

Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ? Romans 8:31-39

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On Friday we looked at these verses and considered God's *role* in the death of His Son, and God's *design* in the death of His Son. God the Father did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all. It wasn't just Judas and the Jews and Pilate who delivered Jesus up to death. But, ultimately, it was the Father who purposed for that to happen. As Isaiah 53 says, it was the will of the Lord to crush him. That was God's role in the death of His Son. And He offered Jesus up for a specific group of people—for "us," who, in this passage, refers to those who love God and are called according to His purpose, those whom God foreknew, predestined, justified, and glorified, the elect. This was God's powerful and effective design in Jesus' death, that He would atone for the sins of the elect.

Because of that death, and because of the resurrection, we should have tremendous confidence in the promises of God. And this morning we're going to look at some of these amazing promises in this passage.

God Is for Us

If you are a believer, if you are truly saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus, then God is for you. Now, we have to let the weight of this sink in so that we don't take it for granted. God is not for everyone. And even for those of us who are believers, God has not always been our ally. Up until the time of our conversion, we were actually God's enemies. We were against Him, and He against us. We were under His condemnation, deserving His wrath. That is a very scary thought. For those who are apart from Christ, God is not for you. He is against you. And if you remain at odds with God, He will punish you in hell forever. That is the clear teaching of the Bible. Many choose not to believe it, but they will find out soon enough that God's Word is true, and God's warnings are not to be ignored. They will be like the people in Noah's day, who went about their lives without any fear of God's judgment. And then it was too late. Don't take this lightly, friends. Don't ignore the warnings of Scripture. Don't reason this away.

Easter is such a happy celebration of what Christ has accomplished for sinners like us. But if you're going to celebrate this, you have to understand the predicament we were in apart from

Christ (or maybe the predicament you are still in apart from Christ, if you have never submitted yourself to the Lord Jesus). Just consider the danger of having the all-powerful God of the universe as your enemy. That is worse than anything imaginable. It is worse than anything a mere human could do to you. It's worse than having nuclear weapons pointed right at your house. It's worse than losing all your money, all your family, all your earthly comforts. It's worse than starving to death, or being tortured. Because all of that suffering, as bad as it is (I'm not trying to make light of any of those trials), lasts but for a moment . . . in comparison with eternity. And if you are God's enemy, as the Bible says we are if we remain in our sins, then your afflictions will never, never end.

Now, in light of all that, listen again to verses 31-32. "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?" Paul words this as a rhetorical question, in an "if, then" statement. His point is: Since God is for us [again, the "us" referring to the elect, those who are believers, those who have been called by God and justified, etc.]. Since God is for us, therefore nobody can ultimately be against us. Wow! That is Good News!

Infinite power, which was against me to bring about my eternal destruction, is now for me to bring about my everlasting happiness. Is there any news better than that in all the world? Oh, let us never take this for granted, brothers and sisters. God was against us. But now He is for us.

No Enemy Can Succeed against Us

One of the implications of God being for us is that no enemy can succeed against us. The way Paul words this statement in verse 31 may sound like nobody can be against us in any way. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" But Paul certainly knows that there are many enemies who come against us. He lists many of them later in this passage. In verse 35 he lists persecution and danger and sword. These clearly imply things that are against us. There's somebody carrying out the persecution. There's someone or something causing the danger. There's somebody on the other end of that sword.

And we should recognize that this list of afflictions—which Paul says, none of these things can separate us from the love of Christ—these are very personal to Paul. These are things he experienced in his own life.

He writes of “*imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*” (2 Corinthians 11:23–27, ESV)

And a few verses later, after talking about the thorn in his flesh, he says, “*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV)

Paul certainly knew that, as believers, there are plenty of things that can come against us in this fallen world. But the point in saying, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”—the point is that nothing can ultimately be against us. Nothing can succeed in destroying us. Nothing can triumph in its attempt to bring us down. Instead, God is using those very things for our good. God ordains these trials in our lives. He allows them to happen, in His mysterious purposes, so that we will be more than conquerors through Him who loved us (v. 37).

One of the church fathers, John Chrysostom, who lived in the 300s, wrote about this: “Yet those that be against us, so far are they from thwarting us at all, that even without their will they become to us the causes of crowns, and procurers of countless blessings, in that God’s wisdom turneth their plots unto our salvation and glory. See how really no one is against us!”¹

What an awesome truth that should give us a whole new level of perception of reality as we go through trials of various kinds. The boss or co-worker who is making your life miserable, the family relationships that are the source of tension, the marital conflict, the wayward child, the financial hardship, the health problems—these are all things which seem to be against us, which sadden us, discourage us. And yet God is working it all together for our good. None of these things have the power to thwart us, but will actually work for our sanctification. None of these things can condemn us or bring a charge against. For God is the One who justifies us. If God is on our side, declaring us righteous in Christ, then no one can say otherwise. The world, the flesh, the devil, cannot condemn us. No enemy can succeed against us.

¹ Quoted in Moo, 539

To contrast this again with the predicament of those who are apart from Christ, think about the implications of Romans 8:28 for those who never repent and believe. For those who do not love God and are not called according to His purpose, all things work together, not for good, not for their sanctification and eventually their glorification in heaven, but rather all things work together unto their never-ending destruction. In the life of the believer, even the very difficult things in life are working together for our good. In the life of the unbeliever, if they never repent, then even the very nice things in life are ultimately working together for their destruction. Money, success, family, hobbies—even these good things, can be idols which hold people in bondage and keep them under God’s wrath.

But if you are in Christ, then all things are working together for your eternal good. God has sacrificed His Son for us and will graciously give us all things.

Just think of the power and the confidence and the comfort we ought to have in life, knowing that God is for us. God is on our side, fighting against the enemy. In C. S. Lewis’s classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there is a point in the story where it seems that the White Witch is going to prevail over Peter’s struggling army. But Aslan, the Christ-figure, who had been put to death on the stone table, came to life again. And he went and breathed life into those many creatures who had been turned into stone by the White Witch. When all those creatures, along with Aslan, arrived at the battle, it was a totally different story. “Then with a roar that shook all Narnia from the western lamp-post to the shores of the eastern sea the great beast flung himself upon the White Witch. Lucy saw her face lifted toward him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement. Then Lion and Witch had rolled over together but with the Witch underneath; and at the same moment all war-like creatures whom Aslan had led from the Witch’s house rushed madly on the enemy lines, dwarfs with their battleaxes, dogs with teeth, the Giant with his club (and his feet also crushed dozens of the foe), unicorns with their horns, centaurs with swords and hoofs. And Peter’s tired army cheered, and the newcomers roared, and the enemy squealed and gibbered till the wood reechoed with the din of that onset.”²

You see, in that story, if Aslan is on your side, if He is alive and well, risen from the dead, powerful to defeat the foe, then nobody can triumph against you. This is the hope we have, the confidence we have, to persevere in our struggles. Like Peter’s

² The end of chapter 16.

army, who must have been greatly discouraged by their dwindling numbers and the power of the enemy against them, they found fresh hope when the risen King was fighting on their side. They knew they were going to win, then.

And that's our great hope, too. Christ died, and rose again, and He is on our side. So we've been thinking about this great truth that God is for us, and therefore no enemy can succeed against us. And now let's look more closely into Christ's role in this. Christ's life and death and resurrection and intercession for us is at the center of this Good News. It is the basis of our justification. It is what removes our condemnation. It's how God is for us, and not against us. Because Jesus Christ lived the life we ought to live, but do not because of our sin. And He died the death we deserve, as our substitute. And He rose again in triumph over the grave and to confirm the efficacy of His death. And now He is continually interceding on our behalf.

Christ Interceding for Us

Verse 34 tells us that “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.” This is an awesome thought. Think about the comfort you get when a friend says, I'm praying for you. That should be of great comfort to us, because God hears the prayers of His people. Prayer is powerful and effective. Now think about Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, praying for you, interceding for you, pleading your case in the courtroom of God. This is an awesome thing, indeed.

Our Savior, who died for us and rose from the dead, and is exalted at the right hand of God the Father, He is praying to the Father on our behalf. He is our high priest. He offered Himself as the sacrifice, and He is the priest presenting that sacrifice before the Father, making atonement for His sheep. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament compares Christ with the priests under the old covenant.

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:23–25, ESV)

So picture Jesus, eternally making intercession for you, making it known before God that your sins are washed away by His blood. When you are discouraged, when you stumble in sin

and you are mourning over that sin, there can be joy and confidence and hope in your repentance because “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).

Listen to these words from Charles Hodge, in his commentary on Romans. This will give you something to chew on for a while. “Christ, as seated at the right hand of God, and invested with universal dominion, is able to save: his interceding for us is the evidence that he is willing to save—willing not only in the sense of being disposed to, but in the sense of purposing. He intends to save those who put their trust in him, and therefore in their behalf he presents before God the merit of his mediatorial work, and urges their salvation as the reward promised him in the covenant of redemption. He is our patron, in the Roman sense of the word, one who undertakes our case; an advocate, whom the Father heareth always. How complete, then, the security of those for whom he pleads!”³

This is a powerful reason for confidence in our salvation. Jesus not only died on the cross, which is where He bore the wrath for our sins, but His resurrection proves the power of that death. And He is now in a position of exaltation at the right hand of the Father, and He is interceding for us.

With this rock-solid assurance, we know that nothing—absolutely nothing—can separate us from the love of Christ.

How can you know if these promises apply to you?

A key question arises at this point. I’ve said the “us” of this passage is the group of people God foreknew and predestined for salvation, whom he called, justified, and will one day glorify. But how do we know if we’re part of that group or not?

One way to think about that question, still looking in the context of this passage, is to consider verse 28 and ask yourself if you are one of those who love God. Do you love God? Verse 28 says, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” (Romans 8:28, ESV)

It’s interesting that verse that the group of people designated there are described from the human perspective and the divine perspective. From the human perspective, they are the ones who love God. From the divine perspective, they are the ones whom God has chosen. These are the elect, the predestined ones. God chooses individuals unto salvation, He calls them effectually,

³ Pg. 290.

regenerates them, giving them new life with new desires and new loves. They are the ones who are justified and will most definitely persevere to the end and inherit eternal life.

So one way to examine yourself and consider whether you are in that number, is to look into your own soul and ask, “Do I love God?” And, of course, we have to be careful with that word, “love.” This isn’t using the word “love” in a flippant way like you might say, “I love pizza.” No, this is a deep and abiding love, a life-changing love, a love that reorients your perspective on everything.

Think of other individuals whom you love—spouse, family, friends. How does your love for them affect your life? You want to communicate with them. You want to hang out with them. You make sacrifices of time and money and energy in order to be with them more and to express your love for them. You think about those people whom you love. You are attentive to the things they communicate to you.

Do you love God? A lot of people say they believe in God, and I imagine plenty of people would say they have some amount of love for God. But when you look at a person’s life, you can begin to tell what they really love. So the question I’m asking you now is not whether you give some lip-service to God. I’m asking, in the depth of your being, is there a love for God that has changed your life.

It’s not going to be a perfect love. We continue to sin because of the weakness of our love for God and some of the sinful loves which remain in our lives. But if you love God your life will be different. You will realize, “I want to read the Bible, because this is God’s Word to me. And I want to know him. I want to communicate with Him in prayer. I want to be in heaven with Him forever.” As I’m saying this, do you resonate with these things? Do you find yourself saying, “Yes, I do have those desires within me”? Or is this just meaningless church-babble to you?

It’s impossible to overstate the importance of this question for you today. You may be here today simply because you thought it would be a good thing to attend church on Easter Sunday. It’s a nice tradition. But I’m hoping for so much more. I want God to give you a love for Him. I want you to draw near to Him and to know the love and peace and joy of being secure in His care. I want you to know that God is for you, and therefore no enemy can succeed against you. I want you to rest in the fact that Christ is interceding for you.

Free to Risk and Fearless in Suffering

And, finally, in terms of application, I want you to be free to risk and fearless in suffering. Based on God's sovereignty in salvation (as we've seen in this passage), and our resulting confidence in Him and our assurance of salvation, we should then be free to risk and fearless in suffering. We should be free to take God-honoring risks and make risky sacrifices for the Gospel.

How do you think a person ought to act who has been given these amazing promises of no condemnation and no separation?—who has received these promises from the All-powerful God of the universe? How ought a person to act who knows that God is for me! God is on my side. No enemy of mine will prevail against me. Jesus Christ, the righteous, is my advocate, interceding for me. What kind of life does that produce?

Is that person going to hide away in a corner somewhere, clinging to their few possessions, scared of what might be taken from them, worried about what calamity might befall them? No, the freedom we have, the confidence we have, emboldens us to risk and frees us from worry. We can give things away, because our hope is not in possessions. We can open our mouths and share the Gospel with unbelievers, because our hope is not in the praise of men and we do not fear the ridicule or persecution that might result. We can face affliction and suffering, because we know it's all for our good (v. 28), and none of it is going to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 35-39).

Todd Beamer was on United flight 93 on September 11, 2001 when the plane was hijacked by terrorists. He's the one who said, "Let's roll" as the passengers launched their counterattack. He left behind a wife, Lisa, and three children (one who was yet to be born at that point in time). What was it that gave him courage to risk his life in a moment like that? And what is it that has given Lisa strength to carry on. Listen to what Lisa Beamer says,

"God knew the terrible choices the terrorists would make and that Todd Beamer would die as a result. He knew my children would be left without a father and me without a husband . . . Yet in his sovereignty and in his perspective on the big picture, he knew it was better to allow the events to unfold as they did rather than redirect Todd's plans to avoid death. . . . I can't see all the reasons he might have allowed this when I know he could have stopped it . . . I don't like how his plan looks from my perspective right now, but knowing that he loves me and can see the world from start to finish helps me say, 'It's OK.'" (Modern Reformation, 24-25;

quoted in Piper sermon “Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ”)

This is the fruit of clinging to God’s goodness and God’s sovereignty in all things. This is the kind of hope and strength that comes from believing the great promises we’ve seen here in Romans 8.

This is why we can sing, as we will in a few moments, “It is well with my soul.”

“Tho’ Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul.” That blest assurance is due to the fact that absolutely nothing and nobody can separate us from Christ’s love.