Five Truths Against Doubt and Despair
Romans 8:31-39

If I were to ask you to summarise Paul's message so far in Romans 8. What would you say? And you've only got one sentence to say it!

You might say something like, 'In Christ, I am loved by God, and he has a wonderful, eternal plan for my life.' Now, you might think that's superficial, but you could do a lot worse.

The problem is, life often feels a lot worse, doesn't it? Because far from feeling like you are caught up in God's wonderful story of cosmic redemption, you can feel like you're being blown about by the winds of chance, or at the mercy of other people's decisions, or your own bad choices. And as for being loved, if God really loved me, why is this thing happening to me? Or, frankly, why would God love me when I have problems loving myself?

And the people Paul's writing to could have had the exact same reactions. Because many of them, probably, would have been slaves in households of pagan masters - their lives in his hands; while living under an imperial authority growing increasingly hostile to Christianity. And they would have faced all the risks of child-birth, or ill-health without the benefits of modern healthcare or social security; and they were normal people, daily struggling with the same temptations we do. So these guys would also have had ample reason for questioning: is God *really* in control? Does he *really* have a purpose for my life? In fact, does he really love me?

And Paul finishes this chapter by facing just those doubts. And he does so by asking 5 questions of his own. And in answering them, he gives us five truths to help fight despair.

1. God is For You
Look at v31, 'What then shall we say to these things?' What things? Well, the things he's already said in this chapter: that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ; that because of Jesus we have been set free from sin and death; and adopted as sons of God and given his Spirit as a gift - the Spirit who tells you, 'you really are a child of God'; and that we have an unassailable hope of future glory, and that God is working all things for our good, and transforming us into the image of his Son, with the Spirit as our helper. Because we have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified.

And yet… we also face hardships and trials and suffering in this life.

So faced with those twin realities of the Christian life: that we get to live in the good of all that Jesus has done for us and yet, at the same time, face hard and difficult things… What shall we say?

Answer? It's Paul's first question proper: Verse 31 again, 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'

Note what he doesn't ask. Because he doesn't ask, 'who is against us?' Because the Christians he's writing to, or you and I, could probably come up with a list of people who are against us, couldn't we?

Governments who seek to limit the influence of, or oppress, or eradicate the Christian faith. Colleagues or family who mock the faith; the media who routinely put out stories hostile to faith; and other so-called Christians on left and right who drag the name of Christ through the dirt. To say nothing of external temptation, or spiritual powers, or even our own flesh that every morning is against you getting up and reading your Bible and praying.

So, who is against us? The list is long and deadly.

But that's not the question Paul asks. He asks, *'If God is for us*, who can be against us?' Because, *if God is for you* - then absolutely no-one can stand against you. If the God of the universe - the Power above every power, the One who can swat all other powers like you swat a fly, if that God has come to *your* side and promised 'I will see you through' - then no opposition in the world stands a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding against you.

So whatever you are facing, Paul is saying, no one and no thing is going to stand in the way of God's plan for your life.

2. God Gives You Everything You Need

John Newton was a former slave ship captain, and who for a period was himself a slave. But after he was converted he became a minister and an abolitionist. And looking back, he could write - and he's riffing off of Romans 8:28, "All shall work together for good; everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds."

Except, when God does withhold something you really want, or when he sends something into your life that you really don't want, it's not just that you can doubt its needfulness, it's that your trust is shaken and you can begin to doubt the purpose and, eventually, the love of God. Is he *really* good? Will he *really* give me everything I need?

Look how Paul answers: v32, '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?' Again, Paul doesn't ask, 'will God give you all things?' Because you could come up with all these reasons why he wouldn't. He asks, if God didn't withhold his Son, is he going to withhold anything else?'

Imagine a young executive, sitting in front of his boss' desk. A boss who loves him like the son he never had; who has trained and promoted him. And now, they're meeting because the boss has just handed the entire business over to him. And he tells him - it's all yours: the real estate, the capital, the intellectual property, the reputation, the fleet of cars, and the private jets, everything - I've signed it all over to you.

And imagine that that young man, sees on the desk a little bowl of candy. And his mouth is dry. Would his boss mind if he took one? Would he think he was being too forward? Will he take offence if he asks for one?

'Sir, would you mind if I took one?' 'Mind?? I've given you all I have, do you think I'd withhold that from you? It's already yours.'

And Paul is saying, in Christ God has given you *the* most valuable thing imaginable. He's given you the object of his eternal love and the focus of all of heaven's adoration. And if he gave up his own Son for you, do you really think he'd withhold anything else you need?

So why interpret our circumstances as evidence that he does not love us, or has abandoned us? Instead, see him giving up his Son, and the supreme evidence of his love for you.

The 19th Century pastor, Octavius Winslow asked, "Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy; But the Father, for love!" For love of you. And it's because he gave him up, that he will never give up on you.

It's why Paul writes, ''How will he not also with him *graciously give* us all things?' Because it's like the cross of Christ has opened a fountain of God's unending, abundant, overflowing giving to you. That everything you need to persevere is yours.

And yet, you can still be plagued by feelings of unworthiness, can't you?

3. God says, 'You are right with me.'
Verse 33, 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?' Now, you and I get to elect our members of parliament, don't we. And we elect them by voting for them. Well, if you're a Christian, God has voted for you. He's chosen you, Paul says. So who can bring any charge against you?

Well, any of our elected officials might say that just because you've been elected does not mean you you don't have people gunning for you, or wanting to undermine you, and bring you down.

And the same is true for God's elect and chosen people. Because if these Christians in Rome, or you and I could come up with a list of people who might stand against us, you could also come up with a list of people who could accuse you, couldn't you? Who could point out your behaviour and say, 'You? A Christian? I don't think so!' Number 1, there's your enemy, the devil. Secondly, there are other people. But thirdly, there's yourself. Your own conscience can condemn you.

So are you as guilty as they say or you feel?

No, Paul says. Verse 33 again, 'It is God who justifies.' It's God who looks at you and says, you are ok with me. You are right in my sight.' And if he says that of you, it's as if you're coated with a non-stick, teflon, accusation-repelling covering. No charge against you can ever stick.

But, of course, it also means that when hard things are coming your way, it's not because God is punishing you for some charge against you. As Paul opened this chapter, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

Because…

4. Christ has done all that you need him to do
Verse 34, 'Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.'

You see, your heart, and life itself, can feel like a court case, can't it? And the one who's on trial is you. Are you good enough? Have you done enough? Are you hip, cool, and trendy enough? Are you funny enough? Pretty enough? Fit enough?

And those questions can weigh you down. Or maybe they don't. Because as Blaise Pascal wrote, to avoid thinking about our condition we fill our lives with distractions, 'The only thing that consoles us for our miseries' he says, 'is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is that above all which prevents us thinking about ourselves…' (Pensées 414). Thinking about ourselves and, ultimately, our need for God.

But what if Jesus has done everything you need so that you can sit at peace with yourself, and stand before God with confidence? Well, he has, Paul says.

Firstly, v34, 'Christ Jesus is the one who died.' Which means he has taken all of your not-good-enough on himself. As the words of the hymn *Man of Sorrows* puts it, 'Bearing shame and scoffing rude, i*n my place condemned he stood*, sealed my pardon with his blood: Hallelujah, what a Saviour!'

But then, v34 again, ' - more than that, who was raised-' which means Jesus death *on its own* was no guarantee of anything. But when God raised him from the dead, Paul is saying, it's the guarantee that God *has* accepted his sacrifice in your place. And if he bore your condemnation, there's nothing left for you to bear.

So imagine that court of law, with a whole array of accusers calling for your condemnation. Well, they can shout all they like, Paul is saying, they can jump up and down and point their finger, and you can feel as unworthy as you like, but neither you nor they are going to sway the court of heaven one millimetre. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus died for you, and was raised for you. And the Judge has declared you not guilty… so… case closed please, clear the court.

And yet, there is one voice that's heard. Verse 34, 'Christ Jesus… who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.' Last week we saw the Spirit of God interceding in our hearts. Now, it's the Son of God, beside the throne of God, who has taken up your case. And whose voice do you think the Father would rather hear? Your accuser's, or the voice of your defender, the Son of his love?

So when the accusations come, from within or without, look up, and see him there.

5. Nothing and no-one can separate you from God's love

It's Paul's 5th and final question. Verse 35, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' And it's the deal-breaker question, isn't it? Because you could give answers to all the others that could leave you hopeful and encouraged, but get to this last one and fall flat on your face. Because what if something *could* separate you from Christ's love? You'd be in trouble, wouldn't you? It would be like a sword of Damocles hanging over you. And you'd always be one sin, one misstep, one accusation - true or false - away from being evicted from God's love.

So how does Paul answer it? By listing all the things that could leave you thinking you *have* been evicted, the sort of things that could happen to you and you'd think - if God really loved me this would not be happening to me.

Verse 35, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?'

And the word for *tribulation* is the word the New Testament writers use for the kind of suffering you might face just for being a Christian. And distress is any physical or emotional pain you might feel when life is hard. And persecution is persecution. And famine, for the people Paul is writing to, was an ever present danger - especially in big cities like Rome, and especially for Christians who could find themselves shut out of the supply chain. And nakedness - *literally* from poverty, or *metaphorically* from public humiliation; and danger and sword - the threat of violence or capital

punishment for refusing to worship the emperor, or bend the knee to the gods, weren't just hypothetical possibilities, they were very real risks.

It's why in v36 Paul quotes Psalm 44 - a psalm for God's chosen but suffering people, 'As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."' In other words, Paul is saying, suffering has always been the experience of God's people. And so the Christian life is not an invitation to come and live your best life now. It's a call that might just possibly cost you. After all, within a few years, these Christians Paul is writing to, were being hung up around Rome and being burned to death as human torches to satisfy Nero's blood lust.

Was such suffering evidence that God did not love them? Is the suffering of our brothers and sisters around the globe evidence of the same? Or what of the hard things you might face?

Well, look again at that list and think how Jesus, God's *beloved* Son, endured them all. Tribulation and distress: did anyone suffer like him, whose soul was overwhelmed to the point of death? Famine - who hungered in the wilderness and at the cross cried out, 'I thirst.' Nakedness - who was stripped naked and publicly humiliated. Danger and sword - who was executed in the most cruel way possible, and whose side was pierced with a Roman spear.

Are such things evidence that God does not love his Son? No! They bear witness that we worship a God who knows what it is to suffer. And far from any suffering we face being evidence of our *separation* from God, they are evidence of our *union* with him.

So none of these things can separate you from Christ's love, Paul is saying. It's something John Chrysostom, the 4th Century Archbishop of Constantinople knew by expereince. Because he regularly preached against the sins of the elite - including the Empress Eudoxia and her habit of erecting statues to herself. And when he refused to stop, Eudoxia threatened him with exile. To which Chrysostum replied, "You cannot banish me, for this world is my Father's house." "But I will kill you," said the empress. "No, you can't," John replied, "for my life is hid with Christ in God." "Then I'll confiscate all your wealth." "No" said John, "My treasure is in heaven and my heart is there." "So I will drive you away from all your friends and ensure you have no one left." "No, you can't do that" John said, "for I have a Friend in heaven from whom you can never separate me. I defy you, for there is nothing you can do to harm me."

What did John know? That nothing and no-one could separate him from Christ's love.

Verse 37: 'No, in all these things we are more than conquerers through him who loved us.' Now, you know, almost certainly, that Nike is named after the greek goddess of victory, Nike.

Well, when Paul says that through Christ you are more than a conqueror, the verb he uses is ὑπερνικάω - that in Christ, you're not just a Nike, you are a hyper - Nike, you're not just a victor, you're a hyper-victor. Because Christ has won an overwhelming and crushing victory, and you are united with him. As someone once told me when I first became a Christian, it's like Christ got into the boxing ring, punched your enemy out cold, and then handed you the trophy - and you didn't even have to put on your gloves.

And yet, you might still have to suffer. But when you do, because of Christ you will come out triumphant.

Verses 38-39: ‘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.’

‘I am sure’, Paul says, - perfect tense: I was, I am, and I remain, 100%, rock-solid, no-one-is-going-to-persuade-me-otherwise convinced that none of these things - that you might think *could* separate you from God’s love - could ever do it. And Paul’s no armchair commentator, is he? He knows what it is to face these things.

Could death separate you from God’s love in Christ? No! He’s the God who raises the dead. Well, could life do it? The bad stuff, or even the good stuff of life? No! Ok, well what about angels and rulers, the dark cosmic powers: could they somehow peel you off from God’s love? Absolutely not. At the cross, Christ triumphed over them and made a public spectacle of them, and he has crushed the serpent’s head. Well, what about the present or the future? Could something in time do it - now or what to come? Nope. Ok, what about powers, human or spiritual authorities? Er… every other authority is a delegated authority and they have absolutely no ultimate jurisdiction over you.

Well, what about height or depth, maybe something in the highest heaven, or the furthest reaches of the universe, maybe something in the depths of hell could do it? No, Paul says, there is nothing in all creation that could ever do it.

Now, you may be separated from your family of your friends, from your home or your health. Your head may even be separated from your body - the sword, as Paul puts it. But nothing can separate you from God’s love.

Because this is not some kind of sentimental, up and down with the emotions love, this is, v39, ‘the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ And look at him at the cross, emptying himself, so that you might be filled with his love. So that you, as one writer puts it, might be made perfectly holy and gloriously happy. Nothing is going to stop God’s purpose for your life.

So if you’re not yet a Christian, but you find yourself doing what Pascal says we do, and distracting yourself to try and stop yourself thinking too hard about life, don’t stop thinking. You see, atheism tells you, don’t think too much about the pointlessness of life, or the fact that your life has absolutely no ultimate meaning or purpose, it’ll just depress you, just get on and live. But don’t you think it’s a strange philosophy that says ‘don’t think too hard about what we’re telling you’?

Whereas Christianity tells you the opposite, because it says, ‘think deeply about what we’re teaching you, about all that Christ has done for you, because it’s the door to lasting joy. Because it tells you that even when life is hard, you are loved.

So if you’re a Christian, and this week you find yourself questioning God’s love for you, preach the gospel to yourself: because of Jesus, God is for you. And he will give you everything you need. And you are right with him, and Christ has done all that you need him to do, and nothing and no-one can separate you from his love.