

Resourcefulness or Resources?

Romans 8:36

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Will you take a Bible loved ones and turn to Romans 8:35. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" Many of you would have no trouble with the answer. You would say, "No, in my experience none of those separate me from the love of Christ. In my experience in fact, whenever I've come up against tribulation, or the sword, or famine, or distress, I've found that I've drawn closer to Jesus. In those situations I've found the love of Christ most real to me." I think many of us here this morning would answer that way.

Intuitively in our own existential experience we have no trouble with that question. We say, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or sword?" "No, far from those things separating me from the love of Christ -- those things draw me closer to the love of Christ. I feel his love more powerfully when I'm in the middle of situations that involve suffering and pain."

Some of us here would have trouble with the question. Those of us who doubt whether God really exists or not, or who aren't quite sure what kind of God he is. We would have a bit of trouble with that question because we feel if God is a God of love then he can't ever allow distress, or pressure, or tribulation, or famine, or the sword to come upon me. And we have real troubles with that question; we just can't see how a God who is good and omnipotent can co-exist with evil and suffering in his world. Or, some of us would have trouble with the question, who aren't quite sure what sin really is, or who don't really understand why God allowed Jesus to die, or we aren't quite sure what his love is trying to bring about in our lives. We would have trouble with that question.

And so loved ones I'd just ask us patiently, once again this morning, to look again in the light of this question at what sin is; at why Jesus died, and at what his love is trying to bring about in our lives. And I'd ask you first to look at two diametrically opposed attitudes to death, two absolutely opposite attitudes to death. One is stated in a poem by a Welsh poet called Dylan Thomas. Some of you who have done some literature studies at school may know of him. You remember, he died of alcoholism several years ago, I believe on a tour here in the states. His father was dying and he wrote this poem to his father at that time.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,

And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

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And many men and women have died in that kind of protest. Many have died fighting it to the end like that -- afraid of what was beyond and fighting and refusing to “go gentle into that good night.”

Would you look with me at a different attitude entirely -- you'll find it in Luke 23:44-46. “It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.” It's just the very opposite.

One man says, “Dad, don't go gentle into that good night, rage, rage against the dying of the light.” And the other man says, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” And then he breathed

his last. Some of us could say, "Well, one was a fatalist, one was a determinist. One was a poor weak creature who believed that every event that took place in his life was sent to him by God. He was one of those creatures who would say, 'Whatever will be will be and you can't oppose it -- you just accept it as from God's hand' while the other was a real, red blooded man, who opposed the forces of nature that are out to destroy humanity."

Except loved ones, that the interpretation doesn't hold when you go into this man Jesus' life because you find him in his own lifetime constantly opposing death and sickness even when the circumstances seemed absolutely overwhelming. So it's hard to call him a fatalist. It's hard to say, "Oh, he was just someone who was a fatalist who said, 'Oh it was meant to happen so that's why it's happening so why oppose it.'" No, in his lifetime, he repeatedly moved strongly against such things.

Now, there's an instance in that same gospel in Luke, if you want to look at Luke 8:49, "While he was still speaking, a man from the ruler's house came and said, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more.' But Jesus on hearing this answered him, 'Do not fear; only believe, and she shall be well.' And when he came to the house, he permitted no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child. And all were weeping and bewailing her; but he said, 'Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But taking her by the hand he called saying, 'Child, arise.' And her spirit returned, and she got up at once; and he directed that something should be given her to eat. And her parents were amazed; but he charged them to tell no one what had happened."

So Jesus, loved ones, was not a fatalist and yet when it came to his own death you can see that there was a gentle sweet acceptance of it. And there was great peace and rest and yet it wasn't the peace and rest of a fatalist. It seemed to be the peace and rest of not a passive man but a man who was cooperating with something that he knew should happen. And of course, that's the explanation of it. Jesus met his own death that way with such peace and rest. Even though he opposed death in other people throughout his life, he met his own death with great peace and rest because he believed that that was God's will for him at that time.

And indeed, he says that, dear ones, in John 5:30. He says that that is the basis of his own life. "I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." Do you remember in the Gethsemane Garden Jesus prayed very sincerely? He said, "Lord, if you can take this cup away from me will you do it, but not my will but your will be done." And so Jesus met his own death with peace and rest because he really believed that that was his Father's will for him.

Now Dylan Thomas had none of that attitude to his life. He didn't believe that his life was ruled by any God at all. He believed that life was full of chance and he had to fight everything that came his way. And he believed that it was up to him to fight it on his own. And in fact, Peter felt the same way you remember, because the people came to arrest Jesus -- and Peter whipped out the sword, and cut off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. And we in our own lives so often have that same attitude.

So often many of us here this morning do not live sensing that there is a dear Father who has everything organized and knows what is coming to us. Because frankly, we're not too concerned with what he thinks. We feel we're here in this world on our own, we've to live our lives on our own and we've to swipe out at anyone who threatens our existence in any way at all so most of us live the

same way as Dylan Thomas or as Peter. We don't have this sense that Jesus had that his life was in the hands of an almighty God who had it planned for him and whom he could trust to defend him whenever he needed defending. We feel, rather, that we're here on our own, that there's nobody interested enough or capable enough to take care of us or to look after us and I better do the job myself.

We tend to have an attitude to life that, "I look out for myself and I'll live by myself, and for myself." And even though probably all of us here believe in God, yet, loved ones, we have a strange kind of hypocrisy in us; we are somehow able to believe that there is a God and that he controls the world and that in some strange way he keeps us all from falling off. You notice all the Australians haven't fallen off! You should phone them after this service and check, but they probably haven't. We somehow see that this God manages things so we don't all fall off the earth and yet, though we know that, we don't depend on him in our daily experience. We live as if we not only control the spinning of this globe through space at hundreds of miles an hour but as though we can control every little detail that takes place in our lives, and as if it's entirely up to us to do it.

We live, in a sense, as practical atheists and we have therefore developed a nature inside that is like that of a cornered rat. We have a kind of cornered rat or cornered animal nature inside of us that swipes out like Peter at anything that would destroy us and we're really paranoid. We have developed a nature that is programmed for survival at all costs. It doesn't matter what it costs anybody else, we're going to survive. And so we live that kind of life and loved ones, it's entirely opposite to the kind of life that Jesus lived.

Of course it's that nature of ours that we're coming up against when we do try to be unselfish and live by the golden rule. It's that nature inside us that we've developed that we come up against. You know how you try to do something for somebody but there is something inside you that is working against it keeping an eye out for yourself. Now, it's that nature that prevents us being the kind of people that we want to be, and the kind of people that God wants us to be, and living the kind of life that Jesus did and meeting death the same way that Jesus met it. It's that nature of ours that is so anxious to look out for ourselves and is sure that nobody else is looking out for us. It's that nature that spoils our lives. It's that nature that produces irritability -- we get impatient with somebody because they are inconveniencing us. It's that nature that stabs out at people because we think they're out to destroy us. And, it's that nature that was put into Jesus 1900 years ago and was crucified in him.

That's what Jesus and all his apostles said. Paul said, "Look, our old self -- that old self of yours that's so defensive and that lives so much on its own by its own power for its own wants and its own wishes -- that nature that wants what it wants, when it wants, where it wants, how it wants it -- that nature was put into Jesus and that old self was crucified with Christ." And you remember Paul said himself, "I was crucified with Christ and yet it is not I that lives but Christ lives within." And loved ones, the difficulty with that taking place in our lives is not the difficulty of your old self being crucified 1900 years ago. Einstein's theory of relativity solves that for any of us who has done a little thinking.

Obviously, time and space are one great eternal moment. Time really does not exist. The difficulty with that being made real in us is not one of belief -- it is one of will. That can only be made real in you and me, we can only change from this "Dylan Thomas" kind of raging against life and against everything that opposes us and come into this peace that this Jesus had, we can only do that if we're willing to have that nature destroyed in us -- to have that old self crucified. And of

course loved ones, from a natural point of view we don't want that. That is, left to ourselves we want nothing to do with that. Left to ourselves, we don't want that destroyed. Left to ourselves we're like Jacob who is always trying to manage the problem ourselves. We get ourselves into trouble by our deceit and we try and get ourselves out of trouble by our deceit.

We really operate like Jacob. We work basically on the belief that there is no God to help us and it depends on our own resourcefulness. And at times our own resourcefulness means our own lying and deception and our own squirming out of difficult situations. And basically we operate like that. So of course we, for that reason, go for the tenderist piece of chicken on the plate. That's it -- it's the source of all greed, it's that attitude. We don't work it out in detail -- but that is really why you go for the tenderist piece of chicken on the plate -- because, "There's no one else looking out for me so I better look out for myself."

And you know there are moments where we see that we wouldn't actually die if we didn't get the tenderist piece of chicken on the plate at that time. We can afford to sacrifice then because we'll get it later on when we go to Burger King on our own. That's why we go for sitting beside the nicest guy and the nicest girl, that's why. Because we're fairly sure that God doesn't really understand how important that side of our life is to us and even if he did he might not work it out the way we want it worked out. And so we sit beside the nicest guy, sit beside the nicest girl and you know that in itself -- just that little relationship -- is a source of a lot of heartache for a lot of us who have been left out of things.

That's why we go for things for our own sakes and for our own pleasure. That's why we go for the most comfortable job, because we feel, "Well, maybe God isn't looking after us." That's why we go for the job with the biggest salary, because it's easy enough to give the extra dollars back to God but it's a hard situation to get those dollars if he's holding the purse strings. So we go for the salary that is biggest and that will solve all our needs without his help. And really loved ones, that's the way we naturally live and to tell the truth, I don't think we would ever change. While we're standing on our feet we will not change. While we're standing up on our feet we will keep on operating that way until eventually we come to that death experience that we cannot tackle on our own. But while we're standing on our feet we'll try to live our lives by our own resourcefulness, doing without God, getting what we want, when we want, where we want, how we want.

And loved ones, the only time that we will begin to question that whole business is when we come into the experience of Romans 8:35. That's really why God allows those things to happen to all of us. God allows those things to happen to at last begin to expose to us that we're living our own lives by our own power and that it is irrational, insane, crazy, mad, doomed to futility and despair because we are not, finally, dependent only on ourselves. And so God allows these things to come that are mentioned in Romans 8:35.

Maybe you'd just look at the verse and I'd like to point one out to you that I think would make it real in your own heart and your own life. Romans 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation," you remember we dealt with that last Sunday to some extent, "Or distress." Now, the Greek word for distress is "stenochoria". Now, I'm sure you've often had a touch of "stenochoria", haven't you? "Stenochoria" is narrowness of room, narrowness of room. Or some of us would talk about being between a rock and a hard place, or some of us would talk about painting ourselves into a corner. Now, that's "stenochoria." And God graciously allows all of us here to experience "stenochoria" at some times in our lives.

I'll tell you about a monkey who had "stenochoria". This little monkey got into a candy shop and all the candy jars were sitting there and candy jars, as you know, have narrow mouths on them and then they're big inside and all the candy is inside. And he put his hand in through the mouth of the candy jar and grasped the candy and held it in his hands like that. And of course, his hand bulged out and he couldn't get his paw back out through the narrow mouth of the jar. Now, that monkey had a bad touch of "stenochoria" -- he had narrowness of room. But the inner meaning of it is that in order to grab something for himself he trapped himself, but he hadn't the sense to let go of it so he could get out of the trap. Now, that's "stenochoria".

So you end up with a beautiful house, and a beautiful car, and you haven't an extra dollar at the end of the month for a new tire if you needed it. That's "stenochoria". But, you won't let go of the house and you won't let go of the car, and you're uptight all the time. And the wife has to speak to you gently or otherwise you'd kind of break up. Or, the husband has to be nice to you otherwise you'd just scream the roof off. That's "stenochoria". Or, when you end up with the job that you wanted professionally and financially but it's a miserable work atmosphere in which to spend your days. That's "stenochoria". You come home at night and you're uptight, and you're worn out, and it's hateful and miserable, but you're making the money and professionally you're going up the ladder. That's "stenochoria".

Or, you get a set of personal relationships that you feel are absolutely essential for your status and for your own enjoyment, and for your own success in life but they are a bore and a strain, and a pain to maintain. But you continue to maintain them, laugh at the silly jokes, do the things they want you to do because you want what you want. Now, those are situations loved ones that are described by God as "stenochoria". You find yourself in a narrowness of room, you're uptight, you're between a rock and a hard place, and you won't let go to get out of it. Now, God allows that to come because actually sin, which is independence of God, living by your own resourcefulness instead by his ever available resources, sin always drives you back and back into "stenochoria" -- it does.

The world is so organized that way. If you could only see it, our God is no fool. He does not allow us to rebel against him and run from him without our having many signs that we're doing it. The Father has so organized the world that if you keep living by your own resourcefulness -- remember the whole story of Watergate -- wasn't that it? You retreated to a new -- well, it didn't even seem as if they were retreating sensibly. It didn't even seem they were thinking up the lies and planning them carefully. We usually do a better job than that. But, it was retreat, retreat, retreat, depend on your own resourcefulness, trying to duck that one, duck that one, trying to make up a new lie to meet that one.

Loved ones, if your life gets to that point you're in the midst of distress, and "stenochoria" and narrowness of room. And God is saying to you, "My son, my son, my daughter, my daughter, would you stop trying to live it by your own resourcefulness. Would you stop trying to get what you want, when you want, how you want, where you want and would you start being concerned, like my son, with what my will is for you?" Because loved ones, there's a beautiful verse in one of the psalms that says, "God delivers us and brings us into a broad place."

And loved ones, when you're living in the light of your Creator's will and you're living in the fullness of what he wants for you, you find yourself walking in a broad place. Really you do, believe me. You'll find yourself walking every day in a broad place and you're not hemmed in on this side, and hemmed in on that side, and trying to remember which lie you said to that fella, and

what you said to that person, and how you maneuvered this, and how you manipulated that, and how you have to try and keep this person right and keep that person right. Suddenly you're in a broad place when you're walking in a place where you're ready for what God wants for your life.

I don't know how many of you here have worked yourselves into "stenochoria". I don't know how many of you in your jobs, in your home situations, and in your relationship life, have worked yourselves into a tight spot. Do you see that God is allowing that to come to you because Jesus is lovingly stretching out that dear death embrace and saying, "Will you join me on my cross? Here I am not able to control these Roman legions, here I am not able to control this crowd in front of me that is insulting me and hooting at me, here I am not able to control what they're going to do with my body even after I die. Will you join me here? Because I tell you, if you will you will have a great Person looking after you, as I have looking after me, and you will not suffer anything that you cannot bear. Nothing will happen to you but what my Father is willing to happen."

Loved ones, Jesus is trying to draw you into that dear embrace and ask you to die with him. That's what this verse, Romans 8:36, really means. It's a quotation from the Old Testament, "As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'" This society that we live in is not based on this way of life. The society we live in is based on getting its own way and establishing its success and getting its own gratification. So of necessity this society exerts tremendous pressures on all of us.

For instance, do you know the bestselling paperback today? The bestselling paperback is titled "Winning Through Intimidation". It's the game of how to get one up on the other person -- how to manipulate them, and how to manage them. Do you know the latest fad? We're always having the "how to" -- how to live more successful lives, how to be happier with your family and your pet dog, how to be the kind of person you want to be in your business. The latest fad is self assertion training or assertiveness training. Assertiveness training -- assert yourself, make people do what you want them to do, don't let them walk over the top of you.

Now loved ones, this society has all those pressures pressing in upon you and me. It is all the commercial pressures pressing in upon us; "get what makes you comfortable", "get what makes you happy". Loved ones, in the midst of all those we are dying all the day long. We are dying in their eyes because we are saying, "No, that's not the way to happiness. No, asserting myself is not the way to get others to do what I want them to do. No, intimidating others is not the way to win and be a successful business man. No, getting what I want to make me comfortable and happy in this life by buying all that I need -- that's not the way to happiness." We are dying all the day long. In their eyes we're being dumb; in our eyes we know we're joining that dear Jesus on the cross and accepting that finally the only resources we have in this life come from the Person who made us. And those resources will only be made available to us when we give up depending on our own resourcefulness.

Our own resourcefulness is simply a method of living life without any resources at all. And it always involves tremendous bluff, lying, and finally absolute disillusionment. And loved ones, that's what the verse means. We are dying all the day long. We are continually coming into situations where we're asked to join Jesus on the cross and to trust the same Father who defended him to defend us. And oh loved ones, when you begin to do that you'll find yourselves in a broad, broad place. Really, believe me -- because your Father loves you and he will not let anything happen to you that will destroy you and you can trust him.

And so I'd ask you, would you start trusting? Will you stop being practical atheists and start trusting that this dear God is taking care of you and you can afford to join his son on that cross where he died to his own right to get what he wanted when he wanted, where he wanted, how he wanted? And if you do that, you'll find yourself in that broad place that the Father has for each one of us. None of us should be uptight. None of us should live uptight lives. None of us should be in "stenochoria" -- none of us should be little monkeys who won't let go. Let go. Let go and you'll find that God will take hold. Believe me, I know it works. Let's pray.

Dear Father, we would join together, we would put our arms spiritually around one another here in this room today and we would love each other up to you and pray for each other. Father, you know how many of us here, how many of the loving brothers and sisters, are in the midst of all these things. Father, you know how many of us have gotten ourselves into ridiculous situations because we want what we want. Father, we're sorry and we ask you to forgive us now. And Lord we see that you have given us good common sense so we can see what's happening and we can relax our hold on these things.

So Lord I pray that you would show each brother and sister and show me if we're experiencing any narrowness of room, if we're experiencing a tight spot, if we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, if we've painted ourselves into a corner. Enable us now, Father, to see that we've done that because we've tried to manage our own lives instead of seeing what you wanted for them and then receiving the resources that you made available to us.

Lord, enable us to take that plain step this morning simply to say to you, "Father, I have been living like that for years and I am worn out. And now Lord I see that you have destroyed this old self -- this aggrandizing, self gratifying nature, in Jesus on the cross and I accept that Lord, thank you. I ask for a new nature. I ask for your Holy Spirit to come in and give me a new nature. Give me the nature of Jesus -- a nature that is submitted to you and that is anxious to find out your plan for my life and to begin to be satisfied with your resources and not want those that you haven't given me."

Lord, enable each of us to pray that prayer with honesty this morning that you may be glorified in our lives and then we'd be straightened out and we may begin to walk in a broad place. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his glory. And now, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and throughout this coming week and forever more. Amen.