

God's Purpose in Your Trials

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Romans 8:28-29

Out text this morning brings us to perhaps one of the most treasured promises in the entirety of God's Word. This text has undoubtedly given hope to countless believers in the midst of circumstances that, seen through finite lenses, might have otherwise seemed hopeless. These two verses provide us with the absolute certainty that God has secured our salvation and that He is using every detail along the way for our good - to prepare us for eternity. The question is, do we believe this is true? If we are honest, there are times when we are all tempted to question whether God is really in control of what happens in our lives. It seems rather easy to believe that God is in control when the sea is calm, but what about in the midst of life's storms? Romans 8:28-29 gives us hope that that God will complete the work He started in us, and that He will, in His great wisdom and power, orchestrate every circumstance that He has ordained for our lives to ready us for eternity. God has a great purpose for your life and that purpose, as we'll learn this morning, is for His glory and your good. Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning – Paul speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; Romans 8:28–29 (NASB)

I. GOD IS SOVEREIGNLY IN CONTROL OF EVERY FACET OF YOUR LIFE.

“And we know that God causes...”

Do you believe that? I love the fact that over and over in the New Testament we are confronted with the inescapable truth that believers are called to have confidence in God's sovereign control over all things. The word sovereignty means that God is in control of all things everywhere all the time and that He directs all things in complete alignment with His predetermined will. Our surety in the sovereignty of God's control is based on His immutable (unchanging) character. This means that we can have complete confidence that there are no accidents. Life is not a random set of events. We are not left to luck. There is a master and a master plan operating behind all of life's circumstances. Nothing happens that is outside of God's knowledge; nothing happens that is outside of God's control; and nothing happens that is outside of God's sequence. Therefore, you can know without a doubt that every circumstance that comes into your life was sovereignly

ordained by an omniscient, omnipotent, gracious God who loves you and cares for you beyond your wildest imagination.

It is God who calls us, God who regenerates us, God who sustains us, God who sanctifies us, and it will be God who ultimately glorifies these weak, frail frames of ours - and in between - He causes all things to work for the good of those who love him. We're not talking about an impersonal force here, we're talking about a personal Creator-God who is intimately involved of the lives of His children.

It's important to note that the word "causes" or some versions translate it "works" is in the active tense. This tells us that the working of God in our lives is an ongoing activity. God didn't just "cause" or "work" once at some point in time. He's continually "causing" and continually "working" in the life of all people, but as we will see in our study this morning, He works in a special way to bring about good from every circumstance in the lives of those who are His own. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is sovereignly in control not only of the big picture of your life, saving you and getting you safely to glory, but that He is also sovereignly in control of the *moments*? When life *seems* most out of control, it could never be more in control! God is intimately involved in the lives of His children. He is refining us, growing us, sanctifying us, chiseling away that which doesn't reflect the glory of His Son. He is at work preparing you for the day when you will stand before Him without spot or wrinkle or any such defect. God is preparing you for the eternity that you will spend beholding His beauty and worshipping the splendor of His holiness. If that doesn't get you excited, only a new heart will!

II. GOD'S PURPOSE FOR TRIALS IN THE LIFE OF A BELIEVER IS ALWAYS GOOD.

"...All things to work together for good..."

What does all things mean? All things means good and bad; bright and dark; sweet and bitter; easy and hard; happy and sad; prosperity and poverty; health and sickness; calm and storm; comfort and suffering; life and death.¹ God uses everything in the life of a believer for good.

A. God uses sweet things in your life for your good.

A loving spouse, wonderful children, a job that provides for your family, friendships, the Church, God's Word, good health, spiritual influence, fruitful ministries, answered prayer... No one argues that God uses the good things in your life for your good. The challenge arises when we begin to discuss the sorrowful trials in life.

B. God uses sorrowful things in your life for your good.

What about the loss of a child or a spouse? What about sickness and disease? What about the word "terminal"? What about the loss of a job? What about persecution for bearing the name

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible: Volume IV Matthew-Romans*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 704.

of Christ? What about broken friendships? What about a lost and rebellious child? Is God limited in some way from using these trials to shape us and conform us into the image of Christ – absolutely not. God is God over all! He uses each and every circumstance, even the difficult ones, for His glory and our good. It’s been said that the eye that’s washed with tears sees the best; and a sick-bed often teaches more than a sermon. Trying times are growing times.

C. God even uses the sin in your life for your good.

God in His unfathomable wisdom even uses our sin, which is the antithesis of good, to bring about blessing in our lives. As incredible as this truth is, we must remember that we are never encouraged to sin for the sake of the “good” that might result from it. Just two chapters back in Romans 6, Paul’s strongly exhorts us when he says, “Are we to continue on sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” Romans 6:1-2

How then does God use our sin ultimately for good and blessing in our lives? Briefly, I think there are three ways: 1. When the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of sin and we respond in humble repentance, we are reminded once again of the sinfulness of sin. In other words, we grow in an understanding of how heinous our sin really is and that is a good thing. 2. God disciplines us as sons and that produces holiness and Christ-like character in our lives. 3. God also uses our sin to remind us of how big His grace and forgiveness are. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:20 that where sin increases, grace abounds all the more. In Psalm 130:3-4 the Psalmist writes, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness...”

D. There is great purpose in each of your trials.

Rest assured that each trial that God providentially allows to come to pass in your life comes with great purpose. James tells us not only how we should respond to God-ordained trials in our lives, but he also tells us what their purpose is. In James 1:2-4 James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Martyn Lloyd Jones says:

The Christian does not know everything, but he does know one thing. Look at him in trouble with everything apparently [at odds] against him, [when] he is so perplexed that he does not know what to pray for as he ought. He is confused and does not [always] understand. Yet even at that very point he can say, “I do not know which way to turn or to go; I do not understand why these things are happening, and I do not know exactly what to ask for at this moment. But I know this, that in spite of my ignorance, and in spite of everything that is happening to me, this and everything else is working together for my good.”²

² D. M. Lloyd Jones, Romans : An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 177.

IN WHAT WAYS DOES GOD USE OUR TRIALS FOR GOOD

1. God uses trials to help us learn to trust His wise providence and goodness in our lives. God know what is best *for* me and God does what is best *with* me.

2. God uses trials to expose our hearts and to deepen our faith.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that our hearts are deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Oftentimes God uses trials in our lives to help us see the sin that resides in the depths of our hearts. The 17th century Puritan, Thomas Watson wisely said:

Affliction teaches what sin is. In the word preached, we hear what a dreadful thing sin is, that it is both defiling and damning, but we fear it no more than a painted lion; therefore God lets loose affliction, and then we feel sin bitter in the fruit of it. We see that corruption in our hearts in the time of affliction, which we would not believe was there. Water in the glass looks clear, but set it on the fire, and the scum boils up. In prosperity, a man seems to be humble and thankful, the water looks clear; but set this man a little on the fire of affliction, and the scum boils up — much impatience and unbelief appear. “Oh,” says a Christian, “I never thought I had such a bad heart, as now I see I have; I never thought my corruptions had been so strong, and my graces so weak.”³

3. God uses trials to teach us to pray.

We are called to pray continually - without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But oh how often do we become soft in our prayer life. Prayer communicates a lot of things, but it especially communicates how dependent we believe we are upon God. Prayer communicates that God is the all-sufficient benefactor and that we are the ever-needy beneficiaries of His grace. What is oftentimes the first thing you hear when God brings a trial into a person's life... “Will you pray for me!”

4. God uses trials to perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish us.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 1 Peter 5:10

5. God uses trials to reveal our smallness, weakness and frailty.

God ordained trials serve as a reminder that we are not in control. They remind us that we are not as strong as we thought we were. They serve to keep us from thinking more highly of ourselves that we ought (Romans 12:3). They remind us that He is the potter and we are the clay.

³ Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 27-28.

6. God uses trials in our lives to prepare us for an eternal weight of glory.

Everything that happens in this life is used by God to prepare us in some way for the future revelation of glory. Paul reminded the Corinthians when he said, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" 2 Corinthians 4:16–18.

7. God uses trials to allow us to share in Christ's suffering.

God allows, in a limited sense, trials into our lives that give us a glimpse of the suffering of Christ on our behalf. Remember Paul prayed in Philippians 3: 10-11, "[I want to] know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and [the fellowship of sharing in] his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

8. God uses trials to humble us and shake us of our self-confidence.

We all need to be humbled. We need to be shaken of our self-confidence. It is good for us to be brought low before God. It reminds us of our need for forgiveness and grace. It reminds us of how dependent we are on God. When we are humble and contrite, we are in the best position to learn from God and to be submissive to His will for our lives.

9. God uses trials to turn us from our propensity to look to ourselves as our own source of sufficiency.

10. God uses trials to remind us of our need for Him.

11. God uses trials to loosen our attachment to the things of this world.

When you dig away the earth from the root of the tree, it is to loosen the tree from the earth; so God digs away our earthly comforts to loosen our hearts from the [things of] earth. God would have the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, does not much trouble us. Is it not good to be weaned? The oldest saints need it.⁴

God calls us to, "Seek things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set our minds on things above, not on things that are on earth" Colossians 3:1-2. Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 4:18 Paul exhorts us to, "Look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

12. God uses trials to arrest our attention and awaken us from spiritual slumber.

We get apathetic and spiritually lethargic at times... Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "The most dangerous time for a Christian is when everything seems to be going well without much change and without much incident." If we are not careful we can easily slide into the ruts of

⁴ Thomas Watson, 29.

life and become complacent. Trials have a way of startling and awakening us. Jones concludes, "It is good to have the routine of life upset occasionally, no matter what the interruption may be."

13. God uses trials to draw us back when we wander away from Him.

Remember Isaiah 53:6, "We all like sheep have gone astray." Even redeemed sheep are prone to wonder, prone to leave the God we love. And because God is a good shepherd, he graciously extends His shepherds' hook and draws us back in. Twice in Psalm 119 the Psalmist acknowledges that God has used affliction to draw him back to Himself and grow him spiritually. In verse 67 the Psalmist writes, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." Likewise in verse 71 he says, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

14. God uses trials to help us refocus on His glory.

E. The infinite love and wisdom of God are woven into each of your trials.

Do you believe that? The way you respond in the midst of your trials communicates a lot. Difficult circumstances are oftentimes where the rubber meets the road theologically – this is where you learn what you really believe to be true about the God by whom all circumstances in your life have been sovereignly ordained. Our theology is often forged in the fire of affliction. God doesn't spare His children from the trials that are a result of living in a Genesis 3 world, but He does give us the incredible assurance that He is lovingly and wisely working all things for our good. A dear lady in our church sent me a poem a couple of months ago that she had written in response to the death of her first husband. Listen to how God used this incredibly difficult set of circumstances to grow her in a deeper understanding of His love and wisdom:

Higher than the heavens; Your ways are not like mine; But your plans are always right on time. Your thoughts are not my thoughts; Who has ever understood? But you're always up to something good. With an open heart and empty hands; Letting go of all I know and what I don't understand Help me to see with eyes above; Trusting what you give is sifted through Your hands of Love⁵

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO TRIALS

1. Recoil – Angry and bitter at God for allowing trials into your life.
2. Submit – Humbly accept your circumstances as from the hand of a loving and wise God.

⁵ Written by Jani Hamm after the death of her first husband.

Peter encourages us, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” 1 Peter 4:12-13. Likewise, James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” James 1:2-3. One pastor said this about how Christians are to view their trials:

We're not to view trials as some sort of cosmic accident from a God who's just toying with us, detached from any purpose in a way that leaves us in continual hopelessness and despair, nor are trials [an act] of God puppeteering evil over us...That's not the lens by which a Christian is meant to view trials. Those aren't God's purposes. Instead James paints a picture for the Christian here to view trials with joy as an act of faith for what God's divine plan is working out in our lives to produce in us what we could not produce on our own.⁶

EXAMPLES OF GOD-HONORING RESPONSES TO TRIALS (JOSEPH, JOB, HABAKKUK)

One of the most familiar examples of a God-honoring response to trials is the story of Joseph. He is hated by his brothers, thrown into a pit and left for dead, sold into slavery, accused of taking advantage of Potiphar’s wife, thrown in prison, and forgotten about by Pharaoh’s butler. When all hope seems lost and it appears as if Joseph’s circumstances are working in every direction except for good, he interprets a dream for Pharaoh and Pharaoh rewards him by placing him second in command and giving him charge of all the food in the land as the seven-year famine approached. Threatened by the lack of food, Joseph’s brothers trek to Egypt and find themselves unknowingly standing before Joseph, whom they tried to kill. How does the world respond to such a set of circumstances – with bitterness and anger? But Joseph understood all that had happened in light of God’s sovereign will. As he looked his brothers in the eyes he said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” Genesis 50:20.

How did Job respond to the trials in his life? His livestock had been stolen; all his servants had been slaughtered, and all 10 of his children were killed when the house they were eating in collapsed on top of them. In what seems to be the span of just a few minutes Job lost nearly all that he had. Can you imagine the heartache? Can you imagine the questions that must have rolled through his mind? And yet how does he respond? In chapter 1:21 Job cries out, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Recognizing God’s sovereign rights (The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away), Job praised the LORD. He followed adversity with adoration, woe with worship. He didn’t give in to

⁶ Quote from a sermon written by Shea Sumlin “God’s Purposes in Your Trials” April 28, 2013

bitterness; and he refused to blame God for wrongdoing.⁷ In chapter 2 Job was tempted by his wife to “curse God and die.” How did he respond? He said, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil” Job 2:10? That statement is followed by the words “in all of this Job did not sin with his lips.” In chapter 13:15 Job says, “Though He slay me, I will hope in him.” What words of encouragement when we are facing trials of many kinds.

Habakkuk writes, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior” Habakkuk 3:17-18.

Let me ask you a question - when was the last time that you thanked God for your trials? We often thank God for the good, but we doubt His goodness in adversity. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, which is a great passage to memorize, Paul says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Let me ask you another question - What if the answer to your trials is, “My grace is sufficient for you” 2 Corinthians 12:9? How will you respond? What if in God’s wisdom He has determined not to turn down the trial, but instead to turn up the grace. If we understand that God is in control and that He is working all things for our good, then we can say with Job, “Though He slay me, I will hope in him.”

F. “Good” is not defined by how your circumstances make you feel.

It goes without saying that some of our trials can be incredibly challenging. It’s not easy to lose a child. It’s not easy to sit next to your spouse in the doctor’s office after the MRI and hear the word cancer. It’s not easy to endure persecution for your faith in Christ. It can be tempting at times to feel as if what God is doing in your life is everything but good. Remember that God is wiser than we are – His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

I love the familiar promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13. Paul says, “No temptation (trial, adversity, or test) has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” What we feel and what is true are oftentimes two different things.

G. God doesn’t act punitively towards His children.

⁷ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), n.p.

He disciplines us when necessary, but he doesn't punish. All of our punishment was poured out on Christ at the Cross. The writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 12:7-10 says, "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."

WE MUST REMEMBER THAT JESUS IS THE SAME IN THE MIDST OF OUR TRIALS AS HE WAS BEFORE THEM. IN THE MIDST OF YOUR DARKEST DAYS CAN YOU SAY, "MY JESUS IS THE SAME!"

III. AS SWEET AS THIS PROMISE IS, IT'S CONDITIONAL.

"...to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

There only two categories of people. There are those who hate God and there are those who love Him. We were all born God haters. We were all born dead in sin with an insatiable love for self. But God has called some out of darkness and death and changed their hearts – not because we deserved it, but because it pleased Him to do so. Ephesians 2 tells us that, "[We] were [once] dead in trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. The grace of God turns God-haters into God-lovers.

One of the greatest evidences that a person has genuinely been converted is that there is a love for God where there had once only been hatred. What does it mean to love God? To love God means that our true desire is to please Him, to live for His glory, and to keep His commandments. (2 Corinthians 5:9, 1 Corinthians 10:31, John 14:15)

God rules over everything and every one (believers and unbelievers), but His oversight is very different in the case of believers. To them – and *only* them – does God's providence work "for good." If you are not a believer, this promise is not for you. You can't use this promise as a magic wand to provide yourself with the assurance that everything will turn out fine in the end. Should you die in your condition of unbelief, providence has not been working for your good. The writer of Hebrews says, "It is appointed for a man to die once, and after that comes judgment" Hebrews 9:27.⁸

⁸ Derek Thomas, *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home*. (Sanford: Reformation Trust, 2011), 94.

IV. GOD'S ULTIMATE PURPOSE IN YOUR TRIALS IS TO MAKE YOU MORE LIKE CHRIST.

"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren"

We will talk more about God's foreknowledge and predestination next week when we study what is commonly referred to as the golden links of Salvation. Simply stated, to foreknow means to "forelove". When we speak about God foreknowing us, what we are saying is that God knew us from eternity past and because of His mercy and grace He has regarded us with a sovereign and distinguishing delight. To predestine means that God has sovereignly determined to work all things out in accordance with the counsel of His will – He has determined exactly how he will accomplish His will in our lives. The theological significance of all of this is that God is not flying by the seat of His pants with you. Paul says, "He chose [you] in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined [you] for adoption as [a son] through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved" Ephesians 1:4–6.

What is the goal or the aim of God foreknowing you from eternity past and predestining you in love to be adopted as a son? Paul tells us in verse 29 that God's ultimate purpose is that we might become conformed to the image of His son. God is at work using every circumstance in our lives like a diamond cutter uses a diamond wheel. One day, as a result of everything you have endured and enjoyed in this life, He will have chipped and chiseled you into His own image. That makes every circumstance of life praiseworthy!

I said earlier that the trials that God brings into our lives come with great purpose – I hope that you can see that is true. But it's also important that you know that your trials come with a great reward. James encourages us when he says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, *for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him*" James 1:12. We must not forget that the cross comes before the crown!

Take heart – God is in control of every facet of your life. Are you confident that He who began a good work in you, "foreloving" and predestining you before the foundation of the world, will complete the work that He started in you? Do you trust that He knows what's best for you? Do you believe that He loves and cares for you and has an incredible plan for your life? Do you believe that He is big enough, powerful enough and wise enough to tailor a set of circumstances that will culminate in you perfectly reflecting the image of His Son? That is the God you serve!