

Sometimes the smallest thing can tell a greater story. Your great grandmother’s locket containing a tiny picture. Stone markers telling of Civil War battles. A Congressional Medal of Honor pinned to a lapel. A soldier’s dog tags. The smallest things can tell much greater stories, extending over time, involving many people.

Consider a well-used silver cup, about the size of a chalice. It was buried in the homestead of a once prosperous Roman family. When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, it was valuable enough to be buried in a wine cellar but not valuable enough to be taken along as the family fled for safety. This one small cup belonging to one unnamed family told of a much larger story. A story of gods and humans. The story of Rome and what it was like to live under the rule of Caesar Augustus.

On one side of the cup is the image of Augustus, surrounded by gods. He is seated, and being handed the world by Venus and winged Victory, while Mars, the god of war, brings before him a multitude of conquered nations. On the other side of the cup is the image of Augustus, ruling over people. Here, the image is one of mercy and not of war. Augustus is seated, people are coming before him, and he extends one hand out to the people while in the other hand he holds a spear.

This image of the emperor was common throughout Rome at the time when Paul wrote his letter. It was carved into marble, printed on coins, molded into ceremonial cups like the one found in the Italian villa. It helped people understand what it meant to be faithful. Faithfulness was the word used to describe the relationship between the conqueror and the conquered. The emperor held both power and mercy. In power, he would protect his people – so you see him with a spear in his hand – in mercy, he would rule his people – and so you see him reaching out with an open hand. Power and mercy in this one figure, ruling over people, one small actor in the much larger story of the gods.

When Paul wrote Romans, he offered another story of another conqueror who ruled over people in power and mercy. This God and man was Jesus the Christ.

The small portion of the letter that we have before us today is fairly well-known. It names a struggle, the struggle between sinner and saint. This struggle is real and hidden in the heart of every person. Some people confess this struggle openly, asking others to help them in relationships of accountability; other people hide this struggle, putting on the best face they can. All people, however, suffer this struggle and it is not something, like that cup, that can be left behind. Until the day when our conqueror, Jesus Christ, returns, we will be involved in this struggle of being a sinner and a saint.

Paul’s description is personal, individual. It tells the story of one man and one struggle that never seems to end. Paul knows the good that God desires and Paul himself agrees with this desire. He acknowledges that what God wants is indeed good. Yet Paul also discovers that he is “sold under sin” (7:14). Paul uses the language of slavery and of captivity. His members “wage

war” and he is “captive” to the law of sin (7:23). Paul knows the good that he wants to do, but he is unable to do it. Instead, he finds that what he doesn’t want to do, that he does. A slave to sin, a captive to his flesh, Paul cries out for deliverance.

His story, however, is not the story of only one man. This one small revelation of this personal private experience, is the larger story and experience that we all know so well.

This, however, is not the only story that Paul wants to tell. There is a much greater story, the story of God that Paul wants to highlight for all people. This story of God is a story of faithfulness. Not our faithfulness to God but God’s faithfulness to his promises to his people. As early as the fall in the Garden of Eden, God had begun telling this story of his love. As Adam and Eve stood there, naked before God, ashamed of themselves, and yet unable to hide, God began to speak of his love. They overheard it, in a conversation he had with the snake. God said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Here, was the first glimpse of God’s promise. The greater story of God. He would send one, an offspring of a woman, who would bruise the head of Satan and conquer in the fight. Adam and Eve lived in hope.

The individuals, the families, the nations that followed them lived in hope of this story of God coming true. And the apostle Paul writes this letter to proclaim that it did come true, in Jesus Christ. “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Paul cries out. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” In this section of the letter, Paul lets his one small story become part of a much larger story. The story of Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is the one who came as our deliverer. Satan worked through humanity to bruise his heel and yet he delivered us from death and from the kingdom of Satan as he revealed his power in his resurrection and called us into the kingdom of God. This God loves us, dies for us, and rises to give us new life.

“Jesus Christ is Lord” Paul proclaims, and, with those words, he invites everyone into God’s greater story. Jesus Christ is the one who rules, the one who is greater than Caesar and Caesar’s gods. He himself is God, he has come as our deliverer, and he is at the heart of God’s greater story of the redemption of all people in the world. In fact, you could say that the Author of the story wrote Himself into it, to become the one who rescues.

All of that is astonishing on its own, but there’s something else. He wants you to write your story in harmony with His. He wants you to write a story about justice, mercy, and humility. He wants you to live a life that tells a story of grace, forgiveness, and freedom. It’s your story. And it’s also about him. What do you want to say?