

## **The purposeful goodness of God**

### **ROMANS 8.28-39**

On the evening of 1<sup>st</sup> March 1950, a choir practice was arranged for 7.30pm in the church in Beatrice, Nebraska. The pastor and his wife were late leaving their home to attend because their newborn baby needed changing. Leona, a high school student, made a decision to finish off her maths homework before leaving for the church. Two elderly sisters who usually arrived first had car problems and so for the first time in their life would be running late. Mrs Schuster the choir coordinator prided herself on her punctuality but had learnt her mother was sick and so decided to call on her on the way to church. This would make her late. The key man in the choir had no such excuse. He was a shift worker and simply didn't wake up in time to be on time.

So it was that no one from the choir was in the church at 7.30pm that night. So it was that at 7.25pm a small valve in the boiler in the church basement leaked gas into the church basement. So it was that at 7.30pm the gas somehow ignited and the church literally blew up just as the choir practice was scheduled.

We can imagine the frustrations of the various members as they ran late. Everything would seem to be going wrong with them. And yet in the providence of God everything was going just right. Out of apparently adverse circumstances can come good outcomes. It certainly isn't always as plain or dramatic as at Beatrice Nebraska in 1950, but the truth of God's overriding goodness still holds. And this is the theme of our final passage in ROMANS 8: 28-29.

The point of v.28 is not that bad things don't happen to us. Bad things happen to us as well as good things. Trusting in God's goodness is not denying the bad. It is refusing to see the bad as the final reality. It is putting the bad into the context of God's overarching goodness. God works good out of bad in the lives of those who follow Jesus. He did it with Joseph, he did it with Paul, he did it supremely with Jesus in his death on the cross. God takes

the broken pieces of our lives and creates something beautiful out of them. God takes the slender and fragile threads of our lives and weaves his beautiful tapestry out of them.

Our problem is that we don't always see the good, can't always even define the good. Paul gives us an idea of the good in vv.29-30. God's great mission is to bring us to be more like Jesus. He invites us into his family for this purpose. Our salvation is for this purpose. Whatever we may conclude about that contentious concept of predestination, it is clear that the goal is not that we sit back smugly waiting to go to heaven. It is that we become more and more like the perfect human being, Jesus. This is what ultimately defines good. Becoming like Jesus is our destiny, our calling. Not comfort or happiness, desirable as these might be. God promises to work towards our Christlikeness amidst the seemingly crazy, random and downright terrible things that occur.

But when we are stuck in the pit of loss or hardship we may find it hard to trust in the goodness of God. That liar, Satan, will get in our ears and suggest God's goodness isn't what ultimately matters, that what afflicts us here and now is what really matters. V.31 is Paul's answer. Circumstances might be against us but that is outweighed by God being for us. Satan wants us to see our lives as being at the mercy of circumstances. God wants us to see him as over and above all circumstances. The bedrock reality in our life is not the badness or even goodness of circumstances. It is the goodness of God.

And if Satan persists in suggesting this is all fairytale nonsense, Paul gives the goodness of God content in v.32. If God has done the big thing in sending Jesus to remove our guilt and allow reconciliation to him and eternal life, then surely God can be trusted to look after all our relatively lesser issues. Having launched me in my journey and guaranteed its ending, can he not be trusted to help me on that journey? God's goodness is no pious fantasy, no wishful thinking. It is grounded and proven in history.

Even so, this is not easy to live out when faced with setbacks. Vv.33-34 give us further help. Satan, the liar, the accuser, will point the finger at us, reminding us of our shortcomings. He will suggest we define ourselves by our sin. He will suggest our sins determine our destiny. More subtly, he might suggest that while God forgives sins, our particular ones are in a special category. Or perhaps the suggestion that while God might be there, he might not be there for us. The attempted condemnation of the evil one is countered by the real justification, forgiveness, and acceptance of the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since we are not condemned by God (the note on which this chapter opened), we ought not condemn ourselves. Even under the guise of humility or penitence. We certainly admit and confess and mourn our sins but we are not defined by them. They do not dominate us. Grace dominates me. For those in Christ, mercy triumphs over judgement. Because Jesus has borne the burden of my guilt I don't have to bear it. I am not some miserable wretch grudgingly offered some odd morsel of mercy by God. I am a much loved child upon whom my God lavishes mercy and kindness. When it comes to grace and mercy, God doesn't have a ration book in his hand. Because of Jesus he is amazingly generous. We thus bask in the warmth of his acceptance. No more rejection, no more condemnation. After all, life is tough enough without having to deal with that sort of thing.

So God is good, he has proven it in Jesus. Because of that we can experience the supreme goodness of being accepted by a holy God despite our imperfections. Out of this, Paul draws his wonderful and logical conclusion in vv.35-39. He says, in essence, that nothing or no one need throw us out of the orbit of God's love. Whatever life throws at us, God accepts us. Whatever life throws at us, God works it for good. Whatever we feel about all this, we need have no doubt it is true. Jesus proves it. He has done the one great good we had no hope of achieving. He can be trusted to perform the lesser goods.

None of us can live very long without confronting the heartbreaking reality of loss and pain. Any Christian community is a community of the brokenhearted. Not that we are always like that but like the poor, the broken hearted are always with us. Some are obviously so, for others the pain is more private. Some cry on the outside, some cry on the inside. But any church will be a place of tears as well as laughter. And this passage is one to give meaning to those tears and offer us a way forward as we live with and respond creatively and boldly to what life throws at us at times.

It is futile to pretend that life in Christ is a long upward journey unpunctuated by sorrow. It is thus unhelpful to encourage a sense of denial in the church as to sorrow and hardship. If we can't be authentic in the church then there is no hope for us. We weep with those weeping and rejoice with those rejoicing. And yet we don't just shrug our shoulders with a sense of fatalism and grimly accept suffering as our lot in life. We neither pretend all is well or assume there is no light in our darkness.

This passage invites us to face the mess and mystery of the world with our eyes wide open to it. But we face it armed with the understanding that we don't face it alone and that this same mess and mystery can be used to bring us nearer to Jesus and thus closer to our true human destiny. God is for us, Jesus proves it. God works things for good. God accepts us. This is the larger context within which we find our confidence. The bottom line reality for each of us is not the mess and mystery of the world but the unceasing and unconquerable love of God.

We can't help but live in the midst of trouble and occasional heartache. But we can choose to place it all in the light of this grace filled accepting love of God. We can choose not to be victims of circumstances but rather conquerors of circumstances through the unconquerable love of God for us.