

When Life Bottoms Out
Romans Summer Sermon Series – August 5th, 2007

Series: Extreme Make Over
Text: Romans 8:26-39

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on August 5th, 2007 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.

The faith of children is contagious. I love VBS for this reason. One year during a VBS called Marketplace 29 A.D., all of us who participated were once again impressed by how much children want to believe in a God of loving purpose who cares about the outcome of our lives. In the midst of the week, one of our adult volunteers handed me a printout of an email which in itself caused me a bit of a strange juxtaposition. Here I was attempting to play the part of a Roman Soldier in 29 A.D., and someone hands me an email from the 21st century. However, once I read it, I understood why this volunteer wanted to share it with me. He was as impressed as I was with the faith of our children. The email had some of those children's letters to God which sums up their faith so well. Here are a few:

- Dear God: When you made the first man did he work as good as we do now?
- Dear God: Why isn't Mrs. God's name in the Bible? Weren't you married to her when you wrote it?
- Dear God: I know you exist because I go to your house on Sunday and see all the cars parked there.
- Dear God: Where does yesterday go? Do you still have it?
- Dear God: I'm afraid of things at night more than in the day. So if you could keep the sun on a little longer that would be a good thing.

Unfortunately our lives become a bit more complicated the older we grow. We bump into situations where the pain and suffering of our personal lives or the pain and suffering of the world in which we live can cause us to question our faith in a God of loving purpose who cares about the outcome of our lives yet alone the outcome of the world in which we live.

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Perhaps you have been one of the lucky ones who have made it through life so far without ever having to face one of those times in life when God seemed very distant; when all you could feel was the absence of God's presence. If so, our text for this morning will not make much sense to you. However, many of us who have had life experiences which made us question God's providence and grace are grateful that Paul did not avoid the harsh realities of a life in the Spirit. He recognized that there will be times in our lives when all is not well; when life bottoms out.

To set the context of our scripture, we have look quickly at verses 18-25. There Paul tells us he believes that when we live our lives in tune with the Spirit of God, we are helped to cope with the sufferings which are part of the human experience. We are given power by that same Spirit to live lives of hope rather than despair.

However, Paul was not naïve. He knew that there would be times when our faith would falter in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming circumstances; when our suffering would seem greater than our faith in God. What do we do then? These verses in chapter 8 are a powerful outline of what the Christian can do when life bottoms out: First, we pray, and if we cannot find the words of prayer, we sigh, and the Spirit who knows our need before the words are on our tongue, interprets those sighs which he says are too deep for words. Second, we believe what scripture teaches us in both the Old and New Testaments; all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose. Finally, we proclaim the power of God is strong enough to sustain us in the painful moment and bring us hope for our future.

PRAYER: SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

Probably one of the greatest misconceptions about faith that those of us in the ministry encounter with alarming regularity is the misconception that people have about what it means to be faithful. The misconception goes something like this: faith means being strong. Faith means never doubting. If something happens in life that causes a believer to doubt the power of God, or if they are feeling weak in the face of adversity, they fear they are not being faithful. This is simply not a biblical understanding.

In verse 26 Paul begins by acknowledging that people of faith are bound to hit times in their lives when the circumstances they are facing in life are just too much for them to handle. They want to pray, but they cannot. They want to believe, but the evidence is just too overwhelming for them that God could allow something like the senseless killings to happen. They want to believe, but the death of a child or the suffering of a loved one makes it too hard for them to comprehend a God who would allow such a tragedy.

You will recall that the issue for Paul is a life of faith based upon grace rather than Law; a life lived in relationship with God vs. a set of rules to follow. Paul says that if we have been practicing living by the Spirit rather than by the Law, these are the times when the Spirit intercedes for us. We don't have to have all the right words. All we have to do is sigh, and the Spirit will interpret that sigh for us as an offering of prayer. "*DEAR GOD!!!*" is enough of a prayer when we are overwhelmed. You don't have to have all the right words or even the right theology. The Spirit knows the intentions of your heart and will interpret your prayer on your behalf to the ears of the Creator. Now that is a rather sophisticated concept which bears some interpretation. Let me see if I can illustrate.

A colleague of mine helped me with this concept in his experience with the copying machine in his church. He says that one day the copier broke down. While he was not mechanically minded, he had the good sense to call the repair shop to see if they could tell him what the problem was and to see if he could do anything about it. However, what my colleague quickly discovered was that he didn't even know how to describe what was broken. He didn't know the names of the parts or what was specifically wrong. He just knew the copy machine didn't work.

So the repair shop sent out a technician. While working on the machine, he also called the shop. However, unlike my colleague, the technician knew how to describe what was needed. He used words my colleague didn't understand, but the person at the shop did, and soon the copier was repaired.

It is the same process with the Holy Spirit. When we don't know how to pray, the Spirit knows precisely what we need and prays in a language the Father perfectly understands. (Citation: John B. McGarvey, Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 2.)

BELIEVE ALL THINGS WORK FOR GOOD

Once we have sighed our prayer, Paul invites us to believe what the scriptures of the Old and New Testament teach us about the way God works. Paul says, "*We know all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.*" We believe that God can use all things, even the most painful things, to deepen our faith and to help us grow spiritually and emotionally.

This is hard work of our desire to be faithful. It is not a passive faith. It is not a passive acceptance of whatever life brings. It is doing the hard work of looking for the signs of God's presence teaching us how to take the hand that life has dealt us and uses it to deepen our self-awareness and our awareness of God.

This is what Presbyterians mean by predestination: that it is our destiny to be in a relationship with God. This is why Christ died: to insure that nothing would get in our way of achieving our destiny. Therefore, it is within God's power to use everything in our life experience to draw us closer to Him, but we have to do the hard work of discerning where God is active and what God is teaching us through the moments of joy as well as the painful moments in our lives.

This is not just a New Testament concept. Do you remember when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and years later he was able to use his position in Egypt to save the nation of Israel from starvation? Remember what he said when his brothers came to him to beg for something to eat: *"What you intended for evil, God meant for good."*

God uses all of life to draw us deeper and deeper into a relationship of faith and trust, if we will allow it. This is our destiny. This is God's intention for our lives, but that does not relieve us of the responsibility of discerning where and how God is active. This is the hard work of faith.

Gerald May was a psychiatrist and Senior Fellow at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Dr. May died of lymphoma this past April after over ten years of treatment for his disease. Several years ago he wrote of his experience with his disease in the Shalem Institute Journal.

In cyberspace I have met an angel-friend. Her name is Lucy and she's been in treatment for cancer for over a year. We correspond by e-mail. We started out joking about our baldness, but she's become a profound spiritual friend; she knows the trials and graces of this trail so well.

I'm sensing the pattern of how each three-week chemotherapy cycle makes me sick, then compromises my immune system, then gives me a few days of recovery before the next round. Something about this reminds me of Bosnia (Note: This journal entry was in 1996, but the same could be said of the conflict in Iraq).

My last hospital roommate told me he was dying. "I lost the battle," he said, "but you gotta keep on fighting." People tend to think of it as a battle, but I don't. I have no animosity toward my wayward cancer cells, can't see them as enemies. Lucy doesn't either.

I've been sick so many times now: hospitalized, transfused, and medicated, but always I feel my strange gratitude and God's incredible closeness, and I'm always aware of the love and prayers of so many people. Yet I wonder, "With all this love and prayer, how come I feel so terrible?" Lucy calls the suffering "God's kiss." Together we hatch an image of our bodies being canoes, needing to be hollowed out for God. And I've begun to realize that each time when I'm suffering the most, I receive a special Wisdom-gift. (Citation: Gerald May, "Are we having fun yet?" Shalem News, Winter 1996.)

Paul says, "All things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to God's purpose." He doesn't say, "All things work out the way we want them to work out." What he does say is that if we are seeking God's purpose for our lives, God will use the good along with the bad to teach us. It is our responsibility to remain educable.

AFFIRM THE POWER OF GOD

Finally, the verses come which many of us know by heart because we use them all at the time of memorial services for those who have died. Other than Psalm 23 and John 14, these are the most requested verses to be read when someone has died. Paul affirms the power of God over all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth. He says that the power of God is stronger than death, and it is stronger than life. It is stronger than politics and it is stronger than the supernatural. It is stronger than anything else we may face, and it is the power of God alone that will see us through the most difficult

circumstances life has to offer. Paul says that if God is for us, nothing we face can overwhelm us. There is nothing that will keep God from loving us because God paid a high price to demonstrate that his power was greater than any other power on earth through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the greatest power on earth is on our side, then nothing can trip us up or hold us back. There may be temporary setbacks in our lives, but the power of God will ultimately have its way in us and through us.

English explorer George Mallory dreamed of conquering Mount Everest. He organized an expedition, but it failed. A second attempt also failed. A third expedition, launched after the most extensive preparation possible, was most tragic of all. An avalanche killed Mallory and most of his team.

Back in England, friends invited the survivors to a banquet honoring Mallory and his valiant group. At its close, a surviving team member stood and looked around the room at photos of Mallory and his slain comrades. Then, in tears, he turned to face a huge picture of Mount Everest behind the banquet table. "Mount Everest," he said, "you defeated us once, you defeated us twice, you defeated us three times. But we shall someday defeat you, because you can't get any bigger, and we can!" (Citation: Mark Sutton, "God's Man," as seen in Men of Integrity (Sep/Oct 2002)

CONCLUSION

So here is Paul's advice for what to do when life bottoms out. First, you pray, and when you find it difficult to pray, you sigh and trust that the Spirit of God will interpret those sighs in a language that only God can understand. Second, you believe that all things work together for good and that God will use whatever you are going through to accomplish God's ultimate purpose for your life. Finally, you proclaim by God's power nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.