

R12.2 March 2024 Blog Rejoice Always, Even In Suffering

Recently some Christian friends shared their experience about dealing with their son who has cancer. I really appreciated how open they were about their ongoing pain and doubt. They also provided a great witness to us all about faith in God and His mysterious ways and goodness. At the end, the mother said something that really struck a chord with me. She said that if we aren't careful in situations like this, we will try to turn God into a "Santa Claus god" of our own making, rather than worshipping the true God of the Bible.

It seems to me that if we want to understand life on earth, we must try to see God as He truly is, not as we would like to imagine Him. Left to my natural self, I would want a Santa Claus god who will:

- Bless me in everything I do
- Give me a carefree life with no problems including:
 - o Good health for me and my family
 - o Financial security
 - o Great personal relationships with no strife
 - o Power, success, and fulfillment in everything that I do
 - o Etc.
- Ask nothing in return

Maybe this is your life, but it certainly has not been my experience. The reality is if we live long enough, we will all face the loss of one or more of these ideals. So, when calamity *does* strike in my life the question is whether I see God's hand in it, and if so, how does that relate to my view of Him – do I still believe that He is good and has my best interest at heart?

As I reflected on this, two verses came to mind:

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that for those who love God **all** things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."¹ God says that He is in control, no matter how it might appear at the time.

Romans 5:3-5 says, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." There is a purpose for our suffering.

¹ All scripture references in this blog are ESV unless otherwise noted

I believe the keys to understanding the reality of our life in this fallen world are to:

- 1.) try to see things from God's eternal perspective; and
- 2.) focus on what He *actually* promises, not what we *want* Him to promise.

Verses like Romans 8:28 clearly state that *all* things work together for good for those who love God. Can I claim this promise as truth in my life even during difficult times? How can I see good in personal health problems, the death of a loved one, financial ruin, etc.?

In Romans 5:3-5, God promises that there is a purpose for the tribulations in our lives and therefore we should rejoice in them. We clearly learn more about God and grow more Christ-like during tough times than during times of rest and prosperity. But can I truly thank God for preparing me for eternity with Him, even when I don't understand how or why certain bad things are happening to me?

These verses teach us a lot about God's character and who He really is. First, in order for Him to promise that all things work together for good for believers, God must be in control of everything. In other words, He is *the* Sovereign. If we think about it, there are only a few options when something bad occurs:

- God is not all powerful and sometimes Satan wins. All of scripture says otherwise, there is no comparison between God's power and that of Satan.
- God is not all-knowing. He says, "Oops, sorry, that one slipped by Me." This is ludicrous, of course. He is omniscient and aware of every detail in our lives, down to the number of hairs on our head (Matt 10:30 & Luke 12:7).
- God is aloof, occasionally dabbling in men's lives when it pleases Him, but otherwise letting things play out however they will. See Matt 6:26. God feeds the sparrows, and we are of infinitely more value than them.
- He is uncaring or worse yet, mean – jabbing people for His own pleasure. I can hardly even write these words because it is so absurd and against all that the Bible teaches. God is the very essence of love.
- Or, God is in absolute control of the universe, He loves us, and He wants what is the best for us.

All of Scripture tells us that God is good, that He's in control and that He has our best interest at heart. How He can give men free will and yet control every circumstance in our lives is beyond my ability to comprehend. However, just because I don't understand how He does it doesn't mean it isn't true, because His thoughts and His ways are so

much higher than ours (see Isaiah 55:8-9). While it is beyond our ability to understand everything about God, the Bible teaches many truths on which we can depend, including the following:

First, God has an eternal perspective. He is not bound by time like we are. His promises to us as individuals will always be true for eternity, even though we may not be able to perceive how they are in our best interest during our lifetimes. It may be that only once we reach heaven will we fully understand. This is not a comfortable situation, but I believe that God is more interested in our character than our comfort. He brings difficulty into our lives to build our character and to refine our hope so that it lies in Him, and only in Him. To the extent that we can understand and accept this, we can grow closer to God and become more the person that He would have us to be.

Second, there are certain things that can only be learned by experiencing them. It is wise to learn vicariously through others' experiences whenever possible, but not everything can be learned this way. We see this in the life of Jesus. Hebrews 2:10 says, "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." In v. 17 it goes on to say, "He had to be made like His brothers in all things." Jesus experienced suffering just like we do and so much more. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He asked if there was any other way to accomplish His goal without going through the suffering that awaited Him. Knowing that there was no other way, He went through the experience and modeled for us how to manage the most difficult pain and suffering imaginable.

Nowhere in scripture does God promise that Christians won't suffer in this life. In fact, if we are living as disciples of Christ, we will sometimes suffer even more because of it. But if we recognize that God is the Author of these circumstances and brings them into our lives for our own best interests, we can raise our eyes above our problems, see God's hand at work and learn the lessons that He would have us learn. If we truly understand the magnitude of His love, we can become thankful that He loves us enough to bring these problems into our lives, knowing that there is no other better way for us to become more like Jesus than going through these experiences.

My hope for each of us is that when faced with difficulty in life, we will look beyond the immediate problem by recognizing that the circumstances come from God and by maintaining his eternal perspective. Only then will we be able to rest in the peace of knowing that God is in control and has our best eternal interest at heart. We can be grateful that He is with us as we live through these periods of testing. Moreover, we can

be grateful to God not only despite the difficulties we face, but because He brings these circumstances into our lives as an act of His love for us. We trust Him that whatever we face is in our best interest and try to learn the lessons He has for us as He prepares us to spend eternity with Him. Only with this understanding and conviction regarding God's sovereignty and abundant love for us can we face whatever confronts us with true joy and the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

Applications:

1. What is the current "bad" thing going on in your life at the present time? What circumstance(s) or relationship(s) are you dealing with right now that seem overwhelming and troubling?
2. In light of what you have read here, consider God's character, His desire for you, and then reevaluate the situation. Do you see God's hand in what is taking place? Pray to God, praising Him, pleading with Him, pouring out your heart to Him, and waiting on Him.
3. How is your level of contentment as you meditate on these matters? Are you able to thank God for the circumstances He has placed in your life? If not, why?
4. Reach out to a close and trusted follower of Jesus to share your situation and ask them to pray with and for you, and to help you process what is taking place through a biblical lens.
 - a. You may also reply to this email confidentially and ask us to pray for you.