

Sermon for Sunday, February 22, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"THE CHRISTIAN AND THE TEA BAG"

Romans 8:28-39

Text: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."  
---Romans 8:28

I want to begin this morning by talking about a doctrine called "the permissive decree of God." By this doctrine we understand that first of all, everything is under God's control. God is sovereign. God is ruler of the universe. As the spiritual puts it, "He's got the whole world in his hand." Therefore, nothing can happen to us that God can't control. I hope all of us take comfort from this. Nothing is too big for God. Nothing is beyond his power. Nothing is beyond the control of God.

But, having said that, we must go on to say something else. God permits things to happen. That is the second thing we must understand. Because of sin in your life and mine, because of sin in the universe, because of the brokenness of humanity that has rebelled against its creator, because of contamination that has spoiled and ruined his creation, God sometimes lets sin have its way in our lives.

The other day we read about a truck that smashed into a school bus. Now, God didn't will that, but he permitted it to happen. Such things are a part of the brokenness of a world that has rebelled against God and sometimes God permits things to happen. God didn't will that thing nor even desire it, but he permitted it to happen.

Or take illness and death. That is not God's will for us. Sickness and pain and death come because of our brokenness with God. So God permits sickness to come--he permits death to have dominion over us. So, while such things are not outside the control of God, they come to us because of our sin and rebellion and separation from God. He permits the consequence of sin in our lives.

Now, right away someone will say, "If God loves us, why does he let these things happen to us?" The answer is simple. God loved us enough to give us freedom. God loved us enough to let us be real persons with real choices. He loved us enough to give us the freedom to say "Yes" or to say "No" to him. So you are a real person this morning because you have real freedom with God. If you didn't have that freedom you wouldn't be a person; you would be a robot, an automaton. You would be some instinctive creature who couldn't help but act according to your instincts. But God loved you too much for that. He wanted you to be free, to be a real person.

But, having given you your freedom, he will not take away from you the consequences of your decisions. When Adam had the freedom to say "Yes" or "No" to God, he was given the privilege of being a real person. But when he said "No" to God, God did not take away the consequence of that decision. Suppose you have a little child. You want to teach him to be a mature, responsible person. So you give him choices and decisions to make. But suppose he makes a wrong choice that brings bad consequences. And suppose every time he does that, you take away the consequences. Will he ever learn not to make bad decisions? Well, you know very well he will not. For him to grow and mature, to become wise, you must let him suffer the consequences of bad choices. So with God. If he truly gives us freedom, he will not--he cannot--take away from us the consequence of those bad choices.

In our world today there are a lot of bad things. There is pain and sickness and death. There is war and hunger. There is cruelty and inhumanity. All of these things are the result of sin. They are the result of bad choices. So you and I live in a fallen world. We live in a world where there is pain, where there are accidents, where there are broken human relationships, where there is suffering and heartbreak. These are not outside God's control, but he permits us to suffer the consequence of our sin, of our bad decisions.

So, you and I live in a fallen world, a broken world. Some of the things I suffer are not due directly to anything I personally have done but they are a result of my being a part of broken, fallen humanity. A little child who has leukemia may not have done anything personally to cause her disease, but disease and pain and death is a part of the risk we run in being a part of broken humanity, of fallen man.

That is the permissive degree of God. He permits the consequence of sin to have its way in our lives. Those who say a loving God wouldn't let those things happen to us have missed the point entirely. It is because God loves us that he does not take our freedom away from us. God will not take away our right to be persons. He will not take away our privilege of making choices.

Now, if we left the matter right there, our lives--our future--would be rather gloomy. You see, because God does truly love us, he does do something for us. If we love him, give our hearts to him, surrender our wills to him, claim him as our Saviour, God does something very wonderful for us. He guarantees us that the journey--however rough it may be--will have a safe landing. Have you ever been in an airplane when the weather is rough? The plane bounces about and you begin to wonder if the wings will fall off. But the important thing about that flight is not how rough the journey is, but whether or not the plane lands safely at its destination. Well, that's God's promise to you. He promises that if you love him, you will have a safe landing.

Isn't that what our scripture for this morning says? "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." That is, however rough life is, God is bringing good out of it and we are promised a safe landing. Now, that is the first major point I want to make. God brings good out of the worst things that happen to us. Someone has said that a Christian is like a tea bag. He isn't worth much until he has been through a little hot water. And that is true. Only when a person has been through trouble and trials and sorrow and tribulation can he learn to trust God. And he trusts God not because he likes what is happening to him, but because he knows that out of the worst that life can do, God brings good things out of it.

Sometimes I have people come to me who have gone through some tragedy or some trouble or some deep sorrow and say to me, "This terrible thing is destroying my life." "Not so," I say to them. "What you are experiencing seems like the worst of losses at the moment. But the day will come when you will look back on these times in your life and you will see how God was at work in your life. You will be able to look back and see how in spite of your loss, God was making something good come out of it."

Well, it is a comfort to know that when I am in hot water, God uses it to make tea. If, when life tumbles in, I can have faith and confidence that in spite of whatever anguish might grip my soul, God is making something worthwhile come out of it, then I can have the courage and the faith to live through the toughest times.

Because of the permissive decree of God, trouble will come my way. But the first thing I discover is that God makes good come out of it. The second thing I learn about hot water is that it cannot separate me from God. Do you ever feel cut off from God? Do you ever feel nobody hears your prayers? Do you ever feel that God has forgotten you? Well, at one time or another most of us have had such feelings. Yet, the Bible tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In our scripture this morning we read a part of the scripture that is in the burial service. It is a passage we read at a time of death because it reassures us. It goes like this: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Isn't that amazing? No matter what is happening to me, it doesn't put me beyond God's reach. When sin with all its consequences is doing its very worst, it still cannot tear me out of the hands of God. Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." (St. John 10:27,28)

When I get in hot water, first I learn that God makes good come out of it, and second, I discover that even the worst that life can do to me cannot separate me from God's love. In the light of that, the third thing I want to share with you this morning is this: When you are in hot water, you can always thank God for it. In Ephesians 5:20 we read, "Always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus." In I Thessalonians 5:18 we read, "Give thanks in all circumstances..." In Phillipians 4:4 we read, "Rejoice in the Lord always..." And when you stop to think about it, that is rather remarkable advice, don't you think? Can you give thanks this morning for everything that is happening in your life? Well, you can if you believe that nothing can separate you from God's love. You can if you believe that in spite of the worst that life can do, God is bringing good out of it.

Yes, the Bible says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." When you are in hot water try giving thanks. You see, it does not change your circumstances, but it does something far more important--it begins to change your attitude. Inevitably life brings hard things to us. It brings disappointment, it brings sorrow, it brings trouble. Things happen to us such as accidents, failures, and the deaths of loved ones. We cannot change that. But what we can change is our attitude towards those things. When you begin to thank God for everything--when you begin to praise God in all circumstances--you are dealing with your own attitudes, your own response to life.

Will you try that in your life? When the water gets hot you can believe that God is making tea in your life. You can praise him because he will make these things work out for your good; you can praise him because you believe that even the worst cannot separate you from his love. And then, in the very act of praising and thanking God in all circumstances, a change begins to occur. The change is happening in your heart--you are changing in your attitudes.

Let me share with you my own experience. As many of you know, there came a time in my life when the worst possible thing seemed to be happening to me. Yet, in the midst of the worst that life could do to me, I could praise God--not because I liked what was happening, but because first I knew that whatever happened nothing could separate me from God's love, nor could anything separate my loved ones from the love of God--neither life nor death, nor any other creature. Secondly, I believed that God would bring good out of the worst that life could do. As the years have gone by, looking back one can see how God's hand was upon him, and how, out of the very worst, God brought good and beautiful things. We can give him thanks in all circumstances.