

HOPE - The Foundation of Biblical Change – Romans 8:28-29

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How do we offer hope to those who are suffering? We all experience hard times at some point. The Apostle Peter declared that as Christians we shouldn't be surprised when trials come upon us,ⁱ and Paul warned Timothy that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.ⁱⁱ We will be subjected to trials, because it's in the furnace of suffering that we grow; it's the furnace of affliction that prepares us for an eternal weight of glory.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in that furnace of affliction it's all too easy to lose hope. Hope is the very foundation of biblical change; and so, my message this morning is about exactly that... it's about giving hope to our friends who may be in the depths of hopelessness.

I met with a friend for coffee some time ago. He told me that his son - who was in his mid-teens at the time - was struggling with depression. He had been in a battle with drug abuse for years, and had recently been diagnosed with a chemically-induced form of schizophrenia. He heard voices, and was suffering from paranoia. He believed that people could hear his thoughts, and so he tried desperately to hide himself away. The psychiatrists offered no hope whatsoever.

What would you say to my friend? How would you offer him hope? Would you say that the doctors surely have it handled, and not to worry? They're the professionals, after all. Or would you say that God is sovereign, and so things will work out for the best? It's true - God *is* sovereign - but that doesn't always give us hope when we're broken. How do you tell someone who has lost their son that it's "for the best"? Maybe you'd feel so awkward that you wouldn't know what to say. I think a lot of us would fall into that category.

What if your friend comes up to you, and shares that they're feeling really down, or anxious, or they're immersed in some sin that they can't get out of. How do you help them? That's what this conference is about; it's about discipleship. It's about loving one another enough to spend time with them, working through sin issues with them, helping them to wrestle through heart issues that are keeping them from growing in godliness, or pulling them away from living a life that pleases the Lord.

We're all called to this ministry of discipleship. The Apostle Paul understood this when he exhorted Timothy to share what he had heard with faithful men, so that they could, in turn, teach others,^{iv} build each other up,^v help one another to break the old, sinful habits, and to pick up new habits that reflect our new identity in Christ.^{vi}

How do you care for someone, and disciple them when they're stumbling through the darkest hours of their life?

Our brothers and sisters need to believe again that there's hope in the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. There's hope in His Word, and there's hope for whatever problem they're struggling with. And so, the very first thing we do as biblical counselors - and the very first thing you should do when your friend comes to you and asks for help - is to provide a grounded, biblical hope.

Romans 8:28-29 is foundational for what we do in counseling, because it offers hope. Hope for change, hope that the Holy Spirit can use your pain, hope that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

The Apostle Paul had been talking about suffering. He says in Romans 8:18 that *the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. We groan, as we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies.*

But he goes on in Romans 8:28 *we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

That's a glorious promise, and it offers tremendous hope.

1. God uses "all things"

It's easy to think that He's just using the good things of life; the blessings, our comfort, our joy, our health, our prosperity. Those are wonderful things, and God does use them for His glory. But what about calamity? Does He use sickness? Does He use unemployment, or disability, or chronic pain?

I was talking to someone recently who wholeheartedly agreed that God uses all things for our good. But then we started talking about specific life trials that he was going through; pain, medical issues, marital conflict, and then his confession started to waiver. He asked, does God actually use even those things?

You get laid off... and you're optimistic for a while - God is good - but then the hours turn into days, which drag into weeks, which turn into months, and even years! And you start to wonder how God could be using this trial for anything good? When times are easy, it's easy to affirm God's promises; but when times are hard - especially for a protracted period of time - it becomes more difficult. When the tears become an every-night event, or an all-night event... or we have to decide between paying the mortgage and paying the medical bills... then our optimism in the veracity of God's Word can become a bit shaky.

I was watching a documentary movie a while back about a rock climber who had taken on El Capitan in Yosemite. He was a free climber, and he was climbing this crazy rock face... fingers and toes clinging white with tension because he knew that if he let go, even for just a moment, then he'd fall to his death. So, he clings confidently, but almost desperately, knowing that he really doesn't have any other options available to him. Do you ever feel like that when it comes to trusting God's promises? Have you ever gone through a traumatic life event, or a really hard season of life, and all you could do was to cling desperately to God's promises? We cling to the promises in His Word because to let go of those promises would be unthinkable. We believe God's Word is true, we believe it's sure, we believe it's authoritative and sufficient for all of life and godliness (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

But sometimes it seems like the trials of life are screaming at us so loudly that it's all-but-impossible to hold on to that cliff face. Can we really trust God's Word to be true, to be sufficient... and that He'll use all things for the good?

How well does your confession hold when you're in the heat of life's furnace? What happens when God brings unexpected death into your life? What about the tragic shooting last month at the Christian school in Tennessee? How could God possibly use a school shooting for anyone's good?

I'm not going to stand here and tell you that I have the answer to the question of how... how God uses difficult things, even evil things for good. We won't always know how God is working in your life. But what I can tell you - without hesitation... without reservation... and with wholehearted conviction... is that God does use all things for good... for those who love Him. How do I know that? Because he says so... and that's enough. But, we are too quick to turn that confession from an emphatic statement to a question. In the heat of the furnace, we're drawn to ask does He really use "all things" for good? If He does, then that should change the way we perceive life events.

You see, the "all things" includes suffering; hard things generally create greater change in the believer's heart than times of blessing.

Deuteronomy 11:11... The Israelites were entering the Promised Land, and they had high expectations that it would be a land of bounty and great blessing. They were probably expecting Moses to praise them for their hard work and faithfulness. But instead, Moses takes the time to warn them to be especially careful during the times of blessing that they thought were coming.^{vii}

He says, take care *lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied.*

There's nothing inherently wrong with having a nice home, good food, or prosperity. But, he says, *take care... lest you have those things, and then your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God...* Moses recognized their propensity to forget God. Life can be *so good* that our hearts are filled and we forget the Lord. We turn our attention to worldly things. And so, good things are not always the best things for us.

Moses goes on to remind the Israelites of what God had done for them... He brought them out of slavery... led them through a terrifying and thirsty wilderness... He provided for them... but He knew that their temptation would be to take the credit for their own survival. And so he goes on in v17, *Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'* You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth. Don't forget God in the good times... we see steps taken in the Old Testament to remember God's faithfulness; Joshua erected 12 stones at Gilgal as a memorial to God's faithfulness.^{viii} And, we're exhorted to remember Christ whenever we meet.^{ix} But it's just as important that we don't forget Him in the hard times... both are intended by God for His purposes. Both the good times and the suffering are intended by God for your good.

Consider Bartimaeus. We meet him sitting on the side of the road in Jericho in Mark 10:46. Imagine for a moment how difficult life must have been for a disabled person back then. He'd get up early in the morning, and take his mat, and he'd stumble out and find a spot on the side of the road; in the heat of the sun the beggars would jostle for position at the best spots, and they'd sit there and cry out to passers by for help. Bartimaeus was a beggar by trade; uneducated, unable to do anything but beg for crumbs from passers by... despised by those around him. An outcast from society.

I don't know much about Bartimaeus... I know his name, son of Timaeus; but I don't know how tall he was, if he had brothers and sisters... did he play with them as a child? I don't know what he dreamt about, or even what he liked to do in his spare time. But I *can* tell you this; his life was very, very hard. If you want to think suffering, think Bartimaeus. And all he could do when he saw Jesus was to beg for mercy. This man needed mercy. He needed hope!

In John chapter 9 we see another man who had been blind from birth. Another beggar who had suffered terribly. And in this account the disciples were curious... *who sinned*, they asked, *such that this man would be born blind... was it him... or was it his parents?* And what was Jesus' response? John 9:3, He says, *it wasn't that this man sinned, or his parents... but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*

Just like Bartimaeus... this man was born blind... a destitute beggar, he suffered horribly. He was born blind as an object lesson for Jesus' disciples, and the watching crowd... and for us! This man wasn't born blind because of his sin... he wasn't born blind because of some random genetic abnormality (... there are no random genetic abnormalities); he wasn't even born blind to teach him a lesson. His blindness, and the resulting lifetime of suffering, was intended to be an object lesson. It wasn't even ABOUT him!

I'm sure he was shaped by his suffering, but the reason he was born blind - according to the Person who created him - is so that God's glorious works might be displayed in him. God sovereignly chose to afflict this man with unthinkable lifelong trauma... for God's own glory.

His suffering and *our* suffering is always for a greater purpose. Therein lies the hope. It's not just about affliction for the sake of affliction... it's affliction for the sake of fulfilling God's purposes. Your pain may never go away; but there's still hope in the knowledge that God is working. Your suffering is never without purpose. Can you see how that might encourage someone who's hurting?

James 1:2-3 *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*^x There's the purpose statement; it produces steadfastness, with the goal of making us complete, so that we'll be prepared for any work God has for us. There's a purpose for suffering!

And there are other examples in Scripture of people who endured excruciating circumstances for reasons that had nothing obvious to do with themselves... the blind man at Bethsaida, the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda, Lazarus, Job... all of these men suffering horribly so that we might learn from them.

Think of the Apostle Paul... he suffered, didn't he? According to 2 Corinthians 11 he was imprisoned, whipped, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked 3x, adrift at sea, he traveled many long journeys, faced dangers from rivers and robbers, and even from his own people, who turned on him; he endured many sleepless nights, was cold and hungry, and he faced the violent accusation of false teachers.

And, on top of all of that he tells us that he had a thorn in his flesh.^{xi} We don't know what that thorn was - perhaps chronic pain - but that thorn was intended by God, according to 2 Corinthians 12, to keep him from becoming conceited... to keep him humble.

... for those who love God all things work together for good...

All things? What about divorce? What about terminal disease, or the starving children in Africa? What about mind numbing, excruciating, chronic pain? A pain so intense that it eclipses every conscious moment. How could God possibly use those things? What about sin? Could God use someone else's sin for our good? Or even our own sin?

To answer that question, we first need to address the issue of God's sovereignty. Does God even have the ability to use "all things" for good? Romans 8 says very clearly that He does... Paul wouldn't have said it if God wasn't able to follow through on it. So, verses 28 & 29 alone underscore His sovereign ability to do as He pleases.

Psalm 50:15... God says to His people... *call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.* " Nothing is too much for God; He'll come to your rescue, if you'll just call on Him!

Notice that it's deliverance - which comes as a consequence of the trial - that brings Him glory. God is glorified when we handle our troubles rightly.

Lamentations 3:37-38

- 37 Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?

As inconceivable as that may seem to be sometimes. God ordains - allows, or even causes - good things and hard things.

Lamentations 3:31-33

31 For the Lord will not cast off forever,
32 but, though he cause grief,
he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
33 for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.

Our God is a compassionate God... yes, He sovereignly ordains the difficult things, but He doesn't afflict eagerly, and the experience of pain that you're going through is temporary He causes grief, writes the Psalmist, but He doesn't do it cheerfully. He takes no pleasure in inflicting pain.

So, if He takes no pleasure in it, then why would He do it? The prophet Hosea declared, "*Come... let us return to the Lord; for He has torn us... that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up.*"^{xii} Go back, he says! God has struck us down, but He stands ready to heal. God tears down and He restores. The suffering has purpose... it's saving up for us an eternal weight of glory.^{xiii}

Psalm 147:8-9 says that our God provides and sustains...

Daniel 4:35 God governs this world.

Isaiah 46:9-10 God is sovereign even over sin... consider our Savior's death at the hands of wicked men.

Jerry Bridges writes, *if there's a single event in all of the universe that can occur outside of God's sovereign control, then we cannot trust Him.*^{xiv} And that's unthinkable. We plan our steps, but the Lord directs our path.^{xv} Our confidence in the sovereignty of God is crucial to our ability to trust Him. We can't trust Him if we don't understand that He's in control of all things.

The person who says that God cannot be trusted, or that God is not in control of this universe, is the person who is actively and intentionally denying the plain reading of Scripture. Our God is in the Heavens, my friends - and He does all that He pleases!^{xvi}

The author and hymn writer Margaret Clarkson writes,

The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock to which the suffering human heart must cling. The circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident: they may be the work of evil but that evil is held firmly within the mighty hand of our sovereign God. All evil is subject to Him and evil cannot touch His children unless He permits it.^{xvii}

But it's not just the willful, malevolent acts of other people that are under God's sovereign control; so are their mistakes. That driver who ran a red light and struck your car, sending you to the hospital... that physician who failed to notice the signs of cancer in its earliest stages... and now it's inoperable... or the employer who just doesn't like you, and makes your life miserable... all of these circumstances are under the hand of our sovereign God.

Think of Joseph; he was left in prison for more than two years. He was left suffering in prison... because Potiphar's cup bearer *forgot* about him!^{xviii} But Joseph understood that neither willful malicious acts or the unintended mistakes of others can deflect or redirect God's purposes for us. Nothing is too trivial to escape God's attention, and nothing is so great as to be beyond His power to control it.

Our God is sovereign over nature, He's sovereign over the nations, He's sovereign over the government, He's sovereign over the heavens, He's sovereign over evil, and He's intimately involved - sovereign - over every detail of our lives.^{xix} And therefore, He is able to use *all things*.

2. God uses all things for "good..."

What is this "good" that Paul is referring to? Verse 29... *for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.* For those who love God, all things work together for good... and that good,

says Paul, is being conformed to the image of God's Son. That's God's goal in the "all things"... it's Christlikeness. Do you want to resemble Christ? Then submit to the "all things" God brings to you. What greater privilege could there be? To be conformed and molded into the image of Jesus Christ. That's the very center of God's purpose for us.

When you're dealing with life's difficulties... you're being molded by the very hand of God... like a lump of clay by the Potter, molded into something beautiful. The Apostle Paul called this the "prize of the upward call" in Philippians 3:14. He pressed on toward this goal; not just for the time to come, when we're standing before our God, but now, here; God wants you to be changed. Are you allowing God to conform you into the image of His Son? Are you allowing the Potter to shape the lump of clay?

Or, are you kicking against the goads?^{xx} A goad was a long, sharp stick used to get a stubborn ox moving. One would stab the beast in its hind legs until it cooperated. An ox would kick against the goad; to kick against the goads meant to be stubborn, stupid... foolish... to resist the correction. Jesus had to push the stubborn Saul in the right direction, and that goading caused Saul great pain. But instead of submitting to Christ, he kicked against the goads, and caused himself more pain. This is what we do... when we resist God's work in our lives we resist, we kick, and we cause ourselves unnecessary pain.

Paul says that all things work together for good... it's also the hard things... the suffering... the trials... the financial woes... the rebellious child... or that disappointing marriage. These are the all things that God is using! In fact, I'd suggest that Paul's testimony is that pain - suffering - is a requisite for growth. God used that thorn to mold and conform the Apostle. Paul pleaded with God three times that the pain would be taken away, but God chose to leave him with the pain, as a demonstration of His grace. If you're struggling - know that His grace is sufficient. It's enough.

1 Corinthians 10:13... *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.* Rather than fighting it, the suffering Paul experienced taught him how to be content even in the weakness, the insults, the hardships, the persecutions, and the calamities. His physical weakness translated into spiritual strength.^{xxi} He fought valiantly, straining every spiritual muscle, to win the prize. He ran the race with endurance, and he set his eyes on Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of his faith! And, Jesus chose Paul for the ultimate purpose of conforming him to His glorious image. Jesus Christ chose you, Christian - to conform you to His own image. That's Romans 8:29. And that's the goal for which Paul fought with his very life.

Jesus is the standard for our spiritual maturity and perfection. God therefore wants every believer to appropriate the qualities of his Son... that's the good that comes from the *ALL* that God uses!

We can experience misery, pain, suffering... and then even experience joy... that God would choose to give us even these painful gifts... because they have purpose. The blessings of life are gifts from God - they're God's grace - but we can also consider suffering and pain to be gifts as well. Suffering will come. Trials will come; pain will become a reality. Are you ready to proclaim, in those darkest of days, that this is God's best for me? We are all, writes the Apostle Paul, being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another.^{xxii} That transformation takes time, and it takes a catalyst to keep you going.

Psalm 32:3-4 David refused to repent, and suffered as a result.

Psalm 51:1-4, 7-13

In v13 we have this wonderful punchline that I think we often miss. David has begged God for mercy... and then he says these interesting words... (verse 13) *Then (he says) I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.* That's discipleship! That's us doing the work of ministry together. You don't need to be certified or a seminary degree carrying pastor or counselor or Elder or church leader to help your brother or

sister work through their suffering. Repent of your own sin... and teach others God's ways... and they'll return to Him!

David repented of his sin and sought God's face. He turned from his sin – broken 0 and God forgave him and gave him a voice to sing His praises again! But there were also consequences for his wickedness. God used his sin, and his suffering, and even the death of his infant son was used to further God's plan of redemption.^{xxiii}

Because... *God uses all things for the good of those who love Him.*

2 Corinthians 1:3ff... One of my favorite counseling passages because it gives us a specific purpose for the trials we go through. We experience suffering so that God might comfort us, so that we might share that comfort with others. There's hope in that... not only are we comforted so that we'll comfort others, but we're comforted in direct proportion to the number and severity of the trials we're enduring. The more we suffer, the more God comforts us. Which means, by extension, that the more we're comforted, the more we can comfort others who are hurting. And a by-product of that is the sense of Christian community we get to enjoy when we share one another's burdens.

You can be sure that if you're willing to share your burden with others that they'll benefit from the experience. You don't have to go through your trial in a vacuum; God's people stand ready to love you, to support you, to disciple you, to counsel you, to comfort you. This is what Christians do! It's your ministry - to comfort others with the same comfort that you have received from God.

1 Corinthians 12:26 says that if one member suffers, all suffer together; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together. If you're suffering today, we suffer with you. We stand with you, and our hope for you is unshaken.^{xxiv} But for the comfort of 2 Corinthians 1 to work, we need to know what you're going through. To be able to comfort you, we need Christians willing to be vulnerable enough to cry out, *help! I need you!*

3. it's for the good of those... who are called according to His purpose

There's a condition - even a warning - in these verses... Romans 8:28-29 are not for everybody. They're only for those who have repented and trusted in Christ for salvation. If you're not a believer in Christ, God isn't promising you that all things will work out in the end. They will in God's plan, but without repentance and faith, your plans will come to a crashing and abrupt end.

The NASB version presents the words in a better sequence... it says that *God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.* "Those who love God" and "those who are called according to His purpose" are references to the same people; it's simply two of the many titles or descriptions the New Testament uses of Christians. From a human perspective we are those who love God; and from God's perspective, we are those who are called.^{xxv} If you're effectively called - then you will love Him. And, if you love Him, then all things will work together for good.

"All things" is an utterly comprehensive statement. "All things" encompasses every event, every pain, every shout of joy, every trial without restriction or condition. And that promise is for you, if you love Him.

We don't love Him because of the benefits. We don't love Him so that we can be confident that all things will work out in the end. We don't love Him because we're fearful of hell, like He's some sort of cosmic fire insurance policy. We love Him because of what He has done for us; what He did for us in sending His beloved Son to die, for allowing Jesus Christ - the spotless Lamb - to suffer more than any other, and to pay the penalty for our sin. This was a penalty that we could never pay; so that we might be able to stand before Him in glory, washed clean by the blood of Christ, boldly able to proclaim, *not by my works, but by the work of Your Son!*

We could never earn a pardon for the sin we've committed, but even if we could that would only get us so far. Jesus' death paid the penalty for our sin. But He arose! The grave could not defeat Him! And now, He's seated with the Father, ready to receive His own. His work of redemption is complete. And it's now your task - believer - to grow in godliness.

Life continues to be difficult; there are always going to be challenges in the Christian life. And, like Job - or Bartimaeus - we may never see or understand a specific purpose for our pain. But we know that there is hope in our suffering, hope in our trials; our suffering has an eternal value. We can offer hope to our friends who are suffering.

2 Cor. 4:16-18... the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, ... *we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away... our inner self is being renewed day by day.*

Our bodies may be failing, but our souls are energized daily by the Holy Spirit as we submit to His will.

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.^{xxvi}

ⁱ 1 Pet. 4:12

ⁱⁱ 2 Tim. 3:12

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Cor. 4:17

^{iv} 2 Tim. 2:2

^v cf. Eph. 4:14-16

^{vi} cf. Eph. 4:20ff

^{vii} Ex. 3:8

^{viii} Josh. 4:1-8

^{ix} Lk. 22:19-20

^x Jas. 1:2-3

^{xi} 2 Cor. 12:7

^{xii} Hos. 6:1

^{xiii} 2 Cor. 4:17

^{xiv} Bridges, J., *Trusting God*, p25

^{xv} Prov. 16:9

^{xvi} Ps. 115:3

^{xvii} Bridges, J., *Trusting God*, p28

^{xviii} Gen. 40:14, 23; 41:1

^{xix} Psa. 139:2

^{xx} Acts 26:14

^{xxi} 2 Cor. 12:7-10

^{xxii} 2 Cor. 3:18

^{xxiii} 2 Sam. 12:14-23

^{xxiv} 2 Cor. 1:7

^{xxv} MacArthur Commentary, Romans, p481

^{xxvi} 2 Cor. 4:16-18