



Gregory Sterling, Dean of Yale Divinity School
“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

On January 23, 1906, Nevada Taylor, a white woman, was attacked and raped while she walked home from a streetcar stop in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her initial description of the assailant was vague: she had not gotten a good look at him and was unsure whether he was black or white, only that he had approached her from behind and placed a leather strap around her neck. She was only able to describe his basic size and voice. The next morning the Hamilton County Sheriff, Joseph Shipp, arrested James Broaden, a black man, who roughly fit the description from Ms. Taylor. The following day Sheriff Shipp arrested Ed Johnson, another black man, after receiving a report that Johnson had been seen holding a leather strap near the streetcar stop. Worried that a mob would lynch both Broaden and Johnson, Sheriff Shipp transferred them to Nashville. Johnson was quickly indicted by a Grand Jury and returned to Chattanooga for trial. During the trial Ms. Taylor said that she believed that Johnson was her assailant but would not swear to it. Johnson was convicted after three days and sentenced to hang on March 13th.

Two African-American attorneys took up Johnson’s case and persuaded the governor to issue a 10 day stay of execution. Noah Parden, one of the attorneys, used the stay to travel to Washington, D.C. where he met with U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan. Justice Harlan granted a second stay on March 19th to provide time for an appeal in the US Supreme Court. On that same night, Sheriff Shipp and his chief deputy excused the guards at the jail except for one elderly man and moved all the prisoners except Johnson and a white woman. Shipp spent time in the restroom while a dozen or so men lynched Ed Johnson at the Walnut Street Bridge. Unsatisfied with the hanging they shot him 50 times until someone shot the rope and he fell. When a deputy sheriff saw the body flinch, he put an additional five rounds into his head at point blank range. Shipp blamed the U.S. Supreme Court for Johnson’s death, claiming that their interference led to the actions of the mob. The disregard of Justice Harlan’s stay and Shipp’s challenge led to the only criminal trial in the history

of the U.S. Supreme Court: the United States vs. Shipp. Shipp and several others were found guilty of contempt of court.

Throughout the entire process Johnson maintained his innocence. While he was in jail, Johnson was baptized. His tombstone contains his final words: “God Bless you all. I AM A Innocent Man. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.” Ninety-four years later, in February 2000, Hamilton County Criminal Judge Doug Meyer overturned Johnson’s conviction.

There are too many cases of Ed Johnson’s in the history of the United States. Where was his legal champion in Chattanooga? He eventually had three, but they were too little, too late—even though one was a justice of the United States Supreme Court!

It is against the imagined background of court injustice that Paul wrote the close of his second major unit of argumentation in Romans. It was a scene that he knew from his own experience and would eventually end in his own death. Paul asks four questions and offers four answers. The rhythmic character of the passage makes it one of the most powerful statements in the New Testament; however, the power flows more from the intensity of Paul’s existential engagement with the issues than from the beauty of the language—although the language is powerful.

The first question Paul asks is: “If God is for us, who is against us?” The implied answer is No one. Although there may be many against us, who are they in comparison to the one God? Paul speaks with the confidence of Second Isaiah or the Psalmists whose expressions of confidence are unforgettable. We all remember the 23rd Psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with you; your rod and your staff—they will comfort me” (Ps 23:4).

Paul answers that we know that God is for us because like Abraham, God did not spare the only Son. This is how we know that God is for us. When I was a young boy, my father was a guest speaker at a church in Oregon. We stayed with a family that had a beautiful home near a river. After meeting the mother and a boy a little older than I was, I asked my Dad where the boy’s father was. My Dad explained that earlier in the spring, the boy had accompanied his father who ran a logging crew. Somehow the boy had wandered off down the hillside. A large group of logs broke free and began rolling. When the father saw his son in the path of the logs,

he ran and threw him out of the way but was crushed. While I was only five or so at the time, I have never forgotten this. It is a heroic story of a father's love. As I listened to my Dad tell the story, I was confident that he would do the same for me. This is how we would define a parent's love for a child. Yet this is not how Paul did. In Paul's statement God gave the son to save others, namely us. A parent who gives her or his life for a child is heroic; a parent who gives the life of a child for the sake of others is divine.

The second question is more overtly forensic: "Who will charge God's elect?" Who will dare to file charges against us when the accuser knows that God is the judge who pronounces us innocent. I wonder what Ed Johnson thought when he looked at Judge S. D. McReynolds and the all-white jury at his trial in Chattanooga? Clearly the judge was unconcerned about the need for the prosecution to prove a case "beyond a shadow of doubt." Johnson must have known that the case did not even need to reach a preponderance of evidence to be convincing. Evidence was not required; a guilty verdict was. Even more surprising was the actions of the Sheriff Shipp and the mob who defied Justice Harlan of the Supreme Court. One of the assassins pinned a note to Johnson's bullet riddled corpse that read: "To Justice Harlan. Come get your n--r now."

Paul knew what it was like to be tried as an innocent person and held to his faith in God. He affirmed that God declares us innocent and defied any to declare otherwise. The Apostle is probably thinking of the Third Servant Song in Second Isaiah that is best known because of the line "therefore I have set my face like flint" that affirms the confidence the Servant had in God against all opponents. The text culminates with the words that inspired our text: "Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?" (Isa 50:7-9).

The third question, "Who is the one who condemns?" again assumes the answer is No one. Who would condemn us for whom Jesus died, was raised, enthroned, and now intercedes? Who would condemn us with such an Advocate? One of the earliest translators of the Bible into English was John Wycliffe whose translation from the Latin Vulgate into Middle English was completed ca. 1384. Wycliffe's translation was part of a larger frame of thought: he argued for the authority of the Scriptures over against ecclesiastical authority. His open critiques of the ecclesiastical establishment led to a series of arrests and trials, yet he died a natural death. It was not until 1428, more than forty years after his death, that his corpse was exhumed and burned. How did

Wycliffe escape this fate in life? He had a friend in the Court, John of Gaunt, who protected him. Ed Johnson did not have a John of Gaunt and lost his life. Paul is telling us that we have a John of Gaunt and even more than a John of Gaunt, we have the enthroned Lord who will plead our case!

The fourth question comes to the heart of the matter, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul expands the question with a list of hardships, a list that he used in other letters to indicate that although he was personally weak, he endured severe hardships through the strength provided by the Lord. In the present list he offers seven tests and then cites Ps 44:22 (LXX 43:23), a text that later rabbis would use to refer to the Maccabean and Hadrianic martyrs. Perhaps it was already used as a way of describing martyrdom—at least the image of sheep set for slaughter is unforgettable and appropriate.

It is, however, Paul’s answer that we cannot forget: “we are more than conquerors” he begins. He then explains what he means by using the first singular “I am convinced.” It is an emphatic statement that suggests he is speaking from his soul. If you have ever wondered what drove this single-minded man to live the life he did, here is the answer. It comes in four contrasting pairs with two single items mixed into the list. Paul affirmed that nothing could separate us from God’s love in Christ:

neither death nor life—the greatest powers we know;
 neither angels nor rulers—none of the full range of supernatural beings;
 neither things present nor things to come—not time;
 nor powers—no celestial being;
 neither height nor depth—not all of space or the beings that inhabit that space;
 nor any other creature—God is the Creator, all else are creatures and subject to the
 Creator.

We have reason to be confident. When I interviewed for the deanship, Linda Lorimer asked me what most attracted me and what most concerned me about the position. I replied that my answer to the two questions was one and the same: the opportunity to make a real difference in the world through one of the most important divinity schools in the world. What attracted me was the opportunity to make a difference; what worried me was that a great deal lay outside my control. When I got back to Indiana and thought about this, I wondered if I

had said too much. One night I awoke around 3 a.m. in a panic, sat upright in bed, and wondered if I could deliver. I began to think about the people here and realized that the task did not depend on one individual: we are a community, and this requires a community effort. I then remembered these words of Paul and other texts and realized that I needed faith, the faith that is completely confident in God.

We live in a period when many of us are shaken. We are worried that there will be more Ed Johnsons. We are worried that rather than a kinder and gentler world, we will live in a world marked by conflict and cruelty. We are worried that people for whom we care will be taken away. We are concerned that the world that we thought was becoming more just has made a U turn and is becoming more unjust. Like you, I am apprehensive. Whatever happens, remember this text. We stand innocent before God and no one can remove us from God's love. *No one*. May we set our faces like flint and remember "If God is for us, who is against us?"

It was common to conclude an ancient liturgy with a doxology. The same practice became a traditional close for a prayer and then a section of text or even a document. Paul used doxologies to conclude several sections of Romans. An ancient scribe recognized this and added a beautiful doxology to the end of Romans. We use it as a means of closing our worship today.

"Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen."