

3. No Condemnation: More than Conquerors

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[0 : 00] If we could have our Bibles open, please, at Romans 8, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Father, we believe that you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear, things that will change us, things that will transform us into the likeness of your Son.

And so we pray that your gracious Holy Spirit will shed light on this glorious passage and lead us to the one who is its great subject, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ himself.

We ask this in his name. Amen. And so to Romans 8 and the final section, 28 to 39.

In Birmingham once, there was a little Quaker chapel. It wasn't much of a place and it stood on waste ground, but the people who were members there loved it.

They enjoyed meeting there, they enjoyed fellowship together, and they enjoyed listening to the word of God. But one day, the leaders of the chapel received a letter, a rather unfriendly letter, which said, Dear Sirs, we want to buy the plot of ground on which your chapel is.

[1 : 27] We have been here longer than you, and the signature was John Lewis. Now, there's no contest there, is there? The John Lewis Mega Empire and a tiny little Quaker chapel.

And of course, John Lewis, the head people of John Lewis, simply sat and waited for the groveling letter that would come from the chapel. They didn't have to wait long.

A couple of days later, they received a letter which actually seemed to be absurd when they first read it. The letter said this, Dear Sirs, we would like to buy your property.

We have been here longer than you. Now, you can imagine they burst out laughing, the directors of John Lewis, until they looked at the signature, and the signature was Cadbury.

Behind that tiny little Quaker chapel was the vast Cadbury Empire. The scales had shifted, and the battle was won.

[2 : 29] Paul the Apostle is writing to groups of Christians in Rome, who are almost certainly intimidated by the vast Roman Empire.

Probably at the time Paul is writing, there's not widespread and savage persecution of Christians as came later. Nevertheless, Christians are a despised minority. He's writing to them to strengthen them, to encourage them.

Above all, to tell them who is on their side. If God is for us, he says, who can be against us? And that's why back in chapter 1, he said, The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Power does not rest on Caesar in his throne. And power rests in the gospel word, which can change people, and which one day will not only change human beings, but will transform the whole universe, create a new heaven and a new earth.

So as we look at these last words, we must remember what Paul is saying. As Christians, we are a minority. Even in well-attended churches like St. George's Thrawn, think of the thousands who are passing by on the Cannon Street, who are not going into this church, or indeed any church.

[3 : 45] And we sometimes can feel totally intimidated at the powers arranged against us. So Paul is saying here, as he reaches the climax of this great chapter, he's basically saying, Christians in Rome, Christians in Glasgow, or wherever you may happen to be, you are more than conquerors through him who loved you.

He's summing up especially the section beginning in chapter 5, where he said, we are justified. We'll come back to that phrase in a moment. In the sight of God, he says, we stand justified.

That's what he's summing up now. And notice he says, we know, verse 28, we know. Not we wish, not we hope, not we think it might be the case, but he says, we know that in everything, God works for good to those who love him.

That's what he's saying. Chapter 8, which begins with no condemnation, ends with no separation. We're not condemned by God. We'll never be separated from him.

Now this section falls into two main parts, and we're going to look at it in that way. First of all, in verses 28 to 30, Paul talks about the sovereign will of God.

[5 : 05] Now the will of God sounds a very abstract phrase. It's not really. When we talk about the sovereign will of God, we mean that he will carry out what he has begun.

He will complete what he has started. He will keep his promises. There will never be any circumstances which are outwith his control. The first part, the sovereign will of God, in verses 28 to 30.

And then the second part, in verses 31 to 39, the conquering love of God. The will of God and the love of God.

And that is the picture of God that's established right at the very beginning of the Bible. Any former Cornhill students here will know exactly what I'm going to say now. It won't do you any harm to hear it yet again.

Again, at the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, God is a God of power, of might, who speaks and it happens.

[6 : 05] Whenever he says, let there be light, there is light, and so on. In Genesis 2, that same God comes right down into the story, speaks to people, communicates with them.

And when you put these two pictures together, you have the God of the Gospel. The God whose will cannot be thwarted, whose promises cannot be broken. And yet the God whose love never wavers, never changes.

Now you see how we need both. If we simply had the will of God, that would be little more than, He, sirrah, sirrah, sirrah, it would be a kind of unconquerable necessity.

A kind of iron-like tramline on which we were driven. On the other hand, if we only had the love of God, how would we be certain He could carry it out?

When we've got the two together, we have the God of the Gospel. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who did not spare His own Son, and who will graciously give us all things, will carry out His purposes.

[7 : 10] These are realities. They're not primarily feelings. Feelings matter, of course. I'm not saying for one minute the feelings don't matter. It's rather like, sometimes, like a train in a long, dark tunnel.

It's easy to believe for some moment. You're never going to emerge in the light. But the light is still there, and you will see it when the train emerges. And so it is with the grace of God.

Now let's look at these two sections then. First of all, the sovereign will of God, in verses 28 to 30. We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those who are called according to His purpose. God is the Gospel. As John Piper said when he was here a year ago, God Himself is the Gospel.

It's not even that the Gospel is about God, about Christ. It is God, revealed in Christ, and made real by the Spirit. It's what He has done.

[8 : 12] That's why at the end of the service, we'll sing, to God be the glory, great things He has done. And if we take to heart this great truth, then that's enormously practical.

Now some people, when they're talking about the New Testament letters, particularly Romans, say we've got the doctrine in chapters 1 to 11, and then we have the practical section in chapters 12 to 16.

That's only partly true. It is true that in chapters 12 to 16, Paul specifically says, now given that these things are true, given that God has revealed Himself that way in the Gospel, then this is the way to live.

But chapters 1 to 8 are enormously practical as well. Not least because they transform our whole world view. The way that we look at the world.

The way that we look at God. The way that we look at ourselves. When that happens, then there's been a profound change in us. Even before we get to the so-called practical section.

[9 : 17] That's why Paul is to say in Romans 12, be transformed by the renewing of your minds. This great Gospel appeals to our minds, it appeals to our hearts, and to our will.

It's all of us. And above all, it does free us from self-centeredness. The Gospel is not about us. The Gospel is about God. Once we recognize that, then it transforms us as well.

So let's look at these few verses then a little more closely. All things work together for good. One of those texts that's so often torn from its context, isn't it?

Sometimes used very insensitively to people who are reeling from some kind of disaster. People who have just suffered a bereavement. This is not a text to go in and throw at them.

All things work together for good. At a time when a person is reeling with disappointment. At a time when a person is suffering. This is not the text to throw at them.

[10 : 23] It's not that it's not true, but it's so insensitive when used in these circumstances. Nor is it the equivalent of, everything will be just fine. It's not the kind of thing to say, simply as a kind of blanket assurance, oh, everything's just going to be fine.

Notice what the text actually says. And notice, for those who love God. This is addressed to those who have come in faith to Christ, given their lives to Him, been forgiven by the blood that He shed on the cross, realized that He stood in for them to save them from the wrath of God.

That's the people to whom this text is addressed. And when it says work together for good, we've got to remember what the Bible means by good. We use the word good in a kind of vague sense, don't we?

When the Bible uses the word good, it primarily means fulfilling the purpose of which it was created. In Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, once again, God saw that it was good.

It was very good. In other words, as He looked at the creation, He was pleased with it. This is what I made it to be. And what this text is saying is this.

[11 : 39] For those who love God, every experience, the bad ones as well as the good ones, the sad ones as well as the joyful ones, these will work in our lives to make us more like Christ.

Because what is the good that God has called us to? God has called us to be like His Son. And that's what's going to happen. I think also Paul here is echoing another story earlier in the Bible, at the end of Genesis this time.

Remember the story of Joseph and the appalling time that he had. And then at the end of that story, the recognition seen with his brothers, who are amazed and terrified to discover that he is now number two ruler in Egypt.

This is what he says, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Not that the things that happened to Joseph were in themselves good. False accusation, imprisonment, and imprisonment during a great part of his youth.

He was put in prison when he was 17. He wasn't released until he was nearly 30. That was scarcely a good thing. He might well feel the best years of his life had passed. His opportunities had gone.

[12 : 51] God meant it for good. That's what Paul is saying here. Right over all these experiences, God meant it for good. And on the last day, when we stand before God, we will see that that was true.

So, you see, this is an enormously comforting text. But it's far more comforting when it's seen in the context of Scripture, in the context of the Gospel. God has planned for us to be like Christ.

God means that we should be conformed to the image of his Son. And nothing can prevent that. And then Paul goes on to underwrite this by talking about God's plan of salvation in verses 29 to 30, where he goes from predestined to glorified.

Now, this is sometimes called the golden chain. The biggest links, if you like, in the drama of salvation, which goes back not only to the time we were called, not only even to the beginning of the history of the church, or even the beginning of the history of God's people in the Old Testament, but far, far back beyond that, goes back to eternity, when Father, Son, and Holy Spirit planned the wonderful plan of redemption.

Now, this is not to be used in a mechanical way. We've got to realize that this is not to be seen in isolation either. The very heart of Romans is the gospel is the power of God to the salvation of everyone who believes, everyone who has faith.

[14 : 24] So, you see, we mustn't read a passage like this and then torture ourselves saying, am I one of the elect? Am I one of the chosen? Many years ago, I heard Jim Philip Willey's father preaching a series of sermons on this chapter, and he said something which I've never forgotten.

He said, the question you must ask when you read a verse like this is not, am I one of the elect? But will I believe? That's the question we must ask.

Will I believe? Because this gospel is presented as something to which you must respond by faith. The gospel is the power of God to the salvation of everyone who believes, everyone who has faith.

So, it's not a question of something mechanical. It's a question of something we respond to by faith. And let's look briefly at these words.

Those whom he foreknew. Now, this doesn't just mean those whom he knew about in eternity. The word know in its full biblical sense of having a relationship.

[15 : 30] Those that from all eternity he planned to have a relationship with. That's what foreknew means. Those whom he foreknew. He entered into that relationship beforehand.

Before even they were born. Before even the world was created. Those whom he foreknew. He also predestined. Now, this word predestined is a dynamic word.

It means he set in process the series of events that would eventually lead to Christian people gaining the full likeness of Christ.

That's what it means. Predestined. Not an iron word. A word which talks. A word which is dynamic. From all eternity, God planned. Those who are his children.

Should be like his son. He set that in motion. Those whom he called. He also... Those whom he foreknew. He predestined. And he predestined them to be conformed to the image of his son.

[16 : 36] And what happened then? They were called. And that called is the word of the gospel. Every time the gospel is preached, it is a call to people. Do you want to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

To begin the journey to the likeness of Christ. Those whom he called then, he justified. When I was a boy, I used to hear preachers saying, justified means just as if I had never sinned.

I used to think that was very clever. But like so many things that sound very clever, it's not good enough. If you say that justified means just as if I had never sinned, that simply puts us back in Eden, doesn't it?

With the possibility of everything going wrong again. With the possibility of the fall happening again. And the whole sorry process unfolding once more. Justified means that in advance of the last day, the Lord has already pronounced a favorable verdict.

That's what it means. It means that you know before the last day comes, bold shall I stand on that great day as we sang a few minutes for who anything to my charge will lay.

[17 : 51] As we sang last week, bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own. That's what justified means. Sometimes you will feel justified. Sometimes you will be ready to dance with joy at the sense of belonging to Christ.

Other times, you'll feel nothing. But that's not the point. The point is, it's a fact. Nothing to do with our feelings which come and go. It's a glorious reality.

And finally, those who be justified, he also glorified. Notice that word. It's the same tense as the other verbs. It's the past tense. You would have thought you would have said, I'm sure we've been writing that, we would have said, those whom he called, he justified.

Those who be justified, he will one day glorify. That's probably what we would have said. But surely what Paul is saying is that all these things guarantee the glorifying, the indwelling spirit has already begun the process, already begun knocking off the rough edges.

Now, admittedly, what we are now, even at our best, is a fail and paint, I'm getting my words mixed up, a pale and faint shadow of what we will be on the last day.

[19 : 11] But it's going to happen. Those whom he justified, he glorified. In a sense, you cannot be justified without already being glorified. So that's the first thing then, God's sovereign will.

God begun, God will finish. And secondly, God's conquering and unconquerable love. Verses 31 to 39. Like the prosecuting counsel, he comes to his peroration.

What then, shall we say, to these things? What then? Paul is, among other things, a very great orator. He, and this passage is tremendously powerful as his thought begins to soar, as his language becomes ever more eloquent.

But it's not just rhetoric, there is real substance in it. If God is for us, who can be against us? Now, of course, there are many people against us and many things against us.

He's going on to mention them in verse 35. Tribulation, distress, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. All these things are against us. But what he means, surely, is this.

[20 : 21] Who can be effective against us? Who matters? If God is for us, who can be against us? Saying to the Christians in Rome, don't worry yourself that Claudius, the emperor, is against you.

If God is for us, who can be against us? As we look out on this world with its titanic difficulties, with the huge problems that beset the international scene, to say nothing of the problems that affect our daily life.

Remember this, if God is for us, who can be against us? The opposition, hopelessly outgunned. But in particular, Paul is not simply using rhetoric.

Paul is summing up what he's already said in the first part of the letter. What is it then that it means if God is for us? What does that deal with?

Well, first of all, that deals with our sins. Verses 32 to 34. God, who spared not his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not graciously give us all things?

[21 : 27] His own son distinguishes him from the many adopted sons. This is his special son whom he gave so that our sins could be forgiven.

Can we doubt his commitment to us? Can we doubt, says Paul, that our sins actually are forgiven? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. You've got to imagine the court of heaven. And in that court of heaven, there is an accuser. Read about this in the book of Job.

How Job was dogged and hounded and persecuted by Satan in the heavenly court itself. Just imagine yourself standing in the court of heaven and Satan accusing you.

I imagine him saying, why is Bob Fyle here? He's done many, many things that would disqualify him from being here. He's not the sort of person who ought to be admitted to your presence.

[22 : 31] Now, if I were to try and answer it, it would all sound feeble and pathetic, wouldn't it? And I think if we're honest with ourselves, think of ourselves standing before the Lord, standing before the throne of his holiness, and our sins read out.

Not just the sins we commit, but the, just imagine a screen there and all our thoughts, all our emotions flashed up on that screen. It would sound pathetic. But you see, it's not you, it's not me who has to answer.

It is Christ himself who will answer. It's Christ who will say, she is there, he is there, because they are my child, because they are forgiven, because I died for their sins, and their sins no longer are a barrier between them and you, Father.

Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, as we sang, and later on, in chapter 13, Paul is to say, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. So first of all, the fact that God is for us deals with our sins.

Secondly, deals with our problems, our hardships. Verses 35 to 36, who shall separate us from the love of Christ. Many, indeed, most of these things Paul himself suffered.

[23 : 48] You can read about them in 2 Corinthians 11, about his terrible experiences, some of which you read about in Acts, some of which we don't. And Paul is saying, none of these things can separate us either.

And he quotes from Psalm 44, showing that this has been the common experience of God's people since the world began. If we're passing through times of great trial, it is not a sign that God does not love us.

It is not a sign that we're not going to make it. It is a sign that we are actually part of his family. We belong to him. And these are part of the experiences that his family suffer.

It deals with our sins. It deals with our hardships. And finally, it deals with our many enemies. Verses 37 to 39, we have this glorious phrase which goes right back to the earliest days of the Bible translation to the Geneva Bible.

We are more than conquerors, says Paul, through him who loved us. Notice he doesn't say we are more than conquerors because of our courage, because of our endurance, but because of Christ and his hold on us.

[25 : 01] And Paul adds his own testimony. I am sure. I am persuaded. I am convinced, he says. And all possible enemies and all possible experiences are mentioned.

Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. These things which are the common lot of humanity, whether we are Christian or not.

None of these things can separate us from God's love. None of these things show that God does not love us. But not only that, he goes further.

He goes right on to death and life. The whole of experience. As so often the psalmist talks about life and death. The whole of human experience in between.

There are no supernatural powers. Nor angels, nor rulers. And that probably means supernatural powers. And why can no supernatural power separate us?

[25 : 59] Because Christ has been exalted above them all. He's been raised from the dead and put at God's right hand. Nothing in the whole physical universe, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation.

And in case he's missed anything, he says, nor anything else. Look at the bleakest and blackest scenario you can imagine. Look into the face of death itself.

Paul says, nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And notice that love. It isn't just a sentimental thing.

To him who loved us, he says. He is the one who, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And that loved, that's in verse 37, particularly refers to Calvary, the past tense there.

How do we know that he loved us? Where does he particularly demonstrate that? At the cross, surely. But that love, while it was shown there, is also a love that flows out to embrace all other parts of our lives.

[27 : 06] And all of this, as the beginning of the chapter makes clear, as we looked at last Sunday morning, is made real to us by the indwelling spirit. Because really, without the spirit, we are simply like these things I showed to the children, covers without books, torches without batteries, and so on.

We, only the spirit himself testifies with us that we are God's children. That's verse 16. The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children.

So as we reach the end of this glorious chapter, Paul is not telling us it's going to be plain sailing. Recognize, he says, it's going to be a struggle. Indeed, in chapter 7, he's talked about the things in our own nature that make it a struggle.

We will become Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the one person. But recognize, too, that it's not an equal struggle because the victory has been won. And thank God for the spirit that he's placed within us, the down payment that makes certain the full payment will be made, the beginning of the journey that will lead us to glory.

But above all, Paul is saying to us, praise God. Praise the God who gave us that glorious gospel and be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

[28 : 24] Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And God, our Father, we so often become trapped by the things that are against us.

So often, the weakness of our own nature and the diligence of Satan means that we look at the things that are against us rather than the God who is for us. So encourage us today.

And if we have not yet begun that journey, We have not yet begun the journey that will lead us to the full likeness of Christ. We pray that this may be the time when we will make that commitment and begin that glorious journey that will take us from darkness to light and from death to life.

We ask this in his name. Amen.