

Sermons through

Romans

More Than Conquerors

Romans 8:33-39

Part 3

Who Shall Separate Us?

Romans 8:35

With Study Questions

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Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. ³⁴ Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" ³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:33-39)?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (Romans 8:35)?

Introduction

In my many years of ministry I have encountered, more than once, a brother or sister in Christ wrestling through a crisis of faith or some form of spiritual or moral failure or weakness. These types of things can be subtle and gradual or sudden and cataclysmic. I recall a friend going through this type of season. He said his current situation brought about a struggle through Proverbs 24:16.

For a righteous *man* may fall seven times And rise again, But the wicked shall fall by calamity (Proverbs 24:16).

He wanted to know which one he was – the righteous or the wicked? He had difficulty grappling with how he related to God and how God was relating to him. It is not an entirely unhealthy pursuit. But when it gets right down to it, I shared with my friend (in terms of the way he and God relate) that he was the sinner and Jesus is his Savior. God is his Father and he is God's son. This is the fundamental nature of our relationship with God. And there is only one reason the righteous man will continue to rise. It's found in Luke 22:31, 32.

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail (Luke 22:31, 32a).

One might ask, why does my Father in heaven give any power whatsoever to Satan to sift the children of the Living God? God has His own just and glorious why He ordains the difficulties of those whom He loves; not the least of which is presented by Calvin who writes:

We will never have confidence in Him unless we become distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in Him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in Him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.

Chapter V of the Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of Providence*, explains it thus:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; (2 Chron. 32:25–26, 31, 2 Sam. 24:1) and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just

and holy ends. (2 Cor. 12:7-9, Ps. 73, Ps. 77:1, 10, 12, Mark 14:66-72, John 21:15-17)¹

We see the obvious example of Paul where a messenger of Satan himself becomes an instrument in the hand of God to teach Paul humility. Paul did not bemoan his difficulties, but rather prayed, then took pleasure:

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

An Autobiography

If we read of Paul's accounts of his own ministerial and evangelistic efforts, we get the feel that the second half of Romans 8 autobiographical. Paul would record how he was held in "**disrepute**". He would write of his "**hunger, (being) buffeted, homeless, reviled, slandered...like the scum of the world**" (1 Corinthians 4:10-13). He would record his "**afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments**" (2 Corinthians 6:4, 5). He wrote of being "**beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, robbers, toil, hardship, sleepless nights, anxiety**" (2 Corinthians 11:25-29).

Strength and weakness are such odd dynamics for the Christian. There is a godly strength to which one arrives only through a recognition and experience of their own human weakness. But never in that weakness should we consider ourselves devoid of God's love and good favor; hence the numerous rhetorical questions: "**What then shall we say to these things? Who can be against us? Who shall bring a charge? Who is he**

¹ *The Westminster confession of faith.* (1996). . Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

who condemns? (and our current one) **Who shall separate us?** All of the answers to these questions are designed to elevate our souls. And Paul directs us to these questions via the unbreakable chain of God's foreordination.

Un Unbreakable Chain

Those who can lay claim to these glorious promises – the elect – the child of God – are brought into this dialogue with the marvelously shocking and soul-buttrressing revelation that their inclusion, so far from being the product of human will, goodness or intellect, is the product of God's eternal decree and providence. God **"foreknew"** us and **"predestined"** us to be **"conformed to the image of His Son"** (Romans 8:29). At a certain time He **"called"** us **"justified"** us (pardoned our sins) and our ultimate glorification is as good as if it were past (Romans 8:30).

How comforting it must have been for Paul, during his many trials, to meditate upon the genesis of his own redemption. Paul believed – had faith – because in eternity past, God had determined it to be so. That being the case, he would not entertain the notion that his current trials could somehow pull asunder that eternal bond which united Him to God through Christ. He is seeking here to persuade his readers to approach the matter in the same way. In all of this Paul doesn't diminish the severity of the trials; he merely put them in their place.

Who Shall Separate Us?

Paul asks **"Who shall separate us..."** then gives a list of impersonal nouns. Of course **"who"** sounds like a personal pronoun – because it seems as if somebody is out to get you.

The apostle says not (remarks Calvin nobly) "What," but "Who," just as if all creatures and all afflictions were so many gladiators taking arms against the Christians [Tholuck].²

² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 8:35–36). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The implied answer to the rhetorical question is *nothing* or *no one*. And it must be restated that that would include our own weakened will or strength of conviction or lack thereof. This would so defeat Paul's primarily goal, which is to grant the great assurance that favor with God will not – cannot – be severed. If it is possible that our unity with God is dependent on the power of our own will none of us are safe. For I have little doubt that unless my faith is decreed in eternity past and is forged by the power of God's own almighty hand, I will most assuredly be crushed when "**death, angels, principalities and powers**" aim their guns in my direction.

From the Love of Christ

Paul has now transitioned from the court room scene with its legal language of "**charges, justification, condemnation**" (**Romans 8:33, 34**) to the driving force of our redemption, which is the love of God. We should love God, love Christ, love our neighbor; but this is not, it cannot be, the ground of comfort. I had a well-meaning Christian friend (who is now in the ministry and has been for many years) who told me he desired not to get caught up in theology and doctrine. All he wanted to do was teach people how to love Jesus.

It is a sweet sentiment and he was (and I assume still is – I haven't seen him in over 20 years) a sweet man. We should seek to love God, love Jesus, and love our neighbors. But the message which must antedate our love for God and ever maintain priority in the heart of the believer is a deep and rich meditation upon God's love for us.

I think the Wizard errs when counseling the Tin Man that "a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others." But I most assuredly would assert that Christian comfort is not secured by measuring our love for others, but by seeking to comprehend, appreciate and enjoy the "**breadth, and length and height and depth**" of God's love for us. It was toward that end that Paul bowed his knees. (Ephesians 3:14-19).

The love of God can easily be, and should certainly be, part and parcel of every sermon on every Lord's Day. But let us not, because of the incomprehensible breadth and depth of it, fail to seek to apprehend here

the pinnacle of it—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16a). Or as Jesus elsewhere taught:

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

The love of Christ is expressed most fully in His sacrifice. It makes you wonder if we were to poll the natural minds of earth as to their assessment of what the greatest act of love God, or a god, could possibly be. Would they say that the greatest act of love would be to bring an end to disease, hunger, war? I dare say very few would come up with the incarnation (preparing a body for His Son) and atoning sacrifice on a cross for sin. Yet another testimony that we don't truly know what we need. It has been said of love, *agape*, that:

It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires. For example, John 3:16 states, “For God so loved [*ēgápēsen*] the world, that he gave.” What did He give? Not what man wanted, but what God knew man needed, i.e., His Son to bring forgiveness to man.³

Tribulation, Distress, Persecution, Famine, Nakedness, Peril, Sword

Paul then presents a non-exhaustive list of ordeals: “**Tribulation, Distress, Persecution, Famine, Nakedness, Peril and Sword.**” Every one of these, as we stated earlier, Paul had faced except for “**sword**” which he would soon face. These trials were not fiction. And Paul was not immune to the anxieties which would attend these sufferings.

“**Tribulation**” *thlipsis* carries the idea of “pressing” or “pressure” used of the treading of grapes, the pressure that bursts.⁴ “**Distress**” *stenochoria* speaks of anguish. *Literally narrowness, tight or narrow place; figuratively, as the restrictiveness and pressures brought on by inner or*

³ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁴ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

outer problems *distress, difficulty, trouble*.⁵ To feel the whole world is closing in on you. Tribulation might be what is happening outwardly while distress is what it is producing within us.

“Persecution” *diogmos* means to follow, pursue, press toward or hostile prosecution. It is defined as “a program or process designed to harass and oppress someone.”⁶ They don’t let up. There is no respite. Consider undergoing this while suffering **“famine”** *limos*. We’re not talking about being ready for dinner but undergoing tremendous difficulties while weak with malnutrition.

Add to this **“nakedness”** *gymnotes*. Paul conveyed that his toil and hardship and sleepless nights and hunger also involved **“cold and exposure”** (2 Corinthians 11:27). Paul completes his list with **“peril”** *kindynos* – dangerous or threatening circumstances then, finally **“sword”** *machaira* which likely refers to the executioner.

Yet People Walk Away

The long and the short of this is God won’t hear a charge against His elect because we are justified by the blood of Christ. There is no condemnation because Jesus died, rose again and is at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf. Truly, **“if God is for us”**, how insignificant upon any deep analysis are those who are against us. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

Yet we have a thing called apostasy. People walk away from the faith. Paul uses the same words for “tribulation” and “persecution” as Jesus in the Parable of the Sower, where He taught:

...yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation (*thlipseos*) or persecution (*diogmou*) arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (Matthew 13:21).

⁵ Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. (2000). *Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

“If God is for us” (Romans 8:31) contains the conditional conjunction **“if”**. Let me submit that if people walk away from the faith – despite their testimonies to the contrary, they were never of the faith. It is plainly stated by John:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us* (1 John 2:19).

People may walk away from the church, from fellowship, from a community; but not the faith. So it might be a healthy exercise to **“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5).**

I read a distressing article this week about the son of a popular evangelist (an evangelist I had the opportunity to meet and lovingly disagree with). His son described himself as an apostate, now defining himself as an “agnostic humanist”. It was notable how he chronicled his road to apostasy. He said he “passed just about every stage of heresy” on his way to apostasy.

His first step away from orthodoxy (his own term) was a rejection of the sovereignty of God – how could God allow evil things to happen when He is capable of stopping them. He must not truly all powerful. The next step was in college when two of his roommates came out regarding gender orientation. He admitted that he would “ignore certain Bible verses and underline others.” The article then records:

Having rejected the sovereignty of God and authority of the Bible – two cornerstone Christian beliefs – he was already substantially outside the evangelical fold. But then Bart committed what many would call an unpardonable sin: He became a universalist. He simply couldn’t fathom a God who would condemn his nonbelieving friends to hell for eternity.

Then he started rejecting miracles, the resurrection, that Jesus was the only way and so forth. Then he got in a biking accident and just decided

he didn't believe at all. It is a tragic testimony. But there was something written early in the article, almost in passing, that got my attention.

He said he had become a Christian in high school and was drawn by the sense of community and common commitment to love people, promote justice, and transform the world. These are all good things – things that should enjoy, take advantage of and be in our hearts. But then came the soul-piercing comment, “All the dogma and the death and resurrection of Jesus stuff was not the attraction.”

If the death and resurrection of Jesus is not our treasure, we are still in love with the world; our souls are in great peril and we will begin to read the Scriptures through the eyes of one who is in an affair with the thief who comes to “**kill and destroy**” (**John 10:20**) twisting them to our “**own destruction**” (**2 Peter 3:16**).

The signature attribute of one who can lay claim to the glorious promise that they cannot be separated from the love of Christ is the one who seeks to abandon all trust in self, recognizing our sin, weakness and impotence before a holy God. Our wisdom and salvation is found in Christ and His word.

Questions for Study

1. How would you describe the nature of your relationship with God? How can a person rest assured that, though they fall, they will rise again (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why does God give any power to Satan to sift (pages 3, 4)?
3. Discuss the odd dynamic of Christian strength and weakness (pages, 4, 5).
4. Why is God's foreordination such a critical and comforting element for the struggling Christian (page 5)?
5. Can a believer be separated from the love of God by his/her own choice? Explain (page 6).
6. Should Christians love God, Jesus and their neighbors? Is this the source of Christian comfort? Why or why not (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is the pinnacle of God's love for us? Do we always recognize the best way we should be loved by God? Discuss your answers (pages 6, 7)?
8. What are some ordeals Paul mentions which may make people feel that they may lose faith? What are some things you experience that make you feel that way? How do you confront those times (pages 7, 8)?
9. What is apostasy and why does it happen (pages 8, 9)?
10. How can we be assured we are in the faith (pages 9, 10)?