I have several favorite passages in the Bible. I think most of us do. Sometimes a passage makes my list of favorites because of the beauty of it; I like the way the words sound. Or, sometimes it's a passage that I learned as a child, and it brings to mind a feeling or memory, or a person dear to me. But most of my favorite scriptures are favorites because they are ones that speak to my heart and tell me what I need to know about God. I've found through the years that the passages that are at the very top of my list of favorites might change a little from time to time, probably depending on what I most need to know about God at any given time.

For instance, as a teen, when I sometimes might not have felt very lovable and what I needed most was to know that God loved me completely and unconditionally, then Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son would have been at the top of the list. When I was struggling with the fear of never finding anyone to share my life with and sometimes needed to know that God had my best interests at heart, Jeremiah 29:11 was the verse I clung to: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

At times when I've faced discouragement and felt like giving up; when I've needed to know that God is faithful in all circumstances, it has been Lamentations 3:21-24 that I've turned to:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

And at times when I’ve grown weary of the sorrow and loss that are a part of life, and needed to know God has something for us beyond the hurts and tears of this world, my favorite scripture has been these words of promise Revelation 21:

and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”
So, if you ask me on any given day what my favorite verse or passage of scripture is, you might get a little different answer, depending on the circumstances of my life and the need of my heart. But one passage of scripture that has always been near the top of the list is the passage from Romans 8. Because I always need to know, always long to hear, that no matter what the circumstances, nothing can come between me and God’s love and care for me.

I like to sometimes use Max Lucado’s writings in my sermons, because well, because I like the way he says things. I find he manages to get at the heart of who God is and how God loves us in a simple yet profound way. And I’m going to do it again today, because I love what he says about this Romans passage. He recognizes that what we all really need; really want to know, is how much God loves us; that God loves us so much that nothing can ever separate us from that love. I’d like to share most of a chapter he calls, “What We Really Want to Know.” It’s from his book, “In the Grip of Grace.” And just a note, if some of it makes you think to yourself, “Gee, I seems like I’ve read something like this someplace recently,” it’s because I used a section of it in my last newsletter article.

So listen as Max Lucado reflects on the questions that Paul raises in the 8th chapter of Romans and the questions that we all ask ourselves from time to time about God and how much God loves us.

“What We Really Want to Know”
from “In The Grip of Grace” by Max Lucado

It was her singing that did it. At first I didn’t notice. Had no reason to. The circumstances were commonplace. A daddy picking up his six-year-old from a Brownie troop meeting. Sara loves Brownies; she loves the awards she earns and the uniform she wears. She’d climbed in the car and shown me her new badge and freshly baked cookie. I’d turned onto her favorite music, and turned my attention to more sophisticated matters of schedules and obligations.

But only steps into the maze of thought I stepped back out. Sara was singing. Singing about God. Singing to God. Head back, chin up, and lungs full, she filled the car with music. Heaven’s harps paused to listen.

Is that my daughter? She sounds older. She looks older, taller, even prettier. Did I sleep through something? What happened to the chubby cheeks? What happened to the little face and pudgy fingers? She is becoming a young lady. Blonde hair down to her shoulders. Feet dangling over the seat. Somewhere in the night a page had turned and well, look at her!
If you’re a parent you know what I mean. Just yesterday diapers, today the car keys? Suddenly your child is halfway to the dormitory, and you’re running out of chances to show your love, so you speak.

That’s what I did. The song stopped and Sara stopped, and I ejected the tape and put my hand on her shoulder and said, “Sara, you’re something special.” She turned and smiled tolerantly. “Someday some hairy-legged boy is going to steal your heart and sweep you into the next century. But right now, you belong to me.”

She tilted her head, looked away for a minute, then looked back and asked, “Daddy, why are you acting so weird?”

I suppose such words would sound strange to a six-year-old. The love of a parent falls awkwardly on the ears of a child. My burst of emotions was beyond her. But that didn’t keep me from speaking.

There is no way our little minds can comprehend the love of God. But that didn’t keep him from coming.

And we, too, have tilted our heads. Like Sara, we have wondered what our Father was doing. From the cradle in Bethlehem to the cross in Jerusalem, we’ve pondered the love of our Father. What can you say to that kind of emotion? Upon learning that God would rather die than live without you, how do you react? How can you begin to explain such passion? If you’re Paul the apostle, you don’t. You make no statements. You offer no explanations. You ask a few questions. Five questions, to be exact.

Paul’s response to God’s grace is a quintet of queries, launched like fireworks, not to bring answers, but to bring amazement. Paul challenges anybody and everybody, in heaven, earth or hell, to answer them and deny the truth which they contain.

These questions are not new to you. You’ve asked them. In the night you’ve asked them; in anger you’ve asked them. The doctor’s diagnosis brought them to the surface, as did the court’s decision and the phone call from the bank. The questions are probes of pain and problem and circumstance. No, the questions are not new, but maybe the answers are.

*The Question of Protection*

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31 NIV).

The question is not simply, “who can be against us?” You could answer that one. Who is against you? Disease, inflation, corruption, exhaustion. Calamities confront, and fears imprison. Were Paul’s question, “Who can be against us?” we could list our foes much easier than we could fight them. But that is not the question. The question is, *IF GOD IS FOR US, who can be against us?*

Indulge me for a moment. Four words in this verse deserve your attention….. “God is for us.” ....
God is for you. Your parents may have forgotten you, your teachers may have neglected you, your siblings may be ashamed of you; but within reach of your prayers is the maker of the oceans. God!

God is for you. Not “may be,” not “has been,” not “was,” not “would be,” but “God is!” He is for you. Today. At this hour. At this minute. No need to wait in line or come back tomorrow. He is with you. He could not be closer than he is at this second. His loyalty won’t increase if you are better nor lessen if you are worse. He is for you.

God is for you. Turn to the sidelines; that’s God cheering your run. Look past the finish line; that’s God applauding your steps. Listen for him in the bleachers, shouting your name. Too tired to continue? He’ll carry you. Too discouraged to fight? He’s picking you up. God is for you.

God is for you. Had he a calendar, your birthday would be circled. If he drove a car, your name would be on his bumper. If there’s a tree in heaven, he’s carved your name in the bark. ……..

God is with you. Knowing that, who is against you? Can death harm you now? Can disease rob your life? Can your purpose be taken or your value diminished? No. Though hell itself may set itself against you, no one can defeat you. You are protected. God is with you.

The Question of Provision

“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?” (Rom. 8:32 NIV)

Suppose a man comes upon a child being beaten by thugs. He dashes into the mob, rescues the boy, and carries him to hospital. The youngster is nursed to health. The man pays for the child’s treatment. He learns that the child is an orphan and adopts him as his own and gives the boy his name. And then, one night, months later, the father hears the son sobbing into his pillow. He goes to him and asks about the tears.

“I’m worried, Daddy. I’m worried about tomorrow. Where will I get food to eat? How am I going to buy clothes to stay warm? And where will I sleep?”

The father is rightfully troubled. “Haven’t I shown you? Don’t you understand? I risked my life to save you. I gave my money to treat you. You wear my name. I’ve called you my son. Would I do all that and then not meet your needs?”

This is Paul’s question. Would he who gave his Son not meet our needs?

But still we worry. We worry about the IRS and the SAT and the FBI. We worry about education, recreation, and constipation. We worry that we won’t have enough money, and when we have money we worry that we won’t manage it well. We worry that the world will end before the parking meter expires. We worry what the dog things if he sees us step out of the shower. We worry that someday we’ll learn that fat-free yogurt was fattening.
Honestly, now. Did God save you so you would fret? Would he teach you to walk just to watch you fall? Would he be nailed to the cross for your sins and then disregard your prayers? Come on. Is Scripture teasing us when it reads, “He has put his angels in charge of you to watch over you wherever you go?” (Ps. 91:11)

I don’t think so either.

Two Questions about Guilt and Grace

“Who can accuse the people God has chosen? No one, because God is the One who makes them right. Who can say God’s people are guilty? No one, because Christ Jesus died, but he was also raised from the dead, and now he is on God’s right side, begging God for us” (Rom. 8:33:34).

Sometime ago I read a story of a youngster who was shooting rocks with a slingshot. He could never hit his target. As he returned to Grandma’s backyard, he spied her pet duck. On impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck was dead. The boy panicked and hid the bird in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching.

After lunch that day, Grandma told Sally to help with the dishes. Sally responded, “Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn’t you Johnny?” And she whispered to him, “Remember the duck!” So, Johnny did the dishes.

What choice did he have? For the next several weeks he was at the sink often. Sometimes for his duty, sometimes for his sin. “Remember the duck,” Sally’d whisper when he objected.

So weary of the chore, he decided that any punishment would be better than washing more dishes, so he confessed to killing the duck. “I know, Johnny,” his grandma said, giving him a hug. “I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave out of you."

He’d been pardoned, but he thought he was guilty. Why? He had listened to the words of his accuser.

You have been accused as well…..Every moment of your life, your accuser is filing charges against you. He has noticed every error and marked each slip. Neglect your priorities, and he will jot it down. Abandon your promises, and he will make a note. Try to forget your past; he’ll remind you. Try to undo your mistakes; he will thwart you……Can’t you see him? Pacing back and forth before God’s bench. Can’t you hear him? Calling your name, listing your faults.

He rails: “This one you call your child, God. He is not worthy. Greed lingers within. When he speaks, he thinks often of himself. He’ll go days without an honest prayer. Why, even this morning he chose to sleep rather than spend time with you. I accuse him of laziness, egotism, worry, distrust……”
As he speaks, you hang your head. You have no defense. His charges are fair. “I plead guilty, your honor,” you mumble.

“The sentence?” Satan asks.

“The wages of sin is death,” explains the judge, “but in this case the death has already occurred. For this one died with Christ.”

Satan is suddenly silent. And you are suddenly jubilant. You realize that Satan cannot accuse you. No one can accuse you! Fingers may point and voices may demand, but the charges glance off like arrows hitting a shield. No more dirty dishwater. No more penance. No more nagging sisters. You have stood before the judge and heard him declare, “Not guilty.”

“The Lord God helps me, so I will not be ashamed. I will be determined, and I know I will not be disgraced. He shows that I am innocent, and he is close to me. So who can accuse me? If there is someone, let us go to court together” (Isa. 50:7-8)

Once the judge has released you, you need not fear the court.

The Question of Endurance

“Can anything separate us from the love Christ has for us?” (Rom. 8:35).

There it is. This is the question. Here is what we want to know. We want to know how long God’s love will endure. Paul could have begun with this one. Does God really love us forever? Not just on Easter Sunday when our shoes are shined and our hair is fixed. We want to know (deep within, don’t we really want to know?) how does God feel about me when I’m a jerk? Not when I’m peppy and positive and ready to tackle world hunger. Not then. I know how he feels about me then. Even I like me then.

I want to know how he feels about me when I snap at anything that moves, when my thoughts are gutter-level, when my tongue is sharp enough to slice a rock. How does he feel about me then? That’s the question. That’s the concern……..

Did I drift too far? Wait too long? Slip too much?
That’s what we want to know.
Can anything separate us from the love Christ has for us?
God answered our question before we asked it. So we’d see his answer, he lit the sky with a star. So we’d hear it, he filled the night with a choir; and so we’d believe it, he did what no man had ever dreamed. He because flesh and dwelt among us.

He placed his hand on the shoulder of humanity and said, “You’re something special.”

Untethered by time, he sees us all. From the backwoods of Virginia to the business district of London; from the Vikings to the astronauts, from the cave-dwellers to the kings,…..he sees us. Vagabonds and ragamuffins all, he saw us before we were born.
And he loves what he sees. Flooded by emotion. Overcome by pride, the Starmaker turns to us, one by one, and says, “You are my child. I love you dearly. I’m aware that someday you’ll turn from me and walk away. But I want you to know, I’ve already provided you a way back.”

And to prove it, he did something extraordinary.

Stepping from the throne he removed his robe of light and wrapped himself in skin: pigmented, human skin. The light of the universe entered a dark, wet womb. He who angels worship nestled himself in the placenta of a peasant, was birthed into the cold night, and then slept on cow’s hay.

Mary didn’t know whether to give him milk or give him praise, but she gave him both since he was, as near as she could figure, hungry and holy.

Joseph didn’t know whether to call him Junior or Father. But in the end called him Jesus, since that’s what the angel said and since he didn’t have the faintest idea what to name a God he could cradle in his arms.

Neither Mary nor Joseph said it as bluntly as my Sara, but don’t you think their heads tilted and their minds wondered, “What in the world are you doing, God?” Or, better phrased, “God, what are you doing in the world?”

“Can anything make me stop loving you?” God asks. “Watch me speak your language, sleep on your earth, and feel your hurts. Behold the maker of sight and sound as he sneezes, coughs, and blows his nose. You wonder if I understand how you feel? Look into the dancing eyes of the kid in Nazareth; that’s God walking to school. Ponder the toddler at Mary’s table; that’s God spilling his milk

“You wonder how long my love will last? Find your answer on a splintered cross, on a craggy hill. That’s me you see up there, your maker, your God, nail-stabled and bleeding. Covered in spit and sin-soaked. That’s your sin I’m feeling. That’s your death I’m dying. That’s your resurrection I’m living. That’s how much I love you.”

“Can anything come between you and me?”...

Hear the answer and stake your future on the triumphant words of Paul: “I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruling spirits, nothing now, nothing in the future, no power, nothing above us, nothing below us, nor anything else in the whole world will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

So there are some of the answers to the questions of our hearts about whether God loves us, and how much God loves us, and how long God will love us. Surely. Infinitely. Deeply. Eternally. In all things. Always.

I’d like to close by reading verses 31-39 of the passage again, this time with a little different wording than we might be used to. Eugene Peterson has written a version of scripture called “The Message,” in which he paraphrases the message of the Bible in terms that we can understand today.
In Paul’s time the recipients of his letter to the Romans were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. They were in very real danger, and the things on Paul’s list were real and relevant. They knew about hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. They were real fears, they lived them. Today our list would be different. And it might be different for each of us, depending on what we most fear, most worry about. We might know what Paul means, but maybe it helps to hear it in a new way. So here is Romans 8:31-39 from “The Message”:

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us - who was raised to life for us! - is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture: They kill us in cold blood because they hate you. We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one. None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing - nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable - absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.