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English Standard Version, 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, 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.

God's Grace: Ultimate Power.

I had an aunt named Loretta, my mother's sister, who had Rheumatic Fever as a child and it damaged her heart valves. She managed to have three children, despite being too weak to walk. Her husband worked for IBM and his job required him to travel a lot. He deeply loved her and he worried about her, but she was confident and very tough.

One thing he happened to do for her was buy her a pet ocelot as a gift. Yes, a wild animal that he had bought as a kitten in South America: he had given it to her as a surprise gift. When I was twelve, and it was full grown, weighing about 35 pounds, I rolled around in their backyard with it. My father was a retired

Marine and he thought it was just fine that I was playing with a full-grown ocelot that was born in the wild and still had all its teeth and claws.

My uncle, as it turned out, liked to collect coins and had a very valuable collection. It happened to be written up in the local paper, and sure enough, one night a few days later, while he was away on business, a man broke into the house to steal it. He woke up my aunt, who got into her wheelchair and went into the dim living room to see what was going on.

The man, who was standing near the front door, leveled a gun at her and demanded that she hand over the coin collection.

I'll get back to my aunt Loretta.

Our Bible quote from today is from Romans. This is a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome. Most of his letters are written to churches that he had established, and the purposes of his letters were usually to give spiritual and emotional support, or to explain basic Christian principles to the people of these new churches. It's important to keep in mind that early Christians who were not Jews – and the Christians in Rome were not Jews – were typically converts from pagan beliefs and it could take time to get them to understand the basic principles of Christianity. Sometimes Paul had heard that a church had drifted back to

pagan practices and he was writing to correct people's theology. Paul also tended to write letters congratulating churches on moving away from pre-Christian beliefs and turning toward proper Christianity.

But Paul did not establish the church in Rome, although he mentions in the letter that he hopes to visit the church someday. It's an unusual letter in another sense. It is very comprehensive in its theological teachings. This letter, which is by far the longest of Paul's letters in the New Testament, is widely considered to be the defining document on the doctrines that we follow as Christians. If you are a Christian, the letter to the Romans tells you what it is that you believe.

Paul makes a compelling and extremely emotional argument for the salvation offered by Jesus Christ and how it is that we can emulate Jesus in our lives. Several famous people have had spiritual awakenings and discovered the love of God, by reading about the teachings of Jesus Christ in this letter. This includes Saint Augustine, the great Christian philosopher of the fifth century. It also includes John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.

The passage that we are looking at today has to do with an important theme that appears in this letter written to the members of the fledgling church in Rome. Paul is telling us that we are saved only by believing in God, and that we

do not have to rack up a body of good works while we are on earth in order to spend eternity with God. This is a major theological issue that has been debated hotly over the centuries. Are we justified by good works or simply by faith? There are those who argue that the Bible argues that salvation must be earned, but Paul makes it clear that we are saved simply by believing.

Now, Paul doesn't say that we believers can just go off and do anything we please. What's true is that if we believe in God and truly have faith in Jesus Christ, good works will come naturally. Paul tells us that God wants us to be like his son, to show the same love for our fellow humans that Jesus showed. Once we believe, once we have unconditional love for - and trust in - God, we will find ourselves becoming more Christ-like. It will simply happen.

Yet, Paul is saying something even stronger than this. Why do we, as Christians, naturally reflect the love that Jesus showed for humanity? And why is it not necessary to perform specific acts in order to earn God's forgiving grace? The answer is that through Jesus Christ, God has done something that no set of laws can do. Remember last week, we talked about the Old Covenant, the agreement between God and the Israelites, in which God promised 1. his blessing, 2. that the Israelites would have many descendants, and 3. that the Israelites

would have the promised land – only if they obeyed God’s law? And remember that now, with the New Covenant, which Jesus mediates between us and God, there is something far more important than that contract, that legal document.

Through Jesus, God has given us something that can overcome sin. This is grace, which consists of unearned, freely given forgiveness and love. This grace is more powerful than the law. It is more powerful than the Old Covenant. And because it can overcome evil, we are saved simply through faith. This is why we don’t have to worry about performing good deeds in order to be saved. It is also why we naturally want to live the way Jesus lived. Through the New Covenant, which is based on the mediation of Jesus Christ and not on law, we have a power inside of us that is far greater than evil.

It can be hard to feel God’s grace within us. We see so many horrible things going on in this world and it can break our spirit. We can become complacent and withdrawn. We need to remind ourselves constantly that there is a presence in this world - and within us - that is far greater than all of those terrible things we see happening.

Here is another way of looking at it. We can be assured that God will never turn away from us. Nothing can shake God’s love for us. There is nothing we can

do that cannot be forgiven. God's love for us - as expressed in the grace that he gives us and that acts within us every day - will outlive the existence of this world.

Nothing is more powerful than God's grace. Period. And it's ours.

To Paul, and to us, God isn't some distant being that we can only fuzzily understand. There isn't a set of laws that dictate our interactions with God, or our ability to reach God with prayer, or our ability to be forgiven, or our ability to one day spend eternity with God. The Old Covenant of the Old Testament is gone. The New Covenant was created through the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ, and it isn't based on some legal document. The Old Covenant was the story of a people, the Israelites and their contract with God. The New Covenant is the story of one person – Jesus Christ – and his personal relationship with us. The New Covenant gives us a gift from God that is infinitely more powerful than the law.

God's love for us in the ultimate form of security. That is what the New Covenant has given us.

Let me try an analogy. Remember my aunt, with a heart that was too weak to allow her to walk, with three children in her house that she had to protect, with a man pointing a gun at her? She was going to hand over the coin collection,

of course. And as people who have seen the dangers of putting personal information out on the web, we know that it was foolish to advertise the coin collection in the local paper. But there she was, Aunt Loretta, in grave danger.

However, there was someone who loved her very much, someone she had raised from a kitten brought to the U.S. by her husband several years before. My aunt loved that animal dearly and it spent most of its waking hours at her side. As it turns out, that cat, whose name I have to admit I don't remember, liked to sleep on the top of an easy chair that sat near the front door. When the man broke in through the front door, that ocelot was awakened. It didn't know what was going on. But it knew that this person whom it loved more than anything else in all of existence, was under threat. That ocelot felt the fear in my aunt's heart.

That ocelot also realized that this fear was directed at that thing in the robber's hand. That cat's love for my aunt was like God's love for us: total and unquestioning. Nothing was more important to that cat than my aunt. No evil could walk into that living room and confound that ocelot's love for Aunt Loretta.

Now, let me say that I am telling a gory story for the second week in a row. I promise that this is unusual for me, so don't get nervous about showing up for church next week.

That ocelot leapt off that chair with the mission of getting rid of whatever it was in that man's hand that was scaring my aunt to so badly. Before she could hand over that coin collection, before she could even say anything, her pet ocelot had bitten off this man's forearm.

I remember being about fourteen years-old and my father answering the phone when Loretta's husband called the next morning. Now, my father was a kind man, a gentle man and a gentleman. But he was an ex-Marine. He was a sniper in World War II. I remember him asking, "So, what did the cat do to the guy?", and then after hearing what happened, my dad laughed. "That was a smart idea," said my dad, "giving her that cat."

You see, that was the real reason my uncle gave his wife an ocelot. He was leaving a protector in the house. That cat in that house was like God in our lives.

In case you're wondering, the man survived and went to prison with one arm. Back then, they didn't even take an animal away from someone after it did something like that. It stayed in my aunt's house.

God will always stay in our lives. God will never leave. God will never have anything more important than us.

I'd like to end with a brief prayer.

God, it can be very difficult for us to understand your love for us, to feel it in our lives. We ask that you help us to feel your presence and to share that feeling with others. We thank you for your dependability and your grace. We praise your ability to conquer all that is evil.

We ask, God, for an extra measure of your grace for all people in this world who are suffering from illness, loss of loved ones, fear of war and oppression, hunger, and physical pain.

And we ask for your guidance as we strive to live the way your son lived, to love our fellow humans, to value the poorest and the lowest, to cherish children, and to always feel your hand on our shoulders.

We thank you for the joyous life you have given us in the New Covenant.

Most of all, let us never forget 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.*

Amen.