



March 4 & 5, 2018
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More Than Conquerors

Romans 8:31-39

We come today to the final sermon in our mini-series in Romans chapter 8, the Holy Spirit chapter. We've been listening to Paul as he speaks to us about how to live life in the Spirit. We started the chapter with this wonderful affirmation: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We learned that we have the right to call God "Abba...Daddy." We learned that the sufferings of this present time are no big deal compared to the glory we will one day experience in the presence of God...and that even when we are suffering ... when we have no words to say...the Spirit himself intercedes for us. And finally, we heard this great promise in 8:28-"We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose..."

It's unfair that one chapter should have so many goodies packed into it when poor Leviticus struggles along. But you know what? We aren't done yet. Paul is about to close out this chapter with a thunderous finale...and if this passage gets your heart racing, you need a new heart! Listen to this magnificent conclusion to a truly epic chapter

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"What then shall we say to these things?" Paul asks. In other words, now that I have written all that I have...now that we have spent these last 8 chapters exploring God's incredible grace toward us, even in our broken state...what more is there to be said? How can I summarize these great spiritual truths?"

And Paul does so in magnificent fashion with two powerful assertions: God is with us ...and God is for us.

First, God is with us. Every Advent we sing a carol that reminds us of this promise: "O Come, O Come ____ what?" Emmanuel...which means..."God with us." I want to remind you what I said when we were talking about the topic of suffering. God does not choose to explain himself as to why he allows suffering to exist in the world. But what he DOES do as no other god does... is enter into that suffering. God the Son became a human being and dwelt among us. He experienced all that humanity had to offer, the good and the bad. He drank deeply of the dregs of life, even to the point of death on a cross. For everyone who suffers in life and cries out in pain, Jesus says, "I understand. I have suffered, too. I share in your pain. WE will come through this together to a place of glory." *That* amazing truth is Emmanuel; God with us.

In the closing verses of ch. 8, Paul draws a big fat red ink line under that promise. In verse 35 he asks this question: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" And then, he offers suggestions: "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" Actually, this is a litany of the very things Paul himself suffered. Do you remember that long list from II Corinthians? Paul was beaten, flogged, imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, betrayed persecuted, frozen and hungry. This verse is a summary of everything Paul had already experienced...except for one. The last word is "sword." It probably doesn't mean "war." It probably means execution. And even that was prophetic. Eleven years later, Paul was hauled out of the dungeon of the Mamertine Prison taken to a place of execution and beheaded with a sword.

Notice, Paul is clearly not saying we won't go through hard times. In fact, the Old Testament quote about being "sheep that are to be slaughtered" acknowledges that Christians might face persecution. Just ask Pastor Andrew Brunson who is in his second year of prison in a Turkish jail. But what Paul DOES say is that none of these earthly trials...NONE of them...can separate us from God's love. Emmanuel. God is with us.

But he's not done. He closes this passage with a promise that even SPIRITUAL forces cannot separate us from God's love. Listen again:

For I am sure (actually, I like the way I memorized it as a kid...CONVINCED)...

For I am CONVINCED that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul is talking about spiritual forces: angels... rulers (those are demonic powers he is talking about)...height...depth. Those probably refer to astrology. They are words that were used to describe stars that were closest and farthest from their zenith. In other words, this is a list of supernatural and spiritual forces that are **greater even than that first list**. But even these...even death and demons and devils and any and everything else in creation...even all of those things are unable to separate us from the love of God. Emmanuel. God is with us.

My LifeGroup was studying this passage on Friday and one of our members shared an incredible story. As a boy...from the age of 5 to 13...his father came...and left them six times.

He'd come back...stick around for six months or a year...and then be gone again, only to return a few months later and repeat the whole cycle. My friend describes how he would go to bed one night, happy because his father was home. And wake up the next morning to discover him gone. Again. And this runaway dad always left destitute. He remembers living in something like 30 different places in his childhood... including camping in a tent in a state park for a month while his mom tried to find work.

Just imagine...being abandoned by your father again...and again...and again...and again...until he was finally gone for good, never to return. You can understand, can't you, why my friend had the hardest time calling God "Abba...Daddy?"

I suspect this story might be repeated many times across this room. Many of you... perhaps scores of you...understand what it means to be abandoned...separated from an earthly father. But Paul says regarding our heavenly father, "That will never, never, never happen. I'm convinced of it. Whatever you are experiencing, whatever you are going through, NOTHING can separate you from God. Emmanuel. God with us."

But that's not all. God is not just "with us" in a passive sense. Many of you had dads who were "there" but not there. Who were present in the house, who kept the bills paid, but were emotionally distant and disinterested. But that's not our God. God is not only "with us"... he is what? "For us!" If God is for us, who can be against us? God is our champion. God is our biggest fan!

Cyndi and I joined a bunch of Chapel Hill folks Friday night, rooting on our Gig Harbor Tides girls basketball team in the State semis. (2 are CHPC kids.) What a great game! Brynna Maxwell's dad, Steve, is a friend of mine. We meet regularly for fellowship. But I know this about Steve: when he's watching one of Brynna's game... he doesn't want fellowship! He doesn't want anyone sitting next to him. He certainly doesn't want anyone blabbing. He is utterly focused on one thing: his daughter who is out on that court. He is not just there...with her. He is FOR her! Her champion. Her fan! (BTW... I noticed Brynna's mom does the same thing...away from Steve!)

Paul asks puts it in the form of a question. IF God is for us...then who can be against us? What a great question! In other words, if we've got THAT kind of fan on our side...THAT kind of champion... what possibly could we fear from anything that the world might throw at us?

When I was doing youth ministry in Bakersfield, I had a kid in my group named Don Genesee. Don was 6' 7" and weighed 300 hundred pounds. He was a gentle giant...but he it always so. He was once a gang member but when he gave his life to Jesus, his heart was radically changed. But he was still big. SO big...so strong...that it was a little scary! I watched Don, for fun, grab a traffic sign pole that was set in concrete and wiggle it loose. When our youth group played football, they would give Don the ball and he would run down the field, literally carrying tacklers on his back. We counselors would look out and see a moving mass of humanity and say, "Must be Don under there!" Everyone wanted Don on their side...if he was, it didn't much matter who the opponent was.

That's what Paul is saying. If this great God of ours is on our side...if this God is *for* us...who *cares* who or what might be against us? Imagine a God like that! It is actually inconceivable in most religions. Most "gods" are remote and aloof. The idea of a God who is *for* us...a God who is our great fan and champion...that is uniquely Christian. John Stott says that these four words, "God is for us"... are the most concise statement of the gospel of grace.

Paul says, "What shall we say about these things? "What shall we say about the reality of suffering in our lives...what shall we say when our world is caving in around us, when relationships are falling apart; when our career is threatened, our health is threatened, our marriage is threatened, our kids are threatened ... What shall we say to these things?" Well...*none* of them...not one of those things can ever separate us from the love of God. God is with us. But even more, God is *for* us! He is our champion. He is our admirer. He is rooting us on and, through his Spirit, strengthening us to face and endure everything the world and the spiritual cosmic forces might throw at us. We will make it. We will get through it. We will survive.

Is that what he says? Actually...he says something much more. Because we have a God who will never abandon us...because we have a God who is FOR us... we are much more than survivors...much more than endurers...much more than hangers-on. Is that what Paul says we are? "NO! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!"

See that word "conquerors." You'll love the Greek word behind it: "Hypernikomen." HYPER! MORE than! WAY more than! Hyper. And I'll bet you can decipher the last half of the word, too. "*Nikomen*"... does that sound like anything you are familiar with? Nik-omen. How about a hint? Nike! Do you remember what Nike was the goddess of? *Victory!* So, in Christ...in the power of Christ's love...in the confidence of God's enduring presence...in the delight of his championship of us...in all of these things we are "Hyper-Nikes!" We are *hyper-victorious*. We are wayyyyyy more than winners in the eyes of God...in the eternal scheme of things. For those of who have never won a thing except for participation trophies, how does *that* make you feel? To know that, in the most important game of all...life... life eternal... *you are hyper victorious!* Woohoo!

What does it mean to know a God like that...and be known by him? What does it mean to love a God like that and be loved by him? On Wednesday, a friend of mine asked if I would join him for lunch to meet a business associate who had lots of spiritual questions. I said of course.

He was a very impressive guy. Successful, confident, friendly, well-spoken. He was born in India but is now an American citizen. He was raised in a Hindu home but educated by the Jesuits. And he had a lot of questions. He wondered how we could reconcile a loving God with suffering, for instance. (Does that sound familiar?) He has a brilliant son who has a degenerative muscle disease...kind of like a young Stephen Hawking. He himself had just lost a very high power position because he refused to do things in his work that he felt lacked integrity. The more I pressed in, the more I realized that this apparently confident and self-assured man had been shaken. He said, "This isn't what I imagined for myself. I feel like I'm having to start all over."

I asked how he was coping. He said, "I've always been a very optimistic person. I have great faith that things will turn out all right." I replied, "You speak as if you believe optimism and faith are the same thing. I'm not sure they are. Could you tell me... when you say you have faith, who or what is the *object* of that faith? In what do you believe?" He thought for a moment and then said, "I suppose cosmic forces in the universe. Things seem to have a rhythm to them. Sometimes I pray to a picture of one of our Hindu gods...I suppose it is something like that."

Then I shared how one of the great differences between his faith and mine was this: I have *one* God in whom I believed...one loving God who holds my destiny in his hands ...instead of 330 million Hindu Gods...and this God has entered into this world of suffering and redeemed it. This powerful God is in total control of everything that is going on in this earth, even the hard things that we cannot explain. I spoke of what that might say about the sufferings of his son. And I asked how that speak into a moment in his own life when all his plans had fallen apart and he feels like he is starting over.

An amazing thing happened. About half way into our conversation as he was trying to eat his Reuben sandwich, the tears began to flow. This confident, self-assured, successful business man began to weep. He kept dabbing his eyes with napkins and the pile kept growing in front of him. He kept apologizing for his tears and I kept saying, "You have nothing to apologize for; I am honored that you would share so deeply with me." And at the end, after deep conversation and lots of tears, I said, "Would you mind if I prayed for you?" He said, "Not at all; I would like that." And so I did. I prayed for my Hindu-Jesuit-struggling friend. And we left with the hope of continuing conversations.

It was so sweet to me...so profound...so moving. I watched as this man of the world caught a glimpse of a personal, loving, powerful God...one who will never abandon us...one who is for us. Do *you* know that kind of God? Because he knows you...loves you...and longs to be *your* inseparable heavenly father.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.