

Semicontinuous
Gen. 29:15–28
Ps. 105:1–11, 45b
Complementary
1 Kgs. 3:5–12
Ps. 119:129–136
Rom. 8:26–39
Matt. 13:31–33,
44–52

Inseparable Love

Goal for the Session Adults will examine the powers that cause separation and affirm that nothing will prevail against God's love.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Romans 8:26–39

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Karen Chakoian

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WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Steven D. Paulson

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SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

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The weight of all the forces that bring separation into our lives would appear to tip a scale completely over. Few, if any, do not know the weight of these powers; so it is most remarkable when Paul proclaims to these powers loudly and firmly: “No.” Shall these things prevail? Shall these things have the capacity to undo us, to undo the most central element of our lives—God's love? No, no, no! Paul makes a confession. He is convinced, he says, that nothing will prevail against God's love. The conflict of the powers is engaged head-on, and the victor is God's love.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Blair Alison Pogue

The suffering we and our world experience is caused in part by sin, the pervasive power that works to destroy and undermine the things and creatures of God. God is stronger than sin, but sin is still an active reality in our lives and in the cosmos. Through Christ's death and resurrection suffering is no longer passed on, bringing endless cycles of destruction and pain. Rather, Christ absorbs and transforms our suffering. Through him the struggles we face can be transformed into endurance, character, and hope. God uses our struggles to bring us to spiritual maturity.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:26–39

Focus on Your Teaching

Anyone who has ever loved has experienced the pain of separation, for separation from the things and people we love is part of being human. Most adults have known the pain of a child leaving home, a parent dying, a falling out with a friend, or the loss of a job that has given life meaning. But for some, a recent loss may deny them the perspective time can bring. Affirming that nothing, not even unbearable pain, can separate us from God's love is good news indeed.

God, I give thanks for your sustaining love that undergirds me even in the face of pain. Grant me insight as we explore the affirmations of your Word. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or board
- marker
- copy of the focus scripture from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Common English Version (CEV), New English Version (NIV), and *The Message*
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for August 3, 2014

For Responding

- option 1: pens, paper, Bibles, newsprint or board, marker
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- option 3: YouTube clip of “Veni Sancte Spiritus,” equipment to play it

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, print and post the heading “Life is all about separations” on newsprint or a board. Also print but do not yet post the following on newsprint:

- God never gives us more than we can handle.
- God gives us suffering and tribulation to make us stronger.
- The tragedy happened because it was God's will and part of God's plan.

If the various Bible translations are unavailable, use an Internet search engine to locate and download each version. Print Romans 8:18–39.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Greet any visitors and make introductions.

Call attention to the posted statement about separation. Ask for a show of hands as to whether participants agree or disagree. Then ask adults to name painful life separations such as divorce or death, and list these under the statement.

Tell the group that today's Scripture offers a strong affirmation in the face of difficult times. Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O God, we give thanks for your life-giving, life-affirming Word. Be with us as we study your Word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Ask participants with study Bibles to read the introduction to Romans silently and tell what the theme of Romans is and what the circumstances are to which Paul is writing. If no one mentions it, explain that Romans is shaped by Paul's understanding that history is about the relationship of the Creator to the creature. The theme is God's gracious act of reestablishing lordship over all of creation through the gift of Jesus Christ. We know little about the church

or churches in Rome to which the letter is addressed or about the circumstances in Rome or in those churches that may have initiated the letter. We do know it was written near the end of Paul's time as a preacher.

Form four pairs or small groups and give a different translation of the Scripture to each group. Give them time to read Romans 8:26–28 aloud in their small groups. Then ask someone from each group to read aloud verse 28 to the whole group. Discuss together how the meaning changes from version to version. By a show of hands, ask which version seems clearer to them.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Romans 8:26–39). Ask a volunteer to read aloud the “What?” excerpt. Ask:

- ✧ Do you remember hearing the words of today's passage at a funeral?
- ✧ What was the impact of hearing the passage at a time of loss?

If not even death can separate us from God, we can dare to show God's mercy to others while we live. And when it is time, we can die well.

Read the sidebar and invite the group's comments. Ask:

- ✧ How might Paul's words shape dying as well as living well?

Post the statements on losses, and tell the group that these are often heard at a time of suffering or tragedy. Ask:

- ✧ In light of Romans 8:28, what comments or responses do you have about these statements?
- ✧ In the face of suffering and separation, how can we be joined with God's spirit in God's good work?

In the same four groups or pairs, ask participants to read verses 18–27. Have a volunteer in each group read the “Where?” excerpt aloud. Invite volunteers to talk about their experience with prayer at a time when they had experienced a great loss. Ask:

- ✧ What happens when a loss is so great that we literally cannot find the will—let alone the words—to pray?

To move to Responding, ask someone to read aloud the “So What?” excerpt, and another volunteer to reread aloud verses 38–39. Revisit the list adults made in Gathering of separations and losses. Discuss which of these losses named by the group are included in the list of things Paul strongly affirms cannot separate us from the love of Christ. Ask:

- ✧ What is the basis of Paul's assurance that this is true?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **A Contemporary Rewrite** In rewriting verses from the passage to include the losses and separations they most fear, adults can make real the promise of God's presence in very particular ways. Ask participants to read verses 35 and 37–38 and name the things Paul lists as potential factors in separating us from God. List on newsprint or a board. Distribute paper and pens. Have adults write the verses on a sheet of paper,

leaving space to fill in their own particular losses. Encourage them to be as specific as possible to reflect the realities they face in their own lives. When they have finished, ask volunteers to read their personalized verses. Encourage participants to consider using what they have written in their own prayers this week, making additions to the verses as situations emerge in their lives.

- 2. The Forces That Separate** Over and above the powers in the world that separate are the ways in which we ourselves are complicit with those forces. By examining how we participate, whether knowingly or not, adults can engage in confession and affirm anew that nothing separates us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (A Judgment against Complicity) and pens. Ask adults to spend some time considering how they are complicit, individually and as members of societal institutions, including the church itself. Have them follow the direction on the sheet to write sentences of confession. When participants are finished, pray a litany prayer using what they wrote. Include the response, “Lord in your mercy, forgive our failure to resist evil,” after each participant’s sentence.



Taizé is an ecumenical monastic community in France. Founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schutz, a Protestant, more than 100,000 young people from around the world make pilgrimages to Taizé each year for prayer, Bible study, sharing, and communal work.

- 3. Invite the Spirit’s Intercession** In the face of personal or communal losses when we do not have the words to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us. Invoking the Spirit through a musical response affirms God’s presence and underscores that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Play the YouTube clip of “Veni Sancte Spiritus” (“Come Holy Spirit”), which may be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zasyz-tJkOg, a musical response from the Taizé community. Invite the group to listen quietly to the song, entering into prayer along with the repetitive words. An alternative option is to find a similar song invoking God’s presence and to sing it as a group.

CLOSING

Ask volunteers to respond to the following:

- ✠ Paul’s words could shape the way I live by . . .
- ✠ They could shape the way I approach dying by . . .

Invite the group to read aloud verses 35 and 37–39 from the four versions as a closing prayer of affirmation. Ask them to pause after the phrase “anything else in all creation” and silently add personal prayers that name powers that can separate.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for August 3, 2014, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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A Judgment against Complicity



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Finally, however, the text also stands as judgment against our own complicity with the forces that separate. The church itself has far too often been a purveyor of persecution. Those who profess conviction of the power of God’s love have fostered hardship, distress, and famine, or at the least have allowed them to fester undisturbed. Even those who have felt the judgment of their own complicity with the principalities and powers can be transformed by the power of God, who over and over again searches “the heart” and helps us in our weakness (vv. 26–27). Even when we do not know how to pray, the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (v. 26). The firm no to the powers proclaimed in this text can form a rallying cry for those who resist the powers of evil. It is a biblical version of the song “We Shall Overcome.” Proclaiming this jewel of the Christian canon at key moments when the church gathers is well worthwhile.

—Excerpted from David M. Greenhaw, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 282.

The writer observes that the church itself has been a purveyor of persecution. With what specific powers that separate do you think the church has been complicit, or at least has let fester undisturbed? List them here: _____

How have you, as an individual, turned aside from or ignored the powers that separate? _____

Write a sentence of confession to be included in the litany:

We confess, O Lord, that we have been complicit with powers that separate. For _____,
(response) “Lord in your mercy, forgive our failure to resist evil.”