

TJW, HT, 21.6.09, 9.15am & 11am,

Romans 8.28-29

God's presence in a world of suffering

There's a Christian man, called Paul Young, who's recently become well-known. Here's his picture. He's in his 50s. He's Canadian, and he's written a book on God and suffering - a book which he says he wrote to help him deal himself with his own questions and struggles. And for him a lot of it goes back to his upbringing in a very strict home. In an interview he has said: "My Dad was a very angry man", and the God he taught me about was "white, Anglo-Saxon and angry." It was a "monster-god", who was supremely "disappointed, distant and disgusted". And "as a religious kid growing up I was not allowed to ask questions about my pain".

The book he wrote is called *The Shack*, and it's being widely read by people inside and outside of church.

So it's right that we take a Sunday to see what God says in the Bible about the issues that the book raises. This sermon isn't just some long review of the book - so if you've not read it this sermon won't leave you behind.

We all know people who struggle with God in the way Paul Young has done. You may be one of those people yourself.

It's not that they doubt God's existence. The problem is that they doubt his goodness towards them.

Maybe they feel that the God they were presented with in the past was a tyrannical, distant task-master.

Or maybe events have come into their lives which have been so traumatic that they've never been able to get a sense that God is good to them.

Or maybe they had a religious upbringing which seemed so abusive that they've never been able to get beyond that.

What does God want to say to such people - what does he want to do in them and for them? What does he want to say and to do for all of us who struggle with reconciling our pain with God's love?

Let's come together to God's Word, which the Holy Spirit loves to take up and make alive for us. Turn with me to Romans chapter 8. And there's just one verse we're going to dwell on this morning - verse 28 [READ].

“We know”, it says, that “in all things **God works.**”

Of course, there is a lot about ourselves and about God that we don't know - and the Bible isn't shy of talking about that. Just look at verse 26: “We don't know what we ought to pray for”. How often that's true!

But what we don't know doesn't take away from what we do know. And what we do know about God are the things he's shown us in Jesus, and told us in the Bible.

And in Jesus, and in the Bible, God shows us that he is at work in his world, and in us. He is involved in his creation.

We've messed up his world in so many ways - but he's come and got his hands dirty in his world.

And it's so much easier to trust someone, and love them, when they're prepared to come and get their hands dirty alongside you.

God is not a God who barks out his instructions, and then sits back, not lifting a finger, like some sadistic sergeant-major, tutting to himself and shaking his head while we mess it up.

A few of us may have had fathers like that. But if we know Jesus then we know that God the Father is not like that. (And I reckon that that will be a powerful point for some of us, especially today on Father's Day.)

You see, God is angry at our sin. We don't make him appear one jot more loving by trying to erase his anger from the picture. (I wouldn't become more loving to my young son if I stopped disapproving when he behaved badly, and stopped disciplining him.) Ignoring sin wouldn't be a loving thing for God to do - it would be uncaring. He loves us enough to face us up to our sin - and then to deal with it for us.

And he's dealt with it by taking on the full identity of a human being.

Being born in poverty as Jesus Christ. Becoming a refugee, when his family fled from their home to Egypt to escape a king who wanted to kill him. Being rejected by even his closest family.

Being persecuted and betrayed, so that at the moment of death even his closest friends had abandoned him, and he was utterly alone. Suffering a degradation and pain in death that we will never come anywhere near experiencing. And ultimately by enduring, for our sake, the horror of a separation from God on the cross that was more literally hellish than we could ever imagine.

God works in his world - he's involved in his world.

And that includes our lives. I know several people right now who can see that God has been working in them to bring them right now to committed faith in Christ.

I think of a woman who's known Christ for several years, and who knows right now, in the midst of awful turmoil in her life, that Christ is at work in her life, because she's entrusted her life to him.

God is angry at sin. If his anger has been used in your past to beat you down, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. His anger is one aspect of his holy love - and in his love he is intimately involved in his world. And he intimately involved in our lives, if we open ourselves up to Jesus Christ.

If you struggle to comprehend that God would ever want to be at work in you, out of love for you - then, for every one look you take

at yourself that drags you down, you need to take ten looks at Christ, because in him God is at work to raise you up.

But now see how verse 28 goes on. God is at work - and “we know that in all things God works **for the good of those who love him.**”

Children are brilliant at putting words in their parents’ mouths.

“Can I have an ice cream, Dad?” “We’ll see,” says Dad - which is what he says in answer to most things. Half an hour later: “Dad, can I have that ice-cream you promised?”. “What? Did I say that?”. And of course the older you get, the less you trust your memory. Maybe you did promise it, because the kids’ memory is often better than yours.

We must beware of putting words in God’s mouth. We’ve got to listen to what he has told in Scripture, and not wish him to say what he hasn’t said.

You see - what is the ‘good thing’ that God promises to do in the life of everyone who loves him?

Well, these verses here tell us - and we’ve always got to interpret each verse of the Bible in its immediate context. That’s how we make sure that we don’t end up making the Bible say whatever we want it to say.

So let’s look at the very next verse, verse 29 [READ].

Our ‘good’ is to be conformed to the image of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

So the “good” that God is working for, is for us to be made like Jesus Christ.

Our greatest good right now is to put our trust in the Son of God, and so to be made children of God in our own right, alongside him.

Our greatest good right through our lives is to develop a character that gets more like Christ’s with every passing year - to have our thought-patterns and our attitudes and our values made more like his.

And our greatest good at the end of our lives is to be found trusting in Christ and growing in Christ-likeness, so that beyond death we can be certain of being made perfectly in his image, with every hint of sin wiped away.

That’s why this chapter 8 of Romans is one of the most glorious in the Bible. And that’s why it ends the way it does.

If you’re a Christian who’s never got to know this chapter well, you should read it every day this week. And for now, look with me from verse 35 [READ verses 35-38].

Our greatest good is not to be spared pain and sorrow and discomfort and trouble. God never promised that in this life.

Our greatest good is not to have all pain and trauma and grief erased now. God never promised that in this life.

Our greatest good is to be saved from the condemnation of sin - in a relationship with God in which we know that not even the worst that the world can throw at us ever has the power to draw us one inch away from God's love.

Of course, God does love to bring experience of healing and redemption into our lives.

For someone who's been so hurt in the past that they feel they can never trust anyone again, God loves to work to change their heart.

Many of us here can testify to that kind of inner healing.

But in these things, till the day we die, we be "a work in progress",.

He never promises the experience of full redemption till we enter the new heavens and the new earth which he will create.

Last Sunday I was really moved in church to hear Charlie Burbank speak about her own struggles with what she calls her 'addiction' to self-harming - and how she's experiencing some healing from God in that, which is partly coming through medical help.

And Charlie also spoke about how the book of Revelation is a great comfort to her, because there God promises that one day - in his new creation - he will wipe away every tear from our eye.

That sounded to me like someone with a solid grasp of the good that we know that God is working for those who love him.

One of the positive things about the book *The Shack* is that it speaks of a God who has the power, if he chooses, to bring us freedom in this life from emotional trauma.

One of the potentially misleading things about the book, if you love it too much, is that it doesn't point you to what God's greatest good for us is - that he's working not supremely now for our emotional healing, but for our Christ-likeness.

Some of us will carry emotional and psychological scars till the very end of life. You do not need to wait for the kind of unique encounter with God that the man in *The Shack* has, in order to be growing in Christ-likeness, even in the midst of your struggles right now, and to be letting the gospel begin to heal you.

We know that God works. He works for the good of those who love him. And there's one last thing to notice in verse 28. It is **in all things** that God works for our good.

This is the hardest part for us to get our minds around - but it's the most crucial part to accept and trust.

Everything that happens to us, the bad as well as the good, comes to us under God's sovereign hand. If we say that God is not sovereign in the bad, then we're saying that there are some parts of his universe where he is not God.

The God in *The Shack* is squeamish about this. He says that he hasn't allowed evil to happen.

But I heard something else this week that I found more true and more affecting, because it's more in line with Scripture. It's from a young Christian man called Tom Chapman. He's married with young children, and he has a brain tumour. He doesn't know if the tumour will kill him or not.

He said this: "I didn't need a little God, wringing his hands and sending me sympathy cards. I needed a God who was really in charge, a God big enough to give me a tumour. I needed a God big enough that I could shout at and cry in front of, and actually expect to be some use to me - that's the God I needed."

And he quoted a letter which a friend had sent him, saying that this is the kind of things that Christians should say to each other, in times of suffering:

"If your lifespan is cut short, what can I say? In that case my prayer for you will be that you will be given grace to die well, that will leave a heritage for your wife and children that will buoy them up both for this life and for all eternity, not least in the tears. And if instead God shows your family special mercy by extending your span here, my prayer is that your remaining life will be tinged indelibly with a sense of eternity."

That is the sentiment of Romans ch.8: "I am convinced that nothing, neither angels or demons, can separate us from the love of God."

So, in the end, what of *The Shack*? The big picture it presents is right: God is good. God is love. God wants a relationship of love with you.

If someone has tried everything to come to feel that for themselves, and it's all failed, *The Shack* might have an emotional power that can break them out the hole they're in. If it's worked for that way for any of us, that's great.

And of course if it's the only book about God that a friend of yours who's not a Christian will ever read, and if it provokes a conversation with them about God for the first time - that's great, too.

But it does make several misleading statements along the way - misleading because they don't fit with the Bible's teaching. If you found yourself drawing lots of details from the book, you need to check yourself. We've printed off some reviews which point out some of the major errors in it - they're out in the Welcome Area, and they're free to take away. There's another one listed on the notice-sheet.

But I'm not here either to praise *The Shack* or to bury it. In the end it's just a novel. We're here to have God work in us through his word.

And he says that we know that in all things - God works - for the good (the ultimate good) of those who love him.