

Victory in Christ

Romans 8:26-39

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

This text is the main reason I wanted to preach this series of sermons from Paul's letter to the church at Roman. By the time we arrive at this text Paul has already addressed many issues that have challenged Christians over the years.

One problem Paul addresses is suffering, which he traces to sin. Through Adam sin was brought into the world (5:12-21). Christ, in the likeness of sinful flesh, destroyed the power of sin, which the law could not accomplish (8:3-4). With the Spirit of Christ in us, we are free from sin's power (vv. 9-11). What we long for (vv. 21-22), the glory to be revealed (v. 18), is already glimpsed in us, who have the first fruits of the Spirit (v. 23), the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead and dwells in us (v. 11). We are heirs of that glory because we have been adopted

as God's own children (vv. 15-16). Suffering too is part of our joining with Christ and must be understood in light of the eternal hope (v. 17). **Karen Chakoian**

Today's text is one of the favorites of many pastors and in churches. If 1 Corinthians 13, the "love chapter," has become the preferred reading at a wedding, Romans 8:26-39 has become *the* text for funerals. When Paul expresses his personal conviction—that he is convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—his statement is itself persuasive. It is one of the most important pastoral privileges to stand with those who have been weighed down by the power of death and proclaim with Paul, "No, these things cannot prevail." It is a testimony to the strength of Christian faith to witness what happens to those gathered at a funeral. Where the power of death is palpable, we can see how moved those gathered can be Paul's words of conviction that even death cannot separate one from the love of God.

Beyond the setting of a funeral, this text has much to offer. It speaks not solely of death, but of many matters that threaten separation. Separation is a genuine issue in our lives. In a splendid essay, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes, "Ah! If only I could grasp and embrace everything!—and how cruel it is to choose and exclude." Every choice we make along the way necessarily separates us from some other option. We cannot do everything, and so, when we do anything, we must exclude something. Such exclusion, such "leaving behind," is a source of great pain in human living. Even the most natural thing, like growing up, involves leaving something behind. I cannot become an adult without leaving childhood behind. I do not stay young forever, and so I leave behind my young adulthood with all its brimming potential. Nearly everyone understands that, in the usual course of things, my parents will die before me. We raise our own children with a full expectation that they will go away from us, step out on their own.

At the very heart of what it means to be human is separation from those things and those people we love. Several years ago, Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson published a book with the title *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*. The title itself speaks volumes. To be human is to have loss and grief. No one is able to escape loss and grief. Anyone who has remotely loved anyone or anything will suffer the grief of loss and will know the painful power of separation. On July 5th a cousin died and on the 20th a dear sorority sister died. We have all heard how many people have lost their battle with COVID-19. There are highway signs that count the traffic fatalities each year. If you have not been touched by loss yet...just keep living and your time will come.

Portrayal of the powers that cause separation is part of the genius of the eighth chapter of Romans. Paul understands the conflict of cosmic forces that cause separation. He lists many of these forces. One of the first he mentions is hardship (v. 35).

One commentator mentioned that several years ago he heard a preacher who enthralled a congregation by repeating the simplest observation: "life is hard." She said it again and again, and with each repetition you could feel the visceral acknowledgment of those in the room. Life *is* hard. The hardness of life, the struggle it presents us nearly every day, and so much a part of our lives. But after you ask someone how they are doing and they say "fine," if you keep listening you will hear how hard life really is, even if we find it hard to say out loud.

Paul's list of those things that separate continues. It includes distress. Distress is a frequent force in our lives. When we cannot complete what we so want to finish, we are in distress. When we have done all that we can do, and it is still not enough, we are in distress. Like the waters flowing over a sinking ship, distress overwhelms us.

Next in Paul's list is persecution. The prevalence of persecution makes this force especially significant. The violence done to women and men because of their inclusion in one group or another—be that grouping on biological, social, or convictional grounds—remains a force with devastating capacity to separate. Homeland Security reports human trafficking **involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act**. Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked worldwide – including right here in the United States. It can happen in any community and victims can be any age, race, gender, or nationality. Paul goes on, naming "famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword." This includes unemployment and under employment, making it difficult to pay bills, stay in one's home, or purchase healthy food. We know "sword" means war at home and abroad and not only kills, but also impoverishes the most disadvantaged. The forces that cause separation are many.

But before we get to excited and point the finger at others...the text also stands as judgment against our own complicity with the forces that separate. We can be the very ones that cause the persecution. Those of us who profess conviction of the power of God's love have sometimes been the ones who fostered hardship, distress, and famine, or at the least have allowed them to fester undisturbed. The good news is even those of us who have felt the judgment of our 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 weight of all the forces that bring separation into our lives would appear to tip a scale completely over. Few, if any of us, 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. **David M. Greenhaw**

Can death separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can life separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can angels separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can rulers separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can things present separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can things to come separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can powers separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can height separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can depth separate us from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

Can anything else in all creation separate from God's love...no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...we have victory in Christ!

As people who have the Spirit, we can be patient in suffering. We do not despair but remain certain in our suffering. We know all depends upon the

faithfulness of God to God's promise. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). So, nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" Nothing?

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. **Steven D. Paulson**

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