense this isn't directly applicable to you, I hope nonetheless you will leave this morning having seen how very attractive the Christian life is, and so be drawn to it.

Indeed it may be, and my hope would be, that actually it would cause you to put some of your objections perhaps into perspective, and that you'd find yourself asking the question, well actually, why shouldn't I become a Christian?

[2 : 3 7] What is stopping me from putting my trust in Jesus? So I want to begin this morning by asking a question. What do you fear?

Might be the fear of illness, or suffering, or death, either for yourself or for someone you love. It might be the fear of losing your job, and the effect that would have on your lifestyle, and your expectations, and the way in which you live, or where you live.

It might be that you fear rejection, you fear losing friendships, or a particular relationship, or perhaps you fear what others would think of you if you were to be a public Christian, and an open Christian, perhaps with colleagues, or with some friends.

Or perhaps you have children, perhaps you fear for them, and what the future might hold for them. Now, of course, behind all of those questions, all of those fears, lurks a much bigger question, doesn't it?

Which is, can I really trust God? As I think about all these things, can I really trust God? Perhaps if you're not a Christian, you fear that if you were to start following Jesus, that actually God would ruin your fun, that God would spoil your life, that others would mock you.

[4 : 03] For those who are Christians, behind our fears, lurks exactly the same question. Can I really trust God? After all, trust is in fairly short supply at the moment, isn't it?

The banking crisis shows that we can't trust the banks. The pedophile scandal, that we can't trust the church. The expenses scandal, that we can't trust our MPs. And now the phone hacking revelation shows that we can neither trust the press, nor the police.

You see, as our national institutions fail the trust test, is God simply another institution who cannot be trusted?

Well, last week, if you were here, we looked at verses 18 to 30, where the Apostle Paul asked the question, if God's people, if God's children suffer now, is it really worth following Jesus?

And the answer came, didn't it, a resounding yes, because Christians have such a glorious future. And that, of course, begs today's question, which is this.

[5 : 17] If the future is the key, if heaven is the key, if the new creation is the key, can those who put their trust in Jesus be certain that they will get there?

Can you and I, if we put our trust in Christ, be certain that we will get to heaven? Well, you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, let's think about confidence in the death of Jesus.

Confidence in the death of Jesus. Because these verses, 31 to 39 of Romans chapter 8, conclude everything we have seen in all of Romans 5 to 8.

It's why Paul asks that question in verse 31, what then shall we say to these things? And Romans 5 to 8 have been the most magnificent chapters, haven't they?

We've seen the most wonderful promises that those who have faith in Jesus have been justified, they are right with God now, they are at peace with God now, they are reconciled to him.

[6 : 19] That we no longer face God's condemnation on the final judgment day. That God's Holy Spirit has given us new hearts, new minds. That he will one day give us new bodies in the new creation.

We've seen that we are God's children. That he is our heavenly father. We've seen that the future is secure. So chapter 8, verse 31, if God is for us, who can be against us?

Now that is a powerful question, isn't it? Because I take it you and I know that there is much that could be against us. We've seen, haven't we, in these chapters in Romans 7 and 8, that Christians continue to sin.

We've thought about the circumstances of our lives. We live in a fallen world just like everyone else. And therefore, Christians get ill. We suffer. And then, of course, there's the opposition which we face simply because we are Christian believers.

Simply because we trust in Jesus. It's why I ask at the start, what do you fear? But, verse 31, if God is for us, who can be against us?

[7 : 35] Now that is unpacked, I think, in three ways, which I put there on the outline, in three ways in just the next few verses. So notice, first of all, that God's generosity assures us.

Verse 32, 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?

Now just have a thinker moment, at what point might God's love and kindness fail? Well, surely he'd be at the point of the cross.

Why should God give his son to die for us? Why should he do that? But he didn't. God's kindness didn't fail then, and so it won't fail in the future.

So you imagine a wealthy businessman who buys a kind of flashy new car, you know, £50,000 worth. Would it not be absurd if he picked the car up from the garage, took it for a spin, ran out of petrol a couple of days later, went to a petrol station, and was so appalled by the high cost of fuel that he'd just left his car on the side of the road and never used it again?

[9 : 01] Would that not be absurd? You see, that is the force of the argument here. God didn't spare his own son, he gave him up to death for us so that we might be right with God.

Having done that in the past, he's not now going to abandon us by the side of the road if we put our trust in Jesus. Because the fact is that God doesn't give us all things now, does he?

God doesn't give us everything we want in this life. Perhaps that job which we long for, or that relationship we long for, or a child, or happiness, or healing.

Now, of course, when he does give us those things, faith is easy. But when he doesn't, then, of course, we find ourselves asking, well, is God really for me? Is God really on my side?

Can I really trust him? Is he really committed to getting me to heaven? Well, yes. Look at the cross. God has given his son for you so that you might be reconciled to him, have peace with God, and be certain of the new creation.

[10 : 17] God's generosity assures us. Secondly, God's justice upholds us. Let's have a look at verse 33. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Now, of course, you'll be conscious if you're a Christian, as I am, that actually there are plenty of people who might want to bring a charge against us.

There is our own conscience, isn't there? Will God really forgive me? There's Satan himself, the great accuser. You don't think God's going to forgive you that, do you? Surely, in doing that, you have overstepped the mark.

Not to mention a watching world. In fact, there's almost anyone, isn't there, who could bring a charge against those of us who are Christians. And above all, God could. On the final judgment day, imagine a court scene.

Above all, God is the one who could bring a charge against us. But wonderfully, because of the death of Jesus, he overrules any objections.

[11 : 26] And we are found to be righteous. God the judge has justified us. He has declared us to be right with him. You see, when we doubt that the verdict on the final day is secure, you and I need to ask a question.

And that is this. Do I really think that some new accusation might come along which actually would change God's minds on the final day?

Would change the way in which God feels about you? I take it that's one of the reasons why the nation is gripped by the phone hacking scandal.

because, you know, every day we think there might be some new revelation which will change the final outcome and what's going to happen in the end. But the glorious truth is that if you have put your trust in Jesus, yes, there are plenty of things that will come along that will change the way in which other people think of you, God's but nothing will change God's verdicts on you.

God's generosity assures us, God's justice upholds us, God's Son defends us. Verse 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

[13 : 06] Jesus himself is the God appointed judge on the final day. He could condemn us, but wonderfully he is the very one who has died for us.

And more than that, he was raised to new life, given a new body, just as we will be given renewed bodies in the new creation. What's more, he's now interceding for us. Now, I don't think that means that Jesus is kind of in heaven pleading with God not to condemn Christians.

It would be easy to read that, isn't it, and kind of think like that. But Jesus doesn't need to plead like that because he's died already. Our sin has been punished in Jesus and doesn't need to be punished again.

Rather, I take it that it is the very presence of Jesus in heaven, the one who died, the one who was raised again, is his very presence in heaven that is his intercession, so to speak.

That it's the proof that his death worked, if you like, that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[14 : 21] So, you see, how can we be certain that God will get us to heaven if we put our trust in Christ? Christ? Well, God's generosity assures us, his justice upholds us, and his son defends us.

In each case, the challenge is answered by the death of Jesus. Which leads us to our second point, because confidence in the death of Jesus leads secondly to confidence in the love of God.

Have a look again at verse 37. Now, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Now, notice that word loved, is that not slightly odd?

Loved in the past tense, through him, not, he doesn't say, does he, through him who loves us, but through him who loved us. Now, that is not to say that God doesn't love us now, if we put our trust in Jesus, he does.

But you see, how do you know God loves you? How do you know God loves you now? Well, it is because he has loved you.

[15 : 39] You see, it's when we look back to the cross and see God's love for us demonstrated in the death of Jesus that we can say, God loved me, therefore, he loves me.

God loved me, therefore, he loves me. You see, look again at verse 35. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Lots of things threaten, don't they, to separate us from Christ.

You and I, as we look at verse 35, you and I are meant to feel, I take it, the terrible range of things, that as we simply think about our lives, as we think about our world, the terrible range of things which actually could separate us from the love of Christ.

The things that we imagine might cause a genuine believer to be torn away from Jesus. And the fact is that these are real possibilities for Christians.

[16 : 48] Ask any Christian in northern Nigeria, Nigeria, for example. Twenty years ago, the opposition and persecution that Christians today face in northern Nigeria would have been totally unimaginable, totally unthinkable.

See, who knows what Christians in this country will face in the next 20 years. Those who use the Barnabas Fund prayer diary will have been praying just this last week for two villages in Pakistan where 3,000 Christians were recently forced to flee their homes.

And the son of a church leader was shot in the face. But notice for you how Paul goes on in verse 36 to quote Psalm 44.

He does so to show that this experience of verse 35, that there is something of that experience that is normal in every Christian life.

Verse 36, as it is written, for your sake we are being killed all day long. it is precisely because this believer in Psalm 44 is faithful to God that he suffers.

[18 : 00] In fact, it's such a fantastic psalm, I want to turn back to it. So keep a finger in Romans 8 and turn back to Psalm 44. because I think it's a psalm which speaks very powerfully to us when we find ourselves asking the question, will God really get me to heaven?

So Psalm 44 on page 564. Now it's a psalm which begins with rejoicing, rejoicing in God's great rescue of his people in the past.

Their rescue from Egypt and being brought to the promised land. Just have a look at verses 1 to 3 and see if you can hear them rejoicing. Oh God, we've heard with our ears.

Our fathers have told us what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old. You with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted. You afflicted the peoples, but them you set free.

For not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arms save them, but your right hand and your arm and the light of your face, for you delighted in them.

[19 : 15] But then the psalm changes, doesn't it, because as the psalmist looks around him, he feels as if God has rejected his people. Verse 9, but you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies.

You have made us turn back from the foe and those who hate us have taken spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations.

And the point is, this has not happened because they have turned their backs on God. Have a look at verse 17. All this has come to us, though we haven't forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant.

our hearts has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way. Verse 20, if we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread our hands to a foreign God, would not God discover this?

For he knows the secrets of the heart. If they had turned against God, perhaps all this would be understandable, but they haven't. So you see, how do they feel?

[20 : 31] Well, look at verse 22, and here is our verse from Romans 8. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Awake, why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself. Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face? Let me ask, in the midst of suffering and hardship, in the midst of the battle with sin, have you ever thought to yourself, is it just possible that God is asleep?

Have you ever thought to yourself and felt that actually God has turned his face away from you? That he has forgotten about you? You are perhaps so busy running the whole universe that actually he hasn't really noticed what's going on in your life and even if he has he certainly hasn't got the time to help.

Well that is how the psalmist feels. But did you see how the psalm ends? Verse 26 rise up come to our help redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

Now that is a cry isn't it that is answered in Romans because in Jesus God has come in Jesus God has risen up in Jesus God has rescued his people.

[22 : 10] And therefore back in Romans chapter 8 have a look at the list of things in verses 38 and 39. For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers 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.

Notice here is the physical world that we can see as well as the spiritual world that we cannot see. Here is the present that we do know about as well as the future and what is to come that we don't know about.

You see have a look at those verses is there anything in verses 38 and 39 that is excluded? Is there anything that you fear any experience that you may face that is ruled out that is not mentioned in verses 38 and 39?

It's all there isn't it? Nothing can separate those who put their trust in Jesus Christ from the love of God. As you go back to verse 37 let me ask a question what does it mean do you think for us to be more than conquerors?

notice it's not a promise of release from things it's not that we'll be delivered from these things it is we are more than conquerors in these things and I take it that we are more than conquerors because it is these very things these very things that we fear so often that God turns for our good so you look back to verse 28 which we looked at last week and we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose and what is our good?

[24 : 23] What is our good? What is your good as God looks at you? Verse 29 is that we be conformed to the likeness of Christ verse 30 it is that we get to the new creation in other words you see the very things that so often we fear the very things that as we perhaps think of our lives which we might think of are our enemies it is those very things which God uses as he transforms our enemies into our friends and he uses them to make us more like Christ and to get us to heaven now of course we still fear them but God's love is so powerful he turns our greatest fears into our friends let me just read what an early church leader called

John Chrysostom how he wrote about this he said this those things that be against us so far are they from thwarting it at all that even without their will they become to us the causes of crowns and the procurers of countless blessings in that God's wisdom turns their plots into our salvation and glory he finishes see how really no one is against us after all wasn't that the experience of Joseph in the Old Testament how at the end of his life he was able to look back on his life to see the suffering the pain the injustice the uncertainty and Genesis 50 verse 20 which I put on the outline he was able to say to his brothers as for you you meant evil against me but God meant it for good that many people would be kept alive above all isn't that what we see in the cross how does the apostle

Peter explain it in Acts 2 23 this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men you see there you have on the one hand only human evil Satan trying to do his very worst but all being used for the plan of God and for the glory of God how can we be sure God will get us to heaven because nothing can separate Christians from the love of God not even the things that we fear the most because those things God will also use to get us to heaven this last week I've been reading parts of this book again it's called Genius and Grace by Gaius Davis who used to be a consultant psychiatrist down the road at the Maudsley Hospital and he was a member of a previous church we went to in

Beckenham but it's a series of wonderful biographies of Christian men and women in whom God was powerfully at work in adversity and as a psychiatrist he looks at many of the great Christians of the past and he shows how God used either the circumstances which they faced or their character and temperaments both for their good but also for God's glory and honour so Lord Shaftesbury the great social reformer who suffered so badly with depression that Francis Nightingale said of him that if he hadn't given himself to reforming lunatic asylums he'd have ended up in one himself there's Christina Rossetti who's described as the finest English woman poet of the 19th century yet she suffered the most terrible illnesses all the way through her childhood from the age of four until 18 again in midlife and died of breast cancer at the age of 44 there's the desperately unhappy childhood of

C.S. Lewis there's Martin Luther the reformer with his obsessive personality played by anxiety suffered terrible pain from kidney stones and William Cowper the poet and hymn writer who was played constantly by depression now the genius of the book is that it shows how God used their character and their suffering to make them more like Christ and for his glory they are all illustrations of what Paul is saying here in Romans chapter 8 in these things we are more than conquerors so let me finish with a challenge and an encouragement and the challenge is this it is that you and I live in a world don't we and we live in a culture that is completely obsessed by personal happiness our culture is obsessed by happiness and fulfillment and success it is if you like a therapeutic culture and the danger is that you and I will distort the gospel that will make the gospel all about me and all about making my life comfortable or more comfortable more successful happier and more fulfilling now that is not the gospel but if we distort the gospel and make it like that then when life becomes difficult when the very things that we fear happen to us we all blame

[30 : 50] God that's the challenge but then the encouragement because you see God is at work in people far more wonderfully in a far greater way than simply to make your life in this world more comfortable he is at work to get Christians to heaven he is doing that Romans 8 verse 28 in every situation of your life indeed there will be no situation in your life in which God is not doing that you see God is good nothing can separate you from his love not even the things that you fear the most even those things are testimony to God's love and care for you as he uses them to conform you to

Christ's likeness and to get you to heaven let's spend a few moments in quiet reflection and I shall lead us in prayer who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword now in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us heavenly father we praise you afresh for your great love for us supremely demonstrated in the death of Jesus thank you for this reminder that in him there is nothing that can be against us thank you that you gave up your son for us that there is no charge that can now be brought against us that will stick on the final judgment day and we pray heavenly father that you would please continue to work in our lives to conform us more and more to the likeness of Christ that as you have promised to get your people to heaven to the new creation so you will do so and we ask it in Jesus name

Amen