

Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of Christ—Not Death or Life.

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Romans 8:35-39

“For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, ...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” ~St. Paul

His disciples cautioned him about going back to Jerusalem.¹ Enemies there sought opportunity to catch him and do away with him. His entrance into the Holy City was carefully staged. There were secret passwords² exchanged with the people who provided the animal on which no one had ever ridden.³ He entered from the Mount of Olives by the Golden Gate, the gate below Temple Mount through which it was believed the Messiah would enter Jerusalem. He consciously enacted a prophecy of the Prophet Zechariah.⁴ None of these things would have been lost on his enemies who watched above, from windows in the Temple. Reading this from the safety of my desk, I am struck again by his courage as he entered Jerusalem. Matthew wrote: “...when [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred saying, ‘*Who is this?*’ And the crowds said, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.’”⁵ Can you imagine how this infuriated the opposition and captivated those who believed in him? “At last we have him,” one group muttered. “As last God will save us!” the other group shouted.⁶ Above it all is his undaunted courage in the face of peril. He knew what he had to do.

Two of the most momentous events in the history of Western civilization and Christianity occurred in AD 165 and in 251.⁷ In those years two epidemics struck Europe and each decimated one quarter to one third of the population of the Roman Empire. The first is thought to have been small pox and the second measles. Besides the mortality and destruction, the two plagues were a serious blow to paganism, still the official religion. Pagan religion with its belief in gods who did not care one way or the other about humanity was hard pressed to provide meaning and a path forward during these plagues. Christianity, on the other hand, had two things going for it in the face of these viral holocausts. One, the Christian faith provided a belief in the afterlife, that even if Christians died—and surely many did during both epidemics—they would still be taken care of in the future. Second, with Christianity’s insistence on the love of God, people found help coping with loss and death. Moreover, there is historical-literary evidence that the response of

¹ John 11:7-8.

² Matthew 21:3. The password: “The Lord has need of them.”

³ Mark 11:2.

⁴ Zechariah 9:9.

⁵ Matthew 21:10-11.

⁶ *Hosanna* is a Hebrew invocation to God meaning, “Save us!”

⁷ Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), see p. 73f.

many pagans to the plagues was to abandon their sick and flee from the cities. Because of the Christian belief in the importance of loving neighbors, Christians took care of one another and, even, their pagan neighbors. The fearlessness of Christians who nursed people through sickness and the positive impact of nursing the sick resulted in greater recovery rates among Christians and the pagan neighbors they took care of. This had the effect of making Christians seem to be miracle workers, and, indeed, they were. When the plagues ran their course and the devastation ended, pagans spared death by the goodness of Christians, converted to faith in great numbers. The epidemics were so horrible, that many completely changed their views about religion, life and death. We have surviving sermons by Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and an Easter letter by Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, as well as accounts of the pagan physician Galen and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius⁸ describing how all the plagues affected pagans and Christians. Everyone struggled with what the epidemics meant and how to behave. But the Christians taught the love of God and neighbor and reassured the grieving in their congregations of the afterlife. When all was over, Christianity grew markedly and paganism lost ground.

As Jesus came into Jerusalem on the Sunday of his last week, we see the same courage that would later animate generations of Christians facing other horrors like those two plagues. St Paul, 20 years after that first Palm Sunday wrote his remarkable statement to the Christians in Rome. No doubt Cyprian and Dionysius had the Apostle in mind as they tried to reassure and motivate those suffering in the plague years that “...*nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not 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.*”⁹ Paul’s is a remarkable statement of Christian hope and conviction. Having been a minister for over thirty years, I assure you it is entirely possible for each of these setbacks and tragedies to pull us away from God and one another. We are Christians but we still grieve, worry and suffer. Paul would not have written this ringing affirmation of the faith had he not known that experiences like those 2nd and 3rd century plagues can and do pull us away from Christ Jesus. But note the way he put it: “we are more than conquerors *through him who loved us.*”¹⁰ Knowing and believing that you are loved and that you will be taken care of by the Savior of the universe is a very potent self-defense. When your mind is set upon Christ, when you see his own courage before his death, it makes a momentous difference in the way you face trouble, illness, grief and all the other setbacks of life. Against every discouragement of life, Jesus, Paul and every Christian minister since has proclaimed, ‘*nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not death, not life.*’

As I think upon this I am drawn to Christ riding into Jerusalem as a conquering king. So, *fear not*: the love of Christ is bigger than the opposition and your fears.

End

Not Life Not Death.DOC

⁸ Marcus Aurelius himself perished in the first plague in AD 180.

⁹ Romans 8:38-39.

¹⁰ Romans 8:37.