**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**STEADFAST LOVE**

**“Divine Comfort for Saints in Distress”**

**November 10, 2024**

“Doubt or uncertainty isn’t always bad,” writes Sam Storms. “It can be productive when it drives us into deeper prayer and study and investigation. If we are absolutely convinced about everything, beyond the shadow of a doubt, we face the even bigger problem of arrogance and pride. Doubt humbles. It reminds us that we are finite and that our knowledge is always subject to improvement and increase.”

“But doubt can also be crippling in a way that undermines our relationship with God. If we are constantly doubting his Word or wondering if he will fulfill his promises or are cynical of his stated intentions, it is hard to grow spiritually.”**1** That’s just one of the reasons it’s always good to be reminded of God’s faithful, loyal, steadfast love.

In the Old Testament, there is a word that is consistently used to speak of God’s love. It’s the Hebrew word, *Hesed*. It’s usually translated “*lovingkindness*” (NASB); or “*mercy*” (KJV). A better translation is the one found in the NIV, “*unfailing love*.” But the best translation is found in the ESV; “*steadfast love*.” That’s because this word is the covenant word; it expresses God’s unwavering faithfulness to the covenant promises which He gave to His people (Ex. 34:7-8; Deut. 7:9; 1 Sam. 20:8)

God’s “steadfast love” is written in boldface print throughout the Old Testament. It brings God’s people deliverance and guidance (Ex. 15:13). It gives them hope in desperate times (Ps. 33:18-22). It is the basis of forgiveness of sin (Ps. 51:1). It restores the poor and needy and brokenhearted (Ps. 109:21-26). Most important of all, God’s Word assures us that His love has no limits: “*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*” (Lamentations 3:22-23, ESV).

Such was David’s confidence when he wrote the well-known twenty-third Psalm. After he portrays the Lord as the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep (vv. 1-4), and as the gracious host who provides for their every need (v. 5), he concludes with these familiar words: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (v. 6, ESV).

The word translated “mercy” is the same word for “steadfast love” (as reflected in the ESV footnote). That’s the ultimate reason for David’s confidence in the Lord’s gracious care for him. He knew with absolute certainty, beyond all shadow of doubt, that God would never grow weary of His commitment to him. He was *sure* that God’s goodness and steadfast love would pursue him, like “The Hound of Heaven,” for the length of his days; be they good days or bad days, days of despair and disappointment, or days of celebration and joy.

This glorious truth finds its fullest expression in the New Testament Scriptures. It’s because of God’s love for us *in Christ* that we can be even more assured that *nothing* will ever separate us from God’s loving embrace. That’s why Paul writes what he does in Romans 8:38-39; “*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*.” Like all texts, the context is the key that unlocks the full significance of this tremendous truth.

Once again, the best place to begin is with the most precious and powerful promise ever given to the people of God: “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Rom. 8:28, NIV). As I mentioned in the message on “Divine Providence,” this glorious promise has been likened to a pillow upon which we can rest our weary heads. It’s like a steel girder that sustains and upholds us through the most difficult times in our lives. It’s like a boulder on which we can place the full weight of our confident trust in God.

What follows is the reason *why* we can know with certainty that God will work in all things for our ultimate good (vv. 29-30). As we saw in last week’s message on “Sovereign Grace,” Paul is describing the golden chain of God’s saving purpose for us in Christ. It’s an eternal chain, as it spans eternity past into eternity future. It has five unbreakable links: **(a)** before creation God foreknew us or set His love upon us; **(b)** He predestined those whom He foreknew to be conformed to His Son’s image; **(c)** those whom He foreloved and predestined, He brought to saving faith through the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit; **(d)** those whom He calls are justified, or declared to be righteous in His sight; **(e)** those whom He calls and justifies are those whom He will not fail to glorify – when Christ returns and we are given new resurrection bodies.

Paul now closes his argument by asking a question; “What, then, shall we say in response to this?” (v. 31a, NIV), or “What is there left to say?” (J. B. Phillips), or “What can we add?” (Jerusalem Bible). His answer to his own question is to ask five more questions. He challenges anybody and everybody to deny the truth which they contain.

**A. The First Question:** “*If God is for us, who can be against us*? (v. 31b). Notice that Paul does not ask, “Who is against us?” If that were the question, there are a number of answers we could give. There are many in this unbelieving, hostile world who are opposed to us. And let’s not ever forget that our enemy, the devil, “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). But if God has foreknown us, predestined us, called us, justified us, and will glorify us, then *He is for us*. We will always face opposition as Christians, of course, but no one or nothing will *ever* prevail against us, not if God is for us.

**B. The Second Question:** “*He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?*” (v. 32). Again, let’s suppose that Paul had simply asked, “Will God not graciously give us all things?” If that were the question, we might have an uncertain answer. Our needs, at times, are difficult and demanding, and while we certainly hope that God will meet them all, how can we be sure that He will? But that’s not the way Paul has asked the question. He points us to God’s great love for us by giving His Son to die for us, and then argues from the greater to the lesser. If God has already given us His greatest gift – to meet our greatest need – then how will He not give us whatever else is necessary to meet our other (and lesser) needs?

**C. The Third Question:** “*Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies*” (v. 33). Again, if this question stood on its own, it could be answered in any number of ways. When we fail, our conscience accuses us. The devil, as the “*accuser of the brethren*” (Rev. 12:10), always presses charges against us; and as we all know, we have many enemies who delight to point an accusing finger at us. But this question does not stand on its own, for Paul has also said that God has *chosen* us and has *justified* us. Since God has declared us righteous in His sight, all such accusations are to no avail. That’s not because we are innocent of what we are accused of; it’s because the penalty of whatever sin we may have committed has already been paid in full. There is nothing, therefore, that can ever sever our relationship with God, not if we have been chosen and justified.

**D. The Fourth Question:** “*Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*” (v. 34). If *this* question stood on its own, there would be many answers that could be given. Sometimes our own “hearts” condemn us (1 John 3:20); so do our critics, our enemies, our detractors, and even the demons of hell. But their condemnations all fail. Why? Once again, it’s because of the work of our Savior: **(1)** He has died for us; **(2)** He was raised from the dead; **(3)** He is seated at the right hand of God; **(4)** He is interceding for us. Every time an accusation is brought against us, God the Son turns to God the Father and says, “I died for that sin. The penalty has been paid. Your justice has been satisfied.”

**E. The Fifth Question:** “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*” (v. 35a). “We are climbing the grand staircase here,” writes John Stott, “and this fifth question is the top step. As we stand on it, Paul . . . first asks who will separate us from Christ’s love and then looks round for an answer. He brings forward a sample list . . . He mentions seven possibilities (35b).”**2**

* “*Tribulation*” awaits us. Is it possible, that when I’m suffering some severe trial that I won’t respond in the way that I should? Maybe I’ll get angry with God, or become bitter, or curse His holy name. Will that ever separate me from the love of God in Christ? No!
* “*Distress*” will surely come my way. What about the inner turmoil, the emotional anxiety, the doubts and fears that I might feel? Will that ever cause God to leave me? No!
* What about “*persecution*”? What if I buckle under the pressure? What if I’m so worried about what others can do to me that I don’t say anything to them about Christ? Will that separate me from the love of God in Christ? No!
* What about all the numerous threats to my physical wellbeing: “*famine, nakedness, danger, and sword*? If I ever should go hungry or without clothing, or if I’m exposed to terrible dangers and threats, and am perhaps even martyred, does that mean that God has abandoned me and cut me off from His love in Christ for me? No!**3**

To be sure, all these adversities and adversaries *do* impact Christians. No Christian is ever exempted from suffering, or even from being killed for the cause of Christ. In order to drive this truth home, Paul quotes from a Psalm, one which pictures the persecution of God’s people by the surrounding nations: “*As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered*’” (Psalm 44:22).

But can all this painful suffering and loss ever separate God’s people from His love? “*No,*” to the contrary says Paul; “*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (v. 37). That’s how the conquering comes; it is not by our courage or resolve or determination. It’s *through* the indwelling presence of Christ at all times. It’s *not* our hold on Him but His hold on us that enables us to stand securely through the very worst of times.

Then comes the *grand finale* (vv. 38-39). Paul lists every conceivable threat to God’s steadfast hold of us. *Death* cannot separate us from the love of God. Nothing that we can experience in *life* can separate us from His love. Nor can the *angels*, who do God’s bidding, nor the *demons*, who oppose His will, ever threaten His love for us. Nor can *things present* nor *things to come*, nor *any* *spiritual power* ever separate us from God’s love in Christ. Neither can any *height* norany *depth*, or *anything else* in *all creation*. Case closed! *Nothing that ever is or ever will be* can ever separate us from the faithful, loyal, steadfast love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 38-39).

There is nothing that encourages the fainting spirit of saints in distress more than viewing life from this perspective. In God’s providence, He is at work in our lives. He has a perfect plan for our good (v. 28). Because of His sovereign grace, that plan is going to succeed. Every link in the golden chain of salvation is unbreakable (vv. 29-30). There is nothing to fear because God is for us; and God cannot fail us because it’s impossible to be separated from His love (vv. 31-39).

As we encounter the many threats and testings and tribulations of life, we can rest assured that our loving heavenly Father will keep a tight grip on our souls. He will never let go of our hand. He will never leave us or forsake us. Nor will He ever let us leave or forsake Him.

When I fear my faith will fail,

Christ will hold me fast;

When the tempter would prevail,

He will hold me fast.

I could never keep my hold

Through life’s fearful path;

For my love is often cold;

He must hold me fast.

He will hold me fast, He will hold me fast,

For my Savior loves me so, He will hold me fast.

(Ada Habershon, 1861-1918; Matt Merker, 2016)

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**1**Kept For Jesus, Sam Storms. Crossway, 2015, p. 71.

**2**The Message of Romans, John Stott. IVP, 1994, p. 257.

**3**Sam Storms, p. 83-85.