

It's Bigger Than You Think

July 26, 2026

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

If you've been trying to count the Scripture passages I say are among my favorites, well, add another one. Or maybe I've already mentioned it. In any case, it's true. This section of Romans includes some of the words that ring most true in my soul.

I've known what it is not to know what or how to pray because the sadness and the hurt go so deep. I've been in places where prayer itself has seemed impossible – although God had supported me through many stresses and trials, I simply couldn't find not just words, but even a direction for prayer in the sorrow of my soul.

How important it is to know that in those profoundly disconnected times, the Spirit helped me in my weakness, interceding with groanings too deep for words.

Sometimes I became aware of that. Other times, I didn't. It didn't matter. The Spirit was there, groaning with me whether I knew it or not.

As Israel Kamudzandu writes at Working Preacher, "The inarticulate moans or groans of the Holy Spirit are not oriented to the human conscience but they are directed to God on behalf of a believing faith community... The reality is that human beings run out of words, especially in moments of sickness, death, hunger, poverty, and whenever life confronts us with pain."

It doesn't stop there for me. That next verse about all things working together for good for those who love God – well, I know there's some problems there. Let's face it, not all things work together for good period. There are plenty of people who do evil and seem to delight in it. There are storms and earthquakes and although they have no conscious intent to harm, harm they do. The history of these islands, going way back or staying recent, reveals both evil intent by human beings and evil impact by impersonal force or human accident.

But still. I read that verse with relief. Maybe everything doesn't work for good, but God does. God doesn't set the world into the courses of evil. God acts to mitigate the harm, to transform it into something else. When human hubris and arrogance crucified Jesus Christ, God brought forgiveness in Jesus' own words and then resurrection in Jesus' own life. If God was willing to transcend the rejection of God's most precious gift, then what will God refuse to transcend?

I can't think of anything.

As Erin Heim writes at Working Preacher, “In Christ, God does not meet our human violence with divine violence or retribution but, rather, takes on our human violence and overwhelms it with God’s self-giving love (8:32–34). In Christ, God promises to bring justice and wholeness through God’s overwhelming love. In Christ, God’s love has had the final word, and in Christ, the ending is sure.”

The question that has occupied a lot of Christians over the last two thousand years is: for whom is this ending sure? That is, once God’s love has had the final word, for whom has God spoken?

It’s a knotty problem.

The plain sense of the English translations with which we’re familiar uses the word “predestined.” A lot of theologians and Bible scholars have concluded, based on that word, that God has chosen some people to become Christians and to be saved in advance. Some theologians and Bible scholars have further concluded, based on this passage, that God has chosen other people not to become Christians and not to be saved. Among those who believed this were Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin. Calvin was one of the Reformation thinkers behind our own Reformed tradition. Our church was more influenced by Calvin than by Martin Luther.

Did the Apostle believe that some people were blessed ahead of time and some people were cursed?

I don’t think so. The reason I don’t think so is found in the purpose of Paul’s letter to the Romans in the first place. When he wrote the letter, Paul hadn’t visited Rome. He seems to have known something about the leaders there, and he seems to have known at least a little about conditions for the Christians in Rome. But he hadn’t been there, and... he planned to visit.

He planned to visit on the way to Spain.

Why was he going to Spain? For the same reason he’d toured around the cities of the Anatolian peninsula, modern Turkey. For the same reason he’d visited the cities of Macedonia and Greece. He was introducing the news that Jesus Christ had lived, had taught, had died, and had rose again for the blessing of humanity. He firmly believed that embracing that truth brought eternal life to those who did so. So he set out to bring that word to a horde of strangers he’d never thought to meet. He set out in journeys fraught with risk and hazard – in his Second Letter to the Corinthians he mentioned that he’d been shipwrecked no less than three times. Now he proposed to take the longest sea journey of his ministry from the eastern Mediterranean to the western.

That’s an enormous amount of effort for someone who believes that God has predetermined it all. If God has set it all out ahead of time, what difference do the actions of any human beings matter? God has set it. It’s determined. It’s done.

Paul couldn't have believed that and done the things he did.

In Paul's day, people believed in big powerful deities and in local gods whose influence was limited to small areas or whose concern was limited to particular nations. In contrast, Paul taught of a God who could exert power in many places, but who was concerned for and extending grace to people of many backgrounds, even every background. As Michael Fitzpatrick writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Class, race, sexual orientation, wealth, fame, gender, religion, marriage, political party — none of these categories by which we carve up humanity into various tribes counts for or against a person in the Kingdom."

Paul's travels and labors were in service of a first century quest for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Church of Jesus Christ and the Realm of God. "How much grace did God have?" people might have asked him. "It's bigger than you think," Paul would have replied. Paul did reply: "For I am convinced 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 bigger than you think.

These are days of factionalization, of separation into my group and your group, of division between the "We're entitled" and "You're nots." It's not the first time in human history; it won't be the last. Isn't it obvious that such thinking feeds the violence of the automobile attack on a Pride parade in Berlin yesterday, or the wars in Iran, Palestine, Ukraine, and more? Doesn't it buttress the fears of women who receive no justice when they are assaulted?

In contrast, Paul taught of a church in which male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free — the most significant categories of his day — no longer mattered. God's grace was for all. Did Paul fully recognize the implications of his own thinking? I don't think so. He was still a person of his time, as we're people of our time, and there were limits to his imagination just as there are limits to our imagination.

God's grace is bigger than we think.

Of all the things I try to teach you from this pulpit, of all the things I try to convince you of from this pulpit, of all the things I try to persuade you of from this pulpit, this is the one I most earnestly want you to remember, to believe, and to live from:

God's grace is bigger than we think. It's for you. It's for me. It's for them. It's for everybody. It's for the ones we don't think it's for. It's bigger than you think.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson