

Why? – 4. Why God’s Love Prevails
Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39
January 29, 2023
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Today we wrap up our January message series where we have been looking at some of the more challenging questions of our faith. Questions like, why does God allow suffering and is suffering a part of God’s plan? Why do my prayers seem to go unanswered and why can’t I see God’s will for my life? Throughout this series, Pastor Bethany and I have received many comments about how helpful and applicable this series is. We have also heard comments that say, “This is really messing with my mind.” If you have always believed everything happens for a reason, and that whatever happens must part of God’s plan for your life, perhaps this series has challenged you to reconsider your preconceived ideas, ideas that perhaps you’ve held since a very young age, about who God is and how God works in this world. Maybe some of the ideas we’ve shared have left you feeling a little certain. Rest assured. This is okay and normal because when you wrestle with questions of faith, your faith grows stronger. Today, I want to conclude with a message of hope, “Why God’s Love Prevails.”

So, let’s begin by looking at today’s scripture from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Romans 8 is one of the most famous and beloved scripture passages. Listen once more. *“And we know that in all things God works for the good...”* Note here that it does not say that God makes all things happen but that God works for good *of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* That means God is going to force good to come from the suffering, evil, and horrible things that happen in this world.

Then Paul asks, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...”* Or I would add, disease, or mass shootings, or misuse of power or wars or any other hardship or pain we experience in life? Then he answers his own question, *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39)

Paul is describing his own personal experience of what God has done in his life. It is easy for us, over 2,000 years later, to look at that and say, we’ll that was easy for him to say. He was one of the great apostles of our faith. But if you spent time studying Paul, you know that’s not what Paul’s life was a hard life. From the moment he was converted on the road to Damascus, he had people wanting to kill him. When he traveled by sea, he was shipwrecked, not once but 3 times. He was arrested many times. He was stripped naked in the middle of town and humiliated. He was beaten, whipped, and stoned. Throughout his life, he had fellow Jews who hated him and wanted to see him dead. He had fellow Christians who disliked his theology and worked against him. He was kicked out of town after town after town. On many occasions, he wondered if he was going to live or die.

This letter to the Romans was written in anticipation of his visit to Rome. Little did he know that when he actually arrived in Rome it was because he was under Roman arrest. They first put him in house arrest and then he was thrown into the prison and eventually was beheaded for his faith. This is the man who wrote these words. He was testifying to his own experiences that through all of his hardships, God had worked to bring good out of the persecution and

pain. Every time something horrible happened to him, he could look at it and name the good that came from it.

So, when he asked, “what can separate us from God’s love? There is nothing in all creation that can separate us,” he was speaking from experience. And then he goes on to say, we are more than conquerors. That’s a word that carried a lot of weight, especially to the audience to whom Paul was writing because the Romans were conquerors. They conquered other people and nations then oppressed and subdued them. The Greek word for conquerors means to have victory over or to prevail. Paul says we are MORE than victorious, more than prevailers, we are super conquerors through Jesus Christ who loves us.

So you might be asking, how does this actually work? How do we experience this victory especially when we realize that following Jesus does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us? And how could Paul have written that promise when he was beaten, abused, and thrown in prison over and over again? If God is not promising to supernaturally intervene in the lives of Christians, to stop the laws of nature from happening, or to stop bad people from doing bad things or to keep deadly viruses and diseases from attacking our bodies, if that is not what God is promising, then how are we more than conquerors?

Here are just three ways that God makes us more than conquerors.

We see it in how God works to sustain our faith, give us hope and calm our fears.

We see it in how God promises to walk with us and work through us.

We see it in how God forces the evil and suffering in life to bend toward good.

God is with us.

Fear, being afraid, is a fundamental part of the human condition. We all face dangers, we will be hurt; we will get sick, grow old and die. The knowledge of these things produces deep feelings of anxiety or dread. And if we are not careful, we can allow fear to define our lives in so many ways; fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear about the future, fear of getting sick, fear for our children and grandchildren, fear of leading meaningless lives, fear of being alone, fear of dying. Faith in God is how Christians respond to fear. One of the things we hear over and over again throughout scripture is God’s promise to be with us. It’s right in the name, *Emmanuel*, God with us.

The words “do not be afraid” appear over 360 times throughout scripture. We hear it in the words of God to Joshua as he prepared to lead the children of Israel into the land of Canaan where they would face fortified cities and well-armed giants. “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9) We hear it in the words of God to the Jewish people as they lived in exile in Babylon. “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10) We hear it when King David wrote about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and not being afraid because “you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4) And as we trust in these promises we experience the “peace of God that passes all understanding.” (Philippians 4:7) and allow that to replace our feelings of fear.

God not only promises to walk with us, God promises to work through us. When God wants something to get done in this world, most often, that happens through people. If we are listening to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, are paying attention to what is going on in the world around us, and making ourselves available to God, we will become aware of the ways God seeks to use us to answer the prayers of others and how God uses others to answer the prayers of our hearts.

Throughout the Bible, God instructs people in how they are to care for one another. For example, the law of Moses commanded that farmers were to leave the edges of their crops unharvested so the poor could have something to eat. God did not drop food down from heaven, but instructed the people to provide for one another. In Proverbs 31:8-9 we read, *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute, Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

We saw it happen here last Sunday. Under the leadership of our Mission Team, over 200 of you answered the call to be a part of the rice meal packing party and many more of you supported this event with a financial gift. In just 4 hours, 21,600 meals were packed, sealed, boxed, and sent off to the distribution center in Chatham, Illinois. The Midwest Distribution Center partners with UMCOR to get these meals into the hands of hungry people. While we do not yet know specifically where our meals will go, in the past few months, many have gone to Ukraine. In addition to preparing these meals, in response to the humanitarian disaster caused by the war in Ukraine, you have given over \$75,000 to UMCOR in the past 10 months.

Throughout the messages in this series, we have noted that God gives humans a free will, the freedom to do God's will or reject God's will. When we misuse our freedom, and we all do, we hurt others or ourselves. We have also talked about how suffering is inherent in life, things die, the forces that sustain our planet occasionally bring us suffering, our bodies get sick, cells go haywire, and hearts wear out. Evil and suffering are a part of our human condition. As we have seen, God walks with us through times of suffering. God also uses us to care for one another in the midst of suffering and in the wake of evil. But there's something else God does, God forces evil and suffering to serve God. God brings good from evil, takes our sorrow, suffering, and sin and bends it, redeems it, and sanctifies us through it.

In one of the most powerful illustrations of this is found in the Old Testament, when the prophet Isaiah speaks to the Jewish people who have just returned from exile and find their homeland in ruins. Listen to his words as he promises what God will do for all who mourn and grieve. He will.. *bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord.* (Isaiah 61:3)

This is what God does. God takes our pain and grief and suffering and transforms them into objects of beauty, and we become "oaks of righteousness." Why oak trees? Oaks are hardy trees with a deep system of roots anchoring them securely so they can withstand many seasons of hardships and storms. Oak wood is known for its strength, hardness, and resistance to predators. So to be an *oak of righteousness* means that we will have a sturdy faith that is able to withstand the tests of time, weather, hardship, and pestilence. We will endure. The roots of our righteousness, found in Jesus Christ, will be expansive, securing us against all the storms of life.

Once again this week, in addition to watching the beating of Tyre Nichols in the hands of law enforcement officers, we have seen multiple mass shootings in our nation and the world. God's heart breaks in anguish over each act of violence, over each and every life lost and over each and every family that is forever changed because of these monstrous acts. Every time I hear of a mass shooting, I am immediately drawn back to Dec. 14, 2012. That was the day that a lone gunman senselessly took the lives of 20 children and one teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. In the 10 years since, through that horrible tragedy and unimaginable pain, the people of Sandy Hook have been determined to bring good out of their unspeakable loss. While their hearts remain broken, their spirits are not. They are working

together to make a positive impact in this world by putting tools into our hands that can save lives. Their works has produced..

Over 2,700 mental health interventions

Prevented 81 acts of violence.

Averted 9 planned school shootings.

God can take our pain and suffering and make something good comes from it.

Of course, the greatest example of God's work through suffering is the death of Jesus. Jesus faced his own death with both angst and determination. But God used his suffering and death for the redemption of the world. Through this act of evil, God would bring about good. Through his death on the cross, we see God's love for us. Through his suffering, God changes hearts, which lead to changed lives and to good triumphing over evil. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a mountain-top, shout-out from God that good triumphs over evil, that the light will overcome the darkness, and that life will conquer death. The Bible proclaims hope in the face of the darkest of circumstances. It does not promise that we won't go through difficulties or that we won't experience pain but that we have a living hope and these heartbreaking moments in our lives will not be the final word. I like how Frederick Buechner put it when he wrote, *"Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing. It's the next to last thing. The last thing is the best.... You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well."* God's love prevails.

Let's pray: Loving God, we give thanks for life and for this amazing planet on which we live. Thank you for walking with us through our fears, being a real and present help in our times of deepest troubles. Thank you for sending people into our lives to give us hope. Keep our eyes and hearts open so that we notice what is happening around us and are ready to respond when you call. Thank you for taking the most heartbreaking moments of our lives and forcing good to come from them. Mostly, we give you thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, who is our hope and the greatest example of your love for us. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 29, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, I give you thanks for your incredible faithfulness. I praise you for never giving up on me and for loving me with a love from which nothing can separate us. May I become more aware of your activity and presence, so that I will see you more clearly at work in the midst of all the pain and joy of my life. Amen.

Monday, January 30

Scripture: Isaiah 58:2-8, Isaiah 61:1-3

They seek me day after day,
desiring knowledge of my ways
like a nation that acted righteously,
that didn't abandon their God.
They ask me for righteous judgments,
wanting to be close to God.
"Why do we fast and you don't see;
why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?"
Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want,
and oppress all your workers.
You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast;

you hit each other violently with your fists.
You shouldn't fast as you are doing today
if you want to make your voice heard on high.
Is this the kind of fast I choose,
a day of self-affliction,
of bending one's head like a reed
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?
Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
Isn't this the fast I choose:
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,
setting free the mistreated,
and breaking every yoke?
Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,
covering the naked when you see them,
and not hiding from your own family?
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
and you will be healed quickly.
Your own righteousness will walk before you,
and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

The LORD God's spirit is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me.
He has sent me
to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and a day of vindication for our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for Zion's mourners,
to give them a crown in place of ashes,
oil of joy in place of mourning,
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.
They will be called Oaks of Righteousness,
planted by the LORD to glorify himself.

Observation

Isaiah stated a principle implicit in all of Scripture. God usually works through people to bring good from evil during our earthly lives. Isaiah 58 called God's people to value practical steps to feed and free suffering, exploited people more than empty religious ceremonies. Chapter 61 (Jesus' mission statement—Luke 4:16-21) said as we join in God's mission to make our broken world new, God forms us into people who can be called "Oaks of Righteousness."

Application

In Isaiah 61:3, the prophet promised that God would give those who have been poor, captives and mourners "a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement." Jesus, in the gospel of Luke, claimed that passage as defining his mission. What do those words suggest, then, about our calling as Jesus' followers?

Prayer

Lord, use me in your mission to invite the world to Your Kingdom. Thank you for your guidance through the Holy Spirit in my life. Transform me to be more like Your Son. Amen.

Tuesday, January 31

Scripture: Hebrews 11:33-12:2

Through faith they conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, found strength in weakness, were mighty in war, and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they could gain a better resurrection. But others experienced public shame by being taunted and whipped; they were even put in chains and in prison. They were stoned to death, they were cut in two, and they died by being murdered with swords. They went around wearing the skins of sheep and goats, needy, oppressed, and mistreated. The world didn't deserve them. They wandered around in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith. God provided something better for us so they wouldn't be made perfect without us.

So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne.

Observation

Hebrews listed many examples of faith, some with beautiful outcomes and some who met terrible earthly fates. Author Frederick Buechner wrote that God's grace means, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us." God was with all the faithful. Their ultimate reward was in "a better country ... a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16).

Application

At times, said Hebrews 11:39-40, we don't see God's promises realized in this life at all, but must wait for eternity. That can be very hard. When have you had to wait longer than you wished for a divine promise to come true? Are there promises you are still waiting for? What helps you to hold onto faith and trust as you wait?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, when everything goes well, it's easy for me to forget that I need you with me. When things go badly, it's easy for me to think you've abandoned me. Thank you for being with me in both the light and dark days of my life. Amen.

Wednesday, February 1

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood can't inherit God's kingdom. Something that rots can't inherit something that doesn't decay. Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed—in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we

will be changed. It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen: *Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death?* (Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.

Observation

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, who lived in a skeptical Greek society, that we can face even death with total confidence. For Paul, death did not end our service to God. It moved us on to the next chapter of (in C. S. Lewis's phrase) "the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." Like him, we can live our day-to-day lives in the light of Jesus' resurrection.

Application

When Paul said "flesh and blood," he didn't mean just "physical existence," but the brokenness that haunts our lives (Romans 8:7-8). Paul said Jesus' resurrection means we can trust that, in God's eternity, all the brokenness and hurt will be gone. There are many details we don't know about how eternity will work. What is one promised change you deeply look forward to in God's world made new?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, make and keep me firm and unshakable. Walk with me every day of this life, and then go with me on into the next chapters of the great adventure you have in store. Amen.

Thursday, February 2

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

We know that if the tent that we live in on earth is torn down, we have a building from God. It's a house that isn't handmade, which is eternal and located in heaven.

Observation

The apostle Paul knew firsthand about "the worst" in our world. Yet he believed, as a pastor in Frederick Buechner's novel *The Final Beast* said, that "the worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well." In Christ, we look beyond the worst to the "eternal stockpile of glory" Jesus promised.

Application

In Romans 8:24, Paul wrote, "We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see?" In today's verses, he talked about our focus on the things we can't see, yet which are more enduring than what we can see. What hopes do you

hold that remain out of sight right now? What steps do you take to anchor your hope in God's goodness, and to live with patience and trust?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, so much of what you said and did seemed odd and out of step to many people. But you weren't shortsighted. You looked beyond the obvious and visible. Give me your eyes to see, however dimly, the glory of eternity. Amen.

Friday, February 3

Scripture: Romans 8:28, 35-39

We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *We are being put to death all day long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.* But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Observation

The apostle Paul did not believe God caused evil things, but he knew they happened. "Trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword"—he'd faced all these and more (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). Yet his list was not a complaint. He wrote it to say, "In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us" (verse 37). No matter what life throws at us, we can march with Paul and a long line of believers in God's eternal victory parade.

Application

Paul asked a compelling question: "Who will separate us from Christ's love?" His wording assumed that the answer was "Nobody and nothing!" What situations are most likely to leave you feeling separated from God's love? What spiritual "anchors" keep you connected to God's love, hope and peace, even when times get difficult?

Prayer

All-powerful God, whatever comes my way, hold me close in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping victory in "all these things." Amen.

Saturday, February 4

Scripture: Revelation 3:20-22, 21:1-5

Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me. As for those who emerge victorious, I will allow them to sit with me on my throne, just as I emerged victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. If you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud

voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Observation

Jesus said that, for God's people, the end of the world is a time of redemption, not fear (Luke 21:25-28). Revelation ended on the same note, with glowing, symbol-filled images of the glory that awaits God's people after this world ends. The most glorious reward of all, John's extraordinary vision said, is that God will be with us, and we with God, throughout eternity.

Application

The apostle Paul said Christians can live very differently from those "who don't have any hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). At a time when Rome hated (and sometimes killed) Christians, John pictured a splendid future for God's people, using symbols from Genesis 2's description of the garden of Paradise. The exiled seer invited everyone to choose a life like his. Have you said yes to that invitation? Can you live every day in triumphant hope?

Prayer

Jesus, you said in John 14 that you were going to prepare a place for us, that your Father's house has lots of room. I want to be there when you make all things new. Thank you for promising me that I can be one of your redeemed, living with you eternally. Amen.