When Life Stinks

Rev. Rick Hull ~ Romans 8:18-39 ~ November 1, 2026

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Our Condition – Suffering in Hope
18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are
not worth comparing with the glory that is to be
revealed to us.

19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the
revealing of the sons of God; 20 for the creation was
subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will
of him who subjected it in hope; 21 because the creation
itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and
obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning
in travail together until now; 23 and not only the
creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of
the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as
sons, the redemption of our bodies.

24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is
seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But
if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with
patience.

Our Lord's Connection – Intimate Access
26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we
do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit
himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.
27 And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is
the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for
the saints according to the will of God.

Our Companion – Divine Commitment
28 We know that in everything God works for good
with those who love him, 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 first-born among many brethren. 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.

31 What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who
is against us?

32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up
for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? 33
Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is
God who justifies; 34 who is to condemn? Is it Christ
Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who
is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for
us?

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall
tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or
nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For
thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are
regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

Our Lord's Conquest – The Abundant Victory
37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.

38 For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor principalities, 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.
(Romans 8:18-39, RSV)

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It was the summer of 1988. Yellowstone National Park. It was the year of the great Yellowstone fire. Down at Old Faithful you could see the flames above the ridge in the distance. The fire had gone on for days and a heat inversion was trapping every smell in the Yellowstone bowl.

I was hiking through the Norris Geyser Basin. And, thankfully, the family was elsewhere. It was hot and sticky, and the overwhelming stink of sulfur vapors seemed almost too much to bear. I mumbled and fumed and sweated out my anger as I climbed uphill on that boardwalk.

"Whose idea was this vacation anyhow!?!" I was in no mood for pleasantries. When around the bend, a family came toward me – Mom and Dad and two kids – daughter about 6 and son about 10. And mom seemed to be in the middle of a Sunday School lesson.

I heard her say, "And God created all of this!" To which the ten-year-old piped up: **"Wow! He sure did a good job!"** That, dear friends, was a Children's Sermon in reverse! I have never been so eloquently mocked!

Now, to fully appreciate what the kid said, let me invite you to take out the bulletin scripture page and walk through these beautiful words as Paul insists that our Lord ***"sure does a good job!"***

We begin with an astonishing premise. It's one that I teach in my New Testament Theology classes. If we are to see our Lord's Hand – and follow His leading – we need to read our theology and spiritual history **backwards.** In fact, that has been the way of Believers from the very beginning!

We are the people who read our theology backwards. For example, we love the biblical Christmas stories. But we celebrate them with joy because we know how it all ends – with the Resurrection and the victory of the Empty Tomb. We honor the teachings and commands of God in the Old Testament, because in the New Testament Jesus instructed us in them, and fulfilled them, as He sent us to shape the world by living them out!

So, let's use the lens at the bottom of the text -- to guide our study of everything that precedes it. Verses 38 & 39 are the menu of all the things that **cannot separate you** from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Death can't separate you -- Even in the greatest losses of life, He is quietly there, holding you in all the things that break your heart. Not just in the loss of dear loved ones, or the fear of dying ourselves, but in all of life's sudden changes and unwelcome endings.

Life can't separate you -- He stands with you in the stresses of living. Whether it's the brokenness of our immediate world, or the pains of health issues, or the burdens that engulf the day, His love is still there.

Angels can't separate you -- He is your Sovereign Lord, and no spiritual influence, whether heavenly or Satanic can separate you … ever!

Principalities can't separate you -- The powers that rule earthly systems, with all their brokenness and breakdowns, cannot thwart your Lord's personal presence.

Powers can't separate you -- He stands above all the things that would dominate you – all the corruptions, power-plays, and disasters that abuse and victimize both the weakest and the strongest of us.

Things **present can't separate you --** He is alive and acting in this current moment – when life is at peace, and when it is chaotic and fragmented.

Things **to come can't separate you --** When the future is uncertain, and you fear what may be lurking around the next corner, He is already there, waiting – already holding *the you* that has not yet arrived.

Height can't separate you -- When we aspire to the heights, and our personal goals drive us and dominate our focus, He speaks to our visions to guide us toward His purposes.

Depth can't separate you -- When we sink under the weight of our sins, He offers forgiving mercy and corrective grace. In the depressions, fears, and agonies that would submerge us, this is the Lord of lifting love.

Nothing else in all creation can separate you -- In everything not yet identified, He is already at work on your behalf.

Now we move up to verses 35 and 36. "Nothing else" can block His love? Really? YES. And that includes: the tribulations that squeeze us -- the distresses that leave us in tears -- the persecutions that attack from both inside us and outside -- the hollowness of our personal famines -- the things that leave us nakedly vulnerable and exposed -- the dangers that would strike and destroy.

This is the Lord who loves you – the God who proved His love at the cross, and whose love can meet us in every place and time. What an over-the-top celebration! Paul has made his point! Now let's go back to the top and apply it:

Our CONDITION – is Suffering in Hope.

We begin at verses 18-25: and the compelling question: *"Are those assurances more than just platitudes? Can they really help me while I'm stuck in life's messiness?"*

He made promises. But when we struggle, can our Lord really bless? Or is He, just like us, an observer, reacting to the realities of life?

Paul is convinced that the suffering will end in glory, even when we don't understand it! And he is well qualified to make that point. He's been threatened, arrested, shackled, beaten, lied about by church members, and ultimately headed for death row and an unjust execution. He knows suffering intimately!

And he says that the whole creation knows it too. As do we. Verse 20 – the creation has lived in futility. Verse 21 – it suffers decaying and bondage. Verse 22 – it "groans" under the weight of the corrupted times. And God has somehow permitted it to suffer the burdens of its own sin-filled brokenness.

Yet, according to verse 21, there *will be* a freeing and a glorious liberty, though for now, we who trust Him only get a foretaste of it.

And, get this! We, who are the "children" mentioned in verse 21, are to become "sons" by adoption in verse 23. (And, by the way, that powerful assurance here -- *is not gender-specific.)* The word means a fully grown,

mature, inheritor of the whole estate. A divine "inheritance" is held in trust for every suffering believer! In fact, according to verse 23, this "adoption" by our Lord is a huge, God-sized blessing for our whole selves – body, mind, and eternal soul!

That is the hope that wraps its arms around our suffering! And, here's another truth. The word "hope" that Paul loves to use, literally means *expectation*! We don't just vainly wish! God does not just wait and wish with us. He, and we, live in the expectation of mercy, grace, and glory. Even when life stinks!

As we struggle, we will so often wonder: "*Where is God in all of this?*" And Paul has an answer. Our Lord is "for us" and "not against us." The Lord knows what He is doing, even when you and I don't!

I hear those words and I remember the lovely poem that Corrie Ten Boom used to quote as she told her concentration camp story. Maybe you know it.

My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colors;
He weaveth steadily.

Oft' times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.

Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best
To those who leave the choice to Him.

When the Gestapo is at your door (masked or unmasked) -- when the diagnosis is dire -- when the conditions get the better of us -- when God seems to allow the things we resist, Paul invites us to join him, trusting that the unseen Lord is still "weaving" -- even in the most unlikely times and places.

Yet, even those lovely assurances in verses 35 through 39 don't always light up the gold and silver threads or make sense of the dark ones. Feeling alone and empty, on the under-side of this tapestry, we study the knotted threads, and naturally wonder: *How do I get through this ragged moment? How will manage?"* Paul anticipates us, and moves us forward, declaring that:

Our Lord's CONNECTION is Intimate Access.

Take a look at verses 26 and 27. When we are so empty that we don't even know "how to pray" – when we feel so far off from God that He might just ignore our prayers -- when our praying seems pointless and the prayers go up, hit the ceiling, and clatter back at our feet, this is the Lord of redeeming love and ***inseparable*** **connection**.

And verse 26 reminds us that we are seen by God, known by God, held by God. Nothing in our lives goes unnoticed! The Spirit is listening to every beat of our hearts, and He reaches in to make the connection. What a great intimacy!

I have a dear friend who is battling aggressive cancer right now. He is one of the most committed believers I know. And he recently told me how he prays from the depths of his medical pit. He opens the scriptures and prays through the Psalms. And the Psalms open up the channels. He meets his Lord there – and they connect!

What a promise! Your Lord knows you from the inside out, and meets you even in the things that are too deep to handle. When life stinks and it can seem too hard to hold on, this is the Lord who holds onto you and me. And that intimate access takes a form that is almost unheard of in all of human religious history – as Almighty God becomes:

Our COMPANION – in a Personal Divine Commitment.

Look at verse 28. It has been paraphrased in several ways. Some translate it to say that in the end, *"everything works for good."* That's nice. But I think it misses a far more powerful promise! The Revised Standard Version boldly declares: *"We know that in everything, God works for good* ***with*** *those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose."*

God works ***with*** those who love Him and respond to His calling. It's a tiny word in the original language, but it carries a lot of weight!

In Paul's day, people outside of a Judeo-Christian heritage harbored all kinds of notions about commitment to those very separate, quite uncaring, mythical "gods." They made pagan "*commitments*" that

involved rituals ranging from the silly to the hideously gruesome.

But this was radically new! A divine, very mutual, companionship! The truth that the Lord God would make *His own* commitment – would love a wayward people – would offer His own life to redeem them – and then be their companion and support at His own cost *was frankly just impossible!*

Dear Friends, once you read the "bottom lines" of our faith, the glory of this truth is as *inescapable* as His love is *inseparable!* Verse 29 -- Your God sees you and knows you and has always known you. Verse 30 – He personally calls you, and is calling you now. Verses 31-34 – He commits to you in a way unheard of, that welcomes you, cleanses your sin, and commits the personal Lord to stand <u>with you</u> and <u>for you</u> forever! Verses 35-36 -- He commits to you against all odds – no matter what the world may do, or assume, or how it labels you.

And I love the way it ends: The world treats us as worthless sheep. It would eat us up! But we are a whole different kind of mutton! In Christ, we are the companions of Almighty God!

This is why Paul could declare, in the midst of his sufferings: "I know Whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him …" (II Timothy 1:12). And that brings us back down to a most wonderful summary:

Our Lord's <u>CONQUEST</u> – the Abundant Victory.

In earthy language, the idea of *"conqueror"* means a battle between us. You declare an "enemy," and blow up their strongholds and resources. In contests large and small, you are the acknowledged "winner" and someone else is branded the "loser." And, you can thump your chest with noisy hubris. It means that you are now on top. You may even be *great* again.

But the "top" is a narrow, precarious peak to perch on. You have to keep a delicate balance, and defend your turf. You may be the conqueror – but the "conquered" will never be happy about it. And life at the top will not be so much a bed of rose petals as a prison of thorns.

I'm not really interested in being a traditional conqueror – <u>*nor*</u> in what I'd have to do to *remain* that way! I want something **more** than simple conquests. (Here I'm remembering the man who climbed the ladder of success to the top of the wall – only to find it was leaning against the wrong wall!) So, let's explore what verse 37 has to say about conquest.

We are **more** than conquerors ecause our lives are partnered *with Christ.* The word for "more" here means "super abundance." "More" is a "conquest" <u>above</u> ordinary victory – trusting our Lord – following His way – leaning on Him and finding His blessings.

This can be hard to wrap our minds around when life overwhelms, and things are eating us up, and we feel like "mutton." But we are partnered with the Lord of super-abundance. And in the heights, and depths, and life, and death – and everything else that Paul can name, Christ still has the last word. And the last word is still His purpose, His blessing, and His inseparable love.

"More than conquering" gets us off the pinnacle, trusting in more than our success strategies, and leaning on the arms of our victorious Lord. And <u>*that*</u> is better than human conquest!

So, let me end here with a "life stinks" situation that both proved the presence of the inseparable Lord, and ended in a victory that was definitely "more than conquering."

I have a dear friend who is a pastor in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. When I teach at the seminary there, Tesfa is my driver and encourager. I preach in his church. And we have become closer than brothers.

A few years ago, there was a land dispute about the place where his church was worshipping. People who wanted the Christians removed from the neighborhood engaged in a persecution that was aided by some corrupt police.

It's a long story, but he was confronted, and thrown in jail – for no reason. It was done on a Friday, because that would keep him in jail over the weekend when the courts were not working. He was locked in a cell with three other arrestees, cut off from his family and his parishioners. It was a desperate, evil situation.

When he told me about it a few days later, I asked, *"What in the world did you do?"*

He said, *"I knew the Lord was with me there, and had a purpose for me. So I told the prisoners about Jesus. I led the three of them in committing their lives to Christ as their Savior. And next Sunday, they are joining my church."*

Nothing could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ his Lord! That's super-abundance! And, this is a guy who is <u>more</u> <u>than</u> <u>a</u> <u>conqueror</u>! And when life stinks, I want to be just like him! Amen.

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"The Next Step"
A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read through Romans 8:18-39 again. Of the many insights Paul includes in this text, is there a theme or a message that particularly speaks to you?

2. In his sermon, Rick said that in many ways, we read our theology "backwards" – from the bottom up. Can you describe "bottom lines" that open up the great truths and define the blessings of our faith?

3. Suffering and "groaning" in "hope." What does this mean in practical terms today? And what is the connection between this hope and these sufferings?

4. Sometimes our Lord uses the "sufferings" and "groanings" of life as instruments of blessing and growth. Can you share examples of this from personal experience or observation?

5. What have you learned, or experienced, that helps you to connect with God in prayer?

6. Sometimes our prayers just seem to fall flat, as though there is no connection and no one is listening. What do you do when that happens?

7. It is encouraging to know that God works for good with the ones who love Him, and that He calls them into the work. How can we be more effective in answering His call?

8. What does it mean to be "more than conquerors"? Why don't we feel that way more often?

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Table to Table
Something for kids and adults to consider together

Jesus promised that because God loves us, He will never leave us alone. By faith, we know that He is here right now. How can we reach out to Him and be close to Him when we can't see Him?