

Hespeler, 26 July 2020 © Scott McAndless

1 Kings 3:5-12, Psalm 119:129-136, Romans 8:26-39, Mat 13:31-33, 44-52

**H**ave you ever heard someone say, “*Don’t worry, God won’t send you more trouble than you can handle.*” It is a phrase that is so common, repeated by so many people, that you maybe just assumed that it came from the Bible. You may have even gone looking for that verse. Or maybe you are thinking right now, yes, I’m going to go look for that verse later.

If that is what you are thinking, let me save you a little bit of time. You won’t find it; it’s not there. The Bible never promises you anything of the sort. But I probably don’t need to tell you that because, really, this year of 2020 has, up until this point, pretty much been continual demonstration that the troubles of this world can come at you and be totally overwhelming. And, because it is 2020 and not one of us has any clue what yet might be in store for us during this year, I just want to say that it is time for us to give up on that saying and that, if you have been or are feeling completely overwhelmed these days, you shouldn’t feel bad about that. You should not feel as if you have failed somehow. I suspect we’ve all felt like that at some point this year.

So, that is what the Bible *doesn’t* promise you in a year like this, but I think we’re all looking for a little bit of encouragement at this point. So, let’s ask, what *does* the Bible promise us? Well, if there was ever a good passage to read during a bad year, I think that the passage we read from the letter to the Romans this morning is a good place to turn. God may not promise you not to send anything you can’t handle, but he does promise you this: “**All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**” And, while that other saying might set us up for some unrealistic expectations, I do think that this one is particularly helpful at a moment like this.

It doesn’t say that everything that happens is good or even that everything happens for a purpose. That, by the way, is another trap we easily fall into, thinking that every bad thing that happens must have some divine purpose behind it. That sets people up, makes them think that, if only they can figure out this hidden purpose behind whatever tragedy they are dealing with, everything will all just make sense and everything will be good. I have known people who drove themselves into mental and bodily illness in a fruitless quest to find the purpose behind various



tragedies they have lived through.

I have also seen well-meaning friends and family members torture their loved ones with speculation about the purpose they claim to see in a tragedy. I knew a couple, for example, whose daughter had died at a young age of cancer. That is, of course, a horrible thing for anyone to live through. But it was made worse, for them, by the people around them at that time who kept trying to explain to them the purpose that they thought God had in making that terrible thing happen. None of the proposed purposes was good enough, of course, and I met this couple years later and they were still tortured by a question that, I believe, really had no answer.

So it's not that everything that happens is good or has a purpose, the promise, instead, is that God makes things work *together* for good or, to put it another way, that God has a way of bringing good out of even the worst circumstances. I think that this is an important difference. I don't pretend to understand why God allows various bad things to happen in this world. I happen to believe that God is just as grieved when people die in a pandemic or in a war as any of us are – probably more so. But even in the worst of circumstances, God does have a way of bringing good out of it.

I've seen that throughout this pandemic. There really is this potential for good things to come out of it – for communities to pull together, for us to rethink how we treat and how we value people who do essential work, to do a better job in long-term care and there are many other great things that could and should come out of it.

22That doesn't mean that these positive things *will* all happen, of course. In fact, as I look at the response to this crisis and how people are retrenching and protecting old privileges, I am often worried that the people in charge are going to stubbornly resist learning *anything* from this whole thing and that powerful forces will exert themselves to make sure that *nothing* really changes. But whether we manage to find the good and bring it out of the bad thing that happens, I think, is up to us. And we've got some work to do to make sure it happens. God's promise is to work to make that good a possibility.

But, still it has to be said, even if all that good did come from this pandemic, I would not suggest, even for a moment, that that is something that would make the suffering, the death and the deprivation all worthwhile. It doesn't work that way – no positive outcome could make that a fair exchange.

And as for purpose, there is purpose to be found in this and in every tragedy, that is also a promise that is made in this passage. But note that Paul doesn't say that the purpose is to be found in the tragedy itself. This is what he says: **“All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”** The purpose, you need to understand, is not in the tragedy or the bad thing that happens. The purpose

is in *you*. *You*, as someone who loves God, have a purpose. God calls you according to his purpose for you.

What does that mean? It means that, while it is often a fool's errand to try and find the purpose in some particular tragedy, you may always believe that there is a purpose for *you* that you can realize in the midst of whatever your circumstances are. That purpose is most completely fulfilled in love. That's what Paul has to mean when he refers to those who love God.

When you're in the midst of some awful events, you do have a purpose. You are called to comfort and support others according to your ability. Or sometimes, when you are truly overwhelmed and have nothing to spare, your purpose can simply be accepting that, in this moment, you are called to *receive* love and compassion and care from other people.

Paul goes on to write, **“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”** Paul wrote this as someone who had experienced hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword in his work of preaching the gospel. And he was writing it to people who had also experienced these things or lived in fear of experiencing them.

They all understood that the promise was not that God would never send you any trial that you couldn't handle because nobody can handle all of that. Nobody can go through it without feeling overwhelmed. And I think we all have a better understanding today about what it means to handle hardship. When this crisis started back in the middle of March, I think that most of us felt like we could ride out the storm. We would hunker down, load up on some supplies – hopefully score a big pile of toilet paper as if that was all that really mattered – and we'd make it through this thing. But then we all know what happened, it dragged on and on and on a psychological level and a physical level it became harder and harder to bear.

I'm not trying to suggest, of course, that we are living through the worst tragedy that human beings have ever had to deal with – far from it – but I'm just saying that the length of this and the uncertainty of the length have definitely taken their toll on us. And it has given us a taste of what it is like to be in a situation where everything is out of control and you just can't handle it. That happens. That is part of life in this world and people of faith, people who love Jesus, are never given the promise that they will be spared that.

But the promise that Paul gives us in this passage is significant. He is promising you that, though you may pass through some trials, nothing you have to face is going to separate you from the love of God that has been shown to you in Christ Jesus. You may sometimes feel overwhelmed. You may have things going on in your life or in the world around you that you just can't handle. What Paul is promising is that when you are overwhelmed by circumstances, God will overwhelm you with love.

So those are the truths and those are the promises that you need to be holding onto, especially in uncertain times like these. But that still leaves us with one lingering question: how are we supposed to manage all of this? I mean, it is all well and good for me to stand here and tell you that nothing bad that could happen to you could possibly separate you from the love of God, but, when you're in the middle of it, when you are feeling totally overwhelmed by what is going on, what are you supposed to do with those feelings? What are you supposed to do to help you cope in the middle of it?

I believe that the number one tool that God gives us to help us cope when we are feeling overwhelmed is prayer. In fact, sometimes prayer is nothing more and nothing less than the act of admitting to yourself and to God that you are overwhelmed. It is saying to God, I know I can't handle this. I mean, I'll do what I can. I'll try and do the best that I can for the people I care for in this situation, but I just know that there are parts of this that are out of my control and so, God, I'm going to have to hand those things off to you. Prayer is simply the act of giving over to God what you know that you can't carry.

But there is a problem that may come with that when you are feeling overwhelmed. Sometimes the situation is so complex that you honestly do not know what is needed and what is going to help. And so people might wonder how they can pray when they don't even know what they're hoping for or what to ask for.

Paul speaks to that very issue in this passage. **“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”** You see, prayer is not really an exercise in figuring out what is needed in a situation and then telling God what to do about it. Prayer is first of all about God meeting us where we are. And sometimes, when we are overwhelmed, we cannot even put into words what we want or what we need.

The promise we are given in that kind of situation is this: nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not our inability to pray, not our inability to express what we need, not our feeling of being overwhelmed. When all we have left are the cries and groans of our own hearts, God can and does meet us there. The promise is not that we will be spared the troubles of this world. The promise is that we do not have to face them alone and without the support of the love of God. And that, I promise you, is what you need most.

Many people have no doubt been wondering why it is that we are the ones who have to deal with the crises of our present time. I don't have an answer to that question, I only have a promise. God is alive and God is with his people to support those who lean upon him and who trust in him. And I know that that is enough.