

Inseparable Love

Romans 8:35-39

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Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:35-39, ESV

Last week, we started looking at Satan’s four fiery darts, which are presented to us in Romans 8:31-35 as four rhetorical questions from the Apostle Paul. These “four fiery darts” are described well by Sinclair Ferguson in his book, *By Grace Alone*:

Fiery Dart 1: "God is against you," Satan says. "He is not really for you. How can you believe he is for you when you see the things that are happening in your life?"

Fiery Dart 2: "I have accusations I will bring against you because of your sins," Satan argues. "What can you say in defense? Nothing."

Fiery Dart 3: "You can say you are forgiven, but there is a payback day coming—a condemnation day," Satan insinuates. "How will you defend yourself then?"

Fiery Dart 4: "Given your track record, what hope is there that you will persevere to the end?" Satan asks.

Last week, we saw answers to the first three of these four darts:

Satan says, “God is against you,” but God demonstrated how clearly and strongly He is FOR us when He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up FOR us all.

Satan brings his accusations and piles on guilt and shame, but it is God who justifies on the basis of the work of His Son, who bore our sins in His body on the cross.

Satan wants to threaten us with the coming judgment day, when we may stand condemned, but Jesus has already been condemned for us, and so there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus has conquered sin and death for us and ever lives to make intercession for us. As Hebrews 7:25 says, He is therefore able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him.

But now we come to the fourth fiery dart: "Given your track record, what hope is there that you will persevere to the end?" Satan asks. All may be well and good now, but will we persevere? Satan may even quote Scripture, as he did when he tempted Jesus in the desert wilderness. He may bring up Matthew 24:13, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

We've been so weak, so lukewarm at times, so riddled with doubt at other times. What if something finally comes along to separate us from God's love?

I. Who Shall Separate?

And so Paul tackles this attack of the enemy head-on. He is clear and bold and unwavering in his response to this fiery dart. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

Now it's important that we understand up-front what Paul is asking. "The love of Christ" could mean either our love for Christ or Christ's love for us. But it's clear from the context that Paul has in mind Christ's love for us. In verse 37, he refers to "him who loved us" and in verse 39, he concludes this whole chapter with "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The sad reality is that, if Paul were asking about our love for Christ, we could not boast confidently that nothing could separate us from it. Thankfully, it is Christ's love for us that is in view, therefore it is Christ's love for us which ultimately matters more in salvation. Our love for Him is a responsive love, a reflective love. His love is radiant, pure, strong, holy and saving.

A. 7 Means of Separation

While Paul asks "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?", he then names seven things. These seven things should then be understood as means which Satan may attempt to use to separate us from Christ. What are these seven possible means of separation?

tribulation – This is a general term for affliction, hardship or trouble.

distress, - This is a word for anguish that literally means "narrowness of space" and speaks of feeling squeezed or crushed internally by distress.

persecution, - This refers to being hated or punished specifically for believing in God and following Christ

famine, - This refers to physical hunger, going without life's necessities, especially food.

nakedness, - This refers to any lack of adequate physical clothing.

danger, - This word is peril, the threat of physical harm or some other attack.

sword – This is a reference to the ultimate physical threat, death by the sword.

Together, these seven terms seem to be comprehensive, encompassing all danger, opposition and internal distress we may face in this life, even up to and including death.

B. Promised Persecution

Paul is not referring to these seven potential means of separation as merely hypothetical possibilities. He says in verse 36 that these problems and trials are promised and have been prophesied for God's people, as he quotes Psalm 44:

As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

And for Paul personally, these seven hard realities were not just hypothetical possibilities nor were they merely promised in prophecy. In 2 Corinthians 11-12, in a letter written before Romans and reflecting on life experiences Paul had already endured before he wrote this letter, Paul specifically mentions each of the first six of this list - *tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness and danger* – as things he had already personally endured. The only one of the seven he had not yet personally experienced was the sword and, within ten years of writing this letter, Paul would indeed be beheaded by the sword in Rome.

Not only Paul, but many of these Romans Christians who read this letter would face some of these seven realities within ten years of reading this. And we today should not think of this list of seven harsh realities as things of the ancient past. Our brothers and sisters around the world suffer *tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword* every day. Each of us has known some level of the first two – tribulation or hardship and distress or anguish. Bad things happen in our lives and we feel the inward squeeze.

Yet what does Paul say about these seven things? Can they separate us from the love of Christ?

II. More Than Conquerors

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

What does Paul mean by “more than conquerors”? Well, Paul is using the intensifying prefix *hyper-* or *hyper-*. We are *hyper-conquerors*. It's the same prefix he used to intensify his description of the Spirit's intercession in verse 26, when he said, “the Spirit himself intercedes

for us.” I pointed out to you at that time that Paul used a unique word that means hyper-intercedes, the only time the word is used in the New Testament. Well, here he says that we hyper-conquer or we are hyper-conquerors, in another unique word in the New Testament. But what does that even mean, hyper-conquerors?

What does it mean to be a conqueror in a battle? It means that you win, right? Well, if all of these things were unsuccessful in separating us from the love of Christ, we would be conquerors in all these things. But Paul says the truth is more than that, which is something that he knows from personal experience. The truth is that, while Satan intends to use these things to separate us from Christ’s love, they only show us our weakness, cause us to despair of self-reliance and drive us closer to Christ, thus having the opposite effect of what Satan desires. In God’s plan, through the power of His Holy Spirit working in us, that which would threaten to separate us from Christ only draws us closer to His love.

It’s like being in a fight and every blow landed by your opponent only makes you stronger. The more they attack, they more you win. That’s hyper-conquering!

I was describing this to Andrew and he said it was kind of like the Incredible Hulk. If you attack the Hulk, you only make him angrier, and the angrier he gets, the bigger and stronger he gets.

I also think of Obi Wan Kenobi in the original Star Wars movie. When he fought Darth Vader, he told him, “You can’t win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.” You should tell Satan that: You can’t win Satan. The more you attack me, the closer Christ draws me to Himself. Even if you kill me, I shall just be finally free of your harassment forever!

A. Through Him Who Loved Us

But this is possible only “through Him who loved us.” It’s significant here that Paul does not say, “Through Him who loves us,” but “through Him who loved us.” We’re able to be more than conquerors through Christ because He was first more than a conqueror on the cross.

In Luke 22:3, we’re told that Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, and in John 13:2 that Satan put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Thus Satan put into motion the plan to have Jesus betrayed, unjustly tried, condemned and crucified, but when Satan attacked Jesus, he was only fulfilling God’s plan and bringing about his own downfall.

In Colossians 2:13-15, we’re told, “*you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the*

record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."

B. 10 Impotent Forces

And then Paul says, that because of Christ, "*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Literally, when Paul says, "I am sure," he writes, "I have been persuaded . . ." Paul has been persuaded. This is a reminder to us that Paul had his mind changed about Christ. He was once the one doling out persecution and wielding the sword against Christians, bringing tribulation and distress to the church. But Jesus confronted him on the Road to Damascus and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This was the beginning of Paul's understanding of how much Christ loves His own, His church. For Paul to persecute the church was for Paul to persecute Jesus. And if Christ so identifies Himself with His people, then nothing can separate us from him.

This time, Paul does not give us a list of concrete realities, like he did before. This time, he stretches our minds to the limits of possibility. It is not even possible for "*death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation*" to separate us from Christ.

Here he presents some opposite pairs:

Death nor life: Not dying nor any of the things that might happen to us in life. That pair alone should be enough, because death and life pretty much cover everything that might happen to us, right? After all, something either happens to us in our life or else it brings about our death. But Paul wants to be comprehensive, so he adds . . .

Nor angels nor rulers: This probably refers to all spiritual entities, either the angelic hosts or the demonic powers. So, not only things in this life and this world, but even all of the things beyond this world.

Nor things present nor things to come: Here's another comprehensive pair. Nothing that is now nor anything that ever will be. That covers everything we're facing now or may possibly face in the future.

Powers: The series of pairs is interrupted by this single comprehensive term. No power of any kind can separate us from God's love.

Nor height nor depth: We could go as high as the heavens or as low as hell. As David said in Psalm 139:7-8:

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! (ESV)*

Nor anything else in all creation: This is a final catch-all, in case we might think of something that could possibly fit into a category apart from what Paul has already named. Everything is either God Himself or else a part of His creation. So, “nothing else in all creation” means nothing else at all.

Paul is so amazingly comprehensive that we’re meant to draw the only possible conclusion: If you belong to Jesus Christ, you cannot be lost. But still, some people have missed it. They have asked, “Well what about me? Surely I can separate myself from His love, can’t I?”

Well, let’s see: Are you a part of His creation? Does your power, as small as it may be, fit under the heading of “powers”? Are you a thing present or a thing to come? Yes, I think you are very well covered in these comprehensive inclusive classifications. So relax, you’re not as powerful as you think you are.

There have been times in life when I’ve had to hold onto my children going across parking lots or through crowded malls and they haven’t necessarily wanted to be held onto. What they soon found out is that they were not stronger than their Daddy. You are not stronger than your Father, and you are not more powerful than your Savior.

III. Inseparable Love

A. The Love of Christ

Notice one more thing: See the parallel between the question in verse 35 and the end of the answer in verse 39. In verse 35, we’re asked, “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” and in verse 39, the conclusion ends with “*nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

B. The Love of God in Christ

The love of Christ is the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This means that Christ is fully God and is also our Lord, our King.

We saw this same truth a couple of weeks ago in John 10:27-30:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one. (ESV)

Conclusion:

And so we come to the end of Romans 8, a chapter that began with the good news that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” and ends with the good news that there is no separation from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In these 39 verses, we have seen Paul give us assurance and confidence in the face of every obstacle, every challenge, every trial: guilt, weakness, shame, doubt, persecution, suffering, Satanic opposition. But the assurance and confidence has never come from us.

Paul has never pointed us to look within ourselves, except to indwelling Holy Spirit. He has repeatedly directed our attention and our hearts to find unshakable confidence in the Triune God. God’s love. God’s power. God’s forgiveness. God’s justification. God’s presence. Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension and intercession. Christ’s atonement. Christ’s love. The Holy Spirit’s help. The Holy Spirit’s leading. The Holy Spirit’s intercession. The Holy Spirit’s power.

David Dickson (1583-1662) became extremely sick in December, 1662, an illness that would end up taking his life. When a friend asked him what he was thinking, he wisely said, **“I have taken all my good deeds, and all my bad deeds, and have cast them together in a heap before the Lord, and have fled from both to Jesus Christ, and in Him I have sweet peace.”**⁸²

Derek W.H. Thomas. *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home* (Kindle Locations 1013-1015). Kindle Edition.

And when I think of how Paul assures our hearts and where he again and again sends us for confidence, I think it’s appropriate to close this series with Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

² *Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,*

³ *though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the chariots with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!"

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah