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Romans 8

Introduction:

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and *she* was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me

That was the first 2 stanzas of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe. I heard it in high school. The reason I remember it is because I had a wonderful English teacher in high school. His name was Mr. Fopma and he loved words. He would bring in Newspaper Headlines when he thought they were clever, he was always creating puns and even giving me a love for puns. And he loved poetry. So, I remember this poem because of how much Mr. Fopma loved it. We didn't just read it and analyze it, Mr. Fopma gushed over it. He couldn't get over the line, "we loved with a love that was more than a love." He would say it over and over again. Even throw his head back because he could hardly handle the beauty of those words. "we loved with a love that was more than a love."

Page 1: GT: God loves with a love that is more than a love

This is how I imagine Paul writing this section of the letter. He is just gushing over God's love. In verse 32, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions. The first one: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

So, Paul could have just answered his own question pretty quickly. Who can be against us? Verse 33 could have read: "No one. We have the victory in Christ." That sums it up. It faithfully answers the question. Chapter 8 of Romans could very well have been finished with a summary in verse 33. But it doesn't. Because Paul gushes about God's love. "God loves with a love that is more than a love..."

He asks a few more rhetorical questions. "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?" He could have just answered that question really quickly too. He could have spoke at length about the wonders of God demonstrating his love for us. God is our Judge. He has an only Son – Jesus. He is completely sinless. We, however, are full of sin. God pronounces his guilty sentence...on Jesus. So wide, so long, so high, so deep is the Father's love for us. He did not spare his Son Jesus so that he could spare us from eternal death.

And Paul just keeps going and asks another question, "Who will bring any charge again those whom God has chosen?" The answer? No one can! Not a one! Whoever God justifies is declared innocent and immediately all allegations against his children hold no weight. The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

And the gushing continues as he asks another question: "Who is he that condemns?" He has just made a strong case that sinners need to be made righteous before a holy God. It's not obtainable for us by our own merit, so God did it. Salvation is a free gift that we receive by faith. Jesus Christ earned this salvation for us. It was his death, his resurrection, his intercession

All of these questions that Paul asks all have their pinnacle in his last question: Who shall separate us from the love of God? Who could possibly stand a chance against separating God's abundant incomparable steadfast benevolent love from his people?

It's pretty difficult to nail down a definition of how much God loves us. Have you ever tried? We might use an analogy – God loves me like my parents, but more! Or maybe we would respond with some examples of what Jesus did in the bible– he loved me so much that he died for me. That he came to earth to pursue me. That he saved me. Another way to think about how much God loves us is to give a testimony of his love in our life.

Paul does that here. Remember – he's gushing about God's love. God loves with a love that's more than a love. He remembers his own life and gives testimony to all the ways that Satan has tried to separate him from God love, but he can't! He just can't!

Page 2: TT: Satan tries to separate us from God's love

Satan knows the bible and he knows that God will always love his chosen people with his good, gracious, and sovereign love. He can't stop God's love for us. But he can lie to us. He can convince us to believe that God doesn't love us. He tried very hard to convince Paul of this. He sent Paul all kinds of troubles.

Out of the 7 things that he lists in verse 35, he has personally experienced 6 of them.

Listen to part of Paul's testimony from 2 Corinthians 11:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul knows what he's talking about. Our enemy is always working to separate God's people from God's love. He is always bringing trouble. And this isn't weird. This should not surprise us. As our text reminds us, "for the sake of believing in Christ we are being put to death all day long; we are considered sheep to be slaughtered."

And slaughtered Paul was. The 7th thing he lists is the sword. He hadn't experienced this yet, but he will. He wrote this letter in 56 or 57 and tradition tells us he likely died about 7 or 8 years later. By the sword. In Rome.

Pages 3: TW: Satan tries to separate us from Gods love

For thousands of years Christians have been put to death for the sake of Christ. And I'm sure they would all testify that Christ is worth it. In North America we don't see too much of persecution by death, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Here are some stats from a few years ago from the organization Open Doors: About 11 Christians are killed every day for their faith – that only counts the Christians from the top 50 most persecuted countries in the world. And that doesn't count the number of Christians who are arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned because they worship Christ.

While in our context we are not likely in danger of being killed for our faith, it doesn't mean that it won't happen. Nor should we be surprised if we do. Our enemy is always bringing us trouble. He is always trying to separate us from God's love. And he is throwing a lot at us. Our churches here in Edmonton experience our fair share of suffering.

Sometimes life is great, and we celebrate. But sometimes life is really hard. We are afflicted. We are under distress. As we read through the list of Satan's tried and true tactics, we might be able to sum up a common lie: "If God really loved you...he would not let you suffer." I'll say that lie again: "If God really loved you...he would not let you suffer." That's a lie. A lie with the purpose to separate us from God's love.

Many of you are familiar with the story of Job. We know how much God loves Job. He brags about Job in the heavenly realms. We get a glimpse of how much Job glorifies God against the dark powers that we cannot even see. And he allows Job to suffer immensely. And when we suffer, one of the first questions we need answered is "Does God really love me?"

And Satan wants you to hear that the answer is no. I still remember the week when I was writing this sermon. I was struggling with the truth of this passage. I was experiencing inward distress. I was challenging God's love for me even as I wrote this sermon and his words were plain as day in front of me. I found myself substituting words in verse 35. Shall stress separate me from the love of God? Shall unkind and unjust people cause me to question that God is working good in my life? Do I have the strength to declare to the heavenly realms that no matter what is thrown at me, I will believe that God is always working for good?

Are you experiencing distress in your life? Afflictions? Tribulations? Try putting them in verse 35. And remind yourself that Satan is trying to convince you that God does not love you.

I'm going to tell you a story of a lady I talked to a few years ago. Her name is Stephanie. And she has suffered immensely in her life and she would be the first to admit that she is a great sinner. She, like Paul, and us, has experienced many afflictions in her life.

She grew up and had an incredibly cruel childhood. Then in 2004, Stephanie was incarcerated. Through the prison system she had a mentor named Trix and God used Trix to lead Stephanie to Jesus. After she was released from prison, she fell back into the cycle of addiction, homelessness, and prostitution. For the next period in her life, she was beaten, thrown out of cars, raped, and participated in violent acts – including manslaughter for which she ended up being incarcerated a second time.

It seemed like Satan tried to throw everything he had at Stephanie to convince her that she wasn't worth it. To convince her that she was too great of a sinner and that such a loving God wouldn't have allowed her to go through those things.

Page GW:

But it didn't work. Stephanie wasn't convinced God didn't love her. She had this moment where she thought that maybe she could leave that lifestyle if God helped her. So, she prayed and told God that she needed him. Then this light bulb came on and her eyes were opened and she just sensed the Lord telling her, "Stephanie...I never left." Memories of how he had protected her through those years flooded her mind. She realized that not all girls make it out alive, but she did. God's love for Stephanie was not dependent on her lifestyle.

Last I heard her plan and her hope was to be a pastor – specifically to those in the inner city community.

She said the whole time that she was in this dark period of her life, she just somehow knew that God was there all the time. Philippians 4:13 would regularly enter into her mind, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This is what she kept saying to me: "I can't explain it. He was just there. There are no words that can describe this feeling! There was nothing that could separate me from God's love. Nothing." Stephanie was convinced that there wasn't anything that could separate God's love for her.

What's more – it's like the trouble that Satan brought to her helped to reinforce that great truth. God works for our good in all things. And all these things that Satan throws at us,

Congregation. We are not just survivors of these things. We are not even merely conquerors, but we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. As one commentary put it, "A conqueror is a person who defeats the enemy. One who is more than a conqueror causes the enemy to be a helper."

Stephanie and Paul and I hope all of us here are convinced how abundant God's love is for us. Even troubles that Satan sends, still under God's sovereignty, God has good intentions for. Stress. Unkind or unjust people. physical ailments. Covid-19. Nothing in all of creation, death or life, angels or demons, time, powers, height, depth, nothing at all can separate us from the love of God that is more than a love, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isn't that good news? Isn't that what we all want? To never be separated from those we love? To never be separated from love? As humans we actually work towards those goals. None of us like being separated from those we love. So, we try to change it. For example, my family lives in the US in 3 different states and I am up here. So, we are separated. But, to ease this separation, people have invented things to help us out. If I ever want to talk to my family, I can go to my computer and I can talk to them. It's not the same of course as being in person, but it's ok. I'm sure many of us have family that lives far away. We're separated, but we can still remain in contact. We have airplanes and cars to travel to see the people we love too.

I think that Covid-19 has shown us how much we dislike separation from our loved ones. We hated it. We suffered because of it. We found ways to be together. Zoom. Facetime. Skype. Jackbox. Going for walks. There have been so many issues in our province because people suffer when they are separated from love. The goal is to reunite so we can see and touch the people we love.

You know...We can't do that though when someone dies. Sometimes I think and grieve of those who have we have lost – family, community – especially recently. We have no control over their deaths. It's done. We can't communicate with them. I can't talk to them or visit them if I tried. They are gone.

My family is far away and separated from me, but not like that. The force of death separates us from those we love. If you ask people why they fear death, it's not death itself that's so scary. It's the separation. Separation of love.

I'm going to read the last 2 stanzas of the Edgar Allan Poe poem. In the middle of the poem we read that Annabel Lee has died. This is what Poe has to say:

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

That's a really nice poem. The man who loved Annabel Lee says that the love is still there. Whenever he sees things, he feels and remembers her. So, the memory of love is there. But the reality is that Annabel Lee is gone. We know this all too well.

Congregation, we have a much better love story. Not only does God love with a love that is more than a love. Jesus died with a death that was more than a death. Christ Jesus was raised to life and is sitting at this moment at the right hand of God and he is interceding for us. Do you know what this means? It means that Jesus isn't dead. Jesus is alive. His love for us is not some memory. His love is not separated from us. We have it right now.

What's more, all of our loved ones who have experienced death are also not separated from him. Our friends and family members who know Christ who have gone before us are with Him now. Which means that because of Christ and what he did on the cross our loved ones are not that far away. There is absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Even our own death. Someday we will all die. We fear that day because it means a separation. Take heart, dear Christians. Yes, there is a very short separation between the people that leave behind. But there is never any separation with our greatest love. Jesus. Jesus will be right with us when we die and he will take our hand and bring us into glory.

Application/Mission:

So great is God's love for us. Let us gush about it. I love Stephanie's story because she, like Paul, just gushes about God's love for her. She couldn't stop talking about it. I'm not sure if she realized it or not, but as she's speaking about God's love for her, she was simultaneously speaking about her own love for Jesus. She said that He is the most important person in her world. The first thing she does when she gets up is to pray and talk to Him and it's the last thing she does. She responds to God's love by loving him too and living for him.

Let us respond to God's love for us by loving him back. Let us be filled with the love of Christ that is alive and active. Let us be confident that nothing can separate us from that love. Let us be convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God. For God loves with a love that is more than a love. Nothing can separate us from thee.

Amen.