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Pentecost 10 – Romans 8:28-30 – The Christian Life Is a Win-Win Situation

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The Greeks would say that right now in our society, it's like we're between Scylla and Charybdis. That's sort of like how we say we're between a rock and a hard place, except that the rock and the hard place are both mythological creatures who want to kill you. For sailors who wanted to make their way through the narrow strait between the toe of Italy on the east and the island of Sicily on the west, the old story said that they had to avoid the many-headed monster Scylla on the one side so he wouldn't snatch them off the deck of their ship, and yet make sure they stayed far enough away from the whirlpool Charybdis on the other side so their ship wouldn't get swallowed whole. Well, that old Greek myth became a proverbial idea for trying to navigate a safe passage between situations in life that could both be equally harmful.

And you really don't have to look too hard to see some current examples of that. Do Black lives matter? A Christian would say of course, we want to affirm that moral, social truth in the clearest and strongest way possible and we would never want to give any person of color any reason to think differently. But would you want to say yes, Black lives matter, if it means getting lumped in with the political movement and all the baggage that goes with that? Not everyone would, and yet saying no to that question probably means getting labeled a racist and potentially having your freedoms and livelihood canceled by the culture around you. Or here's another one: should we mask up and lock down again to try to stop the spread of the coronavirus? If you say no, you will be accused of having blood on your hands from all the people who will get the virus and die from it. If you say yes, you will be accused of having blood on your hands from all the people who can't put food on the table or keep a roof over their family's heads because they won't have a paycheck coming in to pay the bills. Or here's another hot button issue right now: should schools open in person or online this fall? If you say in person, then you must not care about the teachers or all the kids who will bring the virus home from school, or from home to school. If you say online, then you must not care about real academic growth or mental health or domestic abuse, all of which suffer under those circumstances. So take your pick for any of those situations: it's not very easy, is it? Will it be Scylla or Charybdis? What is the lesser of two evils, and is there really any good that can come of any of that?

The more we Christians listen to the news and look around at the brokenness of this sinful world, the more we can get jaded and see the glass half empty and convince ourselves that life itself is really a lose-lose situation. But friends, that's why lessons from God's Word like this one from Romans are so very important for us, because here Paul reminds us not to focus on the world and its ugliness, but to focus rather on God and his goodness. Paul tells us that

actually the Christian life is a win-win situation, because no matter how it might *look* sometimes, our God promises that he is working all things for our good right now and that he will glorify us in eternity.

So Paul begins our lesson for today with one of our most comforting and well-loved passages in the Bible, "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" This is such a great promise for Christians because it is confident, because it is comprehensive, and because it is constructive. *We know*, Paul says – we are absolutely certain this is how God works in our lives and in this world, because he has promised it and he never lies and never fails. *In all things*, Paul says – not just in some things, not just in the easy or obvious things, not just in the pleasant things or the things that go our way, but in *all* things, yes even in the hard things and the bad things – or at least the things that *seem* bad to us at first, God works for the good of those who love him. That promise is comprehensive, because that means there is never a time in your life that your God isn't actively working for your wellbeing. And what kind of *good* is that? Well, we're not necessarily talking about what the world around us would consider good. We're talking about *spiritual* benefit, *eternal* welfare. With everything that happens to you in this life, your God intends to bring you closer to him in faith right now and closer to him in heaven one day soon. That kind of good is constructive, because it is always building toward a better outcome down the road – and when your perfect, loving Savior-God is the builder of your life and eternity, you can have every confidence that he will never let you down here and now and he will be faithful to you until he finally delivers you home to himself.

Now sometimes, I will admit, it can take a little searching to find the good in any situation a Christian person might have to go through. But you can be sure that it is always there, and sometimes the harder you have to look for it, the greater the treasure turns out to be in the end. For example, I can't tell you how many times people have commented to me how hard it must have been to move here and almost immediately have to go into a shutdown. True, it wasn't easy in a lot of ways and it didn't help me get to know names and faces any better, but it did give me more opportunity to help my family get settled in at home. It did give me more time to be helpful to my wife before our baby was born. It did allow us to reconnect with our extended family better when they wanted to help with the kids being out of school – that was especially nice after being so far away for so long. And it did give our church council a prime opportunity to work together to improve our church technology setup and online presence, among other things. I mean, who knows if any of that would have happened as quickly or as well if not for the coronavirus.

But if you think that's a good example, then maybe this one is even better. I knew a woman in Nebraska when I left who had terminal breast cancer and only a few months to live. Well, she also had a husband and three young girls who are around my kids' age. What a terrible

thing to think about losing your mother so young. Lots of people would be very angry with God for letting something so bad happen to them and their family. But this coronavirus shutdown meant that those girls got to spend every day with their mom for the last two months of her life. And even though she's gone now, that story didn't end in sadness. No, she's gone to heaven, gone to be with Jesus, gone away from cancer and everything else in this life that hurts right now, and those little girls get to look forward to the happy ending of seeing her again one day when there will be no more goodbyes. Yes, God worked for good even in a situation like that, and he can work for good even in your life too when you lose people you love as well, because he was good enough to give them to us in the first place; he was good enough to let us make memories with them and learn lessons from them that we can still cherish and use and apply for the rest of our lives; he is good enough to let us play that same role for the generations after us; and he is good enough to promise heaven to all of us who believe in Jesus as our Savior so we can be sure that we will be together in heaven forever. That means that no matter what happens now and how tough it might be in the meantime, the Christian life is always a win-win situation.

Yes, our God allows us to go through some really difficult things and face some really difficult challenges in our lives so that we can appreciate him and his gifts to us that much more, and so that we can serve him that much better. I mean, why would God allow someone to go through a tragic or traumatic experience in their life? Why would God allow someone to struggle with their spiritual or sexual identity? Why would God allow someone to get wrapped up in drug or alcohol addiction? Maybe it has to do with what Paul said here: "*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*"

God knew us from eternity. He chose us to be his own saved people. He made us true brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ by faith, and he promises that whatever he is doing in our lives, he is doing in order to conform us to the image of his Son – to make us more like Jesus here in this world and for eternity. What an amazing thought that is that God intends to make us all like little Christs in this world, people who reflect our Savior's goodness and love to others by the things we say and do. But now think: how did Jesus live in this world, and how did he reach his goal of winning our forgiveness and new life and eternal salvation? Only through struggling, only through suffering – and so also now God allows us to struggle and to suffer sometimes because that's his way of focusing us not on *material* wealth but on *spiritual* wealth, and drawing us away from this world and toward the world to come.

So why does God allow people to struggle with tragedy or trauma, or with their spiritual or sexual identity, or with addiction? It's so that when he finally brings them through it, they can realize all the more how empty the pleasures of this passing, sin-broken world really are.

It's so that they can look forward to the perfect pleasures of eternal paradise that much more. It's so that they can come to realize how truly fulfilling the Lord and his Word and Will are for their lives. And it's so that they can be equipped with Christian love to help and understand and reach others who go through those same things in a special way that not just anybody else could what hasn't been there. No, the sufferings we go through in our lives may not be easy or pleasant. But our God always makes good on his promises to use them for our ultimate benefit both now and forevermore, and so that means he will surely deliver us from those things either by taking them away in this life or by taking us to the next.

In fact, that has been his purpose for us all along, and he has done everything we needed to make sure he sees that purpose through: "*Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*"

How can we be sure that God is working for our good? Because he's been proving it from eternity, and he'll keep proving it to eternity. Like we said before, he *predestined* us to be his children before creation even began, and when God makes that kind of firm decision, nothing will break his resolve to make sure we make it home to him one day. But then what God decided way back when, he also followed through on for us when he *called* us to faith by the Gospel. In Holy Baptism he washes away our sins and makes us his own children. In Holy Communion he promises us forgiveness and a place next to him in heaven. In the Holy Scriptures he tells us that he loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to save us. Through those Good-News Gospel promises, he brought us to trust in him and so he *justified* us – he declared us not guilty of all our sins for Jesus' sake. And because Jesus lived and died and rose again to forgive us and bring us into God's family forever, we know that the bad things that happen to us now aren't punishing us. No, they're what our heavenly Father uses to teach us and train us to follow Jesus into glory. And even though we're not there yet, God's love for us and everything Jesus did to save us are so certain and so complete that it's as good as done and our entrance into heavenly glory one day is guaranteed.

So as the old Greek poet Homer told it, Odysseus was the man who was finally able to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis – but not before losing six men to one monster and very nearly getting swallowed up by the other. Well friends, you can be sure that we have a much better navigator guiding our lives, one who never loses those he loves, and one who delivered us from a foe far more fearsome than Scylla and Charybdis. So whatever the options are that society presents to us in our lives right now, no matter how difficult they might seem to balance, remember that in Christ, there is no such thing as a lose-lose for us. No, our Savior-God is working all things for our good right now and he will glorify us in eternity, so that means the Christian life is always a win-win situation! Amen.