

**Nothing Can Separate**  
**Romans 8:26-39**  
**July 30, 2023**

This passage is a favorite. I read it as I sit or kneel by the bedside of a person ill or dying. I use it often in a memorial or out in our columbarium. It is filled with hope and promises and theology and grace.

Yet, one pastor said, “This is the goriest chapter in all of the New Testament.” The reason is you can count at least 20 things that can undo us: suffering, weakness, frustration, decay, ignorance, trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death, life, angels, demons, powers, the present, the future, heights, depths, “and as if that were not enough, ‘anything else in all creation.’” (John Piper)

I read it to those going through their own sufferings and failures and anxieties and illnesses. Because across all these things we can write: nothing can separate us from God’s love.

So, let’s take a deeper look at this scripture passage. There is too much here to cover it all, so I will blatantly pick out my favorite parts.

Actually, let’s start with a part that I would rather avoid: predestined. A good old-fashioned Presbyterian word. It comes after the most glorious of verses of hope that is quoted by many a Christian: verse 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.”

Note that it does not say God causes all things. It says God takes all things and makes good out of it for those who love God. God is at work in all circumstances of our lives – good and bad.

Then the passage jumps right into predestination. Yet, the kind of predestination discussed here is not concerned about salvation, who gets into heaven, or who is chosen to serve God. Rather, it is talking about becoming like of Jesus.

The passage says we are “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

God takes all those things that happen to us – good and bad – and uses them to make us like Jesus.

Some will say, “Why doesn’t God just take away all suffering?” We need to keep in mind that when Jesus came to earth, he did not take suffering away. Jesus did not explain suffering, instead Jesus entered into it. In fact, scriptures says that Jesus still has his scars from being here on earth. Being human is not easy.

Our hope is not that we will escape distress or peril, but that our Gracious and Almighty God takes every one of our agonies and makes them an instrument of good. So we become more like Christ.

And not only an instrument of good, the passage says we become more than conquerors. How can we become more than conquerors? Think of the company Nike. If you really think about it, it is a strange word for a company. Yet, the company is so famous that we don’t think about the word nike. It just is.

The word nike is a Greek word and is contained in the Greek phrase “more than conquerors.” Nike means victory. In fact, the Greek word used here sounds like hyper nike, more than victors.

We are more than conquerors when we encounter terrorism, warfare, job loss, cancer, bankruptcy because nothing can separate us from the love of God. We will experience the full forces of hardship over the course of our lives. The promise is that such events will not overpower God’s presence and never-ending love with us every day.

Another favorite scripture passage I use with people overcome by hard forces of this earth is from Isaiah 40: 10 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

This passage was the mantra of a women dying of a brain tumor. We always ended our time together with her saying “I am in God’s grip.” It became the theme of her memorial service because she was still in God’s grip.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God. For we are conquerors. Not just conquerors, but more than conquerors. Tribulation and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and peril and sword are not just defeated, they are turned into servants for our good because God has God’s grip on you.

One pastor said it this way: “Take a moment, and savor every word. God is for us! Your family may have turned their backs on you, your child may have disappointed you, your job may have disappeared into the thin air of layoffs and cutbacks ... but the maker of the mountains is for you. The One who laid the floor of the oceans is for you. The one who scattered the more than 100 billion stars over 100 billion galaxies, in what scientists say is a length of more than 30 million light years with a playful toss of his hand, is for you!” (John Piper)

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, so unshakable, a love so powerful that it turns every circumstance into a triumph. And it will grasp you. We are in the grip of God’s love.

Therefore, because of God’s presence, God is not hidden. God is in even in the smallest of wonders.

At our adult VBS class, I reminded them about a book called *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, hid Jews in their home during WW II in the Netherlands. They were eventually caught and put in a concentration camp.

The building where they were kept was infested with bugs and insects of all kinds. Corrie’s sister, Betsie, praised God for the bugs. The reason? Because of the bugs, the Nazi soldiers would not come into their building. So they were able to live without a lot of oversight by the soldiers. Thus, Betsie said, “Praise God for bugs!” Finding God in the smallest of wonders even in a concentration camp.

This is the business of the church: God spotting. We walk with you, encourage you to spot God’s presence in any situation.

This church went through the deepest of grieves when our senior pastor died suddenly seven years ago, but in the months and years ahead, we learned new ways to spot the presence and love of God even in the midst of our pain. God took our failures and worked it for good until today we are experiencing a resurrection.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Sometimes there are times when we cannot articulate or pray in the midst of our pain and troubles. The very beginning of this passage gives us another reason to hope that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Re-read it with me: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

On Friday, when I was writing and typing out this sermon. At this very point in the sermon, my wrist and hand began to hurt. Typing is difficult at times. I went and put on my brace (do so in front of people) and it eased my pain.

As many of you know, I broke my left arm at the end of April. Those of you who have broken bones know this: it is not just the bone, but the ligaments, tendons, muscles and nerves are injured as well. My broken bone is healed, but my wrist and hand are still swollen and painful.

I will frequently throughout the day, turn my wrist a certain way and I will groan, sometimes yell out with pain. I will try to figure out what movement I had done that caused the pain because I don't want to do it again, but I can't articulate it. All I know is that it hurts and I groan out loud. So, I put on my brace and it keeps me from moving my wrist in a painful way.

When we do not know how to pray, when we are unable to express our needs to God, whenever life confronts us with pain, when we run out of words, or we become completely inarticulate, the Spirit "intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Romans 8:26).

This brace reminds me when I groan that the Holy Spirit groans or prays for me when I cannot. Nothing can separate us from the love of God because the Holy Spirit prays for us.

Charles Stanley, a pastor and author, passed away recently. He told the story of a professor he had in seminary who had a unique way of teaching his students the concept of grace...that is, the unconditional, ever-present love of God.

"One of my more memorable seminary professors had a practical way of illustrating to his students the concept of grace. At the end of his evangelism course he would distribute the exam, and caution the class to read it all the way through before beginning to answer it. This caution was written on the exam as well. As we read the test, it became unquestionably clear to each of us that we had not studied nearly enough.

"The further we read, the worse it became. About halfway through, audible groans could be heard throughout the lecture hall. On the last page, however, was a note that read, "You have a choice. You can either complete the exam as given or sign your name at the bottom and in so doing receive an A for this assignment."

"We sat there stunned," Stanley said. "Was he serious? Just sign it and get an A? Slowly, the point dawned on us, and one by one we turned in our tests and silently filed out of the room.

"When I talked with the professor about it afterward, he shared some of the reactions he had received through the years. Some students began to take the exam without reading it all the way through, and they would sweat it out for the entire two hours of class time before reaching the last page.

"Others read the first two pages, became angry, turned the test in blank, and stormed out of the room without signing it. They never realized what was available.

"One fellow, however, read the entire test, including the note at the end, but decided to take the exam anyway. He did not want any gifts; he wanted to earn his grade. And he did. He made a C+, but he could easily have had an A."

So hear the words of Romans 8 to get an A, so to speak. There is no need to depend on your good works to obtain God's approval. There is no need to give up trying to make the grade. There is no need to spend a lifetime being angry at God when God desires to give you grace, that unconditional love that can never be separated from you. God already has a grip on you and already given you an A. All you need to do is receive it.

May we be in wonder of that love that holds us. May it fill our minds.

You are going to help me end this sermon. When I raise my hand, I want you to say, "God loves me." May the love of God fill our minds at the beginning of the day (God loves me), and then again at midmorning (God loves me), and then at noon (God loves me), and then at mid-afternoon (God loves me), and then at supper time (God loves me), and then at bedtime (God loves me).

Amen. And now, we sing it....Jesus Loves Me.