

We are more than conquerors

Romans 8:31-39

A Sermon for the Season of Pentecost

If we could travel back in time to 1912 and imagine ourselves sitting around a table talking about current events and the future, we would find there was a lot then to look forward to. The future looked promising.

Of course, there had been a war in 1870 between Germany and France. Germany took over the Alsace-Lorraine territory from France. That was already forty years back. In 1905 the Japanese had destroyed the Russian Navy at Vladivostok. But that, too, was far away and didn't seem to affect us. In 1910 there was a World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, where they said: "We're going to bring the Gospel to all the people of the world in this generation."

At that time there were five great empires, and everything was stable. There was the German Empire with the Kaiser, the British Empire with the King, the Russian Empire with the Czar, the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire with its own kind of Emperor, and the Hapsburg Empire, mainly Austria and Hungary, held Central Europe.

If we were sitting around a table talking in 1912, and someone had said: "In seven years from now four of these great empires will be gone," the rest of us at the table would have thought that person was out of his mind. And yet seven years later the Ottoman Empire of the Turks was gone. The Hapsburg Empire was destroyed. The Russian Empire had fallen, and the German Reich was gone. The British Empire remained another forty years, but it changed dramatically.

If we were to sit around a table today talking about the future, who is to say what it is going to be like in seven years, in 2030? Some futurologists say that predicting anything beyond five years is pure guesswork. We just don't know.

The same could be said about each one of us individually. Where will each of us be seven years from now? Or for that matter, seven months from now? We don't know. We try to plan for the future, but the only thing to be sure of is to expect the unexpected. There are those who try through religious means to hedge the future. It's a kind of religious insider trading, to try to have some kind of an edge, so that I can go to the Bible and use it to make predictions about the future.

Today we hear all kinds of predictions about all kinds of things—artificial intelligence, climate change, China, and the like.

When the Roman Empire fell in 410 A.D., Augustine wrote his first great book, *The City of God and the City of the Devil*. What is God's plan?

In 1347 in Central Europe and for ten more years the Black Death wiped out 40% of the people and nobody knew why or where it was coming from. The Black Death continued until the Nineteenth Century but the Fourteenth Century was the peak of the damage it did.

There was the Thirty Years War, a series of wars between 1618 and 1648 in which 40% of central Europe was destroyed.

We don't know what the future will bring. We don't know when there is going to be another pandemic, or another conventional war, biological war, or cyber war. We worry and wonder: What is the plan? What is happening? How can we have an edge?

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with doing this unless it makes us turn away from what God's promise is.

People often use the Book of Revelation to see into the future, to get an edge. What do we say about that Book? When we study the Book of Revelation and other literature in the New Testament and Old Testament like it (Mark 13, Luke 21, Matthew 24-25, 2 Thessalonians), when we get to know what this kind of literature is about, it becomes rather boring. It's not the kind of thing that is telling you about the future, the dates, and what is going to happen, so that you have an edge on others in that way.

What do we say to these kinds of questions that also arise in Romans 8:31-39? Here Paul comes to the point of it all. What he writes is really the key to the Book of Revelation, the key to what the Gospel is about.

He says: "What shall we say to this?"—by which he means all that he has previously written in the first eight chapters of Romans. "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" Obviously the answer is "Yes."

"Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God who indeed intercedes for us?" (Romans 8:33-34)

Remember a few weeks ago, in Romans 8:26, it was the Holy Spirit as the one who intercedes for us. Here it is Jesus Christ who intercedes for us, who prays for us.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Then Paul presents one of his lists: "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35). You can add to that list whatever your problems are, those things that you worry about.

Then he takes a verse from Psalm 44:22. It is a Psalm we don't know very well, but it raises this kind of question. There are terrible things happening so Paul quotes the Psalm: "As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be

slaughtered" (Romans 8:36). Are we defeated? No! Paul counters: We are **more than conquerors**. How can we be **more than conquerors**? That's superlative upon superlative. Higher than the highest. Paul:

"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 principalities, 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" (Romans 8:37-39).

The text doesn't say "Amen," but it ought to because that's the point of our Christian hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We usually don't pay much attention to the Book of Revelation because it is so badly misused. But a great leader in the German Church under Hitler, Hans Lilje, who later became a leader in the Lutheran World Federation, wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation in which he said that when you are in prison, as he was in the concentration camp under Hitler, this book is great comfort.

It's like that great commentary on the Book of Revelation by William Hendriksen, the son of Dutch immigrants. He titled his commentary *More Than Conquerors*, after Paul in Romans 8:37: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." As someone has said, the best commentary on the Book of Revelation is Romans 8:31-39.

Therefore whatever the trouble, whatever the hardship, whatever the problem, whatever is our fear, our struggle, all these things fall into perspective because "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen

(Note on Romans 8:38-39: "Height/depth" = technical pair from astrology. Also "principalities" refers to pagan religious powers. See also Ephesians 6:12.)