

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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GOD'S PURPOSE IN OUR SUFFERING

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

INTRODUCTION: THE (NOT SO) TERRIBLE YEAR

Do you like sitting in hospital waiting rooms? Know anyone who does? Let me tell you the story of a woman named Nancy, who says:

Ever since my husband, Barry, first underwent open heart and quadruple bypass surgery 15 months ago, I've been in this waiting room – or one just like it – more times than I can count on one hand, waiting for him to come out of the operating room.

In little more than a year's time, my vocabulary has increased to include words and phrases such as aneurysm, atrial fib, and EP study with ablation. They all mean I have to put on a cheery face, kiss Barry good-bye, and promise I won't worry about him or forget to eat lunch and lock the garage door at night while he is in the hospital again.

With all of Barry's surgeries and procedures, we've had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year – one of the worst in our 32 years together. Yet, ironically, it has also turned out to be the best.

I have learned just how deeply Barry loves me. As he was all prepped and waiting to go into surgery to repair his aortic aneurysm, Barry looked at my friend Tara, who was waiting with us, and said: "Make sure Nancy takes care of herself. Promise me, or else I'll worry."

He wasn't worried about being sliced open again – he was worried about me.

I came to faith in Christ three years after Barry and I were married, and for almost 30 years I prayed about my husband's relationship with the Lord. Then the day of his open-heart surgery, Barry told me if he died, I would see him again, because he knew Jesus was his Savior. He prayed with me, he prayed with a friend, and he prayed with his surgeon. Since that time, Barry hasn't stopped praying – he prays with me every day.

What I had asked God for all these years – to heal the spiritual rift in my marriage, to bring my husband and me close – God had given. He had performed heart surgery on us both, ripping us apart and knitting us back together.

Barry and I talk often about this past year, how it has been awful – and awfully good. We wouldn't wish this kind of year on anyone, and we wouldn't want to

go through it again, but we're glad it happened.

We thank God for the good days and the bad, because in all our days God has held us both securely in His grip. We have known God's incredible kindness to us. Our hearts are in His hands.

We've had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year – and I praise God for it.

(Condensed from “Walk with Me,” a Today's Christian Woman blog, December 5, 2007.)

Alexander, in the children's book, had a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” Who hasn't, somewhere along the way? But some of you, no doubt, like Nancy and her husband Barry, have had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year. Maybe you're in the midst of it right now. Or maybe you know someone who is. Maybe your life – or the life of someone you care about deeply – is full of the “disruptive moments” I talked about two Sundays ago.

I told you then about the disruptive moments I've experienced in the last year or so. We looked at this same passage in 2 Corinthians 1 and noted two things in particular:

First, we saw that the God we know and worship – the God who made us and loves us, the God who has made Himself known to us, the God who is sovereign over all creation – is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (1:3). God is a God of *comfort*, and He comforts *us* “in all our troubles” (1:4). In all our disruptive moments, in all the afflictions and adversity we experience in life, God is with us. He is with you. And He is with me. He stands beside us and walks with us in our times of suffering or testing to encourage us, to give us “strength for today and hope for tomorrow.” So I urged you to let God be to you what He is: the God of all comfort.

Second, we saw the purpose of God's comfort in our lives. It is not just for us. The reason God comforts us in all our troubles is “so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (1:2). God comforts us so that we can comfort others. So that we can comfort one another. So that we can be His agents of comfort and encouragement in the lives of people who need it.

There are two more things I want you to see in this passage today.

1. GOD'S PURPOSE

First, I want you to catch at least a glimpse of the purpose of God in the suffering we experience. There may be many different reasons God allows suffering to come into our lives. A seminary professor named Dave Earley has written a book called 21 Reasons Bad Things Happen to Good People, in which he offers 21 reasons drawn from the Bible why God may allow us to experience adversity or affliction. Paul identifies one of these reasons in our text. In verse 8, he says that God has brought him through a time of

hardship and trouble in the province of Asia. He doesn't tell us what it was, but whatever it was, it must have been more than a stubbed toe or a stiff neck, because he says it was so bad he thought he was going to die. He thought it was all over for him and his partners in ministry. It felt like they had received the death penalty. The stress of the situation was more than he could handle. Have you ever felt like that? If you have, know that you are not alone. It happened to Paul. And it happens today.

Why does God allow us to get into situations like that? There may be a number of reasons. Why did God allow that to happen to Paul, His chosen apostle and ambassador? The reason, Paul tells us in verse 9, "is that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." There it is: One reason God allows us to suffer is to teach us to rely fully on Him and not on ourselves or our finite human resources. He allows suffering to come into our lives – more than that, we can say that He ordains it – to bring us to understand our inadequacy, our impotence, our inability to handle the trials and troubles of life on our own. And as we come to this place of understanding, God wants us, in the midst of adversity and hardships, to experience and appreciate and appropriate the absolute sufficiency of His grace. His grace *is* sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). His grace is enough.

When Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 about his "thorn in the flesh," that unidentified handicap he struggled with, he said the reason God gave it to him was to keep him from becoming conceited as a result of the special experiences God had allowed him to have (12:7). It was to keep him from pride. It was to keep him from thinking of himself more highly than he ought (Romans 12:3). It was to keep him from having a big head, spiritually speaking.

Pride is a deadly sin. And none of us is immune to it. It can infect every one of us. It can wound, or even kill, a relationship. And it can poison our relationship to God, making us "insensible," as the Puritans would say, to our desperate need for God. The Bible says that pride shuts us off from the flow of grace, because in our pride, we refuse to admit our need of God's grace. Or we think that God somehow owes us His grace (a contradiction in terms) because of our service to Him or our "spiritual maturity." But what does the Bible say? Both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 say that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

To recognize our need for God and our dependence on Him is a mark of humility. It is a lesson we all need to learn, even apostles. Why did Paul have to endure almost unbearable suffering? So that "we might not rely on ourselves but on God" (1:9). Do you know the acronym FROG? It's a good one. It stands for "Full Rely On God." I encourage you to remember that. Even more, I encourage you to do it. To live it out, whatever your circumstances or challenges may be: Fully Rely On God.

John Piper goes so far as to say that the whole Bible wants to teach us the lesson of 2 Corinthians 1:9. Do not pin your hopes on yourself to make it through life. Do not trust in yourself, as gifted, as bright, as strong and energetic and talented as you may be. Do not put your trust in any person or anything this world can offer. Even though there is a

lot the world can offer, in the end, it cannot offer what we need most. Instead (as Piper says) look to God for your hope, your joy, and your fulfillment, even in the valley of the shadow of death, even when death itself stares you in the face, for the Lord is the God who raises the dead. As Piper points out, God's purpose for us in adversity or suffering is not to cause us to become discouraged or angry, but to shift our hope away from earthly things onto Him. God's main purpose in all adversity is to make us stop trusting in ourselves or in any person or any human agency.

Our hope in the midst of life's adversity and uncertainties is not the church as an institution, or the pastor or pastors with all their wisdom and theological understanding. (Ha!) Our hope and security are not in the economy – a reality which has been made abundantly clear in recent days. Our hope is not in American military power or expertise, as impressive and overwhelming as it can be. Our hope is not in our political system, as ingenious as it is. Our hope is not in the person who occupies the Oval Office. Nor is it in any candidate for president, or any political party, whether you're Republican, Democrat, or Independent.

With Election Day just a month away, now is a good time to remind ourselves of the wise counsel of Psalm 146, which says:

Do not put your trust in princes (or presidents),
In mortal men who cannot save (verse 3).

Eugene Peterson expresses the following verse this way in *The Message*:

Mere humans don't have what it takes;
When they die, their projects die with them.
Instead, get help from the God of Jacob,
Put your hope in GOD and know real blessing
(Psalm 146:4-5).

Where is your hope today? On whom – or what – are you relying? Sometimes God brings suffering into our lives, as He did with Paul, to teach us not to rely on ourselves but on Him. Have you learned this lesson in your life? I'm still learning it. I invite you to join the FROG Brigade with me: Fully Rely On God.

2. THE VALUE OF PRAYER

The second thing I want you to see today is the value of prayer. Listen to what Paul says in verses 10 and 11: "(God) has delivered us from such a deadly peril (whatever it was), and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted to us in answer to the prayers of many."

Here is a second reason why God allows suffering in our lives. He allows us to suffer so that, as a result of the prayers of God's people on our behalf, God Himself will be

glorified – He will receive thanks and praise from many people for His gracious favor in response to those prayers.

There is something mysterious about prayer. God doesn't need our prayers. There is no intrinsic power in the prayers we offer to God. But, as Philip Edgecombe Hughes says, the New Testament again and again points to prayer as a vital prerequisite for the release and experience of God's power. Think of Peter, for example, in Acts 12, arrested and imprisoned by Herod with the intention of having him put to death. While Peter was in prison, the Bible says, "the church was earnestly praying for him" (Acts 12:5). Do you remember what happened? The night before Herod was going to put Peter on trial, an angel on a rescue mission came and freed Peter from prison and brought him out to the street (12:7-10). When he realized what had happened, Peter went to a house where many of the Christians in Jerusalem had gathered to pray. When he showed up, at first they didn't believe it was really him – even though they had been praying for his deliverance (12:11-17). But God heard their prayers and answered their prayers, to the praise and glory of His name.

"In prayer," says Hughes, "human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence." The power isn't ours. It is God's. So the applause – the expressions of thanks and praise – belongs to God. But the ministry of prayer – (both personal prayer and corporate prayer when we are gathered together as believers and followers of Christ) – is both our privilege and our sacred calling in Christ.

I like what John Piper says: "Earnest, heartfelt prayer is the means by which we (hitch) ourselves to the locomotive of God's power."

Are you hitched up to the locomotive?

Are you connected to the power source?

Or are you too distracted, too preoccupied, by all the things you want to do and the things you have to do and the things other people want you to do, and there just doesn't seem to be time to commune with God?

A lot of people – a lot of *us* – feel that way. But when we neglect the privilege of prayer, we shut ourselves off from "the locomotive of God's power," and we miss out on opportunities to trace God's hand and to praise Him for the answers He gives to our prayers.

Many of you have prayed for me, and continue to pray for me. For all your prayers I am deeply grateful. And please, keep them coming! The fact that I drove to church today by myself – for the first time since February, the fact that I am able to stand before you to preach is a testament to your faithfulness in prayer and to the power and sufficiency of God's grace in my life.

God uses the prayers of His people – ordinary people like you and me – to do extraordinary things. Many of you have seen it and experienced it in your own lives. Don't doubt it. And don't neglect the privilege of prayer. Even in our suffering and adversity, amid the trials and tribulations of this life, God uses our prayers for our good and His glory.

Dallas Willard said: "To those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you." Believe it, my friends. Nothing.

So, what are we to do?

Fully rely on God. And don't give up, but keep on praying. Even, or especially, if you're in the midst of a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year. Perhaps you will be amazed at what God does.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.