**MORE THAN CONQUERORS**

**(Romans 8:18-39)**

***“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (v. 37)***

All of us have been on teams before. Have you ever had a teammate or group member who suddenly gave up when things started to become difficult? Their defeated attitude drags everyone else down with them. On the other hand, some people are relentlessly optimistic. No matter the odds, they always seem to know how to respond, as if they were already winners. All too often we live out our Christian lives like the first type of person. Without understanding why we must suffer or where we are going, we give up in the face of adversity. But through today’s passage, we learn that in Jesus, we are “more than conquerors”! We have every reason to claim victory in every area of our lives. I pray that through the Holy Spirit’s help, we may come to share in Apostle Paul’s joy and boldness that come from faith in God.

**I. Groaning and hoping (vs. 18-27)**

Let’s start by looking at verse 18. ***“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*** Sufferings are an inescapable part of the human experience. Take a moment to think about sources of suffering in your life. Everyone goes through physical sufferings. We get sick, develop toothaches and break our wrists. We feel the effects of aging in our backs, and see it in our faces. We suffer for our school studies or jobs. We seem to work too hard for too little reward, often pushing ourselves to the point of becoming burnt out. One of our biggest sources of suffering is emotional pain. We may struggle with loneliness, not feeling appreciated by those around us. We are burdened by our personal shortcomings (oftentimes we are our own worst enemies). Broken relationships within our families or workplaces can burden us for years. On top of all this, we are called to a life of self-denial and persecution for the sake of Christ. Serving God’s mission on top of our studies or our jobs can be exhausting. It can also be frustrating when it seems to have little impact. But like Jesus, we must humbly serve without any recognition in the world. And we in America have it easy! Think of Christians whose daily lives are in danger, like Coptic Christians in Egypt, or those living in Sudan or North Korea. Life is indeed hard for the Christian!

But what does Paul say? ***“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*** Paul has weighed our sufferings and our future glory in the scales of eternity and come to the conclusion that our heavenly reward *vastly outweighs* even the worst of hardships we could ever experience in this lifetime. There is no comparison! Paul knew this not only from Scripture but from experience; for though he suffered so much as a servant of God, he also frequently tasted the joy of the kingdom of God through his walk with Jesus. His craving for more filled him with a relentlessly positive attitude to endure all hardships in this life. If we can develop the same mindset towards our present sufferings and future glory, it can completely transform our lives.

To help us, Paul sets out to answer two important questions: “How did the world become like this?” and “Where are things headed?” Let’s look at verses 19-20a. ***“For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it…”*** Paul seems to be referring to Genesis 3:17-19, when God proclaimed his curse after Adam and Eve fell into sin. *“To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat from it,” Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’”* In the Garden of Eden, mankind lived in harmony with the rest of creation. God made all things for our benefit and established us as his stewards on earth. But when we rebelled against God and tried to establish our own rule, our relationship with creation was fragmented. Things like crop failure, bear attacks, bacterial infections, sun burns, mosquito bites and allergies became a grim reality. Our lives degenerated into a fruitless struggle for survival, often in hostility towards nature rather than under its blessing. Not only are we subject to frustration, but the creation itself is frustrated in its state of decay, and for having to bear with sinful human beings who do not render glory to the Creator! Paul says the creation has been “groaning” in the pains of childbirth up to the present time (22).

But where there are birth pains there is also the expectation of new life! Verses 20-21 read, ***“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”*** God did not curse the ground in vain. He had a plan to redeem mankind and all creation with them. By frustrating the efforts of sinners and pushing us to our limits, God forces us to look back up to him as our only Savior. We give up on trying to rule for ourselves and seek the new life that only God can give. The moment we surrender ourselves to God’s grace to us in Jesus, we enter into the freedom and glory of the children of God. This redemption will one day extend to all of creation. Revelation 21 talks of a *“new heaven and a new earth”* that God will establish after the Final Judgment. *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes.  There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” (Rev 21:3-4).* Our sufferings will be done for good and we will enjoy God’s presence for eternity!

Now look at verse 23. ***“Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”*** As of now, we have only been given a small foretaste of God’s kingdom through the Holy Spirit. So, we too are “groaning” inwardly as we wait for the completion of our adoption papers. I think it’s important to note that “groaning” is not the same as “grumbling”. Grumbling stems from unbelief. It is to doubt God’s goodness and complain about earthly things we lack. Groaning, on the other hand, comes from faith. It is to believe in what God has clearly promised and to long for it earnestly, like a marathoner groaning for the finish line! We should long for the day when all our sufferings will come to an end and we will enjoy God’s intimate presence. We should long for the redemption of our physical bodies, which will be exchanged for glorious, immortal resurrection bodies like that of our Lord Jesus (So the next time your back goes out, groan *inwardly*!). And we should groan over our current sinful nature in our desire to be made sinless, just as Paul lamented that he was unable to do what he wanted to do, and did what he didn’t want to do (Ro 7:18-20). We groan that our spirits are willing, but our flesh is weak.

But God does not leave us alone to groan in our weak flesh. Look at verse 26. ***“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.”*** Like a loving parent groaning over his suffering child, the Holy Spirit always has his eye on our condition. Jesus referred to him as *“another advocate” (Jn 14:16)* who comforts, counsels and defends us just like Jesus. Though we often lose heart in the midst of our sufferings, the Spirit compassionately intercedes for us according to God’s will and turns our hearts back to God. He is even praying for us when we don’t know what we ought to be praying for! What a comforting thought! We are never alone in our sufferings. What a wonderful friend we have in the Spirit!

The main point of this section is summarized in verses 24-25. ***“For in this hope we were saved.  But hope that is seen is no hope at all.  Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”*** The key is HOPE. No one likes to wait. But when we truly want something, we wait for it *patiently*. A long line for ice cream. A hot new product about to go on sale. One final semester before graduation. In our minds, these prizes far outweigh the short-term suffering required to wait. Is this our attitude towards our heavenly reward? Are we groaning for our intimate reunion with our Creator God? Our future glory is no fairy tale. Jesus has risen from the dead and is coming again very soon. We must ask ourselves, are we storing up treasures in heaven? Are we willingly suffering for Jesus’ sake now because of the reward he has in store for us? We need to weigh our present sufferings and future glory in the scales of God’s word. Where have you placed your hope? Our answer to this question will determine the course of our entire lives.

**II. God is working for our good in all things (vs. 28-30)**

Even after we have personally accepted the future glory that awaits us, it doesn’t mean our sufferings in this life will be easy, or even that they will make sense. Accidents happen. Terrible misfortunes befall even those who love and serve God. We might ask, “How can our good Father allow such things to happen to his beloved children?”

Paul replies to such concerns in 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.”*** Talk about Bible verses that should be written on our hearts in big, gold letters! I think this verse is easy to understand but one of the hardest to accept. Does God really use *all* things for the good of those who love him? The cancer diagnosis for a young child? The suicide church bomber? The holocaust? Recently, a very precious coworker of ours from Boston was incapacitated after a tragic car accident. How can any of these be considered “good” for God’s people?

Paul did not say that everything is good in and of itself. There are plenty of things that are bad. Tragedies are bad. All sin is bad. But God is the absolute *master* at bringing good out of the bad. Verse 28 can also be translated, *“…all things work together for good to those who love God…”* Intrinsically bad things, when weaved together in the great fabric of God’s sovereignty, somehow, some way turn out for good in the end, even unimaginable good beyond our wildest calculations. Remember Joseph’s story in Genesis? When Joseph told his brothers his dreams of becoming a great ruler, they sold him as a slave to Egypt! Awful! Then, when Joseph worked for Potiphar, he was falsely accused of adultery and thrown into prison! Dreadful! And when Joseph correctly interpreted the cupbearer’s dream, he was forgotten about! Despicable! If anyone had reason to doubt God’s goodness in all things, it was Joseph. But we know how his story ended. Eventually Joseph was exalted to the highest position in Egypt under Pharaoh. With God’s help, he correctly predicted a severe famine and saved the entire nation. Later, Joseph’s brothers even repented and were reconciled to him. This led Joseph to declare, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20).*

In everything, God has some beautiful purpose that we cannot even imagine. But verse 29 gives us some insight. ***“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”*** This is the end-goal of our salvation, which we have already begun to experience. Through all the bad stuff that happens, God destroys our pride. He teaches us Jesus’ patience and long-suffering love. He refines our hope so that our eyes are fixed on him and his promises. Didn’t Joseph, through what he suffered, change from a cocky young shepherd boy into a faithful, Christ-like servant who could lead a nation? If we only recognized our sufferings as God-given opportunities to grow in Jesus’ image, we would mature rapidly and be able to rejoice in all circumstances!

One of the lowest moments in my life was when I received my rejection letter from the University of Minnesota graduate program. Since school studies had always come naturally to me, this felt like a colossal mistake. It was easy to question God’s love for me. But then something amazing happened. This crisis forced me to really consider God’s overall purpose for my life. I had a big decision to make: continue my education in a different program at another school or find a way to stay in Minneapolis and continue growing as a disciple of Jesus. Little did I realize at the time, but God was using this to conform me to the image of his Son. Through Matthew 6:33, God challenged me to stretch my faith and seek his kingdom and righteousness as my life’s goal. I was left with no other option than to pray very earnestly about this, more earnestly than I had ever prayed for anything before. My relationship with God grew so much during this short time. In the end, God answered my prayers and made a way for me to enter the program anyway. I still obtained my degree in the end, but more importantly, God showed me the wonderful purpose he had for me to grow as a Christ-like spiritual leader for this generation. Praise God for using what was bad to bring about something so good!

Bad things are going to happen to you, things that don’t seem to make any sense. But never for a moment doubt in your Heavenly Father’s love for you! Could it be that perhaps God loves you so much that he cannot possibly bear the thought of you living apart from him? Could it be that sometimes we leave God no other option than to violently shake us out of our comfort zones so that we have nowhere else to run but his arms? In ALL things, God is working for our good, to conform us to the perfect image of his Son. He will not allow you to be anything less than what you were made to be. So let’s learn to trust in God as Jesus did and grow to be spiritual blessings to the world.

**III. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us (vs. 31-39)**

At this point, Paul is awestruck by how much God loves us. Look at verses 31-32. ***“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*** This reminds me of a young child who is absolutely certain of his father’s love and protection. He is saying, “Do you know who my Dad is? No one is stronger than *my* Dad! He’s invincible and he’s *my* Dad!” This boldness springs forth from the historical fact of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, whom God gave up for our salvation. Knowing that God had already done the unthinkable, we have no reason to think he would withhold anything good or necessary for our salvation. So there is nothing to fear! In fact, Paul dares anyone to condemn those whom God has already declared “innocent” in his sight (33-34a). As verse 34b reminds us, Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father at this very moment, actively interceding for us as our advocate. How could the Father possibly forget what he accomplished for us when Jesus, the very evidence of his love, is standing beside him?

Paul continues, ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?  Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered’” (vs. 35-36).*** Confidence in God’s love exposes sufferings for what they really are. Paul endured all of these things himself (2 Co 11:23-29), yet none of them, even the threat of death (sword), could tear him away from the love of Christ. In God’s time, they only served to make God’s love more real to him and further conform him to the image of Jesus. Paul’s quotation of Psalm 44:22 proves this isn’t a special case for a handful of God’s people, but an absolute principle true for all Christians. We can thus be sure of only two things: 1) We will face suffering and persecution in this life (2 Tim 3:12), and 2) Nothing can separate us from God’s love to us in Christ.

Now let’s read verse 37 all together. ***“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”*** Have you ever wondered what it means to be “more than conquerors”? The Greek phrase can be translated “hyper-conquerors” or “super-conquerors”. So Paul is saying that Christians are completely and overwhelmingly victorious in the big picture. Is this because Christians are especially wise or talented people? No, it is ***“through him who loved us.”*** When we are certain of God’s love for us in Jesus, we already have everything! We’ve already won the prize! We stand as victors in this life, not afraid of anyone or anything. Our hardships can’t defeat us. By God’s sovereignty, they actually *serve* us, bringing us closer and closer to the total victory that awaits us! We are royal princes and princesses who will inherit all things! So let’s join Paul in personally confessing our confidence in verses 38-39. ***“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** NOTHING in the entire realm of creation, not even the extremes of time and space, can separate us from God’s love! Do you know who you are? You are the one God madly loves. Whose image are you being conformed to, that of a loser or that of a conqueror? Our Lord Jesus is more than a conqueror, and so are we when we fully entrust ourselves to God’s unfailing love.

Though are present sufferings are very real, they are nothing compared to the glory that awaits us. While we groan and wait for what God has promised, we can be sure that God, who never stops loving us, is working for our good in all things. Do you want to live a defeated life? Or do you want to live as more than a conqueror in Jesus? He who gave his own Son for us promises to graciously give us all necessary things. Let’s trust in his love like little children and willingly endure all hardships for the sake of our Lord Jesus.