

Romans 8:28-39

Did you know I went to Israel? Have I mentioned that to you? Well, I've also been to Europe! Here is the Roman Coliseum, right around the corner I had the best lasagna I've ever had in my life. The coliseum, what an architectural marvel! Built in 70-80ad it was a prominent place for Romans to gather and watch the gladiators fight to the death. What excitement! Why not put those criminals to good use and punish them at the same time? A little barbaric, yes, but justice enough for the murderer or abuser. But what about the falsely accused or the slave? What about when you, Christian, when your faith, faith in Jesus, becomes criminal?

Paul's world changing letter to the Romans was written before this world changing building was made, but the sentiment was the same in the empire. If the emperor didn't mind Christians, maybe you just had to pay more taxes, but if he didn't – it wouldn't be uncommon to find a pastor or a family member in a venue like this.

What is the Christian to do when their loved one is eaten alive by lions? What is the Christian to do when they shove a sword in your hand and tell you to fight to the death with war criminals and thugs?

I think they say verse 36, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

"Where is God? Why doesn't he care? Why should I worship Jesus if this is what it gets me and my family?"

In response to this, Paul writes Romans 8.

28: We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Did he say "all *good* things work together for good"? No, all things - good and bad - work for good. So pandemics, cancer, job loss, lions, and coliseums, are, painfully, at work, but are our paths, with Jesus by our side, leading to eternal life. So let us, like the Romans, stand fast until that day of goodness is revealed.

29: For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Now this sounds nice, we who are God's people chosen by him, called by him, will be conformed to his image. But what's the image we see most of Jesus? Him on a cross – an image of him suffering and dying. Suddenly being conformed to the image of Jesus doesn't sound like much fun. Yet the Romans, bleeding in the Coliseum - O how they looked like Jesus as they died! Our King wasn't above suffering, what makes us think we are? The promise, however, is we will look like him in the resurrection as well: healed, whole, and to never die again.

30: And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

How do you know if you are predestined? By looking at your works? That's not what Paul says here. You know you were predestined if you were called! By baptism, or by the word from a pastor, from a friend. Is it an accident you are in a Church pew? No. He offers salvation for free, the glory of the resurrection – to be conformed to that image, for free. Make no mistake, it is for you, you have and are now called.

31-34a: What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us who can be against us? 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? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?

The Roman Emperor? Please. There is a higher court. Satan the accuser has a few things to say about you, but no, he stands condemned not God's people redeemed by His Blood. We condemn ourselves, sometimes. "I'm not good enough, not worthy." We condemn each other, "They're judgmental, they're unkind, they don't get it, they're ..." You can fill in the blank. But once more, there is a higher court than you and I. The Lord who answers to no one else but judges justly, righteously, whose eye pierces the heart and mind, who will not forget the sacrifice His beloved

Son gave for you and I. I suggest we stop arguing or doubting the veracity of his verdicts. No one can challenge them.

34b: 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.

We are so good at killing. So efficient. The Romans liked to do it painfully. So they invented crosses, and brought out beasts. Throughout time we have thought of Iron Racks, dark cells, germ, and now, nuclear warfare. Our guns have higher fire rates, our bombs have bigger blast radii, and can pierce armor. Outside the battlefield and torture chambers, we've made killing even more efficient. We can make it painless, neat, clean, inoculated. "Oh we are so civilized! We aren't like the Romans we are compassionate." And people die from saline solutions and pills, or with the assistance of a professional. Oh, we can kill. We can die too. That's easy. Takes no skill, even a child can do it - tragically. Yes, we can kill, we can die. *But who can raise the dead?* This One, this Jesus! He died like so many in the coliseum, like so many of us, but – more than that! – he is risen again! And speaks on our behalf. So not even death can condemn us.

35-39: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No[!], in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Who will condemn the child of God? No one. Who is strong enough to take us away? Romans, lions, fire, crosses, cancer, heart attacks, Coronavirus? Paul even gets metaphysical here, he gets abstract, "Height, depth," he's pulling from anywhere and everywhere to make his point: Nothing can do it – nothing can take us from Christ. He is stronger, he is the risen King.

So the call for the Romans was: “Be of good courage, stand firm. Because your God is helping, and has already helped you. In Giving His own Son, that you might be given salvation and a resurrection.”

And the call is the same for us. “They might take our tax exempt status!” Bummer. But it won’t end the Church. “They will throw our pastors in prison over marriage issues.” That’s too bad, send me a cake with a file – or how about a copy of Romans 8? It’s the same for our brothers and sisters in the East who face real, bloody persecution today. Pray for them. That this wonderful promise might give them courage.

And may it give us the same courage. When faced with whatever this world throws at us, with our own sin and doubt, with strife, discord, and death, turn to these promises in Jesus. We know he loves us, not because everything goes great in our lives – it sure didn’t for the Romans, but because he has given his Son. And that Son is risen and intercedes for us. That doesn’t mean the trials are easy or fun. No. But we pick up our crosses because Christians go where crosses are. Because we know the cross of Christ leads to an empty tomb where there is life! Life abundant!

In Jesus’ name. Amen.