

“More than Conquerors”

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Easter Sunday

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¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ...

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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: 18–23, 31–39)

For the past six weeks, we have journeyed through the season of Lent using the book of Romans as our guide. Much of the discussion has focused on the reality of sin, especially the way that sin separates us from others, from God, and from our true selves. Our faith tradition has a helpful way of summing up this sinful predicament we are in. Sin, we believe, “is a condition of the heart.”¹ Our hearts do not function properly. And, just as a heart condition is a dangerous thing for the body, an unclean heart is every bit as deadly to the soul. And we are all afflicted.

This reminds me of a reflection written long ago by a British officer in World War I. “There is an incident in my life,” he wrote, “that still makes me go hot and cold with shame... I was traveling on Christmas Eve to London on the last train out of Bristol. Three of us were playing cards in a first-class carriage. We had seats, but third-class passengers were packed like sardines all down the corridor. And then, when we pulled into Bath, we saw a seething mass of troops on the platform, every last one of them hoping to get the last train into London for Christmas.”

“Let us in, governor,” they were yelling. When the station master saw the crowd pressing in hard against the train car, he was very direct. “The only way you are getting on this train,” he told the enlisted men, “is if those officers say yes.”

¹ <https://centernet.pcusa.org/what-we-believe/sin-and-salvation/>



“We were playing cards,” the aging man admitted. “We were comfortable. We said, ‘No.’ But as soon as the train started rolling out, we finally came to. We tried to pull the cord to get the engineer’s attention. But it was broken.”

“To my dying day,” the old soldier wrote, “I shall see the faces of the men we left behind on that platform. Left them to celebrate Christmas far away from home. I may be forgiven, but I won’t forget.”²

Sin hardens our hearts and leaves us cold. It can also break our hearts in those moments when we wake up and realize how much our behavior has hurt other people. The biblical conclusion is that “*No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one... all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*”³

While Romans paints a dark picture of human nature, the goal is not to leave us in despair. Yes, we are afflicted with a condition of the heart. But the apostle wants us to know that there is a cure... that there is hope for our ailment. “*Who will separate us from the love of Christ?*” he asks. Can a heart condition separate us from God? How about suffering... oppression... injustice... peril... war? “*No,*” the apostle says, “*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*” Nothing that has been, nothing that is, nothing that may be in the future, nothing in the universe can “*separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

That statement is the Mount Everest of the book of Romans, and certainly one of the highest peaks in all of scripture. And the core idea is found in the compound verb ὑπερνικάω (hoop-er-nik-ah-o). The base verb, *nikao*, means “to overcome,” “to prevail,” “to be victorious.” But the word used here begins with the preposition *hyper*, which means “over,” “above,” “exceeding.” This is no ordinary win. It is a hyper-victory, an overwhelming conquest. For someone with a heart condition, this is not just good news. This is hyper-amazing news. We were deathly ill, but now, thanks to God’s love and grace, we are more than conquerors. In all of scripture, this is the one and only time this word is used.

Right about now some of you may be thinking something along these lines: “Well, that sounds lovely, but I do not feel much like a conqueror.” In fact, it feels like the opposite is true. In our world, war is spreading, not decreasing. Violence is being embraced and celebrated, while kindness and thoughtfulness are being mocked. Cheaters are prospering, while those who play by the rules seem to lose way too often. You may also be going through some painful difficulties in your own life: a strained relationship; a frightening diagnosis; a career stuck in the mud; a feeling of isolation and hopelessness. You may feel like you have been waiting for a win for a long, long time, and it just won’t come.

It is important to note that the promise of this scripture does not ignore reality. In Paul’s own world, good often seemed hopelessly outmatched by evil. Resistance often seemed futile. Paul’s goal was never to deny reality, but he did hope to refocus God’s people on the good that does exist, and the power for good that was coming. Yes, creation is suffering and in pain, but these are actually labor pains. Something new is being born. Hope is coming. A cure is on the way.

² George Macleod, *Daily Readings with George Macleod*, Ron Ferguson (ed.) (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1991), p. 55.

³ Romans 3:10-12, 23.

When I was growing up in Greensboro I knew a man in our church named Bob Stone. Like my father, he was a graduate of Davidson College. Both of them had both a son and daughter who also attended Davidson College. As Wildcats living in the same city and active in the same congregation, our families were naturally close. But, in the winter of 1990, after a particularly strenuous game of handball revealed some concerning symptoms, Bob received devastating news. He was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma – cancer of the kidney. He would soon discover that the disease had already spread to his spleen, his liver, and his lungs. Many were tempted to say that his situation was hopeless, that treatment was futile. At least one doctor said that very thing. But Bob Stone was not one to waste time wallowing in the valley of the shadow of death.

A key moment came when his cousin Jeny wrote him a particularly encouraging letter. “We have really been rocked by what has happened,” she wrote, “as I am sure you have been too, in spades. We do not accept this! I am sorry that you are being deluged with phone calls from all of us who feel the same way. [But] this is what you get for leading a good upright life.” She closed her with a moving inspirational quote.

That letter, and especially the quote, opened Bob’s eyes to a vision of everything that was to come. The vision was to fight like hell, and to build a team – a collection of family, friends, co-workers, and prayer warriors. The team included the old and the young, people close by and around the world. They were encouraged to pray, but they were also invited to share joy, hope, and positive thoughts with Bob and his family. “When I get a hospital address,” he said, “I would like for you to send me pictures – of you, your children, your grandchildren, your parents, your pets, your current girlfriend or boyfriend... cards or letters telling me what you’re doing, what’s happening with your family... who you think will be in the Final Four... funny stories.” “Draw pictures for my room,” he said. “I want to smile and laugh a great deal!”

That is exactly what we did. And, like any real team, we needed a name. Bob picked a perfect one. “I called us the Buffaloes,” he said. “The buffalo – an endangered species, a dying breed -- but making a comeback!”⁴ Inspired by Bob’s strong faith, our comeback would be based on two essential truths: (1) that there are some afflictions that only God can heal; and (2) we would travel this journey, wherever it may lead, together as a team.

On the first of those points, Bob knew that modern medicine could do amazing things. He dove into the literature, found great doctors he could trust. But Bob also understood that, at the end of the day, God was ultimately responsible for his healing. He knew that, as challenging as his cancer might be, his conquest of that condition was also deeply entwined with that pesky heart condition that we all have. That condition, to quote Bob’s own words, “is the separation of man from God.” Medicine can do a lot, but when it comes to what really harms us, we do not have the capacity to heal ourselves. We have to look to a higher power for that. So, the Buffaloes moved forward together, in one mind and of one accord, based on the assurance of Christ, who says to all disciples “*In [this] world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*”⁵

And, thanks to Bob, we all came to understand through first-hand experience how sharing a journey with grace and joy really is the only way to win at life. “We have [all] been

⁴ Bob Stone and Jenny Stone Humphries, *Where The Buffaloes Roam: Building a Team for Life Challenges* (Atlanta: Lapidum Press, 1993), p. xi.

⁵ John 16:33.

left with a God-sized hole in our heart,” Bob wrote. “But we can do a lot of back-filling when we allow ourselves to love others the way God loves us. Hard, unconditionally, and for life.”⁶ If you are not yet convinced that the cure for our deepest ailments can be found in community, just listen to the language Paul uses in Romans 8. It is never “I” or “me” ... it is only “us” and “we.” “*If God is for **us**, who can be against **us**?*” ... God gave up his only begotten Son “*for **all of us**.*” Christ “*intercedes for **us**.*” “*Who will separate **us** from the love of Christ?*” ... I do not conquer anything... but we... “***We** are more than conquerors through him who loved **us**.*” And “*I am convinced that neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate **us** from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

If you are left wondering what Jenny told Bob in that letter – and more particularly, what kind of quote inspired such a movement, it also came from a World War I officer. The German juggernaut was advancing on Paris, and when they arrived at the Marne River, it fell to the French Ninth Army to defend the city. Field Marshall Ferdinand Foch knew immediately that they were in dire straits. They were hard pressed on every side. But the message he sent back to central command was the stuff of legend. “My center is giving way,” Foch said. “My right flank is in retreat. Situation is excellent. I am attacking.”

Fueled by that initial inspiration, Bob Stone and his team of Buffaloes attacked. Cars bearing the team’s signature bumper sticker could be seen all over town. They bore the simple message, “RT Stone Buffaloes: Undefeatable Champs.” They could just as well have said “More Than Conquerors,” because in a little over a year Bob Stone was tumor free. It was a glorious, unlikely, hyper-amazing victory.

And that is the end of the story, in a way. On the other hand, happy endings can be elusive in this world. As it turns out, not surprisingly, some stray cancer cells found some places to hide. In time, they regrouped and counterattacked. Four years later, they took Bob Stone’s earthly life. Which takes us back to something I said earlier. True faith never denies reality. It does not pretend that pain does not exist, or that loss is real. But it does remind us that, in the kingdom of God, there is one thing we can always, always count on. And that is God loves us – loves us unconditionally, completely, utterly, and without condition. And there is nothing in the world that can ever change that. There is no sin too big, no mistake too severe, no illness too grave. For we are assured that there is nothing – nothing you can ever imagine – that can separate us from the love of God. That love holds you with all the power of heaven and earth, and there is not a thing you can do about it. And with that kind of love, what can possibly prevail against us?

That, for us, is the ultimate victory of Easter. Paul himself wrote to the Corinthians that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death.”⁷ When the meaning of the empty tomb began to dawn upon the disciples... when they realized that Christ, who had clearly been dead, had risen from the grave, it was clear that this final enemy really had been vanquished once and for all.

So fear not, even if you feel like the darkness is winning. Do not despair, even if you feel like your ailments are getting the best of you, even if your center is giving way, even if your defenses are in retreat. God is with you, and your situation is excellent.

Claim your faith, gather your team... and attack! **Amen.**

⁶ Stone and Humphries, 125.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:26.