

Theme: Why?

“Who Shall Separate Us?”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

May 9-10, 2020

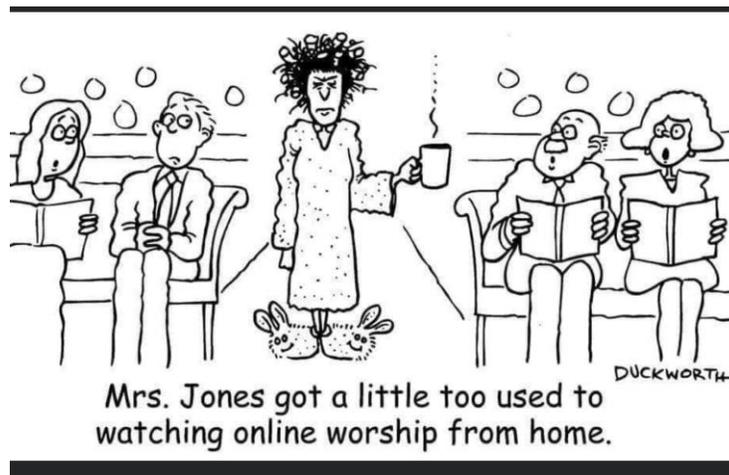
Scripture: Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39

VIDEO Sermon Starter

SLIDE Who Shall Separate Us?

I thought I would start with my favorite Corona Virus meme that somebody sent me this past week.

GRAPHIC Mrs. Jones got a little too used to watching online worship from home.



If you have not done so already, please take out a pen and paper so you have something to write with. I think there will be several things you may want to write down and reflect upon in the week ahead. I pray each time we gather for worship that God is speaking to us and that you might hear something the Holy Spirit is seeking to save just to you. If you go to our website under the sermons tab, you can find meditation moments for the week with daily Scripture readings to help you go deeper on the topic for today.

We are bringing to an end today the series of sermons in which we are contemplating big questions that sometimes lead people to turn away from God or faith. Every person wrestles with these questions from time to time when bad things happen, such as the pandemic in which we find ourselves today. Where is God in the midst of suffering? Why do my prayers go unanswered? Does God really have a plan for my life? How do I make sense of these big questions and still maintain my sanity and my faith?

We have been questioning some of the assumptions we often carry with us for when we were children. I have discovered that many people who turn away from faith do so not because of the deep-seated theological problem, but because no one has been willing to honestly answer their questions and ways that make sense for that fit together. We expect something from God and we anticipate God will act a certain way because of things we have been taught, or things that people have said to us since we were children. When God doesn't perform according to our expectations, we are profoundly disappointing God. We get disillusioned and we sometimes get rid of God and push God away altogether.

We have talked about natural disasters, human illness and evil which happens to us and which exists in the world. We often hear the phrase, **“Everything happens for reason,”** which means that God must have some

big plan in place, and which also means that God is the author of disasters, illness and evil. If God has some perfect plan which is laid out, then God is turned into a monster and does things that none of us would do to people that we love, or even our enemies. **Even our insurance policies call horrific things that happened in nature, “Acts of God.”** I saw there was a governor asking that the coronavirus pandemic be ruled and “Act of God,” so that certain legislation would kick in when it comes to natural disasters.

Much of these arguments are things that we recognize don't make sense. Do we really think that God decided to send the coronavirus pandemic to wipe out millions of people, especially those who are most vulnerable because of illness or poverty? Do we think God sent tornadoes on Easter Sunday to several towns in Mississippi, killing several people? Do we believe that God sent an earthquake to Jamaica earlier this year, killing dozens of people in order to send a message, punish them with you several lesson? As God kill thousands in these natural events to fulfill some cosmic plan? Is that really how God works?

2000 years ago, how else could you make sense of pestilence or hurricanes or earthquakes which swallowed entire cities? The only way it was understood was that some force must've done something because these people deserved this horrible thing to happen. Today, we understand this differently. **Scientists and weather forecasters understand that the very things which lead to disease or natural disasters are also the very things necessary for life to exist on our planet in a very delicate balance.** We can predict earthquakes and tornadoes and hurricanes and even the movements of pandemics. **Does this mean that scientists are predicting the will of God?** Or do they understand the weather patterns and biological forces at work in the world and simply make an educated guess?

Without these systems that sometimes lead to natural disasters our

planet could not maintain life and we would not be here. Yet, when human beings collide with these great forces of nature, we often come out on the short end of the stick. It was not that God sent these large natural phenomena to punish people, but it is part of what happens when human beings are mortal, frail and fragile when compared to the entire universe and its creation.

In the sixth century is when we have the first recording of the bubonic plague. It was a small bacterium which struck Europe and 25 million people died, which was repeated in the 14th century. We think it was the same bacteria which swept across Europe and 1/3 of the population of Europe died during that epidemic. They couldn't see bacterium during those days, but they did figure rats were carrying something. Fleas visit the rats and then fleas visit people and the plague was passed from person to person. We had persons in Colorado not even a decade ago which ended up contracting that same bacterium. They received an antibiotic and they recovered, and that plague stopped with those four people.

Medical science knows what caused the plague and some of what is causing our current pandemic. Eventually, we will have a vaccine and this current coronavirus will be in our rearview mirror. And eventually, there will be another and our scientists work to come up with a cure. **Aren't you grateful that our scientists don't say, "Illness is an act of God?"** It must be the will of God that people have coronavirus! There is no need for us to research cures." **Aren't you glad that the medical community doesn't say, "This pandemic must be part of God's plan?"** Let's not treat anyone with coronavirus and instead **let God's will be done!"**

Instead, we see that Jesus came to be a healer. We don't think God wants people to be sick like this, but it's part of the human body which is not perfect. Cells mutate and viruses are born in imperfect climates. Doctors and

nurses and scientists work hard to figure out a vaccine and treatments which will help people get well again. We don't believe that we are fighting against God, but we are fighting something which is not from God and is not part of God's will.

When a car misses the red stoplight because the **drivers distracted and it T-bones another car** the intersection and innocent victims die, do we believe God sent that car careening into the other vehicle? **Do we believe that God distracted that driver to kill the children in that car?** Do we think that God wanted someone to **abuse a small child or spouse?** **Those things are antithetical to the will of God.**

Instead, all those situations point to the fact that we human beings have freedom. God has ultimate dominion and sovereignty over the entire universe, and yet in Genesis 1:28, God said that the first humans, "Take charge." This means we have the freedom to make choices and we have agency in the world. We can make good choices or bad choices. We can do good or we can do evil. We can love or we can hate. We can bless or we can curse. This means we are responsible for our actions. **We can't blame God for the things that we do to each other, and the ways we hurt each other.**

If God is not controlling everything, and does not have a perfect, predetermined plan for every detail which happens in our lives, and God is not going to supernaturally suspend the laws of nature to bring about healing when we are sick and we pray, then how does God work in our lives? God can do miraculous healings, but that doesn't seem to be the norm. If God is not going to prevent all these horrible things from happening to us, **then what is the point of God?** Why have faith if God is not always going to protect us and keep bad things from happening to us? **Why have faith if God is not going to always answer our prayers the way we want?** If God doesn't have **this perfect plan figured out for our lives**, then why pay attention to

God at all?

Despite the fact that we understand these things, **we are going to look at how our faith can give us hope for facing life** and why God is essential in our lives, especially moments like today. **Next week, we will begin a new sermon series on Courageous Hope** and in many ways this sermon is an introduction to the next four weeks. As I was reflecting upon this idea of having hope that is courageous, I thought of people I have worked with who have terminal illness or a debilitating injury that will not get better. I have sat with people who have **spinal cord injuries** and **challenging diagnosis** with lifelong implications.

I think of the several people I have worked with who have been diagnosed with **ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease**. Last year I spent time with a man I played basketball with for over a decade who was diagnosed with ALS and I was inspired by his courage in the face of that illness. This last week, I was exposed to the story of Scott Cart who was diagnosed with ALS in his 30s. He and his wife have two young children and their story is powerful. Let's take a listen.

VIDEO Scott Cart – 1

“If you spend all your time looking at the bad, you're going to miss the good and the beautiful.” That is a **courageous statement**. I find it amazing the way this family has lived with something so horrible and found so much joy and meaning and blessings in the middle of the diagnosis of that totally turns your world upside down, just as much as this pandemic in which we are living.

One of the most famous and best love the passages of the apostle Paul is found in the book of Romans, chapter 8. We often read these words at funerals when there is a tragedy. Here's what he writes.

BIBLE 28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

First, let's notice in this one sentence that **Paul doesn't say that God makes everything happen**. Instead, he says that in all things which happened, God works for the good. **God is going to force evil**, even terrible and tragic things, to accomplish something good and beautiful. He goes on with these powerful words that are meant to carry us in challenging moments in life.

35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (Or pandemics, earthquakes, ALS or cancer?)

37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul is describing his personal experience of what God has done in his life. **Paul did not live a charmed life**. From the moment that Paul was converted to the Christian faith, he had people trying to kill him. He was shipwrecked on multiple occasions. He was arrested numerous times. He was stripped naked in front of the entire town and humiliated. He was beaten

with rods and with stones. He was lashed with a whip. Not only did fellow Jews hate him after he converted, but there were Christian factions which didn't like his open theology which was directed toward the Gentiles.

Paul was kicked out of multiple towns and often wrote about the fact that he might die at any moment. Paul is writing to the people of Rome, but eventually he ends up in **prison in Rome in a dungeon**. Eventually, he is **beheaded** for his faith. This is a man who writes these words which have profound meaning for us today. **Paul is testifying that in his own experience** of hardship in life, God works for good and brings about meaning from the pain and the hurt. He was always able to look back and see how God was working for good. This was Paul's perspective based on his own experience.

He celebrates that there is nothing which can separate us from God love. Paul doesn't care how bad our lives might seem, because God is more powerful, and his grace is sufficient. I love how he says despite all these things, we have overwhelming victory through Christ who loved us.

SLIDE We have overwhelming victory!

This is no small thing. The Romans were the ones who typically had victory and this word was applied to them on a regular basis. The word in Greek literally means, **"To prevail or overcome."** Paul accentuates the word by using overwhelming. The direct translation is **"hyper."** We are **hyper-victorious!** We **hyper-prevail**. We are **hyper-conquerors**. We have this victory through Jesus Christ loves us in a hyper way. We can't get out of tragedy or suffering the side of eternity. But, we are hyper victorious when Jesus is part of the equation.

We come to this important question though. **How does this work?** How do we experience this victory, especially when we realize that following Christ is not a promise that nothing bad will happen to us? How could Paul be promising this overwhelming victory when he is beaten and abused and put

in prison constantly. **How are we to have overwhelming victory when the end of our life is about being beheaded?**

If God is not promising to supernaturally intervene and **stop the laws of nature** when the **car is careening** your way, or some person is about to do an **act of evil and you are caught in the crosshairs**, how is it that we are hyper victorious through Christ?

SLIDE We are often afraid

Let's recognize that a fundamental part of being human is that we are people who are afraid. **Fear is built into our DNA** as part of the fight or flight reflex for all mammals. I remember being at the **watering hole on a safari in Kenya** after a mission trip and seeing how twitchy the envelope and other edible animals react to any small noise. They are constantly afraid and **we human beings can be the same way if we are honest**. We all wrestle with fear and anxiety, especially in times like we are experiencing today.

We live in fear of getting old, getting sick and dying. We are afraid of each one of those parts of our human existence. We are also **afraid of failure, rejection and being unloved**. We are afraid of **not having enough** when we retire. We watch the **stock market** over the past two months and that fear builds inside of us. We are afraid of what **might happen to our kids**. We are even afraid of success because it might require more of us. There is much in life which causes us anxiety, and **some of it is justifiable, and some of it is not**.

Much of what we fear in life is just not worth the anxiety, but we have a hard time convincing ourselves that, don't we? One of the most common phrases in the Bible is...

SLIDE "Do not be afraid."

God says this over and over because God does our tendency as human

beings is to let fear grab a hold of us. **Moses led the people out of slavery** and through the wilderness for 40 years. **Joshua** takes over and gets ready to lead the people into the promised land, but they **are afraid of the Giants** living in the land. The cities are fortified and there is much to cause fear in the hearts and lives of those Israelites who have been wandering in the desert. God says this to them in **Joshua 1:9, and I believe they are words to us in 2020.**

BIBLE 9 “This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

There is no promise that we won't have battles or struggles or difficulties. **There is no promise that there are not Giants which can overwhelm us.** God simply says to be strong and courageous because God will be with us wherever we go. **You might write this down on the card and just carry it with you as you journey to the land of the giant virus.** We read the headlines and we can **easily be overwhelmed with fear** and I believe God longs to speak to us a word about being courageous and having hope and knowing that God is with us in the middle of the challenges.

700 years later, **the Israelites were overwhelmed by the Babylonians.** The **king's sons were killed,** and the **king had his eyes blinded** and then was forced to lead his people to **exile in slavery in Babylon.** They would be there for more than 50 years. When they arrived in exile in Babylon, they were hopeless and overwhelmed. **The second half of Isaiah** is about God speaking to these people where God says again these powerful words through the prophet in chapter 41, verse 10.

BIBLE 10 Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

Here's that same idea of overwhelming victory that **Paul writes about in his letter to the Romans. He would've known these words**, learning them as a young Jewish boy. **Notice that the prophet doesn't say that life will be easy, and they will be going back to Jerusalem any day now.** He doesn't say the city will be magically rebuilt and everything will be fine. They will end up in Babylon for **50 years and it will be their great-grandchildren** who finally returned to the promised land and Jerusalem. What God does promise is God's presence. **God says there will be helped in ways they can't imagine they will be strengthened by God's victorious right hand.**

When Matthew was telling the story of the birth of Jesus, he tells us that Jesus will be called **Emmanuel, which means what?** Emmanuel means God is with us. Final words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew that we looked at just a few weeks ago at Easter are these powerful reminders of God's presence.

BIBLE "And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We read Psalm 23 and moments of distress and heartache and find comfort in these words.

BIBLE Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

The prevalent message of the Scriptures is this truth. When our kids were little and we would have those **amazing thunderstorms** moved through the area which would make the entire house rumble, it would sound like the lightning struck in the backyard. Things would fall off the shelves and it was terrifying for our children. They would both come running into our bedroom and climb into bed because they were frightened by the lightning and the thunder. **They would crawl in between us** or on top of us and we would remind them they didn't need to be afraid because we were right there. They

would soon fall asleep even though the storms continued. There were still lightning and thunder, but they could sleep right through it because they knew their parents were right there with them and was going to be okay. **Of course, we didn't get any sleep, but God also promises not to slumber or sleep when we are in the midst of the storm.**

One of my favorite songs is one that we also often read at funerals, especially living here in the mountains. But I remind you of what Psalm 121 promises and those first few verses.

BIBLE 1 I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? 2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth! 3 He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. 4 Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. 5 The Lord himself watches over you!

The apostle Paul writes from prison his letter to the Philippians where he gives us these powerful words in chapter 4.

BIBLE 6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

When we trust that God is walking with us, there is a peace which will guard our hearts and minds because of Christ Jesus. This is how we discover a hyper victory. **Paul doesn't say that we should pray about everything and God will make it all better.** Paul does tell us that we will be sustained, and God will see us through.

I pray daily for my wife and my kids. I pray for their protection is a God would be with them. **Wednesday was the fourth anniversary of our son's**

death and so I know those prayers are not always answered the way I want them to be. I know for fact that God does not supernaturally intervene and stop the bad things from happening, even though the preacher is praying for it. **What brings the peace is that even during the worst thing that can happen for any parents, the promise is that God is by our side.** I know that **God holds my son close today and that Thomas is safe** in the arms of his Savior. **That's what I tell parents** when they lose their children because it is what carries and sustains me.

I have a picture of what I want God to do, but I also know what can happen in life when we are mortal, frail, and fragile human beings. Sometimes, this life that we live on this earth isn't fair. But I trust that God is just and merciful and, in the end, **the worst thing will never be last thing.**

We also know that God works in and through us to answer prayers. On more than one occasion I get an email or note from someone who tells me that something our church did was an answer to their prayer. People have told me they were praying for rent last month and it came from a church member who helped through the church assistance fund. I have delivered Christmas gifts and food to families because you all gave extra money at Christmas and seeing the tears and a single mother's eyes as they tell me their faith has been restored.

When we are able to help someone in need like that, we don't solve all their problems. In those moments, I hear people say they believe that health **was sent by God** as we will call this congregation given be generous and support those who feel alone. I believe that also, even though I don't understand how that works all the time. I get to be the lucky one who often makes a phone call or is here at the church when someone comes by. Just after we had to shut down the church building, **I had a gentleman come by a knock on the door.** He told me that he had come by the church several years

ago when he needed some help and we were able to keep them from being evicted. **He wanted to give back and so he wrote a check** and asked if I could make sure it got to someone who might be in that same place right now. He felt like **God had answered his prayer** and now he wanted to be the answer to someone else's.

As followers of Jesus, we believe this kind of thing happens every single day if we pay attention. Are we watching to see what God is doing and then asking how we can be a part of it? **We call this divine Providence because God works through people**, when we are willing to let God use us. Some people might say it's a coincidence that I was here in the building, even though it was closed, when that gentleman came by. Someone say it's coincidence that the very next day we were able to help someone with rent. **Do you think it's coincidence?**

As people of faith, we call it something else. **We call it a God incident.** Those are the moments where we are blessed to be a part of God's work in the world when we are paying attention. **The truth is that gentleman had to come by the church. He knocked on the door even though the sign said we were closed. I went to the door even though I worried he was someone looking for assistance and I wouldn't be able to help him.** One of you in the church had to notice the person who needed to be helped. The person who needed to be helped had to be willing to email.

If God normally works through Angels and suspending the laws of nature, then God would never tell us to help the poor in Scripture, which God commands more than 500 times. Instead, God would just rain food down upon their houses. **God wouldn't have to tell us to visit the sick** because God would send angels to take care of them. **God wouldn't need to tell us to stand up for justice or speak up for those who can't take care of themselves. God wouldn't ask us to care for the vulnerable.** Instead, God

commands us to do these things because we are the hands and feet of Christ.

It's why we have passages like these from Proverbs 31.

BIBLE 8 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. 9 Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice.

God tells us these things because we are God's instruments of administering justice for those being crushed. We are God's mouth, speaking up for the poor and helpless, and those who cannot speak up for themselves.

Me ask you a simple question. **Did God live a charmed life when God walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ?** Did everything go perfect for him? Did only good things happen to Jesus? **Of course not.** People hated him and **he was kicked out of his own hometown after his first sermon!** On several occasions he was chased out of town for challenging the religious leaders. **After just three years of public ministry, Jesus was arrested.** They mocked him and spit on. Remember, this is God in the flesh! Jesus was condemned to die by very religious people. **They torture them for six hours and made him carry his own cross, like a common criminal.**

God experienced the suffering that we experience. God takes that to show us we are not alone when we go through moments of suffering, agony and even death. Jesus prays, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"*** We know that we have a God who knows what it's like to feel abandoned.

And then finally, on the cross, **the last words of Jesus are meant to help us remember that our lives belong to God before we are born and they belong to God long after we are gone, even for eternity.** I often remind people mother very personal and profound place that our children belong to God before we belong to us, mostly because of these final words from the

cross.

BIBLE **“Into your hands, I commend my spirit.”**

This was the darkest moment, and even then, there is a recognition that our life belongs with God. **Remember that on Easter, just four weeks ago, we celebrated at the cross was not the final word.** Evil and hate and brokenness and suffering and torture and death are not the final word. God has hyper victory over death, through Jesus Christ. **Through the resurrection, God has victory over all things.** As followers of the crucified Messiah, who has been raised from the dead at Easter, we also can celebrate that we will have hyper victory. Therefore, we have hope.

We know that God forces evil to accomplish good. We know that God can redeem anything. We know that God does not cause every bad thing to happen, but God can do something with everything in creation. We know that God works in and through us to serve one another and be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. We know that God sustains and carries us, even in the darkest moments. **We know the truth that the worst thing is never the last thing, and that is what we celebrated at Easter.**

In 1 Corinthians 15: 53-55 and 57 we read these words from the apostle Paul.

BIBLE **53 For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.**

54 Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:

“Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

57 But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through

our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is a powerful word in a powerful promise which can sustain us when we walk through dark places. I think of the story of Brittany, a young girl in high school who died of Lyme disease because it was discovered too late. Last words she wrote were from Psalm 118 on her bedroom mirror so she would see it every day.

BIBLE 14 The Lord is my strength and my song; he has given me victory.

God didn't miraculously intervene, as much as we wish that is how life worked. God is not **fairy godmother or magic genie** in a bottle who makes all things better, and who gives us whatever we wish for. What we see is that God walks with us through the hell on earth that we sometimes can experience. God experienced the suffering himself and he redeems it. God has said to us through Jesus Christ that these experiences will never have the final word.

I want you to hear from Scott Cart one more time about their story as they describe how they lived with ALS, something so unimaginable and so horrible that deteriorates your motor skills until you are virtually paralyzed, unable to speak or swallow or, eventually, breathe. Us take a listen to how they get through.

VIDEO Scott Cart - 2

“We don't believe God did this to us. You play the and you've been dealt. You cherish every moment. Your friends and family surround you and sustain you. Give thanks to God every day for the gifts God is giving you.” That's how we **experience extreme and hyper victory.**

There's nothing wrong with praying for a grand slam, out of the park, homerun miracle. **We pray for our dreams and sometimes those prayers are answered as they impact our lives.** But most of the time, what we see, is

God working through people around us and then God walking with us. We see God redeeming the broken places and forcing good to come from evil. Even when the worst thing happens, is not the last thing. That is what it means to experience victory and the assurance that **nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ**. Let's pray.

SLIDE **Prayer**

With your head bowed and your eyes closed, I would like to give you an opportunity. Some of you may be experiencing worship for the first time, or the first time in a long while. You may have just been joining us for a few weeks, but you still feel like holding back, not really sure you want to trust your life to God. Maybe there are questions which have kept you away from God. I would like to invite you today to trust in God for the first time, or again. You might whisper this simple prayer.

Thank you God... Thank you for my life... Thank you for this amazing creation... Thank you for your grace and mercy... Thank you for walking with me... Thank you for the people you bring across my path... Thank you for the hope I can have in Jesus... Thank you.

Lord, I give my life to you... Keep me in your care... I trust Jesus as my Savior... I wish to follow him as my Lord... I invite your Holy Spirit to comfort and lead me... In your holy name—amen.