

Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"WATCHING THE PARADE THROUGH A KNOTHOLE"  
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

She was standing by the coffin when I walked into the room. When she saw me, she began to cry. "Oh, Dr. Jumper," she said in deep despair, "why did God let this happen to me." But let the scene change. This time I'm ringing a doorbell. A call had come that the child of a member had been playing on top of the garage and had touched a live power line. The father opens the door and his face is marked with stunned grief. "Oh, Pastor, how could God let this happen to a little boy like Mike." But let the scene change again. She enters my study and takes a seat across the desk from me. She is wearing sun shades but now she takes them off. Her eyes are puffed and red from crying and she begins to weep again as she tells me that her husband has left her and the children. "Why," she asks plaintively, "would God do a thing like that to me?"

Such incidents could be told almost endlessly. Something goes wrong, a job is lost, a loved one dies, a marriage breaks up, some disaster strikes. Almost inevitably comes that agonizing question, "How could God let this happen to me?" Have you ever asked yourself that question when something has gone terribly wrong in your life? I know I have.

The first thing I want to say this morning is this: God loves us and desires only the best, the happiest, for us. When some tragedy has struck your life, can you believe that? Yet, it is true. But if God loves us and wants only the best for our lives, and if things still go dreadfully wrong, does that mean that God is powerless? Does that mean that God is helpless to do anything about the problems, the heartaches, the tragedies, that come into our lives? No, it doesn't mean that at all.

Let me remind us how the Bible begins. It begins with the story of creation--the story of how God created everything and it was very good. And then, as the crown of his creation, God made man. He made him in his own image, the Bible says. He made man to love him, to fellowship with him and for man to love him in return. But because he wanted man's love for him to be real; because he wanted man's love to be given truly and freely, he gave him freedom. Man was no robot, no automaton, who had to respond just as God had programmed him. No, man was truly free. He could say "yes" to God, but he could also say, "no". Well, you remember the story that the Bible tells. It tells how man used his freedom to say "no" to God. He rejected God, he disobeyed God, he responded in unlove. As a consequence, man's fellowship with God was broken. The Bible calls that brokenness sin. And sin did dreadful things to man and to his world. Man's rebellion, his disobedience, spilled over into every area of his life. Brokenness entered his social life--his interpersonal relationships and one of the first things to happen was for a brother to kill a brother when Cain slew Able. Brokenness entered his emotional/mental life for the Bible tells us that Adam knew fear and anxiety, the basis of all our emotional problems. Brokenness entered his physical life for the Bible says that man became subject to sickness, pain, and death. Worst of all, brokenness entered man's spiritual life for his disobedience and rebellion and unlove broke fellowship with God so every area of man's life knew brokenness. And do you know, another dreadful thing happened, for the Bible tells us that man's brokenness spilled over into his world, too, and man found himself living in a broken world.

So, if you take the Bible seriously, that's the kind of picture we get: the picture of fallen man living in a fallen world. To the lady who asked why her husband died, to the man who asked why his little boy had been killed, to the woman who asked why her husband had abandoned her, that is the answer. It is the brokenness of our lives, the brokenness of our world. No, God didn't do it. God didn't will it. It is the consequence of our sin.

Does that make sense to you? You may not have done any great wrong deserving of punishment, yet tragedy, disaster, death come into your life. Why? Because we are broken people living in a broken world. If the story ended there, what a tragic story it would be. That was the only story the great philosopher novelist Albert Camus knew. If you have read his books, you know the pessimism, the despair that permeates them. And at the end he drove his car into a tree at high speed. But why not? If that is all life means--if despair and tragedy and hurt are all we have to look forward to, why not drive into a tree?

Well, the reason we don't drive our cars into a tree is because the Bible story doesn't end on a note of despair. Instead, we read passages such as "For God so loved the world," and such passages as our text for this morning which says, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." What does that mean? It means simply that in spite of the worst, in spite of the most tragic that life can do to us, God is at work in our misery and pain and hurt to bring good out of it. We may not be able to see it at the moment because our vision is dimmed by our tears, but because we trust God, we know that in times to come when we look back, we will be able to see how God's hand was upon us. See how it works!

Imagine a little boy watching a parade go down his street through a knothole in the fence. All he has is a knothole view of the parade. If he sees a lion, he gets scared. If he sees a clown he laughs. If he sees and hears a band, he taps his foot. If he sees a space between the band and the acrobats he may think the parade is over. He has to evaluate the parade on the basis of what he sees or what he doesn't see and the whole experience can be very frustrating. But suppose as he is watching the parade, his brother calls out to him. His brother has crawled up on the roof of the house behind the fence and is calling little brother to come and join him. So the little brother scrambles up on the housetop with his big brother. The view from the housetop is great! Now he can see the beginning of the parade, the middle of it, and 'way down the street, the end of it. And how great it is! He is seeing things in a new perspective. He doesn't have to fear the lion, because just behind it come the clown and the acrobats. He doesn't have to be afraid of the bearded lady, because just behind her comes the big brass band and the jugglers. The perspective from the rooftop is entirely different from the view through the knothole.

Unfortunately for us, in real life we can't climb up on the roof to get God's perspective of life. We are stuck with the knothole in the fence. All we can see of life's parade is what is happening to us at the moment. We see the lion and we get scared because we can't see the clown coming behind him. All we can do is trust our big brother Jesus who sees the parade from on high; all we can do is trust God who loves us and who turns out to be the parade master who put the whole thing together in the first place.

So the view of life's parade through the knothole in the fence can be very frustrating. A loved one dead, a little son tragically killed, a husband run away seen through the knothole of the moment can break our hearts. But if we trust that the view from the rooftop makes sense, if we believe that God is in control of the whole parade, then we can trust him and have faith that even what we are seeing right now will, in the end, work for good.

Some years ago, long after World War II was over, out in the desert of North Africa, men exploring for oil found an incredible thing. There, sitting intact in the desert, all of her instruments still workable, was a World War II bomber. On the nose of her fuselage the name of the plane was still legible, she was the Lady Be Good. A search of the records showed that the plane had gone out on a mission and had never been heard from again. But how could this be, for here the plane was 400 miles past its destination in the desert.

How did it happen? Investigators concluded that the Lady Be Good had gotten into a high altitude air current that doubled its speed without the crew being aware of it. Since the crew knew how long it ordinarily took them to return to base, when they reached their destination in half the time it ordinarily took them they assumed their instruments were in error and flew on into the desert. At last their fuel ran out and they crash-landed. Later on searchers found the remains of several of the crew who perished trying to get help.

Disaster came because the crew would not believe their instruments. Isn't that what happens to us when we don't trust God? The Bible promises us that if we love God, everything is working for our good. But when we don't trust him, when we refuse to put our faith in him, we always end up in some desert of despair.

Do you remember that incredible New York Met team of 1969? The year before they had been mired in the bottom of their division. Yet in 1969 they not only won their league title, they went on to beat Baltimore in the World Series in five games. What happened to turn the tramps of the league into world champions? Well, the year before their manager Gil Hodges had a heart attack. The doctors were pessimistic, but he began to fight his way back to health. As he thought about coaching again he determined that he would stress the fundamentals of baseball with his players but he would stress another kind of fundamental, too: their attitude toward defeat; because, as he put it, "you tend to become what you think about." "We walked off the field...champions of the world because," he said, "we learned our lesson about where the real fundamentals lie."

When you look through the knothole at life's parade and see some tragedy, some hurt, some defeat, it is so easy to lose confidence. So often we ourselves become defeated because of our attitude and we become what we think about. But the man who trusts the parade master, the man who refuses to give in to the view through the knothole, who believes that even in the worst that life brings God is working to bring good out of it, will not surrender to despair. In the end he will walk off the field a champion.

Let me suggest one final thought. Most of us ask about the meaning of life when things go bad. But the text for today says that in everything God is working for good if we love him. So what if we see a clown through the knothole that makes us laugh? That is, if good things come into our lives, do we look to see how God is working there? See how it works.

'Way back in 1916 a little girl named Edna Walker was getting excited about Christmas. Unfortunately it looked as though there would be no Christmas for her. Her father was sick and without work. She understood why Santa could bring no toys but she was only six and there had been a doll in the window of the store that she desperately wanted. Then, on Christmas Eve, a Salvation Army worker in her blue uniform had come to their little house in North Carolina bringing a big basket of food and goodies and toys for each child in the family. For Edna there had been a lovely little doll dressed in hand-sewn clothes. Edna loved that doll, dressed it, washed it, slept with it. Never was there a doll that received any more love than this one.

Later, in years to come, Edna remembered that wonderful moment and for years now Edna Walker has made hundreds of doll outfits for the Salvation Army. God used that bright, happy event in her life for good so that Edna reached out to touch other lives with joy.

How about you? How is your view through the knothole in the fence as you watch life's parade? Is the view good? Is it breaking your heart? But what ever you are seeing this morning if you love Him you can believe that God is working to bring good out of it. Back in spring training the year the Mets won the pennant, Gil Hodges said to his players, "We've got to shed the old Met image of the league losers. It may have made us loveable, but it keeps us losers." If you trust God and believe with your heart that he is bringing good no matter what you see through the knothole in the fence, you will never be a loser.