

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Roman 8:28-39
“We Belong To Jesus Christ Forever”

June 12, 2016
(4th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 8:28-39 "WE BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST FOREVER"

// Plato, Republic 10.12, 612e-613a, Ancient Defense Of Providence

A5. v.28 THESIS 5: GOD'S PROVIDENCE AT WORK IN THE WHOLE PROCESS, 1 For.

//v.22, Communal, Traditional Assertion, "We know" = New Unit

28 WE KNOW that in **all** things God works (together) for good //v.22a, 26, *synergei*, God Works With Us
 with those who **love** him, (Responsive Love) Not Inevitable, 1 People, 2 Descriptions, 5:5. 8
 who are *called* according to his purpose. (Divine Election) *pro-thesis*, 1:1, 6-7, God Initiates! Link (vv.28c, 30a, b)
 Thesis = God At Work In All Things For The Faithful Called Who Love

B5. vv.29-39 WARRANTS/BASIS, GRAND VISION, Q & A, 2 For's, 3 Forms.

Word Chain + Double Questions (Creedal) + 2 Lists

Foreknew **1. vv.29-30 Call: A Dynamic Planned Process From The Beginning To End, 5 Aspects.**
 Prior To Time → End (v.29) + Process, Eph. 1:4

29 a *Because* those whom he *foreknew* *hoti*, (*pro-egno*) Foreknew → Predestined → Called → Justified → Glorified
 Predestined b he also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of his Son, End Is Set, (*pro-orisen*), *symmorphous*
 in order that he might be the *first-born* among many brethren. 1:5, (*pro-totokon*) Col. 1:18, Footnote?
 30 Called c And those whom he *predestined* he also *called*; Creation, 11:2, (*pro-orisen*), All Aorists (Past)
 Justified d and those whom he *called* he also *justified*; *sorites/klimax* (ladder), God's Actions
 Glorified e and those whom he *justified* he also *glorified*. 3:23, 1 Thess. 2:12, Phil. 3:21
 All Who Say Yes And Continue Will Be Set Right & Glorified

2. vv.31-34 Questions (6) + Answers As Questions, 2Q + Christological Affirmations.

9 *Who's (tis)*, For us (3x) Creedal: Title + *Who* Affirmations

31a Q1 What then shall we say to this (these things?) Cf. 8:1-27, Transition, Diatribe Question
 b Q2 If (since) God is *for us*, *who (tis)* is against us? vv.31-32= ? + Christology, vv.33-34 = ? + Christology
 32 Q3 He *who* 'did not spare his own Son' 'but gave him up *for us* all,' //v.34b, 3:25, 4:25, 5:8, 8:3, [Gen. 22:12, 16]
 will he not also give us **all things** with him? Yes *Who* (7x), If The Greater, Then The Lesser
 Scene = Future Last Judgment

33 Q1 *Who* shall bring any charge against God's elect (*called*, chosen)? Angels? [Is. 50:8-9], *egkaleo/ eklektos* //v.30a
 34a Q2 It is God *who* justifies; //v31b (form), Acquits, Legal Metaphors At Last Judgment
who is to condemn? //8:1, God Has Acquitted Us Already! No One!
 b Q3 Is it Christ Jesus, //vv.3, 11, Key Christological Affirmations:
 c *who* died, yes, Sacrifice //1 Cor. 15:3-5 Creedal, v.3 = Sending, Death (1)
 d *who* was raised from the dead, Victory p.v., Resurrection (2)
 e *who* is at the right hand of God, Enthroned/ Active Rule [Ps. 110:1b], Session/ Rule (3)
 f *who* indeed intercedes *for us*? //8:26c-27, 1 Jn. 2:1, Heb. 7:25, 9:24, Present Work: Intercession (4)
 Paul Is Confident In God, God's Purposes!

3. vv.35-39 The Security Of God's Love, 2 Questions, 7 Pressures, 5:1 Chiasm.

Virtue Through Testing, Question = Bridge From vv.31-34 to v.35

35a Q1 a *Who* shall *separate us* from the **love** of Christ? Fate? External Resistance, Subjective Genitive, a. Question 1
 b 1 Cor. 4:10-13, 2 Cor. 6:4-11, 11:26-27, 12:23b-28, List From Paul's Experience, Not Sword
 7 Human Forces b1 Shall tribulation (pressure), *thlipsis*, 2:9, 5:3-4, b. List 1: 7 Item Question + Warrant From Scripture
 2 or distress, Historical Tragedies? An Anything External To The Relationship Sever Us?
 3 or persecution, Form: Q1 (v.35a), Q2 (v.35b) // A2 (v.37), A1 (vv.38-39)
 4 or famine, Surface Structure = 5:1 Chiasm, *Love* (a-c-a'), Lists (b//b//)
 5 or nakedness, 2 Lists Of Opponents To God's Plan: vv.35b//vv.38-39a
 6 or peril, *Sword* = For Roman Citizens, Capital Punishment Was Beheading
 Q2 7 or sword? No. 7 Has A Quote Attached Because *Sword* = Death

36 As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed **all** the day long; It's Normal, Pain Is Expected
 we are as sheep to be slaughtered." Ps. 44:22 (LXX, 43:23)
 v.37 Spoken By One Who Suffered v.35b

37 A2 c No, in **all** these (i.e. seven) things c. Answer + Explanation
 we are more than conquerors through him who **loved** us. "I Love You In The Troubles"

10 Cosmic Forces vv.38-39 = 1st Singular, Paul's Triumphant Confession
 38 all b'1-2 **FOR I AM SURE** that neither death, nor life, //vv.2, 6, b' List 2: 6 Statements/ 10 Item Affirmation
 demons 3-4 nor angels, nor principalities (cosmic rulers), All 9 Are Ultimate Threats! Topic = Astral Powers
 time 5-6 nor things present, nor things to come, 3 Pairs + Single, 1 Pair + Single
 demons 7 nor powers (heavenly powers), 1 Cor. 15:24
 39a space 8-9 nor height, nor depth, Technical Terms: Zenith/Nadir
 all 10 nor anything else in **all** creation, *Height/Depth* = Powers Ruling Upper/Lower Heavens

b A1 a' will be able to *separate us* from the **love** of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." vv.28-34 Full Sweep Of God's Plan; If Not These, Then What Can? We Can!
 5:8, a' Promise

A Brief Treatment Of Roman 8:28-39

Romans 8:28-39 is the last of five thought units that comprise 8:1-39. *In Christ Jesus* (vv.1, 2 // v.39c) is an inclusion for the section. The words *love* and *all* (v.28//v.39) bracket the thought unit, as do claims to knowledge (*We know*, v.28 // *For I am sure*, v.38a). An opening claim (v.28) is followed by three support paragraphs (vv.29-30, 31-34, 35-39). The initial assertion (v.28) as a defense of providence has Jewish and pagan parallels, the idea being that a God– or gods– work in all circumstances for the devoted. Paul is willing to incorporate the insights of general revelation; this is one of them. *We know* is a claim to apostolic teaching, and– while not all things are good– God is more than able to bring good from them for *those who love him, who are called according to his purpose*. The logical order is that God’s *call* elicits *love* which draws us into the divine *purpose* (Gk. *pro-thesis*), the first of four terms with the prefix *pro* in succession: *foreknew* (*pro-egno*), *predestined* (*pro-orisen [2x]*), *firstborn* (*pro-totokos*). Because God is active in all circumstances, nothing exterior to the self can separate us from divine love.

The first warrant (vv.29-30) is an expansion of our *being called according to his purpose* and answers the question *How? Because* (Gk. *hoti*) makes the link explicit. The form is a word chain (Gk. *sorites* or *klimax*) in which a term is repeated before the next is added (*foreknew, predestined/predestined, called/called, justified/justified, glorified*). God’s will is grounded in eternity (*foreknew, predestined*), revealed in history (*called, justified*), and completed at the end in resurrection (*glorified*). The final goal is previewed in an insertion that interrupts the chain, “... to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (v.29b). God’s will is that there be a great family who share in the glory of a new creation. What God desires (*foreknew*) is guaranteed (*predestined*); those who say *Yes* to God’s call are set right (*justified*) and destined for a glory like Jesus. This is not philosophical determinism, i.e. that all details are preset and unfold without variation, but rather the workings of divine grace which incorporates all sorts of difficult raw materials (v.28) in the formation of a people.

The second warrant (2. vv.31-34) consists of two sets of three questions (vv.31-32, vv.33-34) to secure the idea that the God and Christ who are *for us* (v.31b, 32a, v.34f) will not condemn us at the end. The first question (v.31a) is a link to vv.28-30, “What then shall we say to *these things?*” The answer is also a question, “Since God is for us, who is against us?” with an argument from the greater (*God*) to the lesser (*who*). The same argument is used in v.32 where the content is theological, christological, and scriptural, “He who did not ‘spare his own Son’ (Gen. 22:12, 16) but ‘gave him up for us all’ (Is. 53:12), will he not give us all things with him?” The imagery in the second set of questions is forensic (*charge, justify/acquit, condemn*). Repeated uses of *who* (Gk. *tis*) tie vv.33-34 together. As we stand at the bar, does any angel bring a charge? No! This is followed, as in v.32, by a theological and christological confession (v.34). If God sets us right, who condemns? No one! And if the one who died and was raised and now shares the rule is the same one who now prays for us, who is left to condemn us? No one.

The final warrant (3. vv.35-39) is formed as a 5:1 concentric pattern (a-b-c-b’-a) with the words *separate* and *Christ* in the frames (a/a’) and *love* at both the frames and center (a-c-a’). A list of seven human tragedies (v.35b) linked by *or* and sealed with a quotation from Ps. 44:22 (v.36) invoking sacrificial imagery stand in parallel to a list of ten cosmic powers (vv.38-39a) linked by *nor* that also influence us. At the pivot (c.v.37) is the confident claim we are *super-victors* over all obstacles because of the God whose love is larger and more enduring than any circumstance. Whatever human or angelic resistance we encounter, they are no match for the One who loves and is *for us* all in such powerful ways. We may turn away, but nothing exterior to the self– visible or invisible– is able to pull us away or separate us.

WE BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST FOREVER

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

A question people ask, then and now.

R O M A N S 8 : 3 5a

On July 23, 1992 the police in Beattyville, Kentucky told Rosemary and Luther Smith that two of their sons— Jeremiah, age 15, and Drew, age 18— were dead. They crashed returning from a concert in Indianapolis.

Darkness like nothing she’d ever known settled over Rosemary, yet she found solace in her faith. While following the hearses to the burial site, she heard church bells toll thirty-three times. "As I counted," she said, "it hit me. Jesus died he was 33, which was also the combined ages of my sons."

Not long after the loss, Rosemary began a ministry to grieving parents named *Fellow Travelers*. "I feel this is my mission," she said, "I now have a higher purpose than what I was doing, and the death of my sons took me there."

Each day Rosemary reads the newspaper and searches the web for child obituaries. She either calls the families or sends a packet of books on loss, a music CD, a three-ring notebook of inspirational messages, and more. She gets about fifty emails a day from people requesting a packet. More than 5,000 packets paid for by Luther and Rosemary have gone around the world.

"We are here to help other people," said Rosemary. "It gives me great joy thinking God is using me to help others."¹

Was God responsible for the wreck? Was there some eternal decree, some long ago foreknown determinism that both boys would die this night in this way with no other factor but that *it had to be*? No on both accounts. God was not responsible, and there was no predestined fate, no preset termination date for

¹ Edited, Kara Bussabarger, "A Fellow Traveler," *The Southeast Outlook* (12-15-05).

these two young lives. To account for any human event entails many variables, and in a world like ours with fragile human flesh moving at high speeds inside metal vehicles, and with the freedom we and others are given, bad things happen. Blowouts. Accidents. Hydroplaning. Mechanical failures. The mistakes of others with whom we share a narrow ribbon of asphalt. And Yes, even youthful foolishness and intoxication. We live in a naturally dangerous world, and when you add to the mix of frailty and freedom the larger issues of sin and evil— both human and angelic, you begin to see the immense complexity of adequately accounting for any single event.² Simple answers don't work.

But could God have stopped it? Yes. Then why didn't God intervene? The simplest response is that if God stepped in every time there was about to be a painful consequence— great or small— our freedom would be an illusion and the link between action and consequence broken.³ It would not matter what we thought or did because the outcomes and pain would always be short-circuited. Wisdom and the character born of experience would vanish; virtue would be impossible; we would forever remain children instead of growing into mature adults of rich understanding and deep sympathies. God's purpose in the world did not require that these two boys be rescued from death or mom and dad insulated from perhaps life's cruelest grief. Being a Christian is not a contract for protection. Our lives are bettered as we learn God's ways and walk in God's wisdom, but God is not obligated to shield us. Our faith is for walking through the whole of life, not around it by a privileged path.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

So while God did not cause it— except in the remote sense of shaping a world of

² On the issue of complexity I have found Gregory Boyd helpful, especially his *Is God To Blame?* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), Chapter 2, "Evil And The Blueprint," 41-60.

³ For an treatment of the gift of freedom, its limits and outcomes, see Dinesh D'Souza, *Godforsaken: Bad Things Happen. Is there a God who cares?* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2012), Chapter 5, "Divine Omnipotence and human Freedom," 77-90, and Chapter 6, "Choices and Consequences: Why a Lawful Universe," 93-116.

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actions and consequences, and while God did not suddenly intervene in the physics of the collision, that does not mean God was absent or off duty or uninvolved.

Only God understood all the factors of the event and all the possible ripples that fan out from the horrible news. So God gave grace to sustain the crushed parents and then— as Paul notes in verse 28— began to bring good out of the loss by working in other resources and possibilities after the fact and along the way. It’s a perversion of thought to claim that since God wanted a new ministry to the grieving, he arranged for the death of the two boys to kick start it. Such a God would be a moral monster unworthy of our worship or love. It happened. God did not stop it, but after the event, God took two broken parents and opened their eyes to the needs of others just like them. The story of Rosemary and Luther Smith is a living example of what Paul offered as common Christian teaching in verse 28, “We followers of Jesus know that in all things God works together in the direction of good with those who love him; these are the ones who are called by God according his purpose.”⁴

Now with such a large idea as this, it’s helpful to rule out misunderstandings. Paul is not saying that everything that happens is good, but that on battlefield earth where all sorts of horrible things happen, God is yet able to take the results and rework them in a new direction in cooperation with those who love him. Paul is not saying *things are not as bad as they seem* because some are already as bad as can be imagined. He’s not offering the bland idea that *everything turns out good in the end*, because many things do not. There is much suffering from which no good comes, at least not in this life. Paul is announcing that with those who love God as a response to new life in Christ, the whole of life is raw material for God to turn to good in us and through us.

There is simply nothing God cannot use for those who yield and follow. This is an insight that changes everything. It means everything in your life has meaning and that our great God is at work amidst it all for a good bigger than we see. The suffering you did not seek and cannot avoid is raw material for a deep transformation through a partnership with Jesus Christ, and if we take him

⁴ A paraphrase to highlight certain aspects of the Greek syntax.

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our sufferings, he turns them into building materials to make us more like him.

Some retreat into their sufferings and never emerge. Over time they become ever smaller in soul, living for the next drink or the next injection or the next show in their favorite TV series or the next bit of distracting gossip or the next trip or the next novel. They turn away from God and close their hearts and minds around their loss till it becomes the organizing principle of life. Others stay in the relationship and give God time to work, and over time they become larger souls with deeper capacities for giving and receiving love.

Now Paul is not claiming this as a universal human experience across the board as if it automatically applied to all people; it is not for those who reject God’s love and are not interested in the divine purposes. Paul says nothing about them; here he speaks to Christians only. God does not will all things and nothing that is evil but works in all things, and it is the faithful who receive this grace. Since pain and suffering are not optional but standard equipment, proving the truth of Paul’s words is an advantage. It’s something you need to understand to live well. It doesn’t make the hurt any less, but it does fortify us with hope and sometimes yields deep insights that come no other way. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, who suffered for two decades in hellish Soviet prison camps, wrote:

“Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.”⁵

What a costly insight. Life is good but not fair, not easy, sometimes brutal. We live on contested territory, on a grand battlefield with real casualties and a hundred percent mortality rate. Every day there are slights and disappointments, bumps and bruises great and small, sometimes catastrophic failures and irreplaceable losses so that your mind screams in protest and your heart recoils from the pain it must now absorb and integrate. But if you return the love of the God who came on a great rescue mission in Jesus and are drawn

⁵ Quoted in Eric Metaxas, *Miracles* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2012), 65.

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into his purposes, then God is free to work with you and through you to bring good you never sought from tragedy you sought to avoid, and— in the process— you get a deeper, larger soul, as Rosemary Smith said on the far side of the loss of two sons, “We are here to help other people," she said, "It gives me great joy thinking God is using me to help others." You can't defeat that kind of person because underneath their life is the buoyancy and lift of God's near presence.

Dr. Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who endured the death camps of the Third Reich, wrote in his famous *Man's Search for Meaning* that “In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.” He observed in the rigors of the camps that “those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear almost any ‘how.’”⁶ Life with our God is jammed with meaning, and so when someone asks, even casually, “How are you doing?” my best answer is not the casual, “Oh, fine.” It's rather, “My life is intensely meaningful at my sector of the front,” and that is a true report.

It was in the early fifth century, as the world of Rome was crumbling, that St. Augustine, the philosopher bishop of North Africa, paraphrased verse 28 in these words, “The omnipotent God, primal power of the world, being himself supremely good, could not permit anything evil in his works, were he not so all-powerful and good as to be able to bring good even out of evil.”⁷ Evil and sin are pervasive and have a temporary freedom to inflict pain and chaos, but in the end they shall be banished, and even now their grip is loosened as God turns their evil to good through the responsiveness of Jesus' followers in every age. How frustrating that must be for the rebel forces. I can hear them even now snarling, “Is there anything we can do to frustrate his disgusting goodness?”

So that's the big idea Paul offers in his thesis statement, verse 28. In all things— even the worst— God works for good with his partners who love and trust him. But this claim is then supported in three paragraphs that build to a climax that nothing outside the self can separate or pry us away from the God's

⁶ Idem.

⁷ *Faith, Hope, and Charity (Enchiridion)*, translated by Louis A. Arand (Pine Beach, NJ: Newman House, 1955), 17-18,

love as demonstrated in Jesus Christ, who is the human face of God.

Now if you want people to remember something, you make it memorable, and that is what Paul does in verses 29 through 30 in a five member word chain. And if you'd asked Paul what he thought God was up to in the big scheme of Creation and the Crisis of Sin and the Call of Abraham and the Covenant with Israel and the Coming of Christ and the Creation of Church and the Consummation of all things at the end,⁸ he might have said:

“Our God, the God of Jews and Jesus, is after one thing, the creation of a people, a faithful community through whom the full glory the Son can be expressed. God is creating a new kind of family with Jesus as our faithful, elder brother, the firstborn of the resurrection, a reality into which all are invited.”

How do I know this? Because Paul inserted it into the second member of the word chain. If it was just a word chain, it would have unfolded as *foreknew/predestined, predestined/called, called/justified, justified/glorified* and it would leave us asking about the climactic word, What does *glorified* mean? Well, Paul answers that question by interrupting the chain at link two, “...he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,” then this insight, “in order that he— meaning Jesus— might be the firstborn among many brethren!”

With you being you for eternity, God wants to shine the love of his Son through all your particularities, and not just through you but through every member of a large new family, not based on common DNA or ethnicity or status but on an affinity and attraction to Jesus Christ.

So when I think of my life as a disciple, I dare not let modern individuality dominate the landscape and make it little and personal and all about me. No, I'm caught up in something much larger, even cosmic. Something God knew forever in the councils of the Holy Trinity, something God set in motion for a clear destination before creation ever exploded into existence. God *fore-knew*

⁸ On this big-picture approach to the story line of Scripture, see Brian D. Russell, *Invitation* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2015).

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and *pre-destined* that the deepest goal of the entire drama of creation is to have a faithful people, and nothing can stop that coming about, and so when living and serving as a faithful church dominates our lives, we are as near to the core of God’s heart as we can be this side of the kingdom.

And so, when God’s eternal desire enters the messiness and chaos of a world gone wrong, it shows up clustered around two special words: *called* and *justified*. God initiates communication; God interrupts expectations; God speaks so people hear; God lays claim to a life; and when the call is answered and not resisted, a new relationship opens up in which the person is *set right* with God—*justified* being the technical term— not because of previous moral performance but through the risk of trust. Their hand reaches out to the hand that first reached out to them. And for those who let God’s initiative enable their trust since grace calls for faith, a process is set in motion in which all the stuff of life, the agonies and ecstasies, the boredoms and the beauties, are raw material for God to work with inside the new relationship. And when those folk come together on the day of resurrection, what we call *Sunday*, we catch a glimpse of the people God is forming and reforming. And what a mess we are!

My little, local, limited, short, stumbling life as son Phil and disciple Phil and husband Phil and father Phil and Pastor Phil is a small but real part of the grand drama of God as encapsulated in Paul’s five part word chain.⁹ Because it’s foreknown and predestined by God before creation, it’s utterly reliable. The outcome is guaranteed, which is what *pre-destined* means, not the kind of philosophical determinism in which everything follows an exact blueprint. That would be *pre-determinism*, which is not what Paul offers. The end, the outcome, the goal, the destiny are guaranteed, thus *pre-destination*. This train, whatever its route, will arrive at Destination X and loaded with disciples of Jesus Christ. The destiny and destination is pre-set; history will arrive at the goal, but between here and there much is undecided, which is what gives life such a feel of high-stakes drama. Our choices matter, and God creatively incorporates them into the drama because he is the editor of his own book.

⁹ On the necessity of genuine drama for meaning, see J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), Chapter 1, “The Hunger for Drama in a Thin World,” 17-36

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I'm in the middle of Paul's word chain. You see, I've been called; I've been given the gift of a healed relationship with the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; I'm in a dynamic change process I do not fully understand because I cannot comprehend all the factors involved or view all the players, the people and the angels good and bad, but this I know: I am being pulled ever deeper into the purposes of God to display the perfections of the Jesus the Son across the entire landscape. It was upon reflecting on the strangeness of his own journey that C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic *Mere Christianity*:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised.

But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of— throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but He is building up a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.”¹⁰

So this is the process. Before history: foreknown and predestined by God. In history: called and set right by God. After history: glorified in a forever family by God. The big picture in three periods. “But what about me? What about when I'm called before the bar of Judgment? If the truth were known, I'd be rejected and ashamed.” That's a common fear, which is why Paul speaks to it so directly in the next supportive paragraph, verses 31 through 34. And he does it in a staccato series of six questions because questions clear spaces for reflection. “What shall we say about all this?” is how he begins. Then a second question in answer to the first, “If God is for us, who is against us?”

¹⁰ <http://cslewisquotes.tumblr.com>.

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“Wait a minute, Paul! If God is *for me*, in my corner, guarding my back, helping me, enabling me, encouraging me, doing for me what I cannot do for myself, and if God’s is the only opinion that matters on that day, what should I worry about?”

“There, you’ve got it!”

And when you add to this that God has already set me right with himself, and that Jesus in his life and in his death and in his resurrection and in his co-rulership is now praying for me, I face the judgment with confidence. No angel or human would dare raise a charge against one so completely defended by God! The judge is your Father, the prosecutor your beloved older brother, the Holy Spirit your character witness. Relax. Live in love without fear.

But there is yet another fear to be addressed, and so Pastor Paul, one who read the subtleties of the human document with care, speaks to it in verses 35 through 39, which many scholars consider to be the dramatic pinnacle of all Paul’s writings. It is to Paul what the *Hallelujah Chorus* is to Handel’s *Messiah* or what *Climb Every Mountain* is to Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Sound of Music*. And the question it addresses is this: Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Life is complex, the path narrow, and I am frail.

There are times when I tell personal stories to people. I do it hesitantly, but if it’s the most effective way to get through barriers, I do it. And if we’ve already established basic trust, it works well. So having asked the question everyone is thinking, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul gives a list of six powers that have come against him though other people and a seventh he is yet to face but will, which is having his head severed from his body by a Roman executioner on Nero’s command because crucifixion was reserved for non-citizens and the blade for citizens. That it’s last on the list and that it happened to him about eight years later I take as a prophecy of sorts. Paul had a holy hunch what awaited him.

So when he speaks of pressures and distresses and violent persecutions, of not having enough food to fight off hunger or enough clothes to fend off cold, and when he speaks of the physical perils, say of crossing snowy mountains in Asia Minor or being adrift on the ocean for days, he’s not speaking theoretically

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but from experience.¹¹ He's faced all these, and none have separated him from the love of Christ his companion. "He was with me in all these," is his testimony and inferring, "And he will be with you as well."

We've had an easy time being Christian here in America for a long time. We've gotten soft and coddled, whereas for believers in Iraq and Syria under ISIS, Psalm 44:22 is a daily reality, "As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are as sheep to be slaughtered.'" And while we do not seek such martyrdom, and must work and pray to give them relief and hope, the fact is that Jesus Christ is also with his people in these extremes. Nothing people can do to you separates you from the love of Christ. From their love? Of course! From his? Never! And when- under pressure- we lean deeply into his care, we find it reliable, as the saints and the martyrs testify.

But Paul had a multi-dimensional world view, and so what others did to him on the horizontal human level was not the only axis to be accounted for, which is why I'm grateful our first baptismal vows acknowledges the presence of cosmic, spiritual evil, of ranks of fallen angels who are always near to deceive and lead us astray. It reads, "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin, meaning the precise ways you have cooperated with the hostile powers thus far?" **I do.**¹²

So what are the *spiritual forces of wickedness* and *the evil powers of this world*? Well, it's the same forces Paul refers to in his second list of ten powers that are- like the initial seven- exterior to the self, in this case *angels and principalities*, and later in the same list *powers*, all of which were common terms in his day for fallen angels or demonic powers. If you've ever felt that someone was always trying to trip you up, guess what? They were, because all the soft spots in your character are on file. They been watching us a very long time!

There are people who resist us and our faith on one level, and there are invisible actors who resist us on another, and both must be accounted for. At D-

¹¹ See 1 Cor. 4:10-13, 2 Cor. 6:4-11, 11:26-27, 12:23b-28 for catalogs.

¹² *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989, 34.

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Day there were both ground forces and air powers to contend with, and to plan for ground attack only is not a full accounting of our opposition. To this battle plan Paul then adds still a third layer in the full range of *life and death*, the issue of time as *things present and things to come*, and the zenith and nadir of the stars which were then understood to be living beings, thus *nor height nor depth*, and a final category to cover any unnamed items, *nor anything else in all creation*. None of this, being exterior to the self, can separated us from the love of Christ. There is nothing people can do to me, nothing fallen angels can do to me, nothing in the current fallen world order by way of its structures that can sever me from his love. So, even if they *do me in*, I'm more than a conqueror because the one who owns me and has a great future for me has already defeated them all and will one day inform them of the same by banishing them forever.

But, and here is the challenging news, there is one item Paul did not place in his lists of seven human tragedies and ten larger forces. And that is because it is not exterior to the self because it is the self. Only one thing, rather one person, can separate me from the good effects of the love of Christ, and that's little ole me. As Ben Witherington puts it, "There is no eternal security until we are secure in eternity."¹³ Your biggest challenge is not other people; it's not demons or other cosmic powers; it's you and your rebel heart.

Could I walk away from Christ, renounce my baptism, trash my ordination, make a moral mess of my life, become a public embarrassment to the church, and destroy my family? Yes, the freedom remains, and it is not a capacity God will coerce. After all, what is hell but God's monument to the human freedom to say No forever? I could, because I remain capable of great treachery and moral evil, and some do, but I don't want to, and it is that deep, graced desire that keeps me on track, because if following Jesus is as meaningful as it is now, what wonders must be ahead, and I do not want to miss out!

CONCLUSION

When 13-year-old Lauren Blakemore was newly diagnosed with cancer, she heard a sermon at her church and knew God wanted her to do mission work with

¹³ *Paul's Narrative Thought World* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1994), 232.

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cancer kids. She said, "I can give them hope by telling my story."

Lauren's cancer, a primitive neuroectodermal tumor, was rare and aggressive. Only about 450 cases are diagnosed a year. The tumors invade bones and often lead to amputation. After 14 rounds of chemotherapy and 25 radiation treatments, Lauren's recovery is considered a miracle.

Throughout her battle, Lauren found comfort from a gift received before she was born— a blanket. A neighbor named Mildred made her a bright, multi-colored quilt. This "Miss Mildred" blanket was always her favorite. She snuggled in it throughout childhood and then through the nausea, fatigue, and sleepless nights that came with her battle with cancer.

After Lauren's dad visited a children's cancer ward in India, he returned to tell her about the kids. Immediately, Lauren began to raise money speaking at Rotary Clubs and schools. She wanted every child to have a "Miss Mildred" blanket because, as he said, "chemotherapy makes you cold all the time."

Thanks to women in Bosnia working at Peace Crafts, a cottage industry started by her church's missionaries, each child's bed in the cancer ward is now warmed by a "Miss Mildred" blanket.

"When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I knew God had a plan for my life," Lauren said. "This is part of that plan."¹⁴

If you've got a better God than Lauren's and Rosemary and Luther Smith's and the Apostle Paul's, please tell me. I'd like to meet him.

¹⁴ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 8:28-39.
