

M. Scott Peck said it: *"Life is difficult"* [The Road Less Travelled, p. 15]. Peck suggests sometimes we entertain the crazy notion, *"Life should be easy."* Christians too propagate the myth that once you come to Christ your problems are over. Unfortunately, even the songs we sing spread the cunning lie. *"Running over, running over, my cup is fully and running over. Since the Lord saved me, I'm as happy as can be. My cup is full and running over."* True, sometimes we explode with *"a joy unspeakable and full of glory"* [1 Peter 1:8]. And even in the most difficult times there can be a deep down undercurrent of joy in the Lord. But uninterrupted ecstasy this side of Paradise is a pipe dream. Let me reinforce the image. You're in the Roman Coliseum. Like Russel Crowe's character, Maximus [image] in the movie, *Gladiator*, you can be surrounded by troubles, flanked by spiritual enemies, your relationships, your mind, your body disintegrating before you. Jesus said: *"In this world you will face tribulation. But be of good courage. I have overcome the world"* [John 16:33]. Romans 8 tells us you can be going through your darkest night and still overwhelmingly conquer.

I. UNSHAKABLE CONFIDENCE: A Place to Stand. The first thing Christ equips us with in the coliseum is unshakable confidence. We can stand our ground and fight in the Coliseum of difficulties because we have a place to stand. Archimedes said he could raise the earth from its foundation if he had a long enough lever and an immovable fulcrum; i.e. if he had a place to stand [a pou sto, cf. L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*, p. 56]. Here's an anchor for the soul, something we can hang on to in the darkest hour. Paul writes in vs. 28: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* Don't misread the text. Paul does not say that all things are good. There are plenty of difficulties that rush at us that are not good, many down right evil, others that are not part of God's ultimate purpose for us. Paul writes in vs. 35: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger our sword?"* 7 is the number of fullness. 7 enemies surround us in the coliseum: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword. Such enemies are ready to slice us and dice us. But here is the good news of God's providence. Not all things are good, but God because He is absolutely sovereign He is able to work all things out for the good of His people. Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff is a brilliant philosopher in the Reformed tradition. He taught at Calvin and then later went on to teach at Yale. When his son Erik, was 25. His life was snatched from him in a mountain climbing accident in the Austrian Alps. Nick Wolterstorff the scholar was shredded. How could this horrible thing happen in God's world? Certainly, since God is Sovereign there are plenty of things happen in God's world that He absolutely hates. Lamentations 3:33 brought some comfort to this great philosopher. *"The [Lord] does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men"* [Lamentations 3:33]. Likewise, Fuller Seminary theologian Lewis Smedes wife, Doris, came down with breast cancer. He wrestled with it. Did God, His Father, His Papa do that? He clung to the verse in 1 John 1:5, *"God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."* In a violent, shakable world, this is our unshakable confidence, our rock of Gibraltar, a place to stand. All things are not good, but God works them out for good for those who love God who are called according to His purpose.

II. IRREPRESSIBLE COURAGE: THE COLISEUM. Paul closes chapter 8 with a series of 5 rhetorical questions to which there are

no answers. *"He hurls them into space, as it were, in a spirit of bold defiance. He challenges anybody and everybody, in heaven, earth or hell, to answer them and to deny the truth which they contain"* [Stott, *Romans*, p. 254]. But the questions are absolutely unanswerable. In the face of immense difficulties all that gives us indomitable courage. Paul introduces the series of 5 unanswerable questions by saying, *"What, then, shall we say in response to this?"* [and then proceeds with...]:

Question 1: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" [8:31b]. Imagine again that you're in the coliseum. We are not in the ring alone. There are hostile forces arrayed against us from every direction. Off in one corner of arena [diagram] there's **hostile people**, the persecuting world, that want Shylock's pound of our flesh. In another corner repeatedly we wrestle with **the final enemy, death** and all the mini-deaths that lead to the final gasp of air. In still another edge of the coliseum there is our **fallen human nature: the flesh**, seducing us with all the beasts of desire: the lion of pride, the camel of greed, the wolf of lust, or the tapeworm of gluttony. And what about **the demonic hordes**, the Devil himself and his fallen angels. We are surrounded by enemies. Certainly, if we had to slug it out in the coliseum all alone, we would be fighting a losing battle. But wait, there is an invincible champion who enters the ring with us. Our champion is God Himself. Before Him not one foe stands a chance. *"If God is for us, who can stand, who can prevail against us."*

Question 2: "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?" [8:32] From the Coliseum, Paul takes us to the **cross**. It's not the Son, Paul asks us to look at, but the Father. I cannot imagine the horrific pain that burned in the Father's heart when he offered up his Son, his only Son on the cross. Paul here argues from the greater to the lesser. If the Father made the ultimate sacrifice; lifted the sacrificial knife like Abraham over his Son. [If God broke the bank, gave His very own Son to rescue you, why do you doubt He'll take care of the nickel & dime problems of life.] If God loved you so much that he did not spare his very own Son; won't He see to it that every need of yours is met? *"How can he fail to lavish every other gift upon us?"* [REB].

Question 3: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies" [8:33]. **Question 4: "Who is he that condemns? 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"** [8:34]. With Questions 3 & 4 from the Coliseum and the cross, Paul takes us to the **courtroom**. Satan is our worst nightmare. A lawyer from hell. He shoves his bony finger in our chest and nails us to the legal wall. Yes, on our own we have hundreds of skeletons in our closet. A graveyard of sins, foul-ups, and violations of the legal code. And yes our own consciences echo Satan's accusations. We keep flagellating ourselves, kicking ourselves all over the interior of our brains. How do we deflect our self-inflicted legal blows or the accusations of Satan Himself? This is how. By faith with both fists we grab hold of the new verdict that is ours: not guilty! The Judge of all the earth has spoken and His judgment is irreversible. Who could ever bring a charge against God's elect and imagine that such an accusation could stick. God's not going back on His Word. You are justified! What is more *"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."* Satan is a lawyer from hell, but *"If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One"* [1

John 2:1]. You and I have the best lawyer in the universe. This lawyer, Jesus, loves us so much that he laid down his life for us. And now risen from the dead, He'll never stop pleading our case before the Father. *"He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them"* [Hebrews 7:25]. In the court or coliseum, Satan would hurl his accusations like fiery darts. But because we wear God's armor, the breastplate of Christ's righteousness and lift the shield of faith, we may *"extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one"* [Ephesians 6:16].

III. THE CLIMAX: INVINCIBLE LOVE. We come to the final unanswerable question: **Question 5: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** [8:35a]. Then Paul continues the question pinpointing the worst case scenario. This is the worst a hostile world could hurl at us: *"Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"* As a young pastor 40 plus years ago I would drive early in the morning to Willmar, MN to the Country Kitchen, drink coffee and devour books. One book I feasted on was written by Christian Philosopher, Hendrik Van Riessen, *The Society of the Future*. He argued that historically Christians have been miserably oppressed. For some strange reason in our journey through the wilderness to the city of God we are living in an oasis, a period of unprecedented prosperity. This has not always been the case. The following words leapt up off the page. *"The normal situation for the community of Jesus Christ is not to be influential and prosperous, but poor and oppressed. Jesus says that it is our lot to have tribulations in the world (John 16:33, 2 Tim. 3:12). [The next words hit me like a bolt of lightning] 'We are Christ's sheep...and it so happens that sheep are to be slaughtered'"* [p. 234]. I could not help later than to reflect on that. Paul takes the Psalmist's words in Psalm 44:22 and applies them to the Church when he wrote: *"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered"* [Romans 8:36]. In our journey to the end of history, let there be no illusions, no naivete. We want joy, we want peace, we want uninterrupted bliss. But we're sheep and history is our slaughterhouse. It is our destiny to face death all day long.

Victim or Victor. You're in the coliseum, perhaps the Circus Maximus. You are surrounded by difficulty. wild beasts, angry bulls, hungry tigers, lions and hostile armed enemies without number. They have you cornered. With all the problems you are surrounded with you can play the victim--just stand there in your self pity and take a thrashing, or you can like Russel Crowe's character in *Gladiator*, you can rise up Christian and fight with all the energy Christ pours into you, you can fight and become a victor. Paul uses a very rare word. Most of us have heard of Nike Tennis Shoes, named after Nike the winged goddess of victory [**image**]. People who wear Nikes can soar. But Paul says we're hyper Nike, Super Nike; hupernikomen=super conquerors, turbocharged champions, more than conquerors, more than victors through Him who loved us. This morning the risen Christ wants to breathe bravery into your souls. Paul drives the message home: *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us [drive a wedge between us and] the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* [8:37-39].

This is the invincible love of God: emblazoned on the cross, arisen from an empty tomb, poured out into our hearts by the Spirit. No matter how tough life gets, never wimp out. We

have a place to stand. Because of God's sovereign providence, this is our unshakable confidence: God works all things out for good. There is an unbreakable chain. God chose us before creation. He will not fail to usher us into the glories of a new creation. And yes, we have an invincible champion living in us and with us. *"Greater is He who is in us, than he who is in the world"* [1 John 4:4]. *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go"* [Joshua 1:9]. Rise up, gladiators of Jesus Christ. In the Coliseum of this fallen world, do not be afraid. For Immanuel is with us. He will put on the battle gear and fight with us and for us. And His strength and His love is invincible. He says to you, *"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"* [Hebrews 13:5-6].