

FOREVER LOVE

Romans 8:28-39

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 30, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 8, verses 28 through 39. It is a glorious description of the strong and enduring love of God. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Romans 8, beginning at verse 28, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 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? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 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.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This passage is filled with beautiful descriptions of God's love. We especially see that God's love is active, selfless, and powerful. God is for his chosen people. And he is not idle. His love is not just a passive feeling of affection for us. God's love is active and powerful. He works for those he love.

And maybe you feel like you know all about God's love. Maybe you've heard it every Sunday, and here and there throughout the week, for your entire life. So we might take it for granted. It might be comfortable, but not exciting. Don't take it for granted. Don't think, “Yeah, I know this.” Instead, look at the specific descriptions of God's love in this passage.

There are several quotable verses in this passage. The first one is verse 28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” This is probably one of the most popular verses of the Bible. Sometimes people

will choose this as their life verse. You might have a coffee mug or a wall hanging with this verse on it. It's been used so much that it has kind of become a cliché. And that's not bad. Sometimes things become clichés because they are true and really, really good. It's a marvelous promise, especially when we fully understand it. "For those who love God all things work together for good." And "all" really does mean "all." Even tragedies and disappointments work together for good.

But I have a caution for you: if you're going to use this as your life verse, or even just one of your top ten, you should know what it means. Pay attention to what comes before and what comes after. The Bible was never meant to be read one verse at a time. Both before and after this verse, the apostle Paul is talking about the new creation. He's not talking about everything being good in this life. He's talking about the life to come. In the verses before this, which we talked about last week, Paul teaches "that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (8:18). This world is not the way it's supposed to be, and we suffer in this life. But in the new creation, God will make all things right.

And in the verses following, he speaks of how God "predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (8:29). To be conformed to his image means that we will be like him. And when it says that Jesus will be the "firstborn," that means that there will be more children of God, who will be raised from the dead, just as Jesus was, and we will live eternally, just as he does.

So the "all things" in verse 28 especially refers to our sufferings, and the "good" God promises us is in the world to come, not this one.

There is actually a great danger in believing this verse without knowing the context. For one thing, we might hear the phrase, "All things work together for good," and we might think that God actually causes the bad things in life. It sounds kind of like when something bad happens, and someone says, "It's for the best." That's not true. There are evil things in this world. There is sin and death. None of that is good. Maybe someone you love dies. Maybe you fail at something. Maybe someone does something terrible to you. The last thing you want to hear is, "It's for the best."

Using this verse in those circumstances can actually be dangerous. That is, if we use it wrongly. We don't have to say that our tragedies and sufferings are good. That is to call evil good. If that's the case, you might as well just say that the devil is your best friend. But he's not. And evil is not good.

That's fatalism. It's what the pagans believe. The pagans believe that the gods dictate everything, and, therefore, whatever happens must be "for the best." That's false.

I suppose the reason we're tempted to think this way is that we really don't want bad things to happen. So if we can convince ourselves that bad things are actually good, then we won't be suffering anymore.

But that is not what the Scriptures teach. There is evil, but God does not cause it. He is not the source of evil. Instead, the providence of God is seen in his ability to do good in the midst of great evil. His providence is demonstrated when he brings about something good for us, despite the wickedness in the world, and even despite our own sin. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh can go wild, but God will still make things right in the end.

But if we go the route of fatalism and think that everything is determined by God, then, when the evil just becomes too much for us, we might finally conclude, "I don't think I like this God anymore. If he took so-and-so from me, or if he made this terrible thing happen to me, then he can't actually be good." And you would be right ... if it were true that God causes evil. So we

should not take this verse to mean that everything that happens is for the best. It's not. It means that God takes the bad and he does something good with it. Bad things are still bad.

The other danger, and I think this is the more common one, is that we expect to receive the good in this life. But that is not what God promises. Instead, the Scriptures warn us that we will suffer in this life. Bad things happen. Evil things happen. And sometimes they just stay evil until the day we die.

It is dangerous to our faith to believe that God is going to make things good in this life, because he does not promise that. So it might not happen. And then, when it doesn't happen, we despair of God. We think that he must not be as good as he says he is, or maybe he doesn't actually love me, or maybe he's just not real. We despair when God doesn't satisfy the false expectations we set for him.

The basic problem is that we are in love with this world, and we pursue happiness in this world. I'm going to call this "The Heresy of Happiness." It's not just that we want to be happy. Everyone wants to be happy. And there's nothing wrong with being happy. But the heresy is when we think that the goal of life is to be happy, or we expect that the purpose of God is to give us happiness. But both of those ideas are wrong. And it's not just that they are wrong, but they are deadly to faith. A heresy isn't just any false teaching. We reserve the word "heresy" for those false teachings that pose a fatal threat to saving faith. And "The Heresy of Happiness" is just that.

If we think that the goal of life is to be happy, and if we think that happiness is God's will for our lives, but then we're not happy, we start to think there's something wrong with us. Or maybe we think there's something wrong with God. Or maybe there's something wrong with the faith we have confessed. Maybe it's just not true. If it's supposed to make me happy, but then I'm not, something must be wrong.

Christians like to put on a happy face. I suppose everyone does. In the Christian subculture, that is, in the various kinds of Christian media, there are a lot of happy faces. That's how you market something. Nobody markets their actual product anymore. They market happiness. They make it look like buying their product will satisfy you. So we buy a product, it might deliver for a short time, but the feeling fades, and we move on to the next thing. It's effective at selling products, but it's terrible for Christianity, because Christianity does not deliver the kind of happiness the world is selling. Now, there is nothing more satisfying than knowing our sins are forgiven, but there is still suffering, and there is still a longing for something more, because we're not in the new creation yet. We don't believe Christianity because of the way it makes us feel. We believe it because it is objectively true, and it delivers the greatest eternal promise to us.

Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins. And he rose from the dead on the third day, not just in spirit, and not just as a legend, but physically and historically with hundreds of eyewitnesses. This historical fact secures the promise God has attached to it: that when Jesus returns on the Last Day, he will raise the dead and grant everlasting life to all who believe in him. That's why we believe it. It's true, and it promises eternal life.

Then Paul gets to the beautiful conclusion. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:31). It's a rhetorical question, but go ahead and try to answer it. If God is for you, who can harm you? Who can condemn you? Can the devil drag you into hell? No. If he could, he would just come and kidnap you and take you there. But he is absolutely incapable of doing that, because God prevents it. Can your neighbor harm you? Yes. In this life, people can do great harm to us. God sets limits to it, but they can still do great harm. But no one

FOREVER LOVE (Romans 8:28-39)

can take anything from you that God will not give back a hundred times more in the resurrection. If God is for you, and he is, no one can cause any lasting harm to you.

And Paul reminds us where God has shown this love to 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?” (8:32). Again, a rhetorical question, but try to answer it. That’s the point. God gave his Son for you. Jesus paid the ultimate price to forgive your sins. After paying that price, do you think God is going to say, “Well, I could raise your body from the dead and bring you into the new creation; it won’t cost me anything more, but nah”? God paid the price, and now he wants to get what he paid for. And the thing he paid for is your eternal salvation.

Think about this: suppose you spend your entire life saving up to get one precious thing, like a rare baseball card or a beautiful gem. Maybe you’re not into those things, but just imagine for a moment that you are. You spend everything you have to get it. Then you order it. And it comes in the mail. What do you do? Do you leave it in the package? Does it sit there under a pile of junk mail? Of course not! You open it and give it the most special place in your house. If God has given even his own Son for you, having paid that price, do you think he’s going to just leave you in the dirt? No way. He’s going to raise that body. He’s going to transform you. He’s going to place you in glory in his new creation. That’s what he paid for. There’s no way he doesn’t give it to you.

Or it’s like a parent who buys presents for his kids. Do you go and buy presents for your kids and then just not give them to them? Of course not! Especially when you find something really great for them, you can’t wait to give them their present. Your Father in heaven loves you more than any human parent loves their children. He has already paid the price to give you every good thing. Do think he’s going to withhold it? No way!

And if Jesus has already borne all of the condemnation for our sin, can anyone accuse us anymore? Will God stand for it? Will he allow the devil or anyone else to hold your sins over your head? Not a chance! Jesus is the Judge, and he’s the one who paid for our sin.

So what can separate you from the love of God? Nothing. We might experience some evil things that frighten us. When we suffer, we might feel like God is distant from us. But remember what he has done for you. He will not so easily surrender his claim on you. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:35, 37). “We are more than conquerors,” not by our own power, but “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” (8:37-39). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.