

Sermon for Sunday, August 26, 2012
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God's Care for Us
Romans 8:28-32

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. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. 31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

This summer we have considered the obligation to care for God's gifts. We've seen that we should care for ourselves - our mind, body and emotions, as well as our integrity and life goals. We should care for our neighbors, for creation, for our relationships. We've seen that these things are more than duties. The Lord guides our work and he forgives our failings. But this week I want to focus our attention on the way He cares for us, whatever we do, whether we are at the top of our game or reeling from failure. God cares for us. And Scripture promises: He always will care for us. Let's listen to his promises, taking them to heart.

God promises to care for us

Near the end of his life, Moses told Israel, "I am no longer able to lead you. But the Lord himself will cross [the Jordan] ahead of you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." That's a core promise "I will never leave, nor forsake you" (Deut. 31:2-8).

God repeats the promise to Joshua, the leader who followed Moses: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Josh 1:5).

David said the same to his son Solomon as he prepared to become next king and build the temple: "Be strong and courageous... for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work is finished" (1 Chron. 28:20).

Hebrews 13:5 repeats the promise. Hebrews says we should show hospitality to strangers, visit prisoners, and not worry about money: "Be content with what you have," for God said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." That is, don't calculate "What will happen if I feed too many people? If someone sees me with a prisoner?" Hebrews continues, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6, cf. Ps. 118:6). If the Lord is our helper, man can do nothing to me.

In the same spirit, Isaiah promised God's care in distress: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through... the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. For I am the LORD, your God... your Savior" (Isa 43:1-3).

The greatest of these promises is in 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." Or "We know that for those who love God all things work for good for those who are called according to his purpose".

God's care is often hidden from us.

These are God's promises. The challenge is that we can't always see *how* the Lord keeps them, how he works for our good in all things. We trust God and believe his promises, but his care is often hidden from us. I got my first job after college *because* a key person failed to come to the first interview – easy to see God's care there. But it's hard to see God's care when we lose a job. A life-long runner told me his doctor said he has to stop and find something else. He wonders, "Lord, how is this going to work for my good? Why can't you heal my injury so I can continue?" Sadly, we usually can't see God's good purposes in the hard times. Yet from time to time we can...

Here is a case from World War II. President Roosevelt asked Admiral Chester Nimitz to become the Commander of the Pacific Fleet in 1941, immediately after Pearl Harbor. When Nimitz arrived there was such despair and dejection that you'd think the Japanese had won the war. On Christmas Day, 1941, Nimitz toured the wrecked and sunken war ships that cluttered the waters of Pearl Harbor. Someone asked, "What do you think?" Admiral Nimitz's reply shocked everyone. He said that the Japanese made three massive mistakes:

First, they attacked on Sunday morning when 90% of the crewmen were ashore on leave. If the ships had been at sea and sunk, the death toll could have been 38,000 men instead of 3,800.

Second, the Japanese were so eager to sink the battleships that they never bombed the dry docks opposite the ships. If they had destroyed our dry docks, we would have had to tow every ship 2,700 miles to America for repairs. Instead, we can repair them here.

Third, all the fuel in the Pacific theater was in above ground storage tanks five miles from Pearl Harbor. One attack plane could have strafed and destroyed all the fuel. So the Japanese made three huge mistakes. And through them God preserved our nation in the face of a totalitarian threat.¹

Hear the promise again: "We know that for those who love God all things work [Or: "God works"] for good for those who are called according to his purpose." First, Paul says God is working for us. The whole of Romans 8 assures us of this. He forgives our sins, so we are not under condemnation (8:1-2). He sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and [so] condemned sin in the flesh." He met the "righteous requirement of the law" for us (8:3-4). He sent us his Spirit, to quicken our minds, raise our bodies and assure us that we are his children (8:5-17). The Spirit hears our cries and gives us hope in hard times (8:18-26). One requirement – faith.

Romans 8:28 tells us several things about God. First, God works. He works at all times, in *all things*. He doesn't get tired or sleepy, lazy or indifferent. He works "ceaselessly, energetically, and purposefully" on our behalf.²

Second, he works "for those who love him." The original emphasizes the phrase: "For those who love him, God works... for the good." Paul doesn't say everything works out for everyone all the time. God works for *those who love him*.

¹ "Reflections on Pearl Harbor" by Admiral Chester Nimitz.

² Stott, Romans 247

This doesn't mean everything works out *as we like*. No Americans *liked* Pearl Harbor. But God preserved his people in Pearl Harbor. And many believe it was good that America entered World War II earlier, rather than later.

Third, God works *for our good as he defines it*. The Lord never defines the good life in material terms. Nor is the good life the trouble-free life. He promises something better: He will conform us to the image of Christ. Our struggles bring us closer to the Lord. They help us to detach from our gods - wealth, reputation, strength and skill. Many say, I'm thankful for all God taught me through recent trouble. I became a new person.

Since sin, conflict, and struggle are constant in this world, the promise of "good" has to include growth in adversity. Jesus promises, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Peter tells believers to expect fiery trials (1 Pet. 4:12). In this world, there is one way to strength and maturity - through trials.

We will never become strong at work until we learn to work with difficult clients and difficult co-workers. We will never be strong parents until a child forces us to be more wise, loving and firm than we imagined we could be.

Fourth, Paul says "we know" this. That is, we should join him in this conviction (8:30). No, we don't always *feel* that all things work for our good. God's care is often hidden, but He is for us and wants to bless us (Rom. 8:31).

Blessing brings happiness, but it's not the superficial happiness that comes and goes with external events. It is the deep happiness that's character-based. That comes as God works in all life's circumstances, so we become more like Jesus.

Jesus shows the way. He saw the alienation between God and man, but he didn't pull away from it. In the Incarnation Jesus moved *toward* the pain and alienation. When we move toward necessary suffering we become more like Christ. God's purpose is greater than salvation from sin. We will "be conformed to... his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (8:29).

Again, God makes good use of bad things. That's how we should see tragedies - wars, floods and accidents. None of these is good in themselves. But we can grow through them. In his ministry, Paul experienced persecution at every turn (Acts 13-23). He admits that he was fearful and trembling, hard-pressed, perplexed - but never destroyed (1 Cor. 2:3, 2 Cor. 4:8-9). He knew God was doing great things through him.

Job

Job may be the great case of God's hidden care. In fact, someone could read Job's story as evidence that God does not care for his people. When we meet Job, we learn that he's blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, many servants, and vast flocks of sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys. He was the greatest man among in his region (Job 1:1-3).

Then Job offers a rare glimpse of God's rule: "One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them." Satan appeared with the angels - he's a fallen angel - and reported that he had surveyed the earth (1:6-7).

The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (1:8).

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. He accuses Job: He has everything and ascribes it to you. His life is so easy! Satan said, “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household... You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (1:9-11).

The Lord's reply is a surprise: he let Satan put Job to the test. "Very well then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Satan quickly killed Job's flocks, servants and children (1:12-19).

But Job retained his faith: "He got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:20-21).

The Lord was pleased but Satan claimed to be unimpressed: "Pfff. Skin for skin. As long as his body is untouched, he's untested. But 'touch his flesh and he will curse you to your face" (2:5). The Lord gave Satan permission to touch Job's body and Satan struck Job "with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (2:7). In his misery, his wife taunted him, "Curse God and die." But he stayed faithful and "did not sin in what he said" (2:10).

Someone may say, "Where is God's care in this? God exposed Job to danger, by letting Satan off his chain. And if Job remained faithful, it looks like he did it on his own. His own wife tempted him. How shall we answer?"

First, Job reminds us of what could happen every day if God didn't restrain evil. Satan would destroy all of us at once if he could. Job reminds us that danger is everywhere. I was driving on a highway this week in a spot where single lanes from east and west come together to go northbound. I came from the west, in the left lane and two came from the east, in the right lane. The first car was slow. The driver of the second was on the phone and apparently wanted to go much faster. She gunned the gas and whipped toward my lane without looking. I don't know why she didn't see me; I don't know how she didn't hit me. I think God protects us in traffic, in our health, and other ways every day.

Second, we can say God worked good for Job through his trials? Job says he learned profoundly through his trials. He confesses at the end: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I... repent in dust and ashes” (42:3-6).

In the first part of the book, Job had sworn that he had done no wrong. As he protested his innocence, he seemed to think, and almost said, that he *deserved* God's favor and didn't deserve his troubles. In short, he was proud and knew little of God's grace.

We can show mercy toward Job. We see how he strayed. When his three friends arrived to comfort him, he felt that they put him on trial. They said: God is just and you are suffering. Therefore you deserve it. Repent and God will restore you. Their principle was retribution: God punishes evil. He is punishing you. Therefore you have done evil and must repent.

There are three ideas here. First, God is just. Second, He governs through the principle of retribution. But third, Job protests that he is innocent. The result is an impasse in the trial of Job. Job could have failed in a couple of ways. He could do what his wife said – curse God and die. But if Job cursed God when he lost his wealth it would prove that Job *didn't* really care about God or righteousness. But God preserved him and Job didn't commit that mistake.

Second, Job could have admitted his guilt, even though he knew better. That is, he could say what his friends told him to say, to appease God. Here too, he would have given up on God – he gives no justice. Instead, he insisted he was righteous. The result: Job put God on trial; he suggested that God was unjust to let him suffer.

Job asked for an advocate because he knew he wasn't up to it, but he presented his case this way: God governs by retribution. I don't deserve retribution. Therefore God has been unjust. Job wanted to win, but consider the price if he had.

If Job wins, God loses. He is unjust. He must apologize to Job. Even if Job wins, he loses, for now he has a God who is not worth serving. The only alternative is to "dismantle the retribution principle."³ Elihu, Job's fourth friend, makes an excellent case for God's justice, but he is still missing the point, thinking of everything in terms of justice.

God doesn't speak from Chapter Three to Chapter Thirty-eight. By that time, he'd already won the first part of the trial. Job remained faithful. He didn't curse God or give up on God. He was faithful, but still awaited an answer. We know that God must have sustained him. Job hints at this too when he says man can't find wisdom by himself (Job 28:12, 23). If Job had wisdom to stay faithful, it was God's gift.

When the Lord speaks in the final chapters he reframes the trial. He does it by asking Job and his friends question after question: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements?" He asked questions about the waters, the heavens, the animals. The message: Job can't even master animals or weather or crops. How then "shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" (38:4-5, 40:2).

The point: For anyone to assess the way God governs the world, he would have to know everything – all that every human does, all of God's reasons for his actions. But no one has such knowledge. Therefore no one has standing to question God.

Job's response in the last chapter is perfect. He stops questioning God and he stops defending himself. He accepts God's word, his vision of reality. He is humbled, as he should be: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (42:3).

He is pleased to know more of God. He says: "I know that you can do all things; and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I... repent in dust and ashes" (42:2, 5-6). Someone summarized the main lesson this way: In his prosperity [Job] thought that he had known God. Now he realizes that all his past experience of God was as nothing compared with the experience he had now found. He therefore no longer cries out to be delivered from his suffering. He rests in God even in his pain.⁴

³ "Job" Walton, Old Testament, 341.

⁴ H Rowley, Glatzer, Dimensions of Job, pp. 125-6

There is much left to say about Job. I have not addressed the loss of his family, the gift of a new family. Time fails. This is a worship service, not a lecture hall. Here is the essence: Job shows that God works what is good for us even if we cannot see his purposes. He brings us to himself, brings us to maturity, even if he doesn't give us what we want. Even if he doesn't give what we think would make us happy. Job faced a terrible situation – like us, but harder. It seemed unfair. Where was God? Job couldn't see how God was working for his good, but he was. Let's apply this to ourselves. There are three lessons.

First, we should never despair. Never give up. Jesus said, "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13). Let's endure as Job did, whatever our challenge may be, because we trust that God sees and hears.

Second, Job teaches us to trust God more than our own judgment. Job's friends thought they had everything figured out. So did Job. Neither was right. God alone sees the whole. He knows innumerable things that we do not. Let's trust him. Job gives us vision. He gives us a glimpse of how much we *can't* see.

Third, Job teaches us to stand together. As we know, Job's friends came and sat with him in silence for a week before they began to talk. When we are suffering, when things are working out badly, it helps to *know* God still works for good for those who love him, whether we *feel* it or not. But when we don't feel it, it helps to have a friend by your side, one who loves God and loves you. God cares for us through his people. So let's do that for each other. Now, back to Romans...

Reflecting on God's care for us (Romans 8:31-32)

We see that "God does works for the good of those who love him" and we are destined for glory (Rom. 8:28, 30). Now Paul invites to us to pause and consider them: "What then shall we say to these things?" (8:31). He asks notable questions.

First, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:32). The Greek is "Who *is* against us?" That suggests an essential truth: many *are* against us. But, compared to God, *who are they?* What *can they do?* Consider our enemies. Paul mentions persecution, which came from both Jews and Gentiles and "the sword" from the Empire. Tyrants are *hostile* to believers because they know we serve another Sovereign. There are *rivals* at work. *Death* is still an enemy, as is *sin*. Sometimes it seems that the world opposes us. But who are these powers? If God is for us, what can they do, in the end?

Only one foe should alarm us – the Lord himself. He sometimes tells hardened sinners, "I am against you" (Jer. 21:13, 50:31, Ezek. 13:8-20). But when we believe in Jesus he reconciles us to God, and forgives our sins, so he will never be against us. When God says, "I am for you," our foes fall away.

Second, since God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (8:32). An interesting argument: God did this great thing, sacrificing his only Son for us. And if he does the great thing, surely he will do *lesser* things. He will give all we *need*. Perhaps not all we *want*. But he gives all we need: food, covering, fatherly care and eternal life.

C. S. Lewis said we want "not so much a Father in heaven as a *grandfather* in heaven – a *senile* benevolence who likes to see young people enjoying themselves and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be... said at the end of each day 'a good time was had by all.'" ⁵

But God aims for something better than good times. He aims for our goodness. We don't want a God who is so soft that he doesn't care what anyone does so long as we feel good doing it? What chaos! He wants more for us.

Scripture says: Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. Yes, God cares us enough to take us forward to glory. Can we be sure? Yes He who did not spare his own Son... Surely he will "graciously give us all things" that we need.

⁵ Pain, 31, 2001