

CENTURION WEST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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MORE THAN CONQUERORS¹

Scripture Reading Romans 8 verses 18-39

INTRODUCTION

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here we have one of the most towering statements ever written by the Apostle Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit². First of all, we are struck by its categorical nature. Paul is saying *beyond a shadow of doubt*. Second, we are struck by its comprehensive nature. *It embraces every aspect of human life*. Third, we note its consequence, or significance. *It has eternal meaning*.

In our day we have grown weary of categorical statements, which we sometimes experience as abrasive and bombastic. The fragmentation of knowledge most certainly makes us suspicious of statements which seek to be all-embracing. Sheer cynicism makes us shy away from any statement which claims to apply to everyone, everywhere, for the whole of time and eternity.

You and I might well approach this statement of Paul with a good deal of caution, asking ourselves how any person in his right mind could make this kind of statement. After all, we have in the course of our lives known a good deal of separation, of suffering, of pain, and, indeed, even of defeat. How on earth can this man come and

¹ Apart from various translations of the Bible and readings of the various texts, the following have been used as main references for purposes of this sermon:

Carson, DA and Moo, Douglas J (2005 reprint). *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
Cary, M (1965). *A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine (Second Edition)*. London: MacMillan & Co Ltd.
Filson, Floyd V (1965 reprint). *A New Testament History*. New Testament Library. London: SCM Press Limited.
Guthrie, Donald (1968 reprint). *New Testament Introduction. The Pauline Epistles*. London: The Tyndale Press.
Moo, Douglas J (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: The William B Eerdmans Publishing Company.
Swindoll, Charles R (2002). *Paul. A Man of Grace and Grit*. Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group.
Wells, J and Barrow, RH (1931). *A Short History of the Roman Empire to the Death of Marcus Aurelius*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd.

² The movement which re-appraises Paul's writings and their objectives – "The New Perspective" – as represented for example by T Wright in *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) would undoubtedly wish to take issue with my statement that Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write as he did. I do not accept that Paul simply had a mission of his own, and that his letters, but especially that to the Romans, were somehow devoid of anything other than his own agenda. I take at face value Paul's statement that *all Scripture is given by inspiration of God* (2 Timothy 3:16).

say things like *we are more than conquerors*? Should we be crying out, as did Festus in Acts 26 and verse 24: *You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane?*

Before getting into the exposition of our passage today let us look briefly at the man Paul, and at the times in which he lived.

Of himself, Paul wrote this among other things:

I have been in prison ... [I have] been flogged ... and [I have] been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked³.

That man's experience of hardship most certainly far surpasses my own, and perhaps that of many of us.

Of the times in which he lived, we are reminded over and over again by historians of the period that massive political instability had crept into the Roman system of governance – Paul lived through the sorry Principates of Gaius, the madman who made his horse a Senator; of Claudius, who gained notoriety as a gambler of some distinction⁴; and of Nero, whose excesses (which included murdering his own mother) would finally lead to the massive fire at Rome, the revolution which followed where there were four emperors in a single year, and a sea-change in the way Empire was governed⁵. New Testament historians are generally agreed that Paul probably wrote his Letter to the Romans during the first five years of Nero's Principate, and that he was probably executed at Rome, on the orders of Nero, about ten years after that.

This man, a man who lived in times certainly no more stable than our own and probably less so, who had known hardships beyond the capacity of many to begin to comprehend, is the man who stated categorically in verse 37 of Romans 8, that *we*

³ 2 Corinthians 11 verses 23-27. These verses flesh out the references he has already made less explicitly in 2 Corinthians from verses 8-11 of chapter 1 and range more widely than those.

⁴ Historians are divided in their view of Claudius. Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* ("pumpkinification") paints Claudius as a drivelling dotard. Robert Graves's *Claudius the God* and *I Claudius* are considered by many scholars to be fairer to Claudius, and to suggest that he was actually a far better Emperor than either his predecessor Gaius (often called Caligula) or his successor Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, known as Nero.

⁵ New Testament historians tend to agree on a date for the Letter to the Romans of 57 AD. This falls within the first five years of the Principate of Nero, which was the best time of his controversial reign. They are of the view that Paul was probably executed in around 67 AD, probably by beheading, and that he therefore did not see the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70.

are more than conquerors. What did he see, what did he know, that made him able to say this?

MORE THAN CONQUERORS⁶

The word that Paul uses might be translated as “we hyper-conquer”, or “we gain a surpassing victory”. The nature of the victory is complete, utter and total.

(1) The Categorical Nature of Paul’s Statement

Perhaps our first question has to be *what is it that makes Paul so categorical?* Why is he so adamant? ***I am convinced***, he says⁷. What Paul says comes at the end of a long and closely-reasoned argument. In verses 16 and 17 of Chapter 1 of his letter he has indicated that his theme is Christ and the Gospel of Christ, and that it is through Christ and His Gospel that we become righteous, and therefore reconciled to God.

What is the context of this statement at the end of Romans 8 which celebrates the security of the believer? In his letter Paul talks first of all about the heart of the Gospel – what is it that makes the Good News, the “eu angelion”? From verse 18 of the first chapter right through to the end of the fourth chapter he talks about how God’s people are justified by faith. This is the core of the believer’s hope – justification by faith: the very heart of the Gospel.

Paul goes on to speak of the assurance that is provided by the Gospel. He deals with a number of aspects – he talks about the hope of glory; he goes on to talk about freedom from bondage to sin; he develops this theme into a discussion about freedom from the bondage of the law; and then he goes on to write about our assurance of eternal life in the Spirit.

In this context Paul speaks about the Spirit of Life; the Spirit of Adoption; and then, from verse 18 of chapter 8 through to verse 30, he speaks about the Spirit of Glory⁸.

In verses 1-17 of chapter 8 Paul has focused on the Spirit as the agent through whom believers are granted life and sonship. “No condemnation” can be proclaimed over the Christian (v 1) because he or she has been transferred from death to life and made God’s own child. But at the end of the verse just before our passage begins Paul has to address the question of how the Christian can maintain hope for eternal life in the face of sufferings and death. How can those who have been set free from the law of sin and of death nevertheless die?⁹

Paul therefore moves on to an exposition of future glory. In an important sense, what Paul is saying in the passage read to us, and which is directing our thoughts, is that we have to walk the way of our Lord. In the same way as for Jesus glory followed after suffering, so it is for the Christian.

⁶ The renowned Dutch-American commentator on the Scriptures, William Hendriksen, chose to entitle his short work on Revelation *More than Conquerors*, echoing this usage by Paul.

⁷ Romans 8 verse 38.

⁸ There are various suggestions as to the structure of Romans. The one proposed here is that of Douglas J Moo, at pages 33 to 34 of his commentary listed above.

⁹ See Moo, Douglas J at pages 536-537.

In verse 18 Paul writes *I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed to us*. This is a theme that Paul raises over and over again: the children of God are justified by faith; they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit at work in their lives; and their ultimate destination is to be glorified by God: the children of God will participate in God's glory. In verses 21 and following Paul reminds his readers that creation itself is to be set free from the bondage to decay into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

It is the Spirit of God who connects our "already" with our "not yet", making the "hope of glory", as yet unseen, as certain as though it were already ours. God's intention is to bring to glory every person who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Our assurance of ultimate victory rests on this promise of God to us. But Paul is also realistic – he knows that between enjoying the promise and where we are, there may be years of challenges, including pain, anxiety, distress and disaster.

Paul is categorical, because he knows that the promises of God are yes and amen.

(2) The Comprehensive Nature of Paul's Statement

We notice, second, the comprehensive nature of Paul's statement. Paul refers to the basis of God's dealings with His children: *the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. What Paul deals with in verse 38 is in a sense a catalogue of the things which people might imagine can go wrong.

- (i) First of all, says Paul, life itself and even death cannot separate us from the love of God. Herein lies a wonderful assurance – we can point out that the love of God transcends our physical reality. It would be completely human to imagine that life starts when we are born and that it ends when we die. Not at all! Paul makes it clear that the love of God for you and me had no beginning and it will have no end. It has always been there. But he is also saying that no matter what life delivers to us, we cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ. As we have seen from the passage read earlier, Paul's experience of life was one which had delivered him many cruel blows. Physical, mental and spiritual trials had assailed him. Death had been at hand many times. And yet, in all of that, the love of God was present.
- (ii) Paul then goes on to say that neither angels nor rulers can separate us from the love of God. Having dealt with the physical mode of existence, Paul moves on to the spiritual realm. Some commentators make the point that Paul here points to the reality that there is a spiritual realm, that it is real, and that it impacts our lives – sometimes for good, and sometimes for ill. Paul himself makes the point, as for example in his letter to the Ephesians, that we spend our lives in a spiritual warfare. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that our lives are not impacted by the spirit world. The important point to take hold of here is that no matter whether good things are happening to us, or bad things are happening to us, the love of God is with us in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- (iii) Thirdly, Paul points to temporality, or the idea of time – the present, he says, and also the future, cannot separate us from the love of God. *Paul's point*, writes one commentator, *is that the believer need have no fear that either the present or future circumstances and events will call into question his [or her] relationship to God in*

*Christ*¹⁰. Sometimes we are concerned about the future. We have fears which relate to our health, to our material well-being, to how we shall cope with a variety of challenges. Paul is encouraging the believers here by reminding us that whole of time and the whole of eternity will see God's love for us, like a never-failing stream, continuing in endless supply. What a wonderful and encouraging truth that is!

- (iv) Paul then refers to height and depth, referring to the spatial realm, and within the understanding of the day he is probably referring to the things "above the earth" (what we might call the universe or space) and things "beneath the earth", that is the depths of the earth. There is nothing there, says Paul that can separate us from the love of God. If at some future time there are believers who are able to take space travel to the distant reaches of the universe, the love of God will be there also.
- (v) Lastly, just in case anybody has any doubts, Paul concludes with *nor anything else in all creation* – there is literally nothing that can separate us from the love of God¹¹

(3) The Consequential Nature of Paul's Statement

In verse 35 of chapter 8 Paul has asked the question: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*

This question to Christians at the time when he wrote was not a rhetorical one. The believers in the early church knew all about trouble and hardship. There were few believers who were not daily assailed by many difficulties, who did not find that to live for their faith was no simple matter. The life and witness of those who are counter-cultural is not an easy life. You and I may yet find ourselves in trouble and hardship because we follow what in the early church was called The Way. A secular society has no time for the spiritual; a materialistic world has no understanding of the non-material; the drumbeat of humanism tends all the time to drown out voices which cry *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*.

Persecution of those who do the will of God has existed for millennia, and even as we are gathered here there are those who are being persecuted and even martyred for their faith. In his work *The Gulag Archipelago*, the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn speaks among other things of the religious reasons why men and women, ordinary citizens, were expelled to harsh and remote labour camps – history tells us that Josef Stalin alone was responsible for the extermination of more than six million people, to say nothing of those who conducted the most dreadful pogroms against believers. In our own time we read daily of persecution of believers, sometimes on trumped-up charges heard in kangaroo courts, because they dare to call God their Father¹².

Famine and nakedness deal with material needs; danger deals with threats to body and mind; the sword raises the very real possibility of physical death. These were well-known to Christians throughout the Empire. Less than ten years after Paul wrote these words,

¹⁰ Moo, Douglas J page 545.

¹¹ There are some who debate what might be meant by a "created thing", and speculate that perhaps our own thoughts and attitudes fall outside such a phenomenon – in other words, we can cut ourselves off from the love of God. There are others who conclude that this is not possible. For purposes of this exposition the debate is not relevant.

¹² A very moving book is one called *I Dare to Call Him Father* by Biltis Shaik, a Pakistani woman who converted from Islam to Christianity.

Christians were horribly tortured during and after the great fire of Rome; just a few years after that Jerusalem was destroyed, with Christians and Jews alike being hacked to death; at the time when Paul wrote Christians in some parts of the Empire would have their hands held in the fire burning before the images of the Emperor, whom they were expected to worship.

Paul's triumphant response to all of this is *No! In all these things we are hyper-conquerors, through Him who loved us.* Nothing, says Paul, can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And here Paul returns to the basis of his belief, and ours, as expressed in Romans 5 verses 6 to 8: *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

It is because of the love of God expressed for us through Christ that we are more than conquerors, for nothing can overcome us.

CONCLUSION

At this very moment, God is with us. His love is here, through the Lord Jesus Christ. And that wonderful love is all about us, right now. All too often we are a little like Eliza Doolittle – *don't tell me, show me!* we often cry. Too often we allow the things of the flesh and of the material world to drown out the spiritual world. It may be that right now you are feeling as though you are being overcome – perhaps by sorrow; possibly by pain; maybe by the cares of this world, which can take so many forms. You may be going round and round in your head, like a hamster on a treadmill, as you try to understand some event or happening in your life which just seems to make no sense.

The message of Paul is encapsulated in a simple little song:

*Living, He loved me;
Dying, He saved me;
Buried, He carried
My sins far away:
Rising, He justified
Freely, for ever –
One day He's coming,
O glorious day!*

May we all be given the grace and the spiritual insight to hold on to that truth; to know that God is ever with us. During the week ahead, may you be able to take with you this wonderful message from God through the words of His Apostle Paul:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May God be with you all and bless you richly.

Amen.