

August 24, 2014
Pentecost 11

"More Than Conquerors"

ROMANS 8:35-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered 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, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ 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.

As I speak Christians living in Iraq are being marked for slaughter by Islamic terrorists. The Arabic letter for "N" is being spray painted on homes to mark people as Christians who follow Jesus the Nazarene. They are being forced to flee, convert to Islam, pay a fine or face death. Some are brutally beheaded for their faith and loyalty to Jesus.

These words we just read to you from Romans 8 were written to comfort Christians in Rome who are about to go through times of severe persecution for their faith. Some who read these words from Paul would one day stand before the blood thirsty crowds in the great Coliseum and hear them roar in delight as they are being attacked and torn apart by wild beasts.

Whatever severe persecutions come to our brothers and sisters in Christ in places like Iraq or Nigeria or Indonesia or Sudan, nothing can separate them from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the deepest, darkest, loneliest pit of life, we can say with Job, "I know my Redeemer lives" and with Paul "We are more than conquerors through him who loves us."

Forces of evil will attack us

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Life is full of changes but one thing never changes. The love Jesus has for you is the same yesterday, today and forever. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

Paul wants his dear Christians in Rome to know that nasty things could come to them in the future similar to what he experienced in his life as he faithfully bore witness to Jesus' death and resurrection. There will be trouble or as he King James Version translates it, "tribulation." In Matthew 24 Jesus says of the last days, "For then there will be distress (tribulation) unequaled from the beginning of the world until now." The Greek word has the thought of being squeezed or pressured by forces of evil that surround you in the world in which you live. Then there are hardships. The word used here has the thought of being crunched into a very narrow place. Can't you hear the Christians in Iraq saying, "Where are we going to go?" There is no place to turn to for help."

Then there is persecution. This word has the thought of being pursued or chased the way a pack of wolves might pursue and chase a deer or elk until they finally bring it down. Paul did that before he became a Christian. He pursued followers of Jesus to other cities to bring them back to Jerusalem where he might put them to death. When you run and hide in times of persecution you find yourself hungry and without enough food to eat. You find yourself without the clothes you need to keep you warm at night. Here is how the book of Hebrews describes the faithful believers in the Old Testament who were persecuted for their faith. "They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-the world was not worthy of them."

It should not surprise us that Christians of the first century and Christians of the 21st century are persecuted for their faith and even put to death. Paul quotes from Psalm 44, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Notice it says that we face death for "your sake." In Acts 4 the early Christians banded together for prayer after Peter and John were released from prison. Here is what they prayed for. "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." And then it happened. It says, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Proclaim boldly and fearlessly that Jesus Christ from Nazareth is your Lord and God and the only hope of salvation and you will suffer for the name of Jesus.

Is there anything in all creation that can separate you from God's love? Not according to Paul. He says, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul says, "I am convinced." He speaks with absolute certainty that the love Jesus has for him is greater than death or life. Death cannot separate us from the love of Christ. When Stephen died for his faith he prayed as he was being stoned to death, "Lord, Jesus receive my spirit." "Whether we live we live unto the Lord and whether we die, we die unto the Lord, whether we live therefore or die we are the Lord's." There is nothing in life that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ are Lord. The arms of the Shepherd hold us tight and carry us whatever challenges life brings to us.

Angels and demons are no match for Jesus and the love he has for us. Ephesians tells us, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." The Revelation assures us that we overcome these forces of evil by the blood of the Lamb and the word of the testimony the Word of God.

Nothing in the present and nothing in the future can separate us from the love that Jesus has for us. How will I make it through this day? What will happen to me tomorrow? Even if you do not know what the future holds, you know who holds the future. Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Go to the highest heights. Go to the lowest depths. Use a telescope to view the distant stars. Use a microscope to search the smallest particles. Take a bathysphere into the

deepest ocean depths. You will not find anything in all creation that will separate you from the love of God that is yours in Christ Jesus your Lord and your God and your Savior. There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper.

The love we have in Jesus gives us the victory

How could Paul be so certain that nothing would separate him from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus his Lord? How can we be certain this love is real for us? It helps if we look at the words Paul that precede the words we read to you. In verse 31 we read, "What shall we say in response to all this? If God is for us who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but him up for us all- how will he not also with him, graciously give us all things?" Then Paul remind us that no one can bring any charges against us because God has justified us. He has declared us not guilty in Christ. And Jesus is at the right hand of God constantly interceding for us.

If my hope of being close to God and loved by God depended on anything that I have done to earn God's love and favor, then I am hopelessly lost. Sin does terrible damage to our lives. When you open yourself to hurting other people and thinking only of yourself, you drive a wedge between you the person you are hurting. Husbands and wives who constantly hurt each other in marriage risk drawing farther and farther apart. Sin separates us from God. It causes us to fall short of his glory and come under his wrath and condemnation. Immediately after falling into sin Adam and Eve wanted to hide from God not just because they were ashamed of what they had done, but because they were genuinely afraid of what a holy and righteous God would do to them because of their sin. Sin drives us into a corner. It tortures us and leads us to cry out, "There is no hope for me. I have nothing to offer God to earn his love and favor."

Satan loves to try to separate you from God by overwhelming you with your sin. The Revelation says he accuses us before God's throne day and night. But then we overcome his horrible accusation by the blood of the Lamb and the word of God. Paul asks the question in Romans 8:34, "Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus who died, no more than that who is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." So dear Christian picture in your mind being hauled into court. Satan is ranting and raving and yelling and screaming about what a terrible person you are. But then you look up and see Jesus defending you with his blood that was shed for you. You see him holding out his hands and showing the wounds that guarantee even your sin was forgiven as awful as it is. You look up and see your Judge smiling at you because your defense attorney and judge are the same person. What a powerful case there is for us, not against us!

Because of where you stand with your God through Jesus you are able to say with Paul, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." We get the word "Nike" from the Greek word for conquer. Only instead of just being conquerors we are "more than conquerors." The Greek adds the word "hyper" which we might translate also as super conquerors.

Why can we say we are super conquerors through Christ? It because everything that Jesus accomplished in his life is now ours in fullest measure. You are a Christian. Christ's death is yours. Christ's resurrection is yours. You are already seated with Christ at the

right hand of the heavenly Father. You are his sheep and he is your Shepherd. You are his bride and he is your Bridegroom. The Chaldean Christians who are dying for their faith in Iraq are dying with the same hope that Christians had when they gave their lives in the arenas of Rome and other parts of the Roman Empire. They are able to pray as they face death, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." If the enemies of the Gospel someday mark your home with an "N" because you follow the despised Jesus from Nazareth, you will be able to say to those near and dear to you, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Amen.