



# #8 “what about suffering?”

To consider how the Christian person should understand the place of suffering in their lives (Romans 8:28-39).



Sue Sylvester is the chief antagonist in the hit TV show “Glee”. In one episode, one of the characters says to her: “what happened to you Sue? Tell me. What horrible, horrible thing made you into such a miserable tyrant?”

SUE: “Since I was a little girl, I had exactly one hero – my big sister. How much I worshipped her! She was the sun and the moon to me. While I was still very young I noticed that other people didn’t feel the way I did. People were rude to her. They were cruel. They laughed at her. And so I began to pray. I prayed every night for her to get better and nothing changed. So I prayed harder and after a while I realized that **it wasn’t that I was praying hard enough, it was that no-one was listening**”.

Q1. Why does the character Sue Sylvester give up on God?

- *She gives up on God because she believes that God has given up on her, because he didn’t answer her prayers in the way that she wanted. She felt “no one was listening”. Either God wasn’t there – or if he was there, that he didn’t care.*

“Romans” is a letter in the latter half of the Bible. It is believed to have been written around 60’s AD, by the Apostle Paul, to the young church in Rome (hence the name). Paul wanted to encourage the church by explaining the “gospel” to them. The key sentence of the letter is this: **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...”** [Romans 1:16]<sup>1</sup>

The word “gospel” just means good news. The good news is to do with salvation – with being saved from God’s anger at humanity. It’s a solution that God himself provides in the sacrifice of his son Jesus (see session 1 on Romans 1:18-32, and session 2 on Romans 3:21-26). It’s a solution that requires trusting God’s promise that Jesus’ death is enough to pay for our wrongdoing (see session 3 on Romans 4:18-25). Two of the benefits of relationship with God are peace and hope (see session 4 on Romans 5:1-11). Jesus’ sacrificial death on behalf of others is a

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powerful incentive to obey God rather than indulge in wrongdoing (session 5 on Romans 6:1-14). The normal life experience of the Christian person is an on-going struggle with sin (session 6 on Romans 7:7-25). There is power to change, and an obligation to change, thanks to God's Spirit (session 7 on Romans 8:1-17). But how is the Christian person to understand the suffering that they go through, which also comes under God's hand?

### **Romans 8:28-39**

**28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.**

**31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 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? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”<sup>2</sup>**

**37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 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.**

Q2. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him”. How would the character Sue Sylvester react to those words? [hint: see Romans 8:28-29]

• *How Sue's character (or any real person) react to these words depends on how they understand the word “good”. According to Paul, our “good” is not our personal happiness or fulfillment now. God's plans are not centred around us but around Jesus. God's overall plan is to provide Jesus with a family of believers who conform to his likeness.*

To answer the next question, it will be helpful to keep the following in mind (this is the next stage in Paul's argument):

### **Romans 9:15-16**

**<sup>15</sup> For he [God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” <sup>16</sup> It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.**

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<sup>2</sup> Paul is quoting from the Old Testament, Psalm 44:22.

Q3. In Romans 8:28-30, what confidence boost does Paul give to the readers in terms of them actually making it to the end and sharing in the glory?

• *The confidence boost comes in two forms:*

- *That God initiated the relationship with them in the first place. In verse 29 “For God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”. What does the word “foreknew” mean? One possible interpretation is that God simply knew in advance who would respond freely to message of Jesus’ sacrifice for them. The problem with this interpretation is that it largely leaves salvation in the hands of human beings. This doesn’t fit with what Paul goes on to talk about in Chapter 9, that who is saved is God’s choice and God’s business (see Romans 9:15-16 above). So “foreknew” must have a more active sense in the idea that God chooses to initiate relationship. If at the end of the day God’s choice underlies human decisions then this is the basis for great assurance.*
- *That God won’t lose anyone along the way. Verse 30: Those God predestines (person chosen for eternal relationship), he calls (circumstances and timing when person becomes a believer), he justifies (the benefits of the death of Jesus applied to that person), he glorifies (person experiences eternal relationship). Notice the past tense of all these words, including “glorified”. The future glorification is such a certainty that Paul can speak of it as if it’s actually already happened.*

Q4. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” In what ways is God on the side of his people? [hint: see Romans 8:31-34]

• *God is “for” his people:*

- *Because he gave up the most precious thing he had – his Son, for them (verse 32). He has invested heavily in his people – for their good.*
- *Because no one can bring a charge against a person God has chosen – verse 33. This means a person does not have to fear that some sin will be flung up in their face in the future to condemn them. All sin has been paid for by Jesus, so God’s person is completely justified (has a right standing with God).*
- *Because God listens to his Son who intercedes for his people (verse 34). The only one who can condemn people for their sin is Jesus. He now intercedes (or acts as an advocate) for God’s people. Further question: who benefits from Jesus’ advocacy? It can’t be God himself – because he already knows whom he has chosen! So it’s God’s people who really benefit in knowing that they have an advocate. They can be completely sure that their salvation is secure. The one who died for them will also speak on their behalf.*

In a sense, the unanswered prayer conquers the character Sue Sylvester’s trust in God.

Q5. What will help a Christian person to ‘conquer’ suffering rather than being conquered by it? [Romans 8:37]

• *It is all of Paul’s argument in this passage:*

- *That God initiated the relationship in the first place*
- *That God won’t lose anyone along the way*
- *That God is “for” his people in Jesus (the sacrifice and the advocate)*
- *The relationship in the first place*

- *So from a human point of view, the Christian person, when they undergo suffering, can choose to be like butter or clay in the sun. Butter melts; clay hardens. They can choose in times of suffering, to keep struggling to trust God (based on the objective evidence of God's love for them in the sacrifice of Jesus) or they can give up. (Incidentally, the ones who are chosen by God will choose to be butter).*

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