

**Sermon preached by Mr. Justin Sembler at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US?

Romans 8:31-39

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Paul, a Roman citizen by birth, at the time of his writing the Epistle to the Roman church, has not yet set foot in Rome. But he longs to see Rome, and more importantly, he longs to be with and encourage the Roman House Churches that have been established there. He writes this letter to the Gentile and Jewish believers like. And though it is impossible for Paul to make it to Rome right away, he wants to communicate to them his longing to see their faith in Christ grow. He longs to be a blessing to them by this letter, as much as he longs to be blessed by their fellowship in person. Paul will indeed come to Rome, but it will be through his sufferings that God achieves this feat. Paul, though he is a hero of the faith, is still human and his fears are great, but he trusts Christ despite his fears, regardless of what the outcome may have been. My question to you today is this: What do you fear? Do you fear the loss of your life, or perhaps the loss of your family? Perhaps your fears are not so much the fear of death, but more the fear of keeping your job or struggling financially in an economy that has been less than forgiving. Or, to put it in more personal terms, do you fear that no matter how much you try, you will never be able to overcome that one sin issue in your life that has plagued you for too long? Whatever the fear, Paul is reassuring us in these verses that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

INTRODUCTION

“What is your favorite movie?” the kids asked. It was my interview weekend here at Faith Church in August of 2003. This was an exhausting, yet fruitful weekend, which culminated with a cookout where all the youth from the church were present. At the conclusion of the evening there was an impromptu interview with the youth, which was loosely organized by one of the parents. For over an hour, the kids fired questions at my exhausted yet cheerful wife and me. But this was a question of obvious importance. Kids love movies as much as they love music. This question trumped any questions of ministry style or vision; they were getting down to brass tacks. As I searched my memory banks for all of the great movies I had seen in my lifetime, I came to this conclusion. “Schindler’s List,” I replied. To my surprise, this was met with about 30 blank stares. I could only imagine their thoughts. Sticking to my guns, I explained that Oskar Schindler, played by Liam Neeson, is such a beautiful picture of what it means to forgo one’s own interests for the sake of others. I think they understood.

If you’ve seen the movie, you will recall that Schindler is a wealthy industrialist whose interest in the Jewish prisoners under Nazi control extends only as far as how much money he can make with their help. He knows what the Nazis are doing with the Jews and he figures if he can save some from the forced labor camps or death camps, it will

ultimately be to his benefit. To this point, he is not against the Jews, but he is not really for them either. It is not until he sees the horrors of the Nazi evacuation of the Plaszow forced labor camp that his heart changes toward his workers. With the help of his accountant Itzhak Stern, he began to formulate the list that bears his name. Over 1100 workers were placed on the list, all of which were bought by Schindler. Essentially, Schindler gave up all of his riches and his reputation among the Nazis to ensure the survival of a group of people whom he was supposed to hate.

Under Schindler's care, the Jewish people did not fear. They no longer feared death, because he protected them from death at every moment. And, though he was a member of the Nazi Party, he was not a Nazi at heart, and so they never feared that he would ever "do his duty" as a Nazi and turn them over to death in the concentration camps. Because of Schindler's selflessness, more than 7,000 descendants of the Schindler Jews are alive today.

Similarly, as those who are in Christ we have nothing to fear. Consider the fears that may have come to your mind when I asked the questions earlier. How long have your fears paralyzed you? How long have your fears hindered you from being the full-blown follower of Christ that all of us are called to be? Paul gives us the greatest of all promises here in Romans 8:31 when he asks the question to which the answer should be obvious, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Paul simply wants the believers in Rome to understand that nothing stands against them, because God is for them. Simply put, if we know that this is true, that God is for us, our response should be this:

We must live fearlessly.

Paul has lived his life for the sake of the Gospel. Even though he wasn't always sure of what God was doing through his sufferings, he never once watered down the truth for fear of his own safety and he is challenging the believers in Rome to do the same. He knows that fear can be paralyzing and that giving into the fears of this world can render believers ineffective in living out their lives for Christ in a world hostile to the Gospel and to the ultimate claim that Christ is Lord of all. Paul in Romans 8:31-39 addresses these fears by making two key points within the text. Essentially, we have the power to live fearless lives because of Christ who secures us and Christ who sustains us.

CHRIST WHO SECURES US

Paul, in verse 31, asks the question, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" Paul begins this mountaintop argument with this key question that implies the obvious answer. Paul uses this tactic of asking questions throughout Romans 8:31-39. The questions Paul asks do not imply that there is doubt in what the answer will be. No, they are questions of which Paul has already given the answers in Romans 8 to this point.

Throughout Romans 8, Paul lays out the "These things," he asks of in verse 31. He addresses the issue of the law and man's weakness to fulfill it. He proclaims that because

Christ has fulfilled the law, we no longer live in the flesh but in the Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. Because of this, we can cry out to God, “Abba, Father!” Essentially, we can cry out “Daddy” when we are facing fears of all kinds! It is the Spirit that enables us to pray, and better than that, it is the Spirit that intercedes for us and perfects our broken prayers. Now Paul wants us to see that in Christ we are secure and nothing can stand against us.

So, what are the benefits of being secured by Christ? *We can no longer be charged, and we can no longer be condemned.*

WE CAN NO LONGER BE CHARGED

In verse 33, Paul asks the question, “Who shall bring any charges against God’s elect? Paul is implying as he does with all the other questions, that the answer is obvious. No one or no thing can charge us. First and foremost, despite all the evidence in the world to convict us, God cannot charge us, because He has already charged His Son on our behalf. The charges against us have been dropped because Jesus has accepted the charges and the penalty associated with them, namely, death. Paul knows that as Christians, we will be charged. We will be charged for proclaiming the hard truth of the Gospel when it does not suit the ears of our hearers. Many of our missionaries called to sensitive areas may be charged, tortured, or possibly face death because, as Paul, they are called to proclaim Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father. Think of the World Outreach Directory where many missionary families in sensitive areas do not reveal their full names or even real names to avoid the possible charges or even death associated with preaching the Gospel in hostile nations. Now, you may be asking yourselves, “these are serious charges and the danger of them is very real, so how can you say that the charges will not stick?” Well Paul has anticipated this by answering, “It is God who justifies.” While we are charged in a worldly sense, God has already justified us in Christ and therefore we have this ultimate benefit in being secured by Christ. Greater yet, we can no longer be condemned.

WE CAN NO LONGER BE CONDEMNED

Paul continues in verse 34 by asking another question, “Who is to condemn?” He answers by pointing out that Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God interceding for us.” Because of this, we are no longer condemned. Paul has already said this expressly in Romans 8:1 when he writes, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” But he gives more specificity to this statement by pointing out that Christ has already faced the condemnation we so deserved. He has paid for it in full on the cross. And so, in a very real sense, we are like the Schindler Jews. Oskar Schindler paid for them in full to ensure their protection. More than that, he was constantly interceding for them. Because of this, they had no fear. When the train of women was mistakenly sent to Auschwitz to be disposed of, he did everything to bring them back to his factory and was successful. Because he loved them and cared for them, nothing would stop him from getting them back. They could not be condemned under his care.

Paul reassures us with these words. Paul continues in verse 35 by reassuring us with the question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” He lists the possible culprits to separation in order of what appears to be less threatening to more threatening ending in death. As Paul points out in verse 35, not even death itself is able to separate us from Christ.

We need to look at Paul’s use of Psalm 44:22 in verse 36 for a moment. It seems at first read that the psalm is ill placed. The context of the psalm is one of great defeat. The psalmist is calling out to God who seems to have turned His back on His people. He even calls for the sleeping God to awake. So why would Paul use it in the middle of listing these things that do not separate us from the love of Christ? Paul knows his audience has knowledge of this psalm or he would not have used it. He uses it to show that suffering is nothing new to the people of God. However, it is important for us to remember that our suffering grieves God, as it did when He sent Jesus to suffer on the cross. And though there may be a great fear in the midst of suffering, there need not be because God is not sleeping and He will vindicate the people, indeed through Christ, He already has.

Now many of you, if you grew up going to Sunday School as I did, may remember the story of Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie was a Dutch Christian who lived in Holland with her father and sister, Betsie. She and her family were ordinary people who lived out the Gospel in amazing ways. Like Schindler, they stood against the Nazis at a time when doing so meant certain death. During the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, she and her family hid Jewish families from the SS in their home. They were arrested in 1944 for harboring Jews and were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp. While in custody, her father Casper and sister Betsie died. Corrie would later relay what her sister Betsie told her before her death. What she said is this, “Corrie, there is no pit deeper than God’s love.” In Betsie’s mind, there was no charge or condemnation too great to keep her from trusting in God’s love for her and her family. She saw God’s faithfulness despite tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, danger, and death, and she did so without fear because Christ was her security.

As Christians, we often look at the pit as being too deep for God to pull us out of it. We sit down at the bottom of it in utter despair, unable to see what God is doing through our sufferings. Many times we are so paralyzed in the pit of our despair that we cannot even pray. We become angry with those around us who seem to be doing so well in their walk, and we are further paralyzed. My friends, since going to Covenant, God has allowed Wendy and me to walk through some difficult times. By moving away from our Faith family and the love we have felt from you for four years and into the great unknown of seminary, God has shown us that we didn’t quite trust Him the way we thought we did when we were comfortable. Many of you know what I am speaking of. I don’t need to tell you how transient this community is. Many of you have moved so many times you have lost count. You just get settled in somewhere with a great church home and the orders come through that move you and your family somewhere new. You are uprooted once again. This constant movement can cause you to shy away from real fellowship that will allow others to know you and to see your sin and struggle. Afraid to

open up, you bear the weight of your sin and sadness alone and are paralyzed. You may have come from comfortable surroundings and thought your trust in God could not be any better. Maybe you were shocked, as I was, to find that this was not the case. It is amazing how God uses our discomfort to show us our sins and the changes our hearts have yet to undergo. Hopefully, you have found, as I have, the freedom to share your struggles and sins with great Christian brothers and sisters that do not charge or condemn you, but point you back to the security you have in Christ. If you are going it alone, you will not make it. If you have been playing church and pretending everything is okay, you will burn out. As the body of Christ, we must live in the light and not the darkness. That means bearing the weight of our struggles together. The Christian life is meant to be done in community and not alone.

So far, we have seen that because Christ secures us, we cannot be charged or condemned. However, if we are to expect that our trials and sufferings as Christians are to be an ongoing theme in our lives and the lives of God's people, wherein lies our hope? Our hope lies in...

CHRIST WHO SUSTAINS US

Upon asking these questions which beg for an obvious answer, Paul continues in verse 37 by his proclamation that, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." In other words, it is Christ who allows us to be conquerors. He sustains us through our trials and fears allowing us to be more than conquerors. But what are the benefits of being conquerors through these sufferings? We are Super-Conquerors and we cannot be separated.

WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS

The Greek word that Paul uses here for "No" in verse 37 could also be rendered "On the contrary." That is contrary to all of these things: tribulation, persecution, famine, lack of clothes, danger, and even death, we are more than conquerors. These trials Paul lists are not matters of indifference, but real suffering and hardship that we endure as a result of the fallenness of Creation. Paul longs for all believers to know how wrong things are and to expect suffering of all kinds, but he also wants us to know that not only do we triumph through our trials, but we, to use the Greek term, "super-triumph" through Christ. We are His heirs. This concept of being a Super-Conqueror means that we don't just simply overcome these things, but through God's Spirit, we can actually say with Joseph in Genesis 50, what was meant for evil against us, God meant for good. We can overcome our enemies, and with God's Spirit, we have the power to lead them to Christ. It is because Christ has gone through all of it and arose victorious that we can face our sufferings victoriously. This should cause us to live without fear in any and all situations where real trials are present in our lives. I think that James Boice puts this best in his commentary of this verse. Think of it, in verse 36 Paul has just used this imagery from the psalm of Christians being the sheep led to the slaughter. Boice makes the point that sheep are so helpless that we would never think of them as more than conquerors. We usually reserve this term for the strong things of this world: Super Bowl winning

quarterbacks, heavy weight champions, or movie action heroes. We do not, however, think of sheep. Boice continues that Christians are seen as sheep. We are considered weak and despised. TV magnate Ted Turner has confirmed this by calling Christians “losers” and “Jesus Freaks.” In the eyes of the world, we are the weak. Thank God for that. Jesus, in the eyes of the world was weak. Jimmy Agan, my Greek professor, made this statement, and I think it sums up our super-triumph in Christ well. “Everything done to Jesus is part of the victory plan. But not everything done to Jesus looks like victory!” We do not look victorious in the world’s eyes. We look foolish, but we have a model for foolish victory that trumps anything and everything that the strong of this world would consider victory.

Therefore, since we are super-conquerors through Christ, what is the result?

WE CANNOT BE SEPARATED

In verses 38 and 39, Paul uses contrasting pairs here to make his final argument secure. He is contrasting between things that are good and things that are bad to make the point that nothing can separate us from Christ’s love. Paul is basically saying, “If you can think of it, it cannot separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ.” He uses this line of argument to show the believers in Rome that just as it is preposterous to think that the good things of this world and of heaven can separate you from the love of Christ, so too, it is equally impossible for the evil things of this world to achieve this feat. Let us read through Paul’s all-inclusive list for a moment to get a feel for where he is going.

For I am convinced that 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 (Romans 8:38-39).

Paul lists these things to call us into lives of fearlessness for Christ. No life, death, angel, ruler of this world, things present or to come, be it good or bad, or powers, no height too high, or depth too low. And just to be sure Paul’s list covers all the bases, he boldly proclaims in verse 39 that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul is probably anticipating that one skeptic out there who raises his hand and says, “Paul, you forgot to mention this one thing. Wouldn’t this separate us from God?” And Paul would respond with a resounding “NO!” Brothers and sisters, we need not fear separation from God, because Jesus has already been separated from Him on our behalf, and even He has arisen as Super Conqueror in the face of death. We have been sustained by this once-for-all final act.

What is it that is causing you to lose trust in the God who sustains you at every moment? Perhaps you feel, as I do, that God will call you to leave what you are doing for something different. Many times I have wondered if Seminary and vocational ministry is really what God has called me to, especially when my professors so graciously point out that my thinking that I thought was so right is actually wrong. We are tempted to think and even say, “This is just too hard and I want to quit (fill in the blank).” Or perhaps you

fear that no matter how much you pray for your kids, teach them to walk in the ways of the Lord, or discipline them in just the right way that they will ultimately walk away from their faith for something more attractive.

A few nights ago I was unable to be at home at the boys' bedtime. My wife Wendy had sung "Jesus Loves Me" to Riley, after which Riley told her that his heart was broken. Wendy told him that only Jesus can mend a broken heart. Riley responded with "That's a good idea!"

Brothers and sisters, I implore you to have this kind of simple faith and to look to the God of all comfort and faithfulness. He has given us through these great promises the blueprint for living our lives in Christ. It is a life that is sustained by God, one in which we are super-conquerors in all that we face, and one from which nothing or no one can separate us. Look to Jesus, in Him we have all things. In Him, we have no fear.

CONCLUSION

I want to take you back for a moment to Oskar Schindler. For me, the most powerful scene of the movie comes right at the conclusion. The war is over, Germany has surrendered, and the hunt for members of the Nazi Party is on. Schindler has to make a quick exit. But, before he does, there are 1,200 workers who want to do one thing for him as a token of thankfulness for all he has done for them. They give him a gold ring made from the gold fillings of one of Schindler's workers. Inscribed on the ring is the Hebrew from the Talmud, which says, "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire." Schindler breaks down and says, "I could have got more." To which Itzhak Stern replies, "There are 1,100 alive because of all you did, you did so much, there will be generations because of you." Schindler points to his car saying, "Why did I keep the car, I could have gotten 10 more for the car." Taking hold of the gold pin that signified his membership in the Nazi Party, he cries out, "This pin is gold, I could have gotten two more with this pin!" He is beside himself with grief. His workers embrace him as he weeps.

Schindler paid for these people with his money, but also laid his life down for them. My friends, on a much greater scale, this is what Christ has done for us. He has secured us, and in Him we are sustained. In Him, there is no regret that He could have done more because His blood is sufficient for the sins of the whole world. There is no suffering in this world that can separate us from Him; we are His heirs. In Him, we have no fear. In Him, we have the power to live fearlessly. For His glory. Amen.