

Suffering Series

A Promise to Cling to

A series of four articles on suffering is all very well, but when you're in the thick of it sometimes all you can do is cling to a single verse or a phrase. This is the story of my verse.

I want to start off with an odd question: What is the least consequential, unnecessary thing that God has done for you that has brought a smile to your face and a thank-you to your lips?

I think of a long journey home from somewhere when I had a notion for chips. You know how it is when you get a notion; not only do you have to get them, but they need to be good—there are few things as disappointing (at this level) as ropey chips. And so we pulled in at the next chippy. The signs weren't good—an empty car park on a Saturday evening, no queue. But we persisted, and a few moments later Judith emerged with the goods. And boy, were they good. On the big scale of life—inconsequential, but on the small scale—thank you, God.

Get your own 'chip moment' and hold it in your mind—we'll come back to it shortly.

In the middle of suffering we need to fight to see life through the lens of Scripture, and not allow our suffering to distort our view of Scripture and God. In other words, we need to have the attitude that says, "Whatever else is happening to me for whatever unknown reasons, this I do know..." One of my lenses

that I kept coming back to was Romans 8:32:

"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?"

Paul has taken us on a magnificent tour of salvation. He has shown us that suffering doesn't win (v.18ff). Not only that, but not one event in the Christian's life will go to waste—that's what v.28 is saying. Satan will get none of God's people, but neither will he claim one hurt-filled event in their lives as a moment of even the smallest triumph. How can we know this? Verse 32 is the answer to that.

There are two things to grasp:

1. God will stop at nothing for your good

Sometimes in the midst of hardship the more you know of the truth of God's sovereignty the more you can question his love. But Paul underlines, in two ways, that God's love is not up for question:

A) Proof from the past

How do you know that God will stop at nothing for your good? Look to the past. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him... graciously give us..."

He is defined twice as the giving Father, who delights to give the best

he has. We think of Jesus giving his life at Calvary, but over and over in Scripture it is the Father who is portrayed as giving his Son. Paul picks up on that, showing you the level of commitment God has for you.

How do you know that God will stop at nothing for your good? Because in the past, he let nothing get in his way to do you good. We had two great problems before God - our sin, and God's wrath - and God let nothing get in the way of his dealing with those problems. He didn't let his eternal delight in the Son, or his holy distaste of my sin. The Triune God would let nothing get in the way. And so the Father gives the Son, and the Son takes your place - sin and punishment- so that you can experience the never-ending love of the Father that was his.

That's how you know he is committed to your good. The proof is in the past.

When you find yourself in hard circumstances, tending to question God's love, you need to come to this verse and say to yourself, "Of all the things I know, I know I cannot question his love for me." He has a track record of not letting even the biggest obstacles get in the way of his love for you.

B) Promise for the present and the future

Now Paul argues from the greater to the lesser; since God has already

done this much for you, giving you the greatest of all gifts, how much more will he do all the smaller things - like a father who has worked and saved to buy the latest toy for his kids, only to overhear them worrying that it needs batteries. "Having gone to all that trouble, do you really think I won't get you the batteries too?"

You can look at the cross and know that God will stop at nothing for your good, and that is not simply a past fact, but one that has promise-laden implications for the present and the future—"... how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

You can almost hear Paul's gentle indignation. What were you thinking - that after having done so much, he would let you down now? Whatever it is he is doing, he isn't letting you down.

“ If my eyesight is to go, I can be confident that God will supply all that I need... More than that, it will only go if it is part of God's best plan

All things that you need are promised here. Do you need strength? How will he not give you strength? Do you need faith? Do you need endurance? Having given you his Son, how will he not also give you faith and endurance to live for his Son? Wisdom? Grace? Courage? Perseverance? Patience? Joy? Kindness with insensitive people? These are all part of the 'all things'.

This verse tells me that, if my eyesight is to go, I can be confident that God will supply all that I need to be a husband, a father and a pastor. More than that, it will only go if it is part of God's best plan - do I want to forgo the best plan, with the greatest provision?

You can face all things confident of his supply because, when Jesus went to the Cross, he didn't just purchase your forgiveness, but he purchased a supply line between the Father and his children, so that you will not have to live like needy

orphans, but that you can live to bring glory to your Father.

You can have supreme confidence that your God will stop at nothing to supply all your needs.

Go back to your own 'chip shop' moment of God's inconsequential, but gracious provision. Take that and put it at one end of a scale. At the other end place the Cross, where he "did not spare his own Son". Between those two points - the inconsequential and the colossal - lies everything you need. Those are the bookends of this blood-bought promise; he will supply all things, whether it is the least need, or the greatest - all things that are necessary, for my good, and for his glory.

2. Let nothing stop you from believing this

This is what we need to hang on to and let the truth and not our emotions speak to us. God's goodness is not up for debate. He will give us all things necessary for life and godliness. But we need to hang on to the promise. That means four things:

A) Let Scripture be the lens.

Don't let your circumstances determine how you see God. Let Scripture do that. Listen to this example from George Muller. On the death of his beloved wife he wrote:

The last portion of Scripture which I read to my precious wife was: "The Lord God is a sun and shield ... no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." I said to myself, "... if it is really good for me, my darling wife will be raised up again; sick as she is. God will restore her again. But if she is not restored again, then it would not be a good thing for me. And so my heart was at rest. I was satisfied with God. All this springs from taking God at his word, believing what he says."

Will we determine to take God at his word? Or will we let our circumstances stop us from believing?

B) Let God define the 'all things'.

I think I know what I need, but I am

not omniscient. He alone knows the 'all things'. He sees my future - the delicate interplay of my life with my family, my congregation, my neighbours, my grandchildren, to the 1000th generation of someone who listened to a sermon over the internet. He sees it all. And he knows which things to provide that will be best for me and for his glory. Will we let our shopping list stop us from believing?

C) Let the Cross be your focus

How do you develop a supreme confidence that God will stop at nothing for your good? It is not by gritting your teeth and putting on a brave face. It is by looking at the Cross, the non-negotiable demonstration of God's commitment to his people. While verse 28 is often quoted, I think verse 32 is the real goldmine because it takes us to the cross.

Sometimes with suffering you get enough distance to have hindsight, and you can see it was for good. At other times God gives you insight, often through his Word, and you can see something of the good he is working. But often in the thick of it you have neither hindsight nor insight; you are walking blind.

In those moments we need to go to an event where we have both an insight and hindsight. That place is the Cross. There we see that before God asks you to trust him with your pain and suffering, before he gives you any explanation, God the Son demonstrates, in his own blood and pain and tears, that the bleakest event is also the best event.

In the flesh and blood of his Son, long before he asks us to bear pain, God demonstrates that he will bring good out of pain. And while you have no hindsight, or insight, and are walking blindly, you can go to the Cross and see written in hurt and pain a promise from God to you, "I will work all the bleakest events for good."



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