

**When in Rome:
GOING HOME**

Romans 8:18-28, 35-39

Despite our struggles, some things are sure.

A sermon preached by
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In November of 1996, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Chicago, died. He had a reputation for goodness, gentleness, and faithfulness. He reached out to all people, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, believer or unbeliever. A crusader against sexual abuse by priests, he showed the essence of Christian love when he publicly forgave a young man who falsely accused him of abuse. He refused to condemn his critics on the right or the left. He fought a courageous battle with cancer and left an example of a life lived with authenticity and truth.

On the day of his funeral, the city of Chicago virtually shut down. The cathedral was packed with dignitaries from around the world, and the service was immense and gorgeous. The funeral sermon was given by Bernardin's best friend, Monsignor Kenneth Velo, who gave a touching and funny remembrance of the Cardinal. Father Velo concluded the homily with these very personal words: "Cardinal, eminence, you're home. You're home."

As the monsignor returned to his seat in the cathedral, there was a moment of empty silence. Then from the back of the church, somebody started to applaud. Instantly everybody joined in. Then everybody stood, from the back to the front, including the hierarchy of the church. They stood in a great ovation—not for the monsignor's sermon or for the magnificent service, but in gratitude for the life of a man who had so clearly been filled with the Holy Spirit of God.¹

Today is the day we clap for the saints. We give an ovation for those who have gone before. Our hearts swell in love and gratitude for the faithfulness and sacrifices that were made to give us the faith and the church we have today. Today is All Saints' Sunday.

All Saints' is sort of like a church-wide funeral. There are some feelings of sadness at those we have lost, and in some sense it is a somber day. We acknowledge the grief. But like any funeral of a person of faith, it is a day of deep joy. We celebrate those who lived life well and faithfully. We thank God for them. We thank God for the peace and strength and hope that come from faith. We know

where they are. We know where we're going. Death is not the victor. God's got this! Hallelujah!

At almost every funeral I do, I read at least part of Romans 8. In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul reaches the culmination of his argument for salvation. He starts with the reality of human depravity, and he talks about the sacrifice of Christ that overcomes sin. Then he talks about the relationship of faith in Christ that saves us from sin and gives us peace. We have new life in Christ; we are free from the Law, and this new life is controlled and empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. That's Romans 1 to 8 in three sentences.

Then in the eighth chapter, Paul gives us three images of life in the Spirit that give us hope.

The first is adoption. Because God loves us and is gracious toward us, he adopts us as his children. God has only one natural Son, but God has all these adopted children, including you and me. Paul says, *"All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ."*²

Those of you who are adoptive parents or who were adopted know the amount of love that it takes to call someone family. One of my favorite shows on TV is *This Is Us*. It's sort of an emotional family drama about a couple, Jack and Rebecca, who have triplets, and one of them dies. So they adopt an African-American infant who was abandoned the same day their babies were born, and they name him Randall. The show tells their story over the course of four decades. A few weeks ago, Randall, who has two children of his own, wanted to adopt another child. So he went to his mother to talk about it. His mother admitted that at first she didn't want to adopt a child. She had two new babies and had just lost another one to death. But her husband insisted that it was the right thing to do. Rebecca told

Randall, “[Jack] pushed a stranger on me. And that stranger became my child, my life. He became you.”³

When we are strangers to God because of our sin, God reaches out in love and grace. God gives his natural Son for us, so that by faith we can be in a relationship with him. We can be family. We can come home. There’s nothing easy about that. It’s not easy to adopt a child or to foster a child or even to raise your biological children. Relationships can be hard and complicated, and life happens, and trouble comes, and sometimes it’s just tough.

So for Paul’s second image of life in the Spirit, he thinks of the hardest work that any human being does. He thinks of a woman giving birth. And he says it’s like all of creation is in labor: “*We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free.*”⁴

Just because you’re in a relationship with God doesn’t mean you get to skip the hard parts. That’s part of the process of becoming the child of God you were created to be.

I remember a story about a man who witnessed a miracle of nature one day. He was walking through the woods, and he spotted a butterfly just emerging from its chrysalis. It was struggling and pushing itself through a small hole in the end of the chrysalis, straining to be set free. Thinking he would do the butterfly a favor, the man took his pocketknife and slit the chrysalis open. In a matter of moments, the butterfly was free. But then, to the man’s disappointment, he saw that the wings of the butterfly were misshapen and limp. The process of struggling against the chrysalis was necessary to push the bodily fluids into the wings so they would be strong and ready for flight. The butterfly would never fly because it had not endured the struggle.

Life is a struggle sometimes. But in the midst of the battle, the Spirit of God comes to help us. Paul says, “*The Spirit comes to help*

*our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. ...So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"*⁵

The struggle is real. But struggle strengthens us, refines us, and prepares us for what is up ahead. So what's up ahead? Paul says, *"I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us."*⁶

So this is what is coming—glory! Victory! Life in the spirit! Life eternal! Life with God! We are going to be part of the sweeping victory of all creation. We are adopted; we struggle; but we win! No victory on earth can compare with the victory we win in God.

Pete Maravich was one of the greatest basketball players that ever lived. They called him "Pistol Pete," and he was highly regarded as a shooter and a ball-handler. As a college player, he led the NCAA in scoring for three years. He played in the NBA for 10 years. He was one of the youngest players ever inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

Forced by injuries to retire, Pete Maravich discovered that the basketball court was not the real world. For two years he became a total recluse. He dabbled in Eastern religion, fad diets, and studied UFO's to try to find some meaning to his life beyond basketball.

Then Pete Maravich met Jesus. He discovered a kind of victory that he could never achieve on the basketball court. He began to tell people, "I want to be remembered as a Christian, a person that serves [Jesus] to the utmost, not as a basketball player."

In January of 1988, Pete flew out to Los Angeles to tape an interview with Christian radio host James Dobson. After the taping, they went to a church gym to play a little pickup game of basketball. It was there that an undetected congenital heart defect caught up with

him, and Pete Maravich died of heart failure at the age of 40. James Dobson said that seconds before he died, Pete said, “I feel great. I just feel great.”⁷

We can feel great today because we have been adopted as children of God. Even though we struggle, we are assured of the final victory. Nothing will ultimately separate us from our heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus. At almost every funeral I do, I share these triumphant words of Paul: “*Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.*”⁸

A few years ago Mitch Albom wrote a best-seller called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. It tells the story of Eddie, a man who was raised in the Depression, hated his father, was a prisoner in World War II, lost the love of his life to cancer, and spent most of his life as a maintenance man at a cheesy seaside amusement park in New Jersey. He was killed in a tragic accident at the amusement park where he worked. The book is about Eddie’s experience in heaven, as five people from his earthly life who have preceded him in death help him resolve the tangled mess of his life and to see how important and significant his life really was.

In the last few paragraphs of the book, Eddie is led by a child to his final destination. He and the child are swept away by a river, which carries him along like a leaf through all the colors of the rainbow, all the pain and weariness of his life washing away in the peaceful waters. Finally he emerges in brilliant light above an almost unimaginable scene:

“There was a pier filled with thousands of people, men and women, fathers and mothers and children—so many children—children from the past and the present, children who had not yet been born, side by

side, hand in hand, in caps, in short pants, filling the boardwalk and the rides and the wooden platforms, sitting on each other's laps. They were there, or would be there, because of the simple, mundane things Eddie had done in his life, the accidents he had prevented, the rides he had kept safe, the unnoticed turns he had affected every day. And while their lips did not move, Eddie heard their voices, more voices than he could have imagined, and a peace came upon him that he had never known before. He was free of [the child's] grip now, and he floated up above the sand and above the boardwalk, above the tent tops and spires of the midway, toward the peak of the big, white Ferris Wheel, where a cart, gently swaying, held a woman in a yellow dress—his wife, Marguerite, waiting with her arms extended. He reached for her, and he saw her smile, and the voices melded into a single word from God: *Home*. ”⁹

This is home. This is the home God made for us. This is the home that is waiting for us. The table is set. The saints are calling. Why don't you come home today?

¹ Leonard Sweet, *Homiletics*, May-June 1998, p. 39.

² Romans 8:14-17.

³ “This Is Us,” NBC.TV,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzJjMAwUJ6Q>.

⁴ Romans 8:22-23.

⁵ Romans 8:26-28, 31.

⁶ Romans 8:18.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pete_Maravich, <https://www.petemaravich.com>.

⁸ Romans 8:35, 38-39.

⁹ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003), p. 193f.