

I Am Convinced:
A Devotional Appropriation of Romans 8 to the Life of the Pastor¹
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Introduction

London. 1623. John Donne, dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, lay nailed to his bed, exhausted by the tasks of *Seelsorge* (soul care) in the extremities of a pandemic. Convinced that the “black death” was moving darkly in his body, he wrote of ultimate things.

*“No man is an island, entire of himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...”*²

But he was a clod of dirt, loosened and falling away. It was a cruel thing to be both dying and dangerous to the touch, filling his chamber with poisoned air, shouting out of the room the company he craved.

There was no morbid death ticker on Fox or CNN to say that, yes, things are bad. Just bells. Constant bells. Someone somewhere is close to the door.

*“Don’t ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for you.”*³

In the course of 23 meditations, the poet cleric played with the metaphor that was his own wasting body, the spitting image of his sinful state before God. But there is hope in the paradox – there is hope for me – that it is those who are most well who cry out their unwellness to a Savior passing by.⁴ I see in Donne a man captivated by the cross, obsessed with Christ, agonizing his way to a turning point: that the dying of Jesus – and through it his own death – would effect his cure.⁵ Dying would not be the final insult, but release from that body of death into wholeness unimaginable, delivery into life, a pulling free.

With thoughts like these, he began to imagine his spirit getting up and walking around the room, young and getting stronger – “outwardly wasting away, inwardly renewed day by day.”⁶

Donne’s struggle distilled in the end into a single, properly extroverted question as urgent – and as cathartic – as ever:

Is the Lord Christ a trustworthy physician?

In *his* day, amidst the horrors of the bubonic plague no less, John Donne concluded that he is.

¹ It was strongly urged on me to write devotionally, to be “*decidedly less academic*” and “*intentionally personal*.” This essay, given the title commended to me, is less *about* “spiritual wellness” and more about seeking it where it may be found. My treatment of Romans 8 will be neither exegetical nor expository. Instead, I play in the familiar themes of a beloved biblical text. I could only hope this towering text could be for you as it has come to be for me: never the same.

² In Philip Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis: A Modern Paraphrase of John Donne’s Devotions* (Littleton: Illumify Media Global, 2021), 92.

³ In Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 92.

⁴ To put a finer point on wellness: “[Luther] held that by very definition, human life can be whole only when lived in and on the basis of trust in the Creator of life. Likewise, his understanding of sin centers on the breakdown of trust that marked the fall into sin, and he believed that God restores the trust in himself that constitutes the heart of humanity on the basis of Christ’s death and resurrection.” Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives As A Foundation For Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 67.

⁵ In his words: “That voice, that I must die now, is not the voice of a judge that speaks by way of condemnation, but of a physician that presents health.” Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 132.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV84).

Looking Back on COVID-19

Experiences with *our* pandemic have no doubt been varied. Some of us sailed through unscathed. We were a different kind of busy, that's all. There were even silver linings. For one, it got me out of parties. Countless homes discovered the family altar.⁷ There were stirrings of gratitude, a shedding of the taken-for-grantedness of simple human things, of human presence.

For many of us, though, the dial was turned up during the pandemic on anxiety and frustration, on confronting our limitations as duties multiplied, on meeting the ugly side of self and others. After whatever battles we may have fought, some coolness, suspiciousness, pastoral loneliness, and social distance may persist. There have been no-win decisions made in the dark, heels dug in, institutional hand-wringing, and thorny “two-kingdom” questions – big questions while life became small. Which room shall I sit in next?⁸ Out there, the national wheels were falling off.⁹

It is not so much that we faced a new uncertainty about this world. We learned that the old certainty was an illusion.

*“Any man’s death diminishes me...”*¹⁰

How much more the death of one you loved? Many of us are grieving over someone today.¹¹ I think especially about when a pastor feels most like a pastor. Someone under your care was dying. That was supposed to be your moment to be the most important man in the world, doing the most important thing. It hurts our collective heart to think about it.

Whatever our groanings have been, we have too much groaned alone or, at best, as distant images on each other’s devices. We are in this place now, wearing our skin, asking, “Brother, how are you?” We are here to “throw off falsehood and speak truthfully to one another.”¹²

Whatever fast from the Supper we may have had imposed on us by COVID, I will be glad to be side by side with any one of you at the Lord’s Table, two sinners with our hands held out. We are here to say certain things to one another. What things?

That nothing whatsoever – no torturing memory, no thing undone – can condemn you, for you are in Christ. “Angry with you?” wonders God the Son. “The Father can no more be angry with you than he is with me. You are in me.”

That nothing that exists can separate you from God. The very love the Father has for his Son

⁷ We will strive to maintain this gift even as the work of calling people back to corporate worship continues. Pastors have described to me their valiant efforts to do just that. It is hard, loving, pastoral work in keeping with the stewardship we keep of things that cannot happen remotely, beginning but not limited to the way we gather at the Lord’s table and see for ourselves that we are one cup and one loaf.

⁸ The pastors I have questioned – God bless them – all mentioned just plain missing people in the muffle of social distancing. The term is an oxymoron. We crave *immediacy*, defined as those sustaining moments in which all social distance is chased away. Here we were, strapping actual masks over our social ones, carrying 12-foot bubbles of privacy wherever we went. How many times did we lament about Zooms and Google Meets, “It isn’t the same.” Nor has the moment of “Whew! Glad that’s over!” arrived. Jesus, grant healing to our fellowship.

⁹ This essay was delivered in the wake of a season of grave national unwellness and a pandemic of angst. The effects: profound cultural polarization, joblessness, racial inequality and unrest, uncontrolled rioting in great cities across the country, and a violent questioning of national identity and ideals. All of this coincided with the pandemic in which uncounted children floundered educationally as windows of learning closed, and the elderly, especially at risk of dying, suffered extreme isolation. Intensive care units around the world, where they exist, were overrun and became scenes of heartbreak and tragedy. Millions succumbed to the COVID-19 virus in the midst of raging animosities over economic shut-down, social distancing, masks, and vaccines. We were in the same storm, but not in the same boat. We were *not* all in this together. This is a world in desperate need of Christ.

¹⁰ In Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 92.

¹¹ I dedicate this essay to a dear friend and faithful pastor, Rev. James Bartz.

¹² Ephesians 4:25.

flows through the Son to you, the baptized.¹³

This is the grand sweep – the merism – of Romans 8, with many astonishments in between. It runs from the conquering of our *past* by the triumph of the cross through the conquering of our *future* by his mighty promises. In this way he gives us *this moment* to be drawn out of the prison of self into “a taste of Christ delighting.”¹⁴

We haven’t seen the last of the pale horse John saw on Patmos, but we know how to read the sign. Lift up your head. Your redemption is near. Don’t you store such things up for some future day’s use. This is for now.

What would Jesus have you do? He would have you be glad.

Spiritual Wellness

Take spiritual wellness, simply put, to be where we want our souls to be.¹⁵

To be sure, there is a wellness that doesn’t feel like wellness for the way it depends on a breakable heart. Yet, even as we groan in concert with all things, we the redeemed, the reconciled to God, can live securely in our eternal sonship, wide awake to the sunlight of Christ. We can see through the lie that would diminish the grace of God or call into question our place in his heart. We can pray, “Bleed on me again, Lord Jesus,” at the end of each day, commend every last thing to him, and be tired with a good kind of tired. We can come clean. We can live forgiven and forgiving, connected vitally to his Word, living transparently Christian lives in true community, celebrating our oneness, sustained for the journey by Christ’s body and blood, and living out our vocations in stubborn joy and in the view of a watching world.¹⁶

We can become “ever more deeply absorbed in the gospel – not letting go *until it blesses*.”¹⁷ Look around. This is us not letting go of its depth, its beauty, its simplicity until, in a twinkling and a flash – in an explosion of life and joy – it releases its final secret.

¹³ Michael Middendorf, *Romans 1-8: Concordia Commentary* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2013), 729.

¹⁴ “A taste of Christ delighting” is an expression that figures prominently in *Connecting*, by Larry Crabb. For all the flaws in his theology, I appreciate the questions he has asked across his career. He ponders, for example, what the ordinary Christian armed with a Word of Christ can do for another as an instrument of significant healing. He argues across his later books that the job isn’t all up to professionals. Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

¹⁵ After days of wrestling with which theological drawers a Christianized version of “wellness” best fits, Prof. Steven Geiger offered me this definition (above). I said, “Oh.” I am in his debt for that wonderful clarity, for his superb collaboration, and for his sure-to-be kind reaction to my essay.

¹⁶ This symposium on pastoral wellness makes a practical distinction between spiritual, physical and emotional wellness while recognizing that there is more truth in the holistic view of ourselves. To feel burnt out, to lack motivation, to be quick to anger, to self-medicate, to be drained by people, or to seldom laugh – these all have spiritual implications but will mostly lie beyond the scope of this essay. For other issues like these, see two raw articles by Carey Nieuwhof that unpack the following problems: Leadership in the church surrounds you with people but can leave you feeling utterly alone; it brings with it a pressure that’s hard to understand if you’re not in leadership; it means you may be adept at giving but not at receiving. There’s more: People don’t often ask how you’re doing, and when they do, you hide; you need a friend while most church leaders don’t have one; and it’s difficult to communicate how dark things can get. The writer concludes that these are all intensely spiritual issues. His prescriptions? Bring your darkness into the light, tell someone, get help. His affirmations for the pastor: “You are loved even when you don’t feel loved. There is hope, even when you can’t feel hope. You have a future, even when you can’t see your future.” Carey Nieuwhof, “Suicide, Leadership and the Dark Inner Struggle Few Understand,” *CareyNieuwhof.Com*, 11 May 2020, <https://careynieuwhof.com/suicide-leadership-and-the-dark-inner-struggle-few-understand/>; Nieuwhof, “Suicide, Leadership and the Dark Inner Struggle Few Understand.”

¹⁷ J. P. Koehler, “Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law” (1959), 3. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/2594>.

Preview

In Part One, I hope to help you up the rugged slopes of “Romans 8” to breathe the cleansing air, to take in that humbling beauty. There is a sweet and healing perspective that we are always needing to regain – this is the real good we offer one another. Funny thing about helping someone up a mountain: when you’ve accomplished the task, there you are as well.

This has been good for me.

In Part Two, we prepare for the plain. This shorter section will be an exploration of why I need to live a devotional life and why I need my brothers, all because I still desperately need the great Physician of my soul at least as much as any person I serve. We will find that his grace – the way he loves – is more than sufficient for us and for this day.

I am convinced.

Part One: The Mountain

Who Will Rescue Me?

Romans 7:14-25

The world and all its philosophies can never heal deeply enough because they do not wound deeply enough.¹⁸ We begin in Romans 7 so as to restore for ourselves the old shock of Romans 8.

Worlds hang in the balance as scholars debate whether the Apostle Paul is playing some distant language game in Romans 7. Can he possibly be speaking in his own voice, describing his present Christian experience as one “*sold as a slave to sin*”¹⁹ and seeking deliverance from “*this body of death*,”²⁰ looking on in horror at all the evil done, the good neglected, all of it against his will?

But this is not what the Pharisee sees. These are not pagan thoughts. This is our Paul taking the disappointing journey inside, searching for some glimmer of goodness in his natural-born self, uncovering a wretch instead. He reaches an awful conclusion.

*“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.”*²¹

Here is the regenerate “I” who delights in the will of God, the “spiritual man,” who concurs with every judgment of the law and cries out his frustration. This is the voice of the mature with a maturity that has no boast – it is too busy weeping.²² Paul’s portrayal of the normal Christian life is beyond valuable. It “keeps Christianity Christian.”²³ Without it, I would fear for my salvation.²⁴

¹⁸ Luther comments often about the state of the Christian in terms of wellness. “They are like sick people in the care of a physician: they are really sick, but healthy in hope in so far as they are eager to get better.... Nothing can harm them so much as the presumption that they are in fact healthy, for it will cause a bad relapse.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 208.

¹⁹ Romans 7:14.

²⁰ Romans 7:24.

²¹ Romans 7:18.

²² To be sure, Christians “stumble often, but do not [need to] spend hours in self-recrimination. They quickly repent, offering the broken moments to the Lord. Their past has been crucified with Christ....” Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2005), 229. The alternative is to be Peter when he had thought he was enough and was consequently inconsolable in his betrayal. That’s the day Peter had just plain had it with Peter.

²³ Martin H. Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary: Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1968), 136.

²⁴ Of all there is to regret, relational ugliness grieves me the most. Sara Groves sings a painful song about a marital spat: “Oh, run for your lives, all tenderness is gone. In the blink of an eye, all goodwill has withdrawn. Marking off our paces, and staring out of our faces. Baby, you and I are gone, gone, gone.” Sara Groves, *Fireflies and Songs* (Integrity Media, 2009). I will stay in my lane in relation to the third essay in this symposium. However,

All struggles overlap in the common pain of the sinner. There is no path out of *Anfechtung* (trial), only the promise of Christ to meet us there by the humble means he has chosen. But why must I suffer these daily assaults?²⁵ How else am I to learn? Learn what?

I learn to be suspicious of myself. I learn to press my spiritual advantage that consists in having no illusions about myself. I learn to hate sin in a way I never could if it did not now and then push my face into the dirt. I learn to turn violently away from the law in my longing for respite. There is a refuge, but it is decidedly not there. I was once doomed in a miserable marriage with that law, but a real death has dissolved that marriage and made me free to belong to Another.²⁶

We learn to hear the sound of the Good News above a raging conscience. We learn to hang on for dear life to the grace of God amidst a barrage of unwelcome thoughts. We rest in a quiet knowing that he will not leave us this way. A light will appear and grow and spread like arms across our horizon.

*“The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.”*²⁷

We learn to say, “I am baptized!” like it means the world. We learn to hold the promises of God up to God, to throw our full weight on Christ, to resort to grace alone. We find a homecoming into the joy of God and an intimacy with him that only the prodigal can know.²⁸

Further, our familiar time in Romans 7 is working in us solidarity with sinners.²⁹ They have the most grace to offer who have once seen in naked anguish what the apostle saw.³⁰

One more: we can take our cues from the unguardedness of Paul. What he let out of the bottle can never be put back. The whole world can know what the man was like, this to elevate his Savior, anything to usher a great crowd of wretches into the arms of God.³¹

This is no theology of glory in which “the struggle of faith is gone, Jacob no longer limps and

the line between spiritual and emotional wellness is a blurry one. Pride is thoughtless. Pharisees are unkind. Our pressures are no excuse.

²⁵ “This will impress upon the Christian day in and day out that his only hope is in the free grace of God, in the redemption that comes by grace through Christ Jesus. This will make him realize day in and day out that not his life of sanctification makes him righteous in the eyes of God, but that his only hope is in the righteousness of Christ, in this perfect righteousness that by faith is credited, imputed to him.” Armin W. Schuetze, “A Christian and the Law” (1964), 14. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/3029>.

²⁶ Cf. Romans 7:1-6.

²⁷ Malachi 4:2.

²⁸ There’s a profound exchange on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* between Lady Aberlin and Daniel Tiger. The puppet sings a song to shame: “*Sometimes I cry and sometimes I shake. Sometimes I wonder if I’m a mistake....*” Lady Aberlin does not interrupt him. She lets him get it all out, then sings her sweet reply: “*When you are sleeping, when you are waking, you’re no mistake, you are my friend.*” Then, they sing their lines together. They sing right over one another. Neither changes their lyric to the end of the song. This is what the song gets right: he keeps on pouring out what he needs to pour out, the inner drama of the wounded child, but it only draws out of her the simultaneous, healing word, the lovely, perpetual layering on of: “*You are my friend.*” PBS KIDS, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood | Lady Aberlin and Daniel Tiger Talk and Sing About Mistakes | PBS KIDS*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6XAP_VThhk&ab_channel=PBSKIDS. This from John Bunyan: “But I am a great sinner,” say you. “I will in no wise cast you out,” says Christ. “But I am an old sinner,” say you. “I will in no wise cast you out,” says Christ. He goes on like this for some time. “But I have sinned against mercy,” say you. “I will in no wise cast you out,” says Christ. “But I have sinned against the light,” say you. “I will in no wise cast you out,” says Christ. “But I have no good thing to bring with me,” say you. “*I will in no wise cast you out.*” (lightly updated.) John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 2004), 279–80.

²⁹ Think of those whose symptoms bother us the most. They are, in fact, sick with our same sickness.

³⁰ I need my pastor to have seen this.

³¹ When we arrived at our places of service in ministry, the people of God had no idea what desperately flawed men we are, how spiritually needy. They need to know. This will bless them as we have been blessed by the great apostle torn open. Paul is open about his past, but he does not threaten his own blamelessness or dare be married to specific besetting sins in the minds of his people. It is enough that they sense a brokenness never far from our surface. This is not disqualifying. Romans 7 didn’t disqualify Paul. Far from it.

Gethsemane is bathed in light.”³² There is groaning at the further outposts of Christian maturity. There is growth that does not feel like growth because we are finding out that our dependency on Jesus is absolute. “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*”³³ Because it is the sufficiency of Christ that we promote, not ourselves, we can dare to be sinners – what a relief! – and wager our everything, now and at the moment of death, on the mercy of God.

I once opened to this portion of Romans in an IHOP. My friend, a former Baptist minister, a he-man rugby player, was making a confession identical to Paul’s, only despair was winning. I answered with something like, “Are you finished?” and, “Why don’t you go all the way and die already?” The things you remember: fat tears dropping onto pancakes. We turned back to Romans 6 to learn that he had already died, having been baptized into the death of Christ.³⁴

For the hiddenness of the Christian life, my brother cannot see the way he blesses me. He comes to me with the transparency of the apostle, this “spiritual man” who cannot stand anything that would come between him and Jesus. Speaking of transparency, I could tell that man anything. For *lack* of transparency, brothers, I could look at the clean-scrubbed lot of you and assume no one here is like me, and that I am alone in my wretchedness.

Imagine a gentle-hearted physician.³⁵ He has traveled far to be where the sickest people are. It is his no house call. He is making a home with them. For a time, they mask their symptoms, murmuring, “I’m okay,” while he waits and sorrows. An excellent diagnostician, he always knows what is really wrong.

When they begin to stumble in at last to present their sorry selves in twos and threes, what would the doctor feel? He could explode with joy! His hand reaches for each burning forehead in an unconscious gesture. His heart rushes forward, full with the hunger to be with them.

He is not glad they are sick or glad that they suffer. Oh, but he is glad they have come!³⁶

Sin is my great misery, the soul-pain that reaches him still. My inner being cries out, “Who will rescue?”...while mercy rolls my way in wave on wave. This is what I have learned. He is unreservedly on my side in my war with the things I hate. Grace, like water, flows downhill.

Why must I live unfinished, daily assaulted? Although I’ve not become the man I long to be, I have learned to love my Savior.³⁷ I cannot let his cross out of my sight. Jesus has made himself indispensable, life without him inconceivable.

“*Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*”³⁸

The law has done its faithful wounding. Good.³⁹ Now send it away, not forgetting what you’ve seen – that God makes a man nothing, then loves the nothing he has made.⁴⁰

³² Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 22.

³³ Luke 5:31.

³⁴ Romans 6:3, 5.

³⁵ This illustration is suggested in: Dane C. Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 36. This book is marred by the false doctrine of perseverance – “once saved, always saved” – in confusion with the truth about Jesus – once Savior, always Savior. Admittedly, that’s a significant blemish for a writer who lacks the full scope of Lutheran paradox.

³⁶ “When you come to Christ for mercy and love and help in your anguish and perplexity and sinfulness, you are going with the flow of his own deepest wishes, not against them.” Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 38.

³⁷ This is inspired and adapted from that affecting scene in *Hammer of God* when the cleric stands back useless while a humble neighbor soothes the soul of a dying man with the profound gospel comfort that she possesses. Bo Giertz, *Hammer of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005), 25.

³⁸ Romans 7:25.

³⁹ There is a strange joy lurking inside Romans 7. It brings us back to the reality of our sinful condition that we may walk away from the dead thing. It is good to see the self-salvation ship has sail without us on it, and to give up on that project all over again, good to see ourselves uncovered by God and then covered again in Christ.

⁴⁰ “It is over the waters of man’s ruined manhood that the Spirit broods and works.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 135. “God himself must be recognized as the ultimate source of *Anfechtung*: it is his *opus alienum*

Not Condemned!
Romans 8:1-3

“Excuse me, Pastor. Could you repeat that?”⁴¹

These are the moments we live for: meeting her quiet gasp with the broadening pastoral smile. “I said, *There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”⁴²

It’s scandalous. A person could be forgiven for saying, “That’s too easy!” about the *just-like-that-ness* of justification, the immediacy of our absolution, this business of scoundrels getting off scott free. Too easy?

“*God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh...*”⁴³

Undiminished Deity became a holy embryo to pass through and redeem every stage of life, the Creator of all worlds fully sharing in our human stuff, getting everything right that we are forever getting wrong. Humanity was graced with an unhurried look into the face of *I Am*. The fullness of God lived in a body like yours, told some stories, made some friends, became for some their hearts’ affection, and for others, a disturber of sleep.⁴⁴ He put a few things back the way they were supposed to be – lepers aren’t supposed to be lepers and little girls aren’t supposed to lie dead – as the sign of who this was who lived among us, the world’s only Light, and as a promise of what will be as *there* broke into *here*.

Love embodied. Compassion walking around.

He became, in the end, “*a sin offering.*”⁴⁵

(I’m sorry. *What?*)

“*And so God condemned sin in flesh.*”⁴⁶

As a corollary of the goodness of God, God is just. A good God is not indifferent to the evil in the world or in us. He must care and he must respond or surrender his God-ness, as if he could. It was not the *idea* of sin or sin in the *abstract* that needed condemning, but *sin in flesh*. Whose?

“*Father, forgive them...*”⁴⁷ he prayed, *Deus Obsconditus* (the hidden God) become *Deus Revelatus* (God revealed) as the nails go in.⁴⁸

(strange work) which is intended to destroy a man’s self-confidence and complacency, and reduce him to a state of utter despair and humiliation, in order that he may finally turn to God, devoid of all the obstacles to justification which formerly existed.... [It is] a perennial and authentic feature of the Christian life. In order for the Christian to progress in his spiritual life, he must continually be forced back to the foot of the cross, to begin it all over and over...through the continued experience of *Anfechtung*.” Tullian Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin: How Suffering Sets You Free* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012), 49-50.

⁴¹ Even years later, when she and I roleplayed “The Woman Caught in Adultery” in a class on narrative witnessing, there was a shine on both our eyes. “*Does no one condemn you?*” “*No one, Sir.*” She played the part of a woman caught in the act, not yet cleaned up at all. As we played our parts, there was on both ends of the exchange something warm and real and no less personal for being forensic. “*And neither do I condemn you*” (John 8:11).

⁴² Romans 8:1.

⁴³ Romans 8:3. With apostolic precision, Paul writes literally that “God sent his Son in the *likeness of flesh of sin.*” Not in the “likeness of flesh” – that would be Docetism’s version of a useless Savior who only seems like one of us. “In the flesh of sin” would be more alarming still. “In the flesh” would confuse us because of how he has used that term a verse earlier for the corruption that “weakens the law.” “*In the likeness of flesh of sin*” means that God the Son came in real human flesh and, as such, looked like other men, but was without sin’s corruption.

⁴⁴ “This is one who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which he passed through the world like a flame.” Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 19.

⁴⁵ Romans 8:3.

⁴⁶ Romans 8:3.

⁴⁷ Luke 23:34.

⁴⁸ I’ve written elsewhere about the strange power of overhearing. This “Father, forgive,” was not addressed to the soldiers, or to the world, or to us. We are met by words that ask nothing of us. We were not consulted. We are

In *The Undoing of Death*,⁴⁹ Fleming Rutledge explores the ways a Roman crucifixion was calculated for the absolute degradation of its victim. It was a violent stripping away of the humanity of one not fit for our race, the erasing of one best not remembered. She includes artists' renditions from across the centuries of the death of Jesus to reflect the efforts of the day to make sense of this uninventable God on a cross. Some portray an other-worldly Jesus sort of floating above. Others better capture the "sorrow and love flow mingled down."⁵⁰

Rutledge includes one image you would not cast to a screen in the sanctuary or show to a child under a certain age: Christ's naked, contorted body, his wild eyes searching a blank sky, while brutal men with rippling muscles climb on him.⁵¹

It is grotesque and fiercely beautiful. It is the glory of God.

The Spirit did not paint in oils but exploited the curious advantage words have for showing us the insides and backs of things or expressing their true dimensions:

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."⁵²

A real hell hid within the physical agonies of our Lord – God-forsakenness, darkness, and death opened its jaws. The holy, innocent Son "made sin for us"⁵³ – a horror to himself, "a worm and not a man."⁵⁴ Death claimed a victim who did not deserve to die.⁵⁵

A gorgeous willingness was perfected in an act in time, in the gripping of the post – "I am ready,

let in on things that passed between the Father and Son, this to the piercing of every illusion we have about ourselves – we are always in the wrong – and every illusion we have about God. Though nothing has ever looked less like glory than a flogged and crucified man, this, just this, is who God is. His blood cries a better word than the blood of Abel. This communication concept, an example of "indirect communication," belongs to Kierkegaard and his spiritual renewal that also happened in a cemetery when, hidden from sight, he overheard a grandfather talk quietly and insistently of Christ to his grandson the next row over. He would spend the rest of his life trying to understand how that form of communication cut through the thick callouses on his heart. Mark Paustian, "The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament - ProQuest," n.d., 16–17.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/32624099147f498d20d544f98f4a4904/1?cbl=18750&pq-origsite=gscholar>

⁴⁹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005),

⁵⁰ "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," 125:3. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997).

⁵¹ Lovis Corinth, "Large Martyrdom." The piece is an "unsparing depiction of the surpassing brutality of the method, what a crucifixion would have been like." Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, 23.

⁵² Colossians 1:19-20.

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁵⁴ Psalm 22:6.

⁵⁵ Rather than taking up the puzzles of theology as the safest place to hide from the operation of the cross, a word from Martin Franzmann: "The cross marks the spot where the disciples failed, and it marks the spot where we all, we theologians, too, must fail. The cross marks the spot where the exegete ceases to be proud of his exegetical niceties, is shaken out of his scholarly serenity and cries out for his life in terms of the first Beatitude. The cross marks the spot where the systematist sees his system as the instrument which focuses his failure; where the practical theologian realizes that there is only one practical thing to do, and that is to repent and abhor himself in dust and ashes; where the historian leaves his long and sanely balanced view of things and goes desperately mad. The cross marks the spot where we all become beggars—and God becomes king. Amen." Martin H. Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 45. From Tullian Tchividjian: "The cross makes a mockery of our attempts to defend and deliver ourselves. God provided a shocking remedy that both reveals and addresses the depth of our illness, our 'sickness unto death.'" Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 131.

Father.” I scarce can take it in.⁵⁶ That or the moment in the garden when he said, “*Mary!*”⁵⁷

And so the gavel boom, *and so* the finality of our verdict, *and so* the suddenness of a case closed, every offense blotted, every crime expunged *just like that*. We are not condemned.⁵⁸

“Too easy!” some say.

“Too easy for whom?” Mark what it cost our Lord, the steep price of being “God for us.”⁵⁹

A friend recalls being in first grade and noticing that the girl across from him had wet herself. She blushed with shame, bracing for the verdict and sentence her peers would hand down. It would feel like dying. So he got up, pretended to stumble, and spilled his apple juice all over her lap. Now she gathered comforters as he became the joke of the day, examined and found wanting.⁶⁰ Who does that? You know.

A new thing – the grace of God – is turned loose in the world.

Romans 8:1 is the door to all that follows. The love that bound Christ to his cross has not cooled.⁶¹ That very love acting *then* is the love acting *now*, in this moment, as he intercedes for you. The willing death of Jesus is of a piece – *a thing of the same kind* – with all that he will yet do, even as he carries our boxes with a smile up to the room he has prepared.

All this is for you, Pastor, with your special brand of self-recrimination. We can cast God’s people as stand-ins for the law,⁶² reading accusation into their words and the looks on their faces. I remember the crushing inadequacy that can accompany a week of pastoral duty. Certain Sundays when it came time to speak the absolution I could barely choke out the words. I don’t regret those days. *Das liebe Kreuz* (the dear cross) is blessed. We sink down over a lifetime, in fits and starts, into the sufficiency of Another. The point is that there is a special pastoral wound, and there is an oil for pouring in.

Of everything there is to say to such men as yourselves, you who walk the world as the “pardon of God,”⁶³ this is first, though it can come as a surprise.

You are not condemned. You are not condemned.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.⁶⁴

When it comes to Jesus, there is being *in* and there is being *out*. The latter is too awful to contemplate. But, brother, this is the truest thing about you. By the inscrutable mercy of God, *you are in*.

⁵⁶ “In venting that righteous wrath God was not striking a morally neutral tree. He was splintering the Lovely One. Beauty and Goodness himself was being uglified and vilified. ‘Stricken, smitten by God...’ (Isa. 53:4). So that we ugly ones could be freely beautified, pardoned, calmed. Our heaven through his hell. Our entrance into Love through his loss of it. This was what ‘loving to the end’ meant. Passing through the horror of the cross and drinking down the filth, the centuries of sin, all that is revolting even in our eyes.” Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 202.

⁵⁷ John 20:16. This, too, comes to us as an overhearing in the cemetery that is this world.

⁵⁸ A disaster of a man was dying. He asked only to be remembered. I imagine him being questioned in heaven. Just what in the world did he think he was doing there? “The man on the middle cross said I could come.” Adapted from a sermon by Alistair Begg: *Getting Our Spiritual Bearings*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2H96xYZKi7Y&ab_channel=AlistairBegg.

⁵⁹ Romans 8:31.

⁶⁰ Told by Dr. Craig Wansick, Virginia Wesleyan College.

⁶¹ “That love was on cosmic display when, atop a Roman tree of crucifixion, Jesus became the millionaire and the addict, the nun and the stripper, the newborn baby and the wrinkled octogenarian. All humanity – with its sores and wounds and twisted soul and barren lives and evil-infested pasts – he became, that humanity might become, in him, resplendent in the eyes of the Father.” Chad Bird, *Upside-Down Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 63.

⁶² Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 65.

⁶³ G. K. Chesterton, quoted in: Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling God’s Purpose For Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 200.

⁶⁴ John Donne: “It would be ungrateful for me to look back on my sins, which in true repentance I have buried in the wounds of your Son, as if they could spring to life again and condemn me to death. They are dead in him who is the fount of life.... Temper your mercy to my soul, O my God. May I not grow faint in spirit, suspecting your forgiveness to be less hearty, less sincere than you promised it to be.” Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 122.

Life in the Spirit
Romans 8:4-13

After Romans 7 had me sighing, “Yes, I know this place,” Romans 8:1 came in with its reliable, pleasant jolt. For the sake of Christ alone we are not condemned. Not ever. We must know the truth of it in our bones.⁶⁵ Why?

So that the life in the Spirit, to which we now turn, is not a return to guilty, coerced law-keeping. From baptism to final breath, it is all about Jesus and what he has done. I say all this because I have wondered, as I’ve read further in Romans 8, whether the news is still good. Do I still recognize myself in Paul’s depiction of the normal Christian life as I did a chapter ago?

*“Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”*⁶⁶

If this convicts you, as it does me, it is because you are alive to God.⁶⁷ Do not let that absolving opening verse drift out of your thoughts as this new life beckons.⁶⁸

*“If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”*⁶⁹

First of all, this can only mean that the sin-power is with me still, the evicted tenant from hell who refuses to leave,⁷⁰ somehow both *me* and *not me*. Clearly, there is no thought in Paul of our growing past our desperate need for mercy. Our need remains.

But there stands Jesus. By the Spirit in me, I see him.

And I break into a run.

This new life is lived exclusively in Jesus Christ.

The provocative title, *Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity*,⁷¹ is a study of the Spirit’s perpetual casting of our attention, in the name of all wellness, onto the Son. “The Spirit testifies about me,” says Jesus.⁷² The Comforter wants nothing more than to infect us with his one great obsession: “Have you ever seen anything so wonderful as he!” This is life in the Spirit.

⁶⁵ Until we do, we cannot ask in the right way what God would have us do. The presupposition of all Christian activity is a soul at peace, justified by faith in Jesus. What is more, our desire to live in the Spirit already pleases God, even before it reaches fruition, even if it never does. Only God could have worked such a thing in you, this will to love someone well for the way you are so well loved.

⁶⁶ Romans 8:6-7.

⁶⁷ This is the Spirit in you not leaving you alone. He won’t give you up without a fight. It is his hard kindness to continue to show us ourselves. When I toss and turn, it is his gift to me. These are the signs of life, not death. I am not too far gone.

⁶⁸ The law is always present in the mind, conscience always preparing a nag, and when I lose my conscious grasp of grace, Romans 7 is the bed I wake up in. I think of how we lose this gospel sense when I remember a pastor of wisdom and long experience telling me that when a loved one was diagnosed with a chronic disease, his first thought was, “God is punishing me.” We will never not need to hear the gospel or ever work ourselves out of a job.

⁶⁹ Romans 8:13.

⁷⁰ “Sin is like an evicted tenant, who, however, doesn’t want to move out and makes trouble for the new resident. He doesn’t have any right to be there, but he is still fighting and opposing the rightful owner in all that he does.” Schuetze, “A Christian and the Law,” 5. Likewise, John Stott has clarity where many Christian writers assume that there is a way to close the door on Romans 7. “I do not myself believe that the Christian ever, in this life, passes for good and all out of the one cry into the other, out of Romans 7 into Romans 8.... He is always crying for deliverance, and he is always exulting in his Deliverer.” John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 78.

⁷¹ Frederick Dale Bruner and William Hordern, *Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984).

⁷² John 15:26.

All the evidence we need that we have “taken hold of the life that is life”⁷³ is there in our uniquely Christian struggle.

*“I am not controlled by my sinful nature.”*⁷⁴

I see it now. I am as Paul was. Even on my coldest days, the regenerate “I” looks on with the sadness of the Spirit at what I am still capable of. In my shabbiest moments the “spiritual man” groans, seeing through every rationalization, concurring with the will of God, taking his side against myself. In my times of greatest shame and angst, the real me dreams of the good I cannot yet bring, and I take it hard.⁷⁵ In fact, if the Apostle Paul did not write about life in the Spirit just as he has, I might take it lying down. But I will not.⁷⁶

My flesh does not control me.

I once choked on those words. I now see that my sinful nature has never been able to pull me off my knees where I am most fully myself or stop the sigh of “Abba” in my chest or keep my spirit from breaking.⁷⁷ It cannot prevent me from placing my loaves and small fish into the hands of Jesus to do with them what he will. This “body of death” will go its way, but there is a room in this decrepit mansion where the lights are always on. The old Adam can pound all he likes outside. He has not one thing to say about it. I will sing my new song.

I find in myself a mindset. It is there by grace.

There is indwelling sin, yes, but you and I are “in the Spirit” – “the dominant and decisive reality of [our] existence, the characteristic mark.”⁷⁸ In a secular age, faith can feel fragile, but the bruised reed doesn’t break.⁷⁹

We are kept by Word and sacrament, held fast beyond perception by the power of God.

We have been given the grace to rely on grace.⁸⁰

Among the glorious achievements of the cross is that we should have the Spirit dwelling in us and among us, the radiant gift, the grace of God acting in time. The Spirit invaded this world in a new way in the anointing of the Son. He is released among us now in the extravagant sowing of his Word, wasteful as

⁷³ 1 Timothy 6:19.

⁷⁴ Armin Panning’s commentary on Romans is unmatched for its clarity regarding this portion of Romans. “‘For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.’ Paul has not forgotten the thrust of the previous chapter in which he lamented the fact that he still continues to sin daily. Paul’s new self fights valiantly against sin; sin isn’t allowed to run rampant or to be in charge. Paul isn’t living ‘according to the sinful nature.’” Armin Panning, *Romans*, The People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001), 129.

⁷⁵ I speak of that real good that is free of all internal resistance, worship without distraction, love that conceals nothing whatsoever that is in it for me, love that does what it does because it cannot imagine wanting to do anything else. This is the good I cannot do. But then I think, “One day!”

⁷⁶ I must fight for you, and you for me. Who or what must I fight against? I fight against myself, and the part of me that would use you, dismiss you, or think and speak badly about you. In just these ways, the people of God need their pastors to join in the fight of their lives, in the contested ground of their own soul.

⁷⁷ “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit” (Psalm 51:17).

⁷⁸ “I am still a sinner and sin much, but that is not the overriding reality in my life. I still have a sinful nature, but that’s not my dwelling place. I am still mortal, but death has lost its sting and its victory. All this is the work of God alone, by his grace in Christ alone, mediated to me by the gospel in word and sacrament, received by faith alone.” Richard D. Balge, “An Exegesis of Romans 7” (1993), 4. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/197>.

⁷⁹ Matthew 12:20.

⁸⁰ The new clarity of vision that comes to man in Christ is agony; the new man sees sin in himself where he did not see it before. But it is an integral part of the new life; the new man never leaves it wholly behind him in this world, but the new man again and again rises above it and finds help and peace where he did not find it before, through Jesus Christ his Lord. There is no way to the victorious confidence of Romans 8 but the unshrinking self-appraisal of Romans 7.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 135.

the sun that shines on the evil and the good.⁸¹

All is not misery and gloom. “This peace is not the grim and quiet piety which sings psalms in a doleful dump and through its nose” (whatever that means).⁸² In moments I do not make happen, a joy breaks through, and a longing so beautiful it hurts.⁸³

I am capable of this, too – of being quietly overwhelmed.

“*And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.*”⁸⁴

The news is still good. How do I know?

The Spirit of Sonship is telling me who I am.

Children of God
Romans 8:15-17

“*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*”⁸⁵

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”⁸⁶ Is it the thought of a Father’s tender care sweetly governing every detail of your life? No?

The Fall entrenched dark, suspicious thoughts about God in our minds. I wonder, does anything grieve the Spirit more? We imagine limitations to his mercy even after all we’ve seen in Jesus. We ascribe to God a vague disappointment with us and a reluctance to pardon, given that our nonsense has gone on so long. Our own sinfulness is clouding our view. We are still haunted by the ghost of *opinio legis* (the opinion of the law), straining in fear to fashion some sort of covering for ourselves besides the robe of Jesus’ foreign righteousness, forgetting to pull our toes under.

For Pete’s sake, you would have caught the smell of that “opinion” on me even as I wrote this homage to grace. Apart from the Spirit we are “*slaves again to fear.*”⁸⁷

How many times must we be told: the Lord’s anger lasts a moment, his favor a lifetime,⁸⁸ condemning is his “strange work” and “alien task,”⁸⁹ while God’s compassion comes from the depths of who he is?⁹⁰

⁸¹ Matthew 5:45.

⁸² Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 65.

⁸³ “It makes a difference where a man finds joy.” Augustine, *Confessions*, Modern English Version (Ada: Revell, 2005), 104.

⁸⁴ Romans 8:11.

⁸⁵ Romans 8:16.

⁸⁶ This is the first sentence in: A. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Cambridge: General Press, 2019), 5.

⁸⁷ Romans 8:15-16.

⁸⁸ Psalm 30:5.

⁸⁹ Isaiah 28:21. There was never anything in timeless eternity that needed condemning. There was only love within the Love and perichoresis that God eternally enjoys within himself.

⁹⁰ Jeremiah 32:41. I am noting the predominance of mercy in the Lord’s self-description. In Lamentations 3:33, the pinnacle of that book, the LORD says that he did not cause pain (literally) “from his heart,” while in Jeremiah 32:41, the LORD promises to restore his exiled people “with all my heart and soul.” It is about pardoning the wicked and having mercy on evil men that he tells us, “My thoughts are not like your thoughts,” but are “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Isaiah 55:7-9). Although the consequences for the haters of God may unfold across three generations – we’re told this so that we don’t think that grace is tolerance – his mercy rolls on for a thousand (Exodus 20:5-6). Then there’s Jesus himself embodying the Old Testament self-revelation of *Yahweh*: “I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29). The Word of reconciliation still meets our minds in a collision with how we naturally think; it is the weakness and foolishness of God (1 Corinthians 1:25). Our need is for constant exposure to the eternal gospel through the means of grace across a lifetime, to loiter at the cross and take in its sights and sounds in humble receptivity. We are forever distracted from a moment-by-moment appropriation of our true status in the kingdom of God. There is a car wreck quality to this struggle. It does draw our eyes. Christ would tear

It is ours to believe that God, in Christ, has a friendly heart.

This counts as righteousness.

“You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”⁹¹

“We cry.” When Luther commented on Paul’s use of *Abba* in Galatians, he sensed more of Gethsemane than the Lord’s Prayer. He called our *Abba* an eloquence that breaks through the “horrible cries” of sin, death, and devil – and our own feelings of banishment – to “penetrate the clouds and heaven...and reach all the way to the ears of God.”⁹²

I don’t leap to “Daddy” when I hear *Abba*. It is enough to know that Jesus addressed the Father this way with characteristic intimacy and affection. The word is ours because it was first his.

We are not *Schwärmer* (enthusiasts). The gospel puts the external Word in our minds, and the Spirit gives us the grace to own them, to mean them, to be moved and changed by them. He alone can teach the self-aware wretch to dare address the Sovereign Lord as “Father.” As a measure of God’s kindness in my life, it is the warmest word I know.⁹³ He would leave no part of this prodigal untouched.

The Father has only one way of thinking about his Son, and so, only one way of thinking about you. For you, too, are the heir of God, a co-heir with Christ.⁹⁴ All that Jesus is and has and has won is yours. The project on which Henri Nouwen spent the last decade of his life is worth considering: to learn to meet the world as it confronts us moment by moment the way Jesus did, living out of this very soul space.⁹⁵ You can hear the sigh of Luther: “I am the beloved on account of the Beloved.”⁹⁶

your gaze away from all that wounds and terrifies by Word and sacrament. He could do no better if he stood visibly before you, shining in his own light, madly waving his arms.

⁹¹ Romans 8:16.

⁹² “But in the midst of these terrors of the Law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death, and roarings of the devil, Paul says, the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart: ‘Abba! Father!’ And his cry vastly exceeds, and breaks through, the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death, and the devil. It penetrates the clouds and heaven, and it reaches all the way to the ears of God.... This is indeed a very short word, *Abba*, but it includes everything. Not the lips, but the feelings are speaking here, as though one were to say: ‘Even though I am surrounded by anxieties and seem to be deserted and banished from Thy presence, nevertheless I am a child of God on account of Christ: I am beloved on account of the Beloved.’ Therefore, the term ‘Father,’ when spoken meaningfully in the heart, is an eloquence that...the most eloquent of men there have ever been in the world cannot attain.” Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), 244.

⁹³ More from Luther on “Abba, Father”: “The words express the confidence which a child has in its father, a confidence which can never arise in the soul of a servant.... A man who is sinful, but through faith has the Holy Spirit of adoption, trusts his God in spite of the consciousness of his own sin, for he, too, knows himself to be one with the Father through Christ. He senses intuitively that in the misery of his sin, even in the wrong of his sin, he can appeal to the heart of the Father, a Father who cannot harden his heart when the child who has done wrong comes to him trustingly and relies surely and confidently upon his grace.” Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 111–12.

⁹⁴ Romans 8:17.

⁹⁵ “When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, he heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’ (Matt 3:17). These words revealed the true identity of Jesus as the beloved. Jesus truly heard that voice, and all of his thoughts, words, and actions came forth from his deep knowledge that he was infinitely loved by God. Jesus lived his life from that inner place of love. Although human rejections, jealousies, resentments, and hatred did hurt him deeply, he remained anchored in the love of his Father.... I know now that the words spoken to Jesus when he was baptized are words spoken also to me and to all who are brothers and sisters of Jesus. My tendencies toward self-rejection and self-deprecation make it hard to hear these words truly and let them descend to the center of my heart. But once I have received them fully, I am set free from my compulsion to prove myself to the world and can live in it without belonging to it. Once I have accepted the truth that I am God’s beloved child, unconditionally loved, I can be sent into the world to speak and act as Jesus did.” Quoted from *Beyond the Mirror* in: Henri J. M. Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living*, ed. Gabrielle Earnshaw (New York: Convergent Books, 2017), 4.

⁹⁶ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 244. We all are trying to be somebody. Now and then, all that must crash and burn for us to ever know who we really are. There is only one identity that does not crush us, because we do nothing to create it.

Let us then take up the pastoral office as men without so much at stake, no fragile sense of self hanging in the balance, no ego needing constant protecting. We know who we are.

*“How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called children of God!”*⁹⁷

Ask the Spirit of sonship to make this your first thought *of you*.

*“How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”*⁹⁸ This is our wellness, that shimmering reality beyond the limits of reason’s tether. It is the thinking of big, bright thoughts of God. Expansive thoughts. Outdoor thoughts. How this would fill you.⁹⁹

So, why do I imagine Jesus to be tired of me? Do I think of him as a squeamish physician, as a poor excuse for a doctor who has no stomach for my puke and pus?

I once watched paralyzed as my wife caught the vomit of our child in her own cupped hands. My little girl, greedy as an addict, had gorged herself at Red Lobster on cheddar rolls and cream soda. There is my bride tenderly cooing, “It’s okay. It’s okay,” while her hands fill up.

I’ve never seen anything like it. It is a Christ-like thing.

Those are Christ-like hands.

And the child had the audacity to smile afterwards, like she was refreshed or something.

Surely, my repentance is something like this. I must let go of my small thoughts of Jesus.

“It is not the healthy who need a physician,”¹⁰⁰ he said. If the suffering of others gets to people like us, as cold as our natural selves are, think about how God in Christ attends to us, how the only one with a fully functioning, ever-human heart draws near.

As the apostle mentions at the end of this section, I want to suffer with Christ on the way to glory.¹⁰¹ Why? Because I want to *know* him in the *koinonia* (fellowship) of suffering. I think of the way veterans or cancer survivors know one another, the exchange of knowing glances between those who have survived the same war or come through the same disease. Just so, I need to know some measure of Jesus’ disgrace “outside the city gates,”¹⁰² and have that in common with him.¹⁰³

There is more to life than being well thought of or getting everything just so. Knowing Jesus is the More.

*“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”*¹⁰⁴

O Breath of God, you’ve convinced these men before. Convince them again.

Christ loved you before all worlds; long ere the day star flung his ray across the darkness, before the wing of an angel had flapped the unnavigated ether, before aught of creation had struggled

⁹⁷ 1 John 3:1.

⁹⁸ Ephesians 3:18.

⁹⁹ Ephesians 3:19.

¹⁰⁰ Mark 2:17.

¹⁰¹ This verse triggered a memory for the sainted Dr. Sig Becker, captured in written transcripts of his lectures. “Sometime ago I asked a seminary professor at St. Louis, ‘Don’t you believe that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible?’ He said, ‘Nobody believes that anymore.’ I said, ‘I believe it.’ He said, ‘Nobody who’s a scholar believes that.’” He received the world’s rebuke. Siegbert W. Becker, “Lectures on Romans” (1992), 79. <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/4332>. Similarly, Daniel Deutschlander writes, “Our glory, too, is hidden under a cross of rejection.” Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology Of The Cross* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2008), 253.

¹⁰² Hebrews 13:13.

¹⁰³ Such a small thing, but I thank the woman who scowled at me during a wedding sermon I recently preached. I feel bad that she holds herself out of the party we call grace. But I have longed for even that minor indignity, although my flesh shrinks from it.

¹⁰⁴ Romans 8:16.

from the womb of nothingness, God, even our God, had set his heart upon all his children.¹⁰⁵

Enough of the dark thoughts of pagans, all who churn over ways to get the deity to care. That is for the slaves. It is not for you, sons of God.

“Cast all your cares on him, for he cares for you.”¹⁰⁶

Search your most nurturing memories, and think deeply, in the Spirit, about how a father – the one you had or the one you hungered for – loves a child.

Not Worth Comparing Romans 8:18-27¹⁰⁷

The philosophers, comments Luther, “do not know how to interpret the sighing of all things.”¹⁰⁸ Where Richard Dawkins has the universe looking on with “pitiless indifference,”¹⁰⁹ Paul shows us a cosmos stretching its neck to see the day when the sons of God shed their veils and shake off their disgrace. We have a common destiny.

Deny God on the basis of suffering, and you have only managed to make it worse. You would make our pain meaningless, no longer that which will be redeemed in a future so bright and weighty that all anguish becomes a feather on the scale.

“Birth pains” – a brilliant image – are the precise opposite of meaningless suffering. This is suffering that matters. The universe is grabbing handfuls of bedsheets with sweaty fists, giving birth to glory.

Linger in the metaphor – the “*thisness* of that and the *thatness* of this.”¹¹⁰ How is the corruption at the bone of all things like a woman in labor and *vice versa* but that in a single moment a newness of life and restoration rushes forward. In a moment, agony vanishes into joy, forgotten. The sorrow *now* is part of the joy *then*.

Our adoption day. Walter Wangerin writes to his son about the day he skinned his knee: “When I held you, then, I said, ‘Don’t cry, my adopted son.’ In dear moments I used the word ‘adopted’ so that it would seem a good word to you and a good thing.”¹¹¹

The papers have long been signed. Soon comes the realization of all that means.
Adoption. Childbirth. A universe straining its neck.

¹⁰⁵ There’s more. “Since that time, has he once swerved, has he once turned aside, once changed? No; ye who have tasted of his love and know his grace, will bear me witness, that he has been a certain friend in uncertain circumstances.... You have often left him; has he ever left you? You have had many trials and troubles; has he ever deserted you? Has he ever turned away his heart, and shut up his bowels of compassion? No, children of God, it is your solemn duty to say ‘No,’ and bear witness to his faithfulness.” Charles Spurgeon, “A Faithful Friend,” in *Sermons of C.H. Spurgeon* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1857), 13-14.

¹⁰⁶ 1 Peter 5:7.

¹⁰⁷ In case a reader may find it useful, I happened to notice how many of the key elements of worldview are all present in this portion of Romans 8: where we come from, what’s wrong with everything, what counts as redemption, what counts as hope. Most people are in the dark, but we are the friends of God. He tells us things.

¹⁰⁸ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 237.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 21.

¹¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 503.

¹¹¹ Walter Wangerin, *This Earthly Pilgrimage: Tales and Observations on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 158. You can find videos on YouTube to capture a small piece of adoption joy – the reveal, the landing in each other’s arms – but there is nothing like seeing that good word applied to willful prodigals, those who made a cold, clean break, welcomed back into the home of God. In the story, it is the Father who runs while the child hesitates. The son calculates. The Father opens his arms. He pours out his extravagance, while the child realizes how little he ever understood.

These are the images we see by, portraits the Spirit hangs in the basement gallery of our hearts. Promises of that future day fill the present with good things. They bring future worlds near, even as creation groans.¹¹²

Sure, it's personification. Yet it feels natural enough when things aren't working. My poor old Honda groans pitifully on a frigid Minnesota morning and the it (*es*) becomes a thou (*du*):¹¹³ "You can do it, old girl. You know you want to."

Of course, it was God himself who poured sand in the gears of all things.¹¹⁴ He subjected his created order to frustration for reasons we can guess at and others that may have to wait.¹¹⁵

For one, there is no mistaking this place for home. We live our lives on the lookout for another.¹¹⁶ "Before the silver cord is cut,"¹¹⁷ a man must be chased to Christ by the realities that make Christ necessary.¹¹⁸ Every man must call out to the "Bleeding Charity" before it is too late.¹¹⁹

None of this is to minimize suffering. "Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven on the face."¹²⁰ Instead, the more it hurts, the greater must be that glory that will dwarf our pain into insignificance. In the face of all that now bewilders, only may the Father show us more of his Son.

Meanwhile, we must grasp the cosmic significance of the question put to us. Is God, in his Christ, worth trusting – will we go on calling him unspeakably good – no matter what we see or feel in this world? The universe leans in, on the edge of its seat.

Faith answers, "Yes," for all that it has seen.¹²¹

¹¹² We stand before the unutterable. Rather than try at length to describe what is indiscernible, the apostle sets glory against the suffering and longing we know well.

¹¹³ My students may appreciate a little play with communication philosopher Martin Buber and his famous *Ich und Du*. That phrase describes the moment when someone becomes more than just their attributes (a sense of humor, a pretty face) or their role (my dentist, my waitress) – more than just "objects in their social world" – when these things recede so that "a person becomes a person before our very eyes."

¹¹⁴ "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it..." (Romans 8:20). The universe could rightly scream, in the throes of delivery, "You did this to me!" One small note of Christian apologetics: any evidence you show me that God is not good, I will give you back as the evidence of the world alienated from God, the world we broke.

¹¹⁵ According to Tullian Tchividjian, the last idol to fall is the idol of explanation – as if God is to be trusted when and only when he has explained all things to my satisfaction. Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 193.

¹¹⁶ Martin Franzmann: "It is no mean part of the Spirit's work to implant in us a deep nostalgia for our true and everlasting home." Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 151. Franzmann sounds like C. S. Lewis who wrote about being "homesick for a place we've been" and the longing like "stabs of joy." God is found in the longing for God. In all this is a crucial validation of Christian sadness. We legitimately long for heaven, and we are not right until we are there.

¹¹⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:6.

¹¹⁸ The book of Ecclesiastes accomplishes this very thing without specifically mentioning God the Son.

¹¹⁹ This is an allusion to one of the chilling but revealing conversations in C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1894), 33.

¹²⁰ Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, IV, iii, 4-7.

¹²¹ A strange gratitude hangs about it. The world is furious that nothing quite works, and is doomed to its grumbling and the perpetual stamping of feet. It will not relent until everything is just so, and it never will be in this present age. We Lutherans "call things as they are," but when I reflect on what I have been given to expect of life in this world and of people, I am opened up to the unbearable sweetness that remains in this bombed-out cathedral. For one, that I am so well loved. Many will recognize these thoughts as the burden of C. S. Lewis' analogy in which a crowd of people go to live in a decrepit building, with half being told it was a prison and the other half a hotel. The paradox is that those who believed it was a hotel are the ones stuck in a constant grumble – "What's the matter with this place!" – while those who thought it to be a prison experienced unexpected delight – "You know, for a prison,

We can admit that it is difficult to grab onto a clear mental picture of *shalom* – everything as it is supposed to be – except to run to him, to *Sar Shalom* (the Prince of Peace), and take in the sights. That great heart went out to the widow of Nain. “Don’t cry,” he said, and gave her back her son.¹²²

“We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”¹²³

We will not be extinguished, blown out like candles, or dissolved into a great nothing. We enjoy the full extremities of hope, “the redemption of our bodies” – these very bodies, washed in baptism, nourished by the body and blood of our Lord.¹²⁴ Our sickbed is transformed by unseen hopes and the promise of a more-than-full recovery.¹²⁵

It is *already* and *not yet*.¹²⁶

Pastor, as we reflect on the coming glory as it glows in Romans 8, there’s an element you might miss, namely, your being *gloried over* by the Father, as in, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant!”¹²⁷

Whatever is the particular shape of our sadness over ourselves and our sins, it all sinks down in his sea of forgetfulness. What you’ve done in faith remains, never to be forgotten.¹²⁸ Its lasting significance – it’s whole meaning – is in Christ. It means something to him.

In “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis speaks of this as the ultimate creaturely pleasure, that purest of delights, as captured in the little boy who has put a smile on his dad’s face. What else is the reason for me than to play a part in the joy of God?

The promise of glory is almost incredible *and only possible by the work of Christ* [emphasis added].... To please God, to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness – it seems impossible, a

it’s not so bad.” In hope, we can enjoy life now for what it is without bitterness for what it is not, or not yet. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 41.

¹²² Luke 7:13-15.

¹²³ To borrow from Dorothy Sayers about the same-old, same-old of the ecumenical creeds, “We can call it exhilarating, we may call it devastating, we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all.” Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 6.

¹²⁴ We will be raised as “spiritual bodies” (1 Corinthians 15:44). This does not refer to disembodied souls, but new bodies fitted for that new heaven and earth, gleaming like a bride..

¹²⁵ “The ministry of Jesus was God’s yes to His creation spelled out in act; Jesus dealt with the body and the bodily ‘dis-ease’ of man. He fed and healed men, and he raised them bodily from death.... The same continuity that makes the body of the future one with our present body connects the new unsullied world of God with the world we know, the world whose frustrated beauty makes us marvel still.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 150.

¹²⁶ About this hope Luther commented, “It is ever so that when the hope that issues from the longing for a beloved object is delayed, love is made all the greater. And thus what is hoped for and the hoping person become one through this hoping, or as blessed Augustine puts it: ‘In the soul is more where it loves than where it lives.’” Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 239. “I’m supposed to apply this to myself. See how the trout leaps heavenward from the tailwaters, how it gulps great breaths of another world, returns to its home where it finds strength to swim against the current.” Seth Haines and Shauna Niequist, *Coming Clean: A Story of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 26.

¹²⁷ This is by no means to contradict August Pieper’s classic treatment of the glory of God, only to explore another layer to glory. August O. W. Pieper, “The Glory of the Lord” (1931), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/3666>. C. S. Lewis was ahead of his time in recognizing an honor/shame motif in Scripture that adds a rich dimension to our appropriation of God’s grace. Becoming aware of this theme in Scripture is to start seeing it everywhere, such as in the book of Ruth or Psalms or in the Aaronic Blessing, not to mention in Romans 8.

¹²⁸ Jesus was comment on a cup of cool water held out to another. What then of the bread and wine held out or the water applied to the forehead at the start of someone new? You say, “I baptize you....” and, “Take and eat...take and drink.” I say, “Amen. Well said! Well done, you!”

weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.¹²⁹

It seems too much. In fact, it is a feature of living in view of such an eternity (*specia aeternitas*) that “we do not know what we ought to pray for.”¹³⁰

I’ve never known much, or else I would have prayed:

“Dear Father, let me make the dumbest decision of my ministry and delay my mission’s building project ten years. Oh, Son of God, if you ever cared for me, let a parade of godly women find me unmarried. Spirit most holy, let my daughter bring a young man with lesbian mothers into my life.”

So begin my life’s most beautiful stories.¹³¹ I relive them and aspire to the heights of faith where a Syrophenician woman once heard the Yes in God’s No.¹³²

What do we know of what should or should not be? Call this “the footnote to all prayers.”¹³³ “How radical Paul actually is, all prayer of Christian men is under the sign of not knowing.”¹³⁴

In our profound “not knowing,” we would have prayed Jesus off his cross, had we been there, and have the groaning go on forever. We would pray ourselves out from under every cross of our own, never needing to seek the face of God on our knees, never finding him the way we find him there.

What is more, our prayers are too small – thin stuff, really – all out of proportion with what we ask, the glory that grins around the corner.

*“The Spirit himself intercedes through groaning without words.”*¹³⁵

Why then bother with prayer? Our ignorance is not a discouragement. Much the opposite. We pray because one far better prays along, one who knows the mind of God, has the view from everywhere, knows all contingencies in an effortless knowing. The sighs of God blend with mine, so that what lands in the ears of the Father might as well have come from his own dear Son.¹³⁶

The Spirit blends our stammering and stuttering with holy incense in the throne room of God, but not to make an unwilling Father willing. To hold Christ is to hold in our fist every string to his heart. No, this is God conspiring within himself – and making all of life conspire – for your highest good.

We have left the tiny realm of the things we are able to do. We have entered the realm where all things are possible with God.

¹²⁹ “I suddenly remembered that no one can enter heaven except as a child; and nothing is so obvious in a child – not in a conceited child but in a good child – as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised...the most creaturely of pleasures – nay, the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure of a beast before men, a child before its father, a pupil before his teacher, a creature before its Creator. ...[T]he satisfaction of having pleased those whom I rightly loved and rightly feared was pure. And that is enough to raise our thoughts to what may happen when the redeemed soul, beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, learns at last that she has pleased Him whom she was created to please. There will be no room for vanity then. She will be free from the illusion that it is her doing... In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.” C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” (preached at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 1942).

¹³⁰ Romans 8:26.

¹³¹ “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places” marking off all that is mine (Psalm 16:6): a ministry that should have failed, a family that exceeds every expectation, a true son in faith. I remember these stories, and many more like them, for the sake of every present story of which I cannot see the ending. God is good.

¹³² Matthew 15:27. If Jesus seemed to her not to care, she knew him better than that. If a little speculation is allowed, I don’t think she knew to pray for that demon to devastate her child or for her own time of desperation. Yet these are what introduced her to her Lord.

¹³³ “Do not take our literal sense. Our limping metaphor translates.” Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 300.

¹³⁴ Middendorf, *Romans 1-8: Concordia Commentary*, 682.

¹³⁵ Romans 8:26. This is “an expression of real pleading, not in human language, intercessions more intimate than human words are able to express or apprehend.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 152.

¹³⁶ Jesus came into the world to stand among many brothers to pray and sing to his Father from here (cf. Hebrews 2:12). Even so, we are in Christ by faith to pray to God *from here*.

In All Things
Romans 8:28-30

Somewhere Luther described his heart as a palimpsest, a used leather parchment that had to be scraped off before it could receive something new. He had been a man (literally) “*of works*,”¹³⁷ not merely relying on them, but given to them at the level of deep instinct and core commitment.

That scraping was hard. And still you could make out what had been written there before.

The image captures something for me – “For God so loved the world...”¹³⁸ scrawled mercifully across a shredded heart. That God welcomes sinners for Jesus’ sake – this is that foreign thought that busts in from the outside by Word and sacrament in all their glorious objectivity. Our need is to live in that thought.

This names also the pastoral kindness, its glory of the hidden kind. Every baptism is a fresh act of God.¹³⁹ With every absolution,¹⁴⁰ every Jesus-story, every sermon, including that little sermon to which you bring nothing of yourself at all – “Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed...” – you inscribe the thought of God at the bottom of the souls you serve. You pour yourselves out that it would be more real to them than any other version of the good, more real than that imagined future or frozen past that keeps them up at night.¹⁴¹ Grace doesn’t only mean to forgive sins but to heal the memory as well.¹⁴²

This portion of Romans 8 will help us, both with the scraping and with the engraving of that something new.

*“Those God foreknew he also predestined...called...justified...glorified.”*¹⁴³

These five aorists leave no room for thinking highly of our merits. They are excluded. The agency is God’s. What began in a spontaneous act of divine favor, a motion in God’s heart, culminates in beggars sitting on thrones.¹⁴⁴ The great mass of Christendom seems not to have heard that the heart and core of Christianity is not that we live for God, but that God, in Christ, lives for us.¹⁴⁵ The great

¹³⁷ Galatians 3:10.

¹³⁸ John 3:16.

¹³⁹ I have in mind the fact that the Church would not roll along on its own stream for a single moment without God’s perpetual actions of creating and sustaining her by his Spirit.

¹⁴⁰ “When your pastor absolves you, he is not making a comment about your faith or your heart. He is making a comment about Christ and applying Christ to you. He is saying that you are objectively absolved because of Christ.” Klemet I. Preus, *The Fire And The Staff: Lutheran Theology In Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2005), 65.

¹⁴¹ To put it another way: the tormenting memory of how gravely they have sinned becomes the memory of how much they have been forgiven.

¹⁴² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 147.

¹⁴³ Romans 8:29-30.

¹⁴⁴ This serves to “destroy the wisdom of the flesh. So far the apostle has destroyed the hands, feet, and tongue of the wisdom of the flesh; now he wipes it out entirely. Now he makes us see that it amounts to nothing, and that our salvation altogether lies in His hands. God absolutely recognizes no chance. Not a single leaf falls from the tree without the will of the Father. All things are essentially in His hands, and so are also our times.” Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1954), 112–13. I hope throughout this essay one can read between my lines an undying Christian optimism. It just doesn’t happen to be grounded in the likes of us. “All flesh is grass, but the Word of our God shall stand” (Isaiah 40:6, 8 KJV).

¹⁴⁵ Christian church history is a face pocked by controversy about the part we play in our own salvation. But there is no such controversy in heaven. There they cry and shout, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:10).

redemption story is the story of God acting. Life isn't merely happening *to us*. Under God, it is happening *for us*.¹⁴⁶

*"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."*¹⁴⁷

An exquisite chapel for my exploratory mission to use might as well have fallen from the sky and on the very afternoon I needed it to. Our search for property was a total bust, then suddenly it wasn't. In a way that makes me shake my head, help was on its way.

A wonderful, godly woman "chanced" Ruth-like into my field.¹⁴⁸

Things happen the way we need them to. People show up. God puts them on and wears them like masks. We look up – "You did that just for me." And you, Pastor, are where the elect need you to be.

Those who find Romans 8:28 to be a "bona fide conversation stopper, a spiritual 'shut up,' if you will,"¹⁴⁹ simply do not have an ear for the theology of the cross in this audacious "all things."¹⁵⁰ In a tragic time, the verse can seem to them a smiley-face sticker slapped thoughtlessly on the wound.¹⁵¹ But no. Romans 8:28 calls for a close reading: what are the "all things?" What is "the good?" Who are those who "love him?"

*"For those God foreknew..."*¹⁵²

This speaks of a tender, intimate knowing of you, your ins and outs, before time began. It does

¹⁴⁶ "It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved of the Lord; the most crushing calamities can only shorten his journey and hasten him to his reward. Ill to him is not ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him; sickness is his medicine; reproach is his honor; death is his gain. No evil in the strict sense of the word can happen to him, for everything is overruled for good. Happy is he who is in such a case. He is secure where others are in peril; he lives where others die." Charles Spurgeon, "A Faithful Friend," in *Sermons of C.H. Spurgeon*, 13–14.

¹⁴⁷ Romans 8:28.

¹⁴⁸ Ruth 2:3. To unpack these stories a little: I was mere hours from pulling the plug on all our plans for my mission to begin services, desperate for a place to hold them. I could find no school gym, no VFW hall, no funeral home. A car dealer that my congregation president worked for had changed his mind – no, he wasn't going to move cars out of his showroom for us every Sunday morning. That same day, a newly installed college president was announcing to his staff, "I see we have this chapel sitting empty on Sunday mornings. Couldn't we find some church to use it?" I heard this in a chance conversation, and found myself sitting alone in that chapel, under a vaulted ceiling, with seating in the round for 250 people, across from me a Tracker pipe organ and grand piano while music softly played over a state-of-the-art sound system. If I *were* a Schwärmer, I'd say the voice of God was whispering, "What are you afraid of? I'm in this." Years later I sat with a discouraged building committee as the sixtieth and final building site was eliminated – something about zoning or soil borings or ingress/egress. Who knows? A young pastor mumbles, "I think we need to stop and pray." So we did. It was an education in how to "change the moment." Meanwhile, both the city and the county engineer, WELS members, were preparing their moves to my community unbeknownst to me. A change of zoning on the perfect site was a signature away. Stories? I have more. So do you.

¹⁴⁹ Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 119.

¹⁵⁰ It could also be that we offer the words in place of empathy – no time in the pit to "mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15) – rather than in tandem with it, allowing all sorts of unintended, relational messages to interfere. "The hope of Romans 8:28 is not intended to be a panacea for the groaning of Romans 8:22. That would be totally inconsistent for Paul, who four chapters later in Romans 12:15 says, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn' Because the full glory of God's kingdom lies in the future, present reality remains tinged by pain and sorrow." Kenneth C. Haugk, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 2004), 22.

¹⁵¹ As can Jeremiah 29. But "I know the plans I have for you..." has to do with God wiping his temple and his dear Jerusalem off the face of the earth. To have them on their knees, seeking him with all their heart when they had nothing else – *that* was the plan. And this: "You will find me." This was their future and their hope. As with Christ, so with us: God has always done his best things in the midst of weakness and apparent defeat. (Cf. Jeremiah 29:10-14). "Believers understand many doctrinal truths in the mind, but those truths seldom make the journey down into the heart except through disappointment, failure, and loss." Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 5.

¹⁵² Romans 8:29.

not crack the door open to some worthiness of ours – *as if* – nor to the “monster of uncertainty” (*monstrum uncertitudinis*) that would come with it. The mystery of our election *in Christ*¹⁵³ only deepens, for we were thoroughly seen and just as thoroughly loved.¹⁵⁴ This was no choosing with eyes closed. No darts thrown at a board.¹⁵⁵ He knew and chose *me*, not just the idea of me. This you must have in your head and in your heart: he chose *you*.

“*For those God foreknew, he also predestined...*”¹⁵⁶

Some break their heads over this teaching – “why some, not others?” How in the world to bring such dogma into harmony with our wonderful powers of reason?¹⁵⁷ “Questions like this are gray and sightless creatures born to live in darkness.”¹⁵⁸ The words aren’t difficult. They speak a personal, heartening Word to the saints about their sainthood. “God freely chose to love me.”¹⁵⁹ This is pure gospel, 200-proof. Before you existed, before you acted, God agreed about you in his hidden counsel. “*This one is mine.*”

“*...he predestined [them] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son...*”¹⁶⁰

The conforming that begins in humiliation culminates in the glory to come. The cross gives way to the crown.¹⁶¹ He will “sanctify to you your deepest distress.”¹⁶² Our culture has an inadequate view of suffering, wanting only to banish it wherever possible. We learn, instead, to value God’s agenda. There is nothing he won’t do so as to shape our hearts and get us home, to look like Christ and shine like lesser lights, to outlive all empires and all worlds. No cost is too high. Not to him. Not to us.

“*...that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*”¹⁶³

¹⁵³ Ephesians 1:3-14, as we all know, expresses this with characteristic apostolic clarity.

¹⁵⁴ “The verb to know is used in a sense practically synonymous with love: to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection and action.” John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1965), 1:317.

¹⁵⁵ Martin Luther: “God does not create and save with his eyes closed as Jacob saw his father do in the prefiguration of this predestination” (Genesis 48:17f). Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 259. “This knowing means personal communion between the knower and the known; it becomes a power in the person who is known.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 153.

¹⁵⁶ Romans 8:29.

¹⁵⁷ A Lutheran apologetic shows itself unique at this and many related points, such as in the question we may ask about those who never hear the gospel: when God seems unfair, we only have the gospel to reveal his true heart. We quiet ourselves there.

¹⁵⁸ Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 156. See also Luther’s brilliant “three lights” analogy in the crescendo of *The Bondage of the Will*. We wait on that “third light,” the glory in the face of Christ, to reveal what human reason and even the gospel still leave in shadow. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 276–77.

¹⁵⁹ “One thing alone is sufficient: *grace!* And only the bearing of the cross makes it clear that the meaning and essence of real life and everlasting life is *grace!* That is, God freely chooses to love me. And he chooses to love me for reasons of his own, reasons that have nothing to do with any good that I have done or ever will do. Even before the world began, when he knew already all of the reasons he would have not to love me, he nevertheless loved me.” Deutschlander, *The Theology Of The Cross*, 38–39.

¹⁶⁰ Romans 8:29.

¹⁶¹ In timeless eternity, the Lord saw my wife’s nightmare, her descent into lupus, and her asking me to help her die (just a few months into our marriage). You’ve already heard a hint of her being beautifully conformed, a copy of Christ the true original. God does not desire our suffering, yet neither is suffering the evidence that some things happen outside the realm of God’s control or outside of his good and gracious intentions for his children, he who “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11).

¹⁶² “How Firm a Foundation,” 416:4. *Christian Worship*.

¹⁶³ Romans 8:29. Armin Panning adds, “The Father honored Christ...by giving him many siblings.” Panning, *Romans*, 141.

So this is why God went through with it! This is the “joy set before him.”¹⁶⁴ Why create those you know will need redeeming at such lengths as are narrated in the Gospels? It was for God the Son to have little brothers for now and always, a place to spend his love, but not to fill some empty place in himself. He doesn’t need us. He just wants us.

“*And those he predestined, he also called...*”¹⁶⁵

He reached into time by means of the gospel in Word and sacrament to fulfill that timeless election. The power of Christ rested on the nothingness of some human instrument – “one of a thousand nobodies”¹⁶⁶ – and on the *apparent* nothingness of the gospel. No matter the human agent who applied the Word and the water, this call was the very call of God.

“*And those he called, he also justified...*”¹⁶⁷

Justification is “a completely new kind of encounter between God and man.”¹⁶⁸ The one who knelt beside a paralyzed man, whose first thought was to say, “Take heart, son. Your sins are forgiven,”¹⁶⁹ must have his own idea of what misery is. Forgiveness is not only a teaching to apprehend, but something far beyond: a sweet embrace, and a uniquely uncomplicated joy.¹⁷⁰

“*And those he justified, he also glorified.*”¹⁷¹

History repeats itself, but it does not walk in circles. This is where it is going. This final aorist ties the bow on all that we said earlier about glory.¹⁷² Our glorification carries this marvelous inevitability – a thing as good as done – fused as it is with events in changeless history, that of the world and of you.

Christ died and was raised.

You were baptized.

All this is the good he is working out. The lovers of God are those who were loved first and better by far. We find in him our heart’s true treasure, and find that all of life is the raw material for this our highest good: to know this Christ, to be found in him, and to see his face forever.

Etch this upon the palimpsest hearts of your people and of you:

It is an honor to owe everything to Christ.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁴ Hebrews 12:2.

¹⁶⁵ Romans 8:30.

¹⁶⁶ “Whoever may have been the vehicle of His call, a Peter or a Paul or one of those thousands of nobodies who carry on their apostolic work, it was God’s call, not any man’s, which reached us and made us lovers of Him. No accident of history made us His; therefore, there are no ‘accidents’ in our history anymore. He was in charge, and He is in charge; all the ‘accidents’ of history are His working for our good.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 153.

¹⁶⁷ Romans 8:30.

¹⁶⁸ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 11.

¹⁶⁹ Matthew 9:2.

¹⁷⁰ “The forgiveness of sins is and ought to be the only sun in life.” Billing, *Our Calling: A Statement of the Relationship of Christian Faith and Christian Living*, 9. Forgiveness is “a real act of God, the living God, through Christ, the living Christ.” (*Ibid.*, 10).

¹⁷¹ Romans 8:30. Notice the inspired choice to leave sanctification unmentioned in this thumping heartbeat of verbs. We deal here with Christ *for* us, not Christ *in* us. The horse, not the cart. The mother, not the daughter. There is nothing here to wake the sleeping Pharisee. Here is a spotlight fixed on the cross and empty tomb.

¹⁷² There are other ways to come at this aorist. “From the standpoint of God who transcends time, the act which ‘glorified’ describes stands accomplished because he has declared for it to be so. It hasn’t happened yet from the perspective of us who are time bound by the chronology of history.” Middendorf, *Romans 1-8: Concordia Commentary*, 697. The best explanation of the aorist is rooted in Jesus Christ “in whose destiny their [the elect Christians’] destiny is included and has already been glorified, so that in him their glorification is already accomplished.” C. E. B. Cranfield, Christopher M. Tuckett, and Graham I. Davies, *The Epistle to the Romans 1-8* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 433.

¹⁷³ “It is an honor to be in debt to God, it is an honor to owe fortune nothing, but God everything, to owe fate nothing, but providence everything, to owe chance nothing, but a fatherly kindness everything.” Søren

If God Is for Us
Romans 8:31-34

*What shall we say in response?*¹⁷⁴ This introduces a series of five grand unanswerables. Our mouths were once shut before the holy, immutable law of God, without a single thing to say in our defense.¹⁷⁵ Now we are silenced in a new way.

*“If God is for us, who can be against us?”*¹⁷⁶

Even Martin Franzmann finds himself at a loss for words: “Paul’s answer makes fools of his interpreters; how is one to comment on this outburst?” Under divine inspiration, he is an artist not merely telling us things but recreating his experience of the grace of God within us by the Spirit, by the Word. If there was ever a man set free by the Spirit of Christ, here is that man.

He says concerning all that confronts us in life: *“If God is for us...”*

This is the key that fits the lock to his kind of freedom: that in the light of Christ, God is so self-evidently *for us*, so all in, so committed. So, child, be still. You squirming patient, lie back. Show the world a man at peace with his Maker, with life, with himself. This is to the glory of God.

*“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all...”*¹⁷⁷

You hear the tone of sacrifice – “gave him up” – with pathos dripping down the page – “did not spare.” God has not given many separate gifts to the world as if love is one, joy another, and peace another still. He has given One Gift to the world, his dear Son, and in that one gift is everything else contained.¹⁷⁸

This is our “prodigal God”¹⁷⁹ in the act of spending himself poor. How is the word used in a

Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses Volume 1*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 253. Admittedly, Kierkegaard absorbed some of his father’s Pietism. But it is a mistake to dismiss him as an existential philosopher or to neglect what he has to say about communicating the gospel in times of spiritual complacency, illusion, and resistance. I argue this in: Paustian, “The Beauty with the Veil.” Sadly, all we have just said can be turned into burdens by perverse theologians. Not to mention how liberal theology has simply moved on to other matters. In a blistering critique of American theological education, Richard Neuhaus reveals how “prodigal academics feed starving students on the dry husks of their clever unbelief.” Richard Neuhaus, *Forward in Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville: Abington, 1995), 10.

¹⁷⁴ Don’t miss the mood. I’ve written elsewhere about the “epidemiological” approach to the biblical text – to catch that mood like a contagion, like a disease. We identified with Paul in Romans 7. We “shared human stuff” with him there as he cried out in grief, all so that we can be with him now. This has been on his mind from the start. This is Kierkegaard’s caution about the “error in modulation,” meaning to get the words right but get the mood wrong. He found it profoundly disturbing to hear people speak of God in a speculative frame the way you might talk about a shiny rock or a strange bird. This is something like what Alexander Pope had in mind with this: “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

¹⁷⁵ Romans 3:19.

¹⁷⁶ Romans 8:31.

¹⁷⁷ Romans 8:32.

¹⁷⁸ This is adapted from Watchman Nee: “God will not give me humility or patience or holiness or love as separate gifts of his grace. He is not a retailer dispensing grace to us in packets, measuring out some patience to the impatient, some love to the unloving, some meekness to the proud, in quantities that we take and work on as a kind of capital. He has given only one gift to meet our need: His Son Christ Jesus.... It does not matter what your personal deficiency, or whether it be a hundred and one different things, God has always one sufficient answer, His Son Jesus Christ, and He is the answer to every human need.” Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977), 127.

¹⁷⁹ You may be familiar with Timothy Keller’s book by the title, *The Prodigal God*, where he picks up this idea that God’s heart is best known by the way he spent himself so extravagantly in the giving of his One and Only Son. The malady shared by both the antinomian and the legalist is simply to not know that heart. The “younger brother sin” of licentiousness and the “older brother sin” of self-righteousness share the same root cause in the

sentence? “Prodigal habits die hard.” Indeed.

“...how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”¹⁸⁰

The apostle argues that the redemptive *act* will surely culminate in redemption’s *realization*. August Pieper called this God’s “one great thought,”¹⁸¹ the restoration of all things in Christ. How could God fail to finish a work that began with the gifting of the one thing that cost him everything? He did not spare his Son, he gave him up when we were his enemies, when we could not have cared less.¹⁸² Now that we’re his adopted children, what will he give us?¹⁸³

Only his everything.

“It is God who justifies. Who is it who condemns?”¹⁸⁴

There are many in that club actually, myself for one. I have much against myself. I have the goods. I recognize in myself a foolishness that has me daily reopening the case God himself has closed, as if that ultimate verdict – “Not guilty, for Jesus’ sake” – never happened.

But it did. The cross establishes the gravity of our predicament. Alienated. Rebellious. Seriously broken. Something in me is so wrong that the only solution was the death of God’s perfect Son. But see, when he died, I died. When he rose, I rose forgiven and free. The matter was taken forever out of my hands and decided in my favor.

We are summoned to life beyond the courtroom.¹⁸⁵ My life and entire existence has been justified

failure to grasp the unspeakable goodness of God. Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

¹⁸⁰ Romans 8:32.

¹⁸¹ August O. W. Pieper, “The One Great Thought of God” (1915), <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/4211>.

¹⁸² “God didn’t meet us halfway. He refused to hold back, cautious, assessing our worth. That is not his heart. He and his Son took the initiative. On terms of grace and grace alone. In defiance of what we deserved. When we, despite our smiles and civility, were running from God as fast as we could, building our own kingdoms and loving our own glory, lapping up the fraudulent pleasures of the world, repulsed by the beauty of God and shutting up our ears at his calls to come home – it was then, in the hollowed-out horror of that revolting existence, that the prince of heaven bade his adoring angels farewell. It was then that he put himself into the murderous hands of these very rebels in a divine strategy planned from eternity past to rinse muddy sinners clean and hug them into his own heart despite their squirmy attempt to get free and scrub themselves clean on their own. Christ went down into death – ‘voluntary endurance of unutterable anguish’ Warfield calls it – while we applauded. We couldn’t have cared less.” Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 191-92.

¹⁸³ “He eagerly suffered for us when we were failing, as orphans. Will he cross his arms over our failures now that we are his adopted children? His heart was gentle and lowly toward us when we were lost. Will his heart be any different toward us now that we are found? ... He loved us in our mess then. He’ll love us in our mess now. Our very agony of sinning is the fruit of our adoption. A cold heart would not be bothered. We are not who we were. When you sin, do a thorough job of repenting. Re-hate sin all over again. Consecrate yourself afresh to the Holy Spirit and his pure ways. But reject the devil’s whisper that God’s tender heart toward you has grown a little cold, a little stiffer. He is not flustered by your sinfulness. His deepest disappointment is with your tepid thoughts of his heart. Christ died, placarding before you the love of God.” Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 194.

¹⁸⁴ Romans 8:33.

¹⁸⁵ Madonna moaned that she is still “mediocre and uninteresting.” She is still chasing “the Verdict” that she is somebody. “My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will.” Quoted in: Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2012), 22. Tullian Tchividjian expresses the only viable alternative this way: “I had to learn the hard way (the only way?) that the gospel alone can free us from our addiction to being liked – that Jesus measured up for us so that we wouldn’t have to live under the enslaving pressures of measuring up for others – including ourselves. I finally understood what Paul meant in Romans 10:4 when he wrote that Christ is the ‘end of the law.’ Because of Jesus’ finished work, I already had the justification, approval, acceptance, security, freedom, affection, cleansing, new beginning, righteousness, and rescue I longed for. There was nothing left to prove or protect, no one to impress or appease. I could be okay with not being okay.” Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 148-49. This makes possible that humility that is the antidote to comparisons

in Christ my Lord.

Perhaps you've heard of "self-compassion." The idea is that you befriend the man in the mirror – he's only human. This is a break with tired notions of self-esteem in that it is simply not evaluative. You get compassion just for being part of the train wreck.

I do not suggest for a moment that wholeness is waiting in the mirror.¹⁸⁶ Yet, it seems fair to ask the soul caught in a loop of painful thinking and punishing self-talk, "Who are you to condemn the one whom God himself has acquitted, to harass one God himself has befriended?"¹⁸⁷

*"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?"*¹⁸⁸

See Jesus wading out into the moaning Capernaum crowd, touching each one indiscriminately. Our healing, like theirs, is *extra nos* (outside of us). It is in our gaze at the beauty of him whose grace is not evaluative. You get it just for being his. Think election. Think baptism.

Tell that to the man in the mirror. And this.

*"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."*¹⁸⁹

Heaven is holding a conversation about you right now. It is kind beyond all telling.

The boy was supposed to be home before the streetlights came on. That was the rule. He wasn't even close. He snuck into a dark house, his bicycle discarded on the lawn. He pushed open the bedroom door to a sight he'd carry for the rest of his life: his father on his knees, praying beside his bed.

Every morning I remember my baptism with splashes of water on my face and head. I've been doing that for years. I find it useful to layer grateful habits on top of mundane ones. My new thing is to push into my bedroom at night like a boy who missed curfew – again – barging in on the Savior at his prayers.¹⁹⁰

I unclench my fists. Though I fail at a moment-by-moment appropriation, I have Jesus' moment-by-moment advocacy.

Faith, at play, soars to a million ways to finish the sentence.

If God is for me...

and jealousies among brothers. An aspect of that cup of cool water on a hot day (that C. S. Lewis was on about) is to be able to enjoy each other's gifts and accomplishments as if they were our own. That's self-forgetting.

¹⁸⁶ I will comment later about the limitations of self-absolution for casting off besetting sins. For that we turn to the means of grace, to confession, and, I will argue, to our brothers. However, in weighing the concept of self-compassion, I note how the psalmist wrote, "Why so downcast, oh my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?"¹⁸⁶ Like he's talking to a friend. You lead a friend deeper into repentance, not with a vicious assault, but by carefully peeling back the bandages, exposing the wound with a ready grace at hand.

¹⁸⁷ I know of a pastor's wife how shouts, "Hey! That's my husband you're talking about," whenever he succumbs in verbal self-abuse. "I suck" is not repentance and no good can come from it. It is an accusation. Who do you think you are? To put it all another way, we need to maintain our instinct for seeking all that we need from Christ. This calls for careful study. For a place to begin: James C. Wilhoit, "Self-Compassion as a Christian Spiritual Practice," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 12.1 (2019): 71–88.

¹⁸⁸ Romans 8:33.

¹⁸⁹ Romans 8:34. Imagine if you happened upon Jesus in the next room. His eyes are closed, his hands clasped, his voice just loud enough to be heard. And you hear him say your name. Imagine. The Son of God is dropping your name to the tear-catching Father.

¹⁹⁰ As to the subject matter, we are not left without clues. We have overheard our Lord in his high priestly prayer. What he said to the Father then happens to mirror the talk communication research finds in all the best human relationships. Here in compact form is the clue to the settled habit of Christ, and of the eternal reminiscing, appreciating, and sharing in hopes and dreams between the Father and the Son. "*Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me before the creation of the world*" (John 17:24). Who is this with such things on his mind the night before his own private hell?

Who Shall Separate Us?
Romans 8:35-39

We can imagine Jesus saying, “If you see the soldier with the spear, tell him there is a better way of coming at my heart. Those who pierced my hands and feet, tell them there is only one way they can hurt me, and that is to refuse my open-hearted pardon.”¹⁹¹

One last unanswerable: Who shall separate us from a love like Jesus has?

“Shall trouble, hardship, persecution...?” – this is Paul’s life story post-Damascus. His life trajectory is there, too, in “danger and sword,” but not his alone. We live in the world that crucified the Son.¹⁹² “We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered”¹⁹³ – so goes the psalm.¹⁹⁴ But something makes Paul shout, “No!” It is the big fact that our eternal destinies – Jesus’ and ours – are bound up together. There is no pulling them apart. We’re in this together.

Think of that cluster of verbs in Romans 6. Our baptism means nothing less than that we are “together-united” with Jesus – Paul revels in the prefix – “together-buried, together-crucified and together-alive.” Here Paul adds: “together-heirs,” “together-suffering,” “together-glorified.”¹⁹⁵

Paul’s pen got hot and what spills out is that, in Christ, we are “Super-conquerors.”¹⁹⁶

A young manic-depressive woman once asked me, on the edge of her depressive phase, how not to go there. I fumbled around a bit before asking her what she would say if Jesus were to say to her, “Sweetheart, would you go through this for me? I won’t tell you why. You’ll have to trust me.” The girl actually smiled. She whispered through tears, “I’ve never thought of that.” What Paul refers to three times as the “inner man,”¹⁹⁷ the true heart within her heart, is gazing at its true treasure.

She is a “more-than conqueror.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ This vignette is loosely adapted from Benjamin Grosvenor, quoted in: Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 38.

¹⁹² What more do we need to think about so as to loosen our attachments to this world? Watchman Nee compares our situation to that of Noah before the flood. In his mind’s eye, he can see the whole world underwater, even as we can see it all on fire. It’s like working for a company and having secret information that it is doomed to go under. You continue to work in that place, but something has happened to all your loyalties as you understand that none of its promises will be kept. You have a future, but it is not there. Even so we go about all our affairs in a world we know will burn. The souls we care for are all we can take with us. They are what matter. Watchman Nee, *Love Not the World* (Fort Washington: CLC Publications, 2004).

¹⁹³ Romans 8:36, quoting Psalm 44:22.

¹⁹⁴ Elsewhere, the apostle wrote about his arduous life – “hard pressed but not crushed,” and all that – in quite astonishing terms. “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). We are jars of clay. We default to merely human thinking, feeling, and willing. But things happen to the jar – “struck down but not destroyed” – and something new is released and shines through at those broken places. You preach at a particularly hard and unexpected funeral. Two crowds mingle together, both are lost in grief, utterly perplexed. The one is crushed and stays crushed. The other is crushed...and in that very crushing, they begin to sing resilient songs, songs of hope. All this suggests powerful questions for the hurting Christian to ask. “If this hurts, *why* does it hurt?” or “What aspect of my foolish, merely human thinking is being broken in this moment? Is it that everyone must love and approve of me? Is it that I need to have control over the things that matter most to me? Is it that I must be somebody in this world?” And the next question is, “What is it that I already know – some truth in Christ, some element of that other point of view – that I may now speak with special understanding and credibility?”

¹⁹⁵ These verbs cluster together in Romans 6:4-8 and Romans 8:16-17. “Shall I fear, or could the head rise and leave his members dead?” “Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense,” 167:2. *Christian Worship*.

¹⁹⁶ Romans 8:37.

¹⁹⁷ Romans 7:22; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16.

¹⁹⁸ I tried to tell her then how the Father was surely looking at her then. “See how I can take away every pleasant thing, every good feeling of my presence, and still she follows in love and trust.” This is one story to stand for dozens. You have yours. Here’s one more. A doctor told my Aunt Marie (my favorite) that her cancer was terminal and that it wouldn’t take long. She said, “Ok.” Assuming she hadn’t heard him, he repeated himself.

We are not men of steel. Neither was Paul.¹⁹⁹ This is no walk in the park. We are simply asking of the things that have happened or could, wherever the pastoral life may take us: Will this thing separate me from the love of Christ?

If “No,” then we may join in that sweet, apostolic defiance.

What about a public disgrace? Will I no longer have God? How about when my idols growl, “You need me!” and demand first-love status? What about demons howling true things at me in my bed? How about deadlier strains of virus? The end of democracy? Total societal collapse? What about chronic pain? The death of a child?²⁰⁰

I’m not trying to be dramatic or to offer up some false bravado. Life can be desperately hard²⁰¹ See, then, that the crescendo at the close of Romans 8 – the unassailable assurance that God is for us in spite of all we see and feel – is shot through with apostolic credibility. In the Spirit, he has unhinged his mind and searched everything that can conceivably be searched – all states, all worlds, all times, all spaces. His list leaves nothing out. Nothing that exists – “neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation”²⁰² – can snatch you, the Chosen, from the hands of Christ.²⁰³

“Super-conquerors” don’t just come along. They do not make themselves. The closing bell of Romans 8 is the only explanation for them.

“*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”²⁰⁴

In Solomon’s *Song*, the “flame of Yah” describes the love between a bridegroom and his bride as a pattern of human love, burning as hot as any love we may find in this world, that we may follow to the feet of Jesus. For surely a fire was ignited in God in timeless eternity as Love took counsel with himself – “*We will be their all in all*” – a love that is, indeed, as “strong as death” and “unyielding as the grave.” “Many waters cannot quench it,” nor can “rivers sweep it away.”²⁰⁵

“That’s fine, Doctor.” They went a few rounds until he was fairly shouting at her, “Marie! You’re going to die!” “Doctor, it’s alright.” She adds another human face to the beautiful truth of Romans 8:35.

¹⁹⁹ This hardly needs proving. We’ve read the letters, including those written with “anguish of heart and with many tears” (2 Corinthians 2:4). I look for the grace to speak in hardship precisely as Paul does in this portion of Romans. To release at the broken places that *other point of view*: that angels watch over me, that the Father’s face is always turned toward me, and that, yes, I am convinced that nothing here is as it seems.

²⁰⁰ From a prayer of King James II (VII): “O my adored Creator! If thou wilt load my back with crosses, and embitter my days with grief, still may thy blessed will, O Lord, be done.... Take what thou wilt of the things thou has lent me; leave in my heart the possession of thyself.... Only one thing I humbly beg: Cast me not away from thy presence forever, nor wipe my name out of the Book of Life.”

²⁰¹ Life’s challenges can be more than we can bear when we try to bear them on our own. Consider Paul’s experience. 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 Paul says he and his companions “...were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die.” Paul simply could not rely on himself.

²⁰² Romans 8:39.

²⁰³ “The mysterious powers that are at work beneath the troubled surface of our history, powers which we cannot know and cannot hope to control...do not escape the rule of him who makes all things work for the good of his elect. The hidden realities of our existence are still mysterious, but they are no longer terrible. The revelation of God’s love in Christ spans that gap which all our human wisdom cannot span, the gap between the present and the future. ...[H]e has pierced the wall, and light falls from the future to the present. ‘In this hope we are saved.’ ... Nothing in all creation can harm us, can pull us away because the Creator who called into being all these powers and dominions of the universe that seem to dwarf us into insignificance is Our God. He is for us. These powers all serve his love, the love we’ve come to know in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary*, 161.

²⁰⁴ Romans 8:39.

²⁰⁵ It goes without saying that if human love can be described in such terms as Songs 8 does, how much more the divine? Could the “Flame of Yah” be a sudden reference to Christ in the Song of Solomon? Christopher Mitchell writes: “This is the single most significant phrase in the Song, and tragically most expositions downplay and mistranslate it. It is the apex of the book’s theological highlight.... The gracious, triune God of the Old and New Testament, who has manifested himself with flames of fire in various passages throughout the Scriptures, is the sole

There is love at the center of all things, a true Heart holding all things together.²⁰⁶

*“If I rise on the wings of the dawn, settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”*²⁰⁷ With words like these he woos us. He convinces us. We have taken the mountain. There is worship in the air.

When we gather around Word and sacrament at the end of this symposium, our bowing heads at the confession of sins will be our “performative ontology” – we enact that we know who we are and who God is. We stand for the Gospel as our “performative epistemology” – we embody how we know what we know. We pastors need worship – to regularly fall back from all pastoral duty into *the thing itself*.

*“The love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*²⁰⁸

Soon we shine in borrowed light, our praise at last perfected, backed by angels in symphony, we millions, we the glorified sons of God. Lord, how we will sing when sorrow is past, when hurt is forgotten, when death is dead, when fathers spot their daughters and mothers their sons in the great throng to shouts of gladness, when he crowns the afflicted with beauty unimagined, when the great redemption music comes into its own. We will know at last what the artists were reaching for just beyond their grasp.²⁰⁹ We will no longer pine for a way to hold onto a fleeting moment of *shalom*. We will be home.

*“Lord Jesus, receive my astonished soul.”*²¹⁰

Thus, the Scriptures narrate our future and transport us to a day when we will look back on this day with blessed nostalgia, all the pain drained out. All was grace.

And if a day of diminishment arrives when you can no longer think of him – as happens as we nightly fall back into the helplessness of sleep – no matter.

He’ll be thinking of you.²¹¹

source of this love.” He further argues: “The imagery of ‘Love’ as fire, finds its fulfillment in Christ’s atonement and the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . This love man cannot produce by himself; it is the action of God – a divine flame.” Mitchell finds emphatic support in many other theologians, including Luther whom he quotes: “This fire, which God has lit in you, neither death, nor the grave, nor all the onslaughts of the world and Satan will be able to put out.” Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Song of Songs: Concordia Commentary* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2003). Roland Ehlke agrees with this interpretation, asserting that through the poem, Solomon has been hinting at a love that transcends human love, and names its source in chapter 8. “It is the Lord.” Roland Cap Ehlke, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, The People’s Bible* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1988), 215–16. Dr. John Brug is not so sure – which gives an essayist pause. He agrees that it would be a “fine literary touch” if we have in Songs 8 a lone reference to the Lord. He finds it more likely that the Lord’s presence in Songs is like that in Esther: nowhere explicit but “present everywhere by implication.” John F. Brug, *Commentary on Song of Songs* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1995), 83–84. I like Richard Dworkin’s thesis that suggests we let Songs be the best Songs it can be, and accept that “fine literary touch” as we continue to account for the greatness of the poem.

²⁰⁶ Lewis wrote of how Christ’s is the love behind every love we have known in this world, if it was really love. “When we see the face of God we shall know that we have always known it. He has been party to, has made, sustained and moved moment by moment within, all our earthly experiences of innocent love. All that was true love in them was, even on earth, far more His than ours, and ours only because it was His. In heaven there will be no anguish and no duty of turning away from our earthly Beloveds, because we shall have turned already; from the portraits to the Original, from the rivulets to the Fountain, from the creatures He made lovable to Love Himself.” C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, reissue edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 190–91.

²⁰⁷ Psalm 139:9-10. Our worship is all foretaste. We are bound for “the Eighth Day,” when we will be face-to-face with Jesus in that new Jerusalem, in the sunlight of Christ that lights up that whole country.

²⁰⁸ Romans 8:39.

²⁰⁹ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 190–91.

²¹⁰ These were the last words of an outrageously immoral scoundrel, Kenneth Tynan, whom C. S. Lewis befriended with unparalleled grace, recounted in: Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 309–14.

²¹¹ This is adapted from another lovely moment in: Giertz, *Hammer of God*, 165.

Still, my soul, be still,
And do not fear
Though winds of change may rage tomorrow.
God is at your side;
No longer dread
The fires of unexpected sorrow.

God, You are my God,
And I will trust in You and not be shaken.
Lord of peace, renew
A steadfast spirit within me
To rest in You alone.²¹²

Part Two: Our Life in Christ

Living Devotionally

How does a man perform his ministry with credibility, freshness, and passion year upon year? How do we stay awake to the deep privilege of our ambassadorship before people who still arouse all our compassion?²¹³

We will be fixed as branches to the Vine, drawing his sap, his kind of life.²¹⁴ We will be as trees planted by streams of water, bearing such fruit as God alone can give.²¹⁵

Our culture does not honor the quiet work that develops our “spiritual root systems”²¹⁶ as the man of God sees to his own soul. It does not know much about the “useless times” that happen out of the view of spectators. Few would guess that the man with the bowed head may be performing the most important work of the day.

In my heart of hearts, I have not always agreed that I somehow need a personal devotional life set apart from my professional work with the Word of God. Why compartmentalize? Preaching is nothing if not personal – if we are not preaching first to ourselves. Isn’t what I learn in a text study immediately available to me in all my separate callings?

I now realize that I have a habit of mind that works against personal appropriation, and against any robust sense of what Jesus means to this moment. I can hardly encounter a genuine Christian insight

²¹² Stuart Townend, Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty. Thankyou Music (administered by Integrity Music.com), 2008.

²¹³ How do we remember, in our frustration, not to become the accuser of our congregations – they already have one of those? See: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

²¹⁴ John 15:1-8. In this portion of Scripture, Jesus fully equates his remaining in us with his words remaining in us. As I live by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), the space I give to his words in my thoughts is the space I give to him. Holding onto this Word in some dark night of soul is holding onto him. There is no difference.

²¹⁵ I preach to the choir. Still, this symposium on wellness is surely a moment to assess such things.

²¹⁶ In a fascinating little book, Eugene Peterson searches the five Old Testament books known as the *Megillot* to advocate pastoral ministry that is genuinely formed by the Scriptures themselves: *Songs* for handling intimacy, *Ruth* for identity, *Lamentations* for suffering, *Ecclesiastes* for confronting religious illusion, and *Esther* for celebrating faith and community. Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 16, 23.

without leaping to the use I can put it to in preaching or teaching. When did I become so pragmatic?²¹⁷ Luther relished the costly “for you.” When do I? When in the course of the pastoral life am I brought into closest possible subjective contact with objective Christian truth, putting myself into its categories, not just other people?

I have mistaken competent ministering for spiritual maturity. That’s a miscalculation.

Psalm 73 is instructive. Asaph ran to the sanctuary, but not to write a sermon. He was driven by something more pressing. He had nearly lost his way to the idol of the comfortable life some pagans have. He went there for sense-making, to reclaim the better story. He went to remember what he had always known – that this is not an enviable world, not when you consider its destiny.

“Yet whom have I in heaven but you?

*And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”*²¹⁸

Asaph did not go looking for a poem with which to edify others. The poem found him within his own naked thirst for God, his heart’s highest affection. For preaching to grow organically out of our personal, sincere pursuit of Christ *for its own sake*²¹⁹ – what else *is* spiritual wellness? – first there must be one.²²⁰

*“You hold me by my right hand.”*²²¹

You. Hold. Me. This is appropriation.

In his private journals, Kierkegaard mused, “What good would it do me to construct a world in which I did not live but only held up to the view of others?”²²² How then to live in that exquisite world of grace and glory of Romans 8 that we have been holding up for display? When is the Spirit given room to

²¹⁷ “We daily turn to him with that upward glance in which all authority of ours disappears, and with it every distinction and title. We are not ‘professor’ there, not ‘Pastor.’ Only ‘his.’ Emptied by daily vocation, faith flies naked to God. In his gracious presence and right-hand kingdom we do not work but only receive. What he gives is Christ. If anyone wants to serve him effectively and well, let him want something else even more, that is, to know him.” Mark Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations,” Seminary Essay File, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium* (2006), 23-24. Daniel Deutschlander takes this argument further. Referring to the saturation of the Word of God in pastoral duty, he writes, “Why does he need more than that for himself? He needs more than that for himself because of the special temptations that the devil has just for pastors.” Deutschlander, *The Theology Of The Cross*, 204. That such special temptations exist is well-articulated in: Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

²¹⁸ Psalm 73:25.

²¹⁹ Three pastors stopped in to see their beloved, ancient professor, his days of sermon and Bible class writing long past. He greeted them at the door with, “Boys, I have something to show you.” They paraded through his home at a pace roughly that of a snail and arrived at last in his kitchen where a Greek New Testament lay open on the table. This is what I mean.

²²⁰ “The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men...of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?” Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 43.

²²¹ Psalm 73:28. We will come to the matter of transparency. I use Psalm 73 as the corrective if we imagine that the goal is to reveal the sordid details of our sinfulness with our members or even our brothers. Asaph comments about the awful spiritual place in which he found himself, “If I had said all this, I would have betrayed your children” (Psalm 73:15). He did not run straight to the lectern, but only after his renewed understanding of the truth God had revealed in his Word, could he use his private experience to bless the congregation. Even more to the point, Ephesians 4:29 guides our thinking on what to disclose and what not to: “only what is helpful for building others up.” We don’t give ourselves a pass on the imperative that edification must be the purpose of all our talk.

²²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers, Volume 2* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 774.

breathe, holy Wind gluing you to that mountain?²²³ How to translate the marvelous truths of Christ into the day-to-day – to work it into the fabric of an actual life?²²⁴

We need to inhabit the wild, biblical world until biblical allusions spill from our pens as they did from the pen of Luther.²²⁵ This devotional life may ask us to sever the association of extreme busyness with ministry effectiveness,²²⁶ to push back on the tyranny of urgent things. Let us be done trying to run the world's rat race "from a Christian perspective."

We make no ceremonial laws regarding your devotional time. This is an invitation to have sweet fellowship with Jesus as the best part of every day. We are "ordinary men"²²⁷ who spend time with Jesus so as to receive his mark and find hearts like his being formed in our chests. We sink down into the mystery of knowing God and being known by him.²²⁸

The prerequisite to public ministry is a full heart.²²⁹

I must chime in a heartfelt "Alleluia" over our new hymnal, worth its weight in gold for its many intentionally devotional features.²³⁰ It will help us realize Luther's ideal: "every home a true church." Instead of prescriptions I offer the image of a sainted professor and the kneeler in his home. You will be blessed by keeping your daily appointment with the Lord Christ, letting the Word dwell ever more richly

²²³ I have advocated not only asking of a biblical text, "What does this teach?" When that task is exhausted, I also like to ask, "What does it *do* to you?" for the sake of an experience of the beautiful diversity of the Scripture's forms that is not confined to the intellect alone. We want to be what C. S. Lewis would call, "men with chests," not heads on sticks but people capable of a full-hearted response to the holiness and grace of God as revealed in the Scriptures. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 25.

²²⁴ In explaining the title of his book, *The Pastor's Justification*, Jared Wilson comments, "There is only the gospel itself – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fusing this reality – the reality of eternal life – to the ordinary life of pastoral ministry is what this book is about." Jared C. Wilson and Mike Ayers, *The Pastor's Justification: Applying the Work of Christ in Your Life and Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 19.

²²⁵ The church's primary intellectual task is not epistemology – we will never satisfy the world by the way we ground the truth in biblical revelation. That task is hermeneutic, the interpretation of our sacred texts as the Spirit enlightens us.

²²⁶ "The pastor glorifies God by rejecting work as his god. If he seems to labor at his ministry as though all depends on him, his own rhythm of work and Sabbath (and his attention to other calls in his web of relationships) reveals that he actually knows better. He knows that deeper sort of trust that regularly watches the world go on with him. He understands Luther's ripping of the pen from the hand of Philipp at dinner crying: 'We worship God also when we rest.'" Paustian, "Unleashing Our Calling," 22.

²²⁷ Acts 4:13.

²²⁸ This is not to make perpetually untroubled thoughts the goal of our devotional life. Calm within the storms is more like it. For example, we drink, with Paul, the cup of concern for our churches (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:28). What is more, I do find, with Luther, that *tentatio* (struggle) actually comes as a result of *oratio* (prayer) and *meditatio* (meditation). "For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God's Word." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelican, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 54:50.

²²⁹ "We have to know, to be assured, that God so loves, cherishes, and delights in us that we can rest our hearts in him for our significance and security and handle anything that happens in life." Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 17.

²³⁰ You may know that these include seven simple orders – with old Latin names like *Lauds* and *Terce* – that are designed for set times throughout the day. They come with guidance in how they work and what they mean. Then there's the lectionary, the psalms schedule (and all the beautiful new settings), the Scripture verses that inspired each hymn, and more. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021). Then, of course, there's the catechism, the Lutheran confessions, and the like. We do not lack for tools. You know all this.

in your mind and imagination.²³¹

A whole worldview hides inside your private genuflection.

Oh, and there's this: you get to ask him anything you like, you with the same access to the Father that Jesus has, you the object of the same relentless affection.²³²

When it dawns on you through long enough Christian experience that you are nothing and can do nothing without Jesus – the height of Christianly understanding – you understand your need for the devotional *life*. Luther wrote, “Thinking must be turned a new direction. Christ must be *thought of* if you are to say ‘Christ lives in me.’”²³³

This is why I love spiritual reading.²³⁴ It's why I need Christian music and Christian art as vehicles that deliver truth to the deepest place, gifts of God to hold back the world and allow my busy, fractured mind to be in concert with itself. They help me to live for a time in a single thought, say, the thought of my forgiveness or of home.²³⁵

*Every Moment Holy*²³⁶ is a book of liturgies meant for charging mundane moments with sacredness. “A Liturgy for Standing in Line,” “A Liturgy for Changing a Diaper” (Parts 1 and 2).²³⁷ “A

²³¹ I don't set myself up as your example. I, too, need to reassess. As it is, I silver-line my chronic insomnia with hours of unhurried time with Jesus nearly every day – the remembered Word of God *is* the Word of God – and am fond of my one-year Bible. My favorite practice for home devotions has simply been to read through books of the Bible at supper, one portion at a time, discuss and reflect as the mood hits, then pray Luther's evening prayer.

²³² “The pastor does not mind the ‘glass house’ in which he lives, but sees his calling as one of commending his very way of life to the people he serves. In his own devotional life (perhaps bracketing his weary days with matins and vespers), he enters the Most Holy Place like a high priest, with the souls under his care like jewels on his breastplate.” Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling,” 21. Ludwig Fuerbringer turns to the same imagery: “Holy Scripture is the Holy of Holies into which pastors are to enter to meet with God and to commune with him. When we have entered, the veil closes after us; we are with God alone.” Quoted in: Kurt Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 12. We must cultivate times when every other voice is shut out save that of the Spirit speaking to us in the Word.

²³³ Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1959), 1345. Likewise our nothingness is chasing us to the means of grace. I'm not entirely sure what Brother Lawrence meant by “practicing the presence of God,” as part of his experiment – what would happen if I learned to keep my saving God perpetually in the front, not the back, of my mind? Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2021). For us it is about the presence of God-with-us in Word and sacrament, including the baptism that we fondly remember.

²³⁴ My father often said, “You can tell a pastor who reads from one who doesn't.” C. S. Lewis wrote movingly about the poverty of the life lived without literature. It is a self-imposed solitary confinement in the closet of one's own narrow experience. It is reading alone that “heals the wound.” Books were to him like the stars in the sky of the Greek poems offering a multitude of other ways for observing life in this world. “I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see.... I transcend myself; and am never more myself when I do.” C. S. Lewis, “Modern Biblical Criticism,” in *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 140. Elsewhere he expanded on the theme: “to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own...we demand windows.” C. S. Lewis, “We Demand Windows,” in *The Christian Imagination* (Colorado Springs: WaterBooks Press, 2002), 51. The soul is somehow a larger place when good books lead us out of our own sorrows and joys to those of the world. (*Ibid.*, 297).

²³⁵ Speaking hymns out loud is to die for. “Abide with me,” for example, takes me to a home in Emmaus at twilight where I sigh, “Oh, stay. Please stay.” “Abide With Me,” 588:1. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997).

²³⁶ Douglas Kaine McKelvey, *Every Moment Holy* (Nashville: Rabbit Room Press, 2017).

²³⁷ The foreign righteousness of Christ and our stunning new status as saints of the Most High God erase the false distinction between secular and sacred in the stuff of everyday life. There is no place that is not sacred, only places that are desecrated. There is no moment that is not holy, only holiness we fail to notice.

Liturgy for Missing Someone,” “A Liturgy for Gradually Losing Your Memory.”²³⁸ Anything to help me pass my days in an unbroken conversation with my Savior.²³⁹

Let’s make this practical. When does appropriation happen best for you? When does that mountain appear through a break in the clouds? How can you grow those moments of recovery, string more of them together? How can you nurture a new and more grateful default for your resting mind, something other than rumination and worry from which no good has ever come?²⁴⁰

We come to understand that the love of Jesus is always the first love. When we have wanted more of him in our life, it is because he wanted us first. When we go to meet him – seek him out in this devotional life – it is he who is drawing us.²⁴¹

And what a clarifying thing it is, within the stubborn complexities of the public ministry, to know that when we remain in Jesus like branches on a vine, we will bear fruit. Not may or might or could.

We just will.

Why I Need My Brothers

It bears repeating: “No man is an island.”

John Donne wrote that it is not only every death that concerns me, but even more, every baptism. Yours concerns me and mine concerns you.²⁴² We are included in the same Christ. Being together in this manner is itself a wonder. This fellowship between us, this holding in common, is not something we manufacture. We only recognize that it is real, that it exists, and learn the better to draw sustenance from it and to preserve the bond of peace for all that we are worth.²⁴³

In these fractured times, we were not immune to the strife out there. Perhaps we have ascribed to a brother the worst possible motives or were unwilling to hear the story within which their strong feelings would begin to make sense to us.²⁴⁴

Jesus said, “*Where two or three come together in my name*” – given all the ugliness that can come between the two or three – “*there am I in the midst of them.*”²⁴⁵ The reconciliation of brothers

²³⁸ Jamie Smith writes in depth about the “liturgies” of the mall, the university, *et al.* to expose how formative our habits and our countless daily rituals may be for enacting and hardening in place what we love, namely, this world. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 93–121.

²³⁹ “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). My moment-by-moment need for Jesus overlaps as well with my need for Christian family, Christian friends, and Christian talk to which we will turn in a moment.

²⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer comments, “Impatience and self-reproach will only foster our complacency and entangle us ever more deeply in the net of self-centered introspection.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 84.

²⁴¹ We learn to cry out, like the startling ending to Psalm 119. It is a hymn to the Word of God in every redundant verse. Then this. “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant!” Oh, come after me!

²⁴² “I am joined to the same body, the church, and what happens to one member happens to all. When the church baptizes a child, that action involves me, for the child is ingrafted into the body of which I am a member. And when she buries a person, that action pertains to me as well.” John Donne, quoted in: Yancey, *Companion in Crisis*, 91.

²⁴³ Let the world look on uncomprehending at the way we love one another as the proof of our teaching, the evidence of our discipleship.

²⁴⁴ Perhaps it’s that a fragile ego needs constant protecting, and we engage in the deadly serious business of getting our due. At any rate, in our obligation of love, we must “make every effort to maintain our unity through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Oliver Cromwell once wrote to a stubborn branch of Presbyterians, “I beseech thee in the bowels of Christ, consider that thou mightest be wrong.” Quoted in: D. Stuart Briscoe, *Fresh Air in the Pulpit: Challenges and Encouragement from a Seasoned Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Baker Pub. Group, 1994), 67.

²⁴⁵ Matthew 18:20. Our Lord spoke these words in the midst of some of the most important things he ever said about conflict: how many times we are to forgive our brother, what steps to take to win him over, a shocking story about unforgiveness, how the unmerciful servant looks to God. He exposes the wedge-shape of sin – just about

within the thick presence of Christ is a flat-out miracle. When it happens, we can imagine our Lord urging, “This is what I do. This is who I am. Now you know.” Theology becomes life when we forgive one another from the heart. We learn what this whole thing has been about from the start.

Enough said.

Henri Nouwen observed about travelling to conferences what an entirely different thing it is to have a travelling companion – entangled in conversation, keeping our best foot forward, sharing in the view – versus travelling alone.²⁴⁶

Anonymous. Unknown. Talking to yourself.

Brother, do you travel alone?

I speak of your functional philosophy of ministry. *Sixteen* verses of greetings at the end of Romans reveal that Paul was no one-man show.²⁴⁷ The blessings of community require pushing through the awkward.²⁴⁸ The alternative is to have no one speaking into our internal conversation so as to disrupt it. To have no fellow traveler sharing his Christian perspective, pointing out the sights.

I share a bit of road with two brothers every month. I could genuinely say after each of our two-hour Zoom meetings, “*Did not our hearts burn...*”²⁴⁹ It’s all about Jesus. After a devotion to focus our thoughts on him and prepare an atmosphere, we each have the floor for forty minutes. Beyond that, the time is unscripted. We read excerpts of our own writing²⁵⁰ but also things we’ve stumbled across that moved us or left a mark. We carry each other’s burdens and share our favorite stories of ministry that constitute that other set of satisfactions, all that doesn’t show up on any statistical report.

I urge you, if you don’t have something like this in your life, seek out a couple of kindred souls, people you admire.²⁵¹ Form a group of which you are not the pastor. To get rolling, just read your favorite stuff to each other and talk about where it came from. Get creative with your agenda as you imagine what

any you can think of – and its power to fracture relationships. As the hymn goes, “We fled our God, and losing him, we lost our brother too.” “In Adam We Have All Been One,” 396:2. *Christian Worship*. We come together “in his name,” then, when we meet as brothers with a view toward everything we know about him.

²⁴⁶ On Nouwen’s mind is how difficult it is to be truly faithful to Jesus inside a cloak of anonymity. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 58–59.

²⁴⁷ Romans 16:1-16.

²⁴⁸ The dearth of true community in our culture, and the staggering number of people who go entirely without it, is well documented. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020). Sherry Turkle chronicles the devastating erosion of such human capabilities as empathy and perspective-taking skills that she ties to hyper-connectivity. She offers three pushbacks on technology so as to exploit its profound benefits while retaining what is poignantly human. All embedded in this essay: to read books, to carve out times of disconnected solitude, and to run to, not away from, real-time, face-to-face, improvised conversation. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

²⁴⁹ Patterned after C. S. Lewis’ Inklings, we call ourselves the LUGs – the “league of unextraordinary guys,” founded early in 2020. Our method was inspired by a book about the Inklings: Diana Pavlac Glyer and James A. Owen, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2016).

²⁵⁰ I find it pure joy to have what Andrew Peterson calls “resonators,” people who receive your work, who understand and eat up what you’re trying to do. Andrew Peterson, *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2019).

²⁵¹ I wonder why I had to go to Thailand and learn, in my late fifties, what it means to sit in a circle of five, to speak honestly about our lives, and to pray as hours pass by. This is what I missed for too much of my life, namely, the particular way Christ shows up among the two or three. We learn to minister in this most compelling way, that is, by the quality of the ministry we receive – “So this is what it is!”

more we could be to one another.²⁵² Remember to have fun.

Then again, you may take your brothers to more challenging places. You could discuss an excerpt from Paul Tripp's *Dangerous Calling*.

The absence of *what* causes us to want to give up and quit? The pursuit of *what* leads us to feeling overburdened and overwhelmed? The fear of *what* makes us tentative and timid rather than courageous and hopeful? The craving for *what* makes us burn the candle at both ends until we have little left? The “need” for *what* robs ministry of its beauty and joy? The desire of *what* sets up tensions between ministry and family?²⁵³

I find incredible relief in transparency. Here's how it goes: I don't mind you knowing that not everything in me or in my life is what I would ever have chosen. Such as you are, you speak to that thing I revealed to you. I receive the good thing you intended for me. I don't bat it away. And a little or a long time later, perhaps these roles may reverse. *You* don't mind *me* knowing...

We are becoming friends.²⁵⁴

True transparency comes from a position of strength. The verdict of Romans 8 is drawing us out of the shadows.²⁵⁵ We need not be armored up.²⁵⁶ We know who we are, each more a hot mess and more a poster child of grace than we can say.²⁵⁷ We can laugh at ourselves to the measure of our faith. We can flex our weakness and exploit every human limitations to better know their bonding powers. We can take pleasure in the overlap of identity and the “me too!” of friendship.²⁵⁸

We can make our faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear “available to others,”²⁵⁹ an exercise in deepening our grasp of God's unlimited, unconditional love. We can return to the fray, consciences calmed, fears spoken to, newly aware of the usefulness of our wounds, and in possession of a fresh Word and a recovered idealism.

²⁵² For example, you could come up with a set of standard questions modelled after the “Beating the 50%” blog and journal for married couples (to connect over in a standing weekly appointment), e.g., What is keeping you up at night? What brought you joy this month? This week? How can I pray for you?

²⁵³ Tripp, *Dangerous Calling*, 102.

²⁵⁴ This idea is affirmed in Altman & Taylor's “Social Penetration Theory,” so named for the penetrating of the boundary between that which is private and all my own and that which is shared and held in common with someone else. It's about who gets in and how far through the outer layers of personality.

²⁵⁵ That is, I see transparency as a function of both law and gospel. It grows out of moments when I ask myself, “How did I ever come to think I was better than anyone?” together with seeing that every need of mine is met in Christ. This is when I see my neighbor for the first time. We can know spiritual intimacy – we can be ourselves in the presence of another – by virtue of the fundamental acceptance we offer to one another in Christ.

²⁵⁶ This triggers the discoveries of group communication theory on how powerful groups can be for those who have never had the experience of being warmly received or genuinely enjoyed by a company of others. A group can come to be, through Christ, a safe and honest place – “Here, I am loved.” Such a group is well able to offer universality (“everyone goes through this”) and the installation of hope (“you will survive”). In fact, there is incredible power for healing in the gift of a single wholesome Christ-obsessed, Word-saturated relationship.

²⁵⁷ “God uses bad and weak people who fail because there is no other kind.” Affair Recovery, *Death, Burial and Resurrection... An Interview with Tullian Tchividjian*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7njtZi_5L4&ab_channel=AffairRecovery.

²⁵⁸ Richard Godbeer (Virginia Commonwealth University) has reviewed the letters that passed between men in colonial America to demonstrate that male friendship is profoundly diluted in our day set next to theirs. Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

²⁵⁹ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 61.

Not long ago, when I experienced a spectacular humiliation,²⁶⁰ my first thought was, “I will tell my brothers.” I knew that I would be with a group of remarkably safe men the very next day, that we would laugh about it, and that they would know how to make it okay. Then an astonishing thing. *That thought already made it okay.* I have never suffered over that event. It’s not like me not to suffer.

I can tell my brothers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer²⁶¹ wrote *Life Together* in the extremities of World War II, describing what was learned in the underground seminary he ran in Finkenwalde. I’ve thought often during months of COVID restrictions about how timely are his thoughts about the physical presence of brothers and the ways this blesses us.

Telling things to my brothers can mean giving more than lip-service to the value of private confession. Bonhoeffer observed, “Sin demands to have a man by himself,”²⁶² and breeds in the “darkness of the unexpressed.”²⁶³ As much as we need to speak the gospel to ourselves, confessing our sins to ourselves and trying to be our own loosing key may not loosen the grip of besetting sin (not to mention guilt, anxiety, or sadness). I must hate the “deeds of darkness” mentioned in Romans 8 enough to slay them in the presence of another.²⁶⁴

I am only as spiritually healthy as the secrets I cling to.²⁶⁵ Brother, I’ll meet you at the bottom. Shame says, “You better hide, son. Don’t you know what I can do to you?”²⁶⁶ We must call shame’s bluff. In Romans 7, Paul wasn’t “letting it all hang out.” It can be enough that my brother, and for that matter, the Christians I serve, knows that I know what sin is. Trust me. I know all about it.

But we can stand to shed a few layers on our way to naked before God. Why? For this. “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you.”

Another shot of distilled gospel, the good stuff we keep in the back.

Life Together, for some fascinating flaws, is a treatise on why I need my brother.²⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer

²⁶⁰ It involved sitting down at a table to hear some work I had done at quite a large conference being thoroughly ridiculed by someone who didn’t recognize me. I’m not throwing anyone under the bus. It’s one of my favorite stories – funny and in a way quite fascinating. The seeming worst had happened and it just wasn’t what I had thought.

²⁶¹ Bonhoeffer is not a safe writer. People of every imaginable theological persuasion claim him as their champion. I don’t know a way to take in the right way some things he wrote, for example, from Tegel prison. But in *Life Together* you can hear a recognizably Lutheran voice. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

²⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

²⁶³ For context: “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

²⁶⁴ “Why is it that it is often easier to confess our sins to God than to another? God is holy and sinless...but another person is as sinful as we are. The other knows from experience the dark night of secret sin.... Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circles of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 102–3.

²⁶⁵ Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 31. See also Eric Geiger’s study based on King David’s fall and restoration, exposing the dangers faced by anonymous, lone wolf leaders in the church who are too much on their own. Eric Geiger, *How to Ruin Your Life: And Starting Over When You Do* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2018), 62.

²⁶⁶ Curt Thompson argues well that “shame is not something we ‘fix’ in the privacy of our mental processes.” The Word, of course, is a power for spiritual healing even when we are by ourselves. However, for times we soldier on with unrelieved pain in our thoughts, we can take his point that resolving shame may be, among other things, what the “twos and threes” are for. Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, 17.

²⁶⁷ This book is a call to meet one another as bearers of salvation, we who daily hunger for the Word about the righteousness we lack and the righteousness we have. We long to speak Christ into another man’s life.

explores how we may look for Christ in our hearts and not find him, simply because faith is not made to look in that direction. But I consistently find that Christ is strong in the Word that comes from another,²⁶⁸ someone to look me in the eye and say what I now say to you.

Brother, you are loved with an everlasting love.²⁶⁹

Conclusion

So, I was a sick kid.²⁷⁰

Our family doctor recommended a colostomy, just what the shyest, puniest boy in the class needed: to show up to first grade with a yellow bag at the waist. I had no understanding of the cure that was on the table or the calculations of life expectancy. I now know that my parents sought a second opinion. There would be no surgery. It made them so glad, they came into my bedroom and pretended to quarrel (quite comically) about what to do with me. Soon Dad was mock-screaming “Help me!” while Mom literally tore the shirt off his back.

Anything to make a sick kid smile.

“You’re going to be just fine.”

Recently, my daughter, knowing none of this, was writing a paper about sick children and the sort of adults they grow into. She read the profile to me. I was stunned. Found out. Tossed backwards to 1967 and to a hospital room – clearly a formative place – into which twenty or so first-graders were awkwardly paraded. They hated being there. It was a devastating glance into the social mirror, that place you look so as to know, by what is reflected back, whether you’re worth anything at all.

I now know that my illness drew a dear Physician to my side, a Friend to break with me. Though he kept to himself all the good things he was up to, it’s a healing image, just Jesus and me in that hospital room. Long did he look into my bewildered face and pained eyes.

“Ah, child.”

It still moves the furniture in my mind around, what his love for me *then* means to me *now*.

This assignment took me to that place of “crushing inadequacy.” God is kind, and I was able to “write my way out.” And I’m here to say: if you think you are alone, if you think your failures are fatal, that your labor is in vain or that it matters little what you do – if you imagine that the love of God has dimmed a few watts from that great day when we were his darkness and he became our Light – I bring you a second opinion.

Yours is not “the sickness unto death.”²⁷¹

Differences between us recede, and the one vital thing between us is Jesus – what he has done for you and what he has done for me. Bonhoeffer writes provocatively on the premise that we can never really meet one another until “Christ comes between.” Otherwise ego is always getting in the way as I use you, compare myself to you, protect myself from you, and so on. “Christ comes between” describes the way I can learn to treat you according to the decisive way God has already treated you, you king, you priest. Bonhoeffer knew from experience that when we are thrown on Christ and turn in love toward our neighbor, we may find ourselves mired in a world of hurt, sitting in places that resemble Golgotha. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 8-12. All this is in the background of my thoughts as I constantly urge my students to nurture a generous point of view toward their brothers and sisters.

²⁶⁸ This is a paraphrase of thoughts in: Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 8–9.

²⁶⁹ The Word of God has efficacy, regardless of whether it is spoken to us by a friend. However, it would be foolish to forgo the blessings of community for that reason. Heiko Oberman writes, “I cannot free myself from my despair, because my own visible righteousness vanishes before my very eyes, and my own conscience forsakes me. That, Luther feels, is why I need the other, why I am dependent on the intercession and community of the church.... The Devil, that master of subjectivity, lurks in the heart and the conscience, but he is powerless in the face of the alien Word.” Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image Books, n.d.), 227. Tullian Tchividjian puts it concisely: “Our hardwiring for law [is] so engrained that we need real friends to remind us of the good news every day.” Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin*, 83.

²⁷⁰ I was asked to be “*intentionally personal*.”

²⁷¹ John 11:4 (KJV).

Yours is the kind that is working out a glory you cannot begin to imagine. We are all of us convalescent souls, in the best of hands, receiving the most excellent of care. We are on the mend. His promises go down like medicine, his wounds the cure for all that ails.

I am convinced.

*"I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done."*²⁷²

I lean into my not-enough-ness. It shapes my whole understanding of the grace that is sufficient and of the Savior who is my Enough. Come, let's celebrate weakness. *"For when I am weak, I am strong."*²⁷³

The world at large is in a tragic predicament, made worse by the wrong diagnosis, wrong treatment, wrong prognosis, in the bleak throes of self-improvement. And there you are, Pastor, the most important man in the world, doing the most important thing. You testify to the absolute wonder and necessity of grace.

There may be better preachers of the gospel than you and me, but I tell you no one on the planet can preach a better gospel than you do as you handle the deep things of God.²⁷⁴

So let the world think you an irrelevance. You stand as dying men before dying people to speak of the majestic reality of God with eternity at stake. Christ intervenes in human history all over again as you pour out all he is and has, all he has done and will yet do. You speak of the beauty of our walking and talking, bleeding, dying, and rising Good News.

*"The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds, we are healed."*²⁷⁵

I cannot think of any workers more essential than the band of brothers before me now.²⁷⁶ If I could be a small part of *your* social mirror, I'd want to be a little-Christ to share in that taste of him delighting. I would mouth that "Well Done" of his in your direction. Don't shrug it off. It says far more about him than it does about us. God the Father is perpetually saying "Well done!" to God the Son, and we are included in him by faith. We serve under the smile of one gentle and humble of heart.²⁷⁷ Knowing

²⁷² Psalm 118:17.

²⁷³ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

²⁷⁴ Wilson and Ayers, *The Pastor's Justification*, 54.

²⁷⁵ Isaiah 53:5.

²⁷⁶ We are the Physician's interns if you like. As a parish pastor, I didn't carry a black bag, just my Dad's old communion kit.

²⁷⁷ Also a heart that is eager to forgive. This poem is the only other writing we have from John Donne's sickbed:

"Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do still run, though still I do deplore?
When thou has done, thou has not done,
For, I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? And, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year, or two: but wallowed in a score?
When thou has done, thou has not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thy self, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;

this in our bones, may we be able to say, “Such as we were, we gave ourselves outright.”²⁷⁸

Pastor, it is no small thing that you do. You nurture in such a world as this an honest, safe place where the Word of Christ is still heard and knees still bend before it. While, out there, the universe stretches its neck toward the Day, in here, necks still crane for a glimpse of the water. Heads turn toward the hopeful ritual splashes at the start of someone new, hearts lean forward to take their turn at bread and wine, and acceptance and hope are held out by all, to all, without condition.

An oasis in the desert. An island in the storm.²⁷⁹

No matter that ministry is messy and feels as fragile as an eggshell, or whether folks in the next town have ever heard your name. Your life is dense with meaning as you cultivate here and there in a world growing darker by the day your community of light.²⁸⁰

And like John Donne, we each “tune [our] instrument close to the door.”²⁸¹

Ultimate healing waits on the other side at the first sight of Christ. It rustles in the leaves of the trees beside the glistening river.²⁸² We will stand on a new earth under a newly minted sky, awash in the one great Sun that is his beatific light. Wholeness is the voice of gentle, glorious Jesus singing the song of God.

This *has* been good for me – more than I can say. To live in a room called “Grace” all of my life, and in my sixtieth year to suddenly discover that one of the walls is an accordion door. You push it back to discover that there is more to Jesus than you had yet seen – more to his mercy, his goodness, his *Seelsorge*.

What shall I say in response to all this?

“My Lord, I find that nothing else will do,
But follow where thou goest, sit at thy feet,
And where I have thee not, still run to meet.
Roses are scentless, hopeless are the morns.
Rest is but weakness, laughter crackling thorns,
If thou, the Truth, do not make them the true.
Thou art my life, O Christ, *and nothing else will do.*”²⁸³

Soli Deo Gloria

Mark Paustian, September 2021

And, having done that, thou has done.
I fear no more.”

In: Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 131.

²⁷⁸ Robert Frost, “The Gift Outright.”

²⁷⁹ This affirmation is of the same kind that Nancy Pearcey includes in her important book about today’s most controversial subjects. Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019).

²⁸⁰ Who is competent for such a task? The answer isn’t “no one,” but that our competence comes from Jesus, as do our ministries. “Since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1). We do not wring our hands. The darker things get around here, the more we shine like stars as we hold out the Word of life (Philippians 2:15). Even better, Pastors, you are held fast like stars in the pierced hands of Christ who walks among the lampstands that are you congregations, keeping them lit (Revelation 1:20).

²⁸¹ Yancey, *A Companion in Crisis*, 129.

²⁸² Revelation 22:2.

²⁸³ George MacDonald, Scottish poet, author, and pastor, and a major influence on C. S. Lewis, in: George MacDonald, *The Diary of an Old Soul* (Wayne: Zossima Press, 2008), February 4.

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