

I really enjoy Christmas. It's by far my favourite holiday. It always has been. As a kid, I would get so excited about Christmas that I wouldn't be able to fall asleep on Christmas Eve. Like, up until I was about 15. I would just lie awake in bed and think about the next day. If I'm honest, a lot of that excitement as a kid had to do with getting presents. I knew I would be getting some good stuff in the morning. But even beyond the presents, the whole day was just fun. We really had a good time. I love the decorations, Christmas music, Christmas cookies, and Christmas movies. I still really enjoy Christmas, but I don't get quite so excited. Being an adult takes some of the wonder out of life. Becky has to work on Christmas, so we're doing Christmas on the 26th and 27 with our families. Christmas is still really special, but I'm just not as excitable as I was when I was a kid. I kind of miss feeling that excited. Although I'm glad I can sleep on Christmas Eve now.

When is the last time you have been overwhelmed with excitement? I'm not sure I can think of a time in recent memory. Now, I'm like that. I don't really get very excited most of the time. Some of you get overwhelmed with excitement when the weather is nice. Becky leans that way a bit. But whether you are a person prone to excitement, or not, Christmas should still overwhelm us. Christmas should cause us to be blown away with excitement. To the point of not knowing how to respond. Christmas is exciting. And not for all the reasons that I got excited as a kid, though those are fun. Christmas is exciting for far deeper and more important reasons than those. Christmas is the celebration of good news of great joy which is for all people. The story of Jesus being born. Of Christ's advent. This December, we did something kind of a little strange for Advent. Instead of going to the Christmas story from Luke or Matthew, like we have the past couple of years, we just kept going through Romans and slowed down our pace in Romans 8. Romans 8 isn't a typical Christmas passage. It doesn't talk about the star or Bethlehem or shepherds watching their flocks by night. It doesn't mention Mary & Joseph, or a manger or wise men from the East. But it does tell us in amazing detail why Christ's birth is such good news of great joy. Why Christ's Advent is so exciting.

Three weeks ago, we saw that Romans 8 starts off by reminding us that God sent His own Son to us in the likeness of sinful flesh, that is, He sent His Son as a human, which is the story of Christmas. And because God did that, we saw that the power of sin has been broken and there is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ, who have put their faith in Him and been made new by His Holy Spirit. Two weeks ago, we saw that not only did Christ's advent break the power of sin, but it also made us children of God. Those who are in Christ are adopted into God's family and we receive the position and inheritance that Jesus deserves. We are loved by the Father as He loves Jesus. Last week, Aaron showed us that Christ's advent also gives us a hope in the midst of suffering. Our salvation is secure because God has set His heart on us from before the foundation of the world and predestined us to become perfect like Jesus is. Our destiny is glory, and no suffering in this life can derail that destiny. In fact, God somehow makes even our suffering work in step with that plan.

This is the good news of Christmas. It's news that's worth being excited about. But we can very easily fail to be excited by this good news. The reason we fail to be excited is because we fail

to think deeply about how good the news actually is. We are too busy getting ready for Christmas. We are too distracted by other exciting things like family, gifts, and turkey dinners. Our hearts get sort of calloused to feeling the real excitement about Christmas. So today's sermon has one purpose: to get us to think more deeply about the good news of Christ's advent - to soak our calloused hearts in the gospel and get them softened up, and maybe even identify some places where we need to take a pumice stone and scrape away the thick dead skin so you can be more sensitive to the good news and more excited by it. Our passage today will finish off Romans 8, and it basically takes a step back from all that has been said so far and marvels at how much God loves us. And that's the whole point of Christmas. Christ's advent proves that God loves us.

So take a look at **Romans 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things?** Paul, as he writes this letter to Christians in Rome, stops and says, I don't even really know what to say next... How do we respond to this amazing news that Jesus has come and broken the power of sin, made us children of God, and given us hope? What do we say? It's overwhelming, it's exciting, it's amazing. It's the kind of thing that should keep you up at night because you can't stop thinking about how incredible this news is. God loves us! What do we say in response? So he pauses to ask some questions that help us to think again about how amazing it is. The first question is at the end of verse 31 **If God is for us, who can be against us?**

Think about that question. God is for us. What does that mean? I'm not a huge sports guy, but I enjoy watching the Blue Jays play. I try to go to a few games each year and casually follow how they're doing throughout the season. I'm for the Blue Jays. But that's not what it means that God is for us. First of all, God doesn't check in every once in a while to see how we're doing. He's not casual about it. He's completely invested. But even more importantly, I have no influence over how the Blue Jays play. I watch, I don't contribute at all. But God isn't like that. He's not just an observer, He's God! He is actively involved with us. That's what we've seen all through this chapter and in the seven chapters that came before it. God has worked and given and sacrificed for us. That's what **verse 32 says, 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?** God's got skin in the game, literally. He gave us His Son. He sacrificed His Son for us. He went all the way to the extremes for you and me. He's already made the greatest sacrifice He could ever make. So what could we possibly need that He will refuse? Nothing. He will also, along with Jesus, graciously give us all things. And when God says all things, He means all things. I can promise to give you everything I have, but that's not very much. Some money, my time, a car, lots of books. But God is God. He will give us all things. He's not limited. Everything is His. God is for us. Who are you worried about being against us? Sure, there will be some opposition and hardship in life. We will experience loss and suffering, we talked about that last week. But through all that, God is still God and God is still for us. So much so that even the worst things that happen in our life are used by God to fulfill His plan for us.

Now, what does that mean? It doesn't mean you'll get everything you want. It doesn't mean you'll never fail. It doesn't mean you won't get older and frailer. It doesn't mean you'll be rich. It doesn't mean people won't think you're dumb for following Jesus. It doesn't mean you won't lose loved ones to disease and senseless accidents. It doesn't mean there will be no heartache in your family. But it does mean, that in all these things, God is with you, that He loves you, that He's trustworthy. He killed His Son for you, so don't think He's abandoned you when death strikes your family. He hasn't abandoned you. Though you may not be able to see it, the cross proves it. **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?** If you are His, He will never leave you and give everything you need to make it to His arms at the end of your life. He'll get you there. And in those moments when it feels like your life has fallen apart, the truth, though you may not be able to swallow it, is that He's using even that to get you ready for that day. **God is for us, so who can be against us?**

The next question is in verses 33-34. And it's this. **If God chose us and justified us, who can condemn us?**

Look at **verse 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one.**

Last week Aaron helped us to understand some difficult truths about salvation. Our salvation is God's work from start to finish. He said that God's attitude towards our salvation is "If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself." And so God did it Himself. That's the emphasis of **verses 29-30 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.** From our perspective, our salvation from our sins starts when we hear the gospel, that Jesus died for our sins and rose again so we could be forgiven. We hear that message and respond with faith and our sins are forgiven. That's what Romans calls justification. Being declared innocent and righteous because Jesus took the punishment we deserve. But these verses remind us that that's not the beginning of the process, it's the middle. By the time we are justified and forgiven for our sins, God has already been working. In eternity past, God foreknew those who would become Christians.

That doesn't mean He flipped to the end of the book and found out how we would respond, it's not like He just knew the answer before hand. Because the point of these verses is to remind us that our salvation is in God's hands, not ours, so we're safe. If that's what foreknowing us means, then it defeats the whole purpose. Foreknowledge isn't that God knew information about us, it's that God knew us relationally. If you're a Christian, it's because God loved you before you loved Him. He loved you before you were born. He loved you before the creation of the world. He loved you from eternity past. I don't know why. And I don't know why some people are known and loved this way and some aren't. We'll talk more about those hard questions when we get to Romans 9 and 10 in January. But for now, the point here is that if

you're a Christian, it's not because you were smart or good and responded in faith. The point is that if you're a Christian, it's because God wanted you. He loves you. He chose you. And because He chose you, He justified you. He declared you innocent of your sins through the death and resurrection of His Son.

That's incredible. It's so incredible that we struggle to think of it as good news. It seems unfair. It seems like a violation of our free will! But if we were left to our free will and treated fairly, we would just be sent to hell for our rebellion against God. God loves you so much. He's loved you from eternity. He loved you enough to send His Son on Christmas to live as a human and die in your place. He has declared you righteous through that sacrifice. So the question stands: **33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns?** The answer to those questions is provided by the newer NIV that we use here. It's not in the original greek of the language, but it's the right answer. **No one.** No one can condemn you. It doesn't matter what your heart tells you about yourself. It doesn't matter what other people say about you. It doesn't matter that Satan himself stands before God and points out your sin to God. God knows all about it. And He loves you. He chose you. He sacrificed His Son to deal with your sin. And He has declared you righteous.

Now, if you're here and you aren't a Christian, this might be sort of offensive. Are you saying God doesn't love me? He didn't choose me? Those are difficult questions. But let me explain it this way, this teaching is not meant to make Christianity an exclusive club, only for those God loves while everyone else is hated by God. God does love everyone. He gives good gifts to all people. All the good things in your life come from Him. And, He provided a way of salvation that is enough for everyone. Jesus' death on the cross is enough for your sins. No one is excluded from the offer. And no one is exempt from responsibility for our sins. We don't have God's perspective on these things. We only have our own perspective. From that perspective, we can know that God is good and that we have sinned. And that He loves us so much He provided a way for us to be forgiven. He expects us to respond in faith and be saved. So I can say with confidence to you that God loves you and He doesn't desire that anyone die without Him. He wants you to be saved. And the Christians around you want that for you too. I want it. We want you as our brother or sister. Once you are in, the teaching that God chose us is given to us for the purposes of humbling us and giving us confidence that we can't lose God's love, it wasn't us who did this. So I want to urge you if you aren't a Christian, this offer is open to you, you can turn to God and be forgiven for your sins. You can be secure in His love. You just have to turn from your sins and believe that Jesus died for you and rose again. It's worth it. It's amazing. It will change you.

I feel like we could stop there and just rejoice. God is for us. No one can stand against us. God has chosen us and justified us. No one can condemn us. That's enough to chew on and celebrate and be excited about. But the chapter isn't over yet! There is one more question! And it's this:

If Jesus overcame death and is praying for us, what can separate us from His love?

Look at the second half of **verse 34 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?** Jesus died for our sins and rose again. His sacrifice paid the price we couldn't pay. Which is incredible. We don't reflect on that enough. But that's not even really the point here. The point here is that we're loved by the one who defeated death. My Gran (my mom's mom) was an amazing woman of God. She spent the last 10 or so years of her life basically confined to a chair because she had PLS which is like ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) but slower. Her motor neurons progressively degenerated and she just wasn't able to get around any more. On top of that, she was almost completely deaf. But she loved her grandchildren so much. She prayed for us all the time. And she paid attention. She used what little hearing she had and her ability to read lips to figure out who was important in our lives and pray for them too. More than once my friends met her and she would say, "Oh, you're Chris? I pray for you all the time!" She was incredible. And her diseases couldn't keep her down. She managed to live on her own (with lots of help) and could get up with a walker and make it to the bathroom and those kinds of things. Which was incredible on its own. But she fell a couple of times and really hurt herself. Towards the end of her life, she fell and broke both of her legs. Everyone thought that was it for her being mobile. But after six months in Providence Health Care, she was back at home and still doing her thing. Eventually though, she was diagnosed with cancer and she died a few months later. We know she's in heaven, but of course it was really hard on our family. We miss her. But one thing we all said was, "We're going to be missing out on her praying for us so much." She loved us a lot, but death separated us from that love. But Jesus loves us so much more than my Gran ever could. His love was proved by His death. But death couldn't stop Him. It couldn't separate us from His love. He defeated death and rose to life and is now in heaven with His Father praying for us. If Jesus is the one who loves us and prays for us, what can separate us from His love? Nothing can! Nothing can hold back His love. Nothing can end it. It is eternal and powerful and true!

Look at **verse 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."** Paul quotes from Psalm 44, which is basically a complaint psalm where the psalmist is asking God where He is. His enemies are attacking and people are dying. Psalm 44 is an honest prayer about the times when it feels like God has abandoned us and doesn't love us. Here's the question being asked: Has God abandoned us when that's happening? Have we been separated from His love? Look at **verse 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.**

Here's what Paul is saying, "Even in our darkest times, even when we're sure God has abandoned us, even when our lives are in danger from persecution, when we're dying from famine, when we have nothing and people are trying to kill us, even then, Jesus still loves us. Those things can't separate us from His love. He hasn't abandoned us. He died for us, defeated death and is in heaven praying for us. Any by the way, if you remember last week, the Holy Spirit is with us, also praying for us. Nothing can separate you from His love. Nothing in creation. Death can't separate you from His love. My Gran is with Jesus right now, she's whole and she is loved by Jesus. Life can't separate you from His love. No matter how badly you mess up and sin. No matter what circumstances come and bring heartache into your life. Supernatural forces can't separate you from God's love, angels and demons can't (not that angels would want to). Satan can't. Nothing happening now in the present. No matter what it is, sickness, family hardship, sin. Nothing that will happen in the future. Nothing can separate you from His love. No one and nothing more powerful than you can separate you from His love. No matter what they do. They may be more powerful than you, but they aren't more powerful than God. Neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, there is nothing AT ALL that can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So this Christmas, and in 2019, don't fear. Don't lose hope. Don't give up. Don't worry. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. So much. But also, don't forget. Don't get distracted. Don't get more excited about other things that aren't nearly as amazing. Don't get cynical. Drink deeply from this well of the gospel this Christmas and be glad that Christ's advent proves God's amazing, unstoppable love for you.