

If God is for us, who can be against us?

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8.32).

Introduction

We come this morning to a new sub-section of chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In this section the apostle draws together all that he has been saying about the great doctrines of our salvation, and brings things to a glorious conclusion, proving that the person who has truly trusted in Jesus for salvation is completely safe. There is no conceivable way that the person who has been truly saved can ever lose his salvation. No power in heaven or on earth can thwart God’s purpose to save that individual and bring him to glory. The person who has committed his soul to God for safe keeping is utterly secure. God will keep him, and bring him safely into his eternal home. Whatever happens in this life, nothing can take from that person what matters more than anything else, which is to know the love of God.

In order to make his point, the apostle asks a series of what are known as “rhetorical questions.” A rhetorical question is a question that the speaker poses in order to make his listener think. As soon as you pose the question, the answer is obvious. So these questions that the apostle puts here are questions to which the answer is obvious. They are posed in order to help us to see that the very idea of God failing to bring to glory those whom he has chosen to save is utterly ridiculous and absurd. These questions are designed to help us to see that it is completely impossible for God to condemn those whom he has justified.

What the apostle says in this mini-section is potentially of enormous help to those of us who are believers. There are those who teach that a

Christian can be truly saved and then lose his salvation. This teaching robs believers of their joy and confidence in the Lord. It very easily leads a person back into a sort of “salvation by works” mentality. Even those of us who know that this teaching, that you can lose your salvation, is false, can very easily fall prey to the accusations of Satan when we sin. It is only too easy to listen to him when he whispers in our ear, “What sort of a Christian do you think you are? You don't imagine, do you, that God will have someone like you in heaven?” Or when tragedies happen in our lives, it can be very easy for us to think that somehow God is against us, and that we have fallen out of favour with him. So it is very important for all of us who are believers to let the teaching of this section go deep into our thinking.

If you are not yet a Christian, I hope that you also will listen very carefully, because this section teaches those who are not yet believers what a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian, and to know the love of God. God uses two main things to draw people to himself. Sometimes he thunders at us through his law, and shows us what terrible sinners we are, and how we are in terrible danger of being judged and sent to hell. Sometimes, he beckons us by speaking warmly about his tender love, urging us to come to him and become a beneficiary of that love. This passage is one of the most encouraging sections of the whole Bible. It shows us what a wonderful thing it is to be right with God. If you are not yet a Christian I hope you will listen to what is being said here, and allow God to draw you to himself as he speaks of his great love for those who believe in him.

My plan this morning is to focus our attention on the first of the rhetorical questions, the one found in verse 31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” This question is obviously designed to deal with the fear that often lodges in the minds of believers, which goes something like this: “I am worried that somehow God might not be strong enough to bring me to heaven. Perhaps some power or force might somehow cause me to do something which will disqualify me. Could it be that my own sin, or some attack by men, or maybe the devil himself, might prevent me from making it to glory?” The question that the apostle puts is designed to make us realise that there is no power in heaven or on earth that can possibly take from us our salvation. In fact, there is no power that can harm us, ultimately, in any way at all. The true believer is completely safe. Nothing can touch him. Even though the believer has very powerful and nasty enemies ranged against him, he need not fear at all, because he is safe in the arms of God.

As we think about this verse I want to do so by considering the three main enemies that the Christian faces, and how the fact that God is for us shows us that we do not need to be afraid of them. Traditionally, the enemies of believers have been categorised under three main headings: the world, the flesh and the devil.

Let us think about these. I shall change the order, and start with the flesh.

1. The flesh

Those who are true believers have been born again. They have a new nature. Where previously they were slaves of sin, now they have the power to live in a new way. However, even though the true believer has been fundamentally changed at heart, he still has a battle with the old tendencies to sin. The word which the Bible uses to describe this tendency to sin is a word whose literal translation is “the flesh”. The NIV translates the word as “the sinful nature”. This tendency to sin still lives on in the believer. There is a constant battle going on within us. In Galatians 5 and verse 17, the apostle says, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (ESV). Although we have a new master, Christ, living in us by the Spirit, the habits of the flesh linger on, and threaten at any time to overwhelm us.

Let me illustrate it like this. Those who have had a serious drink problem, even once they have been “clean” for several years, will usually describe themselves as “recovering alcoholics” rather than “ex-alcoholics”. The recovering alcoholic knows that he cannot relax his guard for a moment. This is because the habit of alcohol abuse was for many years a deeply entrenched habit. The tendency to abuse alcohol is still there, and needs to be constantly guarded against. One slip into drinking can lead to a whole lifestyle of the abuse of alcohol taking control once more.

So, the Christian still has a constant battle against the tendency to sin that still lives in him. He cannot relax for a moment, or sin will overtake him again. The flesh is a very strong and crafty enemy, which can at any moment take us unaware if we are not careful, and drag us back into sinful habits. The apostle says in Galatians 6 and verses 7 and 8, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.”

There is no “easy fix” to the problem of the flesh. Some believers will tell you that, if you have a particular experience, you will be forever delivered from the flesh. They say that all you have to do is to receive by faith the gift of what they call “entire sanctification”. They say that you have to stop striving, to “let go and let God” take over your life. Once you have had this experience, they say, then sin and temptation are no longer a problem for you. But the reality is that the flesh will continue to dog us all the rest of our lives. We will never be able to relax and say that sin is no longer a problem for us.

Nonetheless, although the flesh is a real enemy, the apostle says here, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Yes, the flesh is a terrible enemy. It is the “enemy within”. It is a traitor to what we really want to do, if we are believers. But we do not need to fear that somehow the flesh will win, and drag us back to hell. Why not? For two great reasons.

The first reason is that the true Christian has had all his sins forgiven. They are all fully paid for, by Jesus’s death. If you are a Christian, if you have trusted in Jesus, that he died for your sins on the Cross, all your sins, past, present and future, have been fully paid for. All the debts that you ever had against God, and ever will have against him, are completely cancelled out. You are now holy and righteous in God’s sight. You are justified, declared to be not guilty. God is now “for” you. Before, he was against you. You were the object of his wrath. You were facing eternal destruction and torment in hell. Nothing you could do could save you from this. But now, if you have truly trusted in Christ to be your Saviour, God is for you. He is in on your side, or rather, he has put you onto his side. All the wrath that would otherwise have burned against you has been poured out on Christ. So even if the flesh should get the upper hand for a while, and you should commit some unmentionable sin, nothing will alter your status of being righteous in the sight of God.

The second reason is that the true believer has been born again. He has new desires living in him. Christ himself is living inside him by means of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not allow the true Christian to continue in sin. If a believer falls into sin, the Holy Spirit inside him will make him feel so miserable that he will not be able to continue in sin. Hence John says in his first letter, chapter 3 and verse 9, “No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” The person who has been truly born again will not continue in sin. He cannot do so. The Holy Spirit will not let him.

So, thanks be to God. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The flesh has no ultimate power over the true believer. If you are a true believer, you are completely safe, because of what God has done for you in Christ.

2. The world

When the Bible uses the term “the world” sometimes it does so to refer to the physical world that God has made, in the sense of the earth. Sometimes also the term is used to describe all those who live in the world. But when the term “the world” is used usually it is used to refer to those men and women who have not been saved from their sins, and who are opposed to God. Those who are not saved are under the control of the devil, and the devil hates God and Jesus Christ. The devil can no longer attack Jesus in person because Jesus is now in heaven. So the way that the devil tries to hurt Jesus is by using unbelievers as his pawns, to attack Jesus’s people. Therefore it should not surprise us if we find ourselves coming under attack. In their natural state, men and women hate God. If they hate God, they will also hate his people. Jesus said, as recorded in John chapter 15 and verses 18 and 19, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” John writes in his first letter, chapter 3 and verse 11, “Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.”

If you are not yet a Christian, maybe you have started to experience this already. You happen to mention to a friend that you have been attending the services of a Bible-believing church. This friend then says, “Huh! What do you want to do that for? You haven’t become a Bible-basher yourself have you?” You should not think it strange if this happens to you. It is to be expected if you show an interest in Christ.

For those of us who are Christians already, the opposition that we get from the world can be much worse than that. We may get physically attacked, put into prison, and even killed for the sake of Christ. This is quite normal for the Christian. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 11 and verse 25, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”

If even Jesus, the perfect Son of God, was called the prince of devils, how much more should we expect to be slandered. Jesus went on to explain that even the members of our own households may turn against us. He said, as recorded in verses 34 to 36 of the same chapter,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

If we are faithful to God, we will face opposition in this world. We must expect it. Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 12, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted". Later in this chapter in Romans, in verse 36, the apostle says, quoting from Psalm 44, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." This is the normal Christian experience in this world: the slaughterhouse! Jesus promised us, "In the world you will have tribulation."

So, as believers, we must expect real opposition in this world. This may well hurt us severely. We cannot just "rebuke" the opposition and tell it to go away, and "claim the victory". The more we are faithful to God, and the more we seek to serve him, the more opposition we must expect.

But hear the comforting words of our verse: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Yes, we might be treated appallingly. Yes, our possessions may be stolen from us. Our children may be taken away. We may be made homeless. We may be thrown into prison. We may be insulted and reviled. We may be tortured. We may have to endure years of back-breaking work in a labour camp. We may be killed. But nothing that happens to us can thwart God's purpose to save us and bring us to glory.

Psalm 33 and verses 6 to 11 says,

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm for ever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

Men may hate us, torment us, threaten us, attack us or kill us, but they cannot thwart the purposes of God for us, if we are true believers. Nothing can stop God from doing his work in us. He is the Almighty God, who can do whatever he pleases.

By his power, God is ruling over all the events of this world. Those rulers that he wishes to raise up, he raises up. Those whom he wishes to put down, he puts down. No-one can stand against him. Isaiah says, in chapter 40 verses 22 to 24 of his prophecy, that

[God] sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

The terrible forces that are ranged against us in this world might seem to be overwhelming, but, if God chooses to, he can sweep them away in an instant. If he chooses not to, it is because he wants to use these evil rulers to accomplish his purposes for good in our lives and in the lives of others of his people.

Our God is the omnipotent God. He limits the evil that men can do. Everything is in his hands. He can intervene, just when things look the most serious, and change things in a moment. But if he chooses not to intervene, none of the things that the world might do to us can take away what matters more than anything, which is our relationship with God. With him, we are completely safe. In fact, the more we suffer for the sake of Christ, the greater will be our reward at the resurrection. When this world attacks us, it only by God's permission, for our good.

So we can echo the words of the Psalmist, as found in Psalm 56 and verses 10 to 11, "In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise – in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" Thanks be to God. "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

3. The devil

Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 12, "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." There are mighty spiritual forces that are ranged against the true believer. The devil is highly sophisticated, and

very powerful, and has many spirits under him. He is utterly opposed to God and his purposes, and very crafty. He does his utmost to stop us from becoming Christians. Once we have become Christians, he cannot take away our salvation, but he is intent on bringing us to the point of utter uselessness. He is totally opposed to us. He tries to make us doubt God, and to doubt our salvation. He seeks to make sin attractive to us. He seeks to divide us from other Christians. He seeks to accuse us for our sin, and rob us of our joy of salvation. He will never let up until our dying day.

But hear our verse again: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Next to Almighty God, the devil is nothing. The devil was created by God. He is utterly dependent upon him for any power. He can only act at God's permission. When God says that the devil must stop, he has to stop. Moreover, when Jesus died on the Cross he made a public spectacle of the devil and the demons under him. The apostle Paul says in Colossians chapter 2 and verse 15, "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [God] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The power of the devil over us is in accusation, but the death of Jesus completely broke this power. We can stand against the accusations of Satan and do not need to give way. The Devil may rant and rave against us, and be furious because of our salvation. He may tempt us, he may try to beguile us, and put terrible thoughts into our minds, but none of these attempts to harm us can withstand the power of Almighty God. John says in his first letter, chapter 4 and verse 4, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Remember what we saw in verses 29 and 30. Those who have been saved by Christ were "foreknown" by God, long before the creation of the world. They were loved by him with a special, electing, love. Those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. God has determined that all his children will one day be like Jesus. And those he predestined, he also called. Those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified he also glorified. God's plan will not fail. No power in heaven or on earth can withstand the purpose of Almighty God. For all his malice and great power, the devil is utterly unable to thwart God's purposes for his people. "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Conclusion

We have been thinking about the first rhetorical question that the apostle asks in this concluding section of Romans chapter 8, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” We have seen that what he is effectively saying by this question is that although the Christian has many enemies that are very powerful and extremely malignant, none of these enemies can withstand the power of God. God will keep us safe. Neither the flesh, nor the world, nor the devil himself, can prevent God’s purposes for the true Christian from being fulfilled. If you are a Christian, you do not need to fear that somehow some power beyond your control will sweep you away to eternal destruction. Jesus said, as recorded in John’s Gospel, chapter 10 and verses 27 to 30,

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10.27 – 30)

If you are a Christian, rejoice that the Almighty God is for you, and he will keep you. Serve him with joy and confidence.

What is the message for any who are not believers this morning? Surely it is this: Almighty God is holding his arms out to you. He is offering complete and utter safety in Christ. Apart from him you will be at the mercy of these horrific enemies, the flesh, the world, and the devil, and you will be helpless to stop yourself from being dragged off to eternal destruction in hell. Come to Christ. Ask him to give you eternal life, that you might know his love.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<http://www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=10117410530>

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