

### Romans 8: 31-39 + Romans 9:1-33

I wonder if you can remember the scene from the film Titanic when Rose is given a tour of the ship by the engineer. She makes the comment that from her calculation there doesn't seem to be anywhere near enough lifeboats for everyone on the ship. The engineer replies that in fact there are about half as many lifeboats as they would really need, but that the ship's owners thought that their appearance cluttered up the decks so they were left off the final design. He assures her, however, that he had built a strong ship and that the lifeboats wouldn't be needed! And of course we all know the end of the story.

But God's promises are not like that. Not only is God fully aware of the storms and difficulties which we will face in life but he promises that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, which can rob the Christian of God's love, mercy and the hope of heaven. That will be our theme as we go through our passage this morning. Unlike the designers of the Titanic, we will face up to some difficult questions about the reliability of God's promises, but at the end I hope and pray that we will all be left far more confident than perhaps we have ever been before in the tenacity of God's promises and the perseverance of the all who believe.

Last week we thought from Romans 8 about the reality of suffering and the future hope of the Christian. That glorious hope, combined with the promise of God to use all things for the good of those who love him, should give us incredible confidence in life, no matter what comes our way. And that's the theme Paul continues with in those early verses in our reading today. Paul brings up lots of things which might doubt our faith and our trust in God, and each one is slapped down.

He begins in verse 31: if God is for us, if the almighty and creator God is on our side, then what enemy should we fear?

In verse 32 he reminds us that since God has already given Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, how can we doubt his goodness and love towards us in all his other promises?

To those who struggle with guilt and often feel the accusing words of the devil bringing up past sins Paul reminds us that it is God who justifies us and that Jesus Christ, the one who will be the judge at the end of time, is not only our saviour but right now is praying for us in heaven.

If I might use a football analogy for a moment, it's as if Paul is saying that not only is our team made up of all the greatest players from history, Pele, Maradona, Lionel Messi, Bobby Moor, so that no one can defeat us, but not even the match officials are impartial. They are totally and utterly on our side so no matter what happens in the game, how many goals we might concede or how violent the opposition might be, the end result is absolutely certain. Nothing can stop our final victory.

It's on that basis that goes on to say that since we have been brought into the family of God by faith in Christ there is now absolutely nothing that can separate us from God's love. Can trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No! The Christians Paul was writing to faced those kinds of ordeals, as do many Christians today, but again Paul is confident. He is already said in verse 28 that God will even bring blessing and good to those who love him through times of struggle and suffering, and he repeats that here in verse 37. "*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!*" And when he runs through the things in verse 38 it's clear that Paul is supremely confident that the deep and personal love that God has for the Christian cannot be interrupted by anything in all creation. Death can't stop it. The trials of life can't stop it. There is nothing in the future

that will interrupt it. There are no powers of hell, no demons, not even the devil himself can separate the Christian from the love of God.

Now pause for a moment and just think about that. Death can separate us from the love of our family but not the love of God. Illness or injury might separate us from the love of our colleagues but not the love of God. The future may have all kinds of trials in store, the devil may lay all kinds of schemes to try and trip us up, but if you are a Christian this morning then God's love for you is the most solid and dependable and unchanging thing in your life today, tomorrow and for all eternity.

Now that should change the way we live shouldn't it? Shouldn't it give us greater confidence in life; shouldn't it ease our fears and worries? Shouldn't it open our mouths to praise God and to change the way we use our time and our money and resources? And shouldn't it change the way we feel about ourselves? So many people struggle with self-esteem issues, feeling worthless, undervalued and unloved. But for the Christian the unending, unstoppable, never giving up nature of God's love should change all that.

I hope you can see that and I hope it increasingly becomes your experience. The end of Romans chapter 8 contains some of the most wonderful promises in the whole of the Bible and I hope that over the coming days and months you will continue to reflect on those words and bring them to mind in the midst of whatever trials and tests come your way. They are wonderfully liberating and encouraging. I hope you can see that.

But it may be that those promises have left you with a few questions not least about whether, like the words of the Titanic's chief engineer, God's promises can be fully trusted. If so, I don't think you're alone. In fact, I'm sure that the reason why Romans chapters 9, 10 and 11 are in the Bible is precisely because both our sinful suspicious nature and the timeline of Bible itself raise some huge questions which need answering if we are to be absolutely confident in the glorious promises of Romans 8.

So that's what Paul deals with over chapters 9, 10 and 11. He enters into a dialogue with himself, bringing up questions and providing answers so that ultimately our faith in God's glorious promises is increased.

Now we have time for just a brief look at Romans chapter 9 this morning and I'm fully aware that this chapter contains some difficult and challenging issues which on 1<sup>st</sup> glance we may find unsettling. But let me encourage you not to give up because when we stop and think these things through we will find that the very verses which may challenge us at first reading end up bringing us the greatest comfort. But do come and talk to me after the service if you have any questions. If you want to do some reading on your own, let me suggest getting a copy of *Timothy Keller's commentary on Romans 8 to 16*. It's available from our online bookstore. It's easy to read and wonderfully helpful as it deals with some of the huge issues chapter 9 throws up.

I think there are 3 issues here we need to deal with: are you ready? Whether the history of God's Old Testament people shows that his promises to us can be trusted; whether it is unfair or unjust of God to choose people for salvation, as the Bible seems to teach; and thirdly there's the question of the basis on which God makes his choice.

The first issue then is God's faithfulness. Can his promises be trusted?

You see it's not hard to imagine how people of Paul's day could think that many of God's promises had failed because so many Jews had not believed that Jesus was the Christ. Paul himself is heartbroken by

that fact. You can sense his anguish in verses 1 to 5. So had God's promises failed? No, says Paul, absolutely not.

Although the language may be a little complicated his reason is simple: God's promises were never just about natural birth but about faith. You see, just as people born into a Christian family aren't necessarily Christians -because being a Christian is about a personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ - so being truly part of God's Old Testament people wasn't just about being born into a Jewish family. The Jews had been given wonderful privileges: God's perfect Law, the Promised Land, not to mention all the prophets and kings who pointed them forward to the coming of Jesus the Messiah but without a personal faith in God those privileges were just window dressing. As Paul has already explained that in chapter 4, being part of God's family demands a personal faith in God.

And to make that point Paul turns to 2 Old Testament situations where having the right father counted for nothing. Abraham had 2 sons: Isaac and Ishmael, but it was through Isaac, that God's promises would be fulfilled. And when Isaac's wife gave birth to twins, it was through Jacob, and not Esau, that God's promises went forward. You see, being part of a certain race, even if it is God's chosen people, does not guarantee salvation. As Paul has already said earlier on in Romans the question isn't about genetics but faith.

And since God's promises to his Old Testament people relied on their faith, then the same is true for the Jews in Paul's day. God's promises hadn't failed because many genetic Jews didn't believe in Jesus. God's people have always and only been properly defined as those who come to God in faith.

Of course that raises the question why Isaac and Jacob had that faith and not their siblings, and the perhaps unsettling answer Paul gives here is that they were chosen, or elected by God. And, just as we put our cross in the box on election day, so it seems that God chose Isaac and Jacob and didn't choose Ishmael and Esau.

Now it may be as you think about that your instinctive reaction is that it all sounds rather unfair. How could God choose one and not another? And on what basis did he make that choice? And what about my free will?

Paul's answer to the free will question is that we are not free at all. As slaves to sin all human beings are fixed in our rebellious attitude towards God so that we cannot seek and choose him unless he first chooses us. Once God's Holy Spirit starts melting our cold hearts then we are able to come to him, but only after his enabling work.

So is God unfair in his choosing? Is he unjust? That's the question Paul poses in verse 14. And what's his answer: No! And to help us see why that is so, Paul takes us back to first principles and shows us the character and authority of God.

The quote Paul uses in verse 14 are words that God speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai where God 2 reveals things that are at the heart of his being: his goodness and his sovereignty. You see the Bible is absolutely clear that God is good and righteous, that his motives are pure and right, and that in him there is no darkness at all. God does not sin, nor does he tempt others to sin, and whilst he allows sin and evil to exist in this world right now he not only promises to use those things for the good of his people, as we saw last week, but one day he promises they will be gone forever. God is good and we must never doubt that.

But God is also absolutely sovereign over the world he has made. Paul uses the analogy of a potter deciding what to make out of some clay. It would be unthinkable, Paul says, for the clay to answer the potter back and demand to be reshaped. The clay belongs to the potter. The potter has absolute authority over what he makes. And in the same way, Paul says, God has the right, the absolute right, to do with all his creation, including us, exactly what he wants. In fact the gap between the potter and the clay is miniscule compared to the gap between us and Almighty God. So of course God has the right to choose whoever he likes in accordance with his purposes.

And Paul uses the example of Pharaoh to show just that. In this passage, and throughout the book of Exodus, Pharaoh is described as someone whom God uses so that through the judgement of the plagues and the great Exodus from Egypt God's great glory is clearly seen. All Pharaoh's choices, like all of history, are ultimately used by God for his glory and purposes.

That's why Paul says here that not only does God have mercy on who he wants to have mercy, but that he hardens whom he wants to harden. And that raises another big question doesn't it: if God is in absolute control over us then how can he blame us for the wrong things we do? And how can he find us guilty of sin and condemn us if ultimately we are under his control? Doesn't that suggest that God destines some people for judgment – because if so then God seems rather callous! It would if it were true, but of course God isn't callous or unjust, quite the opposite in fact.

The Bible tells us that God wants no one to perish, that he loves all he has made and that his offer of forgiveness is open to people of every race and age and background. And if you begin to doubt the depth and seriousness of God's love then you need only look to Jesus' death on the cross to correct your understanding. God has demonstrated his love and patience with us and with his Old Testament people time and time again.

And we do need his patience and forgiveness because however moral we feel we are far from innocent. We are all, by nature, objects of God's wrath. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God so none of us can claim to be righteous.

And so if you read through the story of the Exodus you'll see that Pharaoh is no innocent bystander either. He had sought to kill all the baby Israelite boys and we are told numerous times that not only did Pharaoh set himself against God's people but that he hardened his own heart against God. And as we saw in Romans 1, one of the ways that God judgement falls is when he gives us what we want. And that's what we see here. Despite plenty of opportunities to do the opposite Pharaoh turns against God and God simply lets him have his own way.

Does that make God guilty? Of course not! Pharaoh rejected God and so God simply allowed him to go his own way. And sadly many of the Jews at the time of Jesus, and many people today, are just the same. They reject God and God allows them to go their own way.

So God doesn't create people so he can sentence them to hell! The ones that Romans 9:22 speaks of as having been '*prepared for destruction*' face that fate because they have rejected God themselves. It is their own preparations, their own sinful attitudes and actions that ultimately decide their destiny. God is a God of perfect justice and there are never any grounds for appeal in that final heavenly courtroom.

But of course God does choose to save some. In some cases he steps in and gives the gift of faith so that people can turn to him. And that should cause us to marvel at the grace of God poured out on sinful

rebellious people. But all too often our response is to question God again. If God can save some, why doesn't he save all? Perhaps you are thinking that very thing.

But we need to ask why he should? Is there any reason why God should save anyone? If God's judgment against sin is always fair, which it is, and if all people are guilty of sin for which the just punishment is eternal death, which they are, then why should God save anyone? If God is righteous then he is under no obligation to save anyone because he is being true to his righteousness when he condemns the rebellious sinner. No, there is no reason why God must save anyone, but the fact that he does is a mark of his love and compassion and mercy. As Paul has already said time and time again we are saved by an act of God's grace alone.

Two stories here might help.

Imagine you are wealthy enough to start an education foundation to pay for some students to go to university without taking out any loans. It's your money. You have earned it legally so you can do what you like with it. But in an act of great generosity you choose to offer 20 students from your town a free university education. Can we scream unfair because you didn't do that for every student? Of course not! It was an act of grace, of undeserved favour.

Or imagine this.

You hear of 5 friends who are about to rob a bank. You plead with them to call it off but they ignore your advice and decide to go ahead. But you follow them to the bank and as they start to rush towards the door you rugby tackle one and bring him to the ground. The others go in and end up shooting some people before the police arrive and arrest them. The four bank robbers are sentenced to life in prison but the one you tackled goes free. Can the others scream injustice because you didn't stop them? No. Of course not! You warned them. You pleaded with them. And they went their own way. Their punishment was deserved. It was simply an act of grace that saved the one.

Friends God is under no obligation to save anyone, so the fact that he does is an extraordinary act of grace and mercy. What's more the fact that the salvation he gives came at such huge cost, as the perfect Son of God went to the cross to pay the penalty our sins deserve, makes it even more astounding.

But there's one final question Paul needs to answer and that's about how God chooses those he saves.

Is there something in those God chooses to save that warrants saving them over others? Are they naturally more moral than others? Are they more spiritually in tune than others so they are able to make wise decisions? Are they simply the only ones intelligent enough to understand the gospel and so come to God on their own volition?

The answer to all those questions is a resounding no.

Those who are saved by God through faith in Jesus Christ were not more moral or more spiritually in tune or more intelligent than anyone else. In fact there is nothing at all in any Christian that would make God save them above anyone else.

In fact, to imagine there is something in us that would compel God to choose us over others is not only incredibly arrogant but it completely changes the nature of the gospel. The message of the gospel is that we are saved by grace alone through faith so that no one can boast! But if God was in some way forced to choose me because I was more moral or intelligent or spiritual than others then I would have something to

boast about! And if, even in a small way, we have earned our salvation then we are no longer saved by grace alone. And if that is the case then just as salvation is won by our works then it can also be lost by our works.

Do you see the link? If our relationship with God depends on us and our performance, then rather like athletes who lose their speed, or models who lose their looks, we must expect to be cast aside by God and forgo his promises when we fail to be good enough for God. If we are saved or chosen by our works then our faith must rest on our works. But if, as the Bible clearly teaches, we are chosen by God, chosen out of his grace and mercy and not because of ourselves, then God's love and promises to us depend not on us and our performance but on him alone. That means if we are truly saved our salvation cannot be lost, our forgiveness can't be undone, and that God's promise of eternal life and his undying love we rejoiced over in Romans 8 can't be repealed however many times we fail to live as we know we should.

Friends all of God's glorious promises are a gift of his wonderful grace. They rely on God and not on us, and because he chose us to be in Christ we can stand confidently and trust that his words to us will not fail.

What confidence that brings as we face a life full of challenges and suffering! What joy that brings as we look towards a sure and certain future! And how humble that should make us as we talk about Jesus and all he has done for us to a world in grave need of a saviour.

And since we know that God can save anyone, since salvation is a gift of God and not of ourselves, it means we can go boldly into even the darkest places of society with the light of Christ and pray fervently for even the most hardened of our friends and family because God can and will save anyone he chooses.

And of course if you are not yet a Christian this is great news for you too. It means there is nothing you need to do, no moral standard or spiritual level you need to reach to be saved. And since one of the means that God uses to call people to himself is the preaching of his Word it may be that right now you are feeling God's Spirit stirring in you, drawing you towards Jesus in repentance and faith. If so, then let me plead with you, do not harden your heart. Seek the Lord while he may be found; turn to him while he is near; and let his glorious work of grace deal with your sin and let the Lord of life bring eternal life to your soul.

Let's pray...