[1]

Looking Forward Through the Rearview Mirror

Romans 8:28

January 5, 2014, Jeff Germo

Can you believe another year has sped on by -- again? It goes so fast. Sometimes it slips by so fast that I feel like I missed most of it. But, we don't want to do that because we need to learn from the past. As George Santayana[1] is famously quoted as saying, "Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Some things are good to repeat, while others are not. And, as Christians, we always want to be on the growing edge, which means that we need to take the time to learn from our history.

We're going to focus mostly on one verse this morning.

[2]

Romans 8:28 (NLT)

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

This verse is very well known to most of us. But, it is also quite misunderstood. We sometimes use it to support our passive approach to faith. ***God causes everything to work out so whatever happens happens.*** It's sort of a Christian fatalism. We'll just leave it in God's hands – which sort of lets us off the hook. We let God find us a job, or earn us a living, or find us a spouse, or whatever. And it becomes an excuse to not do the hard work involved in walking with God. And then if we happen to fail at those things we can say, "Oh well, I left it up to God." And it sounds really spiritual, but it's actually not.

We need to have a good understanding of how we are to partner, or cooperate with God. God never meant that our faith would be passive. He wants us to cooperate with Him, to work alongside Him. There is probably no verse that more suitably illustrates this than **Philippians 2:12b-13**. **(NLT)**

[3]

Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. 13 For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

Do you see the relationship between our working hard and God working in us? We cooperate with God by letting him chip away at our rough edges. We work hard, but, at the same time, God is working in us making the changes as we cooperate with him, and even our desire to allow Him in comes from Him.

[4]

Others misunderstand Romans 8:28 to say that if we are "good" Christians God will make our lives easy. That sort of thinking has a mathematical equation that looks like this. If I obey God, He will bless me with a smooth life. He owes me. Obedience to God equals blessing, which we equate to a smooth ride.

But, Jesus obeyed God, the Father and look what happened to Him. He was crucified. The disciples all followed Jesus and most of them died as martyrs. The Apostle Paul obeyed God and look what happened to him.

[5]

2 Corinthians 11:23-29 (NLT)

…I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. 24 Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.

[6]

26 I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not.

[7]

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Santayana

27 I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. 28 Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?

And all that happened, why? Because Paul was a bad boy? No, all of those bad things happened to him because he obedient to God. God was not punishing him. It wasn't discipline. Did you know that Paul actually told his protégé Timothy that those who want to live godly lives will suffer persecution?

[8]

2 Timothy 3:10-13 (NLT)

10 But you, Timothy, certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is. You know my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. 11 You know how much persecution and suffering I have endured. You know all about how I was persecuted in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra—but the Lord rescued me from all of it. 12 Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

How's that for a good selling point on becoming a Christian?

Look at what Peter wrote:

[9]

1 Peter 4:12-13 (NLT)

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. 13 Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.

Don't be surprised if you suffer. Some people think that Christians, if they are living right should be above suffering. And if something bad happens to a Christian they say, "Hmmm, I wonder what is wrong in their life that God is making them suffer. Peter said, "Don't be surprised if you suffer as if something strange were happening to you." We suffer just like others in the world, and truth be told, maybe more.

So, make no mistake about it, when Paul said that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose, he was not saying that only good things will happen to Christians, and if something bad happens it means that they are being punished, or that they sinned.

[10]

Let's take a look at what it does mean. It has to do with having a future orientation – looking forward with eyes of faith.

Last week we looked back on what God has done in and through CRBC in 2013. We took a look at some of the spiritual markers in 2013 so that we can sort of connect the dots and see where God is taking us in 2014. We told some stories about what God did in 2013 and then piled some stones on stage to commemorate those stories just like the Israelites did in Joshua 4 when they crossed the Jordan.

Today we are going to look the other direction. We are going to **look forward through the rearview mirror.** If you notice in the image on the screen there is a rearview mirror with an image that is very clear, and the image through the windshield is blurred. Of course, the adage that comes to mind when I look at this is, "Hindsight is 20/20." It's easy to know what we should have done when we look back, or to be an armchair quarterback watching a football game and saying what you would have done if you were in charge. It's a lot harder to navigate into the future. But, unless we look back and analyze and learn from our mistakes we will not bode well in the future.

Professional athletes and teams do this all the time. They will record a video of a game and then watch it to see what they could improve on. We do that as staff as well. We don't video ourselves, but we do have regular staff reviews in which we look at how we have done in the past and talk about ways that we can each improve in our personal lives and in our ministries. Some people are afraid to do this because they don't want to hear ways that they have failed, which is quite sad really, because if you don't look at the ways that you need to improve, you will remain immature.

Ruth and I, in the New Year, normally talk about what we want to become. By that, I don't mean, that we are going to change careers and become brain surgeons or accountants. What we ask ourselves is in what ways do we see God changing us. Ruth doesn't tell me how she wants me to change. She holds her tongue. I tell her how I want to

change by God's grace, and then she tells me how she wants to change. And then we pray together and ask God to help us as we cooperate with Him. And finally we give Him permission to show us things that we may not be seeing. And that could be somewhat intimidating if you don't trust God. If you don't believe that He has your best in mind, you will not want to hear what He has to say about you. But, the point of Romans 8:28 is that God does have our best in mind.

[11]

Romans 8:28

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

The main point of this verse is not that God will only give us good things if we are good boys and girls, as if He was Santa Clause. Nor is the main point that we have permission to passively live our lives.

[12]

The main point is that God does not waste our pain.

I'm sure that each of us here can look back on 2013 and some painful memories come to mind. And we don't like going to those dark memories because it hurts too much. But, God does not want to waste those painful times. He is big enough that He can take those bad things that happened to you and turn them into something beautiful.

Remember the story of Joseph in Genesis. His brothers were jealous of him and so they sold him to some travelling merchants and told their father that he had been killed and eaten by a wild beast. Years later, after Joseph had risen to power in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh, his brothers went to him not knowing who he was, asking for some food to help them through the great famine that was in the land. And after revealing who he was they, understandably feared for their lives, but this is what he told them.

[13]

Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

The point of Romans 8:28 is that God is big enough to make good out of a bad thing, which means we don't have to worry about anything. It doesn't mean that we won't have pain, but that we can cling to God in the confusion, and in the pain, knowing that because He is all powerful, good, and completely loving, something good will happen from it. Satan, and the world, can intend evil for us, but God is not thwarted by any of their schemes. He is big enough.

And I know that some of you are going through some painful experiences even now, and it's hard to see how something good can happen from them. And that's why it takes eyes of faith to navigate through these tough times. It take perseverance. Don't give up. Don't get bitter. Don't take matters into your own hands. Wait for God and He will come through. You will see that He is a delivering God.

So, what is the good thing that we can look forward to?

[14]

James 1:2-4 (NIV)

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

[15]

The key to enduring painful trials is to look past them with eyes of faith to the end result if we persevere. What's going to happen if we don't give up? We will mature through them. We will become the men and women that God intended us to become.

And that may not be much consolation right now when you are experiencing the pain, but if you hang on and give it over to God He will prove Himself to be faithful and you will come out the other end knowing the joy that James talks about.

[16]

This truth is beautifully illustrated in oak tree. The oak tree symbolizes strength. Arnold Schwarzenegger was called the "Austrian Oak" during his younger days as a body builder. Did you know that the roots of an oak tree can go down into the ground up to two and a half times their height? That's what gives them their stability. I also heard from someone that the more adverse weather conditions the oak has the deeper the roots go down. So, it is storms that actually give the oak tree its stability. If it lives a cushy life it would be easily toppled.

It's much the same with us. We actually need storms. We need trials. And in order to come out stronger at the other end we need to believe Romans 8:28 that God will not waste your pain. He will make something good out of it if you let Him.

[17]

Ruth and I have some friends from Calgary who own a summer place in Ferndale right on the water front of the ocean, and they graciously said that we can use it whenever we want. One of the days we were there a couple years ago it was quite stormy and it was too cold to go outside so we stayed and watched the waves and imagined what it would be like to be out on the water in something like that.

There was a post in their back yard with a rope that was tied to the house. It served no purpose, as far as I could tell, except decorative.

[18]

But, as I watched those waves, and took photographs of that post it became symbolic to me of us being so tied to Jesus in the storms of life that even when things look hopeless we know that God is strong and so, with eyes of faith, we look past the storms to the strength of God and see that when the storm finally quiets, we will be a little more like Jesus.

[19]

Romans 8:28 must become real to us. We should memorize it and meditate on it, so that it affects, not only how we behave, but how we think, and even how we feel when we see another storm coming our way.

Romans 8:28 (NLT)

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

God will not waste your pain. God does not just want to make us beautiful people so that we can be a bunch of beautiful people who gather together on Sunday mornings and congratulate each other about how we are so much more loving and kind than we were last year, and or how much more humble we are.

He is transforming us into the likeness of Christ so that He can change the world through us. He wants to increase our capacity to love those around us. He wants us to become more loving husbands, and wives, and children, and employees, and employers, and students, and teachers, and members of society **so that** we can bless those around us.

And, unfortunately, the only way that this will happen is through suffering, which is why we can look at the storms coming our way with joy.

In preparation for communion I want to read a quote from Malcolm Muggeridge. He was a British journalist and a war correspondent in the Second World War, and near the end of his life, he wrote this:

[20]

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at that time seemed especially desolating and painful. I now look back upon them with particular satisfaction.

[21]

Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness whether pursued or attained.

[22]

In other words, I say this, if it were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo-jumbo, the results would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too

banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the cross signifies and it is the cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.[2]

Before we celebrate the Lord's Supper together we are going to sing a song that is recorded by Steve Bell called, *Here by the Water.*

And here by the water I'll build an altar to praise Him
Out of the stones that I've found here I'll set them down here
Rough as they are Knowing You can make them holy[3]

Those stones that we placed up here last week told a story. God's story intersecting with our story. What he wants us to do is take those stones, and by his grace write a better story with him. You may think that your story isn't good enough. You may think that you have little to offer, that the gifts and talents God gave aren't adequate. You may think that your past is too sullied to be used by God. That's where Jesus comes in. He takes those stones that we lay down and because of the cross builds something beautiful out of them. Give what you have to him and let him make something beautiful out of them.

---

[2] Malcolm Muggeridge, *Homemade*

[3] Music and Lyric by Jim Croegaert © 1986 Rough Stones Music - See more at: http://stevebell.com/2007/06/here-by-the-water/#sthash.SCelza8u.dpuf