

**MUCH WANTS TO, BUT NOTHING CAN—SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF
GOD IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD**

Ps 34:1-10 Romans 8:26-39

I: -- “For I am sure that nothing, nothing seen or unseen in the entire creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing can separate us from God’s love? Much seems to. And if we have ever ministered to people whose faith once burned brightly and has since flickered out, people whose faith has been extinguished through pain or catastrophe or confusion, we shall say that much appears to separate us from God’s love and seems to succeed in separating us from God’s love.

In the course of my work as a pastor in Mississauga I went to the church on a Saturday afternoon to conduct a wedding. Ten minutes before the wedding commenced the phone in my study rang. A couple I married five years ago was dead, together with their two-year old son. Could I go to the family’s home right away? I told the caller I’d be over once the wedding was concluded. I stepped into the sanctuary and married the couple in front of me, smiling my best wedding smile throughout the service. Then I went to the home that catastrophe had overwhelmed.

Five years earlier I had married this couple, both of them schoolteachers. Recently the husband had become depressed. He had been admitted to a nearby hospital. On this Saturday afternoon he had walked out of the hospital, gone home, picked up an axe and decapitated his two-year old son in front of the boy’s mother. Then he had decapitated his wife. Lastly he had hanged himself. The dead mother’s parents, both 65 now, were left caring for their two-year old grandson.

In the aftermath of all of this I ministered to the grandparents as they were faithful members of the congregation. Six months later, on a Sunday morning, ten minutes before the service, the grandfather knocked on my study door. He had just been diagnosed

terminally ill.

I can't speak for you, but my exposure to people's suffering has found me agreeing with Martin Luther. Luther maintained that if faith is to thrive we have to shut our eyes and open our ears. We must open our ears because the gospel is heard, heard with our ears but especially heard with our hearts. We must close our eyes, on the other hand, because what we see whenever we look out on world-occurrence; what we see contradicts the gospel. The gospel (heard) assures us that God loves us so very much he couldn't love us more. World-occurrence (seen) suggests that God doesn't love us at all.

So what do you think? Does God love us? Is his love strong enough, and his love's grip on us firm enough, that nothing will ever be able to separate us from an oceanic love vouchsafed to us in Christ Jesus our Lord?

This morning my heart resonates with Paul's. Like him I am persuaded that nothing can separate us from God's love. And like him I have every confidence in what I hear (the gospel) even as I am horrified at what I see.

II: -- At all times Paul is aware that much in life **aims** at separating us from God's love and may **seem** to have separated us.

Tribulation, for instance. According to scripture tribulation or affliction isn't the same as suffering-in-general. Suffering-in-general is what comes upon us because we are finite, frail, fragile creatures living in a turbulent world. Disease overtakes us. Infirmary threatens us. Pain warps us. In all such cases scripture mandates us to seek relief. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus consistently relieved suffering, since such suffering is **not** God-appointed.

Tribulation, affliction, however, is different. Tribulation is pain visited on us on account of our discipleship. It's pain visited on us account of our love for Jesus and our loyalty to him. In short, tribulation is pain arising from our crossbearing, which crossbearing, be it noted, Jesus appoints us to and will not relieve us of until we are in glory. Now we can always rid

ourselves of our tribulation; all we need do is abandon our Lord. All we need do is renounce faith in Jesus Christ and suspend the obedience to him for which we have been publicly ridiculed. To rid ourselves of the pain of tribulation all we need do is deny our Lord and 'go with the flow'. As soon as we do this the world will leave us alone. But since we are unashamed of our Saviour, since he has promised never to abandon us, we aren't going to abandon him.

Let me say it again: the Christian response to everyday **suffering** is to seek relief from it and be rid of it; the Christian response to **tribulation**, on the other hand, is steadfastness, since we can't rid ourselves of it unless we rid ourselves of our Lord.

Then will tribulation drive a wedge between us and God's love? We should ask those who have been afflicted on account of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

I happen to be a Reformation scholar with a huge place in my heart for Martin Luther. I have long been aware that for the last 25 years of his life (from 1521 until his death in 1546) there was a price on Luther's head. Anyone at all could have made himself wealthy by killing the man. And amidst it all; on days that were dark, other days darker, and some days indescribable; on all such days Luther stood **steadfast**.

Then Paul speaks of famine and nakedness. **Famine** is lethal lack of provision **inwardly**; **nakedness** (meaning death by exposure) is lethal lack of provision **outwardly**. If famine and nakedness overtake us (make no mistake; hunger and exposure have taken down millions upon millions in world-history), has a wedge been driven between us and God's love, and driven twice over, since now we both lack what was promised us and have every reason to be anxious?

I have never been hungry in my life, hungry through having nothing to eat day after day. However, I'm told that starvation is an exceedingly painful way to die. When Maureen and I spent a month touring Ireland (Maureen is descended from Protestants in the north,

Belfast; I'm descended from Catholics in the south, Cork) we drove to Stoketown one Sunday morning. After morning worship in Stoketown we spent the afternoon in the famine museum. In the famine museum we staggered from exhibit to exhibit. We learned that the native Irish people who were living in ditches during the potato famine (1845—1849: the potato was the only crop affected); those people attempted to survive by eating grass. Humans, however, can't digest grass; grass makes us vomit. But they kept trying, their mouths ringed green, only to hasten their death as their grass-induced vomiting weakened them still faster.

What made the Irish potato famine all the more horrible was this: the famine victims had to languish helplessly and watch their social superiors eat sumptuously. While one million destitute Irish starved, rich English landowners living in Ireland farmed the land, and exported wagonload after wagonload of food to England and the continent. Hunger-tormented Irish had to die in roadside ditches while overfilled wagons rumbled past them to feed wealthy people who were overfed already. Could any cruelty be more cruel?

Next Paul speaks of peril and sword. To speak of **peril** is to say that life is shot through with disease and danger; life abounds in disease and danger. There is always the danger that arises from sheer accidentality. And as COVID remind us everyday, we are never without that sort of widespread disease the Bible calls 'pestilence'.

And **sword**? The sword means warfare. I am always amused when my students tell me how glad they are that they didn't live in the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, students tell me, people were mean to each other: people disembowelled each other with swords; they 'brained' each other with battleaxes. They burned neighbours at the stake and dismembered them on the rack. Weren't people barbaric during the Middle Ages?

All my students were born in the 20th Century, and to my annoyance they appear to be wholly ignorant of what happened in it. Tell me: do you think Auschwitz was a human

improvement on swordfighting? When atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, human beings were vapourized alive, while survivors were condemned to lethal, lingering agony. Tell me: do you think nuclear obliteration is a human improvement on the bow and arrow?

Does anyone this morning think that nerve gas is a humanitarian advance on spear-chucking? All the major nations of the world have stockpiled nerve gas. One lungful of it, and every muscle in the body contracts. Immediately there is intense sweating, blindness, convulsions, paralysis, and suffocation. In the early 1980s a whiff – only a whiff – of nerve gas escaped in Colorado. Two thousand sheep succumbed on the spot.

Can nerve gas, nuclear explosion, you name it – can any one of these, or all of these together, separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? No.

Neither can “life or death”, Paul announces next.

Death we’ve already said enough about.

Life? How could life, life at full tide, ever be a spiritual threat? Let me ask you a question. How many marriages do you think I’ve seen thrive when a couple was financially challenged, only to fail when the same couple was financially flush? How many people have you seen appear to possess ironfast faith when they were needy and humble, only to jettison such ‘faith’ when they were affluent and arrogant? We should admit that material abundance is no less a spiritual threat than material scarcity. Isn’t this why the writer of Proverbs pleads with God, “Give me neither poverty nor riches”?

III: -- What reason does Paul have for his exuberant exclamation? What’s the ground of his impregnable confidence? His ground or reason is elemental: God has come among us in Christ Jesus, has acted definitively on our behalf, and continues by his Spirit to act within us.

In this regard the apostle puts five unanswerable questions to us.

Question #1: “Since God is for us, who can be against us?” Plainly, nothing and no one can be against us finally, conclusively, effectively, because nothing and no one is going to overturn the the Lord of the cosmos who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

If Paul had simply said, “Who or what can be against us?” we’d be ready with a hundred replies: famine, peril, sword, disease, death, betrayal, treachery, accident – even sin.

Paul, however, doesn’t ask, “Who or what is against us?” He asks, rather “Since God, the living, lordly sovereign creator of heaven and earth; since *this* God is for us, who or what could ever rival him or threaten us?” Nothing, obviously.

Question #2: “Since God didn’t spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t God also give us all things with him?” Note that Paul hasn’t simply asked, “Won’t God give us everything (i.e., everything we need)?” If he had asked that, I at least would be ready with my retort: “I’ve seen countless people live and die who appeared **not** to have been given everything they needed.”

The apostle’s question, however, is more profound than this. “Since God didn’t stop short of giving up his Son, would he ever stop short of giving us what we need to be his people, his peculiar treasure whom he has appointed to live with him eternally?”

There’s an allusion here to Abraham of old; Abraham and Isaac; Abraham and Isaac trudging with leaden foot and breaking heart up Mt. Moriah. Abraham’s faith is to be tested by the summons to offer up Isaac, his long-awaited son, his *only* son, (the text in Genesis 22 drives home to us.) And then, just when obedient Abraham raises the knife above Isaac, a ram appears and Abraham’s son is spared.

Does God love you and me less than Abraham loved Isaac? God loves us more. After all, when God’s love for us visited us in our profoundest need, God’s long-awaited Son, his only Son, *wasn’t* spared but rather was given up for us all. Abraham’s love for Isaac was

ultimately spared the most terrible heartbreak. God's love for you and me **didn't** spare God incomprehensible heartbreak. To say God didn't spare his only Son is to say God didn't spare **himself** – for our sakes. God loves you and me at the price of God's unfathomable anguish. Since God didn't withhold himself then, he won't withhold himself now.

Question #3: “Since it is God who justifies us, who is going to accuse us?” Many people are ready to accuse us. We've all seen people suffering for countless reasons when someone remarks, half under his breath, “She must have done something to deserve this.” What is this except an accusation? And if we can readily dismiss the accusation wherewith others accuse us, too often we are ready to accuse ourselves. Yet it is God who justifies us, insists the apostle.

To say that God justifies us is to say that God pronounces us rightly related to him as we cling to Jesus Christ in faith. To say that God justifies us is to say we are in the right with him regardless of what is unfolding around us or within us. To say that God justifies us is to say that when the Father looks upon the Son with whom he is ever pleased, he sees you and me included in the Son, so closely to the Son does our faith bind us.

Then who is going to accuse us realistically? At the end of the day, no one: not ourselves and not others, and this just because God has definitively declared us rightly related to him.

Question #4: “Since Christ died, was raised, sits at the right hand of the Father, and now intercedes for us, who is going to condemn us?” Will Christ condemn us? Of course not. Christ went to hell and back for us. Therefore nothing and no one can negate his forgiveness and find us condemned.

Question #5: “Then who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?” This question is the biggest question of all, and it can be given the shortest answer just

because we've answered it four times already: Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, because nothing can.

IV: -- And then the apostle has one thing more to say to us: not only are we conquerors in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are **right now, at this moment, "more than conquerors."**

It's wonderful to be a conqueror – i.e., victorious, resilient. But it's always possible to be a conqueror (we haven't been defeated) yet be grim or sour or bitter or resentful or suspicious or simply as "edgy" as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. To be **more** than a conqueror is to be victorious, resilient, to be sure, **yet also radiant.**

Have you ever noticed that the African-American spirituals we relish listening to; have you ever noticed that there is no hint of bitterness in the spirituals? Think of it: slavery, with its brutality, degradation, suffering, and seeming hopelessness – and yet no bitterness in its music, no incitement to revenge, no zeal for vicious vindictiveness; only a confident waiting for God's vindication. The music is radiant.

A woman with advanced neurological disease began to tell me of an incident that had recently befallen her and her husband, himself ill with the same neurological disease. (Both wife and husband can move around only with wheelchairs.) Her story sounded grim. My face sank. She saw my face and laughed, "Oh, Victor; it's really quite funny." Here's her story.

Needing to use the toilet in the night, she transferred herself from bed to wheelchair to toilet. A few minutes later, in attempting to pull herself up from the toilet she lost her balance at the same time as she jammed her arm between the bathroom handrail and the wall. She fell down, her body on the floor, her arm wedged up between handrail and wall. Her husband heard the commotion. He transferred himself from bed to wheelchair, and set off to help her. In his eagerness to help his stricken wife he capsized his wheelchair. Now he was on the floor too (in a different room), couldn't get up, and couldn't get to a phone.

“What on earth did you do?” I asked the woman weakly. To my amazement she beamed: “I knew no one was going to come along to help us until morning, hours later, and so I spent the night reciting over and over again Psalm 34: “I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. Look to him and be radiant.”

Just because nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord, we may, and must, ever look to him and be radiant.

The Reverend Dr Victor Shepherd Streetsville United Church August 2020