

This morning we conclude our discussion of Adam Hamilton's book *Why, Making Sense of God's Will*. I hope that you have found these discussions helpful. So far, we have discussed why the innocent suffer; trying to reconcile God's love and grace with the suffering we see and experience every day. We also discussed that it is not God's will that we suffer. God gave us an amazing gift of free will which gives us the ability to choose our path in life. Unfortunately, some of our decisions often result in suffering for us and for others since we live a world of cause and effect. Sometimes we use this precious gift from God to do things that break His heart, and bring suffering and disappointment to us and those around us.

As we have discussed in the past while we may think that some of our prayers appear to go unanswered, God always hears and answers all our prayers. However, sometimes the answer is no, because like a parent God knows what's best for us. Often, we pray for things which in the long run may not be good for us. And sometimes, let's face it, our prayers are selfish; we are only thinking of ourselves and not how our request may impact someone else. In addition, sometimes God does not deliver us from a difficult situation but carries us through it and uses the situation to transform either our lives or the lives of others. Sometimes prayer doesn't change things, it changes us.

Last Sunday we discussed that in giving us life, God invites us to collaborate with Him in writing the story of our lives. God has an outline for our story, but gives us the choice of writing the story either without Him or in collaboration with Him. God's will is more about how we make decisions than in the actual decisions we make. God's plan for our life is not set in stone, and our story is not complete yet. We have a chance each day to shape it by our decisions and actions.

This morning let's discuss why God's love prevails or another appropriate title may be why hope prevails. Our scripture text is taken from the eighth chapter of Romans, verse 28 and verses 31-39.

Read Romans 8:28, 31-39

You know it's a joy to watch my grandchildren grow up. When our sons were growing up, I was so busy making a living and traveling a lot with the government that I didn't seem to spend as much time observing them as I do with Trevor, Logan and Eleanor. Over the years, I have observed that at times, each of our sons and grandchildren have been afraid of something, such as the unknown, a dark room or a strange sound, and needed someone to go with them or to reassure them. Fear is a natural part of life. It defines our lives in many ways; fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of financial problems, and fear of failing health and growing old.

Faith in God is the Christian response to the problem of fear. One of the most frequent quotes throughout the Bible is “Do not be afraid, for God is with you.” From the mouths of prophets and angels these words offer encouragement throughout the Bible from God to His children. Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20 that He would be with us even to the end of time. Because of this we have hope as we face whatever life throws our way. God may not deliver us from whatever situation we are in, but He promises to be with us no matter what we are facing. In Psalm 55:22 King David writes: “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you.” He doesn’t say: “Cast your burdens on the Lord and He will immediately fix everything that troubles you.” He says that God will sustain you, support you, and help you endure.

The thought of God watching over us reminds me of a story I heard about a potluck at a church. Next to the apples in the buffet line, there was sign that read: “Apples – take one per person. Remember God is watching!” A little farther down the line next to the cookies, someone had written with a canyon: “Cookies – take all you want. God’s watching the apples.”

Dwight L. Moody told the story about a family many years ago in a Southern town where yellow fever was raging, and thus there were strict health restrictions. The moment anyone died, a cart came around and immediately took the body away. The father became ill and died and was buried, and then the mother came down with the fever. The neighbors were afraid of the plague, and none of them dared go inside the house. The mother had a little boy and was concerned for his well-being after she died. So, she called the little fellow to her bedside and said: “My son, I am going to leave you, but Jesus will come to you when I am gone.” Then the mother died, the cart came along, and she was buried.

The neighbors wanted to take the boy in, but were afraid of catching the disease. So, the little boy wandered the streets and finally came to the place where they had buried his mother. He sat down on her grave and cried himself to sleep. The next morning, he woke up and realized his situation – all alone and hungry.

A stranger came along and seeing the little boy sitting on the ground, asked him what he was waiting for. The boy remembered what his mother had told him and replied: “I’m waiting for Jesus,” and then he told the man the whole story. The man’s heart was touched, tears trickled down his face, and he said: “Jesus sent me,” to which the little boy replied: “Well, sir, you sure took your time coming!” And so, it is with us. God will help us, but there are times in which we must wait for the results; we must be patient and have the courage of this little boy.

God not only promises to walk with us, but God also promises to work through us to come to the aid of those in need. A constant theme throughout our discussions over the past two Sundays has been that as Christians we are called to be God’s instruments to address the needs and suffering of others, and to be the answer to their prayers. When God wants something

done, He calls on us to be His hands and feet to a world desperately in need of His love and grace. The key is that we must pay attention and be aware of these opportunities when they present themselves so that our story can be interwoven with God's story for the salvation and redemption of the world. And what makes this more exciting is that we never know when and where this will happen, or what impact we may have on the lives of others.

For example, a nineteenth-century Sunday School teacher led a Boston shoe clerk to Christ. I bet most of you have never heard of this teacher before; his name was Edward Kimball. But you may have heard of the shoe clerk he converted; his name was Dwight L. Moody.

Moody became a well-known evangelist and had a major influence on a young preacher named Frederick B. Meyer. Meyer began to preach on college campuses and while doing so, he converted J. Wilbur Chapman. Chapman became involved in the YMCA and arranged for a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to come to Charlotte, North Carolina, for a revival. The Charlotte community leaders were so enthusiastic with the results that they planned another campaign and brought Mordecai Hamm to town to preach. At that revival, a young man named Billy Graham gave his life to Christ. As Paul Harvey would say, now you know the rest of the story!

Did that Boston Sunday School teacher have any idea how his lessons and example would impact the shoe clerk and eventually the lives of others? I don't think so. Adam Hamilton calls these events God-incidents and not coincidences. We never know when and how God will use us; we just need to be available. We never know the difference we can make in the life of another person for the Lord, and the impact that it may have on the lives of others. God is always at work.

Here's a serious thought. Since we never know when God is going to use us, when we encounter people how do we react; what do they see in us – in our words, facial expressions, and body language? Do they see the love of God or do they see the world's reflections of rude, cold, and judgmental attitudes? Think about this as you meet other people this week. We never know who God will send our way. The key is to make ourselves available to God each and every day, and to pay attention to His leading. In addition, just as God uses us to help others, He will use others to help us when we need it. Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is always hope for each of us.

As we have previously noted God has given us the free will to choose our own path in life and to make our own decisions. We have also noted that suffering is part of life: living things die; the forces that sustain our earth occasionally bring suffering; and our bodies are not indestructible – hearts give out, cancer invades our cells, and age takes its toll on us. While we will experience some suffering in our lives, we can always be assured that God walks with us

during these difficult times. But God can do more; He can use these times to bring about good into our lives. If you look hard enough you can always find something good in any situation.

We can all look back over our lives and see how the events, some of which were difficult, have shaped our lives and molded us into the person we are today. Take for example John Newton. He was seven years old when his mother died. After her death, he spent several years living with relatives before joining his father at sea. His father was the captain of a slave trading ship, and this experience exposed young John to behaviors that were totally different than the Christian training that he received from his mother at a young age. Daily, John witnessed cruel and harsh treatment towards the natives of West Africa who were forced from their homes and sold as slaves. He grew hard and cold in this environment.

But during a severe storm at sea, he had a turning point in his life. Fear gripped him and he prayed to be spared. The sea eventually calmed. John Newton's inner life also experienced a new calmness and peace as he began to care for those he had once despised. Eventually he abandoned the life of slave-trading and entered the ministry. Then drawing upon his experiences and past life, he wrote one of the greatest hymns ever – *Amazing Grace*; he was lost but was now found. As he was dying, he was heard to say: "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

Now the greatest example of God working through suffering is the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the cross. The cross was a sign of death, pain, suffering and humiliation. But God used it to redeem the world. Through the cross God demonstrated the extent of His love for all of us. On the cross the arms of Jesus reached out to a lost world back then and continue to reach out to us today. While the cross may have seemed to be the end of the story, it was just another chapter in the story. As stated in The Apostles' Creed: "Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a shout from God that good triumphs over evil, that the forces of light will defeat the forces of darkness, and that death will be swallowed up in victory. The Bible proclaims hope in the face of the darkest situations. Psalm 30:5 states: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

The Bible ends with the triumphant words of the Book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be His peoples, and God himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will

be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'"

In 1 Peter, the Apostle Peter tells us that God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the hope that the day will come when there will be a New Jerusalem where God's will ultimately triumphs, when God's love prevails over all suffering and evil. This is the hope that sustains us!

Adam Hamilton said that he ends his Easter sermon each year by repeating some questions that people ask him, such as: Do you really believe this story of the Resurrection? Do you really believe that Easter means that the worst thing is never the last thing? Do you really believe that ultimately good will triumph over evil and God's plans will ultimately prevail? He said his answer is always the same: "I not only believe it; I am counting on it too." That's why I love our closing hymn; I am counting on it too and I hope you are also. Victory in Jesus: "I heard an old, old story how a Savior came from glory." Jesus invites us to be part of His story; to walk with Him each and every day as we journey through life with its joys and suffering; to live in hope. Amen