

Forever His

Today In Your Reading...

Paul's letter to the *Romans* is the most precise and profound explanation of the Gospel in the New Testament. He made clear the truths that surround the incredible work of God in our salvation. Today's passage may just be the highlight of this wonderful book, an encouraging stretch of verses that should warm the heart of every believer.

For example, Paul wrote, "We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son... Having chosen them, He called them to come to Him; and He gave them right standing with Himself, and He promised them His glory" (8:28-30).

He continued, "What can we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? ...Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? No... overwhelming victory is ours through Christ... **I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love...**" (8:31, 37, 38).

A common fear among Christians today is that their salvation in Christ may be lost, that by some sin or neglect God's gracious gift may be forfeited. **This fear would be justified if salvation could be achieved through human efforts**; but we know that "no one is good, not even one" (3:10). Any "salvation" gained by human effort is no salvation at all. It could be lost because it was never gained in the first place.

Genuine salvation is by grace alone (a gift, not earned), through faith alone (faith given by God), in Christ alone (nothing else). **Salvation is a work of God not man.** We do not attain right standing before Him by our works; He has

given us right standing with Him because of Christ's work on the cross. What God has given to us, He has promised never to take back. Our salvation, then, rests in the trustworthy word of God, who has vowed to seal us for all eternity.

Consider this confirmation from *Romans 8*. Those whom God has chosen, He calls; those whom He calls, He justifies, and those whom He justifies, He will someday glorify. Paul also wrote, "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns" (*Philippians 1:6*). Jesus said, "My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. **No one can snatch them away from Me**, for the Father has given them to Me... No one can snatch them from the Father's hand" (*John 10:27-30*).

Daily Reflection

Have you ever struggled with the thought of losing your salvation? Why or why not?

To fear losing salvation is to doubt God at His word, and it is to diminish the work of Christ on your behalf. **It is to say that what He did was not enough to secure you a place in heaven with Him.** God does not want you to live like that. He wants you to rest in Him. As John wrote, "These things have I written to you, who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 *John 5:13, NASB*).

A Living Sacrifice

November 27 — *Romans 11:1-14:23*

Day 331 — 34 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

We transitioned into the second half of Paul's letter to the Romans. He spent the first half (*Romans 1-11*) focused on the truths of the Gospel, of salvation. Now, in the second half of his letter (*12-16*), he will focus on the transformation of the Gospel, the effects that salvation should have in one's life.

The turning point of the letter hinges on two verses. "And so, dear brothers and sisters, [after all that I have written already], I plead with you to give your bodies to God. **Let them be a living and holy sacrifice**, the kind that He will accept. When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" (*12:1, 2*).

Noah Webster defined a sacrifice as "an offering to God in worship, to destroy, surrender, or suffer to be lost for the sake of obtaining something" (*1828 Dictionary*). People in the Old Testament sacrificed animals in honor of God. They surrendered their possession of the animal and suffered loss (something they needed or desired to keep) **in order to gain glory for His name**. "For everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory. To Him be glory forevermore" (*11:36*).

Likewise, Paul calls upon Christians to be "a living sacrifice" (a continuous sacrifice) in honor of God's name. Practically speaking, he is challenging us **to destroy, surrender, or suffer for the sake of obtaining glory for God**. What does that look like exactly?

First, in Christ, we are new creatures; the old life is to pass away or be destroyed with its sinful lusts. Likewise, **we are to destroy the worldly influence** that the enemy attempts to

wield in our lives. We are not to copy the behavior and customs of this world. Second, we are to **surrender our will and succumb to the direction of the Holy Spirit**. He has a plan and purpose for our lives, but we so often get in the way; we must, therefore, sacrifice ourselves for His good. Third, we are to **suffer the loss of our sinful passions and selfish desires for the good of others**.

Daily Reflection

Self-sacrifice is not easy. Why not?

Self-sacrifice is a life-long process. It does not happen overnight. Paul wrote, "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." This change is not immediate but continuous. Over a stretch of time, you should notice a change in how you think, how you live, and what is important to you. Can you see that your view of things today is different than your view of them years ago? Explain.

By what means does God change the way you think? How does this process take place?

Tough Love

Today In Your Reading...

We closed Paul's letter to the Romans and opened his second letter to the Corinthians. Although both the closing and the opening are mostly formalities, a common thread became evident to me, that of *tough love*. When we think of love, we usually conjure up images of romance, family, friendships, and other human delights; but, *genuine love is not always an expression of benevolence or affection*. These things are relatively easy for most of us. **Sometimes love requires us to do hard things.**

Our passage today began with Paul's last words on a lengthy subject, that of "loving our neighbor as ourselves" (13:9). "Love does no wrong to anyone," Paul wrote (13:10). Therefore, we must be careful when criticizing or condemning other believers for their convictions, words, or actions. Likewise, we must be careful not to offend others by our words and actions, being mindful to their sensitivities. "We may know that these things make no difference," Paul said, "but we cannot just go ahead and do them to please ourselves. We must be considerate of the doubts and fears of those who think [certain] things are wrong. We should please others. If we do what helps them, we will build them up in the Lord" (15:1, 2). If we genuinely love and care for others, **we will practice self-control and curb our words and actions so as not to offend them unintentionally.** That is tough.

Next, at the opening of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul shared a little of the trouble he endured in Asia. "We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it... But, as a result, we learned not to rely on ourselves, but on God" (1:8, 9). However, Paul did not share these things to illicit pity from his readers; rather he explained to them that "God comforts us in our

troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. So then, when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your benefit..." (1:4-6). In other words, God loves us so much that **He allows us to go through difficult times so that we can help others through difficult times.** That is certainly tough love.

Finally, Paul expressed how stressful it was for him to write his first letter to the church at Corinth, which was a scathing rebuke of their disharmony and worldliness. "How painful it was to write that letter," he said. "Heartbroken, I cried over it. I didn't want to hurt you, but I wanted you to know how very much I love you" (2:4). **Sometimes love requires us to confront sin in the lives of others** and that is tough.

Daily Reflection

Is there a mixed message here? You are supposed to curb your words and actions so as not to offend others, yet there are times when you must confront their sins. Yes. Both of these are demonstrations of love. Where is the line? How do you know when to cross the line and speak to someone about their sinful words or deeds?

Parents love their children, but should they confront, correct, or discipline their children when they are in error? Of course. That is also love, tough love. So then, should you remain silent when other believers are living in sin? Not if you love them. Confronting and correcting them is also love, tough love. **More damage will be done if you say or do nothing.**

Today In Your Reading...

We covered several chapters of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In them he explained the superiority of the New Covenant in Christ over the Old Covenant and the law of Moses. "This is a covenant, not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old way ends in death; in the new way, the Holy Spirit gives life" (3:6). Because of this new life, this new hope in Christ, Paul explained that he found motivation to carry on, despite his many hardships. He viewed himself as Christ's ambassador, reconciling others to God (5:20). In many ways, we too are His ambassadors, charged with the very same mission.

Numerous times, while describing the advantage of the New Covenant over the Old, Paul referred to the veil of Moses. "The old system," he wrote, "began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face... He put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not see the glory fading away..." (3:7, 13). Paul used that veil as a symbol of the hardness of the people's hearts and the darkness of their minds. "Even today... their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand" (3:15).

Next, Paul contrasts what happens at the point of salvation. "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, then the veil is taken away" (3:16). The Spirit of the Lord releases us from the curse of the law, the penalty of the Old Covenant, and opens our eyes to its fulfillment in Christ. Now, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, He gives freedom" (3:17). **The veil is gone!**

Paul continued, "All of us (Christians) have had that veil removed so that **we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord.** And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him and reflect His glory even more" (3:18). The *New American Standard* translation casts this verse in a better

light. "But we all, **with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror** the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

Simply put, because the Spirit of God has "lifted the veil" from our faces and opened our eyes to see that all of Scripture points to Christ, we can behold His glory; and, as we behold His glory or **preoccupy ourselves with Him**, His teaching, His work, His ministry, His nature, then we are transformed, with the help of the Spirit, into His image, a little more each day.

Daily Reflection

Describe what it looks like to preoccupy yourself with Christ. What would that require of you?

As Moses spent time in the presence of God, his face reflected God's glory. In a way, you do the same today. You are a mirror that reflects the glory of God to others. Explain how.

Can you see the progressive work of God in changing you into the image of Christ? How so?

A Harvest of Generosity

Today In Your Reading...

It was evident today that Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was an effort to mend his relationship with church members after an earlier, more pointed letter (which may be *1 Corinthians*). "I am no longer sorry that I sent that letter to you," he wrote, "though I was sorry for a time, for I know that it was painful to you for a little while. Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain caused you to have remorse and change your ways" (7:8, 9).

Another purpose of Paul's second letter became apparent today as well, that of completing a collection to help the suffering members in the church of Jerusalem (8:1-6). A year earlier, the Lord had put it on their hearts to assist them in their financial troubles (v.10, 11). Thus, Paul wrote to encourage the Corinthians "to excel in the gracious ministry of giving" (v.7).

Paul continued to give some principles in regards to giving, principles that still inform our giving today. "**Give whatever you can according to what you have.** If you are eager to give, it isn't important how much you are able to give. God wants you to give what you have, not what you don't have. Of course, I don't mean you should give so much that you suffer from having too little... Right now you have plenty and can help them. At some other time, they can share with you when you need it. In this way, everyone's needs will be met" (v.11-14).

A little later, Paul wrote, "A farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop; but the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure, for **God loves the person who gives cheerfully**; and God will generously provide all you need... and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures

say, '**Godly people give generously to the poor**' (*Psalms 112:9*). For God is the one who gives seed to the farmer and bread to eat. In the same way, He will give you many opportunities to do good, and **He will produce a great harvest of generosity in you**" (9:6-10).

Daily Reflection

Giving is an important aspect of a Christian's ministry to others, but it also produces many positive effects in your own life. Name a few.

Giving is also a test of faith in the life of a believer. How so?

How does the principle of "you reap what you sow" relate to giving?

Have you been faithful to give to the Lord's ministries and to those people in need?

Danger: A Bump-Free Road

Today In Your Reading...

We finished Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. In his closing, he defended his ministry against the false apostles who had descended upon their congregation after Paul's departure. "I fear that somehow you will be led away from your pure and simple devotion to Christ, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent. You seem to believe whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach... I don't think I am inferior to these 'super apostles'" (11:3-5).

Paul went on to boast about all that he had experienced and endured, something that he hated doing. "Such bragging is not something the Lord wants," he wrote (v.17). "If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am" (v.30). He explained that boasting causes people, including himself, to get "puffed up" or prideful, and that **pride leads to self-reliance and neglect of God**. However, he noticed that "to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in the flesh... to keep me from getting proud" (12:7).

While Paul did not like his "thorn," whatever it was, he did notice that it caused him to "beg the Lord to take it away" (v.8). In other words, **his trial caused him to turn his attention to the Lord and away from himself**. Whatever the difficult circumstance was, it moved him to rely upon God instead of his own abilities. Therefore, Paul wrote, "Now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know that it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong" (v.9, 10).

Daily Reflection

Webster defined boasting as "to brag, to exalt or magnify one's self, to make a display of one's worth, property, or actions" (1828 Dictionary). Why is boasting a waste of time? How does boasting appear in the eyes of others? What about in the eyes of God?

What exactly does it look like to boast in your weaknesses?

We like it so much better when life goes smoothly, when everything happens the way it's supposed to happen, when things are good. However, what does a bump-free life develop in you? Why is it better to rejoice in the bumps?

Are you praising God for your smooth road or for all of the twists, turns, and bumps?

On to Jerusalem

December 2 — Acts 20:13-21:36

Day 336 — 29 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

We witnessed the end of Paul's third missionary journey and his return to Jerusalem. He had an overwhelming sense that he was supposed to go there. "I am going to Jerusalem," he told the elders of Ephesus, "drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what awaits me... The Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead" (20:22, 23).

On his way back to Jerusalem, he was warned by friends several times that he was headed for trouble. The disciples in Tyre prophesied that Paul should not go to Jerusalem (21:4). The daughters of Philip the Evangelist had the gift of prophecy; no doubt they warned him as well (21:9). Finally, Agabus tied Paul's hands and feet with a belt and told him, "The owner of this belt will be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Romans." When his friends heard this, they begged Paul not to go (21:10-12).

However, Paul remained resolute in his decision. "You are breaking my heart," he said. "For I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but also to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus. **My life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord**, the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love" (20:24; 21:13).

Daily Reflection

I admire Paul for his steadfast courage in the face of difficulty and danger. He was compelled by his conscience to follow the Lord's will, no matter what happened to him. **Life and death seemed to matter little. What mattered most was that he was obedient to God** and that he did right by Him. "Let me say plainly that I have been faithful... *I did not shrink* from declaring all that God wants... I never shrank from telling the truth..." (20:20, 26, 27).

Describe a time when you sensed that inner compulsion to do something that the Lord had given you to do, no matter how difficult.

We may call this inner strength that Paul demonstrated many things — guts, courage, bravery. Noah Webster called it *fortitude*. Here is his definition: "**The strength or firmness of mind or soul which enables a person to encounter danger with coolness and courage**, or to bear pain or adversity without murmuring, depression, or despondency. Fortitude is the basis or source of genuine courage in danger, of patience in suffering, or forbearance under injury, and of magnanimity in all conditions in life" (1828 Dictionary).

Is fortitude a natural or supernatural quality? Explain your answer.

What motivated Paul to go to Jerusalem was his view that his life was worth nothing unless he was using it for the Lord's work. What does that "work" look like for you? Have you ever shrunk from doing what God has given you to do?
