

**“Three Easter Questions”**  
**Romans 8:31-39**  
**April 21, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

I don't need to remind you that today is Easter Sunday, the day when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Though there's a sense in which every Sunday could rightly be referred to as "Resurrection Day," Easter Sunday is the day when we celebrate this great event in a more focused way. It is something of a high point on the yearly calendar because the resurrection of Jesus is such a significant part of Christianity. It means that Jesus is who he said he is, the Son of God. It means that death will not have the last word. It means that our best days are ahead of us, for any who trust Jesus and follow him.

The end of Romans 8 is similar to Easter in this regard. It, too, is something of a high point in the entire letter. Paul has been patiently explaining what God has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This passage is his summary. He has taken us to the top of the mountain, and now he wants to point out some of the beauties of our vista from that vantage point. Almost three years ago now, my son and I had the great joy of cycling all 490 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway. At the end of each climb, we would be rewarded with beautiful vistas at each of the summits, one of which reached to an elevation of over 6,000 feet above sea level. They were breathtaking in their beauty, and one couldn't help but stop and just admire them. Today's passage is just like that. Paul has guided us up the mountain, showing us all that we have as a result of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And now he wants us to pause and admire the beauty of it all. He is like a guide pointing out the beautiful sights, lest we miss them. He does so by asking seven rhetorical questions. Some of these questions are repetitive, and they really boil down to only three. Questions invite us to ponder, and these are good questions for us to ask ourselves on Easter Sunday, because they boldly declare the victory we have in Christ.

**I. If God Is for Us, Who Can Be against Us?**

Paul doesn't mean to suggest by this that no one is against us, because Christians have enemies all around and within. We battle our own sinful nature, which Paul himself testified to as his own experience in chapter 7. We battle spiritual enemies. We fight, like everyone else, against the normal challenges of life in a fallen and broken world. Christians have formidable enemies against us. How about that first clause, "If God is for us"? The little conjunction "if" can mean several things in Greek, but here it means "since."

The meaning of this is captured well if we understand him to be saying, "Since God is for us, who can be against us and prevail?"

But how do we know that God is really for us? Paul knows our doubts and our constant need for reassurance about such things, so he answers that with the next question he asks. **"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?"** It's really simple math. If you required help totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars and someone made the sacrifice to help you that much, then if you needed help totaling only a few hundred dollars, that same benefactor would surely be willing to help with this lesser need. And what if the initial help required the benefactor to sell his house and liquidate many of his assets to come up with the hundreds of thousands of dollars you needed? He kept nothing off limits but gave whatever was needed to help you.

God has put nothing off limits to help us in our desperate need as rebellious sinners. He never said, "I'm sorry, the price for your deliverance is too high. It will require the life of my Son, and I'm not willing to pay that high a price." Instead, he said, "I will not even spare my own Son in order to gain back these who were lost." Do you hear the passion in that? Do you hear the extravagant love? Gospel logic then says, "If God has done this much for me, then he is for me in everything. I can trust him with matters of health, money, jobs, marriage and children. And since he is for me, no opposition will be able to prevail against me.

If you ever visit my office, you may see one of my favorite pictures, positioned on my desk so I see it all the time. It's a photograph of my oldest grandson nestled in the crook of my right arm while I'm seated in a chair. He was just over a year old when the photograph was taken, and his left hand is holding onto my index finger, his fingers not even long enough at the time to reach around my whole finger. My right hand, which is prominent in the photo, is holding onto his leg. So while he's holding on to me with his weak, little baby hand, my much stronger hand is holding on to him. It's not just the hands that interest me in this photo; it's also the eyes. I'm looking down at him while he's looking out at the camera. This photo speaks to me about this verse. I may be holding on to God, but it's with my weak hand, while his much stronger hand is holding on to me. Further, God's eyes are always on me, which allows me to look out at the world with confidence and without fear.

In this time when there are an unusually large number of challenges facing our church members, Paul is urging us to look at something from the high vista to which he has brought us. Look at the crucified Jesus as the certain word of God for his love and care for you.

## **II. Who Shall Bring Any Charge against God's Elect?**

As was the case with the previous question, Paul doesn't mean to suggest here that there are no voices of condemnation raised against us. One of the names given to Satan is "accuser of the brothers" (Rev. 12:10). And our own consciences accuse us as well. I have been pastoring long enough to recognize that most church members regard themselves as being more sinful than all these other fine people in this room. And then there are the voices of the critics, which can be loud in our ears. In a television interview she did several years ago, the singer Mariah Carey said that if she hears a thousand words of praise and one word of criticism, that one criticism will eliminate the thousand praises.

Many of us can remember words of criticism that happened long ago. I remember one from when I was in sixth grade. One of the privileges given to sixth graders in my school was to be able to take your turn to help serve in the cafeteria line at lunch. When it was my turn, I can still remember a classmate I didn't know looking at me and saying to the boy beside him, "Isn't he ugly?" Though I don't think any permanent damage was done me by those words, it is significant that I can still remember them.

Words of condemnation are an inescapable part of life in this fallen world. Paul gives us other words that need to sound more loudly in our ears. **"It is God who justifies... 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"** (v. 33-34). The trial has already occurred, and the verdict of not guilty has been pronounced. We don't need to defend ourselves against the condemning voices, whether their source is satanic, internal or from other people. The reason is that we have a defender in heaven: Jesus, the one who died for us, was raised for us and ascended into heaven. He is there now interceding for us, pleading the merits of his own blood for our forgiveness.

This is why the nineteenth century Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne said that for every one look we take at ourselves, we should take ten looks at Christ. The voices of condemnation are drowned out by the thundering voice of Christ saying, "It is finished."

### **III. Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of Christ?**

As we are on our mountaintop beholding the beautiful vistas of our salvation, our guide, Paul, has saved the best one for last. **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** Of course, the answer he's going to give at the end is that nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." But this is a truth of such beauty and comfort that the mere statement of it is inadequate. We need to do more than merely acknowledge the truth of this; we need to feel its truth and impact.

So Paul helps us in this by mentioning some possible candidates of enemies that could separate us from the love of God, starting with tribulation and distress. Both of these words involve a feeling of pressure and of being constrained by circumstances outside of our control. Are you experiencing something of that? Maybe it's the middle-aged man or woman whose dreams have not been realized, and now you realize as the years are passing that they never will be in this life. Can that separate you from the love of Christ, Paul asks.

How about persecution? What if the persecutors are powerful people before whom you are powerless? They have the motive and ability to bring harm to you? But can they separate you from Christ? What about such poverty and deprivation that you lack such essentials as food and clothing? Or what about danger or the threat of violence against you? Paul imagines the kind of extreme calamity that we all fear and then asks if these things can separate us from the love of Christ.

Paul is no mere ivory tower theologian. He has experienced all of these sufferings in his life. He realizes that God's people do indeed suffer, a truth supported by Psalm 44:22. **“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”** What chance do sheep have against those determined to slaughter them? They have no power, no defense whatsoever. Yet Paul says not to be discouraged, because **“in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”** In all the things he has mentioned, the tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword, we are more than conquerors. What does it mean to be more than a conqueror? In his excellent new commentary on Romans, Frank Thielman says that “this rare expression refers not merely to overcoming an opponent nor to winning something in addition to victory but to winning by a long distance” (p. 426). Victory was never in doubt. Even in death we win by a long distance, because death only serves to usher us into the very presence of the Jesus who has loved us so. As the poet has said, this life ends as does the runway, which is no longer needed when the plane takes wing.

Paul is not done yet. He names even more things that are unable to separate us from the love of God, beginning with “neither death nor life.” I don't know of any mode of existence outside of these two possibilities. Everyone is either dead or alive. But neither shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ. A second pairing is neither “angels nor rulers.” Angels are the spiritual beings, both good and bad. Rulers are likely earthly rulers. Both angels and rulers are far more powerful than us, but neither have sufficient power to separate us from Christ. Things present or things to come will also not be able to do so. None of us knows what the future holds. There could be some great calamity ahead. What we can know is that there is nothing either in the present or the future that can loosen God's grip upon us. There is no power

able to do that. Neither height nor depth, which speak of places beyond our reach, places where mysteries happen over which we have no control. He finally concludes by saying that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. There only two things in this world: a Creator and his creation. The Creator assures us here that nothing in his creation will ever separate us from him.

A day will come when you will have a particular need to know that nothing will be able to separate you from Christ's love. Perhaps that day is today for you. Or maybe it's years or even decades away. We will all need this promise when this present life comes to an end. When that happens for you, and it will happen for all of us, I want you to know that you don't need to be afraid. We have God's own promise that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ. I do need to point out, however, that this language assumes that at some point you are joined to the love of Christ. You can't be separated from something of which you were never a part. How do you become a part of the love of Christ? One of the hymns we sing says it like this: "All the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him." Tim Keller says it simply: "all we need is nothing; all we need is need." The hymn writer Augustus Toplady said, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

## **CONCLUSION:**

In the final book of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, Lewis imagines what it will be like on the first day of our resurrected life.

As [the resurrected Aslan] spoke, He no longer looked at them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily-ever-after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures... had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

This is the future for all who are joined by faith to Jesus, the one who died, was raised, ascended into heaven and will return to make all things new.  
Hallelujah!