

## **Romans 8:36-39: Text for Sunday May 29, 2022**

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**<sup>36</sup> As it is written:**

**“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> 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 our Lord.**

**Dear Friends,**

**I am indeed glad to be part of your worship service this morning. I bring greetings from the United Theological College, Bangalore, South India. I thank God and all our friends in Germany for your support and solidarity and your partnership in the mission of God for the common good of humanity and the entire creation. I also thank Prof. Dr. Reinhard Achenbach for providing me the opportunity to share the word of God with you this morning.**

**The passage assigned for us today’s reflection is a very familiar text for us from Romans 8, the concluding verses of the chapter where Saint Paul sums up all that has been experienced by him in his ministry of God as well as in his personal life. Saint Paul is overwhelmed by the love of God in all his circumstances including his death-like situations.**

**God is for us, says Paul, having given his own Son for “all of us” (Rom. 8:31–32). Nothing is able to come between us and the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35–39). “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” (Rom. 8:38–39). Many of these things seem to threaten us in the sphere of work. We face menacing or incompetent bosses (rulers). We get stuck in dead-end jobs (things present). We make sacrifices now—working long hours, taking classes after work, serving in low-paid internships, moving to another country looking for work—that we hope will pay off later but may never pan out (things to come). We lose our jobs because of economic cycles or regulations or unscrupulous actions by powerful people we never even see (powers). We are forced by circumstance, folly, or the crimes of others into degrading or dangerous work. All these things can do us real hurt. But they cannot triumph over us.**

**Christ’s faithfulness—and ours, by God’s grace—overcomes the worst that life and work can do to us. If career progress, income, or prestige is our**

highest goal at work, we may end up disappointed. But if salvation—that is, reconciliation with God, creation and people, faithfulness, and justice—is our chief hope, then we will find it amid both the good and bad in work. Paul’s affirmations mean that no matter what the difficulties we encounter with our work, or the complexities and challenges we face with co-workers or superiors in our workplaces, the love of God in Christ always abides with us. The love of God in Christ is the stable force in the midst of adversity now, as well as our hope for bodily redemption in the future.

There are much more dreadful and cruel situations we face that we are directly or indirectly affected in our daily life. I would like to present to you few examples of Dalit suffering in our daily lives in India. These are the only small tip of the iceberg and please listen carefully how these gruesome examples reveal the cruel situation even in this so-called modern times in our world today.

**Example:** Dalits, long victim to a caste-based system of social hierarchy that regards them as ‘untouchables’, comprise around 17 per cent of India’s total population. While caste-based discrimination was outlawed in 1955, the social phenomenon of caste persists and is imparted through birth. As a result, Dalits still face severe hardship and exclusion from mainstream society, with prejudicial attitudes and practices underlying much of Indian society today. Acting simultaneously as a social and physical condition, disability – which varies in form and severity, and may be present from birth or developed during the course of a person’s lifetime – is considerably more prevalent among Dalits than upper castes: 2.4 per cent compared to 1.8 per cent, according to one report. Dalits are also more likely to have severe forms of disabilities generally, and more specifically, to acquire them at a young age. This is due in part to the influence of factors connected to poorer living conditions, such as anemia, pneumonia and low levels of nutrition.

The intersection of disability with caste can compound the myriad issues faced by Dalits. Disabilities reinforce disadvantage linked to Dalit identity and its consequent deprivation of rights, opportunities, and resources. Dalit children, who already struggle to attend school due to having to physical distance, segregation and discriminatory treatment, face even greater difficulties accessing education when they have disabilities.

In rural areas, where the situation is particularly bleak, lack of basic skills gained through education restricts opportunities for vocational and other training leading to employment. Yet access to employment also depends on social capital, and persons with disabilities – and to an even greater extent those who are Dalits – suffer from stigmatization and negative stereotypes that cast them as unproductive and dependent. The low

educational and employment status of Dalits with disabilities in turn increases the likelihood that their households, whose limited resources are already stretched, will face poorer living conditions and greater poverty.

Even natural disasters can be discriminatory in their impacts, affecting Dalits, particularly those with disabilities, disproportionately due to their settlements being situated in vulnerable locations such as rubbish dumps, river banks and other high-risk areas. Furthermore, the response of authorities to assist victims can reinforce this disparity through discrimination. In November 2015, for instance, after devastating floods swept through Tamil Nadu (South India), hundreds of Dalit families who lost their homes and livelihoods found themselves neglected by government relief efforts. Differing starkly from the treatment of upper-caste families, many Dalits were not provided with adequate food, drinking water or emergency health support services, nor even received visits from officials to assess their losses and needs.

Dalit women and girls with disabilities, situated at the bottom of India's social hierarchy, are especially vulnerable. They in many cases perform the most dangerous and degrading work, placing their health at greater risk, and suffer a constant threat of sexual violence from members of their own community as well as upper castes. Those with disabilities are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. While the majority of cases go undocumented, a number of recently reported incidents highlight the severity of their situation. In January 2016, for example, a deaf-mute Dalit woman was gang-raped and thrown from a train in Uttar Pradesh, and at the beginning of February 2016 when a man was arrested for raping a deaf-mute Dalit girl in Berhampur, Odisha.

The vulnerability and marginalization faced by Dalits with disabilities is in part a reflection of inadequate government policies and programmes to protect their human rights. While positive efforts have been made to improve the situation of Dalits – through Constitutional amendment, legislation and monitoring bodies, job quotas, affirmative action in the public sector and education – there remains insufficient political will to adequately acknowledge and address discrimination against Dalits in India and work to abolish caste itself. As for persons with disabilities, there have been some recent signs of progress, with the Minister for Justice and Social Empowerment announcing in early 2016 that the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill had been drafted, which would help persons with disabilities derive greater benefits from welfare schemes.

But while a stronger rights framework for Dalits and persons with disabilities is urgently needed, this alone may not necessarily bring justice and equality for Dalits with disabilities, who may still find

themselves marginalized. It is important therefore that the unique challenges of intersectionality for Dalits with disabilities are also recognized to ensure that they do not continue to be left behind.

Five times here in Romans 8 the apostle Paul has asked questions to draw out the amazing privileges of belonging to Jesus Christ. Verse 31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Verse 32: “How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Verse 33: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” Verse 34: “Who is to condemn?” And now from today’s passage — Romans 8:35-39 — in verse 35: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

The answers are so plain and so wonderful, Paul lets us supply them and rejoice in them. Verse 31: No one can be successfully against us — not even terrorists. Verse 32: God will supply everything we need — even when all seems lost. Verse 33: No one can make a charge stick against us in the court of heaven — no matter who accuses us. Verse 34: No one can condemn us. And today in verse 35: No one and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

And what makes this text so relevant in the light of the examples I shared with you on Dalit oppression is that Paul spells out the kinds of things that cannot separate us from the love of Christ, and they are the sort of things that happened that day: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” The reason Paul chose to mention so many terrible things is to make sure we knew he was not saying: well, there are some things so horrible that they really could separate us from the love of Christ. No. *Nothing can separate us from Christ’s love.*

The reason Paul can say that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ is because Christ is alive and is still loving us now. He is at the right hand of God and is therefore ruling for us. And he is interceding for us, which means he is seeing to it that his finished work of redemption does in fact save us hour by hour and bring us safe to eternal joy. His love is not a memory. It is a moment-by-moment action of the omnipotent, living Son of God, to bring us to everlasting joy.

**Embracing the sovereignty of God brings strength and hope.**

**“God knew the terrible choices the terrorists would make and that Todd Beamer (a person) would die as a result. He knew my children would be left without a father and me without a husband. . . . Yet in his sovereignty and in his perspective on the big picture, he knew it was better to allow the events to unfold as they did rather than redirect Todd’s plans to avoid death. . . . I can’t see all the reasons he might have allowed this when I know he could have stopped it. . . . I don’t like how his plan looks from**

**my perspective right now, but knowing that he loves me and can see the world from start to finish helps me say, ‘It’s ok.’”**

**“If we believe wholeheartedly, each moment, that our destiny rests in the hands of Jesus Christ — the one with ultimate love and ultimate power — what do we have to be concerned about? Of course, our humanity clouds this truth many times but hanging on to glimpses of it keeps everything in perspective.”**

**God’s love takes care of us right now in our suffering, not just later.**

**“He knows that I am hurting and in need right now. Every day he provides encouragement and resources just for me. Little things show me that he is with me: a Scripture with just the words I need to hear, a call from a friend when I feel lonely, help with a task that I can’t do alone, or a hug and ‘I love you’ from one of my children. God’s love is truly sufficient to meet any need that I have.”** (*Decision Magazine*, September 2002)

**Without God, the world is hopeless. But with God no power can destroy or even approach any God’s child including Dalits. Amen.**

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