

There are so many things in our life which threaten to disrupt our faith. We all know of people who used to be very strong Christians, the kind of people who went to church every single Sunday. And yet, for whatever reason, they fell away. Maybe it was for some small issue. They didn't agree with something, and as a result they stopped coming. But maybe it was some very big issue. Something that happened in their lives that really caused them to question. To ask things like: "Why is this happening to me? Where is God in the midst of all of this? Why did God let this happen?" And when dealing with those questions, they're not really sure how to find an answer, and so as a result, they fall away. Now, we as Christians should, of course, pray for those who have fallen, that they would come back and be restored to the Church once more. But we should also remember that there is always a danger for us as well, because we also may find ourselves in a similar situation, having to wrestle with the same kinds of questions. And then what will happen to us in that moment?

Because think about what the Christians in Paul's time had to deal with. If they were Jews who had become Christians, that always meant that they would be rejected by their own family. Their own community would throw them out. Their worst enemies would be those they loved. Or if they weren't Jews, they would still be treated as outcasts even within their own society. Because Romans saw Christians as being a threat to everything. They were the kind of people who needed to be stamped out, the kind of people who were going to tear everything down if you just let them go on. And so they needed to do something about it. And so not long after Paul's time, persecutions began to break out, and they would continue, more or less, for the next three hundred years. People were dying simply because they were Christians. And even in times of peace, when things weren't quite as severe, they still had to deal with the suspicion of all their neighbors. Because they would say things like, "Well, why can't you just go along with what everyone else is doing? Why can't you just offer sacrifice like everybody else? Why can't you just be normal?" And so when faced with that kind of pressure, that led them to ask these questions. Because being a Christian meant having to sacrifice many things for the sake of Christ. After all, didn't Jesus himself say, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me"?

But this is still the reality of being a Christian, even now. Because following Christ means that you're going to be different from those around you. You may even be different from your own family. And being different is always going to cause problems, one way or another. And facing this fact, facing this reality can be a very difficult thing to us to bear. Now, it could be other things too. It could be dealing with loss. It could be dealing with a bad situation. Whatever it may be, it may lead us to ask those questions. So we need something to hold on to in the midst of those times. We need something we can rely on so that we don't fall away.

And in our reading for this evening from Romans chapter 8, Paul gives us something to hold on to. He gives us something we can rely on in the midst of our troubles. And in fact, he quotes Psalm 44 in the course of that reading, the same psalm which we just read as part of our worship service. Because that psalm is a perfect picture of what he's talking about. That Psalm is a perfect picture of what it means to have confidence and hope even in the midst of suffering.

Because Psalm 44 has five main sections in it. The first three verses, the first section talks about what God did in the past for his people. Verse 1, for example, says: "O God, we have heard with

our ears, our fathers have told us what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old." Because think about all those miracles that he did for his people, Christians. He led them through the Red Sea. He caused them to pass through the Jordan River. He led them into Canaan, gave them victory after victory. Even when they were hopelessly outnumbered, a hundred to one, they still won the battle, because the Lord fought on their side. And in that way, God can help them, because he's done it in the past. And he can even help us now, as the second section goes on to say, verses 4 through 8. Verse 5, for example, says: "Through you we push down our foes. Through your name we tread down those who rise up against us." So God can do all of these things for us, Christians. God can help us. That's why we trust in him.

But there's a problem, and that problem is what we see in the third section, verses 9 through 16. The problem is that God seems far away. He seems like he's not helping us, like he's nowhere to be found. And the Psalm talks about the troubles that God's people were going through at that time. They were being rejected by their enemies, trampled underfoot by those who are running over them, suffering defeat after defeat, even being cast out of the promised land. And so in this way, they were wondering, why was this happening? Verse 14, for example, says: "You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples." Where was God in the midst of all of this? Why was this happening? What happened to all of those miracles? Why did it seem like these things were so much bigger than God? Was he ever going to help? That's why it's so hard to deal with these things, Christians, because God seems far away when we need him most.

But that fourth section, verses 17 to 22, continues to show trust in Lord. We can trust him because, despite everything that is happening, we can look to him for help. We can look to him in the midst of our troubles and be confident, because the Lord is still with us. And he will deliver us from all of our problems. That's why Paul quotes verse 22 in our reading from Romans. Though we may be like sheep waiting to be slaughtered, yet we can still be confident. Because even in the midst of that difficult position, even in that place where it seems like there's no way out, God will still help his people. That's why the last section cries to him for help. Verse 23 says: "Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever." And that's not a cry of defeat. That's not a hopeless cry, wondering if anything is going to happen. We can call on the Lord in this way because we know he can do something. Because we know that he can help. He will answer us. He will save us from all of these evils. And even if we are facing death for being a Christian, as many Christians in the past have, the Lord is and will always be our help.

Because Paul in our reading from Romans shows us the answer to that cry. God answers our cry for help in his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is ours, Christians, and for that reason we can be confident in the face of all things. God is on our side. Who could possibly stand against us? God gave his own Son, Jesus Christ, for your sake. So why would you think that he would just forget you after that? Who could possibly accuse you of sin? God's forgiven you through Jesus. Who could condemn you? Jesus died and rose again. In fact, who could separate you, Paul says, from the love of Jesus? Because Jesus has overcome all things, and he is with you in all things. In fact, Christians, he's praying for you. Jesus prays for you by name to the Father. He's talking about all of your problems, praying about everything that you are going through. And Jesus knows every hair that is on your head. He knows you better than you know yourself. And if Jesus cares about

you that much, he's going to take care of you. And nothing will ever stand between him and his love for you. This is why verse 37 says: "In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Even as we suffer like sheep, we are more than conquerors in Jesus. We are hyper-conquerors. We are unstoppable. We have overcome all things in him, because nothing can stand up to Jesus. Jesus will accomplish all things, and nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever get in the way of his love for you.

Do you see what kind of confidence that gives us, Christians? What kind of joy that gives us? We may indeed suffer many things because we are Christians. And that will never be easy. Paul is not saying it's going to be easy. But what he is saying is that these things cannot take us away from Jesus. Nothing can separate us from him, because Jesus will bring us through all of our trials to himself without fail without a doubt. Nothing can separate us from his love.

So are you dealing with illnesses, Christians, even life-threatening illnesses? These things cannot take you away from Jesus. Because even though the body wastes away, Jesus is preparing you for glory. Even though we die, yet will we live in him. Because no illness will ever take us away from Jesus. Are you facing ridicule and mockery for saying what the Bible says? Suffering abuse even from those who you know very well? These things cannot take you away from Jesus. Because Jesus has overcome all things, even those who mocked him. And those who mock you will bow before him when he comes in glory. Because no one can keep you away from Jesus. Christians, are you losing heart because of the way the world is going? How it seems like everything is getting worse and worse with each passing day? These things cannot keep you from Jesus. Because Jesus reigns in victory. Jesus will put all things under his feet. And all of these things which seem so big, which seem so unstoppable, so unbeatable, will come to an end when Jesus brings them to an end, because he is the king of all things. And nothing can keep you away from him.

So no matter how big the cross may be, Christians, that you have to carry, it will not keep you away from Jesus, because he loves you. And nothing in heaven or on earth or under the earth will ever be able to stop his love for you. So lift up your heads! God is with you. And if God is for you, who can be against you? Face all things bravely and confidently, because nothing can stop Jesus from taking care of you. As Paul says in those beautiful words at the end of our reading: "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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."

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you are the king of all things, and you hold all things in your mighty hand. Help us always to trust in you, knowing that you will care for us, and that nothing can separate us from your love; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.