

The Big Texan

A few weeks ago, I saw a billboard outside of Amarillo advertising “The Big Texan Steak Ranch”. They’re famous for a 72-ounce steak dinner including shrimp cocktail, baked potato, salad, and roll. If you eat everything in an hour or less, it’s free of course. (Although I’m sure you pay later). It’s the equivalent of eating 18 quarter pound hamburgers.

A couple of months ago, I embarked on a challenge that reminds me of that steak. I decided to read the book of Romans, which many theologians consider to be Apostle Paul’s masterpiece. I learned along the way that the real challenge is not the reading part, but the digesting. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve enjoyed it, but wrapping my head around it seems like trying to eat half a cow. Let me explain my dilemma. If the Bible were meant to be read like a normal book, you would start at the beginning and end at the end, right? Some of us get a little impatient reading through the Old Testament, so we skip ahead to the New Testament to find out what happens. Right off the bat, we encounter Jesus directly in the gospels. This is really good because it’s a one on one with Jesus speaking to us directly. But Jesus has this habit of quoting the Old Testament ... oops, we skipped over that part. We rationalize those references and move on to Acts, which tells the story about the Apostles in the early days, and also fulfills Jesus’ promise that he would send us the comforter. Acts then tells us about Saul, a devout Pharisee, and persecutor of Christians. Jesus redeems Saul on the road to Damascus, and Saul becomes Paul. Then you get to Romans and since Paul knows both Jesus and the Old Testament intimately, he is in a unique position to show how all these Old Testament prophecies are about Jesus. Oops, I may have skipped some of that. In Romans you finally learn how the process works, (getting to heaven, that is), which is what I wanted to know in the first place, only then you learn that it’s not necessarily up to you all that much, and I gotta ask, Why didn’t they tell me that at the beginning?

Even though I’m muddling along, I have a slight advantage: I can see with fresh eyes. I hope you find renewed joy from these words at the end of Romans chapter 8 that you’ve heard so many times. Listen now: nothing

“in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Who is Paul writing to in chapter 8? He’s addressing believers. He uses words like “for those who love God”, “predestined”, “called”, “justified”, and “glorified.” These are all words for believers at different stages. When you hear the word “glorified” you may think of Jesus the son or God the father, but in this context, Paul is referring to believers in heaven.

Three Truths

Okay, here’s the elevator ride talk: I call it “lessons learned while muddling through Romans”. There are a few inescapable truths in Romans that if you don’t get them down first, you’re going to have trouble. I narrowed it down to three truths, which seems about right to me.

The first truth is that both the New and Old Testament relentlessly point and direct us to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consider the Old Testament passage from Isaiah 53: “Yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” His saving grace is unrestricted in time, it doesn’t just begin at his resurrection but is there for all eternity, or as long as man is in need of redemption.

The second truth is that justification is by faith alone. To be “justified” is to be declared righteous before God, not our righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ. So far so good. Christianity 101. Most Christians believe something like that. It’s like a ticket to heaven that has been paid for by his life, death, and resurrection.

The words “faith alone” are the point where many believers diverge in what they believe. Simply put, “justification by faith alone” means that our justification has nothing to do with our works, that it is only faith. What is Paul talking about when he uses the word “faith”?

At times his use of the word “faith” refers to a spiritual growth in the believer through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Some theologians prefer the phrase “Justification by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone”, which refers to a living faith after we are born

again, that is then subsequently accompanied by works, which still has no bearing on our justification, but is a sign of the spirit at work in our lives.

Another viewpoint on “faith”, held by many believers, is that being born again involves us making a personal decision to follow Jesus, and then Holy Spirit takes us the rest of the way home, although I have trouble seeing how one could get to that conclusion by reading Romans.

Many of us Presbyterians believe that “faith” is a gift that Holy Spirit gives God’s adopted children, whom God adopted by virtue of his good pleasure and grace. This viewpoint holds that our saving faith is initiated by Holy Spirit, who softens our hard hearts, enabling us to enter true fellowship with Jesus. This last way of looking at it is especially powerful when we consider God’s sovereignty.

So, the third truth is that God is Sovereign. Remember that awkward ticket-to-heaven analogy that I used to describe justification? Well, the point of today’s scripture is that this ticket is a one-way irrevocable ticket. Absolutely nothing can ever revoke it, and this truth is possible only because God is sovereign.

God is Sovereign

God’s sovereignty may be one of the hardest of all truths to grasp mainly because we are willful creatures intent on our own way. Modern Christians not only don’t understand God’s sovereignty; in fact it is discounted. We prefer to judge ourselves. Our standard is the others around us: “Well, I know I am a sinner, but not as bad as so and so.” We prefer to think that because God is good, he will not judge. But in God’s kingdom, God is the judge, we are not. As uncomfortable as that may make us feel, the good news is that in God’s sovereign righteousness, he has decided to save us, but not on our terms.

We unwittingly substitute human desires for God’s sovereignty. We are more worried about what other people think of us than what God thinks of us. Think about how many times we seek to please family, friends, our

neighbor, our boss, our teacher. How often do we seek to please God? We blur the distinction between who God is and who we are. Jonathan Roumie, the actor who plays Jesus in the series “The Chosen”, in real life is sometimes confused with Jesus, and asked to bless babies, marriages, you name it. When he talks about his own faith, he will point to himself and say, “TV Jesus”. Then he points up and says “Real Jesus”.

The first time I really gave any thought to the “Sovereignty of God”, was during a bible lesson taught by Pastor Norm. I believe someone asked him how the Presbyterian church is different from other faiths and he said something like, “Well, it’s really about the Sovereignty of God”. At the time I remember my first reaction being something like, “So what? Don’t all Christians believe that?” Boy was I ever naïve. It turns out that God’s Sovereignty has far-reaching implications that I hadn’t really thought through. My hope is that you will see how his sovereignty amplifies the good news.

A major blunder I made not that long ago, and you might be prone to the same mistake, is that I figured that since God’s thoughts are so far above ours, that we have zero chance to know his righteousness. From Isaiah 55: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Wow, I can’t believe that I conflated his unknowable thoughts with his very knowable righteousness. I guess I was just dumb. His righteousness is described to us in a million different ways throughout the Bible. It is no mystery: his righteousness is not hidden from us. How and when and where and why God decides to act, only He knows. But we know it is always righteous and good.

God works all things together for good

Sometimes we struggle the hardest against God’s sovereignty when we go through tragedy or pain or evil done against us. Sometimes it is our own fault, but often enough we are faced with a heartbreak that was not because of anything we did, it just happened. I think of these words from Gordon Lightfoot’s song about the shipwreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald:

“Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours?” He captures the utter isolation and hopelessness those sailors must have felt just before they sank to the bottom of Lake Superior.

Yet verse 28 tells us that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” How can that be in the midst of tragedy? I think there are 3 possibilities: One possibility is that tragedies in life eventually work out for the better. I don’t think that’s quite what he means because I doubt that Paul, who wrote many of his books from prison, is suggesting that all problems in our life will eventually magically disappear. But God did work it for good, for out of Paul’s captivity he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. A second possibility is that when Paul says all things work together for good, he is referring to our salvation. That definitely seems plausible, but I think it’s door #3. I think the “working together for good” refers to Holy Spirit working through every detail in the life of the believer.

Our human timeframe makes it hard for us. Many years after we pass through the storm, we can look back and say, “If that hadn’t happened, I never would have met so and so, who blesses me every day.” Or we might say, “if I hadn’t gone through that terrible time, I would never have gotten over all these fears, and it turns out my fears were based upon nothing at all.” You can fill in the blank, we all have a story like that. When we’re in the middle of the storm, we may intellectually know that God works everything for the good, but that’s not the way it feels, is it? But ultimately, all our suffering comes to naught compared to eternal glory in heaven. And we make it through by holding onto our faith, especially when God feels like he’s a million miles away.

Do we really believe that that all things work together for good for those who love God? Have you tested these words in your own lives and found them to be true? Many believers right here in our church have it written on their hearts. You’ve gone through hard times, haven’t you? And maybe you have the luxury of the intervening years to look back and say, “God did work that out for good.” Many of you are silently nodding yes, I do believe

I can trust these words. If you believe and trust them, the only possible conclusion is that your hearts trust that God is Sovereign.

If you're having trouble trusting that God will work it out, you may be going through those hard times right now or you may be still hurting from the last time. Do you feel your faith challenged? Are you asking, "Where is Jesus when I need him the most?" Don't worry, there is no condemnation. There is no charge brought against you (verse 33). Holy Spirit is right there with you in your affliction. When we are so hurting so bad we cannot even pray, Holy Spirit "intercedes with groanings too deep for words (verse 26)."

Consider verse 34: "Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." Is Christ not also sovereign? Has he not conquered death?

Remember Christ asleep in the boat during the storm? From Mark chapter 4: ³⁹And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Be silent! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

God is unchanging

God's unchanging sovereign nature is a great comfort for believers. He is the same righteous creator he was before he created the world and he will be the same after we die. He is the same God in the Old Testament and the New.

When I was a kid, my brother and I built a little treehouse made from a few wood planks nailed across some branches in the big Cottonwood tree in front of our house. We spent many joyous hours pelting any fool who dared to pass below us with tatones, which are the little green seed pods of the Cottonwood tree. A number of years after I moved away, I drove by the old house that I grew up in. The cottonwood tree was gone! It was a visceral feeling, kind of a gut punch. What happened to my tree? But let me contrast that story with a happier one. Also when I was a kid, my dad took us to a canyon in the Black Range of the Gila. There was a huge Ponderosa Pine tree so big that my brother and my dad and I could barely

reach around it and touch hands. Fifty years later, I went back. It was still there. During those years it survived at least two major fires that burned very close to it. It had survived drought, insects, and man. I was elated. It is such a sublime feeling when you see good things that don't change, you can just count on them being there. But even that mighty Ponderosa will one day die. For some obscure reason, these tree stories led me to the verse from Ecclesiastes, "When a tree dies in the forest, there it sits." Unlike the dead tree, we have a living faith fed by the Holy Spirit.

We crave constancy in our relationships. I've had life-long friends, friends who got me, friends I trusted. Isn't it a great comfort to have a friend like that? Sadly even our closest, truest friends eventually die. But even death will not separate us from the love of Jesus.

Research shows over and over that kids thrive when they are raised in stable households. Not only do kids thrive with stability, but they crave it. They have fewer emotional troubles, they do better in school, and they tend to end up in better relationships. Even as adults, we never outgrow that yearning for peace and stability. When our lives seem to be defined more by upheaval than stability, God's sovereignty matters more than ever.

Obedience

Rather than throw a bunch of adjectives at you describing God's sovereignty, I am going with a verb: "obey". "Obey" is an action, the perfect response to his sovereignty. Let's see, what were those words Jesus taught us to pray? ("Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.")

A common objection you hear to God's sovereignty is what about free will? God gave me free will, so I am going to exercise it. The objection continues ... God doesn't ordain every single one of my actions. I'm not just a puppet going through a script that God wrote a million years ago. Fair enough, but the problem with that kind of thinking is that it tries to paint God's sovereignty into a one-dimensional sound bite.

Of course we have agency. If I decide I want to pull on my earlobe, I can do it if I want to, and God will probably allow me to do it. Aside from trivial

examples like scratching your ear, we feel like our identity is tied directly to our ability to exercise our will. We think we are giving up our freedom by obedience to God's will. I think that is true to an extent. It certainly is true that we give up our freedom to sin. But in exchange we gain a far better freedom; a freedom from the slavery of sin, and deliverance from the consequences of that sin.

Assurance

It turns out that to some degree this sermon is a moot point. (Please don't agree with me too much). But you see, since God is sovereign, God's plan for your life is already in place. But I do hope these words comfort you and give you confidence. My aim is to give you assurance that will mean something to you, an assurance based on God's sovereignty, not on worldly promises.

The Promise

Verse 31 says: "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" Paul is not saying that no one will be against us. Personal experience tells us that many are against us. Rather he is saying that no one can thwart the will of God, that he predestined us to be reunited with him from the beginning. Jesus addressed this head-on in John chapter 33: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Romans chapter 8 ends with the words that fill our hearts with confidence and joy. The accuser wants us to believe otherwise. He wants us to believe we cannot receive God's saving grace, we will never be good enough for heaven, we are failures. His lie cannot stand before God. God has chosen his beloved children for victory and glory, and nothing can stand in God's way.

Hear these words and take them into your heart:

"No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, 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.” And that is the word of God.

Romans 8:28-39 NRSVUE

²⁸ We know that all things work together^[1] for good for those who love God, 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 firstborn within a large family.^[2] 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 are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ^[3] who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, 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.

Isaiah 55:8-9 NRSVUE

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.