

Romans 8:28-39
July 31, '11

**ROAMING THROUGH ROMANS #5
"EVERYTHING...AND NOTHING"**

EVERYTHING...AND NOTHING.

WE DON'T LIKE THAT ORDER OF THINGS, DO WE?

THE REVERSE IS, BY FAR, WHAT WE PREFER.

NOTHING....AND EVERYTHING.

THAT'S THE AMERICAN WAY. IT'S THE HORATIO ALGER "RAGS TO RICHES" KIND OF STORY.

JUST THIS PAST FRIDAY, I WAS READING AN ARTICLE IN THE NEWSPAPER ABOUT THE PITTSBURGH PIRATES & THE POSSIBILITY THAT THIS YEAR THEY HAVE A CHANCE TO END THE LONGEST STRING OF LOSING SEASONS IN AMERICAN SPORTS HISTORY.

THEIR MANAGER, CLINT HURDLE, WAS QUOTED AS SAYING: "IT HAS THE POTENTIAL OF RAGS TO RICHES, FROM LAST TO FIRST, FROM BAD TO GOOD. ALL THOSE STORIES CAN CAPTURE YOUR ATTENTION & MOTIVATE YOU."

WE LOVE THOSE STORIES, DON'T WE?

NOTHING TO EVERYTHING.

THERE'S THE STORY OF THE YOUNG WOMAN WHO MOVED FROM ENGLAND TO PORTUGAL AFTER HER MOTHER DIED.

SHE WAS MARRIED & THEN DIVORCED AND MOVED TO SCOTLAND WITH HER YOUNG DAUGHTER.

SHE SUFFERED FROM SEVERE DEPRESSION & EVEN CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE.

SHE WAS UNEMPLOYED & LIVING ON WELFARE.

THAT, OF COURSE, WAS BEFORE THE FIRST OF J.K. ROWLING'S HARRY POTTER BOOKS HIT THE BIG TIME.

RAGS TO RICHES – NOTHING TO EVERYTHING.

THAT'S THE ORDER WE LIKE FOR THOSE TWO, ISN'T IT?

WE SEE IT IN MOVIES ALL THE TIME – "ROCKY," "RUDY," "THE BLIND SIDE," "SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE," AND COUNTLESS DISNEY CLASSICS FROM "DUMBO" TO "ALADDIN."

AND THERE'S A STORY OF A YOUNG BOY LIVING IN THE PHILIPPINES WHO HAD TO SELL SCRAP METAL ON THE STREETS TO HELP HIS FAMILY SURVIVE & THEN FOUND HIMSELF HOMELESS & LIVING IN A CITY PARK IN THE MIDDLE OF MANILA.

YEARS LATER, THINGS TURNED AROUND FOR THAT BOY & HE MADE IT TO THE BIG TIME.

NOTHING TO EVERYTHING.

EVERYTHING TO NOTHING, THOUGH, ISN'T SOMETHING THAT APPEALS TO US.

THE REASON IS BECAUSE WE EQUATE ONE OF THOSE WORDS WITH GOOD & THE OTHER WITH BAD.

EVERYTHING IS GOOD & NOTHING IS BAD.

IN THE CONTEXT IN WHICH PAUL USES THESE WORDS, THOUGH, BOTH ARE GOOD – THE ULTIMATE GOOD.

HE TAKES US FROM ONE EXTREME AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PASSAGE TO THE OPPOSITE EXTREME AT THE END OF IT AND YET IT'S ALL GOOD.

THIS PASSAGE IS ONE THAT COMPLETES AN ENTIRE SECTION OF THIS MONUMENTAL LETTER TO THE ROMANS.

IT'S THE CLIMAX, NOT JUST OF THE 8TH CHAPTER, BUT OF THE ENTIRE SECTION THAT BEGAN IN CHAPTER 5.

IT IS, IN ACTUALITY, THE CLIMAX TO THE PRESENTATION OF ONE OF THE GREATEST THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS EVER UTTERED.

IN OTHER WORDS, WHAT PAUL SAYS HERE IS HUGE.

I THINK HE KNOWS IT.

HE OPENS IT WITH "EVERYTHING" AND CLOSES IT WITH "NOTHING."

LET'S LOOK AT THESE TWO WORDS & SEE HOW IT'S POSSIBLE FOR BOTH OF THEM TO BE GOOD.

FIRST, THERE'S "EVERYTHING."

"WE KNOW IN EVERYTHING, GOD WORKS FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM..."

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT?

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT IN EVERYTHING, GOD WORKS FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM?

I GUESS ANOTHER QUESTION WE MIGHT ASK IS, *"DO YOU BELIEVE GOD'S WORD IS TRUE?"*

IF YOU ANSWER "YES" TO THE SECOND QUESTION, THEN YOU MUST ALSO ANSWER "YES" TO THE FIRST BECAUSE THIS IS GOD'S WORD TO US.

THERE'S AN IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION THAT MUST BE MADE HERE, THOUGH.

WE HAVE TO BE CAREFUL IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT PAUL *DOESN'T* SAY HERE.

HE DOESN'T SAY, *"GOD MAKES EVERYTHING HAPPEN & IT'S ALL FOR YOUR GOOD."*

IF THAT WERE THE CASE, WE'D BE LEFT WITH THE INEVITABLE CONCLUSION THAT GOD CAUSED THE CAR ACCIDENT THAT TOOK THE LIFE OF A LITTLE GIRL.

WE'D HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT GOD STRUCK A YOUNG MOTHER WITH CANCER IN THE PRIME OF HER LIFE.

WE'D BE CONVINCED THAT GOD TOOK AWAY A MAN'S JOB & CAUSED THE BANK TO FORECLOSE ON HIS HOUSE AND LEFT HIM AND HIS FAMILY WITHOUT A PLACE TO LIVE.

I KNOW THAT'S WHAT SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE.

THEY BELIEVE THAT GOD MICROMANAGES THE UNIVERSE AND SO HE *MAKES, CAUSES, FORCES* BOTH THE GOOD AND THE BAD THINGS THAT ARE PART OF OUR LIVES & SOMEHOW IT'S ALL FOR OUR OWN GOOD.

THAT'S NOT WHAT PAUL IS SAYING HERE.

WHAT THE GREAT APOSTLE IS TELLING US IS THAT EVEN IN THE MIDST OF TRAGEDY – EVEN IN THE FACE OF THE MOST UNSPEAKABLE, HEARTBREAKING EVENTS IMAGINABLE – GOD IS THERE, ENABLING US TO TRANSFORM LIFE'S DEEPEST SORROW INTO A TIME OF GROWTH & REWARD.

GOD DOESN'T FORCE THOSE THINGS TO HAPPEN, BUT WILL CONTROL THE OUTCOME – IF WE ALLOW HIM TO DO IT.

THERE IS A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAYING “*IN EVERYTHING GOD WORKS FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM*” AND IN SAYING, “*GOD MAKES EVERYTHING HAPPEN & IT'S ALL FOR YOUR GOOD.*”

WHAT PAUL IS ENCOURAGING HERE IS A TRUST & A HOPE & A LOVE FOR GOD THAT IS OPEN TO SEE HOW GOD IS BY YOUR SIDE, STANDING READY TO TRANSFORM TRAGEDY INTO TRIUMPH IN YOUR LIFE.

THE PASTOR OF A LARGE, PROMINENT CHURCH IN NEW YORK CITY TELLS THE STORY OF A TIME HE WAS GOING THROUGH WHAT HE CALLED A “MINI-FAITH CRISIS.”

IT WASN'T ANYTHING CATASTROPHIC, BUT HIS FAITH HAD BECOME DULL & LISTLESS.

HE FOUND THAT HE HAD BECOME RATHER DISTRESSED & LESS OPEN THAN HE ORDINARILY WAS IN DEALING WITH OTHERS.

HE DISCOVERED THAT GOD BROKE THROUGH TO HIM IN THE FORM OF A YOUNG MAN WHO WAS ON THE MAINTENANCE STAFF OF THE CHURCH.

THIS YOUNG MAN WAS HISPANIC & HIS NAME WAS (HAYZUS) JESUS – OBVIOUSLY SPELLED THE WAY WE SPELL JESUS.

ONE NIGHT, AS THE PASTOR LEFT A MEETING AT THE CHURCH & STOPPED BY HIS OFFICE TO GET HIS COAT, HE NOTICED THE LIGHTS WERE ON & THE DOOR WAS OPEN, WHICH WAS VERY UNUSUAL.

HE SAW THAT THE YOUNG MAN HAD PAINTED THE DOOR & ON THE SIDE OF THE WALL, BY THE DOOR, HE HAD LEFT A NOTE WHICH SAID, “*DEAR SIR, DO NOT CLOSE THE DOOR.*”

THE NOTE WAS SIGNED, “*JESUS*” – OR “*HAYZUS.*”

THE PASTOR SAID HE JUST SMILED & REALIZED THERE WAS A MESSAGE FROM GOD IN THAT NOTE – A MESSAGE TO OPEN HIMSELF UP ONCE AGAIN TO THE WAY IN WHICH GOD WAS STANDING BY HIS SIDE & WORKING IN HIS LIFE – EVEN IN HIS DISTRESS & IN THE MIDST OF HIS DOUBTS.

YES, WE CAN BE ASSURED THAT IN EVERYTHING – EVERYTHING – GOD IS WORKING FOR GOOD IN OUR LIVES.

SO THERE'S THE FIRST WORD – THE ONE THAT BEGINS THIS PASSAGE.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER – THE ONE THAT BRINGS THIS ENTIRE SECTION OF ROMANS TO A CLOSE AND THE WORD THAT WOULD SEEM TO BE THE POLAR OPPOSITE OF THE FIRST?

THERE IS EVERYTHING AT THE BEGINNING – AND THERE IS NOTHING AT THE END.

IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERSTATE EITHER THE IMPORTANCE OR THE POWER OF THE FINAL 2 VERSES OF CHAPTER 8.

PAUL TILlich, ONE OF THE MOST REVERED THEOLOGIANS OF THE 20TH CENTURY – A MAN WHO IS BURIED RIGHT BEHIND THE RED GERANIUM IN NEW HARMONY - OPENS A SERMON ON THIS PASSAGE BY SAYING, “*THESE WORDS ARE AMONG THE MOST POWERFUL EVER WRITTEN.*”

TILlich ISN'T ALONE IN SUCH THINKING.

THESE VERSES VIRTUALLY DEFY COMMENTARY & ANY ATTEMPTED ELUCIDATION OF THEM IS FOOLISHLY SUPERFLUOUS.

PAUL APPEARS TO BE OVERCOME WITH EMOTION AS HE WRITES THEM.

HERE IT IS – THE CLIMAX OF THIS ENTIRE SECTION OF THIS THEOLOGICAL MASTERPIECE WHICH SETS FORTH THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH.

HE HAS ALREADY TOLD US THAT IN EVERYTHING GOD WORKS FOR OUR GOOD.

AND NOW HE TELLS US WHAT IT IS THAT CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD.

IT IS NOTHING.

NOTHING.

IT'S NOT ENOUGH FOR HIM, THOUGH, TO LEAVE IT AT THAT.

HE LISTS NO FEWER THAN 16 DEMONS THAT CANNOT STAND IN THE WAY OF GOD'S OVERWHELMING LOVE.

THERE'S HARDSHIP, DISTRESS, PERSECUTION, FAMINE, NAKEDNESS, PERIL, SWORD, DEATH, LIFE, ANGELS, RULERS, POWERS, THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE, HEIGHTS, DEPTHS.

AND THEN, AS IF EVEN *THAT'S* NOT ENOUGH – AS IF HE'S CONCERNED THAT HE MAY HAVE INADVERTENTLY LEFT SOMETHING OFF THE LIST - HE ENDS WITH A SWEEPING, ALL-ENCOMPASSING DECLARATION OF “*ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL OF CREATION.*”

THERE IS NOTHING THAT CAN SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE.

WHAT COMFORT, WHAT HOPE, WHAT POWER THAT GIVES US.

WE HAVE THE UNQUESTIONABLE ASSURANCE THAT GOD WILL LET ABSOLUTELY NOTHING SEPARATE US FROM HIS LOVE.

GOD SUSTAINS US WITH THE DIVINE, EVER-PRESENT POWER AGAINST ANY & ALL FOES.

THERE'S A WONDERFULLY MOVING SCENE IN THE NEARLY 30 YEAR OLD MOVIE “THE BEAR.”

A LITTLE GRIZZLY CUB IS BEING ATTACKED BY A MOUNTAIN LION.

THE CUB RUNS FOR ITS LIFE, CRAWLS OUT ONTO A LIMB OVER A RIVER & FALLS INTO THE WATER.

CLINGING TO A LOG, THE LITTLE CUB HELPLESSLY FLOATS TOWARD THE WAITING MOUNTAIN LION, WHO STANDS WAITING FOR THE EASY KILL.

THE BABY GRIZZLY WON'T GIVE UP WITHOUT A FIGHT, THOUGH, AND REARS UP ON ITS TINY LEGS & LETS OUT THE FIERCEST ROAR IT CAN MUSTER.

SUDDENLY & ASTOUNDINGLY, THE MOUNTAIN LION SHRINKS BACK IN TERROR & SCAMPERS OFF.

THE CAMERA THEN SLOWLY DRAWS BACK TO REVEAL, JUST BEHIND THE CUB, ITS MOTHER – A MASSIVE GRIZZLY, REARED ON HER HIND LEGS, DELIVERING A FIERCE, ROARING GROWL TO THE MOUNTAIN LION.

THE CUB'S ENEMY WAS GREAT, BUT IN THE PROTECTIVE SHADOW OF ITS LOVING PARENT, THAT MOUNTAIN LION WAS RENDERED POWERLESS.

WE HAVE A LOVING, PROTECTING PARENT WHO STANDS BEHIND US WHEN WE FACE THE MOST FRIGHTENING FOES IMAGINABLE.

THAT LOVING PARENT ASSURES US THAT THERE IS NOTHING – NOTHING AT ALL – NOTHING IN ALL CREATION THAT CAN SEPARATE US FROM GOD’S LOVE.

IT’S SIMPLY A MATTER OF BELIEVING THE TRUTH OF THE MAGNITUDE OF THAT LOVE.

AMONG THOSE RAGS TO RICHES STORIES I MENTIONED AT THE BEGINNING, WAS ONE ABOUT A YOUNG MAN WHO GREW UP IN THE PHILIPPINES & FOUND HIMSELF HOMELESS AS A TEEN-AGER.

ARNEL & HIS SIBLINGS WERE SHIPPED OFF TO DIFFERENT RELATIVES FOLLOWING THEIR MOTHER’S DEATH & HE HAD TO LEAVE SCHOOL & WORK ODD JOBS JUST TO SCRAPE TOGETHER ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY FOOD TO STAY ALIVE.

HE LIVED IN A CITY PARK FOR MORE THAN A YEAR WITH OTHER HOMELESS CHILDREN.

ARNEL’S MOTHER HAD ENCOURAGED HIM TO SING, THOUGH, AND HE WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO JOIN A BAND & MAKE ENOUGH MONEY TO SURVIVE.

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, ANOTHER BAND HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD, WAS LOOKING FOR A NEW SINGER & FOUND ARNEL ON – OF ALL PLACES – YOUTUBE.

HE MADE IT TO THE UNITED STATES WHERE IMMIGRATION OFFICERS REQUIRED HIM TO SING AS EVIDENCE OF THE LEGITIMACY OF HIS REASON FOR COMING HERE.

ARNEL PINEDA – THE LITTLE HOMELESS BOY FROM THE STREETS OF MANILA – IS NOW THE LEAD SINGER OF JOURNEY – ONE OF THE WORLD’S MOST SUCCESSFUL ROCK & ROLL BANDS.

BECAUSE OF WHAT HE EXPERIENCED AS A CHILD, PINEDA HAS ESTABLISHED A FOUNDATION IN THE PHILIPPINES TO ASSIST CHILDREN IN NEED OF MEDICAL CARE & THE BASIC NECESSITIES OF LIFE.

IRONICALLY, AND PERHAPS PROVIDENTIALLY, EVERY NIGHT – IN CONCERTS THAT HAVE TAKEN HIM AROUND THE WORLD – ARNEL PINEDA SINGS “DON’T STOP BELIEVIN’ – HOLD ON TO THE FEELIN’.”

THAT, IN ESSENCE, IS THE MESSAGE PAUL IS OFFERING US IN THESE MAGNIFICENT WORDS.

IN EVERYTHING, GOD IS WORKING FOR OUR GOOD AND BECAUSE OF THAT, THERE IS NOTHING – NOTHING AT ALL – THAT CAN EVER SEPARATE US FROM HIS LOVE.

WHEN THE THORNY WAYS OF LIFE BLOCK YOUR PATH – WHEN THE WAVES & WINDS OF ADVERSITY THREATEN TO KNOCK YOU DOWN – WHEN DISAPPOINTMENT, GRIEF, FEAR & SORROW ATTACK YOU – REMEMBER THAT IN EVERYTHING, GOD IS AT YOUR SIDE & THERE IS NOTHING THAT WILL EVER SEPARATE YOU FROM HIS LOVE.

REMEMBER IT & BELIEVE IT & “DON’T STOP BELIEVIN’ – HANG ON TO THE FEELIN’.”

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