

**Psalm 103:1-18**

**Romans 8:26-39**

**July 23, 2016**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **WE SHALL OVERCOME**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, two weeks after his 25th birthday, John Lewis joined 600 other people in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The crowd gathered and knelt for prayer at a downtown Selma church, then began walking silently and two-by-two through the city streets.

Because he was the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, John Lewis was marching at the front of the line. Before the march got started good, it was stopped at the foot of the Edmund Pettis Bridge by 150 Alabama state troopers and sheriff's deputies. The marchers were given a 2-minute warning to disperse. After only a minute and five seconds, the officers attacked the marchers with clubs, bullwhips, and tear gas. John Lewis suffered a fractured skull and had to be treated at a local hospital. "Bloody Sunday" grabbed the nation's attention.

At many Civil Rights gatherings and marches in the 1950's and 1960's, participants sang "We Shall Overcome." In his book titled *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, John Lewis, the long-serving congressman from Georgia, talks about the significance of singing that song, especially when he was jailed, beaten, and faced other suffering. He writes, "It gave you a sense of faith, a sense of strength, to continue the struggle, to continue to push on. And you would lose your sense of fear. You were prepared to march into hell's fire."<sup>1</sup>

"We Shall Overcome" is closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Did you know that through the years the song spread to freedom movements in other countries around the world, such as China, Northern Ireland, South Korea, Lebanon, and parts of Eastern Europe? Five weeks after "Bloody Sunday," in an address to a joint session of Congress about the urgency of passing the Voting Rights Act, President Johnson said, "But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you were surprised to find "We Shall Overcome" in our *Glory to God* hymnbook. If you think about it, though, it's a very appropriate song for us to sing as people who live by the promise of God's victory through Jesus Christ. My guess is most people don't know more than the first verse of "We Shall Overcome," and then maybe not even the refrain. Listen again to the words of the last two verses:

*We are not afraid; we are not afraid;*

*we are not afraid today.  
O, deep in my heart I do believe  
we shall overcome some day!*

*God will see us through; God will see us through;  
God will see us through today.  
O, deep in my heart I do believe  
we shall overcome some day!*

That sounds a lot like Paul's ringing words of hope and affirmation: "What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." In Christ, we are not afraid today, God will see us through today. I do believe we shall overcome some day!

Saturday, June 22, 2013 was Sports Festival Day at the Justo Mwale Theological University College in Lusaka, Zambia. Sports Festival Day is an annual event for the entire college community – students, faculty, administrators, and families, including children. The all-day event includes a wide array of games and activities, including relay races, volleyball, chess, Scrabble, net ball, and, as the highlight at the end of the day, a full 90-minute soccer game.

Each year the community is divided into two teams for the day's competition – The Champions and The Conquerors. Scores from each activity are tallied and, at the end of the day, one of the teams is awarded the much coveted championship trophy.

At the conclusion of the chapel service on Friday, June 21, the Dean of Studies, Dr. Lameck Banda stood up and encouraged everyone to participate in the next day's Sports Festival Day. He said, "I am a Champion. How many other Champions are here today?" There was quite a lot of cheering and booing, depending on one's team loyalty to the Champions or the Conquerors. Then Dr. Banda said, "I'd like to remind all of my fellow Champions what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:37: 'No, in all these things ***we are more than conquerors*** through him who loved us.'" That really got the Champions cheering!

When Zach began his work as our Youth Ministry Leader at the end of May, he set up his church e-mail account. When I got my first e-mail from Zach, I immediately noticed his tagline at the bottom: "I'm absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us." Wednesday night I asked Zach why he picked those two verses to put in his e-mails. He said it was because of the anthem that Pepper Choplin wrote for our church's 125th anniversary in November 2009. Karla commissioned Pepper Choplin to write this very special song, based on these verses from Romans 8. If you've ever heard the choir sing it, you know it starts out quietly and builds to a marvelous crescendo: "For we are more than conquerors over danger, trial and sword. We are more than conquerors through power of the love of our Lord."

Notice that the apostle Paul does **not** say, “In Christ we never have another problem, challenge, heartbreak, or dark time in life.” If you’re a human being, you will suffer. If you’re a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ, you might very well experience even greater challenges because of your faith and your lifestyle. Paul is realistic about life — he certainly experienced his share of the sufferings he talks about. No, Paul says, in Christ we shall overcome any and everything this life can throw at us, because nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

You know as well as I that we do and will go through “the dark night of the soul,” when you find yourself wondering, “Is God really for me?” The poet Shel Silverstein wrote a poem called “Whatif” —

Last night, while I lay thinking here,  
Some Whatifs crawled inside my ear  
And pranced and partied all night long  
And sang their same old Whatif song:  
Whatif I’m dumb in school?  
Whatif they’ve closed the swimming pool?  
Whatif I get beat up?  
Whatif there’s poison ivy in my cup?  
Whatif I start to cry?  
Whatif I get sick and die?  
Whatif I flunk the test?  
Whatif green hair grows on my chest?  
Whatif nobody likes me?  
Whatif a bolt of lightning strikes me?  
Whatif I grow taller?  
Whatif my head starts getting smaller?  
Whatif the fish don’t bite?  
Whatif the wind tears up my kite?  
Whatif they start a war?  
Whatif my parents get divorced?  
Whatif the bus is late?  
Whatif my teeth don’t grow in straight?  
Whatif I tear my pants?  
Whatif I never learn to dance?  
Everything seems swell, and then  
The nighttime Whatifs strike again!

One blogger calls Silverstein’s “Whatifs” the “monkey-mind” — “thoughts jumping around in our mind; springing, leaping in different directions almost as soon as they land.” She writes, “Although this poem is told from a child’s point of view, I think it’s safe to say that as adults we’ve all experienced this type of chatter, too. Our list may

look a bit different — perhaps it would include Whatifs about marriage, career, children, our aging parents.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul’s list of “Whatifs” at the end of Romans 8 includes the big-picture questions and challenges: death and life, angels and demons, present and future, height and depth. I’m going to ask you to join me in a thought experiment. Take a minute and think about your “Whatifs.” What is happening in your life *right now* that makes you question if God is really for you? What is going on with you that threatens to overwhelm you, that makes you feel like you have been separated from God’s love? ... What shall we say about all of these things?

One Saturday, twenty-seven years ago, I had to lay aside the sermon I had worked on all week, and write an entirely new sermon and redo the worship bulletin. On Friday morning, as I was reading an article in the *Raleigh News and Observer* about a murder-suicide in Chapel Hill, a church member called with the news that two members of our congregation in Littleton were the victims in the article I was reading. I still have my hand-written sermon manuscript from Sunday, June 10, 1990. My opening statement to the shocked and sad community of faith that morning was this question from Romans 8: “What then shall we say to this?” In that morning meditation, I shared this thought: “In preparing this meditation, I read two statements which leapt out at me because of their truth and applicability to the circumstances in which we find ourselves this morning. First, ‘the gospel of Christ’s resurrection does not eliminate the fear of death. Rather, it gives us a positive support to live with it — the reinforcement we need for the ‘great leap of faith.’ In other words, what can we say in the face of all of this? Exactly this: that we believe that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ, because God himself chose to be with us, Immanuel, to the close of the age. We are not alone.”

Three months later I got an urgent phone call from a member of the other congregation Nancy and I served. The father simply said, “Phil, come to the house. John has shot himself.” John was in his early 20’s. He had gone through some rough times, but seemed to be getting his life together. But he went upstairs in his parents’ house late one afternoon and killed himself. A few days later, the meditation at his funeral was based on Romans 8. In that meditation I spoke to the overflowing congregation that was grappling with what had happened: “The love of God in Christ Jesus gives us hope in the midst of our sorrow, pain, and questions: hope that what seems to be the final victory of death is merely an appearance; hope that life prevails through Jesus Christ; hope that saves; hope that sustains us, even in the face of cruel events which taunt, “Where is your God?”; hope that God’s love for us in Jesus Christ is greater than any tragedy, as painful as it is; hope in a God who understands the pain and sorrow, who wants only life for his creation and his people, and who loves us enough to have brought about that very hope for us in Jesus Christ.”

Four weeks ago tomorrow, Fred called and told me that Royal and Jennifer’s 3-month old baby girl, Lacey, had died. As we gathered in this sanctuary for Lacey’s service the following Friday, I began my meditation with these questions, “What then are we to say about these things? What indeed?” And I shared these remarks: “In our

weakness today, it may be hard to see the hope and love. But that's why Paul's words are such good news in times such as these. The hope and love we need for today and for the future do not depend on our feeble attempts. Rather, they are rooted in God's unfailing love for us in Jesus Christ. That's why Paul can make a list of all of the challenges and obstacles we face in life — even death itself — and still say with conviction, "This is what we have to say about these things! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor 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."

Brothers and sisters, because of God's unfailing love for us in Jesus Christ, from which nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us, "O, deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome some day!"

***Let us pray: Almighty God, you have given victory to Christ, your anointed one and, through him, victory to us, also. Give us strength to stand firm, trusting in the grace, peace, and love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Noah Adams, "The Inspiring Force of 'We Shall Overcome' A Song That Sustains Through Struggle," August 28, 2013 at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

<sup>2</sup>"LBJ, March 15, 1965, Address to Joint Session of Congress on Voting Legislation," at [www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com).

<sup>3</sup>Leslie Green, " 'WHATIF' by Shel Silverstein," May 7, 2017 at [www.trustlifetoday.com](http://www.trustlifetoday.com).