

I few years ago, there was a youth gathering in the Michigan District with a very odd theme. The theme that year was “All About Nothing.” Now, how exactly do you have a youth conference that's about nothing? Well, you make Romans 8:38-39 the focus of your study.

Because this is indeed a passage which is all about nothing. It's about all of the things that can't separate us from God's love. *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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.”*

It's an amazing passage. One of my favorites in all of scripture. It's poetic. It's powerful. It's important. Because, like much of Paul's letter to the Romans, it shows us the world through God's eyes. Our view of life is so narrow. We see only life or only death. We see only the present or only the future. We see only height or only depth.

But God sees it all. He sees the beginning of life and the end of life. He sees the sorrow of today and he sees the joy of tomorrow. He sees the depth of our despair and he sees the height of his power to save. He sees it all. He's above it all. He's with us through it all. His love is there no matter the circumstance.

Which is good, because we need his love in every circumstance. Because the circumstances are not always good. A few verses prior, Paul gives us another rather poetic list. But it's of a much more depressing sort. *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'”*

This is not a hypothetical list of disasters that Paul is posing here. This is the present day reality for Paul's audience. Paul himself is unable to go to Rome to visit the Christians there because he's on his way to Jerusalem to deliver an offering. An offering collected from all the churches of Europe because Jerusalem is suffering a famine the likes of which they haven't seen for centuries. And the price of food has skyrocketed. Such that they can't even afford to buy a loaf of bread anymore.

Along the way, Paul has suffered through tribulation and distress and persecution. He's been stripped naked and thrown in prison. And been threatened with execution by the sword. And the Holy Spirit has already revealed to him that he's only going to face more of that when he gets to Jerusalem.

But he's not alone. All around the Roman world the same thing is going on. The people of God are being rounded up like sheep to be slaughtered. And every day more Christians die.

And though we may not be especially familiar with a world such as the one that Paul presents to us, it still occurs even today. Take a look sometime at the website “persecution.com.” It's the website for Voice of the Martyrs, an organization that tracks the suffering and persecution of Christians around the world. Take a look at what's happening to the Church today. And then thank God for how blessed you are to be sitting in those pews. Because it could be so much worse for all of us.

Christians have always been on the receiving end of all kinds of evil. And the world has always looked on and said, “Meh.” Paul himself knows that better than anyone. Where is the first time we see Paul in the New Testament? At the stoning of Stephen. Standing there in the crowd. Nodding in approval as a mob beat to death with rocks the young martyr. Watching over their coats so that they wouldn't get them dirty.

Stephen didn't do anything to earn a death sentence except call himself a Christian. Just like so many of those martyrs around the world today. But that's enough. If not enough to make someone hate you or try to kill you. It's at least enough to make the world look on with approval as someone else tries to silence you.

And yet, we need to beware of throwing ourselves a pity-party here. For two reasons. Number one, because this is the risk we take when we call ourselves Christians. And we knew it from the very beginning. What does Paul say at the beginning of this passage?

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Well that's comforting, isn't it? All things work together for good. That means nothing bad is ever going to happen to us, right? Or, if it does, its all going to turn out OK.

Well... yes and no. After all, what does Paul say next? *“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 among many brothers.”* Think about that for a second. What exactly is the image of God's Son? When you think about the image of Christ, what's the first thing you think of? I'll give you a hint, it's hanging around my neck and all over this sanctuary.

God predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son. He predestined us to be conformed to the cross. To mockery and persecution and suffering and death.

In order that Christ might be the firstborn among many brothers. Yes, all things do work together for good. Christ is risen. And we too shall be raised. This is God's promise. But even Jesus came out of the tomb with marks in his hands and feet and side. No one, not even Christ himself, escapes from this mortal life without a few scars to show for it.

And the worst part is, we're not just the ones who get them. Sometimes we're also the ones who give them. Because we're sinners too. And we're not exempt from joining in on the world's behavior. And every time we sin, we leave a scar on the Church. Every time we sin we leave a scar on the body of Christ.

Every bitter grudge we hold leaves a scar on our neighbor. Every lustful thought we have leaves a scar on our spouse or future spouse. Every act of selfish greed leaves a scar on the poorest in our community. And every act of doubt and idolatry leaves a scar on us, because it drives a wedge between us and our God.

We blame the world for the suffering of the Church, and often rightly so, but we also have our own blame to share. For we've caused plenty of tribulation and distress for our own brothers and sisters in Christ, by our thoughtless words, our selfish actions, and our sinful intent.

“What then shall we say 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 with him graciously give us all things?” Simply put, God knew what he was getting into when he called you to be his child. He didn't make you one of his elect out of ignorance of your sin.

There is nothing outside the sight of God. Not past, present, or future. He knew you before you were even born. He chose you from before the creation of the world. And he still gave up his Son for you.

“Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” It is God who justifies. Not you. Not the world. Only God can make a judgement for sin. And if Christ himself, who suffered and died because of that sin, is willing to forgive you. Is willing, not just to forgive, but to plead for you, to intercede for you, at the throne of God, then who is left to condemn us?

And that, my friends, is the extent of God's love. Love that would die not just for the righteous, but for sinners. Love that would die not just for a martyr, but for those committing the murder. Love that sees all of you – sinner and saint, past, present, and future – and still loves all of you. From the beginning of time to the end of the world. And into eternity.

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Because he who loves us has conquered sin, death, and the devil. He has conquered the persecution of this world. He has conquered our own stubborn hearts. And he has loved us with a love that will not end. That cannot end.

The Gospel is indeed all about nothing. For there is no evil in this world that God has not overcome. Neither life nor death shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Because neither life nor death could stop our Lord from taking on your sin and rising again for you. Amen.