

## *Preserving Love*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 6, 2022.

What then shall we say to these things? 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? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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 (Romans 8:31–39).<sup>1</sup>

Westminster divine John Arrowsmith referred to the sequentially ordered terms of Romans 8:29–30 as God's "golden chain . . . a chain which God lets down from heaven that by it he may draw up his elect."<sup>2</sup> God's golden chain: "those whom he foreknew he also predestined. . . . And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29–30). From eternity past to eternity future, from before we were to when we always will be, God loves his children, preserving us for our good and his glory.

Arising from this is a certain assurance of our destiny. As Christians, we live *not* to appease the Divine, to win his favor, to warrant eternal love. No, we rest in what God has done, persevering in the sovereign love of God, and this informs how we live. Though we know this, it is easy to let fear and doubt creep in. When we encounter trials and tribulations, we may wonder where is God? Amidst our suffering, we may feel like the forsaken rather than the beloved.

It's easy to let the circumstances of life inform our perspective rather than the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2). When all things are not working together according to our perception of "good," we may quickly presume a broken link in the golden chain or wonder where is God's love? It is times like these that we need good questions to challenge our thinking, penetrating queries to rescue us from ourselves. Paul offers four: First, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Second, "Who shall bring charges against God's elect?" Third, "Who is to condemn [us]?" And fourth, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Four questions: We already know the answers. But Paul doesn't ask them to be answered, does he? No, he asks them to be acknowledged, to be meditated upon, to remind us that no one can thwart the preserving love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> John Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica: A Chain of Principles* (Edinburgh: Thomas Turnbull, 1659), 242.

## **Who can be against us?**

Were the question not rhetorical, perhaps we could answer with a succinct list of our known enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Surely, they are individually and collectively against us? Is Paul's question then a denial of their power and influence? Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). The world entices or attacks us; there is no middle ground. Likewise, our flesh knows our vulnerabilities, knows when to attack us, never resting in its sinful desire. And then, there is that old snake, our adversary, who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). It would seem then that this trio of evil is against us.

But when Paul asks, "Who can be against us?", he is not asking us if we suffer at the hands of the world. He is not asking if we struggle with our flesh. He is not asking if the devil seeks our demise. No, those are all constants of this life. What Paul is asking transcends our circumstances, pointing us to who we are ultimately. Given that our adversary has been defeated, our flesh crucified, and the world conquered, all to be revealed at the end of the age, who can be against us? Not the world, not the flesh, not the devil, no one and nothing.

But asking "Who can be against us?" is a little like asking, "Why worry?" Undoubtedly, we shouldn't, but why? We need a reason, and Paul gives it, interestingly enough with another question: "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?" (8:32) Think about what Paul is saying here: He gives us a gospel-centered reason we can be assured that indeed no one is against us. Such assurance rests not on what we have done, are doing, or will do, but on what God has done in Christ. Everything, "all things," flow from this.

Consider this: Not only did God "not spare his own Son," he "gave him up" for all whom he foreknew and predestined: In love, God gave his only Begotten to atone for our sin through his death on the cross. We are the beneficiaries of what the prophet foretold, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:4-6). If God the Father would ordain such gracious violence and God the Son would endure such cosmic wrath and God the Spirit would deliver it to us, if such an act was ordained, accomplished, and applied for our sake, is there anyone who can thwart such sovereign love? Not a soul.

Though the world hates us, though our flesh seek to ensnare us, though the devil desires our destruction, our gracious God works "all things . . . together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This means that you can stop living every day like the whole world is against you, because what the world means for evil toward us, God works it for the good of our sanctification. This means that you can stop living like a slave to your impulses, because when our flesh rears its ugly head, the Spirit enables us to crucify it for Christ's sake. This means that you can stop living in fear of the devil or his evil mark, because when that pitiful snake prowls and roars like a lion, the Lion of Judah safeguards us, sanctifying us by his presence. In his "divine power," Peter explains, God "has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,

by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet. 1:3-4). In a sense, the Spirit within us rightfully roars, “Who can be against us?”

### **Who shall bring charges?**

Having grounded the eternal assurance of “those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), Paul moves to a legal perspective: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” Surely you and I have done something bad enough to discredit our assurance and warrant worry? (Lord, how have I failed Thee? Let me count the ways!) But as soon as Paul has asked the question, “Who shall bring charges against God’s elect?” (8:33), he quiets our self-righteous folly with fact: “It is God who justifies.”

When Paul writes earlier, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1), he doesn’t mean that God gave Jesus, we bring the faith, and the cooperative result is peace. No, as he explained to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). We contribute nothing to our justification. That we are not under God’s judgment and due God’s wrath, that we enjoy peace with God, is owing entirely to the mercy and grace of God.

Because this is so, we may rest assured that no one, not even Satan himself, can bring charges against us. Why? “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). I have found that Christians who doubt their salvation and struggle with assurance are often looking in themselves for what God has already done in Christ. When God looks upon those whom he has justified, he sees not a guilty sinner but his righteous Son. We are counted right in God’s sight, justified as righteous, or as the Shorter Catechism puts it, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”<sup>3</sup> Who then can bring any charge against God’s elect? Not a soul.

### **Who is to condemn us?**

The eighth chapter of Romans begins with this glorious verse: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). It is a summary statement drawing from the preceding three chapters, but also pointing forward to this verse: “Who is to condemn us? 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” (8:34).

Who then would dare to condemn us? Only one would be so brazen, but the life, death, and resurrection crushes any condemnation, because the accuser who condemns has been crushed. As I read to you earlier, Peter says that God “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by

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<sup>3</sup> “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 33, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 376.

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which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises” (2 Pet. 1:3), the first of which was when God pronounced the serpent’s curse: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). The gospel promise God made at the Fall, he kept in “the one who died—more that, who was raised.” Though Satan may bring charges against us, seeking divine condemnation for us, God looks to the atoning work of Christ upon the cross, looks from the cross to the empty tomb, looks from the empty tomb to the resurrected Christ at his right hand. Though our adversary may hurl our sins in accusation, Christ intercedes on our behalf, rejecting the charges of the evil one, advocating as the righteous One (1 John 2:1), whose mediatorial work for us rendered all condemnation void. There really is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? There is a temptation when considering spiritual matters such as the foreknowledge of God, predestination, justification, on to glorification, to disconnect them from our daily lives. Significant spiritual matters indeed, but when faced with trouble or hardship, or persecution, whether famine or poverty or danger, who thinks, for example, of our union with Christ? Well, actually, we do, or should. Because, when we lose eternal perspective in light of the momentary, we quickly forget what God is doing in us and what he is preparing us for. In other words, Paul is teaching us something very practical: when faced with the worst that life can deliver, set your heart and mind upon the love of Christ. When faced with the vilest treachery of your flesh, train your heart and mind upon God’s love for you in Christ.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
let this blest assurance control:  
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
and has shed his own blood for my soul.<sup>4</sup>

That God is indeed working all things together for good does not exempt us from suffering. As the psalmist morbidly sang, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (8:36). Yet, even in death we are not defeated, but “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37). Lifting your focus from yourself to Christ places your suffering in the context of his, and the remembrance of his dying love for you. There is nothing more stable, nothing more secure, nothing more satisfying than remembering that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

Christian, there is nothing in your past or in your future, nothing that can thwart the preserving love of God. Rest assured that he who foreknew you, who predestined you, who justified you, “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). And because this is true and certain, we are sure of this: “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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” (8:38-39).

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<sup>4</sup> “It Is Well with My Soul,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 691.