

Rejoicing in Suffering (Rev David Harris)

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Date: 13 April 2025

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[0 : 0 0] A prayer. Our Heavenly Father, we pray that your Holy Spirit would bring alive to us the words of Scripture, that you will show us our Lord Jesus Christ and fill us with praise and gratitude for all that he's done for us. For his glory we pray. Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. high. She says the children are happy at school and in their church youth group that they have.

[2 : 4 1] My husband and I are getting on quite well after a bit of a rocky patch. We even pray together. God is good. So, Jack, why do you feel God has got it in for you? And he says, well, it's my circumstances. He's not really doing anything for me. Jill, why do you feel God is good? Well, she says, it's my circumstances. He's been answering my prayers. Well, I think you've spotted probably. Although they're very different in one respect, they're identical. They're measuring God's love by the feel-good factor, by circumstances. Well, Jack, if I can talk to you for a moment, Romans chapter 8, verse 31 onwards, is for people like you who are up against it, suffering, frustrated, disappointed, and you need some reassurance that God is actually on your side. Verse 31, what shall we say in response to these things? What are these things? Well, they're all the sufferings earlier in the chapter that the Apostle Paul has been talking about. If God is for us, 31, who can be against us? Jack, that's what you need to hear. Now, Paul knows that's a big if, if God is for us, but he bases that if, as we see here, on Christ and his cross. Jill, Romans chapter 8, the words of Scripture here are also for you, because you have no doubt that God is for you, but your confidence is based actually on happy circumstances. This Scripture here can give you a much firmer basis, because, I don't really want to say this to you, Jill, but your happy circumstances could change. That feel-good factor could plummet, because you could have some setback, something could go wrong. So, if you're feeling God is good, because he's helping me, you'll be forced then into saying, well, actually, God is not good, when things might go badly. So, Romans chapter 8 is going to point, Jill, you, to the cross as the only sure ground for saying, God is good all the time. God is for me, whatever the circumstances. Well, if we're Christian believers, I guess we're probably a bit of a mixture of Jack and Jill. We have our ups and our downs. Well, chapter 8 faces, as you know, up to the, faces up to the problem of suffering. We do groan. The creation itself groans. How many things go wrong? All is not well. Well, in the light of continuing suffering, we might well ask, well, has the gospel of Christ somehow failed? Or how can our relationship with God be assured if he can't sort out the suffering now? Well, chapter 8, verse 1 begins with the wonderful no condemnation, and it ends, verse 39, no separation. And the extra ingredient, as it were, in these verses, that is added to the previous sufferings is death itself. Christians, as Paul wrote this, were already dying, and some would before long be facing the lions in Rome, slaughtered in the arena. So, it's a big if, verse 31, if God is for you, who can be against us?

Well, that if is answered in the focus that follows on the cross. So, you'll see here then, verses 31 to 32 on my little handout, the assurance of God's love. First, the cross underwrites God's determination.

As we think of the assurance here, this last week, I hardly need to recall the terrible ups and downs on the financial markets and the sense of crisis. And it's recalled memories of the financial crash in, when was it, 2008 and 2009, you know, when some banks like RBS were facing going bust. And what happened then, I'm sure we can all remember that, is it needed the government and the Bank of England to underwrite those struggling banks and to guarantee to savers that their money would be secure.

And that was very risky and costly for the government to do. But this is what supremely God has done for us in Christ. Verse 32, he, that's God, God the Father, 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?

You see the argument, if God has gone to these limits, namely the cost of the cross for his son, as we approach Good Friday, the cost of the cross, it's unthinkable that he will let us go down the plug, as it were. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross underwrites God's determination for his people's good. You know how we sometimes say, if we are very keen on getting a new house or a new job perhaps, we say, oh, I'd give anything for that. Well, yes, but would we actually give our own, if we have children or grandchildren, would we give one of them? Maybe in a hostage situation? Well, fortunately, that's probably never going to arise for any of us. But we can imagine the scenario, imagine the tension if there was a terrible thing going on and we knew that by handing over somebody we really loved, then many lives would be saved. We'd be in a difficult position, wouldn't we? We'd be torn. Well, that's the picture here. And if we were to do that, it would show the level of our determination to sort out that issue. Well, that's what verse 32 is saying. God, who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, well, that shows how determined he is. Will he not also, therefore, graciously give us all things? All things? What does that mean? Is it a blank check? Well,

[9 : 48] I'd suggest it's not all the things we might be seeing today in the weekend supplement, the papers or on Amazon. No, all things, everything we need to progress from our present situation, whatever difficulties we may be going through, to the promise of the resurrection body. It's all things that God considers necessary for the well-being of us, his children.

Sometimes we can't quite believe that, all things, and therefore we hold back in wholehearted commitment to Christ. We're reluctant to give of our time and our money, maybe our involvement in Christian service, fearful of the cost, how it might affect our bank balance or our social standing.

Well, we're reminded here that God is not out to cramp us or to make us miserable. He's determined for our welfare. Secondly, moving on, verses 33 to 34, the cross pleads our case. So we read verse 33, 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, he's at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. So when we think the question then, who's going to bring any charge against us? The answer, sadly, is plenty. Because we can easily feel guilty and weighed down. Even as forgiven Christians, we feel those charges. A bit like Jack. Oh, my prayer life is pretty patchy, even non-existent. My lifestyle's inconsistent. My witness is poor. Plenty of charges against me. But actually, who's bringing in the guilty verdict? Is it God? No, it can't be God, the argument here, because he's the justifier. He may be the judge, but he's already pronounced us innocent when we trust in Christ. That's the promise of verse 34, because the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. And his resurrection proves that he can now plead, intercede, what he's done for us before God, the judge. How can I illustrate this? Imagine a court scene. There are four main sort of people in this court scene. There's the accused standing there in the dock. There's the judge.

There's the counsel for the prosecution and the counsel for the defence. So what happens? The prosecutor goes for the proper penalty. And then surprisingly, the counsel for the defence agrees that the accused is guilty, but offers to pay the full penalty or fine himself, so the accused can be set free. Nothing to pay. Finished.

Some months later, though, the accused hears that the prosecution has come up with some further evidence about the case. And they want him back in court. And in our legal system, a case can be reopened in the light of some new evidence. Yes, but not in the court of heaven, because God the judge knows all the evidence. He knows all our misdemeanors, our past, present and future. And he's declared the case closed because Christ has died. The counsel for the defence, the Lord Jesus Christ, has dealt with it once for the defence. And then finally, the cross proves God's love. Verses 35 to 39. Notice here, it's wonderful. We often have this at funerals. Paul piles up the possibility of the things that can undermine our relationship with God and make us question whether he really loves us. So, verse 35.

[14 : 19] Who shall separate us? Shall trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword? What a grim list. And then, to cap it all, verse 36, even death itself. Verse 36. As it's written, we face death all day long. We're considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Quoting Psalm 44, showing that the people of God are never immune to suffering and death.

Paul the Apostle tries to think of every possible thing that might separate us. Death, life, angels, demons, anything. I've sometimes discovered in my pastoral ministry that older people can often express worries. A Christian believer can say, my one fear is that as I get older, I may lose my mental faculties. I may no longer be able to have clear faith and I can just drift away from God or suffer depression in such a way that I'm cut off from God. Well, even that is covered. Verse 37.

No. In all these things, whatever it may be, verse 37, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. It could be translated super conquerors. That's the promise. Again, how? It's through the cross.

If you happen to have verse 37 open, I'm going to read it incorrectly. This is a kind of Sunday school trick to see, to try and make the point. So here we go. Verse 37.

No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. What's the mistake? Pause. Anybody spot it?

[16 : 14] Vicar's not allowed to say. I'll read it again. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.

Yes? Somebody said it. Yes? Can you say it a bit louder? No.

Well, there is the no. It wasn't that. I'll tell you what it is. It's at the very end, through him who loved us. Not loves us. It's past tense. Through him who loved us. Paul, apostle, doesn't God love us? Of course he does, says Paul, but how do you know God loves him?

It's because, once for all, he showed that love on the cross. That's where Paul wants to take us, back to the cross. Don't rely on your present feelings of love now, says Paul. You know God loves you. How? Because of the cross. It's back there. True, there are plenty of other signs of God's love. The spring weather and new birth, the Holy Spirit, answer prayer, but ultimately it's the cross.

Romans 5, chapter 8, God shows his love for us while we were still sinners. Christ died for us. So, the secret then, if one could put it like that, of being more than conquerors depends on focusing not on circumstances or experience, but on the cross. Because our instinct in the face of trouble, hardship, death, is to say God's not really there. No, the cross shows, he is there. So, when a disaster comes, whatever it might be, we might want to say, ah, that's the work of the devil, of the evil one. No, scripture doesn't credit the devil with such power. We simply live in a fallen creation, as the chapter has already reminded us. The evil one's trick is to cash in on our pain and to use it to rattle our trust in Christ's love. So, in conclusion, who is the super-conqueror of verse 37? I'd like to suggest an example of a super-conqueror is somebody who's housebound, who's pretty frail, who's struggling with the cost of living. She's got chronic pain, but, and this is the point, she's still believing, she's still praying, she's still confident of Christ, she's still sure that neither life nor death nor anything else can separate her from the love of God in Christ. So, Jack, your feeling that God's not very concerned for you is misplaced. If God gave his son for you, be sure that he has your eternal good in his heart. And, Jill, go on thanking God for your present blessings, but keep your eyes focused on the one who loved you and gave his son for you.

[19 : 40] A moment to reflect and I'll lead us in a prayer. Lord Jesus Christ, as we enter this Holy Week, we go with you on Palm Sunday. We do sing Hosanna, save us, and we thank you that you went the way of the cross, assuring us of your determination, your Father's determination for our good. Thank you for the great assurance that as we trust in you, nothing can separate us from the love of God, neither life nor death nor anything else in all creation.

We give you our thanks in your holy name. Amen. Amen.