

Rebuilding the Foundations - Romans
Part 19
“More Than Conquerors”
Romans 8:35-39
Pastor Charles Price

I'm going to read some from Romans 8:35-39. Now Romans 8:35, and Paul asks,

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written “for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels, nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, 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.”

WHO SHALL SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF CHRIST?

If you've been here in recent weeks, you know that we are going through this letter of Paul to the Romans. But for the last two weeks, we've been asking questions that Paul concludes Romans 8 with, a number of questions. We've addressed two of those questions. This morning, we'll address the third and the last of the questions, which he asks in Romans 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" This is a question that is asked by many, many people when they find themselves in experiences in life, where it's difficult, where there's suffering, where there's pain, and they wonder, ‘Has God forgotten me at this point? Is God neglecting me at this point?’.

The question begins to niggle in the back of our minds. If God is really God, how come that I'm allowed to be going through what I'm going through? That may be exactly the position some of you are in here this morning. Now to talk about three things from these verses, I want to talk about facts about his love. First of all, it's important we understand that, then fears about his love. That's implied by the question, and then thirdly, faith in his love, which is the way he concludes this passage.

FACTS ABOUT HIS LOVE

First of all, let me talk about some facts about his love. You see the question is, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Now, before we seek to answer that question, let me put this into the context of the book of Romans, the safest and the best way to interpret Scripture is always in its context. If you've been here in recent weeks, you know that the book of Romans is the most comprehensive statement about the reconciliation of people to God. But it's not just a legal arrangement that we come to with God. Whereby instead of being condemned, we are justified. We've talked about that, that is legal language, that is true.

But it's more than that. At the heart of the Christian life of course is a love relationship. If you lose that, you lose the joy and the power and the heart of the Christian life. You see, it is wonderful to be justified. We've talked about that several times. But justification is just the doorway. It's the hallway into a whole new house, where there are lots of other benefits and lots of other things. If you go back to Romans 5:1 sometime, Paul begins that chapter by saying,

"Therefore, since we've been justified by faith," since we've been made right with God, there are certain things that follow.

One of the things that follows is what he describes as personal experience of the love of God. In Romans 5, he talks about the love of God in two ways. Let me give these to you in Romans 5:8, he says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Now, he says, "If you want to know anything about the love of God, I'll tell you where to look, look at the cross." We recognize, of course, that on the cross, we have the supreme demonstration of God's love. But that is merely an objective knowledge we may have of his love. We can stand back, and we are deeply grateful. We recognize as a demonstration of his love. But there's something more that Paul talks about in Romans 5 as well. That is what our all a subjective experience of God's love. It's one thing to know God loves me because of things out there that he's done and is doing. But in Romans 5:5, he says, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us." Now, this is something much more than believing that God loves me. This is an experiential knowledge and awareness of God's love.

In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul talks about this when he says he's praying for the Ephesian Christians there. He says, "I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And to know this love, that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God."

Now he says, "To know his love is to be filled to the measure of the fullness of God." Actually, he talks in paradoxes here. He says, "You may know this love, that surpasses knowledge." Well, how can you know something which surpasses being known? I guess it's a bit like going down to the ocean. You can see the ocean, enjoy the ocean, swim in the ocean. But you'll never know the whole ocean, of course, because it's so vast.

I guess there's a little bit of that there we'll never exhaust the love of God. But the point I'm making here is that there is this subjective knowledge that is related to the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts, where he sheds the love of God abroad in our hearts, it says. Now, of course, we're all different. Our experience of life is all different. We don't want to imitate other people's experiences of God or try to recreate in ourselves what God has done in others. But I want to give you some examples of people who have known this in a very particular way, where the love of God has been shed abroad in their heart, as Paul says, in Romans 5.

DL Moody was a great evangelist of a century ago, well-known throughout North America and Britain. He came to Toronto in 1896. He had a phenomenal impact on this city, began in the Massey Hall, but that was far too small very quickly and was a wonderful preacher of the Gospel. Well, he gave his story, his testimony on one occasion, have a copy of it here. He says, "Well, one day, in the city of New York, oh, what a day. I cannot describe it. I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name." Paul had an experience on which he never spoke for 14 years. "I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different. I did not present new truths and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be

placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world. It would be as the small dust of the balance." That's Moody, an experience of his love so great, so real, he had to ask God to stay his hand, he says.

Before Moody's day, Charles Finney was a great preacher in North America. He writes without any expectation of it, "The Holy Spirit descended on me in a manner that seemed to go right through my body and soul. He came to me in waves of liquid love. I cannot express it in any other way. No words can express the wonderful joy, the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love until, I recollect, I cried out, 'Lord, I cannot bear anymore'. Yet I had no fear of death."

Let me read you the experience of Oswald J. Smith, who was the founder of this church, a great preacher here in the city of Toronto and whose ministry spread right across the world. In one of his books, the Enduement of Power, he says, "I was in Tampa, Florida. I delivered a message on intercessory prayer. At the close, I called for a season of prayer and knelt beside the pulpit in the Alliance Tabernacle. Now I'm handicapped for words. How am I going to describe what happened? What can I say? Nothing was further from my mind at the time.

Not for a moment had I expected anything unusual that morning, but as the people prayed, I was conscious of an unusual presence. God seemed to hover over the meeting. I was melted, broken, awed, and my heart filled with unutterable love. As my soul rose to meet God, the tears began to come. I could do nothing but weep and praise my precious, precious Lord. It seemed as though my whole body was bathed in the Holy Spirit until I was lost in wonder, love and praise. It

seemed to me as though I wanted to love everybody. The world and all its troubles faded from my sight. My personal trials seemed so insignificant as God, God himself, filled my whole vision. It was glorious."

He goes on to say that for the next week he could hardly eat. Those are very, very dramatic and probably unusual expressions and experiences of God's love. But I want to say to you this morning is this, that there is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that implants the love of God in our hearts. That without which it'll simply be an article in our creed, but nothing more than that. If we don't know this inner sense of God's love, this inner consciousness of his love poured into our hearts, the love of God may be an article in our creed, but it will not be a power in our lives. You see, there are two grounds for assurance that we are genuine Christians.

One ground is believing the Scripture when it declares us as children of God. Now, I lead somebody to Christ. I usually tell them that there are two evidences that this is a genuine work that is taking place in your life. The first is believing what the Bible says. For instance, it says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you'll be saved." As you place your trust in him, you can accept on the assurance of the Word of God that you're saved.

But there's a second source of assurance. That is spoken about in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirits that we are God's children." This is an inner witness. It doesn't come from outside. It doesn't come from a counselor. It doesn't come from a pastor. It comes from the Holy Spirit himself within us, bearing witness, giving assurance that we're children of God.

I came to Christ at the age of 12. It was a Saturday night, and I was at a youth event in the City of Hereford in England. At the end of that event, I knew I wasn't a Christian. I don't remember the words I said, but I prayed something like this, "Lord, I'm not a Christian, but I want to be one. Please forgive me and come and live within my life." I didn't feel anything. I didn't experience anything. When I went home that night, as far as I knew, I was exactly the same person who had left earlier in the day. But the next morning, I went to the church that my parents had taken me to ever since I was a kid, and that Sunday morning, for the first time, the service was interesting. I went back on Sunday night and for the first time, what the preacher said made sense.

I thought to myself, "This is incredible. These people have changed overnight. They used to be uninteresting and dull, suddenly it's interesting, it makes sense. It's alive." And 24 hours after I became a Christian, I knew I was a Christian. For the simple reason, there was an appetite within me that had never been there before. Something was happening inside me. I had a love for God I never had before. I knew that God loved me in a way I never knew before. I talked to somebody just on Monday this week, who told me that four years ago, as a middle aged adult, he had an encounter with God that transformed his life. Up until then, he'd believed the Gospel. He'd gone to church. He was a Christian, but he said, "I didn't read my Bible because it was dry. The words hardly made sense."

But after this meeting with God, he picked his Bible up, opened it in the Book of Acts, and read right through the Book of Acts in one sitting. It was alive. It made sense. He understood it. What

was the difference? The Holy Spirit had done something in his heart. We need to know that God loves us not just because it's a statement of doctrine, but because the Holy Spirit, and this is what we are told will be the case, will bear witness with our spirits. Inwardly we have this realization of his love. You see, if I'm bringing these two verses in Romans together, Romans 8:16, "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirits that we are God's children." How does he do that? Romans 5:5, "God pours out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us."

Without these inner experiences, inner awareness of God's love, we're in danger of our Christian life being a dry routine. But when he gets hold of us, there's this, and I love this phrase, this "expulsive power of a new affection". I try to find this week where that phrase comes from. I'm not sure of where it comes from, but it's a great phrase. The expulsive power of a new affection. The love of God begins to motivate us and drive us. You see, the Gospel has to satisfy our minds. We need to recognize it is true, it is believable, but it also has to excite our hearts as the Holy Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts. Well, those are facts about his love that Paul has already talked about in earlier parts of Romans.

FEARS ABOUT HIS LOVE

Now, secondly, let me talk about fears about his love because this is the issue that is being addressed in these verses by implication. When he asks the question in Romans 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Behind that questioning is the fear that I might become separated from his love. In fact, Paul then raises seven possibilities that sometimes we fear will separate us from the love of God. Let me read you. He says in Romans 8:35, having asked,

"What shall separate or who shall separate us from the love of Christ, shall trouble", that's the first thing, "or hardship", that's the second thing, "or persecution", that's the third thing, "or famine", that's the fourth thing "or nakedness", that's the fifth thing, "or danger or sword". Seven nasty things that come to people in life and threaten us. He says, "Are these going to separate us from the love of God?"

Later in Romans 5:38-39, he lists 10 more possibilities. Though he writes these in the affirmative when he says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any powers, 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." He lists 10 things there because these are things that sometimes we fear will counteract the love of God in our lives and block the love of God.

Now, let me look at these first seven: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. Why does Paul list these things? Because these are the very things that cause us to ask, "Where is God? What happened to God?" Let me go through these things. In 2001, this was the question asked many times, written in newspapers and magazine articles, "Where was God on 9/11?" 50, 60 years ago, it was the question being asked throughout the world, "Where was God during the Holocaust when millions were barbarically killed?" "Where was God?"

You see, there's an old philosophical argument, and it goes like this. God cannot be both all powerful and good at the same time. Because if God is all powerful, says the argument, he cannot be good because his goodness would prevent the suffering in the world. But if God is

good, he cannot be all powerful because he would use his power to prevent suffering. So the argument is God may be all powerful or he may be good, but he is not both. Cannot be both.

But of course, that logic presupposes that suffering is necessarily a violation of God's love. The big question is, "is suffering a violation of God's love?" You see, this is the implied issue behind Paul's question. Paul asked a question, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Then lists these things because of this assumption that if we're going through trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, it may be because somewhere I've become disconnected from God's love, because we assume God's love will protect us from these things. Deep down, many of us are fair weather Christians. I speak for myself when I say that, because I would like, and I feel very comfortable with a pain-free Christian experience. To me, that shows me God's love. But is there such thing as a fair weather Christian experience? Is he a fair weather God in that sense?

Now, there are many times when we experience God's protection and that's wonderful. But is that itself the evidence of his love so that when we're not protected, we can question whether he loves? Some years ago in Britain, I was leading a family conferences where many families had come together for, I think, a week. On one of the mornings of that week before the teaching time, we'd opened it up for testimony for people just to share things. They wanted to tell us how God had been at work in their lives or asked for prayer requests.

I was leading the meeting and there was a man who got up, who told us how that some weeks earlier, his two-year-old son had run out of their home and their home was adjacent to a busy

road, and he'd run out of the house and right in the path of a bus that fortunately was slowing down. But he ran right in front of the bus, the bus hit the boy. He fell, was flattened to the ground. The full length of the bus went over his body. The boy got up, ran back crying into the house with a few bruises.

This father said to us, "We want to thank God for his protection. We want to thank God for his love to us as a family. We could have lost our little boy." We joined in thanking God for that deliverance. A few minutes later, I noticed the lady who was sitting with her husband get up and leave the room. A few minutes after that, her husband also left, presumably to find her. I noticed that, I was on the platform. I noticed them leave. Later that day, that afternoon I was in the coffee shop. I went into the coffee shop. They were sitting there together having a cup of coffee or something. I bought a cup of coffee I went up, and I said, "Would you mind if I join you?" They said, "Not at all." So I sat with them, and I said, "I noticed that you left the meeting this morning. Are you okay?" The lady said to me, "We're so thrilled for that family, that their son was preserved in that accident. But we lost a son this year, and he wasn't preserved. He died."

She said, "Does that mean that God was not protecting us? Does that mean that God was not loving us?" I'm still in touch with that couple, by the way. I had a letter from them just in the last six weeks. Let me ask you the question: "Does God still love us in situations like this?" The answer is yes. Is God's love shown in protecting us from things like this? The answer is no. When things like this may go wrong in our life, God has not violated one promise he ever made to you about your children or about your life or about your circumstances.

One of the things I love about Paul is he is no armchair preacher sitting at the comfort of his study with a pile of books on the side of him and just writing down what he thinks are the right things to say. When Paul writes, he writes out of depth of experience. When he talks about being separated from the love of God, through all these traumatic experiences, he knows what he's talking about. Let me read you what he said in 2 Corinthians 11. He's comparing himself with some pseudo apostles, he calls them, masquerading as apostles of Christ. In contrasting himself with them, he says, "Are they servants of Christ?" In 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, "I am out of my mind to talk like this, but I am more, I have worked much harder. I've been in prison more frequently. I've been flogged more severely. I've been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one", that's 39 lashes. Five times I had that. "Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned, three times I've been shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I've been constantly on the move. I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled, I've often gone without sleep. I've known hunger and thirst, I've often gone without food, and I've been cold and naked." (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

That's just a string of things Paul throws out when he is saying, "Listen, if they think they're genuine, and I'm not, let me tell you what I've experienced as an apostle." Incredibly, he lists these things as evidence that he's a man of God. Not that I've avoided these things and therefore that shows God's blessing on my life, but I've been through them. If we take those seven things he mentions: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword, that's his list in Romans 8. Then in 2 Corinthians 11, every one of those seven things is included in the list.

He's known trouble. He talks about being in prison, exposed to death again and again, being shipwrecked three times, I think that's trouble. He talks about hardship. He says, "I've labored and taught. Have often gone without sleep." I think that's hardship. Persecution: he says, "I've been flogged again and again. I've five times received the 39 lashes minus one." That's where the string of leather straps on a handle that 39 times were lashed across his body. Five times I received that, that's almost 200 lashes.

"I've been beaten," he says, "I've been stoned." We know that when he was stoned, he was left for dead in Listra. So I think he knew a little bit about persecution. He talks about famine. He says, "I've been hungry. I've been thirsty. I've often gone without food." That's famine. He talks about nakedness, "I've been cold and naked." He doesn't tell us how he came to have no clothes. But he says, "I've been in situations I've been stark naked." As for danger, he gives a catalog. "I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false brothers." I think he was in danger a few times. The last of those seven, he talks about sword. He says, "I've been in danger from bandits." You can be sure they were armed bandits.

You see, Paul is not just giving some theory. He is talking from his own experience. He's saying, "Despite all of this, I have never, never, never for one moment been separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus." He sums up his position in Romans 8:36 when he goes on to say, "As it is written, for your sake we faced death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." My experience of life is that day after day, I faced death. I'm considered as something worth slaughtering, sheep ready to be slaughtered. That's been my experience of life,

he said. You say, "I thought the Lord was a good shepherd." But here's the sheep facing the possibility of being slaughtered.

I heard one day of a man pulling up at a stoplight and a big truck pulled up next to him, it was loaded with sheep, several layers of sheep. The windows were open, a hot day and the driver of the car shouted across to the driver of the truck. "Being a shepherd isn't what it used to be, is it?" Carting these sheep around in trucks and the driver of the truck shouted back, "I'm no shepherd, I'm the butcher." Well, Paul says, "I feel as though I'm in the hands of the butcher, not the shepherd sometimes. Facing death all day long, considered sheep to be slaughtered."

You see when you sit down and describe yourself as Paul has, as facing trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword. To sum it up, I face death every day, I am considered like sheep to be slaughtered, you'd say it to yourself, "Paul, you're in a pretty desperate situation, aren't you?" But the question he's asking is, "does all of this separate me from the love of God?" Do the things that come into your life and every life in this place is different. That's the beauty of being human. None of us are replicas of anybody else. Our experience of life is different. We have different catalogs of hardships and pain and suffering, but we all have them.

FAITH IN HIS LOVE

So the third thing I want to talk about, if there are facts about his love and then fears about his love, that I became separated from his love. Then thirdly, let me talk about faith in his love. What

I mean by that is trust in his love, confidence in his love because in asking the question, "Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?" In Romans 8:37 Paul answers with an emphatic no. I don't know if you mark your Bible, I've marked that word "no". "No. In all these things". What things? The things he's just talked about. "In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Now, notice he doesn't say, "Above these things, we are more than conquerors," because being a conqueror is being above these things. You know sometimes you meet somebody, you say, "How are you doing today?" They answer, "well, under the circumstances, I'm doing okay" and it's pretty obvious they are under the circumstances. They seem to be overwhelmed by them and swamped by them. Then somebody else comes along, and they sound a bit more spiritual. They say, "No, no, you should live above your circumstances, not under your circumstances." But how are we supposed to live above our circumstances? I've heard that said, but I don't know how. What Paul talks about here is in all these things. This is a better and more real alternative. Not living under our circumstances and being swamped, not living above our circumstances and probably being in Cloud Cuckoo Land. But living in our circumstances. In all these things, we're more than conquerors. You see, to be above them is idealistic. To be under them is pessimistic. To be in them is realistic. The Bible is always realistic.

You see, the love of God does not exempt us from difficult things. In fact, the truth is this, the love of God equips us to go into difficult things. There's a very big difference. We'd like to be exempt, but we're not exempt. We are equipped to go into these difficulties. You know something it's very often when we're in trouble that we discover the love of God much more than when life

is treating us well. You see, when we experience discomfort, it's when we need comforting. When we experience his security, it's when we're afraid. When we experience his presence, it's when we feel alone. Sometimes when a Christian goes through tragedy or hardship, there are those who often say, and I'm sure you've heard it said, they say, "Now, we'll see if his faith means anything or their faith means anything. Now, we'll see if their God is any good" they say. "Now, we'll see if they still believe." Because behind that is the thought that God is simply a fantasy to them. Now they've hit reality, and the bubble has burst. They're going to collapse like everybody else. But the reality is for those who know Christ, the reverse is true. When everything else is stripped away, that is when you find God to be most real. That's why Paul says, "In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:37) When everything else may be in doubt, the one thing which is not in doubt is that God loves me, Paul is saying, and that we're secure.

I came across a story just the other day of a grandpa who came to visit his daughter and her young son. The grandpa walked into the room. The little boy was standing in his playpen, crying. His face was red and tear-stained. When he saw his grandpa walk in, then he reached out with both hands towards his grandpa. The grandfather walked over to the playpen to pick him up. When he was just about to reach to the boy, the boy's mother came in and said, 'No, no, no. Jimmy, you're being punished. You have to stay in your playpen. Leave him there, Dad.'

The poor grandpa didn't know what to do. He didn't want to interfere in the mother's discipline. But the little boy of course pulled at his heart. He tried to read the newspaper, but he couldn't concentrate with the boy crying in the corner. Then he had an idea. Not allowed to take Jimmy

out of the playpen, so he climbed into the playpen. He said, "How long are you here for, boy? I'll serve the sentence with you." The boy stopped crying and found comfort in his captivity, with his grandpa in the playpen.

The story doesn't say what the mother said, but nothing had been violated. I use that with hesitation. I'm not talking about the discipline of God in our lives. It is true that God disciplines us because he loves us. We're told that in Hebrews, and it's an expression of his love. But there are things that are not the discipline of God. There are things that happen because life is corrupt and fallen. I'll tell you this, he gets in the playpen. In our despair, in our trouble, that's where we find the love of God.

Do you remember Jeremiah, just as I finish? Jeremiah wandered through the streets of Jerusalem after the devastation of the Babylonian invasion. They're reducing Jerusalem to rubble in the book of Lamentations, which is a post script. Jeremiah wrote his prophecies and the word lamentations means weeping. He's walking through the city of Jerusalem. For five chapters, he's weeping. In Jeremiah 3:19-20, he says, "I remember my affliction and my wondering, the bitterness and the gall. I remember them and my soul is downcast within me." Jeremiah struggling with the sadness and tragedy of all of this. Then he says, "Yet this I call to mind. And therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." Jeremiah says, "Despite all the affliction, the wandering, the bitterness and the gall, and my downcast soul I remember this, the Lord's great love is new every morning."

Sometimes you and I need to remember the Lord's great love as he describes it there. You see, this is what it means "in all these things". In the midst of them, we are more than conquerors. There may be some of us here today and some of you listening in your homes through television. You're going through times of affliction and times of trouble and sadness and grief. You may plead with God, "Take this away from me," and his answer has been 'no'. Sometimes he takes these things away. Sometimes he says no. As he said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you in this." But what you do know is this, that in this affliction, you can find the love of God in a way you may never have done outside of this. Let's pray together.

Father, I pray for each person here this morning. It's one thing to talk about these things. Another thing to go home, to know and really know, we are secure in your love. Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that you work in our lives for good as well. Sometimes the toughest times have been your busiest workings in our lives. I pray that we all trust you for that and live with the assurance that no matter what happens to us, the love of God in us, conquers it all. We pray that in Jesus' name, amen.