

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things?

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“What then are we to say?” These verses from the end of Romans chapter 8 are among the most familiar in all of Scripture. And they don’t need a lot of explanation or context for their meaning to be clear: “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So “what then are we to say?” becomes an especially relevant question for anyone preaching on these verses – what more could possibly be said to clarify “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”? These words are often considered the climax of Paul’s letter; some even describe them as the clearest articulation of the Christian message. So what to say about them....

We encounter these words most often at a funeral, where they are used as words of comfort for those experiencing separation from their loved one. But while death is one of the things Paul is talking about here, one of the things that can’t separate us from God’s love, it’s certainly not the only thing he addresses. Understanding these verses as part of the bigger picture Paul is painting about who God is and who we are as God’s people can help us better experience these words as good news when we encounter them, whatever the circumstances.

We pick up near the end of chapter 8 right where we left off last week – in the midst of groaning. Specifically, Paul has been describing the groaning of creation, and the groans of the church, as we wait for the revealing of the kingdom of God, which is already present and also not yet fully revealed. Paul says here that not only does creation groan, including the church, but also that the Holy Spirit comes alongside and groans with us. Paul’s been explaining how God’s giving of the Holy Spirit to us provides us comfort and assurance of God’s promise – reminding us that God who has claimed us and made promises to us is faithful. He goes on to say that the Holy Spirit also prays, for us and even in us. God the Holy Spirit prays with us, and when we don’t have the words with which to pray the Spirit intercedes– and sometimes even the Spirit doesn’t have words, but still prays, with sighs too deep for words.

The Spirit, it seems, is praying in and for us even when we are not consciously aware of it. This brings to mind the phrase that has guided many faithful Christians through the centuries: the Latin phrase “ora et labora”, meaning “prayer and work.” I’ve heard this phrase itself turned into a prayer: “May my work be my prayer and my prayer be my work.” Prayer is an active endeavor, and even when we are not consciously praying, when we are going about our daily routines, using the gifts God has given us in service of God and others, that too is prayer, the Spirit praying through us that God’s will be done.

There’s a mysterious and mystical claim here: not only does God take part in our life, but we take part in God’s life – we are actively incorporated into the relationships of the Triune God. We who have been made part of Christ’s body are a vehicle for prayer by the Holy Spirit who prays that the will of God be done. God chooses to make us part of all of this. God the Holy Spirit prays through us and with us, the body of Christ, for God the Creator’s will to be done and purpose to be accomplished.

All of which leads to the question of God's will: what *is* God's will? What *is* the purpose for which we are created, and incorporated into the body of Christ, and for which we pray and work?

Paul seems to have anticipated this being the next question his hearers, then and now, would raise. Part of the answer is in the key words – all verbs - in the next verses: God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Ah yes, “predestined” – a word that strikes fear in many of us. We mostly hear this term used by Christian brothers and sisters from other denominations. “Predestination” has come to mean the idea that God has already decided what is going to happen, how everything is going to play out – and it perhaps suggests in some sense that we are more or less actors on a stage, performing a script that's already been determined. “Predestined” is usually used to mean that God has already determined who is going to heaven. There are even those who go a step further than these predestinarians: “double predestinarians” want to make clear their belief that God has already determined not only who will go to heaven but also who will be going to hell. No wonder we get a little nervous when we hear this word!

This is not, however, how Paul is using this term; these are later meanings for the word. When Paul says God has “predestined,” he means simply that God has already determined the outcome for us and all creation. And what God has established, and is bringing into being, is good. God's already-decided outcome is not destruction and judgment and punishment; it's reconciliation and restoration. As Paul has been saying all along and says here again at the end of chapter 8: “God is for us.” And God being “for us” has both personal and cosmic significance. God not only predestined us, along with the whole creation, but God also “foreknew” us. Paul perhaps knew that some who hear his words would think, “well, it's good I'm lumped in with everything and everybody, but if God really knew what I was like I wouldn't make the cut. I must've been included in God's good outcome when God was looking the other way.” Not the case, says Paul. God foreknew you, and predestined you. God foreknew all creation, and predestined all creation. And nothing, in all creation – not even you – can separate you or creation from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Just as interesting as what Paul has said here at the end of chapter 8 are the things Paul doesn't say:

He doesn't say that God causes bad things to happen, either as a punishment or as some kind of test. Certainly bad things happen; he lists several examples here – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword --“the things” about which something needs to be said. But to acknowledge they happen is different than saying God makes them happen, either because we have done something wrong and God is punishing us, or because God is trying to get us to do something to prove we deserve God's love. Paul says that the Spirit is with us even when these things happen – that God is present with us, suffering with us and praying for us.

Paul also doesn't say about these things that “everything happens for a reason, and someday that reason will be revealed.” Paul doesn't think God is hiding anything from us. His whole point is that in Christ, God has made crystal clear the loving purpose God has for us. God's word of promise became flesh, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see that God's good outcome cannot be derailed. Not only has God's loving purpose been clearly revealed in Christ, but the church's whole purpose is to proclaim this, in word and deed, to all people and the whole creation. There is no veil of secrecy here.

And there are lots of ways Paul could have assured us of the certainty of God's good outcome. There are lots of two-dollar words Paul could have chosen to do so – indeed, words he has been using throughout the letter. But what he says has been clearly revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the thing from which we cannot be separated, isn't God's “righteousness” or “justification” or even “salvation.” The thing from which we cannot be separated is God's love. In Christ Jesus our Lord, God's loving purpose and good outcome have been both promised and fulfilled, and from this Word we cannot be separated.

In the second half of Paul's letter to the Romans, he will continue to answer the question, “what then are we to say?” More specifically, he'll first explore “what then are we to say about God's word of promise and the people to whom it was first revealed?” and then move to “what then are we to do, how are we to live, in light of God's word of promise?” As we move into this next section, we bear in mind this word of promise to which Paul has been building and from which the rest of his points flow: “nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Thanks be to God! Amen.