

REDEMPTION: Good to Triumph Over Evil

Theme: God's pattern is to bring good out of evil, just as resurrection follows crucifixion.

Text: Roman 8:28-39

Series: What Can We Count on From God?

Read Romans 8:28-39

The Christian psychologist Larry Crabb made the very provocative statement, "No one will conclude that God is good by studying life." Our featured character during this month of studies has been the apostle Paul. Would anyone conclude that God is good by looking at what he endured? Listen to Paul's own catalogue of his hardships in service to God in II Corinthians 11:23-27. In this setting he is defending himself against counterfeit apostles:

23Are they servants of Christ?... I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."

Yet at the end of this litany, we don't hear any sarcasm in Paul's tone in reference to his service to the Lord. He doesn't say to God, "It sure has been fun serving you, Lord. You sure know how to treat your followers well. Thanks a lot for nothing." Paul's life undermines the myth that if we are faithful followers of Jesus, it can be translated into a benefit plan of ease, comfort and earthly rewards. If that is our assumption, then it leads to our question of the month,

Then, "What Can We Count on From God?"

We have affirmed that there is a benefit plan, there are considerable rewards for aligning our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Yet the benefits are primary internal and relational. Over the last three Sundays, we have looked at three basic building blocks that serve as the foundation upon which we construct our life in the Lord. The first building block is that God's love comes to us apart from circumstances through His indwelling presence. In spite of the catalogue that I have just given you of Paul's horrendous strains, he never added those up as evidence against the love of God for him. The love of God embraced his heart, regardless of life's event. The second building block has to do with our basic

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purpose. God intends to shape us into his image and likeness as we have already read. Romans 8:29 says, "For those whom he foreknew (fore loved) he also predestined (intended from all eternity) to be conformed to the image of His Son..." The way we put this was, "God is far more concerned about our character than he is our comfort." Last Sunday, we laid the third building block in place by saying that Christians have the ultimate hope, because for us *the best is always yet to come*. If we have hope for the good life only now, what good is that? This life is a blip on the screen of eternity. Christ has made provision for us to inherit bodies that will last forever in the presence of His radiant glory.

The final building block that I want to put into place in this series is that God is good, and His pattern is to bring good out of the difficult and even evil circumstances of life.

We will focus on one very familiar verse this morning, Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." This same apostle who faced a level of trauma on the intensity meter that would leave us crying "uncle", is the same one who affirms the absolute goodness of God and his ability to carry that good in our lives.

I say this to stress the depth of this verse, because we can easily miss it because of its familiarity. For how many of you is this familiar verse? How many of you have had this quoted to you when you were going through a hard time? This verse can be reduced to a cliché. It is like calling the doctor at 3AM, and since he doesn't want to be bothered, he dismisses you by saying, "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning." Christians who don't want to do the hard work of entering someone else's life strains, can say, "Take this verse and call me in the morning."

I have itemized Paul's tough life from the outset as a way to emphasize that Paul in no way is making light of the horrors and injustice that life can throw at us. But in spite of life he affirms that God is good.

A Promise for Followers of Jesus

For whom does this truth of God working all things together for good apply? Is this an indiscriminate promise? Is he saying that this is true for everyone who walks on this planet? No. Paul gives two qualifiers for this promise.

1. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of [whom]...**those who love him...**" In order to embrace this promise as true for us, we must answer the question, do I love God? To love God is to treasure, cherish, savor, value, prize God for Himself, not just the goodies that He will provide. To love

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God is equivalent to obeying God. In others words, our willing and free submission to God's plan is the way that God moves all things after his will. One person put this condition of our love for God like this, "If a person loves God and trusts God, if a person feels and knows and is convinced that God is all-wise and all loving Father, then he can humbly accept all that God sends to him. Without trusting the grace and goodness of God to bring good out any situation, we will fight God's plan and purpose and then end in bitterness." So to love God is cooperate with God in the outworking of his plan.

2. The second condition of this promise "and we know that in all things God works for the good of those...**who have been called according to his purpose.**" To be called is to hear the summons, and respond to Jesus' invitation "come and follow me". What does Jesus intend in this relationship? For us to become like Him. As we said in week 2, Jesus will do what it takes to make us into his image and likeness, and frankly that is sometimes not very pretty.

So why these qualifiers of loving God and being called, as conditions for God working everything together for good? The nature of this life, and we might wish it to be different, is that we all have to face tough stuff. The tough stuff either shapes us or breaks us, softens us or hardens us, makes us better or bitter. If you believe that God can work through the hard stuff to bring about our good, then we will go with what he has planned. We will bend but we will not break.

How is it that God brings the good out of even the hard stuff of life?

1. God incorporates our life's detours into his roadmap. Our cul-de-sacs become his open highways. Sometimes these dead ends in life are of our own making; we make self-destructive decisions and put ourselves in a position where there seems to be no way out. Other times, we are the victims of others people's actions and through little to no fault of our own we find ourselves coping with difficult choices.

In my first ministry position, I worked with college students at the University of Pittsburgh. I have vivid recollections of Biff coming into my office sobbing because he had made a mess of his life. He was completing his junior year and it was time to prepare for the entrance exams to get into medical school. He was convinced that it was God's plan for him to be doctor. The only trouble was that he had been a lazy student and had not earned the kind of grades to qualify for medical school. He was convinced that he had thwarted God's perfect plan for his life. Since he could never qualify for medical school he had gotten off of God's track and he would never able to get back on plan the rest of his life. He was at a dead end in his mind.

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I had one of these same experiences, which I refer to as my wilderness years. At the end of my first ministry position with college students in Pittsburgh, PA at the age of 29, I was convinced that I was ready to have my own church. Lily and I had had our daughter, Aimee, and were feeling the tug to move back to California to be near family. Anxious to make this happen I jumped at the first suitor that came along. Though I truly had no peace and internal assurance that the call to be pastor of a small church in Burbank, CA was of God, I responded anyway, so desirous was I to make the move. Being still full of my self and assured of my powers, I thought, I can take this small, struggling congregation and turn into a powerhouse for the Lord. Well, the long and the short of this 7 year sojourn was most of the great things I had envisioned didn't materialize, and I felt I was at a dead end. God had abandoned me in the back water of life. My career was over. As much as I attempted to escape to some more thriving situation, it seemed like the Lord had turned a deaf ear. The image that dominated that period was, I was stranded in the wilderness, needing to be rescued. God was in a helicopter flying overhead and I was on the ground waving my white flag of surrender and the helicopter just passed on overhead.

For Biff, for me, and for all of us who love God and are called according to his purpose, **the Lord incorporates our detours into his roadmap**. There is nothing wasted into God's economy in the way he runs his kingdom. John Piper puts it like this, "Specifically the glorious might of God that we need to see and trust is the power of God to turn all of our detours and obstacles into glorious outcomes." I am told that one of characteristics of Persians rugs is that they are full of mistakes. But when the rug maker notices a mistake, he has a creative way of incorporating the mistake into the pattern so that it blends in. This is true of the way the Lord works. Dallas Willard puts it like this, "Nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us on our way to our destiny in God's full world." Only we can decide that God can redeem the mistakes we or someone else has made. God's intention is to do so if we cooperate.

2. Secondly, it often takes the distance of time, to see how the Lord brings the good out of the troubles of life. **Time is the great perspective giver**. Time transforms the meaning of events in our life. I am not implying that in this life that we will know the why's and wherefore's of all that happens to us. Much of what happens in this life will not be clear or even completed until Christ brings in his kingdom and rights all wrongs, and settles the score of injustice. But if we believe that God is the God of great reversals, quite often in our life experience we can begin to see the redemptive good that God will bring about.

Well, at the end of my 7 years in Burbank, it seemed that God finally made one more pass over the wilderness and noticed this frantic person waving the white towel down below. The only trouble was that I had come to the conclusion two years before the Lord had that it was the right time to leave this "dead end". But

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as is true of God's plan, he opened the right door for a ministry at just right time. My motivation had waned, and I desperately needed confirmation that I should even stay in ministry. Yet when it came time to leave the Burbank church, all I wanted to do was put the past behind me. I thought to myself, "I am going to walk out of town and act like it had never happened." I would refer to this as my *parenthesis* in life. Let's put brackets around this experience and flush it from my consciousness. But the Lord had no intention of letting me excise these 7 years from my life. As time passed, I first had to come to terms with the decision I made to accept the call to the Burbank church in the first place. At a retreat I was forced to confess my disobedience in accepting this call. What was it that was driving me to make this decision? Secondly, I began to see that this was the crucible in which God was shaping my character. I came to the Burbank church with the sense that "I and God" can turn this church into a beacon for Him. Notice the order of the words, "I and God". I came to see that those 7 years were about humility. I couldn't make happen what I had dreamed, because it was really all about me. God was repositioning His place in my life. Over time, I came to embrace those 7 years as a gift from God, "Thank you Lord, for allowing Burbank to be in my life."

The Lord put me in a new ministry setting, perfectly matched to the gifts I brought and I was now appropriately disciplined.

3. This leads to the third truth about the way the Lord brings good out of struggle in our life. **It is quite often life's pain that He turns into our ministry.** He redeems the pain by making us available to others who are walking through what he have survived and out of which we have seen new life birthed. Alcoholics Anonymous has built this principle into their recovery process. It is recovering alcoholics who serve as the sponsors for those who are attempting to come out of addiction. Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, understood this biblical principle like few have. He knew that quite often one must reach bottom before we would be willing to climb upward. He said, "How privileged we are to understand so well the divine paradox that strength rises from weakness, that humiliation goes before resurrection; that pain is not only the price but the very touchstone of rebirth."

So when Paul affirms that "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose", he means that God turns our detours into His road map, that in time we get perspective on the redemptive nature of these events, and that pain is the way he cracks open our hearts, to bring new birth.

How Do We Know That God Is Good?

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That is all well, and good. But how do these nice thoughts become more than mere platitudes? I began by quoting the Christian psychologist Larry Crabb, “No one will conclude that God is good by studying life.” If we can’t conclude that God is good by studying life, then where do we look for the evidence of God’s goodness?

I said last week that God puts his stake in the ground of history by means of the defining events of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul did not look at the events of his life as evidence for or against God’s love, so much as the evidence in the cross of Christ. “But God demonstrates his love for us in that we were yet sinners that Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). It was the weakness of God through the self-sacrifice of the cross that was the proof to Paul of our value to God.

The Lord turns the wisdom of this world on its head. The cross followed by the resurrection is the way God works in the world. He grinds us in the crucible of the cross, and follows it through to the new birth of resurrected life.

The cross is such a paradoxical symbol. On the one hand it shows humanity at its worst. Excuse the butchered English; it does not get any *worser* than this. The cross puts on public display what humans are capable of. It answers the question, what would rebellious humans do if God became a man and walked among us? We would howl for his blood and put him through torture that would leave him beyond recognition.

Henri Nouwen tells the story of a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, spoke out against the military regime and its human rights abuses. The local police took their revenge by arresting his teenage son and torturing him to death. The townsfolk wanted to turn the son’s funeral into a protest demonstration. The father chose another means of protest. Instead of dressing his son in funeral attire, he decided to display his body as it had been found in the jail. The son was naked, his body marked with scars from electric shocks and cigarette burns and beatings. All the villagers filed past the corpse, which lay not in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the town jail. It was the strongest protest imaginable, for it put injustice on grotesque display. Paul writes in Colossians, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

Here is the irony, what man means for evil, God means for good. This is a quote from the mouth of Joseph, the 11th son of Jacob. Jacob’s brothers in a fit of jealousy left Joseph to die in the wilderness. God rescued him, brought him to Egypt and made him second in command to the Pharaoh. When famine struck Palestine, his brothers were sent by their father for food. Joseph had the grace

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to see God's bigger plan. So Joseph said to his brothers, "Though you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). This is God's way.

The greatest act of injustice, the cross, becomes God's means to fulfill his just payment for all humanity's sin. The greatest act of hatred is turned into God's demonstration of love. The might makes right political power of the Roman world is reversed by the greater power of sacrificial love.

When we are at our worst, God loves us the best. At the heart of our faith is the cross, a symbol of all that is wrong in life; but on the other hand the sign of our place in the heart of God. When life looks bleakest, there is the bright morning star; it is darkest before the dawn; when it all looks like it is over, then God blasts forth from the tomb and declares that the way to the future is thrown open. "Our best is always yet to come." God follows crucifixions with resurrections. Our disappointments are God's appointments.

Let me conclude this series with one of my all time favorite stories told by the one and only Tony Campolo. Tony Campolo is a professor of Sociology at Eastern College in St. David's, PA near Philadelphia. He has a larger than life personality—brash as one can be. At the time of this story, he was the only white pastor on the staff of an all black church in inner city Philadelphia. He was the 6th of 7 preachers on this particular day at the Good Friday service. As he tells it, "I preached first and man was I 'hot' so 'hot' that I stopped and listened to myself." When Campolo sat down next to his African American senior pastor, who was the last to speak, he leaned over to him and said, "Top that." Self assured, his pastor said, "Son, just you watch."

For an hour and a half he preached one line over and over again..."It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'!" He started his sermon real softly by saying, "It was Friday; it was Friday and my Jesus was dead on the tree. But that was Friday, and Sunday's comin'!" One of the Deacons yelled, "Preach, brother, Preach!" It was all the encouragement he needed.

He came on louder as he said, "It was Friday and Mary was cryin' her eyes out. The disciples were runnin' in every direction, like sheep without a shepherd, but that was Friday, and Sunday's comin'!"

The preacher kept going. He picked up the volume still more and shouted, "It was Friday. The cynics were lookin' at the world and sayin' `As things have been so shall they be. You can't change anything in this world; you can't change anything. But those cynics don't know that it was only Friday. Sunday's comin'! It was Friday, and on Friday those forces that oppress the poor and make the poor to suffer were in control. But that was Friday! Sunday's comin'!"

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It was Friday, and on Friday Pilate thought he had washed his hands of a lot of trouble. The Pharisees were struttin' around, laughin' and pokin' each other in the ribs. They thought they were back in charge of things. But they didn't know it was only Friday! Sunday's comin'!

Campolo continues, "He kept on working that one phrase for a half hour, then an hour, then an hour and a quarter, then an hour and a half. Over and over he came at us, "It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'!" By the time he had come to the end of the message...He had everyone so worked up that they couldn't stand it any longer. At the end of his message he just yelled at the top of his lungs, `It's FRIDAY!' and they all yelled back with one accord, `SUNDAY'S COMIN'!"

"What Can We Count on From God?" I hope you know by now.