

Feeling Unlovely? God of Love – Romans 5:8

Scripture Reading: Romans 5:1-11

Introduction

It's by design that we are wrapping up our "But God..." sermon series as we enter what is widely known as the holy week leading up to Resurrection Sunday

And it's by design that our final sermon of the series deals with God's love

Last week we saw that the default state of all mankind is to be spiritually dead and how, as the walking dead, the unredeemed are completely powerless to do anything on their own to redeem themselves before God

Then we saw how God extends mercy and grace that can be accepted through faith and that he does so out of love

This week, as we look forward in contemplation to Good Friday we will be exploring God's love towards us and how he expressed it in the ultimate gift of sending his Son to die on our behalf; that is, to pay the penalty for our sins

Romans 5:8 is where we find our "but God..." in this passage that, once again, shows the difference that God makes in any situation

Romans 5:8 is Paul's version of John 3:16 as he explains how God demonstrates his love for us and in the verses that follow, Paul fleshes out his statement in Romans 5:5 where he says God poured his love into our hearts

And he does so by first showing us the desperate condition we were in and God's remarkable provision for it and then the remainder of the verses we are considering today go on to tell us why our hope in heaven is certain

And as we saw last week there is nothing about us that would cause God to provide for us and what he does isn't because of anything good in us

Let's take a look at our desperate condition as Paul lays it out before us in these verses:

I. Our desperate condition

Paul uses four terms here to show what we were like when he sent his Son to die for us and as we consider them you will notice a kind of progression from bad to worse

First Paul says in verse 6 [**Romans 5:6**] that we were "**weak**" – while we were powerless and unable to help ourselves where righteousness is concerned

We saw this in **Ephesians 2:1-2** last week where Paul says we were the walking dead – and being dead is as weak as it gets

But Paul makes a similar point using different analogies in several of his other letters

He says in **2Corinthians 4:4** that we were blind and unable to see the light of the gospel

And in **1Corinthians 2:14** he says that the gospel is unintelligible to the natural man so that we couldn't understand it

Then in **Romans 3:11**, he says that since no one understands; no one seeks after God

And in **Romans 8:7-8** Paul says that our minds were hostile to God and unable to please God

So when Paul says we were "weak" he means completely and utterly powerless and unable to do anything at all to bring about reconciliation with God – in fact, we were unwilling to do so as we will see in the other descriptors he uses

Also in verse 6 [**Romans 5:6**], Paul says we were "**ungodly**" – *Christ died for the ungodly*

As unredeemed people, we were without reverence and by our nature profane in our conduct and our speech

At the very least we were living without regard for anything concerning God or godliness – we were unlike God

We were living examples of the truth of **Isaiah 55:8-9** and there was a divide between us and God that we could not span on our own even if we had wanted to

Then in verse 8 [**Romans 5:8**], Paul says we were still “*sinners*”

In this descriptor, we see that we were living out our nature and living contrary to God’s Word doing what we ought not
It moves us from the realm of our nature into the realm of our activity

Romans 3:23 tells us that we all have sinned and it naturally follows that since we were powerless to help ourselves and since we had no regard for God anyway to be concerned about that we would act according to our ungodliness

So we all went astray and lived to please ourselves and for our own glory doing as our nature informed us as we see in **Isaiah 53:6**

And we see the result in our final descriptor found in verse 10 [**Romans 5:10**] where Paul says we were God’s “*enemies*”

I don’t know about you but this descriptor is the most troubling to me in some odd way

Just to think of living at enmity with God of being hostile toward God and actually living in opposition to God sounds rather satanic – and of course, it is because Satan has determined to live in complete opposition to God

But Paul says that is what we all were like as we lived in opposition to God and in hostility to his lordship in our lives

I believe you would agree with me that Paul’s description of the state of unredeemed mankind paints an unlovely picture

But it serves to show us that our hope cannot be in ourselves; it can’t come from within

There will be no man-made utopia filled with perfect people that can appeal to God based on their goodness because that cannot be achieved by weak, ungodly, and sinful people who by their nature are in opposition to God

It’s profitable for us to recognize that fact because it’s only after we view our sin the way God does and see the depths at which we reside that we can stop placing hope in our own virtue or merit and begin to appreciate his great love for us and our need of the Savior

That brings us to our Roman numeral two – God’s remarkable provision for us which we see in our “but God…” verse, **Romans 5:8**

II. God’s remarkable provision

And, oh what a difference it makes!

...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us

God proves his love toward us by taking the initiative to rescue us from our desperate condition

And looking back to verse 6 [**Romans 5:6**] we read that “*Christ died for the ungodly*”

We need to recognize that when Paul says we were God’s enemies that enmity is a two-way street

We were living in open rebellion and hostility toward God but God also looked upon us and our sinful state with righteous disgust – we were hostile toward God and he was hostile toward our sin

But he also loved us so he orchestrated and initiated the plan that would result in our salvation

The scope and expanse of God’s love is quite a bit different than our usual concept of love and Paul uses an example of human love in verse 7 [**Romans 5:7**] – let’s look at what he says and unpack his meaning

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die

This verse has been the subject of many interpretations and debates so let’s try to make some sense out of what Paul is saying here

First he says hardly anyone would be willing to die for a righteous person – it would be quite difficult to find someone who would volunteer to give up their life even for the godliest person

Even when we picture the best, most moral, most innocent person we know; if we are honest, we would probably not be all too eager to take a bullet for them – that much is pretty easy to understand

But then Paul clouds the issue when he says that maybe someone might dare to die for a *good* person where good means to have positive moral qualities of a general nature or someone who is beneficial in some way

So Paul could be making an initial statement of how unlikely it is that someone would die for someone else and then qualifying it a bit by admitting that there are cases where someone might die for the right kind of person

Or he could be saying that one wouldn't likely die for a person who was just morally upright in the general sense but that they might be willing to die for someone who had been kind to them in the past

We certainly hear of those kinds of sacrifices in wartime when one soldier will throw himself on a grenade to save his brothers in arms who would otherwise be killed but we recognize that as a supreme form of heroism and self-sacrifice

And even then, it's an action taken in the heat of the moment based on an instinctive decision made in an instant

We don't want to speculate too much or press Paul's analogy too far because his point is clear

If it is this difficult and rare for someone to agree to die for the righteous and good; what about the unrighteous or those who have no redeeming qualities and are neither pleasant nor beneficial in any tangible sense?

What about someone who truly deserves to die or someone who has treated you badly?

How willing would you be to die for them?

I think we would agree that it would be virtually impossible for us to even conceive of being willing to die so that our enemy could live

And yet that's exactly what God did for each of us – God the father demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son and Jesus demonstrated his love for us by dying upon the cross

It's amazing that the depth of mankind's depravity was no barrier to the height of God's love

Just think for a moment about the remarkable fact that when we were underserving sinners; children of wrath living in opposition to God; Jesus died for us, his enemies

Next week, on Good Friday, Christ-followers everywhere are going to contemplate the cross as mankind's ultimate act of rejection of the things of God and therefore hatred toward God himself

It was a truly heinous act against the only truly innocent and righteous man to ever walk the earth but it was all according to the plan of the Father and Son to demonstrate their love for mankind

God proves his love for mankind in many ways but none as great as what he did at the cross – the cross is truly the ultimate expression of God's love

One more thing we want to consider quickly is found in verse 6 [**Romans 5:6**]

Notice those four little words "*at the right time*" which show that it was God's plan all along to send his Son

This was not afterthought on God's part where he looked over the earth and thought "I'd better do something"

Paul references this fact also in **Galatians 4:4** where he says

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son..."

God sent Jesus to earth according to his eternal plan to fit his purpose and the death of Christ was right on schedule and God sends Jesus into the life of each individual for their salvation when the time is right for them

But God wasn't finished as we see the reality for the believer who has placed his complete trust and reliance in the Son. In verses 10 and 11 [**Romans 5:10-11**] Paul presents one of his arguments where he uses the example of something greater to prove the reality of something lesser.

And he says that if God sent his Son to die on our behalf in order to make things right between us and God when we were his mortal enemies, he will surely continue to care for us now that we are his friends and part of his forever family. In other words, since God didn't hesitate to undertake the ultimate act of love in sending his Son to die for us, he isn't going to balk at continuing to love and bless us once we've accepted his gracious gift.

The love of God is the total truth for the Christ-follower for all eternity.

But there are some important realities that we need to recognize and acknowledge so that we don't get the wrong idea.

III. Some important recognitions

Rob Bell, former pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan authored the controversial book "Love Wins" that caused a firestorm in the Christian community when it was released in 2011.

In that book, Mr. Bell espoused a kind of universalism by saying that everyone would be saved in the end and no one would be condemned to hell because, in the end, God's love wins.

Universalism is a very old idea going all the way back at least to Origen in the 3rd Century A.D. that has waxed and waned in popularity through the years and enjoyed a real resurgence with the release of Bell's book.

It sounds good to our ears and soothes our consciences to believe that God's love is paramount and, as the defining characteristic of God, that God's love won't allow him to condemn anyone to hell.

And when we read verses like **1John4:16** which says very plainly "God is love" we can misunderstand who God is and start to head down the path of universalism.

But "God is love" is not all the Bible has to say about the nature of God even though, as I said a few moments ago, God's love is the complete truth for each and every true follower of Jesus Christ.

Look with me again at verse 9 of our passage [**Romans 5:9**] which says –

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

What does it mean when it says that we will be saved by Jesus from the wrath of God?

Well, wrath is anger or fury and biblically it indicates "the emotional response to perceived wrong and injustice"

In this case it refers to God's anger and resulting actions that man's sin provokes.

But God's wrath isn't like our wrath.

God is not a grumpy old man who is irritated by us and lashing out.

No; God's wrath tells us of the judgment of God that brings about serious consequences for the unrepentant sinner.

God's wrath is the proper and necessary reaction to objective moral evil as J.I. Packer puts it in his book Knowing God.

While we would prefer to think of God only as the God of love; love is not all that defines God and who he is.

God is also just and he can no more allow sin to go unpunished than he can ignore a person's repentance.

So, if we want to say that God accepts those who truly repent and trust in his Son into heaven, then we have to also say he cannot possibly do so for those who do not.

Romans 2:5 tells us that those who are unrepentant are "[storing] up wrath for themselves on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed"

Those who prefer to think of God in Universalist terms like to quote John 3:16-17 to bolster their case.

And we often use those same verses when we are sharing the gospel with those whom we are trying to introduce to our Savior - and rightly so because they are a concise summation of the gospel message

Let's look at those verses together [**John 3:16-17**]

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

People like Rob Bell like to read right past the part in verse 16 that limits the promise of eternal life to those who believe in Christ in favor of the statement that God didn't send his Son to condemn the world but to save it

And they completely ignore the fact that just a little further down on the page we come to **John 3:36** which says quite plainly –

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

God is no sentimentalist and his love is not a grandfatherly love that only *prefers* we accept his Son and obey him but will in the end tolerate our disbelief and disobedience with a stern look, a harsh word, and a loving lap

God's love isn't fickle and, even though he is the very definition of love, he is also justice and he must be true to himself

We need to understand that God does indeed love the world and everyone in it but we also need to recognize and accept that God's love didn't begin with us and it isn't centered on us

Reason along with me for a few moments here and consider that God is immutable which means that God never changes – you agree with me on that truth, right?

Now consider the fact that God is love and for love to exist there must be a lover and a loved – the one who loves and the object of that love – that's logical, right?

Now ask yourself, if God is love and if God has always been love, what was the object of God's love before he created the world?

It was love within the Godhead

The fact that God is love is a very strong evidence of the Triune nature of God – love has always existed among the persons of the Trinity and God's love for himself is one of the reasons he must act as he does

John 3:35 tells us – *The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand*

And **John 14:31** quotes Jesus saying – *...I do as the Father has commanded me so that the world may know that I love the Father...*

It's really a good thing that God's love for himself and his holiness and his righteousness and his justice cannot allow sin to go unpunished and that he must pour out his wrath on those who don't accept the gracious gift of his Son

Because that also means that once he poured out his wrath on his Son on the cross of Calvary that he will be just as faithful to demonstrate his justice in not only not condemning all who accept that sacrifice as payment for their sins and accept Christ as the Lord of their life but he will also reward them as he has promised

Most people tend to vacillate between having an image of God as a stern, harsh judge who will punish for no reason and viewing him as a sappy, soft grandfather type who will let anything slide and accept us just as we are

But we can rejoice in knowing that God is not capricious and he will always act in accordance with his nature which means we can rely on him

God does indeed love each and every person just as they are but it's also true that he loves them too much to leave them that way and he will judge those who fail to accept his Son even as he blesses those who accept him

Conclusion

Evangelist Paul Washer is quoted as saying: “The most difficult task you are ever going to overcome is to look in the mirror of God’s Word and see your sin as it truly is and then to believe that God loves you as much as he says he does.”

That’s very true but also very necessary because it’s only when we fully grasp our unloveliness that we can fully appreciate God’s love and provision for us

But an equally difficult task we must overcome is accepting the reality that God’s love, though universal in its provision of potential salvation through the shed blood of Christ is not universal in its application

God’s love is the complete and total picture for the believer

But no one can rightly say, “God loves me just the way I am so there is no need for repentance, no need for God’s mercy, and no need for Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

Those who enter eternity believing that will find that the wrath of God remains on them and that God’s justice will be, in fact *must* be, done

Every person who is born starts out as one of the walking dead – as powerless, ungodly sinners who are living in rebellion against God

Everyone is truly unlovely in God’s eyes as long as they remain in their sins but he chose to love us anyway and he sent his Son to die so that we who are unlovely might partake of his love that leads to salvation

That’s the message of the Holy Week before us

I want to leave you with two thoughts this morning

I want you to leave contemplating and celebrating and thanking God for his love for you that he so wonderfully demonstrated some 2,000 years ago on a rough, wooden cross on the hill called Golgotha

If you are a believer, if you are a true follower of Jesus Christ, you will only ever know God as the God of love

But I also want you to leave recognizing that that isn’t the truth for all mankind

Sadly, the multitude around us will one day know God not as the God of love but as the God of wrath and that should be a sobering thought for us

And as nice as our neighbors and others we know who are outside of Christ seem to us they remain unlovely before God and God will not withhold his wrath against them forever – he cannot do so and be true to himself

So I encourage you this week as you contemplate what the Father and Son have done for you; that you would renew your intentions and efforts toward reaching others so that they might also experience the God of love

Easter is a one of those times when we have abundant opportunity to point people to the cross and I implore you to find ways to do so within your circle of influence

Let’s pray