

When Love Gets Difficult
Part Two: Held in God's Love
Romans 8.28-39

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When we are in a relationship with someone, and we love them, and they love us – a parent, a friend, a spouse, a child – what words would we want to hear more from them than these?

I love you.

What moving words, what powerful words, what freeing words to hear.

I love you.

But, whether or not it is spoken, it's the word that comes next that we have learned to dread in our love relationships.

I love you . . .

when
if
because
as long as
unless
until

They are all words of condition. They tie our ongoing experience of being loved to something that we do, or fail to do, and they make our love precarious.

I love you when	you are loveable.
I love you if	you love me in return
I love you because	you have shown you deserve my love.
I love you as long as	you meet my needs.
I love you unless	you hurt me or disappoint me.
I love you until	you reveal that you are unworthy of my love.

Last Sunday we looked at Romans chapter 5, verses 1 through 11, and we heard God say to us as his followers, "I love you."

Romans 5.8

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In chapter 5 Paul explains that even when the state of our hearts and the way we lived our lives were offensive to God, even when we turned our backs on him and ran roughshod over his moral standards for us, even when we wanted nothing to do with the God who created us, even then, he sent his Son to die for us in order to reconcile us – to bring us back into relationship with himself, to bring us, as 1 Peter 3.18 says, back home to God.

How amazing that God loves us! What a miracle of mercy, that God folded undeserving us into a love relationship with himself. How amazing to hear God say to us, "I love you."

But . . . at just that moment of joy and wonder, in begins to creep another feeling, a fear, a sense of precariousness.

How long will it last? What will happen when I mess up? Or when things get hard and I call his love into question? Or when my heart grows cold? Or when I disappoint him? Or when I show myself in one of a hundred ways undeserving of his love? Then what?

Is that when the unspoken conditions will get revealed? Is that when we hear the word that comes after "I love you"? If, or because, or as long as, or unless, or until?

Every night when we tucked our kids in, Sharon and I would say to them:

I love you always always, no matter what you do. There's nothing you can do to make me love you less, and there is nothing you can do to make me love you more.

Can you imagine God saying that to you? That there are no conditions?

He does, in Romans chapter 8, which is our focus this morning.

* * *

Let's turn there. Romans chapter 8. We'll begin at verse 28.

Listen to these words of comfort that speak to the fears we have that we will eventually be separated again from God's love.

As I read this through, you'll notice that there are three parts to the passage we are looking at today. We'll look at each of those in turn.

First, in verses 28 to 30, Paul describes how God is working to fulfill his good and loving purposes in our lives – always, and no matter what, regardless of our difficulties. His determination to fulfill his loving purposes for us is unstoppable.

Chapter 8.28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

These are some of Paul's most familiar words. And they speak an incredible word of hope to those of us who are his followers.

Notice how his followers are described: here in verse 28 they are referred to as "those who love him." And we'll see later, in verse 37, that they are referred to as "those who are loved by him."

This is the absolutely bedrock truth that defines each of us who belong to him. We love him and he loves us. He is our beloved, and we are his beloved. More on that in a bit.

in all things God is working for good for those who love him. In the hard. In the unexpected. In the difficult. In the painful.

That promise is so encouraging, but sometimes we can find ourselves pretty uncertain about what it actually means. Does that mean my circumstances will go the way I want them to go? Does that mean I'll get what I want?

Sometimes we focus on the first half of the verse and miss that last part and what follows in the next two verses, where some of those questions are answered.

Look at that last phrase in verse 28:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called *according to his purpose*.

We can miss that the good that God promises to work in this verse is not a good outcome as we might define it. It doesn't say in all things God makes things come out the way we want. It says the good of God is working in all things is the good of God fulfilling his good and loving purposes for us. And then he spells out what those are in verse 29 and 30.

Chapter 8.29-30

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he

predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

God chooses us before the beginning of creation. He calls us to himself. He reconciles us to himself through the death of his son. And then, having brought us into relationship with himself, he sets about fulfilling his purposes for us.

There are two phrases Paul uses in this passage to describe what God's good and loving purposes involve. They both mean essentially the same thing. He is "conforming us to the image of his son," and he is "glorifying us."

God is making us into a more Jesus like version of ourselves.

Which is to say, God as creator is working to put his glory on display in us and through us.

For us as his creatures to be glorified means that we become who God intended us to be from the start: which is glorious with and for the glory of God. That means when people see us, more and more, they encounter him. We put the glory of God on display when we become more and more like his Son, the King of glory.

God's goal is not for us to be happy, happy merely in our circumstances. It is for us to find our happiness in him. And God's purpose is not merely for us to find Jesus, it is for Jesus to be found in us. For us to become like him.

Someone asked Michelangelo how he knew what to chip away as he was working on his greatest sculpture. He said, "It's simple. I just remove everything that doesn't look like David."

There is much in us that doesn't yet look like Jesus. And difficult circumstances are often the hammer and chisel in God's loving hands.

So as his beloved, God is ever working to fulfill his good and loving purposes in us.

* * *

That's what Paul describes first, in verses 28 to 30, In love, because we are his beloved, God is working to fulfill his loving purposes for us.

Yes, but what if God changes his mind? What if I don't get it right? What if I fail him?

Well, in verses 31 to 35, Paul addresses that.

To make sense of these next five verses I think it is really helpful to realize that Paul scoops us up and takes us into an imaginary courtroom.

And essentially, he asks: okay, so who is who? Who is sitting where? Who is accusing who? Who is judging who?

Well, when you think about it, there are two basic options.

Here's the first one.

You and I, we are the accused. A charge has been brought against us. We have failed to live our lives in a way that honors our Creator and reflects his holy standards.

God the Father is the judge. He looks at the law that he himself has established, that reflects his own holy nature, and he looks at how we have lived. And he is going to make a verdict. And he is disposed to make an example of those who flagrantly ignore his holy standards.

And Jesus is the plaintiff. He is the one who brings the charge against us in this scenario. And as the one bringing the charge he says in his complaint: I came to this planet as the only innocent human being who ever lived. And it was your sin, your wrongdoing, that led to my suffering and death as an innocent man.

The judge hears the accusation and renders a verdict. Guilty as charged.

That's the first of the two options. And that fits the facts almost perfectly. God *is* the judge to whom we will have to answer for our lives. We *are* wrongdoers, who have fallen short of God's holy standard, and it *was* our sin that sent Jesus to the cross.

So Jesus is right to bring a charge against me.

As the accused, all I can do is plead guilty as charged.

And the Father is just in condemning me. I deserve to receive his just punishment, which is death, that is, *separation from his love*.

So that's one option of who is accusing who and who is condemning who.

But Paul says, No! That's not the way it is. Here's how it is:

Yes, you and I, we are the accused. A charge has been brought against us.

But Jesus is not the one bringing the charge against us. Someone else is bringing a charge against us.

Maybe it is us. We know we have fallen short. So in our guilt and shame we condemn ourselves.

Or maybe it is someone else, someone who charges us with having wronged them. We failed them or hurt them or disappointed them or failed to live up to their standard.

Or maybe it is the Evil One, whose name, Satan, means the Accuser, whispering in our ears that we are unlovable disappointments and unforgiveable failures.

And yes, God the Father is still the judge. He looks at the law that he himself has established, and he looks at how we have lived. And he is going to make a verdict. But God is not ill disposed toward us. He is not bent on making an example of us. He *loves* us, and he desires his best for us, and he wants to make us examples, yes, but of his grace and mercy.

Jesus doesn't accuse us. Instead, he stands by our side, as it says in verse 34, he intercedes for us, he advocates for us, before the judge. He is our public defender, defending us against the charges.

This one, he says, is one I love. This one is one for whom I died. She belongs to me. He belongs to me.

If we have given our allegiance to Jesus, if we have put the weight of our lives on him, Jesus does not accuse us. And the judge does not condemn us. He says to his Son, on the basis of your loving advocacy, and on the basis of your having taken his or her just penalty upon yourself, the innocent for the guilty, and because he, because she, has received this gift by faith, I pronounce her, I pronounce him, innocent in the eyes of the law.

This is what Paul is describing in Romans 5:1-2, when he says,

We have been justified – that is, declared innocent – through faith. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

So with that context, listen to verses 31 to 34 and see how Paul unfolds this courtroom image.

Chapter 8.31-32

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He 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?

Chapter 8.33-34

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—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

It is boggling. The very ones who are most justified in accusing us and condemning us, the Father and the Son, turn out to be the very ones who draw us toward them in love rather than push us away in judgment.

And if God is for us, who can be against us?

In these verses we crash headlong into an always-always sort of love that is utterly incomprehensible.

In the late 1300s, while the plague was raging around her, and she herself was near death as a result of it, Julian of Norwich had a vision of Jesus on the cross. And in that vision she pictured Jesus interpreting the significance of his death.

She wrote in *Revelations of Divine Love*:

Our soul is so specially loved by Him that . . . there is no being made that can know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly our Maker loves us. 49

Our good Lord spoke, asking, "Are you well pleased that I suffered for you?" I said, "Yes, my good Lord, thank you. Yes, my good Lord, blessed may you be!" Then Jesus, our kind Lord, said, ". . . It is a joy, a delight and an endless happiness to me that I ever endured suffering for you, and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more." 72

He brought to mind the nature of a glad giver . . . The generous giver thinks nothing of all his hardship and the price he had to pay, because of the joy and delight that he feels at having pleased the one he loves. 75

[Showing his deadly wounds from his death on the cross], Our good Lord said, "Look how much I loved you" as if he had said, "My darling, look and see your Lord, your God, who is your maker and eternal joy. See what pleasure and delight I take in your salvation. . . I loved you so much . . . that I was willing to die for you . . . and now all my bitter torment and painful hardship has changed into endless joy and bliss for me and for you." 76, Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

If this is how God views us . . . who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?

* * *

First, in verses 28 to 30, Paul described how God is working to fulfill his good and loving purposes in our lives – and nothing can stop him: no difficult situation, no difficult person, no difficult circumstance. And, in fact, all those things God in love turns to our good.

Then, in verses 31 to 35, Paul insists that the Lord stands by our side, as an advocate, not across from us as our accuser. He doesn't condemn us, despite our failings. He continues to love us in spite of our shortcomings.

And now in verses 36 to 39, Paul goes on to say not only will *God* not separate us from his love for us, but *nothing else* in creation has the power to separate us from God's love either.

Regardless of what difficulty we may create for ourselves, or what difficult circumstances we may walk through, or what difficult person we may encounter, we are and we will remain his Beloved.

Listen to those verses.

Chapter 8.35-37

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

This list that Paul gives isn't theoretical. Every one of these difficulties but the last one – trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, and danger – these are all things that Paul says in other letters that he himself has endured, and the last one – the executioner's sword – is the thing that will take his life a decade after he writes this letter.

Are those things able to separate us from the love of Jesus? Paul asks.

The obvious answer would seem to be: well, *of course* those things can separate us from God's love for us! How could they not?! Don't they call into question the love of God for us?

But Paul disagrees. The quote in the middle of this section is taken from Psalm 44, a psalm written by faithful believers who time after time have experienced the faithful love of God but who now find themselves unexpectedly facing suffering, hardship, enemy attack, even the threat of death.

Here's why Paul quotes from this Psalm. It's one of the hardest things for us to grasp as followers of Christ: I can be loved by God and I can find myself in incredibly difficult

circumstances at the very same time. As this psalm shows, God's love for us and our facing difficult circumstances are not mutually exclusive realities.

Jesus himself is the prime example for us as Christians. Here is the One and Only Begotten of the Father, the Beloved Son with whom God is well pleased, who has never done wrong, who is utterly undeserving of any punishment, and he endures suffering and taunting and false accusation and beating and eventually death.

Jesus himself could have said those words

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

And in fact that is just what he was, the Lamb of God, who through his sacrificial death takes away the sins of the world.

Paul says no. These things only separate us from God's love if we wrongly understand them.

If we think they reflect that we have failed God, and now he is punishing us, and our relationship with God is broken, or if we think they reflect that God has failed us, and now he is showing himself unworthy of our trust, then when things go badly, as they will, we will feel far outside of God's love for us.

But that's why Paul begins where he does. Remember the promise of verse 28?

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.

God never fails to turn all things to his loving ends – joys, sorrows, gains, losses. He bends them all to his redemptive ends, using them to sculpt us into a more Christlike version of ourselves. In God's hands, difficulties are redemptive, not destructive.

That's why Paul writes in verses 37:

No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Notice it says, "*in* all these things," not "*from* all these things." Sometimes God plucks us from life's difficulties. But more often, his love delivers us through our hardships, not from them.

And now Paul comes to his conclusion:

Chapter 8.38-39

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.

In these word pairs Paul is finding different ways of describing every possible force at work in this world of ours.

Life or death.

God's servants or Satan's.

The present or the future.

Powers – whether human beings in positions of power or spiritual beings.

Height or depth – this could mean heaven or hell, it could mean the highest of circumstances or the lowest.

And if that doesn't cover everything, he adds, just to make sure we get it.

"Nor anything else."

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing.

John Eagen wrote a spiritual memoir that he called *A Traveler Toward the Dawn*. In it he chronicles his journey from a Christian life based on trying to prove himself and trying to please others and trying to earn God's love to a Christian life rooted in the deep knowledge of his belovedness apart from anything he might do or fail to do.

One time a spiritual director named Bob Leiweke says to him:

John, the heart of it is this: to make the Lord and his immense love for you constitutive of your personal worth. **Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.** God's love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that, and let it become the most important thing in your life.

What defines you? What constitutes your worth? Your accomplishments? Your appearance? The acclaim of others? Your alma mater?

Paul says to us this morning through Romans chapter 8 what Bob said to John. Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.

* * *

How do you conceive of your relationship with God?



I showed this picture last week when we talked about Romans 5 and how God in his love for us brought us into relationship with him.

It's just as appropriate this week as we talk about Romans 8 and how God in his love holds us in his love for us, keeps us in his love for us, no matter what.

It captures so beautifully what the love of our father looks like for his beloved child, and it captures so beautifully what it looks like for us as his children to be defined by our father's love for us.

Deuteronomy 33.12

Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him,
for he shields him all day long,
and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders.

When we are the beloved of the Lord,
when we know with invincible certitude that it is *for us*, to be in a love relationship *with us*,
that the Father sends his son
and when we know with invincible certitude that it is for us that the son lays down his life,
to bring us into that love relationship with the Father,
well then,
we are free to rest
not in our circumstances, not in our accomplishments,
we are free to rest in him, and in the knowledge of our belovedness,
to rest between the shoulders of the one who loves us.

To those who are his, God says, "I love you," followed not by one word but by two: "always always."

As we come to the close of our service, we want to invite you to respond in a bit of a different way. We'll still have a closing song, and we invite you to sing with us.

But we are also going to use that closing song as a prayer time for anybody who would like to be prayed for.

God the Father looks on us in love. God the son advocates for us. If we are followers of Jesus, neither accuses us. Neither condemns us. We are the beloved.

But sometimes we can lose sight of our belovedness. Guilt and shame accuse us, telling us that we are disqualified from God's love. Fear and anxiety rob us of our peace and joy as the beloved. Difficulties and hardships block our view of the goodness of God, and lead us to question his love. Doubt causes us to wonder if any of it is true.

This morning we've asked some of our elders to be available up front during our closing song to pray for you. If there's anything going on in your life or in your soul that leads you to think it would be a good thing to have someone pray for you, we invite you to come up.

They'll be sitting in the front row. If you'd like to be prayed for, just come up during the song and sit down with one of them and they'll pray for you.

Prayer

Lord, we are your beloved.

You are good and to be trusted in all things.

Let us rest secure in you.

Shield us, shelter us, surround us with your love.

And let us, as your beloved, rest between your shoulders.