
Despair and Hope

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 26 July 2026

Romans 8:26-30,38-39 • Matthew 13:31-33,44-52



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's readings speak about the nature of God and the nature of God's kingdom. We are part of God's kingdom if we accept Christ as our Saviour. When we accept Christ, we are given the Holy Spirit, so that both Christ and the Holy Spirit will intercede with God for us. Paul says that the Spirit pleads with God on our behalf (and crucially) in accordance with God's will. It is God's will both that we may pray through Jesus and the Spirit, and that our prayers will be answered in accordance with God's will which, because of the love which God has for us, will be best for us, as judged by God.

Jesus's parables about the mustard seed and the yeast and the pearl of great value all speak to the tremendous gift which is ours in Christ. The love of God is truly priceless, and we should all continually give thanks to God. The person who sells all he has to buy the field where the treasure is hidden and the merchant who sells all he has to buy the costly pearl are acting rationally, because to live in the love of God is better than anything we can ask or imagine. Not to have that love is, conversely, worse than anything we could imagine.

I was having a discussion with some friends the other day about hell. Many of us think of hell as a place where you are separated from God. We know that God is everywhere and we always have access to God through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, both of whom intercede for us with God. That is always a comfort, to know that we are surrounded by God and his love.

But to be separated from God! What would that be like? To not have his love, his comfort, his presence! God sustains us from day to day, perhaps even recreating us from moment to moment — that is another interesting thought. If we don't have God around us and in us, what do we have? Only ourselves, and we don't amount to much. My own feeling about being separated from God is this: think of the lowest, the most depressed you have ever felt — the most hopeless, the most alone, the most forsaken. Then multiply that by a thousand. That to me would be what being separated from God would feel like. You wouldn't want to do anything. You wouldn't eat, you wouldn't sleep — could you even survive? Personally, to me, that's more terrifying than any image of the flames of hell and devils with pitchforks, way beyond weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So when Paul writes this, from our reading today:

For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

This is immensely comforting. After considering what being without God would be like, this is fresh air, new hope, true salvation. And perhaps — although I would never make light of anyone's depression, fear or hopelessness — we might consider that nothing we can feel would be as bad as being without God. This is the comfort that comes through faith, for which we should give thanks daily, if not hourly!

What does Paul's statement tell us exactly? First and foremost, it points to the sovereignty of God. God is in control. No other power in all creation can separate us from him — think of that: God's creation extends throughout the universe. No other power is greater than God's. So when God gives us his love and grace, it is ours to keep. Nothing can take it from us. Angels and other beings, maybe some we don't even know about, don't have the power and control which God has. Nothing in the world can overrule God. God's love is the greatest gift we can possibly imagine, and it is ours to keep.

Secondly, that love is ours through Christ Jesus. No one comes to the Father except through the Son. If we believe in Christ and give our lives to him, God's love will come through to us. Paul also says that those whom God has chosen

— those who accept Christ in their lives — will become like Christ. We become sons and daughters of God, and we share his glory. That includes having an eternal home with God. And again, no other power is great enough to take that from us. We can rest secure in that knowledge.

In fact, if there is anything that can take the love of God away from us, it is we ourselves. That is, our choice to follow Christ is critical. If we fall away from God, if we turn our backs on God and Christ, then we will ultimately find ourselves in that awful place we talked about earlier and which we may call hell, where we are separated from God.

We talk of hope, and we talk of hopelessness, and the things of this world can cause us to lose hope. Personal events, relationships, external disasters — these can cause us to lose hope and to question ourselves and what we know and who we are, and even to question God. We may despair, which to me is a word that means we're at the very bottom. But when I'm feeling down, I think about a scene from the story of Anne of Green Gables. Some of you may know the story, about an orphan girl in Prince Edward Island, in Canada, who is adopted by an elderly brother and sister, both childless. Anne (spelled with an e) has an overactive imagination, and likes to imagine herself transported to the heights of joy or the depths of despair. One day she asks Marilla, the woman who adopted her, and who tries to temper her flights of fancy: Marilla, don't you ever despair? And Marilla says firmly: No. To despair is to turn your back on God.

To know God is to know that God will never turn his back on us. We are his, and the kingdom is ours. That is a gift of tremendous price, better than any treasure, better than any pearl, better than anything. And so we give you thanks, O loving and gracious God — thanks, thanks, and ever thanks. Amen.