



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

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Therefore God is For Us - (Romans 8:31-39)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

It was eleven years ago today that I started ministry at Northview. It was snowing. November 26, 2006 and it was snowing outside. So, let's hope that that does not happen, but it was snowing outside. I remember when I showed up that day, it was all very new to me. I came from a smallish church in New Zealand at the time. One of the great experiences of my life, actually, was when I interviewed to be a pastor here, the young adults pastor. The interview was not one of the great experiences of my life, but, prior to the interview. I had always wanted to surprise my mother because we had lived in New Zealand for like seven years. I always wanted to just fly back and surprise her so I would give her a heart attack or something. But, I was just so excited to do this. So, when I came back to interview here, I didn't tell my mom that I was coming. I ended up going to my in-law's house, they lived in Bellingham, Washington. My mom and my father they lived in Whidbey Island, which is just about an hour and a half south of Bellingham. I remember calling her from Bellingham pretending to be in New Zealand so that I could figure out where she was going to be the next day. It was landline days, you know, before the days where they could actually see where you were calling from. So she answered the phone, I said, "Mom," and she said, "Oh, what's the weather like?" and I lied. [laughter] I had no idea what the weather was like in New Zealand.

"Mom, what are you doing tomorrow?"

"Why do you care?" She said.

"Uh, I don't know. Mom, we don't talk enough about just the day to day, about your life. Where are you going tomorrow?"

"Well, I got to go do some shopping in Burlington."

I was like, "Oh, that's halfway between where we are. Praise God!"

I said, "Where are you going to shop?"

"Around."

"Ya, but surely there's a place that you're going to go."

"Well, I need to get some groceries."

"Where do you buy your groceries these days?"

"Haagan"

"Ok, do you know the address of that Haagan..." No just kidding, I knew where it was.



“What time... like in the morning? You going in the morning? Like are you going to spend the whole day there or are you just going to go in the morning?”

“Yah, I thought I’d leave tomorrow about ten in the morning and get up there and shop.”

“Okay. It was good talking to you, Mom.” [laughter]

The next day I drove down to Burlington from Bellingham and I sat in the parking lot of Haagan. I was there for a little while and my mom’s car comes in. I didn’t know where to do this, right? I thought, “I’ll do it when she goes into the store or something. I’ll walk right behind her or whatever.” So, I got out of my car and she was a little quicker than I thought. I don’t know why she was walking so fast. I got right behind her and I was like, “Will you slow down, lady?” Right? She went to the women’s room, so that was why she was going... and I got to the edge and... “Oh, okay. So I’ll have to wait for a few minutes.” So, I kinda... they were watching me. They thought that I was stalking her, I think. [laughter] Finally, she came out of the women’s bathroom and she went to look at these cards—she was at the aisle that has all the cards at it— and I walked right up next to her and I stood touching her on the side, just looking at the cards. She could feel the presence of this large man next to her and so she took, you know, a step sideways and so I took a step sideways [laughter]. She took another step sideways and I took a step sideways. Finally, she looked at me and said, “Excuse me!” And I said, “Excuse you,” and she went, <shrieking> “Jeff! Ohhhh!” You know? She’s looking around, like, what, where, are we in another dimension or... One of the great moments of my life was seeing my mother’s face. She used to say when I was younger that I would be really good at any job that required me to be the guy who gave news and I agreed with her completely. Yes, I want to be the flower delivery guy, that’s the job that I want. Show up at the door, “Here’s some flowers.” People are “Oh, I love the...” I want to be the guy that gives the big cheque, right, and has the “Million. You won a million dollars. Publisher’s clearing house. Here you go, balloons. Yeah! Move that bus. This is your house!” I want that job. [laughter] I love being the bearer of good news, love it. Which is why I am really excited about this passage of scripture. In some ways, I think we started the book of Romans so we could here. There is no better news I can give you than what is written here. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no flower bouquet or amount of money that you could win or special surprise from a loving son that would bring joy to your face and your heart like this ought to. My prayer, actually, in the next few minutes is that I can just do it justice.

Romans 8:31-39, here’s our outline. I’ll just show you where we’re going. Three points:

1. God is for us.
2. God is really for us.
3. Even when it doesn’t look like it, God is for us.

So, you know the main idea.

[God is For Us]

Romans 8:31,



“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Now, if you are a Bible study student or just any casual Christian, when you read the Bible and it says “What then..” or “What, therefore, shall we say in response to these things?” a little alarm should be going off in your head “What things?” This is not an isolated little passage that’s just dropped out of Heaven, it’s got a context. What are you referring to, Paul? What things are you talking about? Well, he probably means the whole book of Romans up to this point, but, in particular, he’s referring to Romans 8: 28-30, the three verses just preceding this one. This is what they say, Romans 8:28-30,

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. [So, he takes that word ‘called’ now and he’s going to drop it and he’s going to say, “Now let me show you how you got called because it’s not just something happening in this time, it has an eternity past to it and an eternity future.] For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he glorified. ”

Theologians use the language of “unbreakable links” to describe those words, those verbs in this passage. God foreknows those. He predestined those. He calls those. He justifies those. He glorifies those. Same group all the way through. Great words, right? So, those God foreknew; [writing the word ‘foreknew’ on the top of the whiteboard page] he then predestined; [continuing down the page he writes the word ‘predestined’] those he predestined, he called; [he writes ‘called’. That’s the word that he’s playing with. This is eternity past, [pointing to the top two words] now eternity future. Those he called, he justified; [he writes ‘justified’] those he justified, he also glorified. [writing ‘glorified’ at the bottom of the page]

Now, there is a couple of things I want you to notice about what I have written out here. Number one. God is the subject of all of these. So, if you want to write the proper phrase, “God foreknew those” or you could say “us”. God predestined us. God called us. God justified us. God glorified us. That’s the first thing. God is the subject, we are the object. Subjects act, object receive. Second, and crazy awesome, what tense is that? Do you know what I mean, present, past, future? What is that? That is the past tense, glorified. Now, I’m looking at all of you people and, I gotta tell you, none of you look glorified to me. [laughter] Some of you are awesome, I’m sure, right, not glorified. And yet, why in the world can the apostle Paul write about *you* that you’re glorified? In other words, the salvation that God has acted upon in your life is so sure that he can talk about it as if it’s completely complete. It’s not a future tense for God, for God it is a past tense. He’s done it. So, you might be experiencing, in the present moment, a “we live between the justified and glorified” moment. We’ve been predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so God is working out the image of his Son in us. Sometimes, we wonder, “Oh, God. Are we ever going to make it to the end? I look at the sin in my own life, I look at all difficult.. oh, God, how will we ever make it?” You already have.



There's a great parable that was told about these verses to try to get an idea about what's he's talking about. It's about a sculptor who goes out— he's a wise, great sculptor— and he goes out to a rock quarry and he finds a marble slab, this rough rock. He marks it, thereby predestining it to be conformed to an image that he has in his mind, and he leaves it there for a little while and then he sends, years later, one of his messengers to go out and to get it. They bring their pick up out and they go and they grab the one that's marked. Yes, they call it, they grab it, they bring it into the truck, they drive it back to his workshop, and they unload it. There it is, there it sits, this rough rock that he has chosen. He starts to chisel, right? He cuts away everything that doesn't look like the image that he has in his mind. As it goes, it takes time, right? It doesn't just happen in a day, it happens over long periods of time. A little bit off here and a little bit of there and then, at the end, when it's all ready to be presented, he goes and takes it to the palace of the king and he said, "There. My masterpiece." And everybody who walks by it now gives glory, "Oh, what an amazing thing! How did the sculptor take something that was so rough and ugly and turn it into something so glorious and beautiful? What a great sculptor!" They give glory to him. And this is you. And this is me. And this is what God has done. Sometimes the sculpting hurts, but it is achieving a goal that God has already completed in his mind. There is nothing that is going to stop the sculptor from achieving it because he's already, God has already achieved it in his own mind. What do you say in response to these things, that God acted in eternity past for you? What do you say in response to this? He's acting in eternity future *for you*. How do you respond to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? What's the answer to that? See, the answer is no one. You don't look like you believe it, so he's going to come back. He redoubles back now, that's his point, he redoubles back, and here is his second point then.

[God is Really For Us]

Now, before I read these verses, verse thirty-two and following, I just... Have you ever been in a situation where you've seen something just remarkable, whether remarkably awful or remarkably great, and what comes out of you is just a litany of rhetorical questions? Okay, so I'm a sports fan and my voice is horrible today because for a good chunk of the time that I was watching my kids play volleyball, they were not being very good. What's coming out of me is like, "What is wrong with you? Are you crazy?! Why is the coach even here?" These are the questions, right, that come out of you. You see something horrible and you and it's like, "[frustrated noises]," right, rhetorically, you know the answer to them all, you think. Or, you see something great like a beautiful mountain range with your friends and you're like, "Oh, do you see how *beautiful* it is?! Do you see the *glory* of it?! Have you been here before? Do you want to come again? This is fan..." When you see something magnificent the rhetorical questions just flow. This is what Paul does here. He's overcome with just joy and looking at the majesty of this, of these things, that he just starts rolling off rhetorical questions. Here's the first of them: Romans 8:32,

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all— how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

What's the greatest thing in the universe? Well, God is. What's the greatest gift in the universe, then? Well, if God could somehow give us God that would be the greatest gift. Right, so when God gives you



Jesus, who is fully God, he is giving you the greatest gift. How will he not also, then, give you whatever else is necessary?

My son— we're going to pray together this week— my son is going to take his driver's test. [laughter] I should pause now and seek the Lord. I want you to imagine something that will not happen. I want you to imagine that my son goes and he passes the test and then—that's not the part that we're imagining won't happen [laughter] — he passes the test and then he comes home and I say, "Listen, because you passed the test and because I'm generous, I bought you a brand new Mercedes-Benz. Like, it's beautiful." And he's like, "Oh, dad, really, it's too much, but not really. I love it." He sits down and he's in the car and he's like, "Oh, so great!" and I'm like,

"Yah, it cost a lot."

"Oh, I love it so much. One thing dad. I really love fuzzy dice and I would love to put fuzzy dice on the mirror. Could you possibly consider buying me some fuzzy dice as well as the car?"

Now, of course, my answers going to be "Well, yeah." Well it might be like, "Get your own dice." [laughter] But If you stop and think about it, a generous father is basically going to be like, "Well, the car costs like *that* much [holding his hands wide apart] and the fuzzy dice cost like *this* much, [holding his thumb and forefinger slightly apart] so sure, of course. I'm not get you the car and then not outfit it with the stuff that you need or that you want. The gift is so *great*. How will I not also, along with it, give you all the things necessary..." Listen, how will God stop from giving you everything you need to follow Jesus to the end of your days if he has already given you Jesus?

He has another question here: Romans 8:33-34,

"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died— more than that, who was raised to life— is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

You guys notice the language there, it's very judicial, it's very courtroom-y. You notice those words? Charge. Justify. Condemn. Intercede. Make representation. Paul is trying to draw you an image okay, so here is the way it works. There is a court room at the judgment and you are the defendant and you will be standing in the defendants seat or position. The judge is seated, God the Father is seated. When he looks at you here is what he sees: He sees a person whom he's foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified sitting there, he's adopted you, it says in Romans 8, to be his child. So, when he sees you sitting there, he's like, <whispering> "Hello, hi." The Almighty God is like, "It's going to be a piece of cake." He's also given you Jesus who is now your advocate. He's standing next to you and he is the most honoured son, he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God and all of his enemies are a footstool for his feet. He is your advocate, your representative before God, and when God looks at Jesus he's like, "Hey man, we've known each other for a long time, you know?" In this courtroom, who on earth, who in the heavens could possible come up the prosecutors seat and say, "I've got a charge that will stick! Hey God, I've got something that you should condemn them for." Your critics, will your critics come up in that moment and say, "I've seen them do all of these things!"



Will Satan himself, will he be able to stand there and say, “Oh, I know what they’ve done those wicked, wicked people,” and have it stick?

You ever talked to somebody who has a problem with the cell phone company or ICBC, yes, or some place and they are not worried about it. Like, if you were in their position, you would be really worried about it. “How are you going to get out from this charge or whatever is it they’ve laid on you?” And they say to you something like,

“I’m not really worried about it because, I mean, I know a guy.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, it’s like the president. I know the president. I’ve got his cell phone number right here, kids are in my class, kids are on my soccer time, kids are like... he loves me. So, look, I’m just going to make the phone call.”

And they know, they just know, it doesn’t matter what the charge is, it doesn’t matter what the issue is, they got this direct line to the dude that can make the decisions. “I know a guy,” they say and you think, “Oh, I wish I knew a guy!” Here’s the thing, that when it comes to the final judgment, <starts whispering> you know a guy. <ends whispering> God is really for us.

So here’s the objection to all of this at this point: It’s all nice, pie in the sky when I die stuff, I love it. If God is really for me, then why doesn’t it look like he’s for me in my life right now? Because I look at my life and I’m facing suffering or the potential for suffering. What about *that*? Right, then point three.

[Even When it Doesn’t Look Like It, God Is For Us]

Romans 8:35-36,

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’”

You know what, before we talk about what he’s doing in those two verses, I just wanted to back up for a minute and just own a little bit of our cultural presupposition. What kinds of things do we assume, as a culture, when we read stuff like this? When we read the word “suffering”? So, I think that there are two unstated assumptions, at least, that we have towards suffering in our society these days in the West. Number one, I think that we believe the presence of suffering means the absence of God. I’m not saying that’s true, I’m just saying that that’s kind of what we carry into the discussion as a non-negotiable truth. The presence of suffering means the absence of God. Think if you go out to the street corners anywhere in the Western world these days and you ask a girl on the street how she knows God is for or against her. She will point to circumstances. “I know God is for me if things are going well and I know that he’s against me if they’re not going well.” I think that’s the general rule. That’s why belief in things like Karma these days are on the rise because that tends to be the way that it works. If you’ve done bad things into the universe or toward God, God will get you back. It’ll come back around. Even in the Christian church we use language like “Well, it was a God thing.” “What



was?” “Well, the good thing that happened to me. You know, like I got money, the cheque, right? The Publisher’s Clearinghouse. Such a God thing.” “I used to be single and now I’m married. Look at me. I’m ugly. God thing.” [laughter] Right? God thing. But you don’t hear people say that when they’re suffering, when they are facing suffering. “Well, I didn’t have cancer, now I do. It’s a God thing.” We don’t refer to it that way because we think that what God’s involved in is the good stuff and the other stuff is just “Ahh.” It’s a breakage in the universe and he’s not involved at all in any of that. So, this is basically what Job’s friends came and told Job. Remember the story of Job? He loses his house, he loses his family, and he loses his livestock. There’s the scene, finally, where his life has left him. She says, “Curse God and die.” And he’s sitting on a bunch of ashes with broken pottery, scraping the sores on his body. His friends show up and for a week they’re quiet and this is their best moment... and then they open their mouths. Their argument with him is, “Look, Job. The way it works is if you do good stuff, God gives you good stuff. If you do bad stuff, God gives you bad stuff. You’re experiencing bad stuff, therefore, ergo, you are not a good man.” I think that that kind of thinking, the Job’s friends, the Karmic kind of thinking is part of what we carry into discussions about suffering. The presence of suffering means the absence of God.

I think the second assumption that we have is that we believe we deserve blessing and not suffering. In fact, I think we believe that God’s main goal in the world and his job, as it were, is to protect us from all of the suffering, all the bad things. We have, in the Christian church, a line of teaching that is called prosperity teaching. A lot people like reject that and say, “Oh, that’s horrible stuff,” but that kind of thinking has resulted in a lot of us assuming that some of the things that the prosperity teachers teach. So, they have books that say “Everyday is Friday,” right? Or, “Your best life now.” Or they say that if things are going wrong in your life you need to decree and declare that those things should get better and the reason that they’re going bad is because you’re not activating your faith in the present moment so that you can have ownership and direction over your life. God wants you to be prosperous and if you’re not prosperous that’s on you, not God. To be a Christian means to experience prosperity in the present moment. Some of us will say, “Oh, that’s ridiculous and terrible.” Yah, but it tends to bleed into our thinking so that we expect, especially in the suburbs, we expect life to go well. When we find out that somebody has gotten cancer, we usually say, “Why, God?” But, when they get a blessing, we don’t say, “Why, God?” It’s the bad stuff we say “Why, God?” about because we assume that the good stuff is owed us in some way. I’m not saying that those are right, I’m just saying that that is what we carry into it. So, here’s the thing:

1. We believe the presence of suffering means the absence of God.
2. We believe that we deserve blessing, not suffering.

As a result, we rarely expect suffering to happen. We’re shocked when it does. It’s almost like we think that there’s this bubble that surrounds us, that we walk around, you know, and if we have the right amount of insurance we can keep it going too. We walk around and the bad arrows come and bounce off, boing, boing, boing. When something bad happens to us, it’s such a shock to us.

I was sitting in a classroom when I was in seminary next to a Ukrainian guy who was my friend. People were asking for prayer for all sorts of things, like their foot or their... things that they should be praying



for, but he was just sitting there troubled, agitated. I didn't know why he was so upset. We prayed for the things and he leaned over to me and he said, "You Americans. I think life surprises you." Well yeah.

So our perspective is that suffering is not supposed to happen and yet Paul in this passage is saying the exact opposite. He's assuming it will take place. It's not a question of "if" but "when". Did you see that Romans 8:36:

"As it is written: [he says] 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'"

That's a quote from Psalm 44 where the psalmist is saying, "O God, Israel has done wrong and they're living a rotten life. Everything's going wrong. Why on earth is this taking place?" Paul's quoting it by saying, "Because that's life. Sometimes it sucks." If you're not suffering now, you will be suffering soon. My role as a pastor, quite honestly, boils down to helping you prepare to suffer. And you're like, "Wow, I'm glad I came to church today." [laughter] Because the questions that remains in our minds, at this point, is "How do we live, then? How do you live knowing that trouble is going to come, man? That's crazy!" This is the brilliance of this actual passage, isn't it? Romans 8:35:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"

In other words, there's *nothing* that will keep you from his love. Nothing that will come, nothing that has come, nothing that can even be devised in the universe that will keep you from him.

I've shared several times in church here about a guy named John Paton. He's one of my great heroes of the faith. He was a missionary to what was called the New Hebrides, the South Pacific islands of Vanuatu. Those islands, when the first missionaries arrived by boat, they got off the boat, they took about thirty steps, they saw some natives, and they tried to say hello. Those natives ran out, clubbed them to death, and then ate them. John Paton wanted to go, years later, to preach the Gospel to these people, where the Gospel had never been proclaimed because the last guy who tried got eaten. His friends would say to him, "Are you nuts? You're going to be eaten by cannibals." But he was driven. Takes his wife, his daughter. They go there. His wife and daughter die. He stands at the edge of their grave by his hut by the beach, which is as far inland as he could get without having them eat him. He wondered what in the world God was doing in that moment, as you would. But, he continued on. He kept preaching the Gospel. People would come... he had medicines so some of the natives would call him to their hut and say, "Come and give us the medicine, I'm sick." It was a trap. Several times where they'd remove their robe or remove their blanket and they would pull out a knife and hold it to his throat quivering. And he'd be thinking, "I'm done." This guy used to follow him around with a musket. A chief of one of the tribes on the island used to follow him around with a loaded musket that he got from the traders, just waiting for him to say something that he chief didn't like. All day long, he'd walk around with a loaded musket pointed at your head. Can you imagine doing your job with a loaded musket pointed at your head? And Paton would just kind of keep going and he'd just do his work as if



the guy wasn't there. He used to sleep in his clothes, this man, because he wrote, "Listen, I never knew if they were going to come and try to kill me." How do you live like that? How do you live day to day to day knowing that suffering is just right around the corner? As presently, what do you do? He wrote in his autobiography, he said,

"Our safety lay in our appeal to the Lord who had placed us there, and to whom all power has been given on Heaven and on Earth. He that was with us was more the all that could be against us. This is strength; this is peace: to feel, in entering on every day, that all its duties and trials have been committed to the Lord Jesus- that come what may, He will use us for His own glory and our real good."

My little girl was just learning to swim. She used to be able to, of course, do it in the shallow end quite well. As long as she could touch, she was okay. She'd start to freak out, right, when she was above her head or when she had to actually to start swimming. It was really a challenge for her, so, in order to get her off of that, I would get in with her. While she has in the shallow end I'd try and teach her how to swim. So that if she gave up really quickly she could put her feet down. But at some point, you gotta start going deeper and so when I started to do that I would grab her and I'd say, "Okay, we're going to go to the deep end." And she'd say, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no." And I'd say, "Come on honey. Honey, we're going to go. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay." And I'd hold her tight and she'd claw my arms and I'd hold her tight and I'd whisper in her ear the whole way, "I can touch. I can touch. I can touch. I can touch." She would relax with the knowledge that her father could manage what she could not... and that, no matter what happened, I wasn't going to let her go. You do know that you're going to face the depths, you know that, right? You're walking towards them, but you know, as well, that your Father holds you. This is what this passage is saying. "No matter what happens, I am going to hold you and I can touch. I will always touch and I will never let go because I did this. I foreknew, I predestined, justified, glorified, I did it. I marked you out. You're mine." [Amen] What do you say in response to these things? It's no wonder that Paul ends it with these words. Romans 8:37-39,

"No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, [neither great financial success nor great financial difficulty; neither an amazing spouse nor a rotten one; [laughter] neither the celebrated birth of a child nor another year of infertility; neither miraculous healing nor continued chronic pain; neither getting married nor remaining single; neither ecstatic joys nor crippling sorrows] nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

See, I said it was good news, right?

Let me pray. Father, it's almost sad that there is only week to talk about this. We'll be back, though, talking more about the joy we have in you and the surety that we have in a God who cannot be stopped in his plans. We are so thankful that you've included us in those plans. I can't muster enough



fervour to impart to my friends here how overwhelmingly joyous this is. So, God, I really trust that your Spirit will use just the feeble words of a feeble man to try to just make them reverberate in the minds of the people who are here so that they can see and feel what it means to be loved and held by a Father who can always touch. Grant us joy in this knowledge, Father, and perseverance and a desire to know you more and more as the lover of our souls. Thank you and we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.