

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 28, 2016**

IF GOD IS FOR US (2)

Romans 8:31-39

This is such a monumentally important passage of Scripture that I feel more inadequate than usual to communicate its message to you. It is the zenith, the climax, of Paul's explanation of the gospel and its implications in the first eight chapters of Romans. Here, at the end of Romans 8, it is as if Paul is conducting a news conference in which he asks a series of weighty theological questions and then goes on to give the answers to the questions himself, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We ended last Sunday with the first question Paul poses in verse 31: "What, then, shall we say in response to this?" That is, what shall we say in response to what Paul has said in verses 28-30 about God's sovereign grace in His foreknowledge and foreordination (predestination), His calling, justification, and still-to-come ultimate glorification of those He has purposed to save from before the foundation of the world? And what of God's ability and commitment "in all things", in all the circumstances of life, both good and bad, to bring about good in the lives of those who have been captured by His love and called according to His saving purpose? In a sense, verses 31-39 are Paul's answer to this question. In another sense, to put it in my own words, the answer must be to exclaim: "Wow! What a great and gracious God You are! How can we ever thank You enough for Your amazing, incomparable, unstoppable love? I am Yours, Lord. Have Your way in me. Have Your way in my life. Take me and use me for Your purposes, and for Your glory."

I pray that this is the attitude, desire, and posture of your heart today, because God deserves and desires nothing less than our all.

IF GOD IS FOR US

Continuing with Paul's question-and-answer "news conference," let's look at the second question he poses in verse 31: "If God is for us," he says, "who can be against us?" This is a question that begs a whole series of additional questions, such as:

*Is God really for us?
How do we know God is for us?
If God is for us, why is life so hard?
Why is there so much pain and suffering and evil?
In a world like ours, how can we know if God really is for us?
How do we know it isn't just wishful thinking on our part
to believe that God is for us?*

Do you ever wrestle with questions like these? If so, you're not alone.

Paul begins with the presupposition that God really is for us, though it doesn't mean God promises us a life without pain or suffering or hardship or disappointment. But He uses even the hard things to work out His good purposes in our lives. That is the message of Romans 8:28. We know that God is for us because of the outworking of His plan of salvation that began with His loving foreknowledge and choice of us to be His children before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5).

“If God is for us.” If God is *not* for us, if God is in fact *against* us, we are in heap big trouble. If God is *not* for us, then we are “a pretty sorry lot” (MSG) and are “to be pitied more than” everybody else (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:19). If God is *not* for us, there is nothing in the future for us to look forward to.

But there is no doubt in Paul's mind that God really *is* for us. The force of his question is really: *Since* God is for us ... (or *because* God is for us ...) who can ultimately stand against us? In framing it this way, Paul is not suggesting that we will have no adversaries or difficulties as we live as Christ's followers in this world. He does not mean that we will face no opposition as we journey through this life. He does not mean that we will have no enemies. We do and we will. This world, in the words of Martin Luther, is filled with devils still that threaten to undo us. Satan, the archenemy of our souls, will do anything and everything in his power to destroy our faith, to prevent us from experiencing God's blessings, and to keep us from serving God's purposes in this world. Sadly, there are many people in this world who see the gospel, the Christian faith, and followers of Christ like us as enemies to be opposed, silenced, and defeated. You know it as well as I do.

What Paul means is not that we will not encounter any opposition or face any trials or troubles or discrimination or persecution because of our allegiance to Christ. All the powers of hell may in fact set themselves against us, in an attempt to destroy us and our faith in Christ. Even so, says Paul, they *will not* and *cannot* prevail against us. Why? Because God is for us. *If* God is for us – *since* God is for us, no one will be able to defeat us.

But how do we know God really is for us? In addition to what he has already said in verses 28-30, Paul now goes on to spell out the answer in verses 32 and following.

How do we know God is for us? Look at verse 32. We know God is for us because He “did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all.” We know God is for us because He did not withhold even His only Son, but gave Him up for us and for our salvation. We know God is for us because of the demonstration of His love for us in the incarnation and earthly life, humiliation and suffering, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ *for* us. To save us from our sins. To reconcile us to Himself. To forgive our sins. To remove our guilt. To give us peace with God. To give us the gift of eternal life with Him here and now, and on the other side of death. We know that God is for us because of the willing sacrifice of Jesus His Son to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

In light of what Jesus has already done for us in His saving work on the cross, Paul asks rhetorically if we cannot trust God to give us everything we need for our spiritual well-being, even if life in this world is harder than we ever imagined it would be. The answer: Yes, we

can. If He gave His best for us while we were still sinners, now that we are his children, doesn't it make sense to trust God to give us all we need for life in Him? The answer: Yes, it does.

WHO WILL BRING ANY CHARGE AGAINST US?

Next question. Look at verse 33: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?” Paul’s answer: “It is God who justifies.” You already know that justification – the means by which God pronounces sinners “not guilty” and declares us righteous in His sight – is a big deal in Romans. Paul uses the word *dikaioo*, which means “to justify”, 15 times in Romans. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone is at the heart of the gospel. It is an essential tenet of the Christian faith.

How do we know that God is for us? We know it because, through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us, we have been justified – declared righteous – in God’s sight. Since God, the righteous Judge has already found us not guilty, no charge or accusation brought against us will stick in the courtroom of God’s justice. Jesus has already paid the penalty for our sins. All of them. If you are trusting in Jesus and His saving work on the cross for you, you do not need to fear the judgment of God. As it says in the hymn we sang this morning:

My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought;
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
(Horatio Spafford, *It Is Well with My Soul*)

WHO IS IT THAT CONDEMNS?

Next question. Look at verse 34: “Who is it that condemns?” Paul’s answer: “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.”

Who is it that condemns us? The truth is that many may try to accuse (verse 33) and condemn us, including our own hearts (as it says in 1 John 3:20), our critics, and our enemies (human as well as the principalities and powers in the spiritual realm). But their condemnations will not succeed against us. Why? Because of Jesus and what He has done for us. Look at what He did and what He is doing even now. He died for us. He took our place. He took upon Himself the condemnation we deserve. In addition to His death for us, He was raised from the dead in triumph over the power of sin and death. And that’s not all. Having been raised to life, He is now exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven, where He intercedes for you and me, pleading our case before the Father’s throne.

Hebrews 4 speaks of this aspect of Jesus’ ministry for us when it says: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are –

yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16). He is always there as our faithful high priest and all-sufficient Savior to speak to the Father on our behalf.

1 John 2:1-2 says much the same thing: “If anybody sins” – and we all do – “we have an advocate who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

The death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead were once-for-all-time events that took place in the past. His presence at the right hand of the Father and His ministry of intercession on our behalf, however, are in the present tense. Continuing. Unfailing. Because of His ministry past and present, no accusation or condemnation will be sustained against us in God’s heavenly courtroom. Does this mean we will face no opposition or condemnation or condemners here on earth? No. Jesus made it clear that we should expect opposition, some of it vehement and even violent. But our standing before God and our eternal destiny are assured, because of the ministry of Jesus on our behalf. As Paul has already said in 8:1, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

WHO CAN SEPARATE US?

The last in this series of questions and answers begins with Paul’s two-fold question in verse 35. The crescendo continues to build toward the final climax of the triumph of God’s love for us in verses 37-39. The essence of the question is: Can anyone or anything separate us from the love of Christ for us?

Having raised the question, Paul goes on to list seven categories of suffering or adversity that any of us could experience, and asks if even the worst of these can come between us and Jesus’ love for us: “Can trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” These are not just hypothetical trials. They are real sufferings experienced by real followers of the Lord Jesus. In fact, Paul experienced all of them personally. For 1st-century Christians – and for many 21st-century Christians – these trials and sufferings were the norm, not the exception. They knew, as Christians in many parts of the world today know, that professing your faith in Jesus Christ can be hazardous to your health. It can get you into a whole heap of trouble. It can even get you killed, which is the point of the verse from Psalm 44 that Paul quotes in Romans 8:36.

Paul is reminding us of what we should already know, which is that Christians are not immune to troubles and hardships and suffering of many sorts. Bad things happen. Unimaginably bad things happen. Some Christians have to go through hell in this world, and we have no idea why. God’s ways and purposes are hidden from us. We have no idea why God allows some people – some of His own beloved children – to go through the heart-breaking troubles they go through. No idea.

But none of these things, Paul says, can drive a wedge between us and the love of Jesus for us. The worst kind of trouble you can imagine can’t. Hard times can’t. Persecution fueled by

hate can't. Hunger can't. Homelessness can't. Bullying threats can't. Backstabbing can't. Even the worst sins listed in the Bible can't. Nor can the worst disasters, natural or man-made. (Adapted from Romans 8:35, *MSG*). That is what Paul says in verse 35.

But he isn't done yet. He pulls out all the stops in verses 38 and 39, where he expresses the settled, unchangeable conviction of his heart that nothing in the whole universe can separate us from Christ's unchanging love for us. Death – the last enemy to be defeated (1 Corinthians 15:26) – can't. Life can't, no matter how hard it gets. Unseen spiritual beings can't. Time and space can't.

Who can separate us from our Savior's love for us? Nothing and nobody "will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). Which means *nothing* in your life now or ever can cut you off from God's love. *Nothing* in the life of a family member or friend who belongs to Jesus can ever cut him or her off from the Savior's love.

A painful divorce cannot and will not separate you from Jesus' unchanging, faithful love for you. Losing your children in a custody battle won't either. Foreclosing on your home won't. Being in a miserable job with a miserable boss won't either. Nor will failure of some kind. Or a very public sin that causes very public embarrassment and pain. Nor will a personal tragedy or a natural disaster like horrendous flooding or a devastating earthquake that destroys your home and possessions and takes the life of a love one. Nor will the most dreaded medical diagnosis. Nor will addiction or chronic depression or mental illness. Nor will the pain of persecution because of your faith in Christ. All these things happen. Some of them may happen to you, or may have already happened to you or to someone you love.

SUPER-CONQUERORS

The message of the gospel is that in all these things, God is ever with us. He is forever for us. None of these things, not even the worst thing life can possibly throw at you, can change the unalterable fact of God's unchangeable and unstoppable love for you. In fact, Paul says, when these things or other things like them happen to us, we are not victims. We are conquerors. Not just conquerors but "more than conquerors through Him who loved us" and loves us still (8:37).

The word translated "more than conquerors" is the Greek word *hupernikomen*. It comes from the word *Nike* (or Nike). In Greek mythology, Nike was the goddess of victory. It is where the name of the athletic shoe and equipment company comes from. The verb *nikao* means "to overcome or conquer." It is found in several places in the New Testament, including John 16:33, where Jesus says: "In this world you will have trouble." ("Trouble" is the same word Paul uses in verse 35). "But take heart!" says Jesus. "I have overcome (*nikao*) the world." It is also used in Romans 12:21, which says: "Do not be overcome (*nikao*) by evil, but overcome (*nikao*) evil with good."

When the prefix *huper* is added, the meaning becomes “super-conqueror.” Which is what we are through the power of Jesus’ love for us. Love that has won the victory for us on the cross. Love that will never let us go.

Because of His love and the lengths to which He has gone to shower us with it, we can be absolutely sure that *God. Is. For. Us.* And He always will be. Always.

PRO NOBIS

I don’t know how creative you may get with passwords on your personal devices or different accounts that require a login. My passwords don’t have deep theological meaning, but maybe that will change. I came across a story about a young man who chose the password *pro nobis*. If you know your Latin, you know *pro nobis* is a Latin phrase that means “for us.” After his parents’ divorce, during a season when he thought that God didn’t care about him or had given up on him, this young man found hope through these two simple words. When he began to embrace the truth that God really was – and is – for us, and that God had even sent His Son to die for *him*, it changed his life. It opened him up to receive God’s love in his life and to share God’s love with others.

God is *pro nobis*. He is for us. He is *pro tibi*. He is for you. Personally. If God is for you ... *Since* God is for you, what is there to fear? No matter how hard this life becomes, *nothing* can ever separate you from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord, for we are more than conquerors – we are “super-conquerors” – through Him who loved us and gave His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Believe it with all your heart. And never forget it.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.