

“God Will Make It Better”

A sermon in the series

“Summer Memories: Scripture Verses Worth Remembering”

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- Romans 8:18, 28 (Good News Translation) ¹⁸ I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.
Memorization Verse: ²⁸ We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.
- Exodus 6:28-7:6 (Good News Translation) ²⁸ When the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, ²⁹ he said, “I am the Lord. Tell the king of Egypt everything I tell you.” ³⁰ But Moses answered, “You know that I am such a poor speaker; why should the king listen to me?” ^{7:1} The Lord said, “I am going to make you like God to the king, and your brother Aaron will speak to him as your prophet.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God will make it better.

If you were to study the typical *structure* of my sermons instead of focusing on the *content* of messages, here’s what I think you’d discover. You would find that in the first part of the sermon I tend to explore the meaning of the scripture texts. Then I build upon that to present the theme that’s come to me from those scriptures. I explain why the scriptures support that theme. Usually I end the sermon with a restatement of the theme for that day.

But today let me state the theme at the outset.

Here it is: God will make it better.

That’s the gist of today’s “scripture verse worth remembering.” It’s worth remembering because it can inspire hope and trust especially in times of anxiety or depression. The verse is Romans 8:28, “We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.”

As I said, my simple summary of that verse is “God will make it better.” When you skinned your knee as a child, you knew that your dad or grandma or the school nurse could take the physical pain and emotional trauma of your injury and “make it better” even though it hurt at that moment. Today I propose that whatever hardship or trauma, whatever evil or negligence you’re enduring, “God will make it better.”

That can be very hard for us to accept – that somehow God can take our emotional distress, our financial struggle, the physical pain of illness or injury or aging, the anxiety of world events... that God can take all that bad stuff and somehow transform it into something good. But the reason we have a hard time accepting that God can do that is because when it comes to living our lives, we’re immersed. We’re involved. We’re too close. We don’t have the benefit of perspective. Let me illustrate that for you.

I don’t know if everyone has done this at some point, or if I was a particularly strange child. But when I’d watch TV when I was little, every once in a while I would go right up to the screen – maybe an inch away – and look at the little dots that made the black-and-white image (this was back before the world was in color). I was so close that I could see the little white or gray or black dots created by the electron guns hitting the phosphorous coating inside the picture tube. Of course, I was too close to see the image the dots created on the screen. I couldn’t tell if the image was clear or fuzzy, moving or stationary. From that perspective I couldn’t make sense of what was happening on the screen.

Aren’t there times when we can’t make sense of what’s happening in our lives, either:

- Why am I getting hit with so many unexpected expenses right now?
- How come I can't seem to get over this illness?
- Why are those children antagonizing my child?
- What's caused my best friend to start ignoring me all of a sudden?
- What's the deal with North Korea, or Iran, or Russia, or Syria, or Charlottesville?

Let's face it. Though we may try to wear a smile when we gather for worship each week, the reality is that not everything that's happening in our lives is pleasant, or constructive, or joyful, or easy. Stress. Grief. Anxiety. Betrayal. Disappointment. Emotional turmoil. Physical pain. "Into each life some rain must fall..." – so sang Ella Fitzgerald, and The Inkspots, and Lou Rawls. Or less poetically, in the irreverent Broadway musical comedy called "Avenue Q" the characters sing what many of us feel from time to time, "It sucks to be me." Life's disappointments and struggles may cause you to feel like that for a moment, or for a day or two, or maybe for months and years.

"Where's God?" When we're reflective, or desperate, or spent, or scared, that's what we want to know. "Where's God, and more importantly, why isn't God doing something about what I'm dealing with?!"

St. Paul responds to such pleas in today's "scripture verse worth remembering." Remember, he writes, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose."

Does God really do that? Can God somehow achieve something good even through the events of our lives – or the *periods* of our lives – that cause us to be discouraged or depressed, scared or exhausted, infuriated or numb, hurting or sorrowful? And if God can somehow make anything good come out of something bad, how?

Well, why does God even permit bad things? When God created this world for us to inhabit, God designed it to give us the privilege of freedom and choice. We are not mind-controlled robots that automatically adhere to every command that was programmed into us. No, God gifted us with the opportunity to know God and recognize God and choose to revere and serve God... or not.

Within that freedom humankind has the capacity to help or hinder, to heal or hurt. God *hopes* we'll choose the good. By coming to us in Jesus the Son God appealed yet again for us to choose reverent obedience and loving service. But the opportunity for humankind to choose the bad is always present, and that's why "bad things happen [even] to good people" as the saying goes.

So hardships are a normal part of the natural world. I point that out to dispel the perverted idea that God would send pain or hardship or tragedy into your life for the purpose of teaching you a lesson. No! That would be as abusive as those reports that surface from time to time of an adult touching a child's hand to a hot stove supposedly to "teach them a lesson." God doesn't bring hardship into our lives to teach us lessons.

Maybe during times of despair or distress you've thought to yourself, "I don't deserve this." You're right. But in times of joy and good fortune have you ever said, "I don't deserve this?" Because you'd be right on that, too. Acknowledging the highs and lows of daily life, the book of Ecclesiastes offers this guidance: "On a good day, enjoy yourself; on a bad day, examine your conscience. God arranges for both kinds of days so that we won't take anything for granted."¹

We're not promised lives of ease or struggle. We *are* promised that in Jesus Christ God "will be with [us] always, to the end of the age."² God is not a passive bystander watching from afar. Elsewhere in Romans Chapter 8 Paul asserts that by God's Holy Spirit God is present in all our successes and disappointments, our joys and our challenges. Paul writes, "God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will."³ God is with us in all times.

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:14 The Message

² Matthew 28:20

³ Romans 8:27 GNT

So how is God able to work for good in all things? God sees the big picture because God has already painted it for us. God can redeem hardship and salvage tragedy because God knows where we're headed. As a Bible scholar explained, "God knows the end to which [God] will bring [the] creation, namely redemption, and that this destiny is firmly set in [God's] purposes.... The destiny has already been set."⁴

God knows our destiny. God has set our destiny to be redeemed, to be transformed to serve God's will, God's purposes. To use a fancy theological term you may have heard before, God has "pre-destined" that we'll grow into "the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."⁵ We have confidence because the future is already in God's hands, not ours.⁶

What does it mean that God sees the big picture that we cannot? I came across a story that told how

All afternoon a little boy tried to put together his birthday gift from his father, a picture puzzle. Some of the pieces were bright, some dark; some seemed to go together, others seemed to fit nowhere. Finally, frustrated and exhausted and with nothing to show for his efforts, the boy gathered the pieces, put them in the box, and gave it to his dad. "I can't do it," he explained. "You try it."

To [the boy's] amazement, his father assembled the entire puzzle in a few minutes. "You see," he said, "I knew what the picture was like all the time. I saw the picture in the puzzle, but you saw only the pieces."

Paul tells us here that God causes all things to work together for good. Those "all things" are the pieces. [Paul] then tells us *how* they work together for the good – according to God's purpose. That is the picture.⁷

So we're not asked to be Pollyannas and deny that hardship or evil ever touches our lives. As people of faith, as "those who love God," as "those whom God has called according to God's purpose" it's okay for us to acknowledge that joys *and* sorrows, that triumphs *and* failures happen to us within the expanse of God's creation. But we profess that we can see only one small part of God's great design. As 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 assesses the difference between our perspective and God's, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."⁸ Our faith assures us that whatever we suffer, whatever we endure, "God will make it better," because "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose."

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⁴ Paul Achtemeier, Interpretation: Romans. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985, 144

⁵ Ephesians 4:13 NRSV

⁶ Op.cit. Achtemeier, 143

⁷ Baker Books, 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching, by Michael P. Green at <https://www.sermons.com/sermon/romans-8-28/1475606>, accessed 8/9/2017

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12b NRSV