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Romans 8:31-39

“God is on your side”

When I was in my late teens, the older sister of one of my friends developed a growth in her brain. It was a serious condition, and doctors weren't sure how to proceed. Her mother told me the story one afternoon as I visited my friend in her home. She ending by dissolving in tears and proclaiming, “Linda never harmed a hair on anyone's head in her life! Why should this be happening to her?”

When I served as a hospital chaplain during seminary I met a man who had been in an automobile accident. He was healing from his injuries and would soon be released from the hospital. However, his life would be changed forever--- both his legs had been crushed and had required amputation. As we talked day by day, he grew to trust me, and one day confided in me. “I wasn't living the right kind of life. I was running around on my wife.” His eyes reddened and misted up. “Do you think God is punishing me by taking away my legs?”

Through 21 years of parish ministry I have heard similar comments and questions as people encounter suffering and tragedy. Misfortune seems to elicit two responses in people:

“What have I ever done to deserve this??” It's a cry of outraged innocence.

OR

“I have done so MUCH that is wrong; is this a punishment from God?” It's a query that arises from guilt.

I believe this is a universal struggle, and today's Scripture provides a clear answer to our questions.

Remember that the latter books of the New Testament are what we call “epistles”. These are letters, many of which were written by the apostle Paul.

Paul never knew Jesus before his death and Resurrection. In fact, he was a prominent Jewish leader who persecuted the first Christians. Paul saw these Jews as blasphemers. He was convinced they were a danger to the true faith and he was in favor of executing some of those in leadership. He was present when Stephen was stoned. But then he had a remarkable experience as he was traveling on the road to Damascus, where he intended to round up and punish any Christians he might find. Suddenly he had a vision of a bright light, and heard the voice of Christ speaking to him. He met the living, risen Christ, and was totally transformed. He became a follower of Christ, and spent the remainder of his years risking life and limb to spread the good news of God coming to us in Christ.

Keep Paul’s history in mind as we consider the words he wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome. Also keep in mind that early Christians were not understood or accepted in many of the cultures in which they lived. Some of them experienced persecution: terror, attacks, death in the night. Paul and other Christians were run out of towns, arrested, imprisoned, and beaten.

Do you suppose those Christians ever wondered, “What have I done to deserve this?” or “Is God punishing me for what I have done wrong in my life?”

Paul provides an answer in Romans 8:31-39. Paul begins by affirming God is FOR us, not AGAINST us. God is on your side, Paul tells us. God is on your side.

How can we know God is on our side? The demonstration is given through Jesus. God became FLESH and came to us in Jesus Christ. God gave his own life, through his son Jesus Christ. If God would do this--- to forgive us, to open the door to abundant and eternal life to us, there is nothing God would ever withhold from us.

Since God is on our side, who or what could possibly threaten or harm us?

There is an ancient world view that gives us trouble here. It sees the world as a battlefield, in which God and Satan wage war. The world is like a piece of rope, and God and Satan are tugging on opposite ends. This view is known as dualism, and it is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Paul spells this out for us. God is the ultimate power in the universe. God's might is greater than everything, even evil incarnate. Satan is not on the level of God. Evil is weaker than good. There is no contest, ultimately, between the two.

Now, this doesn't always seem true to us, but our faith proclaims that it is! If we really believe that, then Paul's words of comfort begin to make sense.

God is on our side. God has not deserted us and will never desert us. God is the only one with any real power to accuse or condemn us. And that very same God came in the flesh in Jesus Christ and DIED for us. This God protects us, acts on our behalf, and seeks our good in all things.

Walter Wangerin, Jr, Lutheran pastor and writer, shares a remembrance in his book, *Mourning into Dancing*, which captures the feelings we may experience as we wrestle with trusting the goodness of our God. In this passage, he wrestles with how much to trust his father in a childhood crisis.

When I was a boy, I told people that my father was stronger than anyone else in the world. He was a handsome man in those days. He had a curl of hair at the middle of his forehead, and brown eyes, and a pulsing muscle in his jaw. And he loved me.

So I would go out on the front porch and roar to the neighborhood: "My daddy's arm is as strong as trucks! The strongest man in the world."

In those days a cherry tree grew in our backyard. This was my hiding place. Ten feet above the ground a stout limb made a horizontal fork, a cradle on which I could lie face-down, reading, thinking, being alone. Nobody bothered me here. Even my parents didn't know where I went to hide.

I felt very tricky. Then came the thunderstorm.

It was usual for me to dream in my tree and ...not to notice changes in the weather. So if the sky grew dark or gave any warning, I didn't see it.

... a wind tore through the backyard and struck my cherry tree with such force that it ripped the book from my hands and nearly threw me from the limb. I locked my arms around the forking branches and hung on. ..I tried to wind my legs around the limb, but the whole tree was wallowing in the wind.

"Daddy!"

The sky grew absolutely black. Dust whirled higher than the house. I saw a lightning bolt drop from heaven, then there was a perfect calm, and then the thunder crashed.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

The whole tree bowed down and rose again, and the wind blew my shirt up to my shoulders, and the rain hit like bullets, and I thought my arms were going to slip from the branches.

“Dadeeeeeeeee!”

There he was. I saw his face at the back door, peering out. Lightning stuttered in the sky.

“Out here! Up here! I’m here! Daddy, come get me!”

The branches swept up and down, like huge waves on an ocean- and Daddy saw me, and right away he came out into the wind and the weather, and I felt so relieved because I just took it for granted that he would climb right up the tree to get me.

But that wasn’t his plan at all. He came to a spot below me and lifted his arms and shouted, “Jump.”

“What?”

“Jump. I’ll catch you.”

Jump?? I had a crazy man for a father. He was standing six or seven miles beneath me, holding up two skinny arms and telling me to jump. If I jumped, he’d miss. I’d hit the ground and die.

I screamed, “No!” At least I could feel the bark of the branches against my body. “No!”

I made up my mind. I’d stay right here until the storm was over. I closed my eyes and hung on.

But the wind and rain slapped that cherry tree, bent it back and cracked my limb at the trunk. I dropped a foot. My eyes flew open. Then the wood whined and splintered and sank, and so did I, in bloody terror.

No, I did not jump. I let go. I surrendered. I fell.

In a fast, eternal moment I despaired and plummeted. This, I thought, is what it's like to die.

But my father caught me.

And my father squeezed me to himself. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and felt the scratch of his whiskers on my face and began to tremble and cry. He caught me. Oh, my daddy—he had strong arms indeed. Very strong arms.

But it wasn't until I actually EXPERIENCED the strength that I also believed in it. And I myself did not choose so frightening an experience. The storm did.

Horrible storm. Wonderful storm.

It granted me what I had had all along, but what I had not trusted. A father with arms strong as trucks.

Paul knew there are things that do exercise power over us, but none have power greater than God's power. God's might is greater than all natural things—like storms and distance and time. God's might is greater than all things beyond the natural- like angels or demons. No created power—the only powers that exist other than God's--- can affect our lives in any way other than temporarily.

There is comfort in knowing that WE are God's creation, too. And even WE, ourselves, cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Even if we have persecuted Christians as Paul did. Even if we have betrayed a spouse. Even if we have failed loved ones in other significant ways. God is STILL on our side. God's love and forgiveness are STILL accessible to us.

This passage is a powerful word of comfort and assurance. It is often read at funerals, for it proclaims that DEATH is one of those powers that is puny compared to God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

Even our own frailty, that makes it difficult for us to live trusting in God—our frailty is not able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God is on our side to the point of giving us the ability to believe and trust that God is on our side!

Nothing can separate us from God's love. This is good news beyond compare. We can trust God. Always. Amen. Amen