

Sermon: Romans 8:28-39

(See also Deuteronomy 7:6-9; Matthew 13:44-52)

There's nothing quite like the experience of a good con artist movie. I always feel like the plots in those movies are admirably intricate and well put-together. Perhaps the quintessential con movie of the 20th century was a film released in 1973 called *The Sting*.

The Sting has a complicated plot, but the big con comes at the very end (yes, I'm going to spoil it, but you've had over 40 years to watch this thing, so I think I'm within my rights here): a big crime boss has been conned into betting half a million dollars past-post on a horse at an illegal off-track betting parlor. What he doesn't know is, the parlor is run by con artists who plan to take the money and run.

But before the operation finishes, everything goes wrong! Half a dozen FBI officers storm the parlor and start arresting people on the spot. The leader of the con men singles out the movie's main character for betraying them to the FBI, then shoots him dead. The lead FBI officer then shoots the con leader, also a major character in the movie, who falls to the ground. Meanwhile, the big crime boss—the bad guy—is presumed innocent and is quickly escorted away from the firefight.

At this point, everything looks lost. Our hero is dead, the con leader is dead, the FBI has control of the parlor, and, presumably, the bad guy might even get his money back. But once the crime boss is gone, the two dead men stand up to the sound of cheers and applause! It turns out the so-called FBI officers were themselves in on the con and were all part of the getaway plan! Just when you thought everything had gone horribly wrong, it's revealed that it was actually all part of the plan. I love that kind of movie—where an operation is so incredibly well-planned that even when things seem to be going wrong, in the end you find out that even those mishaps were part of the plan.

A well-drawn plan like that takes every contingency into account. It's based on solid information, considers every possible scenario, and achieves its goal no matter what happens. In fact, a skillful enough planner might even start to look like he can see the future just because he can predict and adapt to every possible scenario so well.

Well, that's the kind of plan that Paul is talking about in today's reading from Romans 8. "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good." In other words, everything, all things, are a part of God's plan, and the goal of that plan is the good of those who love God. I was talking about how a good planner looks like he can see the future, but with God, he actually *can* see the future! He *writes* the future!

Verse 29: "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." We talk about how we don't choose God; he chooses us. But *when* did that choice take place? According to Paul here, it took place long before you were aware of it. God foreknew and predestined us to be his children and factored all of us into his master plan for all things before we were even born.

Paul elaborates on the plan in verse 30: "Those whom he predestined [before we were born] he also called [before our conversion], and those whom he called, he also justified [at our conversion], and those whom he justified he also glorified [a little now, but ultimately at the end of time]." Your salvation has been a critical part of God's plan all along! And yet even more than that, all things, Paul says, work together for good for those who love him.

Now for the past couple of weeks we've been talking about suffering as Christians. We suffer one way when we battle against our sinful flesh, and we suffer other ways when sin attacks us from the outside, be it by persecution or disaster or whatever. We suffer through all of this now because we know that a future glory awaits us—a glory to which our present sufferings can't even hold a candle!

Yet the devil presses on against God's people with all manner of attacks against our faith. He'll tell you things like, "You're not good enough to deserve eternal life." But in verse 33 Paul reminds us that God himself is the one who *makes* us deserving of eternal life. And the devil will bring up all kinds of old sins, past regrets, pet sins, big sins, addictions, whatever he can use to condemn you in your own mind. But verse 34, right there: "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." In other words, Christ has already been condemned on your behalf—there *is* no condemnation left for you!

If you believe God sacrificed his own Son Jesus for our sake, then it follows that he will gladly give us everything else we need, since nothing else is as precious as his own Son. You know, Stacy and I are planning on buying a minivan soon. Thing's probably gonna cost, like, 20 grand; that's over two thirds of my annual salary. But I have a plan! I'm gonna recoup some of that money by not doing any expensive maintenance on the van. Oil changes, tire rotations, inspections, none of that stuff. I'm just gonna keep it as it came from the factory. Sound like a good plan? No? Why not? Because following a plan like that'll turn my vehicle into a \$20,000 road block within a year or two, right? It's not worth it to destroy something so costly in the name of saving what amounts to a bit of chump change in comparison.

God feels the same way about you, his children. God bought you at a price—an incredibly expensive price. God bought you at the cost of his only-begotten Son, whom he sent to give up his precious life to win you back from sin. And then Satan comes along and tells you that you're not good enough, that the bad stuff you do in life somehow disqualifies you from being in God's family, but honestly, do you really think God would sacrifice his *Son* for you only to lose you to whatever dumb trap sin has caught you in? No! If God can plan all things to work together for our good, then surely he has planned a way of salvation that won't be thwarted by the fact that we're not perfect.

Satan likes to parade your suffering as proof that God doesn't love you. "If God loves you, then why doesn't he heal you? Why did he kill off your loved ones? Why does he make life so hard for you?" But suffering has always been a part of our heritage as God's people. Paul quotes from a psalm seemingly from out of nowhere in verse 36, but it really fits here. The psalm—Psalm 44—was written from the perspective of good, God-fearing people who still suffered. "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." It's a psalm of complaint against the pain God had ordained for them to suffer. And Paul quotes it here purely to remind us that God's people—God's good and faithful people—still suffer. Just because we are saved doesn't mean we won't suffer and die in this life.

Suffering is certainly not a sign of God's wrath against us or anything like that. Paul knew that better than anyone. He lists 7 forms of suffering in verse 35 that he himself had undergone: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. That suffering in that order was common for Christians who suffered for their faith back then. Tribulation and distress

knowing what could come, persecution when the violence actually began, famine and nakedness as the fugitive Christian loses everything, danger when they're caught, and sword when they're executed. And yet all of that was suffered not by wicked people, but by those whom God loved most: his own children, bought with the precious blood of his Son.

The Psalmist complained that we are being killed all the day long for God's sake. How does God respond? Not by ending the suffering, but by taking it upon himself right alongside us. In Christ, *God* was killed all the day long for *our* sake. Think about that. Every aspect of our present suffering God took upon himself in Christ and continues to take upon himself by the Holy Spirit who lives in each of us. God in his infinite wisdom allows suffering to continue for reasons we can't understand. But what we *can* understand is that he also suffers right with us, to show us that he is willing to go through anything he puts his children through.

Our present suffering looks bleak now, but God promises it will get better. Paul says in verse 37 that through Christ we are more than conquerors over our suffering. I like that phrase "more than conquerors" because in the original Greek it's all one word that would roughly translate to "hyper-conquerors" or "super-conquerors." In other words, we won't just come out on top of our suffering in the end—we will *dominate* it. Suffering will be *obliterated*.

And Paul uses the present tense here: we *are* hyper-conquerors. Not we will be—we *are*. Normally you'd say not to count your chickens before they hatch, but in this case, they've hatched. We are *already* hyper-conquerors in Christ; he just hasn't executed that final blow against sin yet. But our hope of that future victory is so certain that we have every right to celebrate it right now.

You belong to Christ! And Christ's ultimate plan will come to fruition in *his* time, not in ours. But never be discouraged by these present sufferings, nor be dismayed by Satan's lies. Paul says it, and I echo: "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." Take pride and confidence and comfort in your place in God's plan for his children, for it is flawless and it is good. In Jesus' name, amen.