MORE THAN CONQUERORS

Romans 8:31–39

Key Verse: 8:37

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

 Paul wrote this letter to show that the only people who are truly right with God are those who live by faith. In the first part, chapters 1–4, he described how everyone is a sinner and everyone needs God’s solution: the death and resurrection of his Son. No one can redeem themselves from their sins; we can only trust what God has done for us in Jesus by faith. In the second part, chapters 5–8, Paul describes what living by faith in Christ looks like. First, our inner life is changed: we have peace, joy, hope, rejoice in our sufferings, and our hearts are full of God’s love. Second, by faith we’ve stepped into a world where grace and life reign through the overpowering influence of the Second Adam, Christ, and in him we too can be a blessing. Third, we don’t abuse God’s grace; instead, by faith in Christ we gain victory over sin by presenting ourselves to God. Fourth, we learn to serve in the new way of the Spirit, overcoming all our legalistic ideas and miserable failures. Fifth, the Spirit of life sets us free from the power of sin in both mind and body and gives us the assurance that we are God’s children. Sixth, the Spirit helps us see our glorious future hope, even as we go through all kinds of suffering, and he helps us to pray. Now, in this last part of chapter 8, Paul says that living by faith means being sure of God’s love for us.

 Have you ever doubted if someone loved you? Most of us have. What made you doubt it? It could have been what they said, or what they did, or didn’t do. Maybe you were just left alone to struggle all by yourself, and you felt abandoned by the person you thought really cared for you. A few of our relationships in life might seem really strong, but there are some things that could break even those. In today’s verses Paul describes many things that can cause us to doubt that God loves us. By asking seven questions he also tells us all the reasons we have in Christ to think differently. So, how can we be sure of God’s love? And why do we need to be? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

 As we’ve seen, Paul has been describing all the sufferings we go through in life. These sufferings are real, they’re painful, and they can seem futile. Sufferings are caused by all the sin and death and curse of this fallen world. As Paul said earlier, they also can be caused by just being followers of Christ. Paul taught us that we all need to suffer with Christ in order that we may also be glorified with him (17b). In today’s passage Paul explains further what these sufferings are. They are having people “against us” simply because we believe in Jesus (31), or withholding from us what we really need because they don’t like that we’re Christians (32). Paul says people may “charge” or accuse us of wrongdoing and “condemn” us, all due to our faith (33,34). Suffering with Christ also includes life situations like “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword” (35). The author of Hebrews described it like this: “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb11:35b–38). In history so many people have experienced poverty, disruption, insecurity, pain and danger because of their choice to follow Jesus. Suffering with Christ also involves facing invisible but powerful spiritual forces using all their might against us (38,39). These may seem like extreme experiences. But actually, for Christians they’re normal. Our Lord Jesus taught us, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Mt10:22; Mk13: 13; Lk21:17). He also told us: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn15:19).

 Generally speaking, we human beings, by nature, are social creatures. It’s the way God made us. We need relationships with others, beginning with our immediate families, but also extending to our neighbors, classmates, friends, coworkers, and people in general. If we’re being honest, we all want to be liked, admired, respected and appreciated for who we are—it’s a healthy and normal human desire. This is why it’s so hard, in any situation, if ever we’re despised, shunned or labeled. This desire to be accepted can even cause us to be ashamed of our Lord Jesus and his words (Mk8:38; Lk9:36). Why? It’s because he calls us to live opposite of the world, to reject its materialism and sinful desire, to live unselfishly and be willing to lose everything for the sake of the gospel. When we really practice what he said, people are surprised when we don’t join them in their debauchery, and they malign us (1Pe4:5). Our worldview, our values, our lifestyle become so different that it’s hard to understand each other or even to have much meaningful to say. So many people leave churches for this reason, because they are too unlike the world, and those who remain in church feel rejected and devalued and lonely. This is why so many people retreat into a bubble of Christians like themselves. And even then, among fellow believers we can be hurt by others’ selfish ambition, conceit, self-centeredness and pride (Php2:3ff.). Today there’s a battle raging in many churches about being “woke,” meaning aware of all the social and racial injustice in our society. Many of our fellow believers suffer from being despised, rejected and abused because of their race, and sometimes it makes it hard to do even the ordinary things of life like going shopping for groceries or being in unfamiliar places. They don’t feel truly accepted or understood or safe, and it seems hopeless even to talk about it.

 In today’s passage Paul uses a key word: “separate.” He mentions it in verse 35, and again in verse 39. As we know, there are many kinds of separation. Business partners can separate. Even Christian workers can separate due to their differences. Couples can legally separate or divorce. But in many cases they’ve separated even while they live together. They’ve withdrawn from the relationship. Why? It’s because, for whatever reason, they don’t believe their spouse really loves them. So they just co-exist for mutual benefit and convenience. Children often separate from their parents as well, at least emotionally, for the same reason—they don’t feel truly loved by them.

But the biggest problem is when we separate from God. Paul mentions in verses 35 and 39 being separated from the love of God in Christ. Why does he repeat this? It’s because intense suffering can sometimes cause us to doubt God’s love. We can think that God forgot about us or gave up on us, that he isn’t really listening to our prayers. Paul is concerned that suffering Christians might start thinking like this. According to Genesis 3, doubting God’s love in the Garden of Eden was the beginning point of all sin. The serpent was insinuating to the woman that God didn’t really care about them, even though he had already blessed them in every way! It was all about twisting that one command of God not to eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That one restriction got blown all out of proportion until they doubted and disobeyed.

At the beginning of this section in Romans Paul has already mentioned how we can know that God loves us. In 5:8 he said God “shows” or “proves” his love for us in this one fact: “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” When we believe this, God pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (5:5). Now at the end of this section Paul comes back to God’s love for us in Christ.

What assures us of God’s love? First, Paul says in verse 31 that “God is for us.” Basically, God is on our side, even when people are not, because we have received his grace through the gift of his Son. Second, God gives. Read verse 32. God didn’t even spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. It’s the greatest love because he made the greatest sacrifice. Based on God giving his own Son for our sins, we can be confident that he will also graciously give us all that we need. Third, God justifies (33). God declares us righteous due to our faith in Jesus, and he clothes us with the very righteousness of Christ. So people’s criticisms or accusations don’t really matter.

Fourth, Christ is interceding for us (34). We probably have heard this before, but it’s one of those Bible teachings that we often don’t stop to fully appreciate. A lot of people pray mainly for themselves, or maybe for their own children, but they don’t seriously pray for people unrelated to them. And many people, even if they’re praying for others, probably aren’t qualified to do so, due t their sins. But Christ who was without sin died for our sins, and even more, he was raised to life, totally vindicated. What’s more, he’s now at God’s right hand. It’s the greatest place of honor and power next to the Father himself. And what is he doing there? It says he’s interceding for us. It’s amazing! He’s definitely got God’s ear. So the Bible calls Jesus “our great high priest.” And his intercessory prayer for us, right next to God the Father, is based on the fact that he was made like us in every respect. He can sympathize with all our weaknesses. He is merciful and faithful and he never misses praying for us (Heb2:17; 4:15; 7:25). When we realize that Christ is praying for us at God’s right hand, we can be even more convinced that God loves us so much. Because of God’s great love, we do not allow hard circumstances make us doubt God’s love.

What do we do? Read verse 36. In this verse Paul is basically saying not only that God loves us, but that we love him in return. We’re willing to be killed all the day long. We’re ready to be regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Why? It says, “For your sake.” We’re ready to suffer and risk ourselves and even to die because of the wonderful love of Jesus our Lord. It’s God’s love for us in Christ that moves us to live like this, to suffer like this. With this kind of love for God in our hearts, even death doesn’t intimidate us.

What is Paul’s conclusion? Read verse 37. Paul is saying even death can’t defeat us. In God’s love for us in Christ, Paul says we are “more than conquerors.” The Greek word is “hypernikomen.” It combines two words: “hyper” meaning “above and beyond” and “nikomen” meaning “victors.” In Christ’s love we are super victors or hyper conquerors. The greatest spiritual victory is not to crush or defeat our opponents, but to experience the great love of God in Christ. His love is what makes us invincible, undefeatable. We may not feel like victors sometimes. But when we hold onto the love of God for us in Christ by faith, no matter what suffering we’re going through, we win the spiritual victory. We conquer sin, we conquer death, and we conquer all kinds of suffering. It’s the secret to overcome the world (1Jn5:4). We can overcome everything—people’s hatred, our own weaknesses, and even death—remembering him who loved us.

As believers in Jesus we’re subject to the devil’s attack. It’s real. He wants to tempt us, plant doubt and fear in us. He’s way too strong for us. But the way to overcome it all is simply by holding onto the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (39b). Read verse 37 again. May God renew his great love for us in Jesus. May he make us more than conquerors and love him with life-giving love.