

Suffering Will Not Have the Last Word

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, and Edward is preaching to us from the book of Romans. If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of Vista Bibles at the side, at the back, so please do grab a Bible if you don't have one with you.

And we're in the chapter 8, so Romans chapter 8. And we're picking things up about halfway through the chapter. Romans 8, and reading from verse 18.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

[1 : 40] For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those 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 among many brothers.

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 shall we say to these things?

[2 : 57] 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 with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus, the one who died.

More than that, who was raised? Who is at the right hand of God? Who indeed is interceding for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, for your sake, we are being killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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.

[4 : 18] Amen. Amen. Oh, may God bless to us his word this morning. Amen. Well, good morning, friends.

Can we turn together to Romans chapter 8, the passage we heard a few moments ago, and it's verses 18 to 39.

And my title for this morning is, Suffering Will Not Have the Last Word. And I want us to see here how Paul the Apostle helps us to understand the place of suffering.

Suffering in the whole created order, and also suffering in the lives of Christian people. Now, let me start with a true story.

Years ago, I was working as a young assistant minister in a church in Manchester. And one weekend, we had invited a fine preacher and teacher to come to give us some lectures and sermons, to give our congregation two or three lectures on the Saturday, and then to preach on the Sunday for us.

[5 : 32] Now, our visitor was a man named Sir Norman Anderson. At the time, he would have been 70 or a little bit more. And before retiring, he had been the professor of Islamic law in the University of London.

Perhaps a surprising job for an evangelical Christian, but that's what he had spent much of his life doing. But here he was with us for this weekend, a very able man and a fine Bible teacher. And on the Saturday afternoon, because I was the assistant, I was deputed to take him back to my house and give him a cup of tea between lectures.

Now, I'd never met him before, and I knew virtually nothing about him. So as we drank our tea together, I thought I'd make polite conversation, and I asked him if he had a family.

Well, there was a pause. And he said to me, very gently, he said, my wife and I had three children, but they've all died, having reached adult years.

[6 : 38] Now, I didn't know what to say. I wished I hadn't asked the question. But he was very kind, and he told me briefly and calmly about his three children and how they had died.

Now, you can imagine, for me, that was an unforgettable conversation. And I asked myself, how can this man, now in his 70s, be traveling around the country, teaching the Bible with joy and enthusiasm, having lost all of his children in adult years?

How is he not shipwrecked? How is he not paralyzed with grief? And I realized that the Bible must have given him a structure for understanding human suffering.

Now, in our passage for this morning, Paul the Apostle gives us a clear structure for understanding both the sufferings of the world and the sufferings of Christian people.

There are, of course, no easy or glib answers to the sharp questions raised by human suffering. Severe suffering is, by definition, horrible and can seem to be unbearable at the time.

[7 : 50] But here was Paul, a man who himself had suffered greatly, and he'd been taught by the Lord the words that he passes on to us in this second half of Romans chapter 8.

Few Christians can have suffered as greatly as Paul, and yet he was able to persevere in the Christian life with enthusiasm and joy right to the end of his life, with undiminished love for the Lord and undiminished love for the Lord's people.

Now, we'll get to the details of the passage in a moment, but first I want to set this passage in its wider context within the epistle to the Romans. Throughout Romans, Paul is explaining to the Christians what the gospel is and what it means to live in the light of the gospel.

And his central point in the early chapters is to say that nobody can be eternally saved by their own efforts. Nobody can work their passage to heaven.

Now, of course, most people in the world think that that's the way to get to heaven, to work your passage by trying hard to live a morally upright life. But Paul is saying, no, we are all sinners without exception.

[9 : 05] We are all justly and righteously condemned by God. But God, wanting to save us and not to condemn us, has himself taken the initiative and has provided us with a savior, Jesus, who has taken the death penalty that we deserved, and he has died in our place, on the cross, on our behalf.

And all we have to do to be assured of our salvation is to trust him, to put our faith in him and in what he has done for us. And, says Paul, when we do that, we are justified in God's sight, which means acquitted, declared not guilty, because Jesus has borne the punishment that we deserved. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, by his wounds we are healed. Now, this is, of course, glorious news. It's totally undeserved and it's free.

Well, free to us, though it costs Jesus everything. So, we are forever indebted to him. And we're justified in God's sight, not by our own efforts and works, but by Jesus' work, in which we place our trust.

And once we have really understood this good news, we are filled with joy and thankfulness. Now, that is the gospel in a very condensed form. That's what Paul has been unpacking in considerable detail in the first seven chapters of Romans.

[10 : 33] Now, the problem for the Romans back then and for us today is that we can understand this wonderful gospel. We can understand that through faith in Christ we are eternally forgiven and

justified in God's sight.

But we're very conscious that we're still living in a most painful and difficult world. We're not yet in heaven, where pain and tears and death are no more.

We're still very much in this old world, where pain, tears and death stalk the land every day. If the new Christian believer on becoming a Christian were to be whisked straight off to heaven, the moment they put their faith in Christ, it would be absolutely straightforward.

But that's not what happens. We continue to live in this world of tears, darkness, blood and violence. Paul himself was often subjected to violence.

He was beaten many times, stoned, lashed with whips, imprisoned for long periods, because he kept on preaching the gospel in a world that was hostile to the gospel.

[11:40] But he knew how to keep going as a joyful and enthusiastic Christian, despite all his sufferings. And this is what he's conveying to us in Romans chapter 8.

He knew that the Roman Christians were suffering for their faith, not as painfully as he was himself, but certainly suffering. And he wanted to help them to understand why God should allow them to suffer.

He wanted to give them a structure of understanding, so that they could then say, we're Christians, and Christians suffer, but the sufferings can be endured, because we know what God is doing, and we know that his ultimate purposes are entirely good.

Now, it's exactly the same for us today. Let me briefly catalogue the types of suffering that we can be called upon to endure.

I've got four. I'm sure there are more categories, but I want to give you four. First, there are the sufferings that will come to us because we are Christians. People will dislike us, sometimes powerfully, because of what we believe.

[12:51] We'll be spoken against by acquaintances and colleagues at work. We'll lose some friends because of our position on the uniqueness of Christianity, or because we hold to the Bible's teaching on sexuality and gender, and to its teaching on heaven and hell.

This opposition will sometimes come even from within our own families, and it can be deeply painful. Then secondly, there are the sufferings that come to us simply because we're human beings.

And these are the sufferings that we share with everybody, with atheists, agnostics, people of other faiths, illnesses, physical and mental, financial hardships, the death of people we love, and so on.

Thirdly, there are the sufferings which we don't experience ourselves, but we see them happening all over the world. The sufferings created by wretched political leadership, the foolish decisions taken by national leaders, decisions that bring death to tens of thousands of people.

The sufferings created by endemic corruption, the corruption that brings poverty and starvation, and plunges whole communities into despair. And the sufferings caused by earthquakes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters.

[14:13] Can any thoughtful Christian be aware of all this suffering in the world, and not grieved by it? As John Donne famously wrote, every man's death diminishes me, because I'm involved in mankind.

Then fourthly, there are the sufferings that come to us because of our own sinful nature. We wrestle daily with a hundred demons that arise in our hearts.

I don't mean literal demons, but with the godless impulses that daily tempt us to misbehave, like pigs willfully wallowing in muck. Well, suffering comes in so many forms.

So how do Christians hang on firmly and joyfully to our gospel convictions as we continue to live in this world of tears and darkness?

Romans 8 is written to give the Lord's people wonderful assurance. It's a chapter of assurance. Assurance in the face of these realities. In this chapter, Paul opens up to us a panoramic view of reality, which we would never see if we were left to work things out for ourselves.

[15:26] So let's turn to the chapter now. Look first at verse 1. Verse 1. Paul starts the chapter by saying, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Then look on to the very end, verse 39, where he says, Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now what he means by these two verses is, there will be no condemnation, there can be no condemnation for Christians on the day of judgment, and there will be no separation from God, even if in this life we are afflicted with the worst kinds of sufferings.

That's what the chapter is all about. No condemnation by God, no separation from God. And if that is not good news, I am the emperor of Japan.

This is the basis of our eternal security. Now there are other great moments of assurance in the first part of the chapter. Look for example at verse 11.

If the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, of him who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

[16:43] In other words, if you're a Christian, you will be raised from the dead, as Christ was. Then look on to verse 17. If children, children of God, then heirs, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

So the Lord's people are heirs of the eternal kingdom of heaven, where we shall reign in the end with Christ himself. But just notice that last phrase in verse 17.

Provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. And it's that phrase that opens up for us Paul's thinking in verses 18 to 25.

In verses 18 to 25, he is teaching suffering now, glory ultimately. God is assuring Christian believers that there will be sufferings in this life, but there will be glory and peace in the world to come.

And in this paragraph, 18 to 25, Paul is teaching two things. First, the sufferings of creation and the ultimate glory of creation.

[17:57] And second, the sufferings of Christians and the ultimate glory of Christians. But he prefaces his teaching with a startling declaration in verse 18.

He says, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Now, what does he mean by that?

Well, imagine somebody coming to Paul and saying to him, Now, surely, Paul, it's like this, isn't it? You get, let's say for the sake of argument, you get 100 kilos worth of suffering in this present world. But it'll be balanced out because you'll get 100 kilos worth of glory in the world to come. It'll be even Stevens. To which Paul replies, No, not at all.

You cannot compare the two as if one will just balance out the other. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the future glory. So if you get 100 kilos of suffering in this life, you'll receive 100,000 kilos of glory in the world to come.

[19:01] What's coming to us in Christ, finally, will infinitely outweigh our sufferings in this present world. And then he develops his theme.

Verse 19. The creation, he says, is waiting with eager longing for the moment, which will be the day of judgment, when it will be finally revealed who are the children of God.

Then look at verse 20. What is the present condition of the created order? Futility, says Paul. Futility.

And what a devastating word that is. Futility is the character of the post-Genesis 3 world. Wars, earthquakes, disease, misery, and death.

And verse 20 makes it clear that this futility was imposed upon the creation by God as a judgment from him. It is God who has subjected it to futility.

[20:02] And it's God who makes this clear to Adam in Genesis chapter 3. Right back then, when God says to Adam, cursed is the ground because of you.

It's the rebellion of mankind that has brought this futility to engulf the world. And if futility is the first mark of creation, Paul spells out the second in verse 21.

And that is that creation is in bondage to decay. I think it was corruption in your version, wasn't it, Paul? But it's the same idea. In bondage to decay. Everything is decaying.

Nothing lasts. Isn't that right? Houses fall down. Ships get wrecked. Empires disintegrate. Even church buildings need expensive repairs.

And everything that is beautiful dies. The lovely apple tree in your garden is blown down by an autumn gale.

[21:01] Your dog dies and you shed salt tears. As the old hymn puts it, change and decay in all around I see. If you're over 50, just look in the mirror.

All the bottles from all the beauty shops cannot hide the truth. The creation is in bondage to decay. Then there's a third characteristic of the creation in verse 22.

Groaning as in the pains of childbirth. The whole world is like a woman in labor, groaning, enduring the unendurable.

So Paul is pressing home to us the real nature of the present world. futility, bondage to decay, and groaning in deep pain.

So when Louis Armstrong used to think, used to sing, I think to myself, what a wonderful world. He was looking at it through rose-tinted spectacles. I think Paul would have tapped him on the shoulder and said, Mr. Armstrong, I need to have a word with you.

[22 : 08] Here is Paul, taught by the Holy Spirit, showing us the disturbing reality of the sufferings of creation. But, but, and here is the wonder of the truth, these characteristics of creation are not dead-end, despairing characteristics.

Look at the verse carefully with me. Verse 20, subjected by God to futility in hope. Verse 21, the creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

And then think of verse 22, the pains of childbirth, hard as they are, come abruptly to an end and are followed by relief and joy. So Paul's point is quite clear.

The creation is suffering great pains now, but will be gloriously set free in the end. Well, now let's look on to verses 23, 4, and 5, where Paul turns from the creation to the experience of Christian people.

And it's the same pattern, suffering now, glory ultimately. So verse 23, he says, not only the creation, but we ourselves, we Christians, who have the first fruits of the Spirit.

[23 : 30] What are we doing? We are groaning inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. So Paul is speaking here of the time when we shall be able to enter the glory of the new creation and our very bodies will be redeemed, delivered from groaning.

We shall receive new bodies, just as Jesus, at his resurrection, received a new body, which could never die again. Redeemed bodies, new bodies.

Get that truth deep into your system and it's a powerful antidote to the fear of death. And just notice Paul's phrase here. We groan inwardly, he says, inwardly.

Now we learn to smile on the outside and that's a good thing. But often we are groaning on the inside. It's the human condition. But we're not saddled with it forever.

Now look on to verse 24. For in this hope, this sure expectation, we were saved. Now hope that is seen, in other words, experienced now, is not hope.

[24 : 38] For who hopes for what he sees? In other words, we don't yet see our bodies redeemed and renewed. We don't yet see what Paul calls in verse 21 the glory of the children of God.

I mean, just look at us. Look around. We are not yet glorious, are we? We are rattled. We're stressed. Our minds are often full of pain. But as Paul puts it in verse 24, we are saved in hope, in sure expectation of what we don't yet see.

And that is the perfect peace of heaven. So in the words of verse 23, we wait eagerly. But in the words of verse 25, we have to wait patiently.

And this patient, eager waiting is a central part of the Christian life. We are ladies in waiting and gentlemen in waiting. And we have lots to do in this life to get on with here and now.

We have to do our work. We bring the gospel to our friends and neighbors. We're busy people. We have the nuts and bolts of life to attend to. We have to do the shopping and the cleaning and the cooking, paying the bills, looking after our families and so on.

[25 : 48] But all the time we're waiting. Our eyes are on the distant horizon because we know that one day we shall be with the Lord Jesus in the new world.

So the message of verses 18 to 25 is immensely encouraging. The creation is suffering now, but it will be gloriously transformed. And we who are Christians, the whole church, are inevitably going to suffer in this world, but we wait eagerly for the new creation where tears, pain, mourning, and death will be no more.

Now the next paragraph, verses 26 to 30, that is equally encouraging because in this paragraph Paul explains how God is powerfully and unstoppably working for our good if we're Christians.

If verses 24 and 25 describe our certain future hope, verses 26 and 27 describe God's certain present help given to Christians.

You see, he speaks of our weakness in verse 26, which is expressed in inward groaning. But, and here's the joy of it, the Holy Spirit, verse 26, helps us in our weakness.

[27 : 10] We're not just left to our own feeble devices. The Holy Spirit is our powerful helper. As Jesus had said back in John's Gospel, I will not leave you desolate as orphans.

I will ask the Father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever. Now, the Holy Spirit helps God's people in many different ways, but in this passage, Paul tells us of just one of those ways.

Look at verse 26. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

He is so involved with our weakness and our inward groanings that he groans himself. And groaning is at the heart of the passage.

Verse 22, the whole creation is groaning. Verse 23, we Christians are groaning inwardly. What does a groan sound like? Oh!

[28 : 15] That was an outward groan, so I was teasing you. The groaning is inward, isn't it? And then verse 26, God the Holy Spirit is himself groaning as he intercedes for us, as he prays for us, with groanings too deep for words, groanings that cannot be put into human language.

Now, this mystery here, the very fact that the Holy Spirit's intercessions for us cannot be expressed in human words, means that our rational minds cannot fully grasp what the Spirit is saying to God the Father on our behalf.

But we can trust what we don't understand because, as Paul puts it at the end of verse 27, the Spirit intercedes for the Lord's people, the saints, according to the will of God.

Well, of course, his requests for us must be in line with the will of God. There's no division between the mind of God the Father and the mind of the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of God the Father and the Spirit of the Lord Jesus.

to put it in homely terms, the different persons of the Trinity are singing from the same song sheet perfectly. But even though the Spirit's groanings, his prayers for us, are too deep to be expressed in human words, Paul gives us a strong clue in verse 26 as to what's going on.

[29 : 39] He says, we do not know what to pray for as we ought. Now, he must be talking about something serious there. He's not picturing the Christian praying about minor decisions.

For example, Lord, Lord, please, please teach me. Should I have fish for my tea tonight or should it be a meat pie? Or, Lord, should I phone my terrible Aunt Griselda today or can I put it off till Friday? It's not that kind of thing. Verses 28 to 30 open up what kind of thing Paul is thinking about. These are big things. that shape the final destiny of our lives.

And when he says we don't know what to pray for as we ought, he must be thinking about the kind of quandary that he was in himself when he wrote Philippians chapter 1.

You perhaps remember this little passage. He doesn't know whether it's better for him to die now or to carry on living and exercising his apostolic ministry. So he writes, which I shall choose, I cannot tell.

[30 : 41] I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is better by far. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your account, you Philippians.

It's almost to be or not to be that is the question. He doesn't know how to pray as he ought. But in Romans 8, 26 he comforts himself and he comforts us by saying when we're in this kind of major quandary, we can trust that the Holy Spirit who lives within us is praying for us exactly in line with God the Father's will for us.

And further, and this is massively comforting, although, verse 26, there's something we do not know, which is how to pray, there is something we do know.

Look at verse 28. We do know that for those who love God, all things are working together for good. Now, friends, we need to get hold of that verse 28 and stick it in our pipes and take a long, cool smoke at it.

We don't always know what to pray for, but we can trust that the Holy Spirit knows how to pray for us. And we can trust, therefore, that the things that happen to us, including our sufferings, are part of God working all things together for good.

[32 : 08] Some of our sufferings will be abominable and unbearable, unbearable at the time. But later, maybe much later, we'll be able to look back and see the good and loving hand of God working out his good purpose for us.

This surely was something that Sir Norman Anderson had clearly learned. The loss of his three children at the time, it must have been unbearable for him.

He must have raged and wept. But later, he was a calm, loving Christian who gave himself to strengthening the churches. His sufferings drove him not away from the Lord, but to the Lord.

Verse 29 also opens up the wonderful purposes of God to us. Let me read verse 29. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he, Jesus, might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Now, this is all about Christians. Those who are Christians have been eternally foreknown and predestined, chosen from before the foundation of the world, as Paul puts it in Ephesians chapter 1. [33 : 25] But what does this predestination entail? It's a predestination, verse 29, to be conformed to the image of God's Son.

So every Christian, over time, is being reshaped, reconfigured, reconformed, to be more and more like Jesus.

And if Jesus is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, Christians can expect to experience sorrow and to become acquainted with grief.

We cannot avoid it. We must expect it. Now, of course, it is not the whole story because Jesus is also a man filled with heavenly joy.

As he says to the apostles in John's Gospel, he says not only that the world will hate them, but also that his joy will be in them and their joy will be full. But the joy of the Christian life is a different subject for a different sermon and a different passage.

[34 : 25] This passage is about suffering and we need to hold firmly to verse 28 that for those who love God, all things, yes, including our sufferings, are working together for good.

The worst of them will be simply awful at the time, perhaps for years afterwards. But Paul is placing them in a much bigger picture which is ruled by God's goodness.

Now this is so different from the world's view of suffering. The unbelieving world regards sufferings as unwelcome intruders, vile beasts that have no right to break in upon us into our lives and to rob us of peace and well-being.

But Paul teaches us to regard our sufferings as working together, that is, collaborating, for good purposes under God's hand. And verse 30 shows us a glorious bird's-eye view of how God works out in stages his saving purposes for the life of each Christian.

Just look at verse 30. He predestines us. Now why he predestines some and not others is not our business to know. But as we've just seen, we are predestined to be reshaped according to the character and image of Jesus.

[35 : 46] Then secondly, those who are predestined are then called. He calls to you and me. It's a summons. In the end, it comes at us like a megaphone.

For example, Rodney, I'm summoning you to put your trust in my son. Are you listening to me?

Don't trifle with me. Your eternal destiny hangs upon your response.

Don't reject the one who has laid down his life for you. That's how the summons comes, isn't it?

Then thirdly, those who are called when they've answered the call are then justified, acquitted of the guilt of sin, assured of being in right standing with God.

And then fourth, those who are justified are then glorified. Now, of course, that hasn't happened yet. But Paul puts it in the past tense here because it is certain to happen to those who are predestined and called and justified.

So verse 30 is the map and pattern of every Christian's life, starting in eternity with our predestination and consummating in eternity with our glorification.

[37 : 00] salvation. But Paul is still talking about suffering and he's still bringing God's wonderful assurance to his Christian readers. And that's why he ends the chapter as he does in verses 31 to 39.

He's setting our sufferings in the panoramic view of what God is doing for his people as they live in this harsh world. So let's walk through this final section so that we can feel the force of what God is saying to us.

Verse 31. What then shall we say to these things? In other words, how can we summarize this teaching about our suffering and groaning? What conclusions can we draw?

Well, here's the first. Verse 31. If God is for us, who can be against us? God plus one is always a majority.

If God is on our side, all the fiends of hell can be trying to hunt us down, but they're powerless. All the weight of the world's hatred and atheism can be thrown at us, but it won't, in the end, be able to scupper us.

[38 : 12] Let me unpack this, says Paul. Verse 32. If God did not spare his one and only son, if God was willing to see Jesus go to the cross and die for us, if God gave up his gracious and most precious gift as he gave Jesus to die, surely he will graciously give us everything else in addition, all things, everything we need for our eternal salvation.

And here's another thing. Verse 33. Can anybody successfully bring a charge against those chosen by God? I just imagine a Christian.

Let's call him John Smith. Can the devil say to God, look at this man John Smith. He is a vile sinner. He's the worst kind of human being.

He should be hung, drawn, and quartered and his innards given to the vultures. No. Verse 33 is saying that no such charge against him could ever be successful.

Why not? Because God has justified him. If God has justified a man or woman, nobody, not the devil himself, can condemn that person as verse 34 makes clear.

[39 : 31] God's verdict is final. If God has justified you, you are justified. There's no argument. Then Paul piles on a further reason for our assurance in verse 34.

Jesus, he says, has not only died for his people, he's been raised from death and has been taken up to the right hand of God, to the position of all power and authority, where he is constantly interceding for us, which means that he is constantly the go-between between us and God.

He is the one who by his mediation has secured our justification by God, and he can never be removed from that position. He is at the right hand of God.

He is interceding for us. That's what he's doing for us at this very moment. He is our perpetual savior. He has brought us to God with an everlasting salvation.

And this being so, verse 35, who can possibly separate us from the love of Christ? And you'll see in verse 35, Paul lists the worst kinds of suffering that could possibly happen to Christian people.

[40 : 45] So he says, shall tribulation cast us off from him? No, it cannot. Shall distress, tears, anguish? No. Shall persecution separate us from him?

When, for example, a malicious government deprives us of our jobs, our livelihood, our freedom, even our lives? No, it's impossible. Shall famine do it?

when you drop from 12 stone to 8 stone because your food supplies have been cut off? No, that won't separate us from him. Shall nakedness, when you have only your boxer shorts and a moth-eaten shirt to protect you from the cold?

No. Shall danger separate us from him? When, for example, you're cowering in fear, hiding from those who are out to rob you of your life? No. Shall the sword separate us from him?

It cannot, says Paul. And then in verse 36, Paul quotes from Psalm 44, and this is about persecution. For your sake, it's addressed to God, for your sake, we are being killed all the day long.

[41 : 54] We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. The persecuting enemy think of us as, just as animals, fit only to be butchered, not as human beings.

Now these two verses, 35 and 36, picture human life at its most awful. Situations which even the toughest of human beings would be brought to the brink of despair over.

But Paul says in verse 37, no, not despair, not hopeless tears. On the contrary, in all these things, we are more than conquerors.

We're not defeated by these things. We are the victors. In fact, more than victorious. Paul says somebody, you cannot be serious. If somebody is running a sword through me and I feel the point coming out at the back, how can I feel anything but defeated?

Paul replies, you're not defeated at that moment if you're a Christian. Yes, you're about to die in a horrible way, but, verse 38, I am sure and I speak with a sureness that God himself has given me as an apostle.

[43 : 06] I speak with all the authority of God himself. I am sure 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 that you might name will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You'll see he mentions death there first. which he describes elsewhere as the last enemy to be destroyed. It's the fear of death that stalks all human beings until we come to believe the gospel.

And Paul is saying not even death can separate us from the love of God when we belong to Jesus. Paul is no fantasist. These perils that he speaks of in verse 35, just look back to that, 35, these

were all things that he had personally experienced himself.

He's not some armchair teacher. He's been there. He knows what he's talking about. So friends, in the whole of this passage, Paul is giving us a structure by which we can understand the sufferings that are certain to come our way.

He's teaching us to see life in this world in relation to the great future in the world to come. And the pattern is suffering now, glory later.

[44 : 33] Groaning now. But our sufferings will reshape us, reconfigure us. They'll make us more like Jesus. Do we want to be like him?

Yes, we do. But in that case, we will have to follow the pattern of his life. Suffering first death, but then resurrection and glory.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. we praise you, dear heavenly father, for the glorious destiny that you have prepared for all who belong to our Lord Jesus.

Strengthen us in our convictions, we pray. give much grace to Christians who are suffering today in the way that Paul suffered. And sharpen our appetites and our anticipation of enjoying the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.