

God is With Us

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Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ^[a] who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

In our scripture readings this morning, one of the ideas that is most compelling is that God is with us. God is with us. We are not alone. In the Lord's love we are never alone. The 23rd psalm talks about dwelling in the house of the lord the rest of my days, that in the Lord as my shepherd, I shall not want. In the letter to the Romans, Paul writes that God's love is always with us. In God's love, we are never alone or apart from God's love for us.

I suspect that there are many people in Israel, our Jewish brothers and sisters who are pleading with God today, one day after the shocking Hamas terrorist strike against Israel that has killed so many. They are wondering where God's love is. And they are pleading for that consolation and love. We pray for peace, and we pray for our brothers and sisters in Israel who have lost loved ones and are in fear today.

these days, loneliness and isolation is a big problem for a lot of people. In the early days of the pandemic that became quite apparent and it highlighted a problem a lot of people had, but the problem had been there before the pandemic. in May, U.S. surgeon general Vivek Murthy issued a health advisory on loneliness and isolation. In the

opening letter in the report, the surgeon general wrote that he went around the country talking to folks about how they were doing. A “listening tour” is how he phrased it.

“People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn’t put their finger on the word “lonely,” time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, “I have to shoulder all of life’s burdens by myself,” or “if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice.” The report is entitled, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” Murthey points out that scientific literature has found that In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.”¹

Who is there for us when we feel lonely and afraid? Who can we turn to?

PAUSE

In the last verse in the reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “For I am convinced 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.”

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Paul is writing to the Romans, to a people he has never met. Scholar Neil Elliott writes that this is the longest and most detailed letter Paul wrote and chapters 1-8 “has often been read as Paul’s theological last will and testament, a reflection on and a summary of the gospel of salvation in Christ.”²

Scholars by and large agree that Paul did write Romans, along with six other epistles in the New Testament. There are doubts about other letters that carry his name. But in Romans, that’s not the case. It is one of the seven of the so-called undisputed letters of Paul.

Paul is saying that hardship, distress, persecution, famine, peril, or sword won’t separate us from God’s love. That ultimately God’s love will win out and we will be saved. In the end, God will triumph over death and everything else, through the love of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our salvation and our savior. Jesus is our Good Shepherd, who cares for us, his flock. Like a shepherd, Jesus also has concern, care, and love for his flock.

PAUSE

Our Old Testament scripture is the most beloved Psalm of all, Psalm 23. In the psalm the writer talks about the Lord being the psalmist’s shepherd. According to Richard

² Neil Elliott, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 1975.

Clifford, shepherd is a favorite title of near eastern kings who have compassion for their people.³ They rule with compassion. They rule with love. The shepherd, or the king if you will, rules the people with love and compassion. It is reminiscent of the love of God in Christ. That love, which Paul writes about, can never be blocked from us. Nothing can separate us or prevent God from loving us. We can separate ourselves from God in sin, or lack of prayer and other communion with God. But God still loves us. We can never stop God from loving us.

The psalm also talks about still waters. The still waters are important so the sheep can keep their footing while getting something to drink, or to cross the river, Clifford points out. The still water makes it easier for the sheep to drink. God to me has a characteristic of a still body of water, calming, steady, comforting, cool on a hot summer day. The still water is a source of refuge in a world of strife and confusion. God, our still waters, is always with us.

Psalm 23 is a song of trust, according to Clifford. That is why some posit that it has become so popular to be read at funerals. The psalm reminds those in the congregation that they may be going through the darkest valley of grief and loneliness in that

³ Richard Clifford, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 791.

moment, there is comfort in the Lord. The psalm is meant to remind us that we are not alone in our grief, and that the Lord knows we grieve. The psalmist reminds us that God is with us the rest of our days, that we can take solace in that.

The psalmist also tells us to fear no evil, for God is with us. There is something about the psalm that exudes and gives off an energy of compassion, love, and comfort.

The psalm's imagery is of complete comfort from God to us, even when danger lurks in the darkest valley.

Grave illness and disease may be the dark valley we encounter. Alcoholism or drug addiction is another dark valley. It may be an upcoming talk with a loved one we may be afraid to have. Perhaps our dark valley is the loneliness and isolation that the surgeon general's report talks about.

We run into many dark valleys. The loss of a spouse or child or other loved one. A beloved parent. What have your darkest valleys been? We all have them. You may be going through one right now. I pray that you can remember that the love of God is with you, even in your suffering and despair. Remember God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ

knows pain and suffering, abandonment, isolation. God knows and has sympathy to our suffering.

In these times of the darkest valley, when we think our Shepherd has forsaken us, he has not. He is with us. Paul writes, what can separate us from the love of Christ? Will sickness or distress or persecution or peril or sword? No. None of these will separate us from the love of Christ. Remember, we are the beloved children of God.

Also remember, when we express and live in a spirit of love, we are alive in the Lord.

As 1 John chapter 4 verse 16 says, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." When we are loving human beings, we abide in God.

And God loves us no matter what. When we live in expressions of love, we cannot be alone or feel isolation, for we are expressing love, and we are part of God, who is love.

Dwelling in the house of the Lord, God's love always with us. God is always with us. We sometimes need to be reminded. We are never entirely alone, even though we may think we are. Someone out there knows our pain and suffering. I challenge you this week to share the love of the Good shepherd with someone who you know is lonely or you think might be lonely. Call them. Visit them. Let them know they're not alone and someone cares for them and wants to know how they're doing. It can be a strong

reminder that God has not and will never forsake them. God will be with them always.

The Good shepherd, the good lord, will be with them always. Be the hands and feet and presence of God in someone's life this week.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. PAUSE "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen.