

Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ?

1. A Critical Question
2. A Comforting Answer
1. A Confident Life

Text: Romans 8:35-39

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:14-39

Psalters: 401 (1-4), 187 (1-4), 281 (1-4), 204 (1-4)

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Beloved,

If God be for us, who can be against us? Who shall lay any charge against God's elect? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? It is with those rhetorical questions that Paul finishes this beautiful chapter on assurance.

The important thing to realize about a rhetorical question is this, that it is used to emphasize a statement. You can reverse the question so that it will read in this way: "God is for us, so no one can be against us. No one can lay any charge against God's elect. There is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of Christ. Paul, instead, uses *questions* to bring home the truth of those statements.

We need assurance. We need assurance for body and for soul, for life and for death. We need assurance for the past and its sins—our sins, and the sin of Adam. We need assurance for the present and the trials and the struggles that we go through, the temptations that we face. We need assurance for the future, for the unknown, the uncertain. And we need assurance for the Judgment Day, when we will stand before Christ the Judge.

The theme of this chapter is that we can have assurance, that we do have assurance as God's people, because, if God be for us, who can be against us? Who can lay any charge against God's elect? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Today we are going to look at the last of those questions, and our theme will be that question: "Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ?" We want to notice three things: first, that this is a critical or crucial question; second, that there is here a comforting answer; and third, that this produces a confident life.

This Is a Critical, or Crucial, Question

The question that Paul asks here has to do with our life in this present world—your life at the present and my life at the present. Paul has talked about the past, the eternal purposes of God. You have that in, for example, verse 29: "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate." And Paul had talked about the future. He continues that in verse 30 when he says, "Whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." And he brings up the whole idea of the Judgment Day in that question: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" No one can.

So Paul, as it were, has given us from the Word of God the assurance that we need concerning the past and the sins of the past. He has given us the assurance that we need for the future and the Judgment Day, and that our hope in heaven is secure. When we see Him, we shall be like Him.

But what about the present? That is really where the question of assurance

confronts us, does it not? What about the present? What about the time between our justification and our glory? What about all the experiences of our life in this present world? Is there not something that might come up that would separate us from the love of God?

That is the question.

It is a crucial question, an important question.

That word “separate” is the same word that Jesus uses when He says, “What God hath put together, let not man put asunder.” Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? It is as though Paul is saying, “We are married to God in love. Is there something that can break that bond? Is there something that can come up that might break that bond of love to God?”

And, of course, as you look at your present life, that is a real question. The struggles and trials. Maybe you look at others and it seems that they love God, and yet they have strayed. Can God’s people be separated from the love of Christ?

I say this is a crucial, a critical, question. And it is, when we consider what the love of Christ is. It is also called later in the chapter “the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

What does Paul mean by the love of Christ and the love of God which is in Christ Jesus? I think we can summarize it in one word. He means our salvation. That is what he means. Think about what God has done in His love. In His love, God saves His people. In His love, He has eternally chosen them (Eph. 1:4). He has predestined them in love. In time He sent His Son (Rom. 5:8): “God commended his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And then He sent the Spirit to shed abroad the love of God in our hearts so that we experience that love. In love He has communicated the gospel to us in the Word and by the preaching of the gospel so that

we might know, so that we might experience, His love in our lives.

In Ephesians 3 we have what I think is one of the most beautiful prayers in all the Scriptures. Paul is a minister of the gospel. He preaches the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ—the gospel of the love of God for His elect people. And he utters this prayer for the saints in Ephesus in chapter 3:16ff. He prays:

...that he [that is, God] would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able [and here’s Paul’s desire for the church in Ephesus, that they may be able] to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.

So you look at the love of God. You look at what God has done in love—elected a people, sent His Son to save them, sent His Spirit, revealed the gospel with this purpose: that we might know His love. And the question is: Is there something that might separate us from that love, from the experience, from the knowledge, from the certainty of our salvation because of the love of God? That is what Paul means: our salvation—can we be separated from our salvation?

That makes this a critical question, a crucial question. It is not just an abstract question. It is a very real question. We can answer this question theologically. We can answer it from the point of view of God. And we need to do that. We need to recognize that God’s love is eternal, that it is unchangeable, that God’s love is particular, that God’s love is effectual, that God’s love is irresistible. But Paul asks this question from the point of view of the experiences of

our life. And that makes this a very real question.

That comes out in verses 35 and 36. In verse 36, this is what Paul says: “As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” He is quoting here from Psalm 44:22. And this is what he is saying: God in His Word has told us that our life is going to be like the life of sheep who are going to the slaughter.

Have you ever seen that? I think of a slaughter house, where the animals are in a pen. Sheep are funny creatures. A man opens the gate. One sheep goes out. They all follow. And each of them is walking into a gun-shot: Bam, bam, bam. And Paul says that this is what God’s Word tells us our life is going to be like. We are going to be like sheep for the slaughter.

Man’s life is full of miseries. Job says that man that is born of woman is born to affliction. And Paul is saying that that is the way our life can be described. We can expect that to be our experience. Jesus says, “In this world ye shall have tribulation. If they persecuted me and hated me,” He said, “they will persecute and hate you.” Paul said, “All that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” The psalmist in Psalm 90 says, “Beneath thy wrath we pine and die.” And in Psalm 73, the psalmist looks at the ungodly and concludes that they prosper, while the saints are plagued every day.

So there is a very real question here. As we go through the afflictions of life, we experience that they are intense. They are personally directed against us from Satan. Notice the question: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” That is a question about a person. And the person that Paul has in mind is Satan, who comes against God’s people with everything that he can, just as he came against Job with the accusation to God, “You think he loves you for nothing? Take away all that he has and

he will curse you.” That is what Satan wants. He wants to separate us from the love of Christ.

Can anyone or anything separate us from the love of Christ? A very real question that is, as we must face all these things. And Paul goes on to explain what those different things are in our lives, so that we can see how real this question is. In verse 35 he says, “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Seven different things he mentions there. We can classify them into two groups. The first two things belong together. Shall tribulation or distress? By tribulation Paul means all the different trials that are common in the life of the people of God, the ordinary struggles of everyday Christian life, the trials of life. They take many forms: sicknesses, grief, broken relationships, financial problems. And all the trials that God’s people experience produce (the second word he uses here) distress, anxiety, uncertainty. We do not go through trials in life and simply shrug them off. We are anxious, we are concerned, we are troubled.

And then there is the second grouping. He mentions persecution. And then out of that persecution comes famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. This refers to what God’s people have to go through in the world because they are believers. God’s people suffer these things. Many of them suffer these things today—they are tortured for their faith. And the news media never report it. We suffer too. Jesus speaks of the kind of persecution that we will have when He says, “Blessed are ye when men shall [think of these words!] revile you and persecute you”—in this way, that they say “all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” That is a form of persecution.

“Shall persecute”—and then the things that follow from it. We can expect these things to follow from it: famine (that

is, hunger); nakedness (that is, not only having no clothes, but also being destitute, poor, as a result of persecution); perils (that is, being in danger); and sword (that is, death).

God's people have trials. They have persecutions. Shall these trials separate us from the love of God? Sometimes it seems as though they do. Listen to Job, in Job 23. Job has gone through severe trials. And here he is talking about prayer. He describes his prayer-life this way (Job 23:8, 9): "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: on the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him." It seems as though the trials he has experienced have separated him from the love of God.

But even as that is his experience, Job has the same knowledge that Paul expresses. He says, "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (v. 10).

So this is a real, a critical, question. In our life we face these things. Will they separate us from the love, the saving love, of Christ?

There Is a Comforting Answer

There is a comforting answer. It is given in the last two verses of the chapter, when Paul says: "I am persuaded [sure, confident, absolutely certain] that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now, the first thing to notice about that answer is that Paul does not actually answer the question that he has asked. When he asked the question, "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" he talks

about the real life trials that we go through and the distress that comes from them. He talks about persecution and what results from persecution. But here he does not say, "No, I am persuaded that our tribulations and our persecutions shall not separate us from the love of God." He does not look at our lives and our experiences, but takes us to see something much bigger and much broader—the whole history of this world and all of the expanses of the universe. That is the way to read what he says here. "Not death, not life, not angels, . . . nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature." Do not just look at your trials. Do not just look at your persecutions. But look at all that this universe contains that you might perceive to be against you.

I heard an illustration in a sermon preached on this verse from one of our older ministers. That was ten years ago. It stuck in my mind. So I am going to use that illustration now so that, I hope and pray, it sticks also in your mind.

This is like a child who has to sleep at night and it is dark in his room. He is crying to his parents: "I can't sleep. I think there is a bogeyman in the closet." And so his father comes into the room and says, "Son, there isn't. Let me show you." And he turns the light on. And he opens the closet door to show his son that there is no one there. And then he says to his son, "Just to make sure you know, let's look in every part of this room." They look in all the drawers, and they empty out the toy box—and there is no one there. Then he says to his son, "But just in case you still wonder, let me take you through the house." He takes his son by the hand and takes him into every room in the house. They look in every closet, in every drawer, in every trash can. They go into the basement. They look in the utility room. They dig through the garage.

And he says to his son, “See, you can sleep. There’s no bogeyman.”

Something like that here. Paul transports us from our experience in our life to all the expanses of the universe—past, present, and future. He takes the doubting and the fearful and the questioning child of God who is looking at his own life, and he says, “Come with me, let me show you.” Not death, not life, not angels, not principalities or powers, nothing in the present, nothing in the future, not height, not depth, and in case I missed it, no other creature, no other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ.

Why so? Because there is a love stronger, greater, than any creature. What a wonderful comfort that is for the child of God.

Let us look at those things in more detail.

Paul says death cannot separate you from the love of Christ. By death he means not just death in the narrow sense of the moment when you depart from this life, but, more broadly, whatever might lead toward death: sickness, disease, cancer, a heart attack, a car accident, old age, a stroke. Or, more extreme, death at the hands of others—peril, sword, murder, martyrdom. Death cannot separate us from the love of God. Death sometimes comes so suddenly and so dramatically, and it is so final. But it cannot separate us from the love of God. Your own death cannot separate you from the love of God. Yes, death is separation, painful, final separation, as far as our earthly life is concerned. But Christ’s love is stronger than death. Death becomes the servant of Christ, the servant of the *love* of Christ, the love with which He brings His own to glory. To die, the child of God says, is *gain*. Far better, Paul says, to depart and to be with the Lord.

So death cannot separate us from the love of Christ. But Paul mentions, in the

second place, *life*. And by life he means everything that life involves—all the tribulations and persecutions and experiences of life that he has referred to in verses 35 and 36. None of those can separate you from the love of God. No trial. No persecution. In fact, when trials come upon us as God’s people, they do the opposite. They draw us closer to God. That is why God sends them on His people, so that they cast their burdens on Him, they look to Him, and they experience the riches of His grace. As Paul says: “In my weaknesses, God’s grace is made perfect, because His grace is sufficient in every trial.” The trials make us look up to God. They cause us to draw near to God. They bring to us a richer experience of His love.

And then Paul says, “Neither can angels or principalities or powers.” Those three words go together. Paul may well have in mind here some of the superstitions of the Gentile converts, superstitions that must be dealt with when the gospel is preached. I think, for example, of the Philippines, where Roman Catholicism has a heavy influence. And there are superstitions that come along with it. But perhaps Paul is thinking not so much of *superstitions* as of *realities*. When he says angels and principalities and powers, he is speaking of the *reality* of the devil and his demons and their power exercised against God’s people. That is real. That is not superstition.

We are involved in an invisible warfare. As Paul says in Ephesians 6:8, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood [what we can see], but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” It is a real battle that God’s people are engaged in. Satan wants to separate us from the love of God. He tries to do that by means of temptation—to draw us along with the world. He tries to do that by means of

persecution. He tries to do that by means of making us go after the things of this world and causing us to doubt the love of God. He tries to do that by bringing us into deep sin, so that we are weighed down with the guilt of the sin that we have committed and we think that God cannot love us. Paul says, not angels or principalities or powers. Satan cannot separate God's people from His love.

And then Paul mentions things present. He means by that, all the present experiences of your life—all that is going on in your life and all that is going on in the world in the present. We can think of our struggles, our daily responsibilities, but also of the development of sin and the development of things in this world—the signs of the coming of Jesus Christ, things that take place in government, the war and the unrest, the natural catastrophes that take place in the creation. Can these things separate us from the love of Christ? You look at the world all by itself, and you realize it is not the best place to live, do you not? And Paul says, nothing in the present—in all the present experiences of man—can separate us from the love of Christ.

And nothing in the future, either—things to come. We do not know the future. But we know some things about the future. The Bible tells us some things about what the future holds for God's people in this world. And sometimes, as we think about it, we fear and we tremble. We think of our children living in this world in the future, and we decide that, we would rather not think about it. Paul says, nothing in the future. That means your personal future as well. Maybe you have old age. Maybe you have a disease, and you do not like to think of how it will develop and what it will do to you, not just physically, but also spiritually and psychologically. The future is uncertain. Is there something in the future that might separate us from the love, the saving love, of God? Nothing.

Nothing past, nothing present, nothing future.

And then verse 39. Just in case he might have missed something, Paul says, "Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature." By height, Paul refers to the expanses of the universe. Our understanding of the universe is of course much greater today than it was in Paul's day. But he is saying, there is nothing in all of this vast universe that God has made that can separate us from the love of God.

Nor depth. Now we think of the depths of the ocean. There is nothing in that hidden world that can separate us from the love of Christ. I think of two passages to help us understand this height and depth. In Psalm 139 the psalmist says, "Whither shall I go from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there. If I go into the depths of the sea, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and go to some remote place, even there shall Thy hand lead me and Thy right hand shall guide me." God's people can never be separated from His saving love. And then I think also of Jonah sinking into the depths of the sea. He prays to God. And God has not forgotten him. God prepared a fish for the saving of Jonah's soul. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

And just in case you might think of something that can, Paul says, "Nor any other creature." No created thing. That is the Word of God: Nothing, nothing, can separate us from His love.

This Produces a Confident Life

That means we can live a confident life in this world. That is what Paul refers to in verse 37. He begins verse 37 with the word "Nay," or No. He is contrasting this to what he has spoken of right before this, when he speaks of our life—the tribulations and the persecutions of our life that are described in Psalm 24:22 this way: "Yea,

for thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.” That is what our life can seem like. And Paul says, “No! It is not that. No, in Him we are more than conquerors.” Even though that may be our experience in this world, with all the tribulations and persecutions that come upon us, we are more than conquerors.

We can be confident as we live in this world. Those words “more than conquerors” are, in the original Greek, “super-conquerors,” or “hyper-conquerors.” A child of God is a super-conqueror. What is a conqueror? He is one who overcomes, who has the victory. We can think of great conquerors. Alexander the Great, for example, who by age 33 had marched his army across the world and conquered it. Then came Caesar, and he said: “Veni, vidi, vici”—I came, I saw, I conquered. A conqueror is one who takes on the challenge, who climbs the mountain, who walks over the competition, who is fearless in the face of danger. And we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

That means, beloved, that by faith, as we live in this world, with all the trials and persecutions that we face, we can live with confidence. We can confront whatever challenges come our way and say, “I’m confident, I’m persuaded, I know that none of them shall separate me from the love of Christ and that (as Paul says in verse 28) all of them, every one of them, will work together for my eternal good.”

So we can say with Paul, this is the way faith reckons and reasons: “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.”

Father, we are persuaded of Thy eternal, unchanging love for us Thy people. As we are persuaded of this, Lord, give us confidence, as we face whatever comes our way in this life, that we will have victory in the end. Hear us we pray, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

You see, that is the victorious life of faith. It does not mean that we do not have trials in this world. It does not mean that we are not persecuted. It does not mean that we are healthy and that we are wealthy and that we are happy—that we do not have anxieties and distresses in our life. No, it means this: that in faith we confront those things in the confidence that we can never be shaken from the eternal grip of God’s love. That is what it means.

For whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and they will be glorified.

That, of course, is not in our own strength. That is what Paul says, too, at the end of verse 37. “We are more than conquerors [we are super-conquerors] through him that loved us.” And that means that in faith we do not look at ourselves, we do not look at this present world, but we look to Jesus Christ, who is, as we read in Hebrews 12, the author and the finisher of our faith. We look to Him. And through faith we have the victory that overcomes the world.

God’s people go through many trials. I do not know all your struggles and trials. You do not know all the struggles and trials of the other members of the body of Jesus Christ—their very real fears for the future. But I know this, and you can know this, you can be persuaded of this: there is nothing that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That is the assurance that the child of God can have—the comfort, for life and death, for past, for present, for future. God’s love will never fail.

Amen.