

Romans 8:26-39 – Nothing can separate us from the love of God

Over the past few weeks, we've been dipping into and out of Paul's letter to the Romans.

This isn't how we read our own letters (or more likely emails!). We may note who the letter is from and check how long it is before deciding whether to read it there and then. But we don't usually jump to the fourth paragraph, and then the eighth, and so on. The risk, if we do this, is that we miss the significance of what the writer is saying and we won't make sense of it.

I encourage you, therefore, to read through the whole of Romans, in one sitting if possible. It takes about an hour to read. Your Bible may have an introduction section at the beginning that gives some guidance on the themes covered. And if you have access to a computer, then there are some excellent free resources online.

Sometimes I go to the Bible Society website where a free resource called Bible Book Club (<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/resources/bible-book-club/>) provides handy background information on each book of the Bible. Another excellent website is BibleProject.com (<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/romans-5-16/>)

Quoting from the Bible Club resource, Romans is the longest of all Paul's writings (as Tudor pointed out about a month ago) and is widely regarded as one of the most important letters that he wrote. It is written to the Christians in Rome and is unusual as the church there was one that Paul had not founded, nor even visited before, making this letter his first communication with the community there.

We don't really know what Paul said when he first arrived in a new place proclaiming the gospel. Most of Paul's letters either follow-up his visit or are in response to some news he's received from or about them. Romans, then, is one of the closest accounts we have of what Paul might have said to a community when he first arrived.

However, the Christians in Rome didn't have their own copies, as we do, and the letter would have been read out to them, probably when they were meeting in small groups in homes. I can imagine this taking a lot longer than an hour with there being interruptions, asking for parts to be read again, and many discussions about what Paul was saying to them.

In his letter, Paul introduces himself and lays out his theology in detail (1:1-17); he explains the need for salvation (1:18 – 3:20), God's way of salvation (3:21 – 4:25), the nature of new life in Christ (5:1 – 8:39), the place of Israel in God's plan (9:1 – 11:36) and the consequences that he believed this new life in Christ should have in the lives of the Christian community (12–16).

We too would do well to listen to this letter, as if it is written to us.

This brings us to today's passage, chapter 8:26-39. Even this is too much for us to adequately consider, so I want to narrow our thoughts down to the last five verses.

These start: "Who will separate us from the love God?" and finish with, "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I think that to better understand what this means we should look back to earlier parts of Paul's letter. Earlier Paul explains the need for salvation; he says the whole human race, both Jews and Gentiles, needs to be put right with God.

Things haven't changed. The whole human race – this includes us, you and me – still needs to be put right with God. Why? In Isaiah (Isa. 59:2) it says, "But your sins have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." [Adam & Eve!]

"Surely not me", some of you may be thinking. "You must mean him (or her!) over there!" No! Paul says (Rom. 3:23a), "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

If we remain in our sinful state, we remain separated from God. But there is Good News! Paul goes on to explain that God has made it possible for the human race – including us, you and me – to be put right with him. Chapter 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates (*or proves*) his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul doesn't say, "Stop sinning, and perhaps God will love you."

I'm not looking for a show of hands, but how many of you have thought in the past, or are even thinking now, "But I'm not good enough." Or "I can never be good enough." Well, there is good news for you. You will never be good enough! That is the point! It is "while we were still sinners" that God loves us, and Christ Jesus died for us. There can be no buts. God loves you!

Do you remember that Jesus said (John 3:16), "For God so loved the world (*that is - everyone!*) that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."?

Jesus also said (John 5:24), "I tell you the truth (*Jesus meant, this is very important, listen, pay attention*) whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned and has crossed over from death to life."

Peter in his letter says something similar (1 Peter 3:18a), "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."

Sin separates us from God. But God, through his love for us, has brought us back to himself. God has done it. His love is sufficient. Praise God for this!

Back to today's passage!

"Who will separate us from the love of God?" Paul is referring to God's love for us, not our love for God.

Paul gives some examples, and these were likely to have been the experience of the Christians in Rome at that time: hardship, or distress (whether of body or mind, or difficulties in the affairs and circumstances of life), or persecution (especially that as a result of the Christian's faith and love of God, because others hate them), or famine (needing the necessities of life – food and drink), or nakedness (needing proper clothing), or peril (dangers from different quarters or people), or sword (the sword may kill, but death cannot separate us from the love of God). You are probably thinking about other things that could be on a 21st century list.

And it's worth pointing out that if any of these things should happen to us, or to those we love, these things are not proof, in any way, that God's love has been withdrawn and that we are separate from God again.

Verse 37 is a pivotal point in this passage: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Paul doesn't say, "I am more than a conqueror." He says, "We are..." Not just Paul. Not just the Christians in Rome. We too are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Paul sort of repeats the list of things that he has in v35. Paul is answering his previous question: Who can separate us from the love of God? "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, (*not even, and for the avoidance of any doubt*) nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul is convinced, certain, sure; he's been persuaded. He has full assurance that nothing whatsoever can separate us from the love of God. I looked up the Greek, and yes, nothing means nothing! Nothing includes not, neither, nor, and not even!

There is nothing that we ourselves can do to separate us from the love of God. There is nothing that we can experience that can separate us from the love of God.

A few of us went to Spring Harvest in Minehead just after Easter. I was pleased to see that John Swinton, author of a book I had read during my Reader training, was one of the morning speakers. His book was about "Living in the memories of God." I looked at this book recently, since my father was taken ill, as dad's memory has been damaged due to the brain injury he has acquired. I was encouraged to see that the first verse of scripture John Swinton quotes is Romans 8:39, "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."

Jesus says (John 10:28), "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand." Our bond, or union, with Christ is perfect; it's unbreakable; it cannot be destroyed; it is impossible to take apart or bring to an end.

Isaiah 49:15d – 16a, God says, "I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." This is probably one of my favourite Bible verses.

Chapter 8: starts with, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." It finishes with an equally wonderful promise: nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

May we, like Paul, also be convinced, certain and sure of this.

Who can separate us from the love of God? No-one! What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing!

Amen