

MORE THAN CONQUERORS

Ted Schroder, January 3, 2010

“Invictus” is Latin for unconquerable. It is also the title of a poem by W.E. Henley that inspired Nelson Mandela during his years in prison, and that of the movie about the South African Springboks winning the World Cup. Henley writes about his “unconquerable soul.”

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| “In the fell clutch of circumstance | It matters not how strait the gate, |
| I have not winced nor cried aloud. | How charged with punishments the scroll, |
| Under the bludgeonings of chance | I am the master of my fate: |
| My head is bloody but unbowed..... | I am the captain of my soul.” |

St. Paul also maintained an unconquerable soul in prison. How could he survive and flourish when he faced suffering and execution? What could sustain his spirits, and affirm his value? At moments of loneliness in the cell, what could he look forward to?

He was a repeat offender, incarcerated more often than he cared to remember. Not that he was a criminal, but because he challenged the popular culture, proclaimed a higher authority than the government, incensed the local pagan priests, took away the profits of those who fed off the misery of others, and helped to free those who were enslaved and abused.

He was physically punished by being flogged with the cat o’ nine tails five times. Each time he received 39 lashes. His back had been torn and bloodied until he could not stand upright and his friends had to rescue him and nurse him back from the brink of death. Three times he had been beaten with hard wooden rods. He had been stoned almost to death. He had been shipwrecked three times and left to drown on the open sea.

He had traveled in dangerous parts, crossing rivers and mountains. He had known threats from bandits, strangers, false friends, and gangs on the streets of the cities. He had suffered from hunger and thirst, lack of adequate clothing, freezing cold and searing heat. He lived a harder life than most. (2 Cor.11:23-27)

He had faced all sorts of trouble: mental distress, worries that upset him, disturbed him, afflicted, grieved, saddened, tormented, annoyed, and discouraged him. He had financial troubles, and troubles with colleagues that depressed him. They threatened to separate him from the love of Christ, from the peace that his faith brought.

Yes, he had faced hardship: severe adversity, hurts, difficulties, misfortunes, accidents, mishaps, unexpected blows, reversals, setbacks, tragedies that afflicted him out of the blue.

He had endured persecution: unjustified criticism, attacks, misrepresentations, abuse, bullying, harassment, provocation without cause, injustice and cruelty. Yet, he could still write, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: *‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’* [Psalm 44:22] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:35-37)

In other parts of the world such trouble, hardship and persecution takes the form of famine, nakedness and the sword – physical hunger, vulnerability to theft of one’s clothes and other belongings, and even death, torture, and bodily injury.

Paul was familiar with all these things. He knew what he was talking about. He was no armchair theologian speaking from an ivory tower. What gave him his assurance, his courage, his resilience?

He said that he endured these things for the sake of Christ. He quoted Ps.44:22. The world considers all these sufferings as evidence of being forgotten by God, of being defeated by evil, of being separated from the love of Christ, but Paul sees them as evidence of signs of fellowship with the One who died on the Cross; the One who loved him and all the world. Just as we are considered sheep to be slaughtered, Christ was the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world, the One who took our place – “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7) This proves God’s love for us in Christ more than anything else can do.

We cannot be separated from the love of Christ by trouble, hardship or persecution because that is where the love of Christ lies. It is through such sufferings that salvation is achieved. When we suffer for the sake of Christ, we enter into his sufferings for our sake, which result in a victory over sin, the world, and the devil. By sharing in his sufferings, and becoming one with him in his death by faith, we triumph over death, we conquer mortality, we attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil.3:10)

A conqueror is someone who has overcome opposition by superior strength. William the Conqueror and his Norman invaders overcame King Harold and his Saxon army at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and won the right to rule England. Julius Caesar announced the victory of Zela by which he concluded the Pontic campaign with the words: “*Vini, Vidi, Vici* – I came, I saw, I conquered.” The Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363), who opposed Christianity, found he could not defeat the Gospel of Christ. His dying words were “*Vicisti, Galilae* – You have conquered, Galilean.”

“Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Muhammad and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all the philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of the school, he spoke words of life such as were never spoken before nor since and produced effects that lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he has set more pens in motion and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, works of art, learned volumes, and sweet songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.” Philip Schaff (1819-1893)

Paul claimed that all who are followers of Christ are “more than conquerors” over all troubles and dangers because they can never be separated from the love of Christ. It is the love of Christ that gives us the power to conquer all things.

So through the clouds of Calvary –
There shines his face, and I believe that evil dies,
And good lives on, loves on, and conquers all –
All wars must end in peace. These clouds are lies.
They cannot last. The blue sky is the truth.
For God is Love. Such is my faith, and such
My reasons for it, and I find them strong
Enough. And you? You want to argue?
Well, I can’t. It is a choice.
I choose the Christ.

G.A. Studdert-Kennedy

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