Unless a Grain of Wheat

On Suffering, the Seed That Dies, and the Glorification of the Son of Man

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 1: The Hidden Mercy, Chapter 13

Sermon preached August 10, 2025

Living Into the Future

We are granted, as children of God, the opportunity to live into a future he has spoken over us. He has destined a future for every one of us (a destination without tears, without weeping, without sorrow) and that destiny can begin now, today, on this side of the trillion-mile journey toward the city he has prepared.

As we begin to think about that, we can either think in a way that says: I'm nothing. I'm worthless. I can never be the person God has destined me to be. That future label is not mine to live. It belongs to someone else: someone born higher, someone born Jewish. After all, the promises were originally made to Jews. What can I, some half-breed Gentile, add to the mix? What can I possibly contribute?

That doubt has a long pedigree in Scripture. *The woman at the well. The prodigal son. The woman caught in adultery.* Those are all of our stories. We can read the great destiny (being called the New Jerusalem, a city set on a hill, the light of the nations) and assume it cannot possibly be us.

But hear it again: God means everyone in this room to live into the future he has spoken. If the *old* creation was spoken into existence by the words of God (*the earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and God said*) and if those words spoken

into a formless void brought forth all the complexity of life we see around us today, how much more can the words spoken through his *Son* (who, John tells us, is himself called *the Word*) create the future destiny he has spoken? If you are *in the Word*, how much more is that destiny *yours*?

And if you think, *Yes, well, of course the promise is for me (I was born a European male; of course it lands here*) then be careful. The promise is for you, but not because you are a European male. Not because you are a Jewish male. The promise is for *all* humanity, because God is *one*. Paul puts it in the bluntest possible form in Galatians:

"Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

And then a few verses later:

> For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26–29)

Now *that* is future language. *You are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* The blessing of Abraham (the stars of heaven, the sands of the sea, blessing for all the families of the earth) has fallen on a congregation of Gentile farmers and warriors and tradespeople in a Roman colony at the edge of empire. What a surprise.

Separation and Recovery

Notice the pattern that has been running through Scripture from the beginning. God repeatedly *separates* in order to *recover and unite*. He pulled the rib from Adam's side (and in

the Hebrew, the verb has a kind of *tearing* quality, almost as if Adam was split in two) and brought back to him the woman, that they might know themselves whole only in being two-made-one again. And Adam exclaimed:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh . . . For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23–24).

Separation, then recovery, then a deeper togetherness. That is God's method.

In Genesis 6, violence fills the earth. So God brings a flood. Out of the flood, Noah and his three sons emerge, and from those three sons, the seventy nations of Genesis 10 are formed. The nations spread, create their own cultures, develop their own weapons of war, build their own walls. Babel scatters their languages. And then in Genesis 12, God calls one man, Abraham, and the whole point is exactly this:

"I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing . . . And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2–3).

The intention in calling one man out was that ultimately *all* seventy of those scattered nations would be brought back together through his seed. And the seed, Paul says, is Christ. The whole arc of Scripture is one of strategic separation in service of ultimate reunion.

But how does that reunion come? Not by force. Not by domination. *By suffering.*

"My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?"

Look at Psalm 22. Several of its verses will sound immediately familiar because they are heavily quoted in the Gospels:

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?" (Psalm 22:1).

That is the cry Jesus speaks from the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). And he is not quoting the line in isolation: He is invoking the *whole psalm*, in which the suffering one is mocked, his hands and feet pierced, his clothing divided, his bones counted by his enemies:

> All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!" . . . I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me . . . For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. (Psalm 22:7–8, 14, 16–18)

Every detail at the foot of the cross. Every mockery. The dividing of the garments. The piercing of hands and feet. And then, in the middle of all that suffering, the psalm pivots:

"All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:27–28).

Do you see what the suffering of the Messiah *produces*? The cry of forsakenness in verse 1 leads, twenty-six verses later, to *all the families of the nations* turning back to the Lord. Just as Adam went to sleep and out of his pierced side God produced the woman, *Christ went to sleep on the cross, they pierced his side, and out came blood and water*, and John tells us that blood and water is the source of the new birth (cf. John 19:34; 3:5). What proceeded from Christ's pierced side is what produces a *people*: the bride.

And when Jesus woke from death, where did he come out? In the *garden*. And whom did he meet first? *Mary*, who supposed him to be the gardener (John 20:15). The new Adam and the

new Eve, in the new garden. “Rabboni,” she said. And he said, *Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father* (John 20:17). There was going to be a time, fifty days later, when she could reach out. On the day of Pentecost, she did. And what happened to her, what happened to the hundred and twenty who came out of that upper room, was that they became living beings, the bride of Christ. And they were called to be just like their Bridegroom: *sufferers*.

Take up Your Cross

The week before his death, Jesus said:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24).

It is *suffering* that produced the redemption of the world. And if we think that our coming into the kingdom has somehow changed the kingdom (that it no longer requires sacrificial love from those who have been called, that the trillion-mile journey is now a comfortable one) we are mistaken. The journey of suffering leads to something that, from an everlasting perspective, cannot even be compared with what we are walking through here:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Our suffering takes different forms. Sometimes we suffer when we stand in the midst of opposition for the things of God. But more often our suffering comes when we *give up our rights so that others can grow in grace*. Have you ever had to tolerate a child’s behavior as you allow them to grow in wisdom and stature and understanding? You stay flexible. You absorb a lot. You wait. That is suffering in service of someone else’s growth.

Paul names exactly this dynamic in 2 Corinthians 1:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. (2 Corinthians 1:3–6)

Look at the cascading. Christ went through tribulation, so he knows how to comfort us in our tribulation. We are comforted by him in *our* tribulation, *so that we can comfort others*. When a woman who has been washing dishes in a difficult season discovers that the very sink in front of her has become an altar (when her finding of God in that mundane, exhausting place becomes a balm to others later) that is exactly what Paul is describing. Her suffering opened a comfort she could pass on.

And then Paul continues:

"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

If Paul and his companions could suffer to the point that they were *burdened beyond measure, above strength*, despairing *even of life*, then we are not to think some strange thing is happening to us when we find ourselves in that same place. The remarkable thing about Paul's situation is that he was dealing with the sufferings inflicted by evil men and an evil empire. He was dealing with a Caesar who claimed that *Caesar is Lord*, and Paul kept walking around city to city saying that *Christ is Lord*. That was subversive. There are always a lot of gods vying for our adoration. There is only one God who, if we give him our sufferings, will turn them into

salvation for others. *Our* salvation came from the suffering of *one*. *Our* suffering will lead to the salvation of *many*. That is the point.

Daniel 7: The Son of Man Comes With Clouds

Look at Daniel 7. Daniel 6 is the famous account everyone knows: Daniel in the lions' den, thrown into the pit, with the lions' mouths shut by an angel, lifted out the next morning while his accusers fall in his place. Daniel 7 is essentially the same story retold on a cosmic scale. Four terrible beasts wreak havoc and wage war against the whole world. And then Daniel sees this:

> I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9–10)

Judgment is set up. The court is in session. And what comes next is one of the most important Old Testament passages for understanding who Jesus is:

> I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

"The Son of Man." Hold onto that title; it is the most frequent self-designation Jesus uses for himself in the Gospels. Just as Daniel was lifted up out of the pit in chapter 6, here in chapter

7 the Son of Man is lifted up out of the chaos of the four beasts. He is brought before the Ancient of Days. He is given a kingdom. And what kind of kingdom? *All peoples, nations, and languages serve him.* Everlasting. Indestructible.

But Daniel is *grieved* by what he sees: grieved at the trampling work of the beasts, at the suffering of the saints under them. So the interpreting angel explains:

"Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever" (Daniel 7:17–18).

There is a future-based reality to live into. The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom. *You and I* shall receive the kingdom. When God says *go and sin no more*, he means us to live into the kingdom life. He will not give us a commandment that he will not also empower us to keep. That kind of cruelty is not in his character.

But then the vision shifts back to the beast, and this is the hard part. The horn makes war against the saints. The beast devours the whole earth. The pompous horn speaks against the Most High and persecutes the saints (Daniel 7:21, 23, 25). It almost looks like this trillion-mile journey is too much for any philosopher or homemaker or regular workaday person to walk. *Who are we to wage war against such power?*

And then the answer:

"But the court shall be seated, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and destroy it forever" (Daniel 7:26).

We do not have to do a thing. We stand in confidence with God. We suffer with our Savior. If we fight, if we fight fire with fire, we will become just like the thing we are trying to overthrow. The history books are full of revolutions that overthrew an aristocracy only to install

another dominating force in its place. Watch *Les Misérables*, the same truth runs through every page. Violence cannot satisfy the will of God.

Suffering leads to salvation. Violence leads to more death. Suffering, in the face of sacrificial love, brings things together. When the centurion at the foot of the cross, perhaps the very one who had thrust the spear into Jesus' side, saw what happened after Jesus breathed his last, after the earthquake and the darkening of the sky, he cried out:

"Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54).

Through the *suffering* of Christ, the Roman who killed him was saved. That is how the dominion is taken away. Not by an army. Not by force. Through one who refused to call down legions and instead opened his arms. The dominion shifts from the beast to the saints because the saints learned the secret from the One who suffered first:

> Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him. (Daniel 7:27)

Our job is to see that *all dominions* (all nations, all peoples, all tongues) come to him. Our language has to change. We do not have *enemies* in the old sense. Why did Jesus come preaching enemy love? *Love your enemies, and do good to those who despitefully use you and persecute you* (Luke 6:27–28). Why did Peter write of Christ:

"Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

He committed himself to the One who was able to save him. And he was heard. And so will you be.

“My Hour Has Come”

Throughout the Gospel of John, starting in chapter 2, there is a recurring phrase: *My hour has not yet come*. When Jesus’ mother comes to him at the wedding in Cana, “They have no wine,” he answers, *My hour has not yet come* (John 2:4). When men in the seventh chapter want to seize him, they cannot, *because His hour had not yet come* (John 7:30). When men in chapter 8, at the treasury, want to take hold of him, they cannot, *for His hour had not yet come* (John 8:20).

And then we come to the last week of Jesus’ life. The Passover has begun. The pilgrims have arrived. And listen to what John records:

> Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. (John 12:20–22)

Certain Greeks. Outside the temple. Asking to see Jesus.

Think about what that means. Greeks had once been the great desecrators of the temple, Antiochus IV had stopped the sacrifices and poured swine’s blood on the altar; the Maccabean revolt had been fought to reclaim Jewish worship from Greek paganism. The last time the temple courts had seen Greeks at a feast, it had been to defile. *Now* (generations after the dispersion of the Jews across the Greek empire, after the influence of scattered Jewish communities on those very Greek cities) *certain Greeks* have come to *worship*. Something has turned. The seed planted in dispersion has sprouted in Greek soil.

And what does Jesus say?

“But Jesus answered them, saying, ‘The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified’” (John 12:23).

The hour has come. For two and a half years his hour had not come. But the moment certain Greeks appear at the gate wanting to see him, *the hour has come*. Why? Because the Greeks coming is *Daniel 7 happening*. When Daniel saw the Son of Man glorified, taken up into clouds, served by all nations, that vision is being claimed right now, in real time, on the temple mount, because Gentiles are showing up to worship. Jesus is saying, in effect, *Daniel 7 is happening. Not in the future. Right now.*

Who are the Gentiles in your life? Who is the unlikely one you have been certain would never come? No, that one, that one’s childhood was too rough. That one came from a broken home. That one is not kingdom material. The beasts have devoured her soul. They have done their worst to her. But the moment Jesus saw certain Greeks at the gate, he said, the hour has come. The hour comes when the unlikely show up.

“Unless a Grain of Wheat Falls Into the Ground and Dies”

And right after announcing that his hour has come, Jesus says:

> Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12:24–25)

Notice what “hating one’s life” means here. It does not mean self-harm. It means I prefer your wisdom, Lord, over my own. I prefer your kingdom over my preferences. I am a citizen of your city, and I will choose that citizenship over anything I could grasp for in this life. That is the hatred of one’s life that produces grain.

If we will *die* (meaning, give up our rights sacrificially for the other) we will produce much fruit. I am not talking about literal death. I am talking about the practical, daily, costly act of giving way to the other in love. To your children. To your spouse. To your parents. To your coworkers. To the angry stranger at the next desk. *What does it mean to die for your child?* It means giving up your rights so that they know they are more valuable to you than your convenience, your preferences, your dignity. They need to know that their value extends far beyond surface-level behaviors. It extends to the point where, when I cannot get through to them, I am willing to put them in contact with a God who can change them way beyond my belt or my discipline or my time-out, because there is nothing in the toolkit of parental control that is more powerful than the *sacrificial love* poured out for the child.

They don't serve us. We serve them. And through being served, they learn how to serve others.

Philippians 2: Christ's Pattern, Now Ours

Paul, writing from a Roman prison, picks up exactly this thread in Philippians 2. He says he does not know whether his future holds life or death, but either way, Christ will be magnified in his body. And then he turns to the church:

> Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also

> has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:3–11)

Look at that *therefore*. Christ humbled himself unto the death of the cross, *therefore* God highly exalted him. That is Daniel 7 in apostolic prose. Christ suffered, *therefore* he was glorified. And his pattern is now ours. Let the same mind be in *you*. Esteem others better than yourselves. Look out for the interests of others. Walk the path of sacrificial love.

Coda: A Pastoral Question

One of the great indictments many people raise against the loving God we serve is this: *how could a good God allow suffering?* But suffering is simply part of the existence of every creature. All creatures suffer. The question is not whether suffering will come, but what God is doing in it.

During a hard season once, a sister in our assembly was walking and going through her own mental inventory of the women in our congregation she had known: recalling the women who had been healed, and then the women who had not been. She found herself sliding into the second list, naming the ones who had died despite their faith. And she felt the Lord say to her, very gently: None of your business. That's not your concern. You don't know the conversations I had with that sister. You don't know the conversations I had with that one. You don't know why I took them when I took them. You worry about your journey. I've spoken to you about yours.

There is a humility in that word. Christ, despite all his rejection by friends, his imminent death, his physical pain, *gravitated constantly toward trusting God*. Even on the cross, he was willing to feel the forsakenness of God (*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*) and that

humanity of his gives us a kind of grace to walk our own suffering. Some will not be healed in this life, and we will hear their testimony of God's gracious words to them in their last days. Some will come out of suffering, and their testimony will become comfort for us. We do not know what God is doing in the lives of people who are suffering, but we know he is doing *something*, and we are called to walk alongside them, not to render verdicts.

The salvation of this world depends on us being willing to put others' needs above our own. When the church takes its rightful place as the *humble* people of God (not the head, but the body that lays itself down to make easier the steps of those who are suffering) when we put our cloaks down so the steps of the leper are less painful, when we *become* that people, *the world will be changed*.

Let's go out and be that people. In our workplaces. In our homes. On Facebook. Telling our story, the ups and the downs of it. One person at a time. One cradle at a time. One angry coworker at a time. The God of heaven is using you and me to bring salvation to a world that the seed had to die to redeem.