

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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6/28/26

**Sermon Title:** What Can Separate Us From His Love?

**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:35-37

**Rom. 8:35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

**Rom. 8:36** As it is written,

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

**Rom. 8:37** ¶ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

**Main Point:** The believer’s security is rooted entirely in the unchangeable love of Christ, which transforms every earthly trial from a threat into a tool for our spiritual good

## **Outline:**

1. What Might Separate us?
  - a. Everyday Pressures
  - b. Physical Deprivation
  - c. Lethal Opposition
2. Why They Can’t Separate us

## **Introduction**

We’re now in our second sermon from the end of Romans chapter 8. Two weeks ago, we began to look at Paul’s closing thoughts here, which he began with that

question, “What shall we say to these things?” Paul has given us the words of the gospel. He has shown us our sin and our deep need of Christ. He has summoned the words of God’s Scripture to show us how God has always put forward Jesus Christ as his answer to human sin. He showed us how Abraham and the patriarchs placed their faith in Jesus Christ, and how we’re meant to follow suit. He showed us how in Christ we’ve died to sin and have no motive to ever fall back into sin, or to defame the name of Jesus. He also showed us that none of these things mean we aren’t going to have a struggle with persistent ongoing sin in our lives. And then here in Romans 8 he has shown us the imperative to walk in the spirit, to live as God’s adopted children, and to endure suffering, because it isn’t worth comparing with the glory that’s coming. And he rooted all of this (not in our own fickle hearts and changing attitudes, but) in the eternal election and purpose of God who has an unbreakable plan which will be carried out from eternity to eternity, all of it chosen, enacted, promised, and kept by him alone.

And then he comes to ask,

“What 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?”

He answers his own question: no one can be against us if God will give the greatest possession that he has in order to express that love, to deal with our sin, and make us members of his family.

And you’d think that would be enough. But it clearly isn’t because he does have more to say!

Why? One author has commented that it’s as if Paul now wants to sing a hymn of praise. It’s like Paul is running a victory lap now that these things have been said: no one can be against us if the very God of the universe is for us!

And in today’s verses Paul is running, and he’s running, and he’s saying, “See? See? Try to think of anything! Try to think of anything at all, and you won’t be able to do it!”

I think Paul is a man who is very aware of the human tendency to make up reasons to be afraid: reasons to fear. And so he says, “Fine. I’ll indulge it. What might you *still* be afraid of, Christian?”

And in the time we have, I want to go with Paul on his run... on his worship run. And the two questions before us today are very simple: First, what *might* separate us? And second, why *can’t* they separate us?

Let’s go with Paul as he proceeds, this week and next to remove any and every possible, conceivable cause for fear.

### **1. What Might Separate us? (8:35-36)**

First, what might separate us? Notice that word “separate.” That word in the Greek is the word for dividing something, pulling someone apart from another person, to take someone away.

He asks, “what can take God’s love away from us?” Is there anything? I think that intellectually your average Christian would say “no.” Maybe we’ve heard verses like this before, or we mentally would say, “I can’t think of anything more powerful than God, so no.” But then the troubles come and we may start to speak or think very differently. We suddenly shrink back because these things come our way and we hesitate. What are the potential separators that Paul entertains here? He mentions seven, but I’m going to place them into three groups.

*The first group Paul mentions are everyday pressures.* He uses these words “tribulation” and “distress.” Now, what these things meant for Paul and what they might mean for us could be different. The sort of things that an ancient person saw behind these words may have been more difficult and rugged. They lived in a time of relative peace in comparison to the rest of the ancient world, but they still heard news from the Roman frontiers. They still knew of the barbarians and tribes who made life difficult for the average Roman citizens. News of upheavals, of earthquakes, of storms and troubles were still all around them. Yes, they lived in supposedly a very peaceful time that is called the *pax romana*, but even then the Roman Christians would know very well that life was far from a smooth road.

It's very easy for us to want things to be easy. And so when pressures come on... we might be tempted to say, "why is God being so merciful to these people, but not to me?" Why do they get to go on vacations and here I am in distress. I won't make fun of the sort of problems that we sometimes think of as trouble or distress, because they're quite real to us when we're experiencing them. But at the same time Paul is saying, "Whatever you might consider to be trouble and distress in your life, it's not able to separate you from Christ's love."

*The second group of troubles that Paul mentions are what you might call physical deprivations.* He mentions famine and nakedness. We live in a peculiar time in world history where world economies are interconnected. Famine is unusual in the western world, in large part due to western capitalist economies. What capitalism has created is an incentive structure for global economies where a famine in one area can be absorbed and made up for by the plenty that's enjoyed in other areas. And so generally what happens isn't mass famine, but rather rising food prices. We've had rising food prices ever since the United States left the gold standard, and certainly since food chains were disrupted because of the worldwide response to covid. And yet it is still quite marvelous that the food chain remains resilient.

In that sense, we don't have to sort of food fears and insecurities that people used to face.

Maybe we don't fear famine, but we do worry about rising food prices. It might seem weird for Paul to say, "Can rising food prices or gas prices or whatever separate us from Christ's love?" I don't think that's quite as gimmicky and cute as we might think. That is an incredible source of stress for many people, isn't it? Food is the second greatest expense in my own family's budget – almost as big as my mortgage payment. Guess what? If our food prices go up, or even if there is famine, Paul is saying, "Jesus still loves you!" The resiliency of your bank account, the scarcity of food or clothing... they are not a mark or measure of the love of God.

*The third group of possible separators that Paul mentions are Lethal Opposition.*

He mentions Persecution, Danger, and Sword. Now, again I feel like I have to address our American context. The U.S. constitution is quite the marvel because it was designed for a moral people who fear God. At the same time, it guarantees us protection for our religious freedom to worship. This is a marvel in world history. I think it is safe to say that for all the convulsions that have taken place in our world, we appear to be the most religiously free people who may have ever lived on the face of the earth.

Certainly we are relatively free to worship compared to nearly anyone in world history. And I do not mean to shame us when I say what I'm going to say next. But in the light of world history, it can be pretty remarkable to reflect on just how jumpy we are as American Christians. It is as though we are always flinching and thinking, "This is going to be it. Here comes the persecution. Here comes the trouble." And I'll admit, there are definitely isolated examples of individuals who have come after Christians. But I remember listening to the paranoia that defined Christian talk radio in the 90s and 2000s. For thirty years we have been ready for the other shoe to drop. Now I think that perhaps paranoia about persecution may be a besetting sin of American Christians.

A few months ago, a frightening mob of people entered a church in Minnesota, disrupted the service, ostensibly to protest the U.S. enforcing immigration law. But they refused to leave and left children and members crying and scared. And yes some among the protestors defended their actions. The defense they gave did not make sense to me, and it seemed more like a publicity stunt and a way to intimidate and make Christians afraid. I remember calling a pastor friend of mine and venting about how frustrated I was and how upsetting it was that someone had the nerve to do that. And I'll never forget my friend's reaction. He said, "I have an unpopular take on this event. I am not saying that the law shouldn't play itself out here. But I do think this: those Christians should rejoice that they were found worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus."

I felt very reprov'd. That was not *my* first reaction. I wanted justice brought against them. I wanted vengeance. Maybe you can relate.

Why have we drifted so far that my friend's take was considered so radical?

It may be a function of living in a democracy: we believe our liberties are at stake if we aren't vigilant and don't keep pointing at threats as they arise. Our own freedoms mean we feel we have so much to lose, and our voices are part of the way that we preserve our liberties. And so we see the slightest hint of persecution on the horizon, and we raise up our voices and cry out. And here Paul is and he's been stoned, he's been attacked, he's been troubled, he's been arrested, he's experienced personal persecution and state persecution, and yet he is able to constantly say, the love of God has never failed me.

In some ways, I want us as Americans to have a different goal than comfort. Yes, I love freedom. I want it to exist. But what if we enjoyed our freedom while we have it, and at the same time were able to say truly and from the heart, "come what may, I know that nothing will separate me from the love of Christ."

Then Paul quotes from Psalm 44:22: "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." Do you know why Paul quoted this?

He's showing us that God is for us, even when he might seem to have abandoned us to our enemies.

But is also as though he's saying to the Romans, "This is nothing new."

The point isn't just for us to hear, bad things happen. The real point is that God's people have always been under threat, and faced difficulty and opposition. But the real point is that the Church of Christ is still standing because God's love held them then, and holds us even now.

And we need to hear this too, as Christians today: "Persecution, trouble, martyrdom... they weren't invented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and they weren't invented in the first century early church. God's people have always been under threat. God has always been good. That doesn't mean we've always been physically safe."

Do *you* need to hear that? I'm not minimizing persecution or trouble. I'm maximizing it. Paul is maximizing it. But he's saying, "It can't separate us from God's love in Christ, so we're leaning into it" when we have to.

He's mentioned all of these things that we're so afraid of and said, "Not this. Not this, either. Not hunger. Not trouble. Not persecution. They can't do it. They can't separate us from his love."

## **2. Why They Can't Separate us (8:37)**

Now our second point today is shorter, but it's important, and it's the question of "why?" Why can't these things, as frightening as they may be... as prominent as they may be from time to time... why can't they do it? Why aren't they enough to separate us from his love?

Next week we're going to dwell more on this, but the most basic answer is that God's love is not bound by our circumstances. His love transcends what is happening in our lives. I want to save some of that for next week when we move further into Paul's argument.

But in a sense, Paul is taking on this bigger question: What is the great sign that God is for me? What is the great sign that I can't be separated from his love? Well we've already seen that there is this great temptation to look at circumstances and say, "when things work out for me... I have money, I have a lack of danger, I have good health, I have a full cupboard, I have, I have, I have..." it's so easy to say, "I know he loves me when he gives me things, when life goes my way..." and when things don't work out we may be tempted to think, "what happened? Why has his love abandoned me?"

And Paul actually said it earlier in this chapter. In verse 18 he said, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." So part of Paul's answer is, "These things we're afraid of aren't worth comparing." So part of his answer is what's coming: glory.

And then he said, "we live in hope of things we don't possess yet." And that means, when things get hard or painful, or people turn against us, or when anguish comes our way, it's not a mark that he's abandoned us. It's a mark that this world isn't our home! So another part of his answer of how we can face these things is that we are people who hope. We're not people who have: we're people who cling to what's coming.

We're people who live lives homesick for God, and these troubles are stops along the way as we are continually moving closer and closer to the God we love, and we're getting nearer to what Bunyan called the celestial city.

Instead of victims, Paul uses a different word for us in verse 37: "more than conquerors." And look: he's not saying this to people the world will think of as winners.

He's saying this to potentially beaten, starved, naked people. Losers in the world's eyes. And he's saying, "Sure. They might strip your body. They might humiliate you. They might dox you. You might lose your job. You might go to prison. Maybe. You could."

His encouragement NOT, "God won't let that happen to you!" He's making us face that it could happen and saying, "Our pain is not the measure of his love."

When Paul says we are "more than conquerors," he uses one word, not three like we use in English. The word is *hupernikomen*. In the Greek, a *conqueror* is someone who defeats an enemy. But a *super-conqueror* is someone who takes the enemy's best weapon and turns it into a tool for their own good.

If you merely *survive* a trial, you are just a survivor. If you *defeat* an enemy, you are a conqueror. But if the trial itself—the hunger, the danger, the very sword that threatens you—only serves to drive you deeper into the arms of Jesus and refine your soul for glory, then the enemy has not only lost; he has been drafted into your service. That is what it means to be "more" than a conqueror: the very things meant to destroy you are the things God uses to complete you.

This stuff they can do to you? It's just pain. This stuff they can do to you? It's just stuff. Tell the truth about it: they can touch your body. They can't touch your soul. Resolve it now. Resolve that you'll face whatever comes by telling the truth.

This is why Jesus told us, "Don't fear him who can only destroy the body."

The disciples, when they were arrested in the book of Acts didn't complain, they didn't shriek, they didn't take up arms against their oppressors. They sang psalms, and they rejoiced. And that made them weird, and people noticed them. In a way that winning a swordfight or cutting off someone's ear (even in self-defense) wouldn't have done.

Can I say two things at once? First, it's legally permissible and not immoral for us to exercise our legal rights under the constitution. But I also have a second observation: I wonder if the watching world sees us shrieking, flinching, wringing our hands... and I have to wonder if they might at times find it just a little hard to believe that we think that we're also really citizens of heaven.

Both things can be true. We can have rights. *And* in the exercise of those rights, we might unintentionally be telling the world that we'd rather have earth than heaven. How do we resolve that?

Perhaps the best resolution is found in the reason why we have rights, and what they are meant to be used for. They are not about our comfort, but about being able, as much as possible to be useful for the kingdom and to share Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul, when necessary appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen. Sometimes he pointed out his rights *before* he was attacked. We see that in Acts 22:25 moments before they're about to whip Paul.

But in Acts 16, he waits until *after* he gets publicly beaten to tell them he has rights as a Roman citizen. By letting himself be beaten first and *then* revealing his status, he put the magistrate in a legal bind. Once they had committed a crime by punishing a Roman citizen without his legal protection, Paul was now set free because he had a form of leverage to keep preaching the gospel for all Christians in the area. Paul surrendered his rights and took a beating to secure peace for his brothers.

Paul saw his rights as a tool of the gospel, not a tool for his comfort. And so if the world is going to see us appeal to our rights, I think we do Christ and his gospel great honor when we see our rights as a tool to be surrendered at times, perhaps, if it helps to further the gospel, or to be taken advantage of if it helps further the gospel. We have a dual citizenship, and so we should use our earthly standing to promote the gospel, not just for our personal comfort.

## **Conclusion**

Now, even though Paul is entertaining these ideas or fears, just note that they are not theoretical for Paul. In 2 Corinthians 1:8 he speaks of tribulation he endured in

Asia. In 2 Cor. 6:4 he lists a number of distresses he experienced as a servant of God. In Acts he was persecuted in Antioch and later stoned and left for dead in Lystra. He mentions in 1 Corinthians 4 that he hungered and thirsted for the sake of the Gospel. He mentioned the cold and exposure that he experienced, even needing his cloak in 2 Cor. 11:27 and the danger that he experienced including perils from rivers, robbers, and the sea.

Of the troubles he mentions in our passage, the *only* one Paul hadn't faced at the time of this writing was the sword. But Paul wasn't even exempt from that. He does not preach a sermon he isn't willing to live out.

And church history tells us that he eventually faced that last one as well: even the sword came his way. If you visit Rome today, you can visit the very place where it is said that the Romans took Paul's head. You can almost imagine even as Paul wrote that word, "sword," that he might have wondered: will I face this one as well? I'm willing. But even as he writes he, he hears what he himself is saying: "that sword may come down. But it will not separate me from the love of Christ."

Christian, God's word is fortifying you today.

In the love of Jesus Christ, we are held in a grip from which no man can pluck us out. And even the security that we have in Jesus Christ is held in the hand of a powerful and loving father, secured by his spirit. The greatest force in all the universe summons all his powers for each and every child who belongs to him.

*Let's pray.*