

The Assuring Love of God

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. And if you'd like to turn in the Bibles to page 919 to Romans 8, this is continuing a sermon series I hear.

Things change at Holy Trinity, it seems, as I come back. At the 8 o'clock service, we had a rat with us. I thought, oh, is that lunch? I thought I'd been living in Asia too long.

But now when I climb up to the pulpit, there are some secateurs here. Now, I don't know, I even know what the name is, but I never use these things, as some of you would know.

But I'm thinking, is this to sort of cut the sermon short or something like that? Well, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, your word is light and life, and we pray that you'll shine the light of your word in our hearts so that we may live, and that we may live for the glory of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. People suffer. Many of you suffer. Many of you have suffered and will do. All through Asia, people suffer.

[1 : 12] In fact, there's no part of the world where people don't suffer. Bereavement, sickness, illness, injustice, persecution, opposition.

Buddhism is the main religion in Myanmar and in Thailand, where I teach often. And Buddhism says that suffering comes because of our desires.

So the way to eradicate suffering is to eradicate all desires. It strikes me as a fairly stupid philosophy, to be honest, and not indeed a right understanding of what suffering is really about.

But there is also a number of strands of Christian teaching that suggests that we should not suffer. If we have enough faith, God will heal us, bless us, make us prosperous, and take away all our suffering here and now.

A terrible heresy, in my opinion. But it's very strong in various parts of the world. In Nigeria, where I visited before, where Peter and Elspeth used to minister, but also in many parts of Asia.

[2 : 26] What is the place of suffering for Christians? There's a whole range of ways in which the Bible addresses that topic. So there's a range of answers, in a way.

But in this passage, Paul takes us in one particular line of thinking that is very important, I think, for us Christians to get right. Paul says at the beginning of this passage that the sufferings of this world, or this present time, are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Paul is comparing the present and the future. He's saying that in general, in this world, we suffer. Those sufferings, indeed, may be severe.

They may be very significant, in fact. Paul himself would soon suffer martyrdom, but he'd already, when he wrote this letter, suffered enormously in so many different places.

Maybe his readers had suffered as well. So Paul is not treating suffering lightly here. He's saying the sufferings of this present time, which may indeed be very significant and very great, they are not worth comparing with the glory that is about to be revealed in the future.

[3 : 52] The present and the future. Now, I used to be an actuary. Actuaries calculated things like life insurance premiums. And it all worked on the basis of what is something worth now compared to what is something worth in the future.

If I give you a dollar now, or if I offer you a dollar now, or a dollar in a year's time, you would be wise to take it now. Because, in a year's time, the dollar may be worth less with inflation, and for actuaries, we have to keep all this in mind, people may not be alive in a year's time, or two, or five, or ten.

Money now, something now, is worth more than the same monetary value in the future for those reasons. Often, the present outweighs the future because the future is uncertain.

We don't know what a year, or two, or five, or ten will bring. But Paul here has his calculations the other way round. For him, the future far outweighs the present.

And that is because the future is not uncertain. The future is sure. The future is guaranteed. The future is inevitable and secure for Paul.

[5 : 26] You see, when the future is uncertain, that uncertainty devalues what might come in the future. See, it's all very well to think that, you know, a football team like Richmond might win the premiership in 2073.

But I won't be alive then. It's actually got zero value to me, if you understand what I mean. But when the future is certain, and sure, and guaranteed, then it actually tips the scales the other way.

And all the sufferings that we may face on this earth, both, in a sense, natural ones, because the world is fallen and we'll be sick and bereaved and different things at different times, and the added sufferings of being a Christian and facing the opposition of the world, whatever the mountain of that suffering may be, it is incomparable.

It is outweighed, far outweighed, by the certainty of the glory that is to be revealed in the future. Behind Paul's thinking here, he recognizes that this world was made good by God back in the first chapter of the Bible.

But as we know so well, in chapter 3 of Genesis, the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden sin, and thereafter, our world is subjected to futility and frustration. It's not working properly.

[6 : 48] It's a little bit like having a little virus in your computer, and it sort of works, but sometimes it doesn't. It doesn't always do exactly what it should do. That's our world. And we all face that, whether we're believers or not.

That's the nature of our world. A fallen, futile, frustrated world in which we live. Paul says in verse 20 that the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but the will of one who subjected it.

But then the key in hope. That is, God himself has allowed or even caused this world to be in a futile state for the sake of the glory that is certainly coming.

Sometimes over the years, people have asked, why didn't God make us perfect and keep us perfect? That is, why did he make the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, as we often call them, why did he make them and allow them to fall into sin?

Why didn't God just make it all good and perfect and keep it all good and perfect so that this world is really nice? It's very hard to give a complete answer to that question.

[7 : 59] We don't fully know the mind of God. But here I think we do get a suggestion of an answer. God allowed or made this world to fall into futility and frustration for the sake of the greater glory that will come.

If I can put it like this, words different from Paul, but I think the same idea. If this world was perfect and stayed perfect, we would never need Jesus to come and die and rise.

We would never know the full depths of God's love and grace and mercy, and thus we would never appreciate fully the glory of God. But in God's wisdom, it is better for us and more glorious for him that we be redeemed in Christ than never needing the redemption of Christ.

That I think is what Paul has in the back of his mind here. God has subjected this world to futility in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

That's the glory that is coming. That's the glory that is far, far greater than all the sufferings we may endure in this life on earth.

[9 : 26] So then, creation waits. Verse 19, Paul said, the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

There are two ways of waiting. We can sit and wait where we really don't think it's going to happen. We just sort of do other things and pass the time. But this is waiting eagerly.

This is like the child at the airport waiting for their parents or grandparents to arrive and they're jumping up and down and looking, are they here yet? Are they here yet? That's the eager waiting here.

The creation is eagerly awaiting the glory of God to come. Eagerly waiting for the revealing of the children of God as it's put in verse 19.

Craning its neck, standing on tiptoes, looking forward eagerly to this guaranteed future from God. But at the same time as waiting, creation also groans in verse 22.

[10 : 26] We know that the whole creation has been groaning. But the groaning is not a complaint here. The groaning is in labor pains until now.

Now I'm fairly thankful that I've never experienced and never will experience giving birth. But people seem to complain about the pain of childbirth. And yet at the same time they seem to have more children.

Which seems to be a little odd. But of course, the pain of childbirth is outweighed by the joy of children. That's why I assume people have more than one.

Now that's the image, the illustration that Paul is using here. Our creation is in pain. Pains of suffering, futility, frustration, it doesn't work fully.

But that pain is anticipating the joy to come, the joy of the glory, of the revelation of the children of God to come. And that's why this pain and that's why this suffering is worth it.

[11 : 31] But there is a guarantee at the end. It's not just a wishful hope of something to come. It's a certainty of what is to come. And therefore, what is to come far outweighs the present.

That's Paul's argument through this passage. And as creation groans, so do Christians groan as well. Paul goes on to say in verse 23, not only the creation, but we ourselves groan, we who have the first fruits of the Spirit.

We often think that receiving God's Spirit will give us calm and peace and joy and tranquility. There's some truth in that, but actually, receiving God's Spirit causes us to groan.

Because receiving God's Spirit is like the first fruits of the glory to come. It actually creates in us a greater intensity of longing for the future.

That's partly a significant reason, in fact, of why God gives His children His Holy Spirit now on earth, so that we may long for something to come. You imagine a little child.

[12 : 39] They can smell the smell of dinner cooking in the kitchen, nagging mum, like I used to do. Can I taste some now? A little piece of roast lamb cut off.

It makes you want more. You salivate for more. And that's the role of the Spirit for us, a significant part of His role in our life, that He makes us long for and groan for the fullness of the kingdom of heaven that is coming.

That's how we should be living, with that eager anticipation and deep longing. And in part, the sufferings we endure now are associated and should stimulate that longing for the glorious kingdom of heaven that is coming.

But even more than this, this is not merely a looking forward to the future. God not only gives us His Spirit to anticipate the future, but the Spirit now helps us in the present.

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

[14 : 00] In this fallen world, in this frustrated and futile world, in the face of our suffering, the difficulties, we don't always know how best to pray.

But God's Spirit given to us makes us long for heaven more as He's just said and therefore here and now helps us in our weakness, helps us in our prayers, helps us in our relationship with God in ways maybe deeper that we can ever articulate or understand.

To every Christian, God has given His Spirit as earlier in chapter 8 that was made very clear. And now part of the role of that Spirit is helping us in our weakness here and now in the midst of a fallen and suffering world to pray as we ought to God.

It encourages us because God is not thwarted in His purposes by our lack of prayer or our lack of understanding as we pray. And God, of course, is not thwarted either by our suffering.

Therefore, all things work together for good. A famous verse so often used but yet misused and abused.

[15 : 23] A verse that's so often ripped out of context and it becomes a sort of very Australian type proverb. She'll be right, mate. All things are going to work out for good.

Look on the bright side of life, every cloud's got a silver lining. But actually, that is wrong. That's not really exactly what this is saying. This verse says, in verse 28, we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.

That is, all things work together for good for Christians, for believers. Not necessarily true for unbelievers. All things work together for good.

Good things and bad things. Everything has a good as its goal. As Paul uses that word good, he's not meaning our comfort or our pleasure or necessarily even an ease to our suffering here and now.

The word good is the word that God kept declaring in Genesis chapter 1. God saw what He made, it was good. End of day 1.

[16 : 34] God saw what He made on day 2 and it was good. Day 2. Day 3, 4, 5, 6. At the end of day 6, when God had made everything, everything was very good.

And maybe that's what Paul is alluding to here, that what turns out for good is not just my pleasure, that's not the idea of good, but rather the reversal of a fallen world to what the perfect creation initially was.

That is what is good. That is what God is working towards. And evil things, bad things, unjust things, whatever those things are, whatever those things that we face, good or bad, they are working for, leading towards what is in the end ultimately good in God's eyes.

It doesn't mean that God condones evil, but He brings good from evil, of course. I see that happening around the world where I go.

One of my students is in Burma. His mother was killed in the Cyclone Nagus in 2008. But out of that, Joseph's faith has come alive.

[17 : 49] He's strong in faith, resilient, and keen for people around the Delta area where he is from, where the worst of that cyclone hit.

Many more than 100,000 killed. He is keen for the gospel to flourish there. There is good coming out of a bad event, an evil event.

My friend Stephen in China, whom I taught some years ago in his seminary in Beijing, he suffered a lot in life. He suffered the loss of his mother when he was young, and then his sister whom had led him to Christ when he was a teenager.

She died of cancer. He suffered from poverty as he worked for several years in a cafe just to raise money to go to university and seminary. He suffered injustice at his seminary in the way he was treated a couple of years ago with his academic results.

All of that has made him a deeply resilient Christian pastor and preacher working at a very tough place in the very north of China, very bleak.

[19 : 04] As I think of him there and I think of other students I've taught in Melbourne at Ridley who don't want to go more than 20 kilometers from the CBD because there are no coffee shops further out or something like that, I think, what a contrast from someone like Stephen.

I think of a friend in Pakistan who's a keen preacher, keen evangelist, keen to train others to preach well in a dangerous country but to add to that Benjamin is blind.

Hard enough, I think, leaving as a Christian in Pakistan but he's blind and he's very passionate to see if God will open ways for him, can you imagine, to be an evangelist in Iran which is probably an even harder place for Christians to be but out of the suffering of his life has come a depth of commitment to the gospel, to ministry, to Christian life from persecution in Vietnam which is a place where the Christian church is often facing persecution.

One of my students in Thailand comes out of that context and though he's only about 24 or 25 I think, he's got quite a depth of commitment and maturity for his age, keen to serve his church and though in some ways he may have in the end good opportunities coming from Vietnam to go to the West, stay in the West, stay in comfort, very keen to serve the church in Vietnam.

That's just a handful of examples. There are many more and not just in Asia of course in Australia as well. God brings good out of all things for those who love him and the good is not comfort, it's not ease, it's not prosperity, it's not good health.

[20 : 58] The good is becoming like Jesus. The good is being made stronger as a child of God. The good is about God's purposes for this world being fulfilled.

and the spread of his gospel in this world. To underscore the certainty of the future which is underneath Paul's argument here as how we react to sufferings.

We only can react to sufferings rightly when we grasp the fact that God's future glory for us is absolutely certain. If there was doubt about it, if there was doubt about Jesus' return or doubt about us going to heaven or doubt about the value of heaven or its existence or reality, if there was any doubt, it would seriously devalue that future.

Paul wants us to be clear, there is no doubt that future glory is absolutely rock-solid guaranteed. it will not lose any of its value and because it's guaranteed, its value far outweighs our suffering.

So what Paul now does is to show the certainty of this as he finishes with a sort of climax to this part of his letter. Paul lists five things for a Christian in a sequence verse 20.

[22 : 21] But he lists them in such a way that it shows that this is like a chain where there is no weak link and so if you are in part of the chain, the end of the chain is certain.

He says in verse 29, those whom God foreknew, he predestined and then in verse 30, those whom he predestined, he also called, those whom he called, he justified and those whom he justified, he glorified.

Five things. Those whom God foreknew, that means God established a relationship with those people even before they knew it, before the foundation of the world it seems.

God has started people in this chain. Those whom God foreknew, he predestined. That is, God established their destiny in advance, their destination if you like. What is the destination?

He explains in verse 29, the destination is to be conformed to the image of Jesus. So that Jesus, the firstborn, might actually be the firstborn in a large family.

[23 : 22] That is, there might be many brothers and sisters of Christ. Our destination is to be like Jesus, to be conformed to his image.

And that's the good of verse 28. That's what all things are to lead towards. Good things and bad things are to make us more in the image of Jesus.

in character, in godliness, in moral value. So those whom God foreknew, established a relationship with, God set their destination to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

Those people then he called. Usually that's understood in the sense of now in our own life on earth, God's called us, he's brought us into that relationship. And those people whom he's called, he justified, which you've seen in recent weeks, I assume.

That is, our sins are washed away, we're declared righteous through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And those whom he justified, he glorified.

[24 : 27] But hang on a minute, if we're thinking strictly in terms of time, yes, God foreknew us, predestined us, called us, and justified us, and will one day glorify us.

And yet Paul uses past tense, he glorified us because this is so certain, so secure. Yes, it's a future event, our glorification, it's already begun through the gift of the Spirit, but the fact that that glorification in the future is so certain, Paul can use the past tense to underscore and guarantee, if you like, this future glory.

It is real. It is certain. And therefore, it far outweighs all present sufferings that we may face. Paul is saying that from before history began to its very end, his people, his children, you and me, are bound for glory.

Bound. We're certain of arriving in glory. We're on a glory train, as one of those old spiritual songs put it. What that means and what Paul is saying here is that no evil will derail this train.

No sin will stop this train. No lack of prayer will delay the train. No suffering will slow it down. We are guaranteed to arrive at our glorious destination when we will be revealed fully as the children of God.

[26 : 00] and nothing, nothing in heaven and on earth can stop us arriving at our destination set by God.

That's why we eagerly and keenly await it with eager anticipation. That's why our groans on earth now are outweighed as we look forward to the joy that is coming.

In the face of suffering, whatever we may suffer, whether it's a sort of natural suffering of a fallen world or the added suffering of opposition for Christian faith, it should feed our yearning for God's glory.

It should not make us bitter and complain as so often sadly it does, but it should make us more eagerly anticipate the glory that is ours and is coming.

It should make us respond more by growth in Christ's likeness, that as we suffer instead of becoming bitter, we become more and more like Jesus, conformed more to the image of his son.

[27 : 06] So Paul finishes this with a sort of rhetorical climax. He throws out four rhetorical questions in a sense. Firstly, he says, who is against us then in verse 31?

Now technically we could list a lot of things that are against us. For my brothers and sisters in Pakistan or Myanmar or Thailand or India or wherever I teach, they could probably list a whole range of things from governments and church officials and injustice and Taliban and extremists and terrorists and so on.

They're all against us. But Paul is not asking the question like that. He's throwing it out merely, really, as a taunt. Come on, those of you who are against us, no one. No one can effectively be against God's people because God is for us is what he's saying.

And therefore the opposition, though significant and though maybe bringing us great suffering and maybe even death on this life, on this earth, that opposition is, well, nothing in the end.

Who is against us? Paul says in verse 31, if God is for us, who is against us? Well, there's lots against us, but they're nothing because God is for us.

[28 : 18] And we know that because God did not withhold his son, but gave him up for us all, in verse 32. Secondly, who will bring any charge against God's elect?

Well, we know that lots of people try to bring charges against God's elect. In this country, ridiculing us as dinosaurs in a museum, for example. In Pakistan, with blasphemy laws and injustice in various parts, including Malaysia, where Christians suffer in all these countries, there are many charges brought against, some just, some unjust.

But the point here again is not to list the opposition, but is, in fact, a taunt, really. If God is for us, whose charge will stand on the final day? And it may be on earth that charges against God's elect, which are unjust, etc., may stand, maybe Christians lose their lives for their faith, but on the final day, there is no charge against us at all because we're justified in Christ.

All our sins washed away, our slate is clean. no charge can stand against us. Paul puts it in a different way in verse 34, who is to condemn?

There may be lots in our world trying to condemn us for our faith, but there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, as you saw last week.

[29 : 42] Christ's death and resurrection, that's what Paul says in verse 34, is Christ Jesus who died, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God to intercede for us, who's to condemn us, nobody's condemnation will stick because of Jesus.

That's the grounds of confidence. Jesus died and rose. And then the final question that Paul asks in verse 35, who will separate us from the love of Christ?

And he lists a whole range of possibilities, all sorts of things that may try to separate us from the love of Christ, but they cannot, because we're part of that unbreakable chain.

Our destination is secure and glorious. Will hardship, in verse 35, will that separate us from the love of Christ? Not at all. In some ways, hardship ought to make us more like Christ.

Or distress or persecution. Oh yes, persecution is very severe in parts outside Australia. But though they take our life, goods honor child and wife, and those who mean us ill should ravage, wreck, or kill, the city of God remaineth.

[31 : 07] Martin Luther penned those words. That is, they may even under persecution take our life, but they cannot separate us from the love of Christ.

Will famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword, none of those things can separate us from the love of Christ. And that's why Paul comes to that great statement at the end of this chapter.

He is convinced, he says, 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, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing, nothing at all can make the promise of future glory at risk or in doubt. Nothing, nothing that we will face on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Christ. These are majestic verses. They capture something of the essence of what God is like. A God who is sovereign and his purposes will never be thwarted and never fail.

[32 : 22] A God who is faithful so his love for us in Christ's death will never dry up and never be removed. A love of a God who is generous for us giving even his only son for us though we do not deserve him.

It's a glorious climax to make it clear for every one of us as I hope it is. We are secure in God for eternity.

Future glory is certain. Nothing and nobody can put it at risk or take it away. And therefore though we suffer in a world that suffers in a world that is fallen futile and frustrated and to which in addition Christians face opposition and persecution may almost seem intolerable and unbearable and unendurable for us on earth but in the light of the glory to come that is certain and guaranteed it's no comparison the sufferings of our world are not worth comparing to the glory that is coming and that is sure that is certain because of Jesus let's pray our great God and Father we thank you indeed for the glorious future secured for us by the

Lord Jesus Christ and we pray that we may live and suffer eagerly awaiting that future glory that we may live now for him as your children and be made more and more like him in our lives Amen Heroes Amen time to see you as told in that hall in our room to can Hit home know