

## ROM 8.28,29: 'YOU WERE CREATED TO BECOME LIKE CHRIST'

[Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 11 March 2007]

God has a purpose for your life – that is the thrust of the 40 day spiritual growth journey on which we as a church are engaged.

To quote Rick Warren, the author of *'The Purpose Driven Life'*:

*"If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born **by** his purpose and **for** his purpose"*.

It is therefore vital that we discover why we were created.

On the basis of Scripture Rick Warren, spells out five of God's purposes for our lives:

- Two weeks ago we looked at Purpose 1: *'You were planned for God's pleasure'*
- Last week we looked at Purpose 2: *'You were formed for God's family'*
- Today we come to Purpose 3: *'You were created to become like Christ'*

Along with the weekly Sunday sermons, many of us have also been reading a chapter a day of *The Purpose Driven Life* – still copies available!

Today we reach chapter 22, which appropriately has the heading: *'Created to become like Christ'*. And underneath the heading, Rick Warren quotes *The Message* version of Romans 8.29: **"God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son... We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him"**.

But for some at least the question immediately arises is this: 'Did God know what he was doing?' Before you accuse me of heresy, hear me out for a moment.

I think *The Purpose Driven Life* is a great book – I know that many of you have already been greatly helped by what you have read.

But I have a difficulty with the second chapter, entitled *'You are not an accident'*, which appears to suggest that everything within life has been planned by God:

*"Regardless of the circumstances of your birth or who your parents are, God had a plan in creating you. It doesn't matter whether your parents were good, bad or indifferent. God knew that those two individuals possessed **exactly** the right genetic makeup to create the custom 'you' he had in mind. They had the DNA God wanted to make you"*.

But I question that

- I am not convinced that people's genetic make-up is always God-willed. What about those with defective genes?
- Nor am I convinced that our parents are the ones God necessarily chose. What about abusive parents, feckless parents, inadequate parents?

Did God really know what he was doing from the very beginning?

Well it depends what you mean.

- Of course he knew, in the sense that God by definition is all-knowing.
- And yet I find it difficult to believe that he knew in the sense that he necessarily planned every aspect of our lives – for not everything in our lives is good – indeed, some things which happen to us may be downright wrong, if not wicked.

So let me take you back to Rom 8.29 again, but this time linking it with the immediately preceding verse. Let me read it to you in the GNB:

**“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he called according to his purpose. Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son...”**

If you have Bibles, cast your eye further back, and as you do so, you’ll discover that Paul has just been talking of a world marked by suffering and pain: **“We know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain”** (Rom 8.22). Paul knew that life could be hard, tough, unfair.

Now cast your eye ahead and look at the way in which Paul goes on to speak of this world as permeated by **“trouble... hardship... persecution... hunger.... poverty... danger... death”** (Rom 8.35).

This is the context in which Paul wrote: **“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he called according to his purpose. Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son...”**

Yes, we have been created to become like Christ – but time and again the context is one of pain, suffering, and unfairness.

One of God’s purposes for our lives is for us to become like his Son, but this is not always achieved within a context of his purpose.

In the words of the title that Rick Warren gives to one of his later chapters: time and again we found ourselves *‘Transformed by Trouble’*.

To quote Rick Warren: *“Every problem is a character-building opportunity, and the more difficult it is, the greater the potential for building spiritual muscle and moral fiber. Paul said, ‘We know that these troubles produce patience. And patience produces character’ (Rom 5.3-4). What happens outwardly in your life is not as important as what happens inside you. Your circumstances are temporary, but your character will last forever”*.

Rick Warren goes on to remind his readers that *“The Bible often compares trials to a metal refiner’s fire that burns away the impurities. Peter said, ‘These troubles come to prove that your faith is pure. This purity of faith is worth more than gold’ (1 Pet 1.7)”*.

In this respect Rick Warren tells the story of a silversmith who was asked: *“How do you know when the silver is pure?”* He replied, *“When I see my reflection in it”*.

Yes, sometimes God’s most effective way of creating us like Christ is taking us through difficult and tough times.

So let’s go back to Rom 8.28,29: **“We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he called according to his purpose. Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son...”**

## **1. GOD WORKS FOR GOOD**

First, do note that *it is God, who works for good*.

Some older people may be more familiar with the translation of the AV, which translates Rom 8.28 as: **“All things work together for good to them that love God”**.

Strangely the NRSV adopts a similar translation: "**We know that all things work together for good for those who love God**".

But although a possible translation, it is an unhelpful and misleading translation.

The fact is that not **all things** do work for good.

Some things in life are evil, and it is a nonsense to say otherwise: .

- e.g. the carelessness of a drunken driver which results in carnage on the road and robs a young family of its father or mother brings anything but good. Drunken driving does not work for good, not even in the life of the believer.
- e.g. the abuse of a young child by an adult whose mind is warped doesn't bring any good. It destroys trust, it blights future relationships, it ruins the carefree innocence of childhood
- e.g. the all-consuming pressures at school which lead to the nervous breakdown of a gifted and dedicated teacher do not work for good. The school is the poorer, and the individual teacher goes through hell - it takes months, sometimes years, before his or her life is rebuilt.

None of these things are good - not even to those who love God.

To say "**all things work together for good**" is a nonsense - indeed, it is a form of blasphemy - for it is to ascribe to God not only happiness and joy, but also suffering and pain. But this we cannot do.

God is a good God. He created a world for us to enjoy, not to endure.

He is most certainly not to be blamed for all the evils in this world.

Suffering & pain have never been a part of God's perfect purpose - rather these things are part of our fallen world and are rooted in our human sinfulness.

However, we can affirm that "**in all things God works for good**"

Paul does not explain what he means by the word "**good**".

He clearly is not speaking about our comfort or our convenience.

Rather he is speaking about our "ultimate good".

My mind goes to some words Jeremiah wrote in God's name in a letter to the Jews in the Babylonian exile after the destruction of Jerusalem – life was tough, they were far from home. But God declared through Jeremiah: "**I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future**" (Jer 29.11 NRSV.). And what was true for them, is also true for us

## **2. IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS FOR GOOD**

All things may not work for good - but nonetheless God can be at work in all things. And where God is at work, there good can come, however dark things may appear to be.

We see that in the Cross of Jesus, which we will remember in a few minutes as we gather together around the Table.

Never was there a blacker day in the history of the world than that first Good Friday.

Evil did its darndest when men crucified the Son of God. None of those who stood at the foot of that Cross could have dream that that day could ever have been termed a "Good Friday".

BUT out of that cruellest of acts everlasting good has come.

What was true of the Cross, can also be true of your life and mine. Suffering and disappointment may not belong to the perfect will of God, but nonetheless God can use our suffering, he can use our disappointment. However bleak life may seem, however unfair life may seem, with God the outlook is never hopeless.

In this respect let me draw your attention to the words with which James opens his letter: "**My brothers and sisters, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure**" (Jas 1.2-3).

The fact is that tough times can often be incredibly productive times.

Difficulties can turn us into stronger people.

The trials of life can often be used to knock off some of our imperfections, so that as a result we become better and wiser people..

In the short-term God may not appear to have been working for our good - but in the longer-term our ultimate good may have been better served as a result of the difficulty or failure we may have experienced.

Rick Warren speaks of the way in which God uses problems to draw us closer to himself.

- He quotes Psalm 34.18: "**The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit**".
- "*Your most profound and intimate experiences of worship will likely be in your darkest days – when your heart is broken, when you feel abandoned, when you're out of options, when the pain is great – and you turn to God alone. It is in suffering that we learn to pray....*".
- He quotes Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident wrote: "*When life is rosy, we may slide by with knowing about Jesus, with imitation and quoting him and speaking of him. But only in suffering will we **know** Jesus*"

**"We know that in all things God works for good"**

### **3. IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS FOR GOOD WITH THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.... THOSE WHOM GOD SET APART TO BECOME LIKE HIS SON**

The phrase "**with those who love him**" is no mere addition.

Indeed, in the original Greek, this phrase comes right at the beginning of the sentence, and was undoubtedly put there for reasons of emphasis: "**For those who love God we know that in everything God works for good**".

**"With those who love him"**. This is an important rider.

Paul is not stating a universal truth applicable to men & women in general.

Rather, he is talking about those who have responded to God's love by trusting him and loving him, whatever.

Sadly disaster and disappointment can make some people bitter and sour.  
They moan about their lot. They talk about the unfairness of life.  
They focus on their loss & upon their unhappiness.  
They become pitiful & self-pitying individuals.  
Sometimes too, they begin to rail against God and shake their fists at him.  
They give up on God, they give up on God's people.

The truth is that there is nothing automatic about God working for good in all things.  
For God to work, we have to co-operate.  
And we co-operate by loving him and by trusting him whatever.  
At the time when our world collapses, it may well be difficult to see any good emerging from our troubles.  
But this is where we are called to trust God.  
This is where we need to turn and look again at the Cross of Christ, and see there the everlasting heart of God - whatever else is uncertain, one thing we can be certain of is that he loves us - God wants our ultimate good.

"We know that **in all things God works for good.**  
This has been the experience of **those who love him**  
This was Joseph's experience. When his brothers sold him into slavery, he must have wondered where God was to be found. And yet subsequently he realised that God overruled even in that cruel act of betrayal. At the end of his life he told his brothers **"You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good"** (Gen 50.20)....

But that good was not instantly recognisable.  
Time had to elapse before the hand of God become evident.  
In the words of Lamentations: **"The Lord is good to everyone who trusts in him. So it is best for us to wait in patience - to wait for him to save us"** (3.25,26).

The fact is that if we are to see good, we have to trust, we have to wait.  
And as we trust and wait, we have to begin to pattern our lives on that of Jesus.  
Character building – becoming like Christ – takes time.

To quote Rick Warren: *"You are a work in progress. Your spiritual transformation in developing the character of Jesus will take the rest of your life, and even then it won't be completed here on earth"*.  
Rick Warren goes on: *"Sadly a quick review of many popular Christian books reveals that many believers have abandoned living for God's great purposes and settled for personal fulfillment and emotional stability. That is narcissism, not discipleship.... His (Jesus') purpose is far deeper: He wants to make us like himself"*

So to go back to *The Message* version of Romans 8.29: **"God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son... We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him"**.

To those of you who are going through tough times, let me encourage you to trust God, to wait patiently for him to reveal his hand, and in the meantime keep going his way.  
For God loves you - he loves each of his children.  
God does work for good for those who love him.  
And perhaps the greatest good is that out of the furnace we emerge more like his Son.