

ROMANS 8:28-39
LOVE BEYOND MEASURE

Questions are a good thing. Do you have a question that bothers you? Is there a question that you have always longed to ask, but have never had the courage or the opportunity? Questions about anything bother us; in this context, we think about questions about church life, questions about faith and what it means; maybe these are questions raised by a Bible passage that you've been reading. We don't always have the opportunity to ask them; or we think 'it's a stupid question' and that everyone knows the answer to it, so we won't ask it, only to discover that when we do ask the question, everyone else in the room is delighted because they all wanted to ask, but no-one else had the courage!

Someone once wrote in a song: "there are more questions than answers" and that is often true of the Bible; typically, the questions we ask of the Bible are ones that the Bible doesn't answer, so we have to say "we don't know" which is not terribly satisfying to a person with a question. This format of preaching and teaching doesn't lend itself to questions, but any preacher should be aware of questions and look to anticipate them or respond to them later. Our Evening service, and Bible Study discussions give more opportunity for questions and answers. Asking questions is such an important part of learning and growing; children just love to ask questions about all sorts of things and can't be fobbed off: "why did God create midges and mosquitoes?" is a great question that I was asked by a 6-year old; it took me ages to find the answer; we want to learn, we want to know. The answer:: food for birds!

The climax to Romans 8 is a set of questions, the answers to which allow Paul to make some hugely important assertions about the gospel. The whole chapter opens up some major consequences of what Jesus has done for us. "Since Jesus has died and is raised..." these things are true: "*there is ...*" (8:1) "*those who...*" (8:14) "*Since we are...*" (8:17) "*we groan...*" (8:23) Christians in first century Rome are facing persecution; the authorities are about to embark on a massive attempt to stamp out this new faith; how should the Christians respond? Should they give up their faith because it is not worth it; the cost is too high and what are the benefits? So Paul sets out in his letter to show them the consequences of the gospel: since Jesus has died and is raised we are free; there is no need to be afraid; we are forgiven; we are part of God's family; we will share Jesus' glory; we shall be perfect people. This is all designed to make them stronger in their faith; it is all to make them more able to live out their faith in their troubled world; it is all to show them that faith is a thing most precious, most valuable, that faith is worth living and dying for!

I look around and see Christians today who are asking whether faith is worth the struggle. The society in which we live is advocating values that we find hard to accept; people are much more vocal in their criticism of Christian faith than ever before; churches are struggling to survive, let alone grow; people seem uninterested in Christian faith. On top of that, all the struggles of life that have always assailed people still assail us: we still become ill, there are still family pressures to deal with; relationships are difficult. All of that and more makes us doubt and question: "is faith worth it? Why should I keep believing?" The Bible never tells us to pull our socks up; it never does what some of the new lifestyle books do, and say 'look inside yourself for strength'; Paul does in Romans 8 what the Bible in other places does – he shows us what God is like and what God has done for us and says "believe and keep believing."

“We know...” (8:28) God is good and is out to achieve something good for us. God is about the work of saving us: He has set about achieving our salvation and working out that salvation in us. Our best interests lie with this good plan that God has. Part one of that plan is already done: He has achieved our salvation when Jesus came into world, lived, died and was raised and so Paul can affirm *“those he...” (8:30b)* It is as good as done and nothing can undo that work. Now, God is at work in us to help us live out our faith and be the kind of people He has called us to be. Our lives, our world, our future – all of that is in God’s good hands. We still face difficult things; life is still hard at times; He has not promised that life will be a walk in park, but there are promises here to help us, equip us to live life by faith.

There are three questions in Romans 8:

Question 1 – *“if God...” (8:31b)* “God on our side” can be uncomfortable; all kinds of people make that claim and use it to indulge in unspeakably bad behaviour. Israel uses that claim to persecute the Palestinians; some parts of the German army had that kind of slogan on their belts in World War 2; others make some similar exclusive claim that somehow God is on their side and not with anyone else. Yet, we can affirm that God is with us and God is for us because that is the God of the Bible. Jesus came into our world, shared our human nature – God with us, God for us. This promise is open to anyone and everyone who asks. The Gospel is never exclusive and closed, but the offer of grace is for anyone and everyone; so for us to rejoice that God is with us is a good thing: it reminds us of His grace, and sustains us when life is hard. The hardest thing God could do, was to give us His son – He has done that and now He can and will give us everything else that we need. *“He who...” (8:32)*

Question 2 – *“Who will...” (8:33f)* There still seems to be something here that bothers Paul; he has already said that *“there is...” (8:1)* but he is back at it again. No-one can lay any charge at our door because Jesus has died and is raised. Again and again we are brought back to Easter, the story of the cross and the resurrection; it is at the heart of everything we understand of the gospel; because Jesus has died and is raised there is forgiveness. The only one who could judge and condemn is Jesus and He is our Saviour; He is the one who prays for us. We are free to love God and be ourselves because Jesus died and was raised.

Question 3 – *“who shall...” (8:35)* This is the last, biggest, and greatest question of all. “Has God gone away? Has God’s love gone away?” These are big questions and it is usually at the toughest moments in our lives that we ask them! In our suffering times, we ask “why?” questions to which there are no answers and if anyone offers you an answer to a “why?” be careful! Paul is convinced, sure, persuaded in his mind and in his heart that nothing can separate us from the love of God. This is the man who has been beaten up for his faith, who most likely is writing this letter from some kind of prison, who has been shipwreck, who has had to escape over the city wall in a basket, who has been mocked and ridiculed for his faith, who has had people challenge his ministry and tell him that he is mad, who is facing persecution and the prospect of death for his faith. He didn’t live life protected from the world and its troubles. Yet still he is persuaded that nothing would ever separate him from God or His endless love. This is faith honed in the heat of the struggle and the fight and hardship; here is faith in the God who did not ever go away!

You say “that’s Paul! He is a member of the spiritual elite; of course God is going to love him; we’re just ordinary people who want to believe, but are not sure about faith.” I love the story of Jesus and the woman whose daughter was ill. The woman was foreign and that was a big issue in first century Israel! She came looking for Jesus to heal her daughter and there has to be more to Jesus’ reply than meets the eye. The words He says are one thing: “*First, let...*” (Mark 7:27) You would expect a first century Jewish rabbi to say that; these are the right words. But there must have been something in the way Jesus said these words that encouraged the woman to come back: “*Yes, Lord...*” (7:28) There’s faith in these words; she trusted Jesus; something in His demeanour encouraged her to believe and to trust Him; her faith was rewarded. “*For such...*” (7:29) Here is the love and compassion of Jesus for everyone; this is a picture of what God is like; the love expressed by Jesus is for everyone; the love of which Paul writes is for everyone; God’s love for us is endless!

What disturbs us most? Christians are persecuted for their faith in places like Pakistan and China; there are stories from the UK of Christians whose faith leads them into difficult situations, when the authorities challenge the expression of that faith. We become ill and ill-health is one of the biggest challenges most of us will ever face to our faith in the God who loves us; again “why does this happen to me?” is the kind of question that we ask in our darkest moments. Broken relationships disturb our sense of well-being; other people damage us. The fear of the future is an issue that gives many people cause for concern, we’re not sure about what tomorrow will bring or next month. Some of us look at a Church that seems to be on the verge of tearing itself apart and wonder where God is in this debate. All sorts of other things disturb us personally and as a community.

I say this with all tenderness and mindful of the fact that this is much easier to say than to live: none of these difficulties and troubles can separate us from God’s love! God’s love is stronger than all of these things. It is a glorious affirmation of faith and confidence in God who loves us. No matter what may happen, no matter how dark the day, no matter how it may seem and whether we recognise it or not, God’s love has not gone away! God is still there and His love for us goes on. Even if we are angry and in despair; even when we cast doubt on God and blame Him for our circumstances, His love for us goes on. A young man went off on life’s big adventure and had everything; his lifestyle was a bit questionable; then he promptly lost everything and had nothing left; he was away from home, he knew nobody, he was employed in the lowest of the low; then he decided to go home, yet not sure about the reception he would get. When he came home, he realised that his father had never stopped loving him. The Prodigal Son shows us what God is like in His love for us.

I won’t pretend to have answered all your questions; maybe we’ve even prompted some more; feel free to ask! Paul’s three questions show us just how much God has done for us. Since Jesus died and was raised, God is with us everywhere we go; since Jesus died and was raised, we are free and forgiven and Jesus prays for us; since Jesus died and was raised, God’s love is endless and nothing can separate us from such love. We are humbled by love like this; take courage and believe!