

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

GOD'S LOVE-FILLED BLESSING OF PAIN

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After visiting with the Holts the other day I thought now would be a good time to spend a sermon or two on the issue of pain in the life of a Christian. By pain I'm referring to any suffering a person experiences, whether physical or emotional, and I'm focusing on Christian people. So pain here refers to injury, illness, disease, fear, anxiety, depression, bereavement, grief, etc.

And today I want to make this point about pain: Pain is predestined. By "predestined" I mean that God destined it for us before he created the world. Think of God giving you an airplane ticket for New York. The ticket marks out your destination before you ever get on the plane. Your destination is fixed beforehand. You won't end up in Seattle or Minneapolis; in fact, you can't. With ticket in hand you can only end up one place: New York. So before Creation God wrote out a ticket for you: The destination you're headed for is not New York, but Pain. And this is specific pain; planned pain; designed pain; surgically precise pain; appropriately selected pain, all chosen with you in mind. I'm telling you here that your specific pain, which you have suffered and which you will suffer, is predestined by God.

And I want to show you the Bible presents such a picture of predestined pain. In order to do that I want to offer two lines of evidence. First line of evidence: The Bible gives a general picture of complete divine predestination of and control over the world, including control specifically over Christian pain and suffering. Second line of evidence: The Bible provides individual examples of men for whom God planned or predestined pain. Let's start with our first line of evidence.

A GENERAL PICTURE OF PREDESTINED PAIN: 3 TEXTS

Psalm 139:16 Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.

Here the psalmist praises God for his perception of the psalmist even in the womb, and then he makes the statement that before the psalmist's life began, God had already written down in His book all the days which were ordained for the psalmist. What we're looking at is a plain statement that God ordains, or appoints, or fashions, or makes the days of our lives before those days ever begin.

Imagine an author developing a novel, each chapter of which is about a day in the life of the hero. The author shapes and fashions each day of the hero's life, including his movements, his words, his actions, his interactions with others, and all of the responses of other people in the book. The author adds numerous unexpected turns and twists in the life of the hero, with drama, suspense, tragedy, moral development for our hero, and much more which increases the interest of the story. Now imagine the character in the story is you, and the author is God. And realize how much pain and suffering is contained in the stories you like to read. And that means the author also added the ingredient of pain into the story as he fashioned each day in the life of the hero.

Because if God fashioned all our days and wrote them in his book before we were born, and if our days include pain, then it is God who appointed pain at various points of the story of our lives. And this would mean that all our Pain is Predestined.

Proverbs 16:1 The plans of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Proverbs 16:9 The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 16:33 *The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD.*

Proverbs 16 has a distinctly predestinarian flavor, as you can see. The plans of man's heart and mind, combined with his casting of lots to make decisions, all issue in outcomes which the Lord himself has appointed. We consider what to say; what actually comes out is from God. We consider which way to go and what to choose; whatever we end up doing is what God has directed us to. We roll the dice to make a decision but it all comes from God's predestinating hand. This doesn't seem to leave out any human endeavor at all; every plan that men make results in the accomplishment of God's will.

Now have you ever said something that resulted in pain for you? Of course you have; opening your mouth and suffering pain is practically the definition of marriage, and we have a number of married people here. Have you ever made a decision or taken a course which resulted in pain? Yes, we all have. Or flip it around: Has anyone else ever said or done things which resulted in pain for you? But if every decision we or others make issues in results chosen by God, and we say and do many things which end up in pain for us, then our pain is chosen and appointed by God. Our Pain is Predestined.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-3 *Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be ¹disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that ^awe have been destined for this.*

The Thessalonian Christians are suffering persecution and Paul is worried they may be deserting Christ; that's why he sends Timothy to check on them. In the text above Paul says exactly what I mean to say to you all today: Don't be disturbed by these afflictions because they are your destiny. Now the only person who can assign

destinies is God, so God destined both Paul and the Thessalonians to affliction for Christ's sake and it's no different for us. We will suffer for Christ and also suffer in ways not directly related to Christ. Our Pain is Predestined. Now let's take three individual examples of men for whom God predestined pain.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF PREDESTINED PAIN: 3 MEN

Genesis 50:20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

This is Joseph's famous statements about the differing intentions of God and his brothers in the event of Joseph being sold into slavery. We need to see two things here: First, that from the time Joseph was sold to just before Pharaoh promoted him, Joseph suffered a great deal of pain, from the pain of his brothers' hatred to the injustice with Potiphar's wife, and even the wrongdoing of the cupbearer who forgot about Joseph. Joseph spent many years in prison through no fault of his own. We might also mention the pain Jacob felt at being bereaved of Joseph and thinking him to have been the victim of a violent death. So first we need to notice that when Joseph was sold into slavery the result was a profound amount of pain for Joseph, not to mention others like Jacob. And here's the second thing to notice: The selling of Joseph into slavery was God's intention. God didn't just work an evil deed for good; God actually meant the evil deed to take place. It was God's intention. So all the pain caused by this event, whether to Joseph or anyone else was Predestined Pain.

Acts 9:10-16 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his

sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, ^ahow much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Jesus' plan was to make Paul an apostle, and that means pain. Read 2 Corinthians some time to see how many pains and hurts Paul suffered for his apostleship. But we can't say Jesus didn't warn him. In the above text Jesus speaks of the many things Paul must suffer for his name. Perhaps this was proper given how much pain Paul had given others for Jesus' name prior to Paul's conversion. But Paul must suffer these things; it could not be otherwise. It was key to Jesus' divine plan in guiding the life of Saul of Tarsus from persecutor to preacher and martyr. When, at the end of his life, Paul put his head on the chopping block, it was a chopping block which Jesus himself arranged long beforehand. Paul's pain was planned, arranged, and predestined by God.

Acts 4:27-28 "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

And we saved the best for last. Of course the best example of predestined pain is Jesus' pain. The leaders of Israel came together to snuff him out on the cross but all they succeeded in doing was whatever God's hand and purpose predestined to occur. Of course Jesus hurt terribly, in all sorts of ways, physical, emotional, spiritual. And his pain was not accidental, or surprising, or out of control. It had all been planned **long ago...**

So, our Pain is Predestined. Let's consider what this means for Christians who suffer.

It means that our pain is never pointless or meaningless. How can it fail to have point and meaning if God is behind it and is guiding it? Can God plan things which end up pointless and without meaning? It means that God knows exactly what is happening to us and he is not distant, however tempted we are to feel he is. God is as involved with the sufferer as with any other Christian; maybe more.

It means that God is controlling our pain carefully, and we will have just the amount God has intended, no more. God knows what we can handle and what we cannot. Our pain may overwhelm us and seem totally impossible to deal with; but it isn't so. God will help and bring about deliverance for us by some means. It means that in God's hand our pain is accomplishing a good purpose; indeed, the best purpose, since, as we'll see another time, pain is necessary for the sinner God is saving. It means that when we are in pain we are right on schedule. God has planned that we would suffer in all the various ways we do. Pain is not a sign that the train is off the rails. It's a sign the train is running on schedule and will arrive at the destination just when God planned it would.

Now the Christian who believes their pain is not predestined, that it is an arbitrary, surprising, uncontrolled event and God has nothing to do with it; that Christian will be angry, fearful, anxious, bitter, perplexed. Their trust of God will be threatened because their view of God is threatened. They will be spiritually and emotionally exhausted. They will be in danger of full blown despair, since they are at the mercy of powers they cannot control and God is, at best, uninvolved, and at worst, actually opposed to the suffering Christian. Sad to say, this is the experience of some Christian people.

On the other hand, the Christian who believes their pain is predestined will have an endless theological and spiritual resource to draw upon in their hurt. They can remind themselves ten-thousand times that their pain is from the hand of God and

is for their good; that God has always planned to give them this pain for their good and that their life is right on schedule; that their pain is a hundred miles from pointlessness, meaninglessness, arbitrariness, or uselessness.

Their pain is not a waste, it is not arbitrary. It is of great moment since it is one more step on the path to glorification. Indeed, this Christian can be so confident as to come to the place where they would say that, given the choice, they would not take back the pain they suffered since they know it was one crucial instrument which brought them near to God.

Okay, so that's the difference between the two. Now what to do? This is where we address all those folks who claim theology is an impractical waste of time. You may be sitting there thinking predestination is as irrelevant a subject as it gets; but then you're likely also healthy, happy and comfortable, and not particularly in need of the doctrine of predestination at the moment. But get a bad report from the doctor, or receive one of those phone calls that flip your world upside down, and I suggest that suddenly predestination becomes incredibly relevant. Whether or not this world is spinning under the control and according to the plan of God will be your highest concern at that moment. Theology is not, or shouldn't be, impractical. Really, it might help if we stopped calling it theology and started calling it the science of dying well.

So, here's what to do. When your turn comes, and it will come, then is the time to seat your soul in the pew and get to preaching to yourself, like the psalmist. Then is the time to grab hold of predestination like a tool and a weapon, and to wield it with all the skill you have. This doctrine, and every other, is given in order to equip you to live and die well, and if used rightly that's exactly what it's going to do.

When your pain comes, get out the doctrines and arrange them carefully before your eyes. God planned it for your good. God is controlling it. It isn't arbitrary or lacking in meaning and point. It doesn't mean Gods on vacation and the world is

out of control. On the contrary, since Christian pain is predestined pain, it means the train is running right on schedule.

So, believe the doctrine, and be at peace in your pain. Meet the challenge with the peace and calm of a Christian. The Christian practices dying daily; it is all a rehearsal for dying once last time, when the time comes. What did you think you were practicing for? You didn't suppose it would always be just a drill? Believe the doctrine, rest in God and his truth, make a good showing when your hurt comes around. That's why we study theology, A.K.A. The Science of Dying Well.