

The good that God brings out of our sufferings, part 3

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
at Poplar Baptist Church, on 28th May 2017

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28, ESV)

Introduction

We have been thinking about this verse for a few weeks now. It teaches us that God is ruling over all the circumstances in our lives, good and bad, for the good of those who truly belong to him. We were thinking two weeks ago, and the week before, about some of the good that God brings out of our sufferings. So far we have seen the following things:

1. Our sufferings lead us to know Christ better.
2. Our sufferings prove our faith to be genuine.
3. Our sufferings weaken the power of sin in our lives.
4. Our sufferings lead us to experience God’s comfort, which in turn helps other believers
5. Our sufferings lead us to rely on God rather than ourselves
6. Our sufferings cause the power of God to be revealed in us and through us

Today there are two further things that I wish to talk about in terms of the good that God brings out of our sufferings:

1. Our sufferings lead to the Gospel spreading to more people

The apostle says in Philippians chapter 1 and verses 12 – 14,

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Paul had been put in prison because of his preaching of the Gospel. But he could see how God had ruled over it for good, because as a result of his imprisonment the whole palace guard and everyone else knew that he was in chains for the sake of Christ. The name of Christ had become widely known. And other believers had become emboldened to speak about Christ.

This is a principle that we see throughout Scripture, and in church history. God uses suffering to enable the Gospel to go forward.

Acts chapter 8 records the martyrdom of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, who was a man of astonishing gifting. The whole of Chapter 8 in the book of Acts is given over to a long speech that he gave to the Sanhedrin, in which he very clearly showed that the Jews had again and again rejected God's servants. Then we read in verse 54:

⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. ^{8:1}And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

This must have been for the believers at this time a most shocking and terrible event. Stephen was a very godly man, one of the seven original

deacons, and a tremendous preacher. His death will have been a huge blow to the church. Then following his death, a ferocious persecution broke out against the believers in Jerusalem. We can assume that many more were killed. Others were imprisoned. Those who survived had to flee. It is very likely that they will have been forced to leave all their possessions behind. They will have lost their homes. They will have arrived destitute in other areas of the Roman Empire, and will have had to rebuild their lives in these new locations. Many of them must have been deeply traumatised by these events.

But great good came of what happened. In verse 4 of chapter 8 in the book of Acts we read, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Remember, the official preachers, the apostles, were still in Jerusalem. But God used the ordinary members of the church to take the message of the Gospel all over the Roman Empire.

One of these was Philip, another of the original seven deacons of the church. He went, as a result of the persecution, to Samaria. A very large number of people were converted there. He also was instrumental in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, who, we can safely assume, went on to preach the Gospel in Ethiopia, leading to the birth of the church in that area, which survives to this day.

Going further on, to chapter 11 and verses 19 to 21, we read,

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

We see here that the scattering of the believers arising from the persecution of Stephen led to the first Gentile church, in Antioch. This church would, in turn, become the base for the missionary travels of the apostle Paul.

Moreover, Paul's own conversion is attributable at least in part to Stephen's martyrdom. Before he became a Christian Paul was known as Saul. Acts 7 verse 58 says that as Stephen was being killed, "the witnesses [that is, those who were stoning Stephen] laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." Chapter 8 verse 1 says, "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." He had seen Stephen die.

The martyrdom of Stephen, and the way he died, we can be sure will have had a profound effect upon Saul who became Paul. This may well be what led to the conviction of sin that he experienced, which is described in Romans chapter 7 verses 7 to 13, which prepared him for salvation when he met the Lord on the Damascus Road.

Paul himself was then heavily persecuted for his faith in Christ. One time is recorded in Acts chapter 16, when Paul was in Philippi. He had driven out an evil spirit from a slave girl. This caused the owners of the slave girl to stir up a riot against Paul. We read in verses 22 to 34 of Acts 16,

²²The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. ²³After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. ²⁷The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised. ³⁴The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God — he and his whole family.

There are two main things we can learn from this story. Firstly, we can learn from the example of the apostle how we should respond when we experience suffering. He had been treated most appallingly. He had committed no crime, but rather had helped a poor girl who was in the power of foul spirits. He had been arrested, whipped and put into prison. But rather than feeling sorry for himself, he praised God and sang hymns.

Secondly, we see from this story the good that can come from suffering, especially when we respond in the right way. The jailor was converted, along with his family. What was it that caused the jailor to tremble with fear? He had seen the power of God. How did he see the power of God? In the earthquake? Yes, to an extent, but many people experience earthquakes without coming under conviction of sin. The great miracle he had witnessed was the joyful thanksgiving of the apostle and his friends, even when they had suffered terribly. There was no human explanation of this. God used it to speak to him mightily and to convict him of his sin and lead him to Christ.

Down through the ages, the testimony of believers when suffering has been frequently instrumental in the conversion of others. An ancient writer wrote that the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”, and this is indeed true.

In this country, under Mary I, during the 1550s, hundreds of true believers were burned at the stake. The martyrdom of these believers, and the way they bore their suffering with patience and love towards their tormentors, had a profound effect upon those who watched, and led many to faith. The effect for good of this suffering was known for many centuries afterwards. One of those who was burned at the stake, Hugh Latimer, said to Nicholas Ridley, as the fire was about to be lit, “Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” His prophecy was fulfilled, and during the 100 years after these martyrdoms there was a massive spread of Biblical Christianity across England, the effect of which is still felt today.

This is true not only as regards the testimony of how we know God's help when we are persecuted, but also how we know God's help when we suffer in other ways. When you go through trials, your non-Christian friends are watching. When you are able to rejoice and to be patient in those trials, and not grumble and complain, but to keep on trusting God, it is a tremendously powerful testimony which can be used by God. Many people have been converted through the testimony of those who have continued in their faith, even in times of suffering.

The full effect of this will only be known in eternity. When we get to heaven many of us will meet people who were helped on their way to salvation by the way we responded to trials. We can and should be encouraged in our suffering that God is using it for the good of others, to bring them to faith, and also to encourage and strengthen those who are already believers.

So, our sufferings are used by God to cause the Gospel to spread to others.

2. Our sufferings increase our heavenly reward

Some of you were here a few weeks ago when we thought about Romans chapter 8 and verse 17: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

We share in the sufferings of Christ *in order that* we may share in his glory. This is not teaching salvation by suffering. The letter of Paul to the Romans teaches emphatically that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is only through God’s undeserved kindness that we have received, as a free gift, salvation from our sins and the right to go to heaven. It is only through faith in Christ that we shall experience the glory of God.

So why does Paul say here that we share in Christ’s sufferings in order that we may share in his glory? The answer is that God prepares us for a richer experience of his glory by taking us through suffering. All believers – even those whose lives are relatively easy – will know the glory of God at the resurrection. In fact, as the apostle says in Romans 8.31, we have already been glorified. The glory that we have is hidden in Christ in heaven, and will be revealed when Christ comes again.

But God wants to give us more than, if I may use the term, a “basic” experience of his glory. He wants to give us, for want of a better word, a “bonus” of extra glory, a far richer experience than that of the believer who is saved and then lives a very easy and comfortable life. Of course the glory of God is far from “basic”. Even at its lowest level, it is exceedingly splendid and ecstatically exciting. I am struggling to find words to convey the idea. Perhaps I should say that the least that a Christian will enjoy will be a staggering amount of glory, but God wants us to know hyper-abounding, super-staggering glory.

How is this “bonus” glory, this hyper-abounding, super-staggering glory known? Through suffering in this life. The more we suffer here, the more abounding will be the glory that we shall know at the resurrection. So when God brings suffering into the life of the Christian, it is because he wants that Christian to have an even more wonderful experience of his glory at the resurrection.

The same truth is taught in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verses 16 and 17, where the apostle says, “For our light and momentary troubles are

achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

The apostle says an extraordinary thing about the afflictions that he went through in this life. He called them “our present troubles”, which he calls “light and momentary”. Yet if you look later on in the letter at the sort of things that he went through, they were far from what we would call “light and momentary”. In 2 Corinthians 11 verses 24 to 29, he describes his sufferings:

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 laboured 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. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

So how can he call his troubles “light and momentary”? This is only possible because he views them in the light of eternity.

Then he says something even more amazing. He says that these troubles are “are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Our troubles bring about glory for us. We can learn from this that God has ruled over our troubles, and brought them into our lives, because he wants to bless us with an even better and richer experience of his glory at the resurrection. All true believers will experience God’s glory. But those who have suffered more in this life, will have a richer experience of God’s glory at the resurrection. When we get to heaven none of us who are believers will regret the sufferings that we knew when we were on earth. On the contrary, we shall be very grateful for the sufferings that we have been through, because they have augmented the glory which we know at the resurrection. What we need to learn to do in this life is to anticipate now the gratitude we shall have at the resurrection. We need by faith to reckon on the glory that is coming to us as a result of the sufferings that we experience now. We need to see our sufferings positively, as a source of eternal blessing,

rather than to view them negatively, as a source of grief in this world. Be grateful to God if you suffer. He has given you the privilege of suffering, so that you may have a richer experience of his glory in the future.

Conclusion

We have seen today these additional truths things about our sufferings:

1. Our sufferings are used by God to bring others to Christ.
2. Our sufferings add to our future glory.

If you are a Christian, lift up your head. Be glad. Your loving heavenly Father is ruling over all the events of your life. He has perfectly tailored the circumstances of your life to do you the most good. He knows what he is doing. Do not be discouraged. Trust him, even in the darkest moments.

If you are not yet a Christian, I have to say to you, as I have said before, that the sufferings of this life are but the harbinger of far worse in the life to come, if you do not repent. People foolishly say about this life, "This is hell." It most certainly is not. This life, sad though it is in many ways, has many comforts that are not known in hell. In hell there will be no sympathy, no love, no doctors to help alleviate suffering, no medication, no tranquilisers, no family, no friends. And there will be no way out. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security by the pleasures and comforts of this world. Turn from your sin. Receive God's salvation. Then you will be able to know the comfort of this verse.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

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