

Part 4: Love is Safe

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We live in an anxious era where despite everything we have, we never really feel secure. We have passwords, locked doors and blocked numbers all because of the reality that there are people who are against us.

Patty and I have a sister in Christ who once called us in the middle of the night because she was terrified that someone was going to break into her home. It turned out to be nothing. But we came to find out that her life was dominated by the fear of being assaulted. She was constantly hypervigilant. It was up to her to protect herself. And if she failed, she feared that she would be getting what she deserved - that God would be punishing her. So everything in her life was meticulously calculated to protect herself from being assaulted.

In the world we live in, what assurance could I give that that would never happen to her?

It's common to hear people say "I didn't feel safe" or "it's not a safe relationship" or "they aren't a safe person." And sadly, the people who are most likely to do you harm are often the ones who are supposed to love you the most.

A Christian brother of mine had a distant, angry father who was domineering and would rip him apart. This brother felt abandoned by his family. He learned that it wasn't safe to ask for help. As an adult, conflict in his marriage seemed to reinforce the narrative that he was a failure and alone. Not being able to fix it left him imagining God shaking his head at him in disappointment.

Where can you find a sense of security in a world where even your close relationships can be against you and it can feel like God has abandoned you?

Well as Paul concludes Romans 8, he brings the chapter to a climax helping Christians rejoice in their security. He doesn't deny danger and opposition – instead he actually features the reality of some of our greatest fears. But in a series of 4 questions, he dispels the possibility that any of it could ever change how God feels about us. The first question we ask is "Am I safe?" The first question Paul wants us to ask is, "Am I loved?" And in an unsafe world, Paul is sure that God's love is safe.

And so our main point today is this: Your security is in God's secure love.

And we're going to look at this in three points:

1. God's provision is secure
2. God's verdict is secure
3. God's love is secure

So let's look at our first point:

1. God's Provision is Secure

Let's read Romans 8:31-32.

Paul asks his first "who question" – "who can be against us?"

Who is against you in your life? Maybe you're experiencing a strained relationship, a messy breakup, marital strife. Or maybe you've suffered from being abandoned or abused.

Paul is not unaware of real opposition. If we glance just a few verses later he's going to talk about persecution, and danger, and being killed. So he's holding up two truths that seem to contradict each other. God is so "for us" that no one can be against us *even though* they can cause us a lot of pain.

So what does it mean for God to be for us? Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If the Father was willing to give up his own Son for you – if he didn't withhold what is most precious from you, what could he hold back now? How could he be stingy with anything else?

The cross is proof that God will provide all that is ultimately good for you. And so whatever opposition we face, Paul wants us to dwell on the reality that if God is for us no one can be against us.

David models this for us in Psalm 56. He was on the run from his father-in-law who was trying to kill him. David was so desperate that he sought refuge amongst his people's national enemies, the Philistines. But then the Philistines recognized David and seized him and wanted to kill him. That's when he desperately cries out to God in lament. Like we saw last week, he brings his complaint to God and makes requests, but then he chooses to trust God saying, "This I know, that God is for me. 10 In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, 11 in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? He repeats the same question twice. "What can man do to me?" He has to keep challenging his thoughts and reminding himself of reality. This is what we do as we lament. Even though the circumstances haven't changed – even though the situation is still scary – we remind ourselves that God is for us and choose to trust him.

Is there something in your life that you need to pray like this about this week?

God has provided himself to us. People can take a lot of things away from us, but they can't take away who God is for us. His love is safe.

And it says that along with Christ, God will graciously give us all things. Sometimes it feels like we don't have what it takes – we don't have what we need to make it through. If God gives us all things, then where is the restored relationship, the changed spouse, or justice?

But what are the "all things" that God graciously gives us? Remember just a few verses earlier, Paul used that same phrase "all things" and said God works "all things" together for good. And that "good" is helping us know and become more like Jesus on our way to glory with Jesus. So even as we pray and seek resolution, we can know that he's going to graciously give us all things.

For the Christian, all things come to us through the cross. Apart from the cross, everything ends in condemnation and judgment. But it's been said that through the cross, everything good and

everything bad turned to good comes to us as a gracious gift. So we rejoice and boast in God's Son when we receive the "all things" in our lives as coming to us graciously through Christ for our good.

Many of us have heard the story of Corrie Ten Boom who was in a Nazi concentration camp with her sister Betsy. And their living quarters were infested with fleas. Betsy encouraged Corrie that the fleas were a gift that they should thank God for. Only later did the sisters realize that it was the presence of the fleas that had protected them from being harassed by the prison guards so that they were able to minister to the other women with Bible studies and prayer.

Sometimes gifts don't look like gifts. Sometimes it's hard to thank God for the fleas. But somehow, all things come to us with grace. This is what it means for God to be for us – not that he always steps in like a bodyguard to spare us from pain, but that as our loving Father, he will always see to it that all things ultimately serve our relationship *with* Christ to the glory *of* Christ.

Are there situations in your life where it's really hard to thank God for the fleas? Where are you most prone to resentment? What would change if you shifted your gaze from the horizontal plane between you and those who are against you and instead saw everything as coming from your heavenly Father as a gift purchased through the cross?

But what about the evil things that have been done to us? How can God be involved in things that he hates? How do we make sense of God giving us "all things" when those things include evil.

Joseph in the book of Genesis could easily have shared this concern. He was betrayed and abused by his own brothers, experienced repeated sexual harassment, was wrongly accused and thrown into prison, and was forgotten by the one person who could get him out. Because of his brothers, he lost the life that was stolen from him.

Maybe you can relate to feeling that way.

But by the end of the story, he could look back and tell his brothers: "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Joseph looks back and reinterprets his past through this God-centered lens. He is so confident in God's overruling purposes that he even tells his brothers, "it was not you who sent me here, but God." The betrayal by Joseph's brothers actually set off a chain of events that enabled Joseph to save those very same brothers from famine. And that ultimately preserved the line of Christ.

No brothers, no Christ. No Judas, no cross. What man meant for evil, God meant for good. Evil people are responsible for the evil that they do. And yet somehow in God's providence, their evil actions will not thwart but will only ultimately play into God's overriding purposes for good. The people that have hurt you are responsible for their actions, and yet, in Christ, your suffering is never meaningless.

Sometimes we need to look back like Joseph and reinterpret our own stories with God at the center. For all those in Christ, there was not a moment that you were mistreated where God's love was not set on you – where he wasn't there with you – where he would not work his redeeming purposes for you – where he would not bring beauty from ashes. Those events have no right to tell you who you are or to determine your future. No one could ever be against you in a way that will not ultimately prove that

God is for you. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? God's love is safe.

But what about justice? God promises that one day justice will be served. God will bring every wrong to account either through the cross or eternal punishment. And in the meantime, we can try to get out of the situation - it can be good and appropriate to seek legal justice. But we want to guard against retaliating or growing in bitterness. Instead, we want to follow Jesus' example. As he endured unjust treatment, he committed no sin. He didn't respond in kind. It says, "When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." We combat being overcome by evil by entrusting ourselves to him who judges justly and leaving it to the wrath of God. Trusting our Father like Jesus did is part of how we suffer *with* Christ. It's part of the good that God is working as he graciously gives us all things.

Paul isn't asking us to live in denial of the opposition we face in our lives. He just wants to adjust our interpretive lens so that we acknowledge God in it.

But what does this practically look like in the moment? Well there's a battle in our minds over the narrative. And the battle is fought with questions. Dave Harvey says this, "Grace-infused questions, like a faithful sentry, halt our fear by checking its passport. "By what authority," grace investigates, "do you come to this mind with this message?" Are you checking the passport for the messages of fear that roam freely in your mind? We need to challenge the narrative in our thoughts that tells us we're alone, that our adversaries are too big, or that we don't have what we need to trust and obey our Lord.

We need to bring our fears in for questioning. What do I trust in to tell me I'm safe? Could God fail to provide what I need to see me through this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

We try to help our little kids to do this when they're scared at night. When they wake us up because they are afraid of bad guys, I could assure them that there aren't any bad guys in Missoula and that nothing scary could possibly happen tonight. But can I actually promise that? Instead, I've always prayed with them the same prayer: "God please keep us safe and help us to not be afraid. Help us to remember that you are all-powerful, that nothing can happen outside of your will – and that even if you allow something scary to happen, we know that it comes from a good and loving Father who knows us, cares for us, and works all things for our good."

Kids, I want to encourage you to ask your parents later after church today to help you with how you can pray about the things that you get afraid of.

Parents, you can teach your kids that fear is an opportunity to trust that God's love is safe.

When Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" the answer is an emphatic, "no one."

But perhaps the more constant danger isn't what people can do to us as much as what they can say about us. What if their accusations expose that there's actually something wrong with *you*? Is God's love still safe if *you're* the problem? And this brings us to our next point:

2. God's Verdict is Secure

Let's read v.33-34.

We're always in someone's courtroom. It's easy to feel like people are always watching us, evaluating us, judging us. Our minds are employed as full-time defense attorneys. We pour over the evidence. We replay the tape of our last interaction with someone. We object and plead our innocence in actual arguments or silently in our heads. Our image and sense of identity are at stake. Verdicts, real and imagined, are constantly being determined. You're a bad friend, a bad husband, a bad mom, you're failing to do your responsibilities, you're lazy, you're not changing, you're never going to amount to anything, you're just like your dad, you're not worth being loved.

We are obsessed with justifying ourselves. But the courts are always open. And the charges keep on coming. Each of the 8 billion people on the planet has their own courtroom in their head. But there's only one court that ultimately matters.

Paul introduces his second "who" question. Who can bring any charge against God's elect?

God's elect are those whom he chose to set his love on in Christ in eternity past. We saw this last week: "Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also *justified*." Paul says "God is the one who justifies." He's the one who declares us to be legally "right" before him. We're obsessed with justifying ourselves, but the justification we need is actually in the rearview mirror. It is finished. And it wasn't because we weren't guilty.

Our inner lawyer can get really nit-picky about the accuracy of accusations made against us. Almost without fail, if one of my kids accuses another one of something, the first words out of the defendant's mouth are, "No I didn't." They're so indignant. But when you finally get the full story, the discrepancies between the charges and what happened are really nominal. "I didn't hit him – my hand (in a shape easily confused with a fist) made slight contact with his arm." Or, "I *threw* it at his face but I didn't intend for it to actually *hurt* his face." They're so busy confessing what they *didn't* do, that it's hard to get around to what they *did* do."

God knows everything that we "did do," and when he looked at all the evidence, he found every one of us guilty before him. There's no worse charge, real or imagined, than the charges that have already been accurately evaluated in the ultimate courtroom. No reexamination of the evidence – no new angle in our defense could have yielded a verdict other than condemnation. But for believers, it was only when we abandoned the defense and trusted in Jesus that God justified us.

Where are you prone to defensiveness? How could remembering you're already justified help you to hear criticism differently?

Paul asks the next "who" question: "Who is to condemn?"

What if I feel condemned? Sometimes we're our *own* prosecutor. We can take every role in our own courtroom. We're the defendant, the defense, the prosecutor, the judge. And sometimes the prosecution wins out, and we pass judgment on ourselves in self-condemnation.

Sometimes it's because we've violated our own standards. You might feel condemned because you're one of the ones who your company laid off. You might feel condemned for not being as gifted as

someone else. You might feel condemned as a parent for how your kids turned out. We have to put off the false standards and the false guilt by aligning our conscience with what the Bible actually calls us to. So much of our self-condemnation is over things that God never even asked of us.

But is there any way that you *could* fail in God's eyes that *could* change God's verdict? What happens when you sin and you can't deny that the accusations are true?

Well that happens all the time in God's heavenly courtroom. The word "Satan" means a legal opponent or accuser. And it says in Revelation that Satan is "the accuser of our brothers...who accuses them day and night before our God." In God's courtroom, Satan continually accuses you before God. Every time you sin, your accuser is ready to lay out all the evidence against you.

But Paul says, "who is to condemn? Jesus is the one who died." The punishment has been fully paid. "More than that, who was raised." Jesus' resurrection shows that the payment was fully accepted. "Who is at the right hand of God." In heaven with the Father, Jesus is our High Priest, our mediator, and our advocate. As our high priest he has offered the decisive sacrifice for all our sin. As our mediator he has bridged the chasm between us and God representing God to us and us to God. And as our advocate, he not only stands between us and the Father, but when we sin he comes and stands alongside us *before* the Father. "He indeed is interceding for us."

We saw last week that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. And in heaven, so does Jesus. But the focus of Jesus' intercession in these verses is in relation to the question "Who is to condemn." When a believer sins, Jesus takes up our case before the Father as our advocate. When your Accuser takes you to court, your Advocate is right there with you, and he applies his cross to your sin and pleads your case for you.

In my favorite scene from "Pilgrim's Progress," Christian, the main character, meets the evil Apollyon. And Apollyon tries to persuade Christian to turn away from following the Prince who represents Jesus. One of Apollyon's tactics is to remind Christian of all the ways Christian had been unfaithful on his journey. He lists the accusations out:

- Christian had nearly given up when he had barely started;
- he tried wrong ways of getting rid of guilt;
- he had been lax when he should have been vigilant;
- he almost turned back when he was frightened;
- and whenever he talked of his journey and his experiences, inside he desired vainglory in all he said or did.

Christian responded to Apollyon's accusations this way: "All that you say is true; in fact there is much more that you have left out. But the Prince who I serve and honor is very merciful and most willing to forgive."

Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? No one. Who is to condemn? No one.

If you have never trusted in Christ then no matter how elaborate a defense you can rally, you are under a sentence of condemnation in the only courtroom that eternally matters. But when you cast

yourself on the mercies of Jesus, you are justified and no accusation could ever again threaten your security in Christ.

The case is closed. If you won your case in the Supreme Court, a lower court's opinion can't change the verdict. Why are you still defending yourself in all these lower courts? Paul says elsewhere that it is a very small thing for him to be judged by anyone or any human court. He says he doesn't even judge himself, because it is the Lord who judges him. And the verdict is in, the case is closed, your identity is secure. God's love is safe.

When your spouse accuses you of not listening to them again or not loving them again or of false motives again, how should your security in Christ free you up to respond differently? You don't have to defend your image. They may have got the details wrong. But we all know that there is much more that they have left out. If your identity is in being a recipient of grace, then criticism can't threaten your identity but only further confirms it. And if you are secure in his love in spite of your record, that frees you up to humbly listen and consider potential areas to grow in grace and love. Sanctification is safe because God's love is safe.

So no one can turn God against us. But what if the suffering in our lives seems to indicate God has abandoned you? What do you do when your afflictions are so intense that you can only imagine God has stopped loving you?

Well this brings us to our third point:

3. God's Love is Secure

Let's read v.35-37.

Some verses don't make the Hobby Lobby cut. We edit out the "being killed all the day long" part for the wall art. But this is the climax of Romans 8. This is the pinnacle of Paul's encouragement.

And he gives us his fourth and final "who" question. He asks "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" So he's probably imagining human antagonists behind these situations or who are making these afflictions worse. And he's asserting that none of these threats can separate us from Christ's love.

And these threats are not just metaphorical. Paul providentially wrote this to the Christians who were in Rome during the reign of an emperor named Nero. And just about 10 years later these Roman Christians would face horrific persecution under Nero.

But even in our own experience, the shame and abuse in this list can strike a little too close to home.

Where has being treated shamefully left you doubtful of God's love for you?

In a tragic story in 2 Samuel, Tamar is assaulted by her half-brother. She pleaded with him to stop, saying, "Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" God doesn't have to include details like that in order to just give us a historical narrative. But he saw Tamar. He remembers.

Maybe you've experienced a form of abuse that has left you asking the same question: "Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" Maybe in trying to make sense of what happened you're tempted to take on responsibility for the abuse. You might try to find a sense of security in thinking that if you were responsible then at least you might have a chance of preventing it from happening again. But this interpretation of your story leaves you feeling rejected by God so that his promises might be great for everyone else, but they don't apply to you. But God condemns oppression and looks with mercy on the oppressed.

The shame that might hold your identity captive has to intersect with the grace of the Savior who bore your shame. Jesus is described in ways reminiscent of how you might feel about yourself. He was "despised and rejected," "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," "as one from whom men hide their faces," stricken, afflicted, pierced, crushed, wounded, oppressed, "taken away," "cut off." Like Tamar, maybe you don't know where you can carry your shame. But in Christ, there is someone who carried it for you.

Jesus willingly chose to bear not only your shame but also your actual guilt as a sinner. You are not responsible for the things that have been done to you, but the ultimate danger in all of our lives is separation from God on account of being a sinner. When Judas wanted to right the wrongs he had done, he went to a priest. But the priest just told him, "see to it yourself." But Jesus never says "see to it yourself." He came and bore our iniquities on the cross to atone for our sins. Naked, exposed, pinned to a cross, Jesus already bore and "despised" your shame – he disregarded it – he dismissed it – he didn't count it as worth being acknowledged – it had no ability to keep him from the joy set before him. If you have trusted in Jesus, now your identity is not victim, not sinner, but "in Christ." Your disgrace might loom large in your memory, but in the gospel, grace looms larger. God's love is safe.

But what if God was punishing me? We might generally assume that bad things happen to bad people. That was the counsel Job's friends gave him. Job's suffering was so horrible that it must mean Job did something *really* bad. Their simplistic interpretive lens was "do good / get good" or "do bad / get bad." They had no category for innocent suffering. So when a Christian tells themselves that their suffering is God punishing them, they're doing what's been called "counseling yourself in the voice of Job's friends." God relates a Christian's suffering not to punishment but to the good he is working in them. Since Christ took our condemnation in our place, no "distress" or "danger" or "nakedness" or anything else could ever be the result of God punishing you.

In fact, God's people were aware of this in the quotation in v.36. When he says, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered," Paul is quoting from Psalm 44. God's people were experiencing unjust suffering at the hands of their enemies. They were crying out in desperation and confusion. They lament and cry out to God: "Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" They know they haven't forsaken God and that he isn't punishing them, but they don't know why they're suffering. They don't understand why God seems silent. They cry out, "Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!" They appeal to God's own commitment to love them. They know that their suffering is "for his sake" – they are suffering not because God has abandoned them but precisely *because* they are God's people.

Our suffering is not proof that God has abandoned us but rather that we are a part of God's people. Jesus suffered for our sake and now we suffer for his sake. Anytime we seek to trust and obey Jesus through our trials we are suffering with Christ – following his example and glorifying him. He established the pattern of being made low and then being exalted. We are not spared being made low with him so that we might also be exalted with him.

What would change in your attitude towards being mistreated if you viewed it as suffering for “his sake” in anticipation of being exalted with him.

Like the faithful in Psalm 44, we cry out and lament our pain. But when we reinterpret our past and present pain in light of God's provision, his verdict, his love – we find that we are more than conquerors.

The word for “conquerors” here comes from the word “nike” which means victory. It's where the brand Nike gets its name. The Greek goddess Nike was the goddess of victory. To be more than a conqueror is to be “over nike” – to prevail completely. One pastor explained that to be a conqueror is to defeat your enemy so that he lies dead at your feet. But to be *more* than a conqueror is when your enemy gets up and serves you.

In Christ, your suffering is now your servant. It helps you to know and become more like Jesus. We don't just suffer for *his* sake. It also serves *our* sake. Even death becomes your slave. It takes you right where you want to go – it takes you straight to Jesus. “To live is Christ, and to die is gain!” If our greatest enemy becomes the very means of our greatest joy (to be with Christ), how much more can every other lesser enemy in our lives ultimately serve us?

And so there's an ironic contrast here. Even should the world regard us as mere sheep to be slaughtered, with the lens of faith, we are more than conquerors through the lamb that was already slaughtered for us.

Who can separate us from Christ's love? No one.

Christ's love is better than not suffering. That's the reinterpretation that we need of our trials. It can be hard to trust a God who doesn't guarantee that he won't take away things we want to protect. If your greatest desire is personal comfort and physical safety in this life, then there is no good news for you in Romans 8. Romans 8 can't help you. But if you grasp that the greatest treasure imaginable is to be loved by Jesus – then Romans 8 can find no greater climax than the promise that God's love is safe.

And this is where Paul closes the chapter in v.38-39.

The word for “separate” is used elsewhere in reference to divorce. But union with Christ can never be dissolved. Not death or anything we face in life, not powerful forces or people or things from your past or things in the future or anything else can separate you from his love. Should your worst fear come true, this is the promise that will see you through.

Some former members of our church who moved away are related to a missionary in Africa named Kevin Rideout. Kevin was abducted 9 months ago in Niger. Many of you have been praying for him. One of our family's consistent prayers for him in captivity was that he would remember this promise

in Romans 8 - that wherever he was, and no matter how he was being treated, and no matter how alone he felt – that the Lord would remind him that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Kevin wasn't safe, but God's love for him was. And in God's mercy, just this past week, Kevin was released and gets to come home.

Whatever you have been through, whatever you face now or in the future, there is nowhere safer to be than resting in his love.

What would change in the narrative of *your* story if you embraced this promise? How would it change how you're going through what you're going through right now? And where might you be able to strengthen a brother or sister who needs to be reminded of these promises?

In these last verses, Paul switches from saying “we” and “us” and ends on a note of personal conviction. He says, “for I am sure.” When a brother or sister is overwhelmed, let's imitate Paul and remind them of these verses and assure them of these promises.

Whether it's hypervigilance, self-condemnation, bedtime fears, or persecution, we all need help seeing all of life through the lens of our union with Christ. Sometimes when faith is weak we need a brother or sister to assure us like Paul – we need a brother or sister to take our hand, turn to Romans 8, to pray for us and say, “I am sure of this...that:

- Neither being hurt nor abandoned,
- Nor your spouse disappointing you,
- Nor other people's accusations or opinions of you,
- Nor your children's choices,
- Nor the things you've seen nor the things you've done
- Nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, take heart. God's love is safe.