

Romans 8:28-39

²⁸We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose, ²⁹because those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called. Those he called, he also justified. And those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹What then will we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?

³³Who will bring an accusation against God's elect? God is the one who justifies! ³⁴Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus, who died and, more than that, was raised to life, is the one who is at God's right hand and who is also interceding for us! ³⁵What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶Just as it is written:

For your sake we are being put to death all day long.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Conquerors

I.

Nike. The product name is on shoes, gym bags, kids' backpacks, t-shirts, all kinds of balls and sports equipment. The name was chosen for the company because it's the name of a Greek goddess—the goddess of victory. Nike built it's global brand on winning.

"Winning is everything," goes a familiar saying. We keep score in everything. The obvious is sports: batting averages, touchdowns, yards per carry, yards after the catch—and the big one—the all-important win-loss record.

But we also keep score in lots of other things. Likes and followers. Report cards. Sales goals. Whether we totally admit it out loud or not, we all tend to compare *our* record to somebody else's. "Am I winning?"

Most days, the honest answer is probably "no."

Peter, in today's Gospel, said to Jesus: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (Matthew 14:28, EHV). When Jesus told him to come, Peter figured he was winning. I wonder what the rest of the disciples on the boat thought. Maybe, "Is he crazy, asking to get out of the boat and walk on water?" But Peter did, and he was fine—he was winning. Until he wasn't. He started paying more attention to his surroundings—to the wind howling in his ears, to the waves crashing around his feet and into the relative safety of the boat he had left behind. He started to sink. "As he began to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'" (Matthew 14:30, EHV). One second walking on water. The next second going under. That's not what winning looks like.

How about Elijah in today's First Reading? He had just watched fire fall from heaven and consume the sacrifice he had prepared for the true God—it had proven who the true God really is. But then, Queen Jezebel put a price on his head. The great prophet didn't feel

like a winner; he ran for his life into the wilderness. He sat down in a cave and told God: “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant...I alone am left” (1 Kings 19:10, EHV). The win of Mt. Carmel didn’t feel like much of a victory when he was all alone.

When we used the Psalm of the Day, Psalm 73, we focused on the good parts—the positive parts. But Asaph, who wrote the Psalm, started with lots of negativity. “I almost lost my footing. ³I even envied the arrogant when I observed the peace of the wicked” (Psalm 73:2-3, EHV). It was depressing. He had tried to do everything right in God’s eyes, but he seemed to have nothing to show for it.

Three readings. Sinking, hiding, envying. Does any of that sound like victory?

Do you know the feeling? There’s a diagnosis that didn’t go the way you prayed it would. Maybe the bank account that never catches up to the bills. Like Asaph, perhaps you notice lots of people who don’t care in the least about God, but seem to get ahead in life; meanwhile, *you* do the right thing and it costs you. There’s the promotion you didn’t get because you wouldn’t cut corners. There’s the friendship that cooled off when you wouldn’t laugh at jokes you shouldn’t laugh at.

Or maybe it’s your own conscience. At 2 o’clock in the morning you wake up and rerun all the things you’ve done and left undone; all the things you said or left unsaid. Your conscience wakes you up with the unflattering evidence of just what kind of person you really are.

Paul starts today’s Second Reading: “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, EHV). You’ve heard that one lots of times before. “All things work together for the good.” Combine that with the concept of winning. A bad diagnosis, bills piling up, unbelievers getting ahead while faith in God seems to cost you.

Even though Paul said “all things work together for good,” he listed some of the things that make it feel the opposite: “Trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword” (Romans 8:35, EHV). All the problems in life are part of the “all things” Paul says God will work for our good, but it doesn’t *feel* that way. It feels as though *nothing* is working for our good—as though we are doing anything *but* winning.

Paul asks a question before he lists the problems of life. He says: “What will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:35, EHV). Take your pick: your own past; the devil, who never runs out of material to use against you, the world—all of these will be giving their best efforts to make you *not* win the victory, but lose in dramatic fashion. All these make it feel as though things *aren’t* working for the good.

II.

Will you survive? Will you scrape by?

Paul says you will do much more than survive or get by. He reaches for a word that doesn’t exist—it certainly isn’t used any other time in the Bible. He takes the ordinary Greek word for winning: νικάω (nikao), the word behind the swoosh on your shoes, and adds another word: ὑπέρ (hupair), which means “over,” or “beyond,” or “far more than.” Paul turns them into a compound word ὑπερνικῶμεν (hupairnikomen). He says: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37, EHV). Not “we conquer.” Not even “we win big.” Something more like: “we hyper-conquer.” It’s a victory so far beyond ordinary winning that the language has to be stretched to hold it.

That word doesn’t come from us or from our skills at winning. Before he used that word, Paul said: “God is the one who justifies!” (Romans 8:33, EHV). Not “God lets you build a

good enough record to survive.” Not “God gives you the ability to argue your own case.” Justify means “to declare righteous.” God, the righteous Judge, takes his seat in his heavenly courtroom and hands down the verdict in our favor. He doesn’t dispute the evidence, he simply declares you “righteous.” That’s more than “Not guilty,” that’s righteous, perfect and holy in his sight.

It all comes rather quietly. Elijah, hiding in his cave, expected God to show up the way he did on Mt. Carmel, with fire, with a spectacular display of power. Elijah experienced some powerful and spectacular things as he waited for God, but God wasn’t in any of those. Instead, “There was a soft, whispering voice” (1 Kings 19:12, EHV). God’s answer to Elijah’s doubt wasn’t a louder win, it was a quiet word. Elijah had *thought* he was all alone, but God assured him there were still 7,000 believers in Israel. The victory was bigger than his eyes could see.

III.

That’s exactly what God has done for you. Remember “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose...” (Romans 8:28, EHV). The word for “know” is head knowledge. It’s like learning the information out of a school book. But you haven’t necessarily *experienced* it. We “know,” but it doesn’t always *feel* like what Paul says we “know” with that head knowledge.

Paul went on immediately to say: “...because those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29, EHV). God’s knowing is different than ours. The word “foreknew” has the other kind of “knowing” in Greek: *experiential* knowledge. That’s the kind of knowing that is based on certain fact. Even before you were born, God “foreknew” you, and predestined you to be his adopted child.

And how did God do this? “Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?” (Romans 8:32, EHV). God the Father did not spare God the Son—Jesus. He let his Son be handed the pages and pages of accusations that were meant for you—every sin, every failure, every one of those 2 a.m. doubts your conscience has ever whispered in your ear. Jesus didn’t argue about the accusations. He paid for them. He died to carry out the sentence all those accusations brought.

That’s why Paul can continue: “Who will bring an accusation against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies! ³⁴Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus, who died and, more than that, was raised to life, is the one who is at God’s right hand and who is also interceding for us!” (Romans 8:33-34, EHV). All the things that *could* be brought against you have already been answered for and paid for by the only Judge who matters. Accusations against you are no longer possible.

That’s why Peter didn’t stay under the water. Jesus didn’t wait for Peter to work out his doubts, he just pulled him back up to stand on the water again. It’s why Asaph, after nearly losing his footing in the Psalm could go on to say: “My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26, EHV). He didn’t solve the injustice of the wicked prospering, or win any arguments. He simply found that nearness to God was the only prize worth having.

IV.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”

(Romans 8:38-39, EHV). Look at that list of things Paul says cannot snatch defeat from the hands of victory! Not some things. Not most things. Nothing. Not the diagnosis, or the bank account, not people seeming to get away with everything in life, not even your own conscience. Nothing.

Why? Well, it isn't because you and I are winners. We sink beneath the waves like Peter. We slink into a cave to hide like Elijah. We feel bitter sometimes about people who seem to have more success than we do, like Asaph.

But that's not the verdict that stands. Notice that word "for" that started Paul's list of things that couldn't separate us from Christ Jesus our Lord. Right before that word, before that verse, came Paul's declaration: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37, EHV). Paul reaches for a word bigger than just winning. We are more than conquerors; we are hyper-conquerors through him who loved us—through Jesus.

Notice the word "are." Being a hyper-conqueror isn't something you "might" have someday, or even "surely will" have someday; you have it now. It's already sealed. It's already true, the moment God did not spare his only Son for you. You *are* a hyper-conqueror through your Lord Jesus.

So the next time the accusation comes—in a storm or a cave or in envy—you don't need a bigger win to answer it. You already have one. You are not a winner—you are a hyper-conqueror through him who loved us. Hold on to that today and always. Amen.