

Emmanuel Lutheran Church
Lent 2
February 18, 2017
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
If God had not been on our side

—Romans 8:31-39

Do you ever wonder, “How would my life be different if I weren’t a Christian”? I think that thought crosses the minds of many Christians. If I weren’t a Christian how would I cope with all the evil in the world? If I weren’t a Christian how would I deal with certain stressors or tragedies in my own life? If I weren’t a Christian what hope could I possibly have as I peer into the casket of a dearly departed friend? And as we ponder what life would be like, we snap back to reality as waking up from a nightmare.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean we are immune from evil in the world, or tragedy and suffering in our life. In Romans chapter 8 Paul writes to Christians presently struggling with their own sin within and those who are bombarded with the effects of sin from the outside. Suffering, hardship, persecution, famine, death, Satan and all his temptations—all of these things are present realities—present enemies. But here is the difference for the Christian. Christians have a victorious ally. The triune God himself—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is on your side. ***“If God is for us who can be against us?”***

In order to fully appreciate how reassuring that is, consider the alternative. ***“If God had not been on our side...”*** That’s the first line of the first hymns we sang today. Martin Luther wrote that hymn based not off of this verse from Romans, but based on psalm 124, which dares to suggest, ***“If the Lord had not been on our side...”*** Of course that’s not the case. God *is* on our side—Romans 8 demonstrates that. But if that were the case, If God had not been on our side, the questions Paul asks in Romans 8 sure would have terribly different answers.

If God is not on our side, who is against us? Yes, all of our spiritual enemies—the devil, his lies, our unbelieving world and its sinful aberrations, and our own sinful nature—but not for long. Because it wouldn’t take long before those forces of evil would sweep us away to the other side. More importantly, if God is not on our side, who is against us? God. If God were not on our side, God himself would be against us. That’s far more terrifying than the devil and all his demons, or the world and all its corruption. That’s not just a hypothetical thought. Earlier in Romans 8, we’re reminded that by nature, ***“the sinful mind is hostile to God.”*** By nature we were God’s enemies. Not his children. There’s no neutral ground. Any sin we have committed is against God.

If God is not on our side, who will bring any charges or accusations against us? Satan loves to accuse and bring charges. First he accuses God of being unkind or unfair when he tempts us to sin. Then he turns the tables when we sin and accuses us of that sin so that we despair and think there’s no way that God could ever forgive us. But even worse, if God is not on our side, who will bring any charges against us? God. They wouldn’t be baseless accusations either. Imagine that you are the defendant in a courtroom. If God is not on your side then he’s the plaintiff, and all the evidence he has against you is your own sin, and there’s no way we could honestly plead “not guilty.”

If God is not on our side, who is it that condemns? Our society might arbitrarily condemn certain behaviors and actions. We have a conscience that should convict and strike us with guilt when we sin. But I think you get the point by now; who is the one that condemns? God. God is not a spectator in the courtroom of judgment watching as people either vindicate or condemn themselves. He’s the Judge that drops the gavel and declares the final verdict. He doesn’t just condemn sin. He condemns the sinner.

It’s totally devastating and hopeless to think, If God had not been on our side. But, ***If God is for us... If God is on our side...*** well then that changes everything. When Paul says “If” it’s not a “maybe,” It’s not an “if you meet certain preconditions, then...” No it’s certain. God IS for us. Literally, the phrase used here is “on our behalf.” That simple phrase shows up three times in this section, translated “for us.” Three times Paul uses the simple phrase to emphasize how God is for us, how he has acted on our behalf.

First of all, Paul lays out the solid, unshakeable truth for Christians. ***“If God is for us, who can be against us?”*** Because God is on our side, who or what could be against us? Well all those things we mentioned before are realities. The devil and his lies war against our souls. The world launches a full out attack against our faith. But what chance does any of that stand against God? Really. Is the devil more powerful than God? No! Though the world seems to be spinning out of control, has God really lost control? No! The only one who has all power and authority and dominion, the one who alone should be feared above all... He is on your side. Since he is on your side, who can be against you? No one.

If you want further assurance that God is for you and not against you, and that nothing else can stand a chance against you, you have the greatest assurance in this: ***“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.”*** There it is again; that little phrase—“For us; on our behalf.” He gave his Son for us, on our behalf. That Jesus is on our side, doesn’t mean we are fighting side by side, as though we throw in our effort alongside God’s effort to save us. God for us, on our side means that Jesus Christ, God himself in flesh, has stepped in to take our place, as our substitute. God’s law, his commandments were towering over us, ready to crush us to death—There’s no way you or I could live up to God’s holy standards. But God spared no expense, not even his Son. Jesus came, and he said, “Step aside.” And he kept every last letter of God’s law, for you. On your behalf. In your place.

But there’s more. Even with the perfect life that Jesus lived for us all, there’s only one way to pay for sin, only one way to make it go away. Death. The price God requires for sin is death. And remember, God doesn’t just punish the sin. He punishes the sinner. The wrath of God against sin and sinner hung like an ax over our head. But God spared no expense, not even his Son. Jesus came and he said, “Step aside.” On your behalf, in your place, as your substitute—Jesus died.

Because this is true, what about those other questions Paul asks? ***Who will bring any charges against us?*** Charges will be made, but none of them will stick. Satan will keep on accusing God and accusing us, but his accusations are lies like everything else that comes from his mouth. His baseless accusations don’t stand a chance because the gavel has fallen in our favor. ***“It is God who justifies.”*** Because of God for you, Jesus Christ as your substitute, God has justified you. He declares you not guilty. He declares you as innocent as his Son Jesus.

And since God justified you through Jesus Christ, ***“who is he that condemns?”*** You know the answer to that already—It’s God, but if God has justified and pardoned you by the blood of his own Son, then there is now no condemnation. Tell that to your conscience when old sins come back and cause you to doubt God’s forgiveness. Shove that in the devil’s face next time he comes around and casts doubt on what Jesus has done on your behalf.

If that’s still not enough reassurance that God is indeed on your side, then remember this. ***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.*** There it is again. That little phrase, ***“For us.”*** Years ago Christ served on your behalf as righteous substitute in life and in death, but to this very moment, he is still on your side, still serving on your behalf interceding for you. It’s yet another courtroom illustration. Like a defense lawyer with an air-tight case, Jesus goes before God. Whether it’s a shred or an overwhelming pile of evidence brought against you, Jesus has you covered. If anyone were to step up to the stand to dredge up something you did or something you said, or something you didn’t do, here comes Jesus. He steps in and says, “Objection, that sin was paid for on my cross. You want proof, it’s right there in the empty tomb.” Jesus served on your behalf. He still does.

I don’t mean to breeze over the rest of the verses in Romans 8. But after you let this truth sink in—Jesus Christ for you—the rest becomes self-explanatory. If Jesus Christ and all he has done is stacked immeasurably in your favor, what could possibly separate you from the love of God in Christ? And Paul mentions some pretty heavy stuff... it wouldn’t be long before Paul would catch up to his letter he sent to Rome, led like a lamb to the slaughter... I don’t want to write off the struggles and hardships you endure. I know that they are real and they are serious. But know this: ***In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*** Throughout the season of lent this comes into such clear focus: there we see Christ and his suffering to the max, but then, then we see the total victory as clear as day. Keep that victory in clear view this lent as you ponder Christ’s suffering for you. Keep that victory in mind as you presently suffer and experience many things in this life. No, no nothing can undo what Christ has done on our behalf. Amen.