

Romans 8:18-39
What Then Shall We Say?
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This week was a revelation to us. Whether you know it or not, God revealed something through you this week. I believe God pulled back the curtain on a dimension of life, call it heaven, call it the Kingdom of God, call it glory, that was—as of yet—unknown to us. But Jonathan, you're a pastor, isn't this supposed to happen to you all the time? Well when a person beholds a dimension of God's ever-loving presence and power that they've never seen, words in a book cannot begin to express the what we see with our eyes. And nothing can prepare you for it, and the only response is simply to fall down in worship. What we experienced, I believe, is the peace that comes with the Kingdom of God.

If you are here and perhaps this is your first week, or you weren't here last week, you're probably thinking: that's a pretty cryptic statement, what's he talking about? Let me explain. A few weeks ago, we received news that was altogether discouraging, our hope sunk straight through the floor. My wife Amy got the diagnosis that once again cancer had returned to her body. However we didn't have much time to sulk. Immediately you went to work making phone calls and helping us think through this next phase of life—when we were all but incapable of doing it for ourselves.

Last week, because of a connection here at Wabash Presbyterian, we spend three days at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda MD, meeting with a team of Scientists and Doctors who are, quite literally, on the front line working to cure cancer—particularly the strain of melanoma that is currently intruding and unwelcome in my wife Amy's body.

What is being revealed however, through you and in you, is something much bigger than “thoughts and prayers.” What is being revealed in you is what the Apostle Paul calls the revealing of the children of God. Very simply the Christ who indwells each one of you has something he intends to do in and through you to the world—more specifically the pastor and his wife—you've joined with the Father and the Spirit in loving so dearly.

This story that we're sharing with you is one that you've also shared with us from your lives. It may sound different, but we all know the refrain, lives that groan in some way, longing to be made whole.

So, what then shall we say?

Well for starters, in times like these it's not what we shall say, but what God says that matters. And nothing speaks to the corners of our hearts where fear and hurt reside like Holy Scripture. From Romans 8, starting at verse 18.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the

whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in ^[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes ^[b] for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes ^[c] with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, ^[d] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit ^[e] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ^[f]

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good ^[g] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ^[h] ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ^[i] ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake, we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

How do you do it? How do you keep faith alive in the midst of all of what life brings? This was the question that was asked me Thursday of this week as I sat in a waiting room by a woman named Sister Janice Smith. Janice was there for the same reason I was, and at that moment both her husband ___ and Amy were back getting CT Scans. We had another thing in common as well, he was the Assistant Pastor of Mt Olive Baptist Church in Manassas Virginia. We both had communities of faith holding us up in prayer

How are we getting by? Little did we know, but God was answering that very question as we sat there in the waiting room. By, what I believe was divine appointment we began to speak and share, and the Holy Spirit joined us—in the midst of everything we were both feeling. with one another, and right in the midst of our great worry and fear, the Holy Spirit came and sat near us in our moment of

Romans 8 is a hinge-point in Paul's great letter. In the chapters that precede this one Paul lays out what it means to be a Christian. To sum what he says up very simply, Paul says that what we are offered through faith in Christ is a freedom from and a freedom for. In Jesus Christ, we receive freedom from sin, death, and the power of evil in our lives. In chapters 5-7 we have that mirror pointed back at us. Paul was like us, he faced it all, he felt as we do the random and uncalculated effects of suffering, and the intensely personal feelings when it seems as though it point directly at

us. Paul recognizes that the 24-7 turbulence that flows through every one of us, flowed through him as well. Through Christ we no longer have to live enslaved to these things, but in Christ we are set free from them.

Well how does he do it? Here in chapter 8 he shifts his attention, instead of focusing on the dichotomy between the law and faith or the law and grace, Paul turns and focuses his attention on the freedom we have in the Holy Spirit. For the next four chapters, he will tell us of a life that is available to those who place their hope in Christ Jesus.

Beginning with verse 1: **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** And how is it that we are *in Christ Jesus*? By the ministry of the Holy Spirit that speaks to our hearts. Verse 11: **If the Spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead lives in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you.** I cannot tell you how many times we have spoken this verse to ourselves this week.

I want to tell you that if you are feeling this condemnation, this accusation, whatever it might be these words are for you. Speak them to yourself, preach them to your soul, the Holy Spirit will remind you that what you have in Jesus is assurance that this is all not random, that you aren't facing this alone. That's how the enemy likes to work. The enemy loves to isolate and alienate, you're the only one who's going through this, and there's no one to share it with you. That's a lie, Jesus knows you, he knows what you're going through, that's why he came, to be with you. And he's with you by the presence and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

But as fear and worry crept in we, by the Spirit do not fall back into fear, but reminded ourselves with verse 15 that **we have received the Spirit of adoption as sons and daughters of God, by whom we cry Abba, Father.** This is the Aramaic word that Jesus used to cry out daddy, help. That reminded him as it reminds us that we are the children, beloved children of God, and not only children, but heirs with him as well. The Holy Spirit is that presence that lives within us that reminds us when we're strong and when we're weak, that above all we belong to Christ, in mind body and soul.

You belong to Christ, and there is nothing that compares to a life in which Jesus Christ is being revealed in you. A life that is in Christ is important not only for us, but it is important for the whole world, because it points the rest of creation to what Paul calls the fulfillment of the created order. What do our lives, lived in faith and obedience to Christ point others to?

They point toward heaven, toward the Kingdom of God, toward what Paul calls the fulfillment of all things. Paul begins our reading by saying **I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is being revealed in us. For the creation (everything in all creation animals, land, humans) waits in eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.**

Then he goes on in verse 20 to say something interesting: **For the whole creation was subjected in futility.** Here he is reminding us of the choice that was made in the garden. Adam and Even when they chose to eat the fruit, Paul says that they were subjected to the futility of sin, and we continue to live in the effects of that futility. But Paul does something interesting here, he surprises us: we think he's going to say that we are subjected to the effects of sin in judgement. But here

Paul says, not in judgement, **but hope** that one day creation itself will be set free from bondage and obtain the future glory.

This is Paul's view of the whole created order. God loves this creation, he loves your life, your body, God loves this world, and the mountains, and the rivers, and the oceans, and the animals. This is why it's so important for us to value and protect the environment. My friends as we go through our lives we are a part of the fulfillment of creation. God is moving toward the renewal of this world. The Kingdom of God is not going to be a place we all get whisked away to when this world is finally used up. God's not going to one day discard this world and replace it with a better one, no the book of Revelation says that the Kingdom of God is with man, and that the new creation, the new Jerusalem is coming down out of heaven to be fulfilled here in this creation. That is the direction towards which we are all moving, you and me, and all, fulfillment.

God loves concrete things, it's why we should love concrete things like lakes and mountains, and trees, and rivers, and especially people. We don't believe in the immortality of a vaporous soul, but Christians we believe in the resurrection of the body. When Jesus walked out of the tomb on Easter that was the beginning of everlasting life. This is what he means in Colossians 1 when he says that **Jesus is the firstborn of all creation.**

What God is moving toward is fulfillment. Everything is going to be fulfilled. Think of how exciting this is for your life now. It means nothing is going to be lost, that what is dear to us, what we pursue, what we aspire to in this life will be fulfilled in new creation. That means, if you're 80 years old why not take up learning to play an instrument. Take piano lessons, learn to paint, write a book, learn a new language, you don't have to stop, you don't have to slow down, this story is not coming to a close, it's only beginning. God is going to fulfill your life. He's going to fulfill this world. That's the vision of heaven.

Paul makes this very clear, he says that the whole created order stands on tiptoes waiting for this to happen. People are yearning to see and feel the people of God living life like this. In verse 28 Paul continues saying that **in all things God works for good, for those who love him.** Notice he doesn't say all things are good, there's a lot in our world that is not good. When Paul writes this Gladiator games are going on in the Coliseum, people are being fed to the lions when Paul writes this. But what he is saying is that God is not disarmed by evil, God is not deterred by evil, but in all things God is working for the fulfillment of creation, and we his people have a special role to play in that fulfillment.

Here's where we come to one of the most misunderstood and often discussed ideas in all of scripture. Paul says in verse 29: for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. Predestination has caused a lot of trouble for some because they think it is fatalism, God chooses some and not others. But this is not what Paul is saying at all. It's just saying that God who has a purpose for your life, he knew you ahead of time, and he decided ahead of time something about you.

Now listen to what he decided about you ahead of time. That **you should be conformed to the image of Christ in order that Jesus Christ might be the firstborn among a large family.** This is predestination, God made a decision about us, that we should discover Christ's love and be conformed in it in order that many people would experience that love too. This is a missionary

passage. Let me say it again, God decided before the foundations of the world that we should discover God's love, so that that love of Christ might be known by many people.

God helps us know him by his spirit, and helps us to know that we have a role to play in his created order. You have a role to play both here and into eternity. Think about the experiences that you go through, how our lives become a witness to the new creation that is taking place in us. Our bodies are being prepared for the fulfillment of this creation, the story doesn't end it's just beginning. The work of our hands and the gifts that we share here in this world doesn't end, but will continue into eternity. If you're a woodworker or someone who works on engines, or someone who paints or writes poetry that gift that brings glory to God and brings joy to your heart will continue forever and ever.

Not only does this give us so much to look forward to one day, but it informs us on how we should live our lives here and now. It gives a whole new spin on retirement. Retirement, when you do something you love should never be an option, why not keep doing it all the way up to the end, because when God fulfills all things you'll be able to continue doing the thing you love. As one theologian says "we live from the future for the present, not for the future." This is heaven.

The last thing Paul wants us to know from this passage is that this truth is unshakable. **For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor cancer, nor Alzheimer's, nor joblessness, nor loneliness, nor depression, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Jesus Christ is the one who is revealing the Kingdom of God in you, it's his Spirit that unveils through you and me the fulfillment of creation. It's Jesus Christ who uses gives life and strength and hope to our experiences, and it's Jesus Christ who rescues us. What then shall we say, if Jesus Christ is for us, who can be against us? Let us pray.