

First Sunday in Lent
March 9, 2003
Romans 8:31-39

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Invincible in Christ

1. Never in want
2. Never condemned
3. Never alone

NIV Romans 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 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.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

You hear two different notes in these familiar words from the last part of Romans 8. The first is a cry of boldness and invincibility: *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* The second is nearly the opposite, a quote from the Old Testament that is the cry of those who are helpless to avoid deadly defeat: *"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* So you have to ask, which are we: Victors or victims, conquerors or casualties? St. Paul's answer here in Romans 8 is clearly the former. We are victors in Christ. We are more than conquerors—invincible—he says here. But it's not as though we don't face trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. We do. In fact our association with Jesus only increases the likelihood that these things will come our way. And yet as the apostle reaches what someone has called "the top rung of the ladder of comfort" he stoutly asserts that we are still conquerors because our merciful God sees to it that we are 1] never in want, 2] never condemned, and 3] never alone. Come what may, we are **Invincible in Christ**.

1. Never in want

This section begins with a question. *“What shall we say in response to this?”* In response to what? In response to the series of wonderful promises that precede this question. The promise that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The promise that if this old world is groaning, that groaning is really just a prelude to the redemption of our bodies when Jesus returns. And it’s not just the world that’s groaning. Here we have the promise that the Spirit of God is groaning, too, interceding for us with groans that words cannot express. More than that, **“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”** He predestined us to eternal salvation. He called us to faith. He justified us. And because he’s done all that, we are already now as good as glorified. It’s after he’s told us all this that Paul asks, *“What shall we say in response to this?”* And the answer? We should say what’s obvious: in Christ we’re invincible. “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

There are things, though, that puncture that aura of invincibility. Being in want would do that. Being in need of something essential to our physical or spiritual welfare would do that. It’s hard to say you’re invincible when your insufficiency is staring you in the face. But the apostle says that God has us covered. *“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”* This is called an argument from the greater to the lesser. Could it be that God, who handed his one and only Son over to be betrayed, beaten, and killed to answer our greatest need—the need of ransoming for our souls—could it be that he would now close his hand and turn his back on us? Impossible! As he gave us Jesus, he will graciously give us all things. We are never in want.

God the Father’s love in giving up his Son for us is clearly in view during this season of Lent. Last week we heard the Father set his seal of approval on Jesus at the mount of Transfiguration. Jesus went down the mountain to certain suffering and death—all by his Father’s will. Though it must have torn his Father’s heart, he did not take the cup of suffering away from Jesus. He willed his Son to drink that cup and to die for our sins. He even abandoned him, forsaking him there on the cross in a way that no one else has ever been forsaken. Jesus did his Father’s will and his Father loved him for laying down his life. Jesus willingly did all this, so that we could have life and have it to the full—never in want. Through faith in Jesus and his sacrifice for sin, we can say, **The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.**

As Paul continues up this ladder of comfort, his vocabulary becomes the vocabulary of the courtroom. This enables him to demonstrate our invincibility from another angle.

2. Never condemned

Paul has another question for us: *“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?”* I can answer that question real fast. Satan will. His

name Satan means “accuser.” Bringing charges against believers is his specialty, his reason for living. In the book of Revelation Satan is called “**the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night.**” You see Satan doing just that in the beginning of the book of Job, when he pointed to Job and asked God, “**Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?...But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.**” Do you hear the accusation there? “God, as soon as you remove that hedge and send some adversity into Job’s life, he’s going to crumble. He’s a fair-weather believer.” And in our Gospel lesson this morning, Satan was desperately hoping for an occasion to accuse Jesus with his repeated efforts to get Jesus to succumb to his temptations.

Satan has a wily way of working against us. First, he tempts us to sin. He tries to lead us to look at sinning as harmless, or even helpful. He labors to put disobedience to God in the best possible light. But then, as soon as we’ve sinned, the trap snaps closed. And suddenly Satan switches from the salesman for sin to the accuser of sinners. “You did what? How could you? You sin like that and you call yourself a child of God?” What he’s hoping is that we’ll despair, like Judas did, and conclude that there’s no grace and no possibility of forgiveness for us. And we have to admit that Satan has an edge. So often his accusations are accurate. We have sinned. We’ve been disobedient and rebellious. We’ve chosen to go our own way rather than God’s way. And in so doing we’ve opened ourselves up to his accusations. With our sinning we’ve given him the arrows that he’s shot at us.

But in Christ we’re still invincible because God justifies. Satan, in the terminology of the courtroom brings the charge. He’s the prosecutor. But God is the judge and God justifies, that is, God declares us “not guilty.” Paul wants us to think again about our invincibility when he asks another question: “*Who is he that condemns?*” The answer he has in mind is “no one.” No one can condemn us—for three reasons. “*Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*” Did you hear three reasons why we’re never condemned? First, because Jesus died for us. Our sins have been paid for. They can’t be used to accuse us anymore. Second, Jesus was raised to life. If Jesus hadn’t been raised, it would have indicated that his payment for sin was somehow insufficient. But when Jesus rose from the grave, he as much as said to us, “You are no longer in your sins. All is forgiven.” And the third reason we can’t be condemned is this: Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. We have the best intercessor there is. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, speaks to the Father in our defense. With him as our attorney, no accusation can stick.

This is why we can say as we do in one of our hymns, “**Bold shall I stand in that great day—Who can a word against me say? Fully through you absolved I am From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.**” (CW 376, stz 2)

So God's love supplies all our wants. And God's love declares us not guilty, free from condemnation. The only way for Satan to get around this is for him to somehow separate us from God's love. But there, too, he runs into obstacles. God won't let us be separated from his love for us in Christ.

3. Never alone

Here's another rhetorical question: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* "Divide and conquer" is strategy that has stood the test of time. Predators use it. Generals use it. I'm probably safe in guessing that the people who are interrogating the terrorist Khalid Mohammed are not going to allow him any contact with his co-conspirators. He's more likely to break down and talk if he's separated from his partners in crime. Satan uses the same strategy. He knows that we're unconquerable when we're connected to Christ, so he tries to separate us from him. That's where this seven-part list comes in: *"...trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword."* This is Satan's arsenal. These are the weapons he uses to try to separate us from our Savior.

The sad truth is that he doesn't always have to resort to such "big guns." If he can somehow separate us from our fellow believers who are gathering for worship and Bible study, if he can get us to steer clear of those who would admonish and encourage us, he'll gladly do that. Giving up the habit of meeting together to hear the Word and receive the sacrament is like opening the door to Satan. It makes it easier for him. But even where Satan finds the door locked and bolted, his hatred is such that he'll pound away at Christ's little flock with anything he can find: *"trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword."*

But the person who trusts in Jesus can still say, I'm invincible in Christ. *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."* "More than conquerors" is one word in the original language. We might say "superconquerors." That is because Paul has looked in every corner of the universe and considered every possible foe and could not find one who could best the Christian who is connected by faith to Christ. There are ten things in this list: *"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."* God's love for us in Jesus makes all the difference. By God's love we are not condemned. By God's love we are never in want. And if Satan can't separate us from God's love, then he has no hope of winning. We are invincible.

Invincible. As we stand on the threshold of war with Iraq, I don't hear our commanders saying they believe we're invincible. With the tens of thousands of troops poised for battle and the arsenal of high-tech weaponry at their disposal, they may seem invincible. The lessons of history and common sense, however,

probably prevent our leaders from using terms like “invincible.” But in Jesus Christ, that is precisely what we Christians are. Never in need. Never condemned. Never separated from God’s love in Christ. Through faith we are invincible. Amen.