

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 29, 2020

IF GOD IS FOR US

Romans 8:31-39

A BRIEF REVIEW

Before we turn to God's Word, a brief review: Two Sundays ago, when we first closed our church building and went to livestream Worship only, I spoke about the supremacy and triumph of Christ as Paul articulates these great truths in Colossians 2. I urged you to take ten looks at Jesus for every look at yourself and your circumstances. As then, I continue to urge you today: For every look at the seemingly ubiquitous coronavirus, take ten looks at Jesus, who is always and everywhere present. For every look at the financial markets or your 401k, take ten looks at Jesus. For every look at the latest news, take ten looks at Jesus. For every look at the problems you're facing – as real and daunting as they are – take ten looks at Jesus. For every look at the future with all its question marks, take ten looks at Jesus. For every look at the way the coronavirus has disrupted the flow of everyday life, take ten looks at Jesus. Keep on looking to Him. Remember that He said there would be disruptions and disappointments and trials and troubles in this life. To one degree or another, they are normal for life in this world. But Jesus promised His peace to those whose hearts are settled in Him. In the midst of the troubles, Jesus says: "Take heart! For I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Whatever God allows to come into your life, take ten looks at Jesus and continue to trust in Him.

Last Sunday we looked together at the blessed assurance in Romans 8:28 that in all things God is at work for good in the lives of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose. *In all things*. Even in pandemics like the coronavirus. Not that all things are good; they are not. But God can use all things, even what is evil or painful or disruptive, for His good purposes.

His overarching purpose, as Paul says in verse 29, is to make us "conformed to the likeness of His Son." I mentioned how all of the planets in our solar system, as well as their moons, have what is called an "albedo," which measures how much sunlight they reflect. Some reflect more sunlight than others. God's desire for your life and mine is that each of us have a spiritual albedo of 100 percent, reflecting 100 percent of the light and love of Jesus, being totally conformed to His likeness and character in our daily lives.

Whatever else God may want to accomplish in your life and mine during the season of coronavirus, I believe He wants us to increase our spiritual albedo. In our desires and priorities, our attitudes and actions, our words and our walk with Him, He wants us to become more and more like Him. You can begin (or continue) this process by asking God every day to make you more like Jesus, and, as Paul says in Romans 12:1, by offering your whole being

to Him as a living sacrifice, as a spiritual act of worship. One famous preacher (D. L. Moody) put it this way: “Let God have your life; He can do more with it than you can.” That’s the truth.

Now, I invite you to follow along as I read Romans 8:31-39. The words will be on your screen. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

* * * * *

PANDEMICS IN HISTORY

This coronavirus is not the first infectious disease pandemic the world has ever known. “Pandemic” refers to a disease that spreads throughout a whole country, multiple countries, or the whole world. The highest known death toll from any pandemic in history was from the Black Death (or Bubonic Plague) in Europe and Asia that began in the mid-14th century, claiming as many as 200 million lives before it was finally eradicated. Other pandemics with exorbitant death tolls include:

- The Spanish flu a century ago (1918-1919), which took an estimated 50 million lives, including more than a half million in the US;
- The Plague of Justinian in the 6th century (541-542), which may have taken as many as 30 million lives;
- The Antonine Plague in the 2nd century (165-180), believed to be either small pox or measles, which took an estimated 5 million lives; and
- The Cholera Pandemics of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which claimed more than 1 million lives.

Closer to today, we’ve had what were known as the Asian Flu in the 1950s, the Hong Kong Flu in the late 1960s, the Swine Flu (2009-2010), and Ebola (2014-). A number of factors have contributed to the spread of infectious diseases over the centuries, while advances in medical knowledge, understanding of diseases, and both prevention and treatment have led to significantly lower mortality rates. Which is a huge reason to give thanks and praise to God. And to give thanks for heroic men and women who devote their lives to the prevention and treatment of disease. What they are doing is the Lord’s work. Doctors, nurses, technicians, researchers, pharmacists, first responders – all who serve in any role to care for the sick, to develop vaccines and treatments for this coronavirus and any and all other illnesses, are heroes. They are not the only heroes, of course. There are many others serving sacrificially to bless us all. It is good and right to give thanks for them all.

Paul knew nothing of the coronavirus. But he knew about other kinds of affliction. He was intimately acquainted with hardship. This makes what he says in Romans 8 so relevant, not only in times like this but no matter the circumstances in which we may find ourselves.

GOD’S PURPOSE

Verse 28 contains his magnificent declaration that “in all things God works for the good of those of who love Him and have been called according to His purpose.” In verses 29 and 30

he outlines the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation): “Those God *foreknew* He also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He (Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. Those He *predestined*, He also *called*. Those He *called*, He also *justified*. Those He *justified*, He also *glorified*.” Between our *justification* and our *glorification* is our *sanctification*, which is the process by which we are being formed, transformed, and conformed into the likeness or character of the Lord Jesus here and now. *Glory* is what we will be like when God is finished with us and we are perfectly conformed to the image of Christ there and then. “*Sanctification*,” as F.F. Bruce put it, “is *glory* begun; *glory* is *sanctification* consummated” (Bruce, *Romans [Revised]*, 168). If you despair of God ever finishing His work in you, hang onto the promise of Philippians 1:6, where Paul says that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” You can be sure of this.

WHAT SHALL WE SAY?

After giving these great assurances, Paul says in verse 31: “What then shall we say in response to this?” Some people say: “I don’t believe it.” Some say: “I won’t believe it.” Some may say: “I think I’ll take my chances on getting through the disruptions and challenges of life on my own. Without God’s help.” Others, including you, I hope, say: “Lord, I believe. Lord, I need You. Lord, I trust You. Lord, I am Yours. Thank You for being bigger than the coronavirus. Thank You for being bigger than all the problems that plague us. Thank You for being able, more than able, to handle anything that comes my way, and to do much more than I could ever dream. Thank You for loving us – and this world – as You do. Because of who You are, because of all that You have done, I give You my heart and my life. Have Your way in me, now and always.” It is the only response that makes sense.

Have you done that? Will you do that? There is no better time than today. And you never know when you will run out of time.

IS GOD REALLY FOR US?

“What shall we say in response to this?” is just the first of several questions Paul asks here. There is a second question in verse 31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” This is a question that begs a whole series of additional questions, like:

- *Is* God really for us?
- How do we know God is for us?
- If God is for us, why is life so hard?
- If God is for us, why does He allow so many bad things, like coronavirus and cancer and war and tragedy?
- How do we know it isn’t just wishful thinking on our part to believe that God is for us?

Do you ever wrestle with questions like these? If you do, you’re not alone.

Paul begins with the presupposition that God really is for us. This doesn’t mean God promises us a life without pain or suffering or hardship or disappointment, if we just have enough faith.

Don't ever fall for that lie! Christians and non-Christians alike will get coronavirus. Christians and non-Christians alike will die from it. Christians and non-Christians alike get cancer. Faith in Christ does not make you immune to suffering. The message of 8:28, though, is that God uses even the hard things to work out His good purposes in our lives. We know that God is for us because of the outworking of His plan of salvation that began with His loving and sovereign choice of us to be His children before the beginning of time (Ephesians 1:4-5). "If God is for us." If God is *not for us*, if God is *against us*, we are in deep, deep trouble. If God is *not* for us, then we are "a pretty sorry lot," as it says in *The Message* (1 Corinthians 15:19). If God is *not* for us, we have everything to fear and nothing to hope for.

But Paul has no doubt that God really is *for us*. The force of His question is: *Since* (or *because*) God is for us, who can ultimately defeat us? Paul is not suggesting that we will face no difficulties as we follow Jesus in this world. He doesn't mean that no bad things will happen to us. He doesn't mean that we will have no enemies. We do and we will. Paul did. He does not promise that everyone will be nice to us. This world, as Martin Luther said, is filled with devils that still threaten to undo us. Satan, the archenemy of our souls, will do everything in his power to destroy our faith and ruin our lives. You know as well as I do that there are plenty of people in the world who view the gospel message, the Christian faith, and believers like us as enemies to be opposed, silenced, and defeated. It's a fact of life. But here's another fact of life: "Greater is the One who is in You" – Jesus – "than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Here's another: His grace is sufficient for you (2 Corinthians 12:9). And always will be.

When Paul says that God is for us, He does not mean that you will never experience any trials or troubles or discrimination or persecution because of your faith in Christ. Just ask Andrew Brunson about that. All the powers of hell may be arrayed against you, in an attempt to bring you down and destroy your faith in Christ. Even so, says Paul, they *will not* and *cannot* prevail against you. Why? Because God is for us. *If* God is for us – *since* God is for us – no one will be able to thwart God's good and loving purposes for us.

How do we know God is for us? Verse 32 tells us: We know it because He "did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all." We know God is for us because of all that Jesus did *for us*. We know God is for us because of the voluntary, loving, and all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. That is how we know God is for us.

In view of what Jesus has done for us, Paul asks rhetorically if we cannot trust God to give us everything we need for our spiritual well-being, even if life in this world is harder than we ever imagined it would be. The answer? *Yes, we can*. If God gave His best for us while we were still sinners, now that we are His children, doesn't it make sense to trust God to give us all we need to make it through this life? The answer: *Yes, it does*.

WHO WILL BRING ANY CHARGE AGAINST US?

The Q&A continues in verse 33: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" Paul's answer: "It is God who justifies." Paul uses the word *dikaioo*, "to justify," 15 times in Romans. It is the means by which God declares sinners like us "not guilty." This

doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone is at the heart of the gospel.

We know that God is for us because, through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us, we have been justified – declared righteous – in God’s sight. Since God, the righteous Judge, has already found us not guilty, no charge or accusation against us will stick in the courtroom of God’s justice. Jesus has already paid the penalty for our sins. All of them. It is finished. If you are trusting in Jesus and His saving work on the cross, you do not need to fear the judgment of God. I love the stanza in the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” that goes like this:

My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought;
 My sin, not in part but the whole,
 Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
 Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
 (Horatio Spafford)

WHO WILL CONDEMN US?

The next question is in verse 34: “Who is it that condemns?” The answer: No one. Because “Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

Lots of people may try to accuse and condemn you. But the accusations of our critics and enemies, including Satan, will not succeed. Why? Because of Jesus. Look at what He did and what He is doing even now. He came and lived among us. He took our place in His death. He took upon Himself the condemnation we deserve. But that’s not all. He was raised from the dead in victory over the power of sin and death. And that’s not all. Having been raised to life, He is now exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven, where He intercedes on our behalf when we come to Him for mercy and grace. Because of Jesus, it says in Hebrews 4, we may approach the throne of grace – *God’s* throne – with confidence, there to receive mercy and find grace to help us when we are in need (Hebrews 4:14-16). Jesus is always there and always for us.

The Bible tells us in 1 John 2:1-2: “If anybody sins” – we all do – “we have an advocate who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the world.”

While the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead were one-time, never-to-be-repeated historical events that took place at a definite time in the past, the presence of Jesus at the right hand of the Father and His ongoing intercession on our behalf are in the present tense and will be until the end of time.

Because of this ministry of Jesus, past and present, no charge against you will stand in God’s heavenly courtroom. Will you have accusers here on earth? Yes. Will the devil try to bring you down? Yes. But your standing before God and your eternal destiny are secure, because of the ministry of Jesus on your behalf. As Paul says in Romans 8:1, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

NOTHING CAN SEPARATE YOU FROM GOD'S LOVE

You see, if God is for you, nothing can ultimately stand against you. No one and nothing can defeat you. And, as Paul triumphantly declares in verses 35-39, nothing can separate you from Jesus and His love for you. *Nothing*.

Trouble can't. Hardship can't. Persecution can't. Hunger can't. Exposure can't. Homelessness can't. Danger can't. Violence can't. Death can't. Cancer can't. Coronavirus can't. No disease can. Nor can disappointment. Or disruption. Or a recession. Or a depression. Social distancing can't. Divorce can't. Unemployment can't. Disasters can't. Nothing has the power to separate you from God's love for you. Not even the worst thing in life you can ever imagine.

SUPER-CONQUERORS

Let me wrap it up with this: When bad things happen, when hard times come, when disruptions occur, we are not victims. You are not a victim. Because of Jesus, we are conquerors. Not just "conquerors," Paul says, but "*more than conquerors* through Him who loved us" and loves us still (8:37).

The word translated "more than conquerors" is *hupernikomen*. It comes from the Greek word *Nike*. In Greek mythology, Nike was the goddess of victory. It is where the shoe company gets its name. The verb *nikaō* means "to overcome or conquer." It is used several times in the New Testament, including John 16:33, which I have already mentioned, where Jesus says: "Take heart! For I have *overcome* the world." It is used in Romans 12:21, which says: "Do not be *overcome* by evil, but *overcome* evil with good." When you add the prefix *hyper*, you get "super-conqueror" or "super-overcomer." Which is what you and I are through the power of Jesus' love.

God. Is. For. Us. God. Is. For. You. Personally. Totally. *If* God is for you ... *Since* God is for you, what is there to fear? Even if you or someone close to you gets coronavirus, or your life is disrupted in other ways, *nothing* can ever separate you from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Believe it with all your heart. And never forget it.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.