

Love Conquers All

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[0 : 0 0] As we begin. Let's pray. Father, as we look at your passage, your Bible tonight, and this passage in particular, we pray that as we think about perhaps a difficult topic of suffering, that Lord, you might help us and encourage us to be able to remember your love for us, even through hard times.

We pray this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, imagine for a moment that you discovered that your spouse had only six months to live, leaving you with your seven-month-old newborn.

Or imagine that he or she had been in a terrible car accident and would be in a wheelchair for the rest of his or her life. Or perhaps that was your family home in that bushfire.

And that you have come home to find that you've lost your sister, your parents, and all your possessions. How would you react to such devastating news?

And how would you respond to Paul's words in verse 18 of Romans 8, where he says that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us?

[1 : 2 3] Well, I don't know about you, but I would probably struggle lots. Of course, it doesn't even need to be suffering of that serious of nature, because suffering in life comes in all shapes and sizes.

And even the smaller ones can throw us about. Perhaps it's a difficult or overbearing boss at work. A bully. The struggle to start a family. Or the yearning to settle down with someone.

The thing is, no one is immune to suffering. And no amount of planning or money can protect from it. And more often than not, it draws us because it takes us by surprise.

It comes upon us when we least expect it. Now, we could, of course, approach the whole question of suffering philosophically and try to answer questions like, how can a loving God, how can a loving and all-powerful God allow suffering in this world?

And I guess those kinds of questions are important. And there are good books. This one, in particular, by Don Carson, How Long, O Lord? That can help us to think through it biblically.

[2 : 3 4] But tonight, I want to think about suffering when it hits close to home. When you yourself are personally impacted by suffering. That's when suffering takes on a whole new dimension.

It's no longer an intellectual problem. But it becomes an emotional, a psychological, and even a spiritual problem. Well, the passage tonight we're looking at is full of great truths about God, about us, and about the Christian life.

But I think it's especially helpful for the times when we face enormous difficulty. And it's not surprising that many of us turn to this passage in our hour of need.

For it helps us to grapple not so much with the question of why there is suffering at all, but why it is happening to us in particular. Why me? What have I done to deserve this?

Am I being punished? Could I have done anything to prevent this? And what is the purpose of it all? Well, this passage answers those questions in two ways, I think.

[3 : 41] So the first, in verses 28 to 30, is to know what God is doing to us, to those who love Him. Well, the second, the second way, from verses 31 to 37, is to realize what God has already done for those He loves.

So the first speaks of what God is presently doing in our lives, while the second speaks of what God has already done in history, in Christ's life, if you will. Both of these, as we shall see, are motivated by God's love for us, His unshakable and inseparable love for us in Christ Jesus.

So much so that Paul, who probably suffered more than most, can conclude in verses 38 and 39, that he is convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor paths, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, through Christ our Lord.

But let's backtrack to verse 28, to see what I'm sure is a familiar passage to many. It says, We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.

For those He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom He predestined, He also called.

[5 : 09] And those whom He called, He also justified. And those whom He justified, He also glorified. Now I'm sure you probably know that many a greeting card has featured Romans chapter 8, verse 28.

And I've got a picture of it up there. And it's a great comfort to know that all things work together for good for those who love God. But you also probably notice that many of these cards and posters don't then feature the following verses of verses 29 and 30.

Which to me is a bit of a pity, because in addition to knowing that all things work for good to those who love Him, I think it's a greater comfort to also know that this good which is at work is not subject to the whim and the fancy of a capricious God or His ever-changing purposes or even to the strength of our love for Him.

For you see, friends, if you don't read to the end of verse 30, but you stop at verse 28, you may perhaps be mistaken into thinking that all things work together for good only if you continue to love God.

But Paul is saying instead here that those who love God are the same ones are those who are called according to God's purpose. So the fact that you love God is actually evidence of God's calling.

[6 : 35] The fact that you love God even perhaps in the midst of your suffering shows that He has chosen you in the first place. And because you have been called, you are anchored to an entire chain of God-ordained realities that gives purpose and meaning to your life and to everything in it.

For those who are called are those whom God foreknew. And these are the ones God predestined to be conformed to His Son's image. These are the ones God justified.

And these are the ones God glorified. It's an entire package deal. And all the verbs of God's actions are actually in the past tense. So even glorification, which is actually something that will happen in the future, is in the past tense because Paul wants to emphasize that this is a done deal.

It's as good as done. And it's something which God determined out of His own will, long before you and I came along to influence that will, long before we determined that we should love Him.

So notice how except for loving God, everything else is a description of what God is doing. Even the fact that we are being conformed to the image of His Son has us being passive recipient of that action.

[7 : 59] We do not do the conforming so much as the conforming is being done to us. And so if you refer to the sermon outline which I've got tonight, this is a picture that I've got of these verses in the middle, that timeline.

Right in the middle of that timeline is that little window which is our lives, which we see according to these verses that God is working all things according to His purpose so that we might be conformed to the image of His Son.

But anchored on both sides of this tiny window are these God-ordained realities which we talked about. God's foreknowledge, our predestination, our calling, our justification, and then on the other side, our glorification.

And what is happening now, that little tiny old things, are all working to achieve the purpose of God which He had long ago predestined for us. And God's present purpose in our lives, that little tiny window, is tied to that prior calling of us by Him.

And our being conformed to His image or the image of His Son, well, that's the result of God's predestination of us. He says we've been predestined to be conformed. So the conforming is actually tied to something God had decided long before.

[9 : 20] And so it may seem like in this tiny window which is our lives, that many of the things which we experience are random and without purpose. And perhaps suffering and pain would rank high on that list.

But actually, it is anything but meaningless. We may not understand the minutiae of what's going on in our lives each and every day. We may not be able to make head or tail of our sufferings or difficulties.

But the big picture is that God's ultimate purpose for us, for each and every one of us, is that we be conformed to the image of His Son. And to that end, all things are working together for that ultimate good, to make us like His Son in stature and character, so that we can take our place in His large family when we will be glorified.

And can I say that this extends even to the stuff-ups in our lives. For we may think that perhaps our suffering is a result of our mistakes. You know, we may have done something really stupid in the past.

We may have mixed with the wrong crowd, chosen the wrong career, even, against good advice, or missed, you know, taking the university course that was meant for us because we were lazy.

[10 : 36] Well, whatever it is, even if those things were true, God has now turned even these stuff-ups into things that work for good to conform us to His Son.

So in that sense, there are no wrong turns with God. God has turned these things into things which will work to conform us to the image of His Son.

Well, friends, let us turn now away from that small window which is our lives and focus on an even bigger picture which is what God has already done in history.

For as we turn to verses 31 and 37, we see what God has already done for those He loves, not just in our lives, our specific lives, but in the life of His Son for the benefit of all.

God is not merely working in our history, but God has worked in salvation history. And what you will notice is that Paul is no longer describing us as those who love God, but in the rest of that passage, we are those whom God has loved and continues to love.

[11 : 45] Whatever little attention was placed on our act of love in verses 28 and 30 now gives way fully to God's act of love to us. So three times in that passage, it is God or Christ who loves us.

So in verse 35, who will separate us from the love of Christ? Verse 37, we are more than conquerors through Him, God, who loved us. And finally, in verse 39, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Well, in one sense, these verses really need no explanation. There are a series of rhetorical questions which answer themselves and which Paul answers some of them himself. But even as I read them again, what I would like us to do is to take in the enormity of God's love, which is Christ's death on the cross.

For God to hand over His beloved Son is the most difficult thing He could do. But both Father and Son did it because of their love for us so that we may be justified.

So if you remember that package there in verse 30, so that we no longer face any condemnation for our sin. if you remember two weeks ago in Romans chapter 8, verse 1. So that every accusation which the devil or anyone else could throw at us is met by the presence of the Son of God at His Father's right hand, defending us, interceding for us.

[13 : 13] So every time a charge is brought up against us, like Mary still does not love God as much as she should, or Joe is still gripped by a sinful habit which he continues to hide, or Mike has failed again at work this week by not standing up against unethical practices.

Well, every time that charge is brought against us, Christ now intercedes for us by His presence at God's right hand. So listen from verse 31.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold His own Son, but gave Him up for all of us, will He not with Him also give us everything else?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justified. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died.

Yes, who was raised. Who is at the right hand of God. Who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ. Who hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword, or loneliness, or joblessness, or illness, or depression, or financial hardship, or rejection, or bullying, or failing dreams, or falling share markets, or poor VC results, or marital breakdown, or dead-end jobs, or relationship breakups, or childlessness, or grief, or addiction, or abuse.

[14 : 51] No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors. Not in and of ourselves, but through Him, through God who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor paths, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I never fail to love to hear those verses over and over again. Well, I want to finish up tonight by thinking just a little about how we apply this passage. It was Leon Morris, theologian, Bible scholar, and principal at Ridley, that noted that one of the surprising things about this passage, indeed, in the entire chapter, is that there is not a single command for the believer.

There is, if you know you're Greek, and some of you are studying Greek, there are no imperative verbs in this passage. Instead, what we have is Paul's persistent reminder of God's love for us.

So see again the language which he uses. In verse 28, he says, for we know, and then in verse 31, what then are we to say about these things? And verse 38, for I am convinced.

There's a lot of, if I could use the term, godly self-talk going here, going on here. And again and again, Paul focuses not on what we are to do, but what God has already done and will do.

[16 : 25] It is not our love for God, but God's love for us that will see us through life in general and suffering in particular. And so in the deep and wide ocean, which is God's love, our love is but a teardrop in that vast expense.

It is immaterial in terms of what God is doing in our lives. For it is he who is the one who is working all things for good. He is the one who is conforming us to the image of his son.

He is the one who will make us more than conquerors in life. And yet, I need to say, and I do want to say that our love for God is not insignificant to him.

Because what it does is mark us out as those who are in Christ Jesus, those who are predestined for glory. it is the very response which God seeks from those he has called.

Which means that in times of great hardship, it is still important to sustain our faith as a sign of our love for God. But it is not the amount of faith, but the presence of faith that is important in God's eyes.

[17 : 37] I once knew a minister who was suffering and going through I think it was a period of depression. And during that time, the only thing that he could do some weeks was to drag himself to sit at the back of the early morning prayer book service.

God bless the prayer book service, I say. And often, he wasn't even able to participate in the liturgy, to say the prayers and to read the Bible. But for him, that very little act of faith was rewarded richly by God because he shared that it was during those times that God used the Bible readings and the liturgy in the prayer book to over and over again remind him of God's love for him.

So now, friends, that sometimes it's very tempting, isn't it, when we go through a rough patch in life to just drop coming to church. We feel, for example, that we're not up to worshiping God and that we come and we don't do anything, that we're being hypocrites.

But actually, the opposite is true. It is at those very times when we actually really need to come to church because we need to allow others to minister to us with the constant reminder of God's promises.

Particularly when we ourselves are too drained to pray, to read the Bibles at home. There is actually no shame in coming along and allowing God to use the public reading of God's Word, the words of biblical songs and the prayers of fellow believers to remind you and me of how much God loves us and what He has already done in Christ Jesus.

[19 : 18] So we come to church not to share how much we love God, but to remind ourselves and to reassure ourselves of how much God loves us. To know again and again, to say to ourselves again and again, to convince ourselves time and time again that we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

And therefore, there is nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Let's pray. Father, we thank You for these words and we thank You for Paul's great encouragement to us, the great truth that it's not what we do, but what You've already done and what You're already doing in our lives, that nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God.

And Father, we pray for those in our midst that might be struggling at the moment, that might have suffering. We ask that You might encourage them with these words. Give them strength even when they physically don't have it to continue to hang on and hold on to these promises.

Give them constant reminders through friends, through songs, through the Bible that You love them and that whatever else is happening in their lives, it is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed to us.

We pray this, Lord, in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.