

Out of Africa

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[0 : 00] Who was here for the wedding yesterday? Good number of you. Let me tell you, it was the most decorations I've ever seen for a wedding.

It's amazing how quickly they come down. By the time I got home, it was the longest wedding I'd ever been to. And it was the biggest crowd I'd ever seen.

And it may well have been the biggest, greatest wedding of the new millennium, but it still wasn't as good as the great wedding of the last millennium, which was about seven weeks ago.

Yesterday, during the stretch of the day, I was a little anxious about this passage, feeling it was a little underdone. I found myself in my office doing a bit more work, and someone else found me there as well.

Harry Robinson. He asked me what I was doing. I said I was working on a sermon for tonight. He should have just looked at me. He said, what's the passage?

[1 : 06] I said, Romans 8, 18 through 39. And he paused and said, I think you should have started preparing that ten years ago. You can imagine how I felt.

I don't know whether he was highlighting my inability or the immensity of the passage before us, but either way, I think it would be a good thing to pray, both for me and for you.

So let's do that. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word that brings to us sure promises.

And we pray that you would take these truths that we will look at tonight, and by your Holy Spirit, sow them into our hearts.

Encourage us and change us, we pray. Amen. So as you can imagine, over the last week, being a groomsman and preaching this sermon, I've had two things on my mind.

Well, I've had three things on my mind. My wife and two other things. The passage that we're dealing with tonight and Dan and Catherine's wedding. So you can imagine the whole time that I'm working through this passage, that there's a lot of things that were highlighted in my mind about this passage, similarities, differences and parallels between this passage and between Dan and Catherine's wedding.

[2 : 26] And I don't think you want to hear them all, and I'd probably get in trouble if I told you them all. But one I think is kind of helpful. Remembering that Dan and Catherine's courtship went on for quite some time, a number of years in the evolution toward yesterday.

And remembering that our Dan was so focused on ministry and the elevated state of singleness that for ages, the idea of dating never even entered his mind.

But I think it's fair to think of the days leading up to yesterday as the age of suffering. Particularly for Catherine. And as yesterday, as the dawn of the age of glory.

And I think if you were here yesterday and you saw either of their faces, you would have realized that it really was the dawn of glory for them. And I think if you can understand that picture, you can get a grasp of an overview of this passage before us.

You see, we're looking at a passage that describes two completely different ages. One where we can fairly summarize as an age of suffering, and the other we can fairly summarize as an age of glory.

[3 : 42] One that's necessarily joined to the other and can't be separated. Firstly, they're two completely different ages. Suffering and glory couldn't be further apart.

Secondly, the sufferings and the glory come together and we can't separate them. And thirdly, the sufferings and the glory can't really be compared.

Verse 18. They're to be contrasted but not really compared. Earlier in another letter, Paul, enduring, in weighing the differences between glory and suffering, uses the idea of weight.

And he declares that our sufferings are light and momentary, but the glory to come far outweighs them all. And I think Catherine would agree with that right now.

But this is us, and we're living in an age of tension. We're caught between two ages. Between the age of suffering and the age of glory to come. The present world that we know is neither what it was meant to be, nor is it what it fully will be.

[4 : 55] And it's because of our rebellion that this world is under a curse. Paul describes this as bondage to decay in verse 21. And if you haven't opened your Bibles, you can do that and follow as we work through this.

One. Bondage to decay. I learned this week that scientists call that idea entropy. Entropy. I think that's how you say it. Wherever we look, there's decay and death.

A flower which today is colorful and a picture of beauty, tomorrow withers and wastes away. The sun steadily exhausts all its power rocks crumble and worst of all humans fade away in a relatively very few short years and one fellow has described it like this and I think it's helpful the whole creation is like a wood through which the forester has gone with axe in hand marking with every stroke every tree which is to be felled in the approaching deforestation so every man however young and healthy is already marked for death and has a precisely predetermined time to live and before it is his turn in the universal death which pervades the whole creation it's pretty bleak but it's true the sickness of the world is plain to all of us isn't it but we're also told that what the scientists might call the law of entropy will be one day reversed

Paul sees the sufferings of this world as supremely purposeful like labor pains we heard in the first reading the whole world has been groaning together and it pains childbirth that it may see the yearnings there may be describing natural disasters it may not be either way we know that this suffering and this yearning will give birth to the kingdom of God in the age to come the redemptions the full salvation of our bodies and what is meant in verse 23 is not eagerness or anxiety about whether we will make it whether we will really in the end experience full deliverance that God has promised us but rather a sense of frustration at the remaining moral and physical failings that we know too well while we're caught in this age between suffering and glory and we wait eagerly for the suffering to end so the question arises I think and I think the text addresses this question and the question is how can the Christian maintain hope for eternal life in the face of a life of suffering and death how can we be sure with all the things that are against us that we will actually make it to glory to heaven what can be said about Christian assurance well we're told in verse 25 to persevere in hope in this time of suffering and I think there are three things that sustain us in our hope through this age to come three things that will underwrite our confidence and give us assurance having argued in verses 24 and 25 that the nature and the certainty of our hope sustains us while we wait with patience now Paul says in verses 26 and 27 in the same way that this hope sustains us so the spirit comes and he sustains us also and that's the first the spirit of God sustains us through this age to the next age in verse 23 we're given the first fruits of the Holy Spirit guaranteeing what is to come and even giving us now a foretaste of the glory that will come fortunately the results of what the Holy Spirit does is not dependent on our understanding of exactly how it works but in verse 27 we're told the reason for the effectiveness of the spirit's help in our prayers is that the spirit knows the will of the God and prays accordingly and the one who searches the heart searches the mind of the spirit as well so that these prayers will be pleasing to God and he will answer them the work of the Holy Spirit is there to sustain us through this age to the next and the second thing

I think is there to sustain our hope in this age of decay and death is the sovereign purposes of God we see that in verses verse 28 if you can see it there it's fairly easy to read isn't it what does it mean what does it actually look like to see that verse come and apply to our lives I think Paul is implying here what he says throughout very clear throughout the whole of scripture and that is that the whole of the world is under the control the complete control of God control of God and he says it even more clearly in Ephesians 1 verse 11 that all things work according to the counsel of God Paul is not just saying that God works in all things for good but that he works all things for our good we learn that also in verse 28 that loving God is the qualification for the enjoyment of the promises of this verse loving God and I think it's a qualification met by all Christians in other words

[10 : 37] Paul doesn't mean to suggest that God's promises that all things will work for good will no longer apply to you if you're not completely loving God this week I think it's used as a description that summarizes the general direction of all believers that we love God of all Christians and only Christians we love God and for those that love God God works all things for our good and it brings

us to the question what is our good that it works toward certainly I don't think that Paul means that every evil that we experience every evil that the believer would go through every piece of suffering will be reversed and turned into a good a good that might be defined by you and I that would usually include health wealth and great relationships it's not that good the good is defined in verses 29 and 30 as consisting in our ultimate conformity in heaven to the image of Christ that we might be like him our saviour the reality is that many of us will find ourselves in times of great pain physically financially in relationships and for many of us it may never be brought to an end

I think in Jesus' death it's fairly clear to see that what's in view as being achieved by that death is complete healing in every regard but it's important to see that the healing which Jesus purchased is applied to us now in justification and in sanctification and in the age to come glorification and the redemption of our bodies which we long for I don't think we should go on from here to say that at this point in history God doesn't heal it's certainly clear that he does but even when we pray for it as we should and even when he does heal as he often can and does that it's just like Lazarus who was raised to life only to die again suffering and even chronic illness will be in the context of a refining of our faith and the strengthening of our hope and our being moulded into the likeness of Christ we must be careful to define good

I think in God's terms and not our own there is no greater good than this and I don't want to belittle the seriousness of suffering but I want to be even more careful not to belittle God's sovereign purposes for us in suffering in all things including suffering the promise is that there's nothing that will happen to us in the whole of life that God will not use that God has not intended to use to assist us in our pilgrimage to bring us safely and certainly to the glorious destination of heaven the age of glory to come these are the purposes the sovereign purposes of God that will sustain us and if they're not clear enough I think they get even clearer in the next two verses verses 29 and 30 please look there with me they contain the real reason that Christians can know that all things will work for their good the word for new in verse 29 appears at first glance to refer to God for seeing what future response someone's might be in arranging predestination accordingly the problem with that sort of understanding is that it completely negates the obvious intention of the word predestination which means something has previously determined its course the opposite of letting people decide on their own course

I think it's clear from other parts of the Bible that for new does not mean foresee of course God knows the end from the beginning that's because he designed from the beginning both the end and the beginning foreknowledge has to do with the knowing of relationship so Jesus at the end of time will say depart from me I never knew you not meaning that he didn't know anything about them but that they were not his friends those he foreknew or previously determined to befriend he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son verse 29 those he predestined he also called God brings people's lives to the point where their eyes would be opened and they would see the wrongness of their own way they would see the truth about Christ and they would choose his way those he called he also justified and this word justified has in mind everything that we've been talking about over the last months through Romans 1 to 8 justification secures our present and eternal future from a legal and relational point of view and at this point

Paul's looking at our present Christian experience with all the future trials and uncertainties and whatever may come ahead of us and he leaps them in one grand statement those he justified he also glorified the purposes of God's predetermination or predestination is that his chosen people will be conformed to the image of his son so that Jesus should be the first born among many brothers and sisters so sure is our glorification that it's said to have already happened that he will glorify us because he has justified us in response to such truth Paul asked three quick questions in verses 31 to 35 for the sake of time let me summarize the answers are meant to come very quickly I'll just give you the answers no one no no thing can be against us successfully he's given us his son so he will give us everything that follows without any doubt no charge can stand against you even if it's valid we shall not be condemned even the guilt that you rightly carry can be dealt with so what's the conclusion what do you think that God thinks about you what do you think that Jesus verdict is about you will it be the same at the end of the age and will it be the same every day in the highs and the lows from now to the end of the age so certain is that because the verdict is passed we are justified so sure is this justification that we have said to be glorified verse 30

[17 : 57] I think we can have assurance in light of that the promise of God the promise of the sovereign purposes of God that they will sustain us through this age of suffering and decay and

death to the age to come the final question verse 35 who shall separate us from the love of Christ moves us on to the third and final idea that will sustain us through and it's the sovereign love of God what can separate us from the love of Christ what is the thing that you would most be concerned about that might possibly separate you from the love of God what is the thing that you would be most concerned about that might possibly separate you from Christ's love for me the answer comes very quickly the weakest link in the chain that binds me to God binds me into the salvation that God has provided would have to be my own faith

I used to worry that the one thing that Paul doesn't explicitly mention here willful disobedience leading to an abandonment of Christ could be a concern but it's the very circumstances that would bring this willful disobedience again which he does address and what I'd like to ask you is what is your worst fear because I tend to think I may be wrong I tend to think that if we were faced with our worst fear that we'd crumble I know I would if I was faced with my worst fear I would crumble I know my fears doubts based on those fears would be justified but if he hasn't mentioned it if the thing that's most scary to you that might take you away from the love of Christ even if it's not mentioned there you can include it because in verse 39 he says nor anything else in creation if it wasn't mentioned previously nothing else in creation you can add in there whatever you like Paul is convinced it will not succeed we are conquerors not in our own strength not in the strength of our own faith but through the one who loved us verse 37 it's sort of like Jesus being in heaven and saying you know I died I died for John and God said yeah yeah I know I justified him and the Holy Spirit saying well I opened his eyes that he could see the truth and I've been working on his sanctification and Jesus comes back and says but on the performance of the last 10 days I really don't think we ought to have him in heaven and God says well you better get out the Lamb's book of life his name's been in there for a while but we can still rub it out because that's what would have to happen and I think this passage says that that won't happen that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ

I think sometimes it may look like in your life that God doesn't love you but nothing could be further from the truth if you're a Christian nothing is great as the truth that he does love you verse 37 he loved us it's not that he loved us in the past and doesn't love us anymore but it is the past he loved us can you think of why I think he's got something in mind an event a particular moment in history where the truth that God loves us was established beyond any point of doubt whatsoever and where would that be I think it's the cross well it is the cross isn't it even through these sufferings and trials through to the through to the age to come the age of glory that's the victory over the present and it underwrites our security and gives us assurance in the midst of suffering you can know for sure that God is working toward his unchanging purposes to bring you home and as 1 John 3 2 says when we see him we shall be just like him and this is the glory to come and it is sure tonight's communion and if you believe the good news that that communion demonstrates to us then you'll come forward and partake and you'll eat the bread and you'll drink the wine and if you come forward I invite you to do that knowing for sure that one day you will drink and eat with Christ in heaven at the great banquet because nothing can take you away from the love of Christ Amen