

A Powerful Ending

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

By Pastor John H. Noordhof

Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church

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Evening Service

People of God: This evening we come to this powerful conclusion of this most powerful chapter in all of Romans, and perhaps in all of Scripture. After reading it, I was tempted to just say “Amen” and leave it at that. Let the words speak for themselves. But I can’t do that. We do need to dig into the text. Hopefully, by the end, our Amen to this passage will be more certain than ever.

Paul begins by asking a question: *What, then, shall we say in response to all this?* Say in response to what? To what he has said in the previous verses:

-In verse 28, Paul made the bold declaration of God's providential care for his children, that in all things God is at work for our good.

-In verses 29 and 30, we have that golden chain, concerning the certainty of our salvation. Those whom God foreknew he predestined, those he predestined he called, those he called he justified, those he justified he also gloried.

Stop and consider all of that. What can you say in response? Are there any words adequate to describe our response? What's there left to say?

Paul is able to muster some more words. In response to his own question, he issues five other questions. Five unanswerable questions. John Stott says on these verses: “Paul hurls these questions into space, as it were, in a spirit of bold defiance. He challenges anybody and anything, in heaven, or on earth, or even in hell, to answer them and to deny the truth which they contain. But there is no answer. For no-one and no-thing can harm the people whom God has foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified.”

These questions remain unanswered. Not that we don't know the answer. Because we do know how to answer them. But the answers can remain unspoken. That's because the question itself contains the truth of the matter. The question is its own answer. For that reason, the questions merely

have to raised in order to make their point. The first question is the clearest example of what I mean.

Paul asks: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* Now if Paul had merely asked, "who can be against us", there would be a wide variety of answers. Many people and many things can and are against us. The catechism talks about our three great enemies as our old sinful nature, the world, and the devil. The sinful nature is our enemy because it seeks to trip us into sinning and abandoning our faith. The world is our enemy because it is the strong hold of the rebellion against God. The devil is our enemy because he is striving to undo the purposes of God. These are great enemies that actively out to get us.

But what can these enemies really do, when they are put in a sentence with the opening words, *if God is for us?* Now when Paul uses the word "if" he doesn't mean to create any doubt in our minds about whether or not God is for us. After hearing the golden chain, there is no room for doubt. God is for us. We could put the question this way: Since God is for us, who can be against us?

Who can stand up against God? Do you think there is any power in the entire universe that can prevail against the Creator of heavens and earth? Of course, there isn't any. So if God has aligned himself with us, who will be able to prevail over against us? No one. In fact, if all the forces of hell set themselves against us, they will not prevail. Because God is on our side.

What about the second question? Paul asks: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also give us all things?* Now again, if Paul had simply asked, "will God not also give us all things", we might hesitate with an answer. We might not be so certain as to what we should say. We probably will not be so bold as to say, the Lord will give us all what we need. How can we be sure of answer?

But the first part of the question gives us the reason for our confidence. Paul points us to the cross and the great gift which God provided there. That should remove any doubt we might have about the generosity of our heavenly Father. God sent his own Son to die on the cross in our place.

Now if God was willing to give up his own son, will he not also give us everything else that we need? Paul is here using the argument from the greater to the lesser. If God has given the greatest gift possible, will he not also give us the lesser gifts? The logic of argument concludes: of course, he will. Because in giving his Son, God gave us all we need. The cross, therefore, is the guarantee of the continuing, unfailing generosity of our God. As Paul writes in Philippians 4:19 *My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Jesus Christ.* Look then to the cross for

the proof of the greatest gift God has provided for us.

Let us turn to the third question. *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.* With this question and the next one, we are brought figuratively in the court of law. That's because the word "charge" is a legal term. That's also how it can be used today, as when a person is charged with a crime.

Who dares charge us so that we might be convicted of our sin and thrown into the jail of hell? Once again, if this question just stood on its own, there would be plenty of opportunities to bring charges against us. In fact, earlier in the book of Romans this courtroom scene was also described. Paul himself describes the charge brought against humanity: the charge of being in rebellion against the Lord. Our own consciences accuse us of sin and evil. And if our conscience fails because sin has overwhelmed it, there is always the law of God. The law is that mirror which reveals to us our sin and shame.

To this charge of sinning against the Lord, we are guilty. And yet we do not have worry about this charge at this point in Romans. It does not stand up in the court of law. That's because we also need to hear what comes with this question. It's the fact that we are chosen by God. We are God's elect. And again, we need to think of that golden chain. Those whom God foreknew or chosen, he also glorified.

Specifically, it is the fact that we are justified that makes it possible for this charge to be dropped against us. By this time, I shouldn't have to remind you of what justification is all about. We are declared not guilty in the sight of God because of what Christ has done. Now when Paul issues this third question, he probably has in the back of his mind, Isaiah 50:8-9, which states:

He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me?

This OT quotation brings us to the fourth question, which is almost a repetition of the third one. Paul asks: *Who is he that condemns? 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.* What's different in this fourth question than in the third question is the direct focus upon Jesus Christ.

Now in the Greek, there is no main verb in what follows after the question. There is simply the name Jesus Christ, followed by the four phrases that describe the various stages of his life--reminding us of the Apostles Creed. These stages refer to his death, his resurrection, his

ascension to rule, and his intercession.

Each stage provides a result why we do not have to fear condemnation. Because of his death, we have been freed from the curse we faced. Because of his resurrection, we have been given new life. Because of his ascension, he rules over everything, making sure nothing stops the triumph of God's kingdom. Because of his intercession, we are being watched over. We are brought back to the opening words of this chapter: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

We are now at the fifth and final question. It's the one that Paul does provide an answer. It's the most powerful question. It's the most crucial one. *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* As Paul asks this question, he looks around him and sees a variety of possible answers. He makes a list of seven things that could separate us from the love of God. *Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or danger or sword?*

Paul begins this list with trouble, hardship, and persecution. These words remind us of the pressures and distresses which an ungodly world places on believers. The early Roman Christians, in particular, faced these things. As these things are faced, believers might begin to ask the question: where is God?

Paul goes on to mention to famine and nakedness, which is the lack of adequate food and clothing. That might cause some believers to wonder whether God had forsaken them. After all, didn't he promise to provide for the needs of his children?

Paul concludes his list with danger and sword, meaning perhaps the threat of death and the actual experience of it. Death stares us in the face. Does that show the absence of God's love? How can God let his children die, especially when they die for his sake?

What about these seven afflictions, and others that could be added? They are real. They are unpleasant, demeaning, painful, hard to bear, and challenging to the faith. Can such pain, misery, and loss separate us from the love of Christ? No, they can't. In fact, "*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*" We are not only able to go through these difficulties, we are able to overcome them. We are more than conquerors. Because we are part of a victory that does away with all these things.

This leads Paul to his climax. He ends with a personal affirmation. I am convinced. I have been and always will be persuaded that nothing can and nothing will separate us from the love of Christ. Then he makes another list. A list of ten items which might seem to be that ultimate barrier between us and Christ: *Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the*

present nor the future, nor any powers, 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.

It almost seems wrong to analyze these words, but we need to understand what Paul is doing here. Death and life are the two means of human existence. Angels and demons refer to the supernatural realm. The present and the past refer to time, while height and depth refers to space. Between these pairs, Paul mentions the powers, the forces of the universe. Finally, he broadens the category to include everything else in all creation. He makes sure nothing is left out. But there is the recognition that everything in creation is under the control of God our Creator, and Jesus Christ, our Savior. He is in control. That is why Paul can be convinced that *nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

These are the five powerful questions Paul present before us. They reveal the kind of God we believe in. John Stott concludes: “Together they affirm that absolutely nothing can frustrate God's purpose, since he is for us. Or quench his generosity towards us, since he has not spared his own Son. Or accuse or condemn his elect, since he has justified them in Christ. Or separate us from his love, since he has revealed it in Jesus Christ.”

As the people of God, we desperately need to hear these words of assurance. Nothing seems stable in our world any more. Insecurity is written across all human experience. We hear so much about war and terrorism, about debt and economic collapse, about diseases and death. We as Christians are not immune from these things, nor from temptation, tribulation, or tragedy. But we are assured that nothing will separate us from the love of God. Not because of our great faith, but because of God's faithfulness shown to us in Jesus Christ. That's why we too can be convinced that *nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* To that we can Amen.