

## **“Nothing and Always”**

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**Romans 8:31-39**

The sermon today is about God. If I were sitting where you are sitting I would be thinking to myself, “Well, of course the sermon is about God. What else would the sermon be about?” I would agree with you. I have shared with some of you before my belief that every good sermon should tell us something about God and something about ourselves. How often, however, do we hear sermons that never say anything about God?

Did you know that in some churches today God’s name will not be mentioned? There will be talk about Jesus, but if you talk about Jesus and don’t mention God it is not a Christian understanding of Jesus.

In some churches today the Bible will be mentioned, but not God. “The Bible says this. The Bible says that.” The Bible doesn’t “say” anything. We say words about the Bible. We say words about the inspired words of the Bible. We say words about the people God inspired to write those words, but the Bible doesn’t “say” anything about itself. In some churches today there will be talk about the Bible, but God’s name won’t be mentioned.

In some churches today there will be talk about stewardship. This is the time of year when we talk about stewardship. That’s all right. We need to talk about stewardship. But did you know that you can talk about stewardship and never mention God’s name?

In some churches today there will be talk about money. It is known as the gospel of success. “Just have enough faith, and you will have all the money you’ll ever need.” I have noticed some churches holding workshops on how to get out of debt. They will talk about how to get out of debt, but God’s name will never be mentioned.

In some churches there will be talk about divorce, grief, and loneliness, but God’s name will never be mentioned. In some churches today, there will be talk about forgiveness and service, and even love, but you can speak about those things without mentioning God’s name. Today this sermon is about God.

If we were to ask Paul, I think Paul would tell us, “Of all the things that I ever wrote, this might do a better job of saying what God is like.” If you would at this time, I want you to get a pen or pencil, or a quill pen or a crayon - whatever you

feel most comfortable with; get your bulletin and write down the word “nothing.” If you would, please, write on your bulletin the word “nothing.”

In this passage of scripture in which Paul explains what God is like, Paul says, “Nothing can separate us from God’s love.” Paul has a lengthy list of several bad things that we might face in life, but at the end of this list, Paul says, “None of these things, *nothing* can separate us from God’s love.” At the Bible study this past week, there were some other things mentioned that weren’t on Paul’s list: Terrorism, cancer, loneliness. Paul would say, “*Nothing*; nothing can separate us from God’s love.”

You might not have noticed, but, at the beginning of the scripture that I read today, Paul referred to “these things.” “These things” are a reference to Paul’s explanation in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters of Romans of Paul’s understanding of God, and also Paul’s explanation of why we do some of the things that we do. In the fifth chapter, Paul says, “Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all.”

“Yeah, but what about this? What about the time I did something that no one else even knows. Maybe only God and I and the person who suffered because of my actions know, but no one else. What about...?” *Nothing.*

The cynic might say, “Well, if that’s the case, we can do whatever we want,” but in the sixth chapter Paul says, “Are we to continue in sin, that grace may abound? No, those of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death, and we are dead to sin.” *Nothing. Nothing.*

It doesn’t mean that we will be exempt from suffering. If you’ve lived very long, you know you can be the best Christian in the world and still have suffering in your life. Paul acknowledged that. He talked about the suffering that we can face. In the fifth chapter he said this, “Suffering produces endurance, and this endurance produces character, and this character produces hope, hope that does not disappoint us.” And still, even though we know this, we do things as Paul said in the seventh chapter. “I do the very things that I hate. Who can deliver me from this body of sin?” Then, he answers his own question and says, “Thanks be to God, who will deliver me through Jesus Christ, his son.”

Paul goes on to talk about suffering. He says, “I suppose the suffering of this time will not be worth being compared to the glory that will be revealed to us.”

The toughest pastoral call that I ever made in my life was back before we moved here, earlier this year, on a young couple in Woodward. I’ve had to make some difficult pastoral calls, calls when there had been an unexpected death, calls when there had been a suicide, but this one was tougher than all of the rest. I had

been working with this couple. They had a young son, seven or eight years old, Carson; but they were not able to have more children so they wanted to adopt. They wanted Carson to have a brother or sister. A few months ago Cody, this young father, called me with excitement in his voice. He said, "We've found a mother who is going to give up her baby." The mother was from Tulsa. I think she was seventeen years old. It was her third child. Cody and Monica came over here. They were in the hospital with this mother. After she had the baby, within a few minutes, they held this little baby in their arms and then took this little boy home. They stopped by the church before they went home to show me this wonderful little baby boy.

But the next morning Cody called me with tears in his voice. As happens sometimes in these cases, the mother had changed her mind. It was the toughest pastoral call I've ever had to make. Here was this little baby, so alive and healthy, and facing a life that was going to be so much better, and then these young parents and the older brother in tears, knowing that he would be taken away from them. He was alive, but it was as if he were dead.

A couple of weeks ago, Cody called me and said, "We have another chance at another baby." This time, Cody, who is an attorney, said, "We're not going to take any chances. We won't bring this baby home until all of the papers are signed."

This past Tuesday, a mother in Oklahoma City had a little baby girl, and after all the papers had been signed, Cody and Monica took this little baby girl home, to their home. This young couple, as committed and devout as any Christian couple I have known - they have seen both sides of suffering. They have seen the glory that can be revealed, and I think they would say to us this day, "Nothing; nothing. Even in that darkest time, nothing could separate us from God's love."

I know there are some of you here this morning who have something in your past. It weighs you down, and you feel guilty about it. You need to hear Paul's words: "Nothing; nothing."

There is another Paul, not Paul the Apostle; some of you have heard of him - Paul Tillich. At the Bible study this past week, we studied this scripture. I told the group that I was reminded of Tillich's famous sermon, "The Shaking of the Foundations." It was in that sermon that Tillich uttered the memorable lines, "Just accept the fact that you are accepted." You don't have to do anything else. It might not make any other difference in your life. "Just accept the fact that you are accepted"\* (see excerpt below). But then, Tillich went on to say, "This stroke of grace doesn't demand anything from us." I would love to be able to discuss that

with Tillich, because I think he's wrong. Do you remember in the hymn that we sing, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross:"

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

There is another word that I want you to write down on your bulletin, if you would. It is the word "always." "Always." We know that nothing can separate us from God's love because of something that Christ said, the last thing that he said to the disciples in Matthew's Gospel, before he ascended into heaven. Christ said, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I will be with you ... always." *Always.*

Nothing and always. Nothing will separate us from God's love, because God's Son is with us always. Amen

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\*Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!* If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of

this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*.

“Sin” and “grace” are strange words; but they are not strange things. We find them whenever we look into ourselves with searching eyes and longing hearts. They determine our life. They abound within us and in all of life. May grace more abound within us! - Paul Tillich