

Hope with Jesus  
March 30, 2008  
Elon Community Church

Romans 8:28-39

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called he also justified; those justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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In the days after Easter roughly 2000 years after Christ's resurrection, all of the followers of Jesus should be in a state of glee and elation, right? With our Lord raised from the dead, we are rejuvenated with the rested assurance of having our sins wiped clean through faith in Jesus Christ. So after hearing this news, all life is great, right? Although the pledge of forgiveness and life everlasting is gratifying enough, many of us know that life on earth can be no cake walk for many, if not all of us.

We may understand this basic tenet of the Gospel truth in that grace and mercy can fill our lives with joy and pleasure, yet it may have been very difficult for this community to see God's loving touch when we lost our friend James Michael Elzar Foreman on

these grounds last spring around this time. It brings great comfort to know that Christ rose from the dead and is coming back again to save the world, yet it was also tough for our neighbors down I-40 in Chapel Hill when they lost their beloved mascot Jason Ray around this time last year in addition to losing their Student Body President, Eve Carson, just weeks ago. And we may believe the good news that we are all forgiven and saved through Christ, yet it may have been difficult for our Hokie neighbors to offer forgiveness this time last spring after their tragedy. So although God's grace is sufficient, that does not make life on earth always a complete day dream.

But on this Sunday after Easter, I want you all to know that when we are filled with the light of the Lord, even the simple action of waking up each morning can seem like such a gift. Specifically speaking, when we invite Jesus to live actively through us each day, I believe our morale will be so high that the big tragedies in this world and even in our personal lives through our mortal visions seem much less troubling with the grace and blessings of Jesus.

Let me illustrate this with a few examples. I understand that I gave a little bit of my testimony

during my first sermon here in 2006, yet I would like to go through the quick spark notes version for those of you who were not in attendance, with some added notes. This sermon is not about me; rather it is about some amazing individuals I have met in my life and the effect their walk with Jesus has played through their times of difficulty. Sometimes I get weary of telling my story and think to myself, “Enough already, people are tired of hearing about your testimony. We all go through tough times and my downfalls are no more important than others.” But my story is also your story and your story is also mine, as we are all united as God’s children. Therefore, I will attempt to smile broadly throughout my testimony, because through God’s grace I can tell you this as a witness of God’s power in turning tragedies into triumphs. I do not want to seem as if I am asking for pity or sympathy, I am simply declaring the ways God’s strength has made me the person I am today.

As a sophomore in high school, I was somewhat of an all-American kid who was fortunate enough to have a lot going for me. I had good marks in school and was an aspiring athlete on the hardwood. On top of that, I was the son of Bob and Dusty Fiedler, who work together as Presbyterian Co-Pastors. So every Sunday I was dragged out of bed very early for

Sunday school followed by the formal church service, although I did not really own my faith as a youth. Life was good and cushy for me back then, yet today it is even better.

While driving a teammate home from AAU basketball practice in May of my sophomore year in high school, I was in a serious car accident which resulted in a traumatic brain injury. The accident left me in a coma for 19 days, which created a lot of anxiety in the Cave Spring community. The doctors gave me little hope to survive, ever dunk a basketball again, or even graduate high school. Yet through the grace of God, I stand before you today a healthy 23 year-old college graduate with plans to move on to grad school soon.

There have been some down trials and mental illnesses that followed my brain injury, yet when I realize the amazing gift of life the Lord has given me, I am beaming with enthusiasm and joy. I suppose the turning point from this event was the realization that I was not going to live forever, as life is so precious. Once I realized how fortunate I was to be alive, regardless to how many trials or hardships I had to face, that was when I really drew closer to God and valued my relationship with the Lord. But enough

about me; let me tell you about some of my favorite people and close friends:

As I have earlier stated, life is not always a joy ride. During my sophomore year at Elon, I had a relapse of my depression which came as a result of my brain injury. I was stressed out, negative, and hopeless. Dan can vouch for me on this; I was in need of divine intervention. That is exactly what the Lord did. When we are at our lowest points as humans, it is the perfect time for regular people to step up to the plate and serve as each other's angels.

As I was confused with a low spirit, I withdrew from school that November and retreated home to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Roanoke. I decided to try to keep as busy as possible, so I worked some more volunteer hours as a student at the same rehabilitation ward where I had been a patient about 4 years ago. It was then where I met a true man of God.

Gary Ricketts is one of my closest friends. He is an upright man in every way, shape, and form. I met Gary in nearly the exact same place I found myself many years ago, in a speed bump on my journey. Having gone through nearly the same ordeals that I had been through, we bonded immediately.

Gary is a Jamaican born soccer player. He tells me of years going to church in Jamaica, but never really living for the Gospel. Gary was not only a great soccer player, but he was also a tremendous athlete as a high-jumper. Athletics were in his families genes, as Gary's father was a soccer player as well. As a kid Gary would idolize Pele and fantasize about playing big-time soccer. One day in Jamaica, after Gary miraculously brought his team back from a 3-0 deficit to win, he got recruited to come to America and play college ball: a dream come true!

So in 1995, Gary started playing college soccer at Bluefield College in West Virginia and soon after transferred to Liberty University in Lynchburg to finish up his college eligibility. Upon finishing up his college days at Liberty, Gary got selected to play for the Roanoke Riverdaws, a professional team in local Southwest Virginia at the time. Gary was the lightning-quick half-back who could find his way to the goal with relative ease.

That year while driving back from Atlanta, Gary and his friends were in a car accident late at night. According to Gary they were getting pretty tired and the driver fell asleep at the wheel. Upon this occurrence, the car was flipped in Winston-Salem.

Gary and his friends were ok, yet Gary was left as a quadriplegic. This was a difficult adjustment to make for Gary, and initially was saddened by his loss of physical ability.

But once again, the Lord was at work through this tragedy. Gary accepted the Lord in 2000, and is appreciative of the situation because it brought him closer to Jesus. He has security in Christ today, is a strong man of faith, and is widely-known for his joyful laugh. He is in the process of having his first book published along with finally graduating from Liberty University this May after years of work. He considers it to be a joy to be alive; if only because of his relationship with the Lord.

The effect Gary has had on me is his joy and his faith. Once I met this man who could not even walk or even practically use his hands, yet is so happy to be alive simply for his bond with the Lord; I was changed as a person. Gary is a great example of someone who is appreciative of his adjusted life after a traumatic event and trusts in the God's way.

Secondly, I would like to talk to you about a friend who I met in Roanoke this past fall: Eric Wade. At the age of 39, Eric had a life-threatening seizure in Silver Springs, Maryland around Thanksgiving in

1999. As he had the seizure, he fell down some stairs. The hospital told the family that he had also had a stroke, as he fell into the coma. One doctor told Eric's mother that Eric wouldn't make it through the night.

Upon hearing this, Eric's mother, a woman of faith, told the doctor she did not want to hear about that tragedy and started praying for a miracle. Eric stayed in that coma for 5 months. After 5 months of tube feeding, one day when he smelt some food next door, our friend Eric woke up and said, "I sure would like some of that."

Eric went through a rehabilitation process that brought him back to his childhood days, yet stayed close to God. After much prayer, that miracle was granted. He is happily married and is studying to become a nurse. Eric also attests that he was brought closer to Jesus and lives life with joy and peace.

Some of you may be thinking, "You know Jonathan, these 3 testimonies are all positive, yet they are different then say the tragedy of the death of Eve Carson at UNC because all 3 of your examples survived and thrived. What about the people who tragically die in accidents?" I will say that it would have been extremely difficult for me to

enthusiastically tell the Carson family the day after their tragic loss that God had this in plan and it would be ultimately good, because my small, human brain cannot comprehend in full the ultimate plan that God has for us all.

It is very common for some people to state, “What does not kill you makes you stronger,” or to exclaim quotes such as, “Anything God can bring to you, the Lord can bring you through it.” I think we have to be careful with these types of statements, as sometimes they seem a bit insensitive. Although it may be easy to beat our chest and admire what we have overcome in our lives, pain and suffering are real factors in many people’s lives.

For example, I would feel confident saying that some of the friends and family of Mike Foreman, including myself, would refute this claim. The days after our friend Mike passed away last year, many of his friends and family were still living, yet I do not think many could have said that they felt stronger. The same scenario goes with the Virginia Tech tragedy. Even across the Atlantic Ocean, in Sudan where thousands of women were raped during the genocide; they may be still alive, yet I doubt all of the victims would chant how they became stronger. Pain and

suffering are real, but so is the mighty love of Jesus that can heal the deepest wound.

I remember going to our friend Mike Foreman's funeral last spring, and it was packed. There were no seats even in the overflow section, as it was standing room only. So I only got to hear parts of the service. But I did hear the minister say, "God never makes mistakes." For some reason, that gives me comfort. One of my favorite songs from a youth in church was, "He's got the whole world in his hands." To know and believe that God loves us all so much and that there is nothing we can ever do to separate us from that divine love, this would be enough to make me smile.

I am sure that just about every single person in this sanctuary today has overcome some tough time or is dealing with a difficult trial. Some may have medical illnesses, others may have financial troubles, and still some may have lost a close friend or family member recently. Each person has their own way of dealing with difficulties, and I would like to try to be sensitive to people's emotions. But I will say that Jesus Christ paid the price of our misery by laying his life down on the cross, and rose again from the dead to grant us victory. No matter how many times you have heard this message, I hope that it is enough to

make anyone smile just like my friend Gary, regardless of their situation.

One may ponder the question: While Jesus kindly paid the price for our salvation on the cross; did his actions serve as any purpose for our lives in this world? My answer is yes; when we walk closely with Jesus, that remarkable hope that follows our God can penetrate and saturate our lives on earth with bliss as well. Life on earth is no guaranteed cake walk, as Gary and Eric can attest, yet when we live with Jesus in our hearts and minds everyday, our relationships, our marriages, our jobs, our health, even our grades can be blessed by the spirit. The Bible tells us to bring all our worries to Jesus and all things are possible through the Lord. Therefore, the bright light of hope that is Jesus is so magnificent, when we seek His way first in our lives, our days are improved dramatically.

In closing my friends, realize that each day alive is a precious gift that deserves celebration. It is not the riches of this world that have brought Gary, Eric, or I happiness today, rather a deep relationship with God that has brought us joy. I hope you all can enjoy the same sunshine that is never dampened.

Amen