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Overcoming in the Midst of Suffering  
Romans 8:28-39

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## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, things just happen that can shake you up. Things happen that can cause physical or emotional suffering. Things just happen that can cause you to doubt God's goodness, His support, and His love. The title of my message is "Overcoming in the Midst of Suffering."

Along these lines, my wife Marsha and I have quite a story to share that affected her especially. Ever since we married in June of 2000, we have desired to have a child together. After several years of marriage, a miscarriage, and multiple surgical procedures, we still had no biological child of our own. Marsha was emotionally devastated and felt as if God was against her or mad at her. Soon, however, she had her sights on adopting a toddler and eventually, after a year, I came on board with the idea.

After weighing the pros and cons of domestic adoption with foreign adoption, we chose to pursue a foreign adoption from the country of Ukraine. After a lengthy paperwork process, monetary expenditures, medical exams, and multiple background checks, we were finally approved from the National Adoption Center in Ukraine about a year later. We were elated! All we had to do now was respond with a letter requesting a date to visit an orphanage in Ukraine, which we did. We waited anxiously for two months for a reply with our official dates of travel, and then we got the letter. As I read the letter aloud to my wife and family in great anticipation, we all became extremely disappointed to read that Ukraine had just closed its adoption program to foreigners indefinitely. All that work we had done, and still no child. We were devastated. Although we trusted God to guide us, we just were not sure what was going on at headquarters in heaven.

About a month later, Marsha had been steered to a web site that showed two adorable children available for adoption in the country of Kazakhstan, formerly part of Russia. Vita was an adorable girl of eight, and Russ was a cute boy of six. We felt led to change course and pursue these children. Although the agency said they could not guarantee that these particular children

would be available when we got to Kazakhstan, the representative said there was over a 90% chance that they would become ours if we acted quickly. Well, we acted quickly and once again filled out and sent all the necessary paperwork and much more money was spent. Several months later, Kazakhstan notified the agencies that adoptions were halted for a few months as they were revamping the requirements, which then caused us to redo most of our paperwork again. Finally, we finished the new paperwork and sent it to Kazakhstan once again, and then we were notified by the agency that our desired children were no longer available, as their mother had started visiting them. While we were glad for the children, we were heartbroken since we had their pictures on our refrigerator and in our hearts for several months.

The following month, we were approved to adopt in Kazakhstan but would have to go “blind,” meaning that we would select two children when we arrived at the baby house. We desired a boy and a girl as young as possible and relatively healthy. We were assured they would accommodate us considering the turmoil we had just gone through. In May of 2006, we arrived in Kazakhstan and were not disappointed as we visited a baby house where two adorable babies were placed in our arms. Victor was eight months old, and Nina was thirteen months old. We fell in love with them as we played with them each day for two hours over the next two weeks of our required bonding period. Marsha especially bonded with Victor and I had bonded with Nina. We were a very happy family and our new family picture glowed in our apartment where we stayed. With just two days left in our bonding period prior to filling out the final paperwork for adopting these two children, a new law in Kazakhstan was passed and relayed to us that we could no longer adopt two unrelated children. Thus, we would have to choose only one. Marsha was extremely upset and angered by this news, as we loved both children and could not leave one behind. We suffered through such a difficult decision of choosing one child, though the thought of going home without any child surfaced also. Although we would have happily taken both and loved both as they are,

we learned that both had severe physical or mental problems. We made the difficult decision of not adopting either one.

Everyone has a story to tell. Even people who are normally stable encounter crisis experiences where they are temporarily overwhelmed by their circumstances and desperate to relieve the emotional pain or anxiety. Suffering occurs. We have all encountered suffering in one way or another. It is part of life. Yet, God's Word tells us how we can bear the suffering that arises from our identity with the human race and from our identity with Christ. The apostle Paul, who was very familiar with suffering, writes to the Roman Christians around AD 57 from the city of Corinth and addresses the thoughts and attitudes Christians should have in order to overcome in the midst of suffering.

The theme of the letter to the Romans, which became prevalent with Martin Luther during the Reformation, is that people are made righteous before God by faith in Christ, not by works of the law. Such divine salvation is available to all people, Jews and non-Jews, who put their trust in Christ (Rom. 1:16-17). As we trust in Christ, "the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Sometimes we may feel that since we are children of God, nothing bad should happen to us—that we should never be subjected to suffering. Yet, Jesus went through suffering, and the apostle Paul, who certainly was a man of faith, went through many troubles and suffering, even while serving God faithfully. Furthermore, Paul assures us that since we are children of God, and thus heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, we will surely suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Suffering is intricately woven on our Christian path toward glorification. Suffering is a fact of life, but Christians have the assurance that one day they will be glorified with Christ.

The latter half of Romans chapter 8 deals with the theme of suffering and how the Spirit assures Christians that they can overcome in the midst of suffering toward their final destiny of

glorification. Paul reveals five particular truths for believers to realize to help them overcome in the midst of suffering. As a prelude to our text of Romans 8:28-39, Paul mentions in verses 18-25 that a believer should realize that the present sufferings are temporary and insignificant when compared with the awesome eternal glory that a believer will receive at the end of this life. Next, Paul mentions in verses 26-27 that a believer should realize that in the midst of our suffering, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses, interceding according to the will of God for the saints. You might ask, “What is God’s will for me as a believer?” The next verses show that God purposes for believers to be conformed to Christ’s image, in eternal glory. Paul shares in Romans 8:28-39 how we will surely reach this glorified destiny, as Christians realize the three remaining truths to overcoming in the midst of suffering.

### **1. GOD IS WORKING GOOD FOR US IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING (vss. 28-30)**

The first truth that a Christian must realize to be an overcomer is that God is working all things for good for us, even in the midst of suffering. Romans 8:28-30 says:

<sup>28</sup> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those whom are called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup> For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; <sup>30</sup> and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Four particular words need to be clarified to properly understand the awesome promise of verse 28: “God”, “all”, “good”, and “those who love God.”

First, it is not by fate or chance that things work toward good, but it is the sovereign God who brings about such a transformation. Some Bible translations translate verse 28 as “all things work together for good” (KJV and NRSV), thus making “all things” the subject. Some translate the verse by giving emphasis to the Spirit as the subject that does the working (NEB and REB), while others translate the verse with an emphasis on God, saying that God works all things for

good (NASB and NIV). Regardless of how the underlying Greek manuscripts are translated, it is clear that Paul understood that God through the Spirit was the cause of all things working together for good. Second, the word “all” must be defined by its context, for a context could restrict the meaning of the word. While the context focuses on adverse experiences that cause suffering, the words “all things” include both adverse and desirable things, all of which contribute toward good. Third, the word “good” probably should not derive its meaning from a human perspective; otherwise, it would mean that which is pleasant or comfortable to a person. Instead, its definition should come from God’s perspective, and thus “good” means that which is in accordance with God’s excellent plan and purpose for a person’s life. The focus is God’s saving purpose to conform a believer into Christ’s likeness (verses 29 and 30), which takes shape in this life and culminates in glorious completion in the hereafter. Fourth, the promise is only applicable for those of us who “love God” and are “called according to His purpose.” Both of these phrases are ways of describing a Christian believer, from a human perspective and from God’s perspective, respectively. Those who God effectually calls to salvation become Christians and thereby love God. Therefore, Christians have the assurance that God causes all things in their life to contribute toward the good of bringing about God’s purpose in their life, both now and in the age to come.

To illustrate how God works all things for good for someone who goes through much suffering, I will summarize one of my favorite stories of the Bible in Genesis 37 to 50, the story of Joseph--the son of Jacob (also called Israel). Joseph lived in the land of Canaan with his father and eleven brothers. When the brothers noticed that their father loved Joseph more than them and when they had heard Joseph share the dream he had of his family bowing down to him, they hated him and sought to kill him. As an opportunity came, Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery and lied to their father saying that a wild animal killed him. Sold to Potiphar (Pharaoh’s

officer) in Egypt, Joseph worked hard as a slave, with God's help, and became a high-ranking official in Potiphar's household. Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of sexual misconduct when he refused to sin against God and his master by sleeping with her at her request. Potiphar was obligated to throw him into prison upon hearing his wife's accusations. Even in prison, Joseph maintained a good attitude and worked hard. Realistically, it is not hard to imagine the amount of suffering Joseph went through as he thought about his brothers' betrayal, the hardships of slavery, the false accusation, and his deplorable imprisonment. Yet, God seemed to work on his character and to position him for the next phase. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had a dream. Hearing that Joseph could interpret dreams, Pharaoh pulled Joseph from prison and challenged Joseph to interpret his dream. Since Pharaoh was impressed by Joseph's interpretation that Egypt would go through prosperity followed by famine, Pharaoh made Joseph second in command in all of Egypt and put him in charge of implementing a plan for Egypt to glide through the famine years, which he did. This story confirms that God is sovereign and can bring good out of the evil actions of others in order to accomplish His purpose, which in this case was for Joseph to develop in character and rise up to a position that could keep many people alive (Gen. 50:20).

We, as Christians, can apply the truth of Romans 8:28-30 and thereby overcome in the midst of our suffering in this life. I admit that it is often easier to see that God is working good out of our positive experiences than our negative experiences, but this is because we view things from our own vantage point instead of God's perspective. We must develop a firm conviction from the Bible that God is really working for our good in all things, even those things that are intrinsically bad and evil. Then, we can endure our suffering with greater ease knowing that God's excellent plan for our lives will be accomplished. God uses suffering and difficulties to change you into the kind of person He desires you to be. He is building in you Christian

character and preparing you for the final stage of salvation: glorification and complete conformance to the likeness of Christ. Through tragic circumstances, God also directs you, just as he did in Joseph's life. Sometimes the good that God has in mind is seen during your lifetime, but most of the time the good will only be revealed when you get to heaven. Sometimes God's good lines up with our good, other times it does not. Perhaps losing a job will result in getting a better job, if God so desires, but it could also result in getting a lower paying job if God may want to bring correction to your materialistic lifestyle. Breaking an engagement may result in finding a better partner, but it may result in a single life that enables you to serve in a ministry that would not be feasible with a partner. You need to trust in God's goodness, otherwise, there is a tendency to become unraveled when things don't go your way. We can live above our circumstances by trusting that God will cause all things to work for our good, because God is for us.

## **2. GOD IS FOR US IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING (vss. 31-34)**

The second truth that a Christian must realize to be an overcomer is that God is for us all the time, even in the midst of suffering. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions in verses 31 to 34 to make his readers think and discover for themselves that God is surely for them:

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; <sup>34</sup> who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God who also intercedes for us.

In reference to the many wonderful truths Paul has shared, especially in the latter half of Romans 8, Paul asks, "What then shall we say to these things?" God has said that the future glory will be incredible in comparison to our present suffering and His Spirit is interceding on our behalf and God will ensure all things help us to reach our glorious destination. Since God is for us, no one

can be against us, as demonstrated in the next questions. Paul reasons that God did a really great thing in sacrificing His own Son to suffer and thereby deliver us, therefore He will surely do the lesser thing of giving us all that is needed to help us in this life and the next to reach our final destination. Although Christians have enemies, Paul reasons that no one can successfully bring a charge against Christians in the heavenly court of law because God is the one who justifies us. Furthermore, no one can condemn a Christian in this court because Jesus is the only one who could do such a thing and He has already died for you and freed you from the penalty of sin and sits at the right hand of God interceding on behalf of you and all who trust in Him. If God is for us, defending us, and on our side, then surely no opposing force can win against us.

As an illustration of God being for us, I recall the dramatic difference that a talented little boy made on my son's soccer team. This is the first year that my seven-year-old son, Dimitri, is playing on a soccer team in an actual league and he loves it. Last week, I attended his practice session and noticed another little boy who had amazing soccer skills. He could dribble the ball past the other boys and kick the ball with power and accuracy high into the goal net. When someone else had the ball, he would slide tackle and knock the ball away, as if he were a teenager. I found out that the little boy's name is Daniel, the coach's son, and he was the top scorer in the league last year. I knew I had seen true talent, even before hearing this. The next day, the "under eight" team had their first game and Dimitri got to team up with Daniel. You could hear Daniel's proud mother every time he scored a goal. Goal after goal, Daniel kept dribbling past his opponents and kicking the soccer ball into the net. Furthermore, he prevented any opposing team players from scoring. In fairness, the coach took out Daniel from the game to allow another little boy to play in the game. Things turned, as the opposing team scored their first goal and Dimitri's team could not score any more goals.

Just as Dimitri's team won by an incredible margin when Daniel was on the team, God promises that we will win at life by an incredible margin with Him on our team. By believing that God is for you and on your side and no enemy can stifle you from reaching your prize, you will experience the power of God as he strengthens you in your journey along the path of life, which travels through the land of suffering as well. We should not fear that suffering or adverse circumstances or the presence of enemies is a sign or a means by which God will change his support for us. When you suffer from guilt because of sin and feel Satan might accuse you to God, either now or on judgment day, realize the extent to which God demonstrated his support for you in sending Jesus to the cross. Both God and Christ will surely forgive and defend those who have put their trust in Christ's death and resurrection. God is for us, even in the midst of suffering when accused by our enemies. Just as it is impossible to bring a charge against God's Christians in the heavenly court, it is impossible for anything to separate God's love from us.

### **3. GOD LOVES US IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING (vss. 35-39)**

The third truth that a Christian must realize to be an overcomer is that God loves us in the midst of suffering. Paul expresses in verses 35 to 39 the truth that nothing can separate us Christians from Christ's love for us:

<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> Just as it is written, "For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul imagines that his readers probably are thinking of a whole host of things that could potentially separate them from Christ's love. Therefore, he asks with a rhetorical question whether these seven things can really separate them, "Shall tribulation, or distress, or

persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?” Paul had experienced many of these destructive things in his suffering and could testify first-hand that he continued to experience the love of Christ. Paul quotes from Psalms 44:22 to remind his Christian readers that suffering is the norm for the righteous, not the exception. By realizing that Christ loves us, we can overwhelmingly conquer in a life that includes suffering. Paul goes on to list just about everything imaginable, including spiritual powers, to say eloquently that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death.

To illustrate the opposite effect, I am sure we all know of a guy-girl relationship where a partner promised to always love the other, and yet one or both of the partners withdrew their love for the other either because of their own fluctuating feelings or because of something the other said or did. Such love contrasts with the kind of love God has for Christians, which is stable and unchanging in the midst of adverse circumstances. Perhaps a good example in human terms of such an unconditional love might be the love of a mother for her child, shown to be true even when the child is in jail, when the world seems to be against the child, and the mother is pleading with tears for mercy for her child whom she loves. Yet, even such unconditional love is hard to come by even in a mother. Only God truly encompasses an unconditional love.

To apply these truths is to realize that God is love and embodies an unchanging love especially for those who are Christians. Perhaps you have encountered bad circumstances, such as a loss of a loved one, a diagnosis of cancer, a financial crisis, or an encounter with physical harm, and you might have even questioned whether God really loves you. You might think that God’s children are exempt from having to suffer through such things, and thus you doubt God’s love for you and maybe even doubt your salvation. Yet, the Bible is clearly saying that suffering is closely linked with your path to becoming like Christ and your eventual glorification. Suffering is normal for a believer and the Bible says that God loves you and will continue to love

you. For some of you, you have been let down by close relationships. Instead of allowing your emotions to go up and down based on the changing love patterns of others toward you, you can focus on God's steady love toward you, and His love toward you should matter the most. Even if others abandon their love toward you, nothing will separate you from God's love. It is a tremendous strength to know that God loves you regardless of the circumstances that go on in your life. Thus, the third and final point is summarized by saying you can trust that God will love you through it all.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen from God's Word that in the midst of our suffering, God does work all things together for our good, that God is for us, and that God loves us through it all. Suffering will still bring hurt, loss, and mourning, but we can be assured that God will make it contribute to our ultimate good and lead us on the path of being more like Jesus, culminating in glorification where our bodies become like the immortal body of the resurrected Christ. Glory and suffering are linked together for a Christian who shares in Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification. Sometimes we don't immediately see clear evidence of His working all things for good, His support for us, and His love for us, and other times we do.

When the law came down in Kazakhstan that my wife and I could only choose one child, we were torn between the two babies with whom we bonded. While this law was not fair in our case since we had already bonded with both children, I knew that God loved us, was for us, and would work things out according to His grand purpose. We then remembered meeting a cute six-year-old boy who was healthy, except for some rotten teeth. We decided to see him one more time before we made a decision on the babies. After talking with the little boy through a Russian interpreter, we went outside with him to see him play with his friends. As he ran around the

building to his friends, he was amazed to see me running just as fast beside him. We played hide-and-go-seek, and as I caught him a few times and picked him up in my arms, he was forever bonded with me. As we left that day, he cried out from the window asking if we would come back the next day. I turned to my wife and she said “yes.” We wound up adopting a beautiful, healthy little boy that fit nicely into our family. We treasure this little boy named Dimitri. In addition, a great door opened up last month for Marsha to be the Women’s Director for the Peninsular Florida District of the Assemblies of God, overseeing 350 church ministries. Surely, God had transformed my wife’s character, through our ordeal, in ways to better minister to women, which is a prime function of her new position. It is a job that she had only dreamed of before, but one for which she is well suited. If she were responsible for two “special needs” babies, there would be no way that she could have responded to such an opportunity as this. Surely, God showed his love and support for us as He worked out good in the midst of our suffering.

In a congregation of this size, I know some of you must be going through your own personal tsunami or Katrina. Perhaps you recently encountered a tragedy, a crisis, a teenager out of control, a poor medical diagnosis, a loss of some kind, or a crushed dream, and you are suffering now. God can help you through it, if you let Him. If you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior, I want to invite you to first put your faith and trust in Christ. For those of you that love God and are called according to his purpose, I want you to personally realize that God loves you, He is for you, and He will work all things together for your ultimate good. By realizing such truths, you will be able to overcome in the midst of your suffering.

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