

WHAT'S TRUE MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU FEEL
Survival Guide
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What's true may not be what you feel. The fourth step in the survival guide for difficult times. Maybe another way of phrasing this is to capsulize a two-word phrase: no separation.

As we look at a Survival Guide to Difficult Times we are convinced first of all that we must compare the groaning to the glory, second, that the spirit is helping, third, God is working for the good, and fourth there is no separation. Even if we feel like there is separation between us and God what's true is greater than what we feel.

“What then shall we say in response to this? 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? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus who died and more than that was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and who is also interceding for us. 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. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor heath 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.”

This letter would have been received by the Roman church in approximately 58 A.D. Paul writes it from Corinth. Within six years they would go through, these believers who first received this letter, six years after receiving it will go through one of the fiercest persecutions that any group of believers has ever been called upon to endure. The Roman historian Tacitus who was a first century and early second century historian and a non biblical source his annals tells us specifically what these early Christians endured. He talks about the fact as a backdrop that when the great fire of Rome occurred in 64 A.D. Nero hunted out the Christian community to blame for the fire. For it was a common suspicion that he himself had ordered the fire set in order to raise the slums of Rome and build and extend his palace quarters.

So he selected, Tacitus says, for punishment the Christians. “Accordingly arrest was first made of those who confessed. Then on their evidence an immense multitude was convicted. Not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. [Christians believed that you had to come to Christ in order to be saved. Therefore that was construed as being hateful of the human race. Just like Christians today are accused of a lot of things for standing for what's right in life and in the world.] Besides being put to death there were made to serve as objects of amusement. They were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs. Others were crucified. Others set on fire to illuminate the night when the daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display and was putting on a show in the circus or the arena, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer and drove about in his chariot while these Christians were burning on the crosses. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment. For it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.”

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Here we read Paul's words in verse 35 "These Christians who suffered in this manner shall persecution of famine or nakedness or danger or sword separate us from God?"

The early Christians had to do a massive hurdle in their understanding of God, in their theology of suffering. For always in the Old Testament suffering was visited upon people, God's covenanted people because in some way they got out of fellowship with him and they were at fault. To wit there was sin in their life. Because there was sin in their life and in the nation, holocaust was visited upon them.

But in the New Testament the arena differs all together. In the New Testament we see that the Job kind of suffering which was somewhat unique within the Old Testament setting becomes common within the New Testament setting. Now believers covenanted people in the Lord are suffering not because they have done something wrong, not because there wasn't faith in their life, not because of personal sin but they were suffering for doing right. The early believers needed a handle to get a hold of that. That's why this section of Romans so eloquently helped minister to them. Because Paul was saying to Christians in their suffering, Compare the groaning to the glory, the Holy Spirit is helping you, God is working for the good, and the ultimate result is no separation.

In these 9 verses from verse 31-39, Paul makes four statements in regard to the truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Of these four statements that he makes in broad stroke two of them bear upon our relationship to God. And two of them bear upon our relationship to ourselves.

The first statement he makes about no separation from God is simply this: God is for us.

Everyone may be against us and they may throw everything against us but God is for us. That's why he begins with "What shall we then say?" If we had been taking the time and the months to travel through the letter to the Romans we would have seen how Paul to this point has built his whole case for the Christian life beginning with the statement in chapters 1, 2, 3 that there is condemnation visited upon the world because of sin. But since Christ has come there is no condemnation. That leads us into a life of victory and justification, a life where we struggle with sanctification. But because of the Spirit's work in our life emerge on the outside of that, victorious. We come from that position of no condemnation to no defeat to culminate this doctrinal section with the idea of no separation. God is for us. That's been the whole intent of the letter. To tell us that God is acting on our behalf.

Who could possibly then be against us? We could probably list a number of things that are against us. Sin is against us. Satan is against us. Death is against us. Hell is against us. The law of God itself condemned us for our sinfulness. But God himself is for us.

God chose us and he's not about to let go. God's for us.

The second thing this scripture is saying about God's role in the no separation process is not only is God for us but God is not going to change in his disposition towards us.

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That's the focus of v. 32. Why is he not going to change? Three things are advanced. First he did not spare his own Son. Second, he gave him up for us all. And third, will he not also give us all things with him.

He did not spare his Son. And since he went to that length to give his Son to say that God is going to regard that sacrifice as ineffective is to misunderstand the nature and love and length of God's commitment to us totally. He gave him up for us.

There's a very intriguing thing with this word "gave up" in the book of Romans. If you look in the early chapters especially where Paul is doing a number on what is called the application of the law to the conscious. (There is in vogue in some quarters of the gospel today the idea that we should never talk about sin and guilt and wrong.) If I understand Paul's letter to the Romans correctly, Paul is laying down a Holy Spirit inspired treatise for us on the ground in which we stand as Christians we are not to take that development as though it were something shifting and changing and we have the right to rearrange the data and make it say something it doesn't. In the first 3 chapters Paul leads to a conclusion that says, All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. What he does to bring an effective conversion is he convinces us through the application of God's word against our behavior that we have all sinned and there's not a one of us religious or pagan who can stand before God with a prayer.

I'm convinced that people do not become good disciples unless they understand that first of all. That you cannot simply apply an enamel to a decaying, rotting, sinful human disposition and look at the enamel and say, Isn't it beautiful? The Lord must first of all go underneath the enamel and remove the rot and the sins and it's biblically ok to mention that three letter word – sin. Paul deals with that and he says three times in verse 24 and verse 26 and verse 28 of Romans 1, God gave them up.

You can look at that and if you disassociate those words with the rest of Romans you could say John simply washed his hands of the whole package and walked away. But Paul goes on to say in the letter that God gave us his Son. Will he not therefore give us all things?

What Paul is really saying in the "give up" passages is God as given up on saving humanity by any other way than the gift of his Son, Christ Jesus. All other ways, God has given up on. But God has not given up on the human race. That's why he sent his Son. So the "gave up" must be understood in light of the context that Jesus was given as a sign that God ultimately did not give up on any one of us.

"While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Judas delivered him up for money. Pilate delivered him up for fear. The chief priests and rulers delivered him up for envy. The Father delivered him up for love.

Therefore Paul is saying, "Will he [the Father] not give us all things with him." It's the argument of the greater to the lesser. If the Son were given for our salvation, would he not also be given to provide for all of our needs. And in those moments of difficulty and estrangement will he not take care of us. If he did the greater thing, will he not do the lesser thing. If he began a work in us will he not complete it? The Father does not miscalculate his resources. So that he spends more at the beginning and doesn't have enough to complete the project. Nor does he

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cramp himself by beginning on some grand, large scale and then have to stop before his purpose is completed.

It is the Father's will to graciously give us all things. He's not going to change his disposition of generosity toward us. That we can say in the midst of suffering "God is for me. God's not going to change. He's given his Son for me. He will ultimately give us all things."

That brings us to the third statement that can be made to go along with the idea of no separation. Words to counsel us and comfort us, console us in the midst of difficulties. That statement might be "I am elect" or "I am chosen." Verses 33-34. Here in these two verses Paul is returning to the legal relationship we have with God. I've come to have a real respect for legal transactions. If I understand the whole jurisprudence system correctly it flows out of the understanding that there is a God who's set up this universe to operate by laws and standards.

One of the laws, the greatest law that applies to us, is that we are given by the new birth a legal right of standing as the sons and daughters of God. What Paul is saying here is that Paul is not going to withdraw his vote for us? If Jesus now going to condemn us? Jesus who died for our sins, who took our sins. Is he now going to put those sins back upon us? Jesus who rose that he might destroy the works of Satan, is he going to lay death back on us? Jesus who in his ascension and his present session at the right hand of the Father who intercedes for us, is he going to stop praying for us? Not at all. We're not lost in some organizational chart somewhere. We are known personally to God. And he intercedes for us.

God is for us. God is not going to change. I am elect. I'm special. You're special and the fourth statement Paul makes in regard to no separation...

I am loved.

You are loved. Here's where his greatest concentration comes from verse 35 -39. He has basically five things to say about the love of God toward us.

First, God will not withdraw his love when adversity hits us. He runs through seven different diversities that can come our way.

First tribulation. Tribulation is the pressure, the grinding pressure of circumstances. Or the antagonism of persons. In the midst of tribulation God will not withdraw his love.

In the midst of distress. Distress describes geographically "narrowness of place." It's being caught between the straits. Of being pinched and pressured and maneuvered in such a way that you have no room to maneuver. You are simply locked in. In that distress God is loving us. As Psalm 118:5 says "Out of my distress I called upon the Lord. The Lord answered me and set me in a large place."

Persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and the sword. All of these things happen to believers. The very fact that they're listed show that when these things happen to believers they are not out of the will of God at all simply because these events happen. The Lord does not remove his love from us in adversity. When Paul is done going through the list of seven things that cannot separate us from Christ's love he quotes an Old Testament passage out of Psalm 44:22. I find

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that by the way that when we are reading this text in public without explanation that I often want to skip verse 36 because it almost has to be explained to be understood as to why its here. “For your sake we face death all day long and we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.” The theme of Psalm 44, the totality of it finds the psalmist really upset with God for letting the righteous suffer. And the psalmist is complaining to God. “God, this is how we feel. We do good and we get slapped. How could you let this happen to us? It’s no fair! We’re just like a bunch of sheep going off to get killed.”

So Paul quotes this. After going through this litany of seven things that can’t separate us from the love of God. Then Paul thinks back to the psalmist, Psalm 44 where from his Old Testament context he was complaining because of these adversities and saying this is our lot, just to go tripping along like sheep. As soon as Paul is done quoting Psalm 44:22 he says a defiant word: “No! we’re not just going off to a hopeless faith. We’re not just tripping along in life like losers. No. Indeed we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. That’s what we are. No longer people who are faded and passive going to a fate that we didn’t want or seek. But triumphant people who when facing adversities of life throw back our shoulders, tuck up our chin, suck in our breath and take a step forward and say, “Hit me again!” More than conquerors.

The word by the way, if we were to translate it literally, would describe people who live above the victory. How can you be more? Being a winner is enough. But Paul is saying here that the love of Christ is such in our life that can give us an attitude instead of being defeated your circumstances, that we take the perspective: “I am going to succeed in this! I’m not going to win just by a hair breath which is the idea of simply winning. Conquering doesn’t matter whether you win by one run or ten runs. As long as you win. Paul says when it’s all said and done and we’ve appropriated and realized how much God has loved us, as we’ve done that in the midst of our trial, we look at it and we say, I am going to emerge from this stronger and I’m not only going to emerge barely, by the skin of my teeth, but I am going to outlap the field at the end. So that I come out a clear unmistakable and undisputed winner.

I submit to you that that’s a key in trial. Because one of the things that happens when we get in difficulty is the enemy hits us with a ton of bricks. Mentally with psychological abuse saying, You are not going to survive this one. This one is going to do you in. You will not emerge.” Paul wants to put this word in our heart that when we serve the Lord nothing can separate us from his love and we are going to emerge ahead of the pack. Not laggardly and out of breath at the end. But with defiance and with hope.

This is the kind of spirit in Christians that revolutionized the world of the first century. And it’s the kind of spirit that will revolutionize the world of the twentieth century.

I am sure, Paul says, I am convinced, I am persuaded. He’s not convinced that circumstances will change. He’s simply convinced that nothing can separate him.

So I am loved. And I know that God will not withdraw his love in adversity. Therefore I have the security to win by a mile.

I also know in being loved that the love of God is unaffected by the most extreme changes of our condition. The most extreme comparison that Paul makes. What shall separate us? “I’m convinced that neither death nor life.” He does not lose us in the dust of death. How beautifully

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this contrasts with the saddest aspect of the power of death in our human experience. Death is a separator who unclasps our hands from the closest, dearest grasps. And withdraws us from all our habitude and associations and occupations. And loosens every bond to society. And hails us away to a lonely land. But there is one bond which sheers cannot cut. Their edge is turned on it. One hand holds us in a grasp, which the fleshless fingers of death in vein strive to loosen. The separator becomes the uniter. He rends us apart from the world that he may bring us to God.

What Paul is saying is death may have its victory in separating us from others. But that extreme condition of life can only unite us to God.

Then the third thing Paul says as an affirmation that I am loved is the love of God is unaffected by any order of beings. Neither angels nor demons. Neither any powers have any ability to destroy the love that the Lord has for me. Sometimes these powers seem to effect our love for the Lord. But none have the ability to effect his love for us.

Then Paul says, fourthly about the love of the Lord, the love of God is above the power of time and space. Neither the present nor the future. Neither height nor depth can separate us from his love. Neither height nor depth can separate us from his love.

Then he ultimately says to us, nothing else in all creation can separate us. The love of God will prevail. When Paul says "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God," he has reached the highest point in his letter. Beyond this Paul really has nothing more to say about our security in God. What more can you say? What can you do when you meet a love like that? God loves us dearly.

A modern writer has penned these words to paraphrase these beautiful verses today. I want to close with these words because they so eloquently put before us this eternity of God's love in our life. "God, I may fall flat on my face. I may fail until I feel old and beaten and done in. Yet your love for me is changeless. All the music may go out of my life. My private world may shatter to dust. Even so you will hold me steady in the palm of your hand. No turn in the affairs of my fractured life can baffle you. Satan with all his bradocia cannot distract you. Nothing can separate me from your measureless love. Pain can't. Disappointment can't. Anguish can't. yesterday, today, tomorrow can't. The loss of my dearest love can't. Death can't. Life can't, rots, war, insanity, unidentity, hunger, neurosis, disease. None of these things nor all of them heaped together can budge the fact that I am dearly loved, completely forgiven and forever free. Through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son.

Our Lord, with that we come to this moment of prayer thanking you that what is true is so greater than sometimes what we feel. When we are lonely or distressed or in need we feel forgotten, we feel maybe angry, we may be disillusioned and we may feel hurt. We may feel cast off by you. But your word comes to us to say that in all the heights and the depths of life you're with us. You're going to keep your promise "I will never leave you nor forsake you." There are friends here this evening who know what it is in the deepest human relationships of life to have been abandoned, to have been left at crucial times. Maybe not even left in a physical sense. But left in a psychological and emotional sense when most needing support. Support from another human has not been there. When we open our eyes to you Lord and recognize that we're always cradled in your love, we want to confess again you will never leave us nor forsake us. Even if we are in the night of sin, you're reaching

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through to a David and pressing your love upon him and bringing him to himself and to you. When our successes have been so strong we're because of that success loosening that grip upon you. Your love for us is tightening in. Calling us in success as in pain and reminding us that we're so special to you. You came and died for us. I pray especially for those friends in this congregation this evening who've come to service of you with false ideas as to who you are and find these liberating words with your gracious presence always given to us so difficult to believe. Because their salvation hangs by such a spider's thread so fragile and flimsy that the slightest weight they feel would break the cord that binds you to them. Help them lord to see in the place of the spider's web the strong steel un-cuttable bar which reaches down from you to us and attaches itself to us in an unbreakable way and keeps us in the magnetic flow in your surging love and power for all time. Keep us in days when we don't feel good, keep us in days when we feel badly about ourselves and about you. Keep us true to you. Thank you for always loving us. In Jesus' name. Amen.