

SERMON – VIEWS FROM GOD’S EVEREST – A VIEW OF HEAVEN

Today we are finishing our three-part series on Romans 8. You’ll recall that the first part looked at man from God’s point of view, the second at God’s plan for nature. The third I call “a view of heaven”. It is concerned with the divine love that is offered to us as believers in Christ and how it overcomes the opposition we may face as Christians. Let’s start by reading our passage, Romans 8:31-39:

“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—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and 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, 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.”

What kind of love is it that God offers us? It’s the love of a father who would let his own son be sacrificed for our sake. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.” Can you imagine a deeper love than this? We wince when we read the story of Abraham and Isaac, how Abraham trusted and loved God so much as to be willing to kill his son. And yet how much greater is God’s deed for us, in allowing Jesus to die on the cross not for a righteous and holy God but for sinful humanity, you and me. As it is written earlier in Romans “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” In the words of the hymn “Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should’st die for me?” The love that means we, who trust in Jesus, are now God’s own children, and so God will give “all things” to us.

And this love, Paul wants to assure us, is always there for us who put our faith in Jesus. The passage is one of reassurance. Paul wants us to be confident that, as he concludes “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”. Why should we need that reassurance? Why might we believe we are not accepted? What could keep us away, assuming we have not rejected God’s love ourselves? Well, the passage suggests three things that could separate us from God’s love, our guilt, physical opposition and spiritual opposition. Let’s look at these one by one – and we’ll see that they are all beaten foes, defeated by Christ on the cross. It reminds me of the woman caught in adultery, waiting in terror to be stoned to death. But she looked up, all her accusers had gone away, ashamed of their own sin before Christ.

It’s one of the great truths of the Gospel that our sins are forgiven when we put our faith in Jesus. We are justified, declared in the right. “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” it says in Romans 4:7. But do we always believe it? Do we think God really forgives us? We are vulnerable to feelings of guilt, that we just don’t measure up. Satan has a role to play here, as in Revelation 13 he is called “the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night”.

But we also know from Scripture that God does not side with the accuser against his people. Here is a beautiful picture of how God responds with forgiveness to Satan's accusations of the high priest Joshua in Zechariah 3 "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan!...Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by. "

Romans 8 gives us another wonderful reassurance, even more powerful than this, that God and Christ are on our side when we are accused. It says "if God is for us, who can be against us.....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—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." The Judgement Day is in mind here. God has declared us innocent, whatever we have done, when we put our faith in the death of Jesus his son. He only sees Christ's purity and not our failings. But equally, Christ himself is arguing for us like an expert lawyer, praying and interceding for us up there in heaven, even now. And his triumph over Satan in his resurrection from the dead, assures him of victory in all such arguments.

So if you ever feel overwhelmed with guilt, remember you are forgiven. Christ, the mighty victor over Satan on the cross, will always overcome his accusations. We have nothing to fear, so long as we keep faith, remain humble, confess to God if we have really done something wrong. But equally we must recognise that much guilt is totally false, created by the enemy to confuse us. We need to recognise such false guilt – and here's the test – is there really anything for us to confess to God? Often we haven't broken any law but we feel bad.

So we have nothing to fear from guilt, from accusation, even on the Day of Judgement. They cannot separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Equally, we cannot be separated by physical opposition, such as Paul witnessed in his life "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword". The persecuted church around the world experiences these just as intensely as Paul. We may not meet these everyday in Yalding.....at least not overtly.

But let's look a little deeper. There are things that we encounter in the world that do oppose our Christian faith, and could separate us from God's love, if we let them. It could be fear of ridicule that keeps us silent when we meet non-believers – or actual ridicule when we speak up. Political correctness is now running rampant. It seems to have generated the idea that we shouldn't proclaim our faith for fear of upsetting Muslims. But it is the secular humanists who put forward this doctrine, and behind them I believe Satan who is trying to muzzle the church. Consumerism and wealth try to lull us into a feeling that God doesn't exist, that we can have heaven here on earth. Materialistic science, and proponents of radical atheism such as Richard Dawkins ridicule our faith and claim religions should be outlawed. These are insidious forms of opposition, but arguably they are being much more effective in separating today's generation in Britain from God's love than the overt opposition to Paul was!

A more tangible real world example is how suffering can turn us against God. Or grief at the loss of loved ones. We might come to believe that suffering shows God doesn't love us, as with Job. But if we see suffering correctly, it actually can bring us closer to Christ. Why else did the earlier section of Chapter 8 say we are "co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory"?

So neither guilt, physical opposition nor suffering should separate us from the love of Christ. The final threat is spiritual opposition. This is perhaps the most serious one, not least because society today tends to disregard the spiritual world. And even as Christians, when we live our everyday lives it's easy to start thinking that only the material world is relevant. That's underscored by science that certainly rules out any world beyond that which we can touch and measure. Indeed any serious person talking about spiritual things in our society risks being seen as a "nutter". Why else did Tony Blair's adviser say "we don't do God"?

But what does Paul say in Ephesians 6? "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms". This is saying that as Christians we should expect opposition primarily from evil spiritual forces. And note that what Paul is including in that passage is not just overtly spiritual opposition. He also implies that human opposition to the Gospel and to God's people also has a spiritual basis.

It's spiritual opposition that Paul has in mind when he talks of "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". Angels, demons, and powers here refer to the spiritual world and the opposition to our faith from Satan. Paul includes here as well other things that can be used to turn us against God – our natural fear of death, our anxiety about the future.

This passage tells us why we shouldn't give in to such things. It tells us to stop thinking of ourselves as helpless victims, rather to take courage and see ourselves as the victors that we are in Christ. That's why it is written. "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." We feel weak. But we are strong as the passage triumphantly goes on to assert "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Christ's love again assures us of victory against spiritual opposition to our faith. Not due to our strength, but his.

And the conclusion is a certain and resounding one – nothing can separate us from our Saviour! Let's reread the passage in full now together "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." Christ's love conquers all. We have nothing to fear. We can take courage amid the trials of life, whatever their source! Through him we are indeed more than conquerors, not helpless sheep!

I would like to illustrate what I just told you by things I experienced when I became a Christian. When I reflect on them they do parallel this triumphant final section of Romans 8. It happened at a time when I had contracted an illness called Lyme disease, when I was working in Germany. It's an infection that attacks the nerves, and mimics the symptoms of arthritis. It took me away from work and unable to sleep, in considerable pain. Claire even had to wash me as I couldn't use my hands. And yet in that state I felt a compulsion to read the Bible. On Saturday the 19th of July 1997 I read the Gospels and Acts. I also read another book which made me appreciate the fundamental ideas of evangelical Christianity; only Jesus, only faith, only grace, only Scriptures. So I suffered physical oppression.

But then, that night, I was invaded by a sense of panic. It was extremely disagreeable, a feeling of powerlessness before mighty forces. My heart rate was at least twice normal, as if I had been running. At one stage I woke Claire and she hardly recognised me. One thing I said, though was "I must stop reading the Bible". But the torment was resolved triumphantly. I

appealed to Jesus to save me from the dark invasion. And the unpleasant manifestation rapidly disappeared, to be replaced by a white light and a very real sense of His presence. On the next night; evil thoughts kept invading my mind. I heard whispers trying to tempt me to commit horrific acts. This time I just said "Begone, I am with Jesus", and the thoughts went immediately. So I suffered spiritual oppression.

Having experienced Jesus's saving power I wished him to enter my life. Still, for a time I felt restrained from telling anyone. I felt guilt at the thoughts that had come to me and that Claire would never forgive me if I told her about them. Finally on the following morning I had a sense of disorientation, and a desire to harm myself by jumping from a height. So I suffered feelings of extreme guilt.

Those feelings of guilt only went when I told Claire of my new-found faith, after which we prayed together. I later told my Pastor. In retrospect, it is clear that a major effort was made by Satan's cohorts to dissuade me from my chosen course. But it failed. Don't you see how physical suffering, spiritual oppression and feelings of guilt were seeking to separate me eternally from God's love? And yet, by his grace I experienced such love as to overcome all those forms of opposition. As the passage says – who is against us – no one" Truly, if we desire his love in our hearts, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ! So be reassured! Learn to sing and dance with joy at God's victory. Calvin talks of the love of God "the assurance of which, being thoroughly fixed in our hearts, will always draw us from the gates of hell to the light of life, and will sufficiently avail for our support". NT Wright says that the end of Romans 8 deserves to be written in letters of fire on the living tablets of our hearts!

I believe there may be some who have been suffering with guilt, the sense of being accused and thus distant from God. Others may be grieving a loved one and feeling resentment at that loss as a barrier to God's love. Others may be facing physical or spiritual opposition of the type I've discussed. If that is you, I urge you not to go without having prayer from someone you trust.