

“EMBRACING THE NEW YEAR IN CHRIST’S STRENGTH”

Text: Romans 8:31-39

Tonight, we consider a passage from Romans that’s dear to many. It’s a source of great comfort, offering steadfast assurance and deep confidence. Just imagine this: **‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’** And then, that powerful declaration: **‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’** The answer, my friends, is simply: nothing. As Christians, we are forever bound to Christ. Through baptism, we’ve been united with Him, and in that union, we find an unshakeable security, no matter what life may bring.

Tonight, on this eve of a new year, these words of comfort resonate deeply. As we reflect on 2024—a year filled with its own unique blend of triumphs and setbacks, of joyous moments and heart-wrenching losses – we can’t help but feel a mix of emotions. On the one hand, there’s a sense of relief that we’ve made it through another year, a testament to our resilience. And yet, there’s also a bit of anxiety over the unknown that lies ahead. What will the New Year bring? What unexpected twists and turns await us?

And so, it’s incredibly reassuring to remember where our true confidence lies. It’s not in our own abilities or accomplishments. It’s not in the fleeting powers or people of this world. No, our confidence rests firmly in the One who has conquered all – Jesus Christ. He overcame the world through His death and resurrection. He reigns victorious, wielding ultimate power. And He holds us securely, with the promise that no one can snatch us out of His hands.

He’s our Savior, our Lord, the very Creator of heaven and earth, eternal and unchanging, He entered human history, born as a baby—an event we celebrated just a week ago tonight. His name, Jesus, speaks volumes—it means Yahweh is salvation: ‘He will save His people from their sins.’

You see, the greatest threat to us isn’t terrorism, violence, natural disaster, or even the ever-present reminder of death that awaits us all. These things can take our lives, but for those who belong to Christ, (who have been baptized into Him), death itself is merely a gateway to eternity.

Sin, however, is a different beast entirely. Sin not only separates us from God in this life but threatens to condemn us for all eternity. But the good news is this: we’ve been saved from our sins! The forgiveness of our sins is ours. The barrier of sin that once separated us from our Heavenly Father has been shattered! We’re safe. We’re secure. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God that is found in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It might be exciting to watch the ball drop in Times Square, but a far greater thrill awaits us: know that the foot of our Savior has dropped upon the serpent’s head vanquishing sin and death, and to know the ending of his reign over us! This is a victory worth celebrating!

It’s this salvation, this freedom from sin that empowered St. Paul to record those powerful words in Romans we heard tonight. **‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?’** Paul himself experienced these trials firsthand, again and again. And he knew that we, as Christians, would face them too. But he also knew that these trials hold no real power over us. Because the Christian who has received God’s forgiveness, who has been reconciled to Him, has laid hold of the greatest treasure of all.

But Paul isn’t suggesting that the Christian life will be a bed of roses, even with the hope of a new year 2025. In fact, quite the opposite. To emphasize this point, Paul quotes Psalm 44, (a psalm written during a time of immense hardship for God’s people). It reads, **‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’**

This wasn't happening because they had forsaken God or turned to idols. No, this suffering befell them precisely because they were God's people.

This, my dear family in Christ, is the way of the cross. Martin Luther once put it this way (*and I'll paraphrase, because it's a rather long quotation*) he says, "It does no harm that you should be in the midst of danger... Christ is powerful enough... to nullify the plans of the ungodly sovereigns... ...Christ tries us... to see whether or not we, too, take his word seriously. If we truly desire to be Christians and inherit eternal life, we must be prepared to carry the cross, just as Christ did. The world may try to shirk this responsibility, but as Christians, we must embrace it." (LW vol. 49, 248)

Think of the crosses borne by the saints throughout history – the Old Testament prophets, the apostles of Christ, the early church martyrs, the heroes of the Reformation, and even those who suffered persecution just a generation or two ago. Yet, listen to St. Paul's resounding declaration: ***'In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.'*** Notice, he says ***'in all these things,'*** not 'in spite of them.' It's in the midst of trials, not in their absence, that we find victory through Christ.

Jesus echoed this truth in the Sermon on the Mount: ***'Blessed are those who mourn, who are persecuted, who hunger and thirst for righteousness.'*** Now, I know that it doesn't always feel that way! In fact, perhaps more often than not, we feel more like the conquered than the conquerors. But whose word will we ultimately trust? Will we let the world define what constitutes true blessing? Will we allow our feelings to dictate reality?

The truth is, neither the world nor Satan has the final say. Our feelings aren't the ultimate judge of truth. No, it is our Father who determines reality. What He declares is true, regardless of appearances, regardless of our emotions, regardless of the world's opinion. He, who sent His Son to bear the cross, also sends His children crosses to bear. And He promises that these crosses, though challenging, will ultimately prove to be blessings. So, whose word will we believe?

Mary and Joseph clung to the Word of the Lord, spoken to them by the angel Gabriel. The world whispered doubts, and perhaps their own hearts echoed those fears. But faith, unwavering faith, held onto the promise of God's blessing. And so, Mary, despite the uncertainty and the whispers of doubt, declared herself blessed.

And so it is with us. We believe the Word of the Lord, spoken to us through His servants and messengers, that our sins are forgiven. When ***'tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword'*** come upon us, the world may whisper accusations, and our own fears may amplify them. We might feel cursed, like we've somehow brought this upon ourselves. But faith, true faith, clings to the promise of forgiveness. We are forgiven. We are blessed. We are baptized children of God.

And so, baptized into Christ, we face each new day with unwavering confidence. We don't merely hope for a better year; we know that our security rests not in our own resolutions but in the unshakeable promises of God. Clinging to His Word, we have everything. We are indeed conquerors, victorious through Him who conquered sin and death.

As St. Paul powerfully declared, ***'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.'*** In the Name of Jesus, Amen.