



*28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Christians are usually well intended but we don't always end up doing good. Romans 8:28 is a great example of this. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* There is such immense depth of truth in this verse and for many of us, it has carried us through some really hard times. But sometimes we are a little too quick to apply it to the lives of others. For example, this well known verse is a "everything's going to turn out OK" verse. What I mean is that it's kind of like ketchup. You know those people who put ketchup on everything? They pour ketchup on their hamburgers and hot dogs, but they also put it on their eggs, their spaghetti and all kinds of things to which God never intended should have ketchup applied! If you are one of these people, please do not come up to me after the service and say, "Oh yeah, I put ketchup on my Rice Krispies"® or something like that. You'll just give me a stomach ache. ;-)

So just as some people apply ketchup to everything, so some people apply this verse to every situation. If you are having a bad day, someone will post this verse on your facebook wall. "Don't worry, God will work it out for good." If you receive a cancer diagnosis, people are quick to speak this verse to you. When you lose a loved one, this verse is commonly quoted to you at the visitation or in a sympathy card.

I'll say it again--most people who do this mean well. They want to bring you comfort and encouragement and they think that is what they are doing. And because this verse does have so much comforting truth in it, it is commonly applied. Don't get me wrong. I love this verse and I have done exactly what you do. But the fact is, most of us are uncomfortable when other people

suffer. We don't like to suffer ourselves so it is natural we don't like to see others suffer either. So our temptation is to look in our Biblical first aid kit and put a spiritual Bandaid on a severed artery. That's what can happen when we use a powerful verse like Romans 8:28.

Again, we want to be helpful and often are, but sometimes we can make matters worse. Please allow me to offer a few principles about how to make use of a marvelous verse like Romans 8:28. You could say that I have turned this sermon upside down. I am giving you the application before we pull the meaning from the passage. But that's OK. We'll get to it soon enough.

### **1. Be pastoral first and theological second.**

When people are hurting, they need two things--truth and love. We always need both but the order in which you give these is very important. Love is the pastoral response. But you say, What do you mean? I am not a pastor. I'm just someone who sits in the pew on Sunday mornings and maybe helps in the nursery once in a while."

I beg to differ on that point and so does the Bible. Listen to what Peter wrote. *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* (1 Peter 2:9) This is what is called the "priesthood of all believers." What this means is that every member is a "priest." Not that you are busy sacrificing bulls and goats for the sins of others, but since Jesus is our High Priest, we no longer need a human mediator between us and God. We each have direct access to God. The other implication is that every believer is a minister. I am a minister by vocation--it's my job, but you are no less a minister than I am.

Do you get this point? Do you see the immense implications of it? If you are a minister--not just me or the guy or girl sitting next to you--if you are a minister, you need to be asking the question, "What is my ministry?" "What has God gifted and called me to do?" Much more could be said here, but my point is that you are all ministers, so in this sense, you can respond 'pastorally' to those who are hurting. The pastoral response is one of love.

Now there is powerful truth in Romans 8:28 and I don't mean for a minute that you should bottle this up and keep it for yourself. This verse and others like it very well may enter into your first conversation with someone who is suffering, and that's fine. But what I am saying is, don't lead with Romans 8:28. Lead with love and then bring in the truth second. Because if you lead with Romans 8:28, what it can sound like to the sufferer is "Don't worry, God will work it out for good. Don't cry, everything will work out somehow." This is probably the very last thing you intend to communicate, but if you lead with a verse like Romans 8:28, it may be what is perceived by the other person.

Now the suffering person needs truth. They need the theological truth found in Romans 8:28. They probably need it more than they even realize. I don't want you to shy away from the truth, I just don't want you to lead with it. Be pastoral first and theological second. Lead with love and let the truth come in after that.

Are there times when we need to lead with truth? Sure there are? There have been a rash of Christian ministers and leaders falling into gross immorality. These things always seem to come

in pairs or groups. You hear of one and a week later another story pops up and week later a third tragedy is revealed. What is needed in cases such as these? Truth! We must always speak the truth in love but sometimes you lead with truth.

I will never forget the first time I confronted someone. It was during my seminary days. I saw a destructive pattern in a fellow student's life that he obviously did not see. I literally spent six months praying and thinking about how to do this. Now don't think I was super spiritual or anything. I was actually afraid to do it. It was mostly a lack of courage that kept me from speaking up but I eventually asked him to sit down and talk. And the whole thing went very well. he was very receptive to what I had to say and thanked me profusely for reaching out to him.

Did I show love to this guy? If done for the right motives, sharing the truth is a loving act. I do feel I showed love in the careful way I talked with him, but my point is that I led with the truth. Love was there, but I led with truth. But when another person is suffering, you want to reverse this and lead with love.

## **2. Be a Job chapter 2 friend.**

God allowed Satan to test Job with the most extreme trials. Satan took away all of his wealth, all of his family, save his wife, and eventually all of his health. Here's what happened in chapter two.

*So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. 9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die."*

Satan took everything Job had except his life. Job's wife was telling him to abandon his faith, turn his back on God and kill himself. The picture is of a man in utter misery. I doubt any of us will ever approach this level of suffering. And then his friends enter the scene.

*Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. 12 And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. 13 And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great (Job 2:11-13).*

There's the key--*for they saw that his suffering was very great.* This is how you minister to someone who is suffering, even if it is not Job-like suffering. First, you have to have eyes to see what is happening to them. Now don't feel like you need to have experienced what the other person has experienced in order to minister to them. If a parent has lost a child in some tragic fashion, you don't need to have lost a child to know that they are in agony. It may be true that a parent who has also lost a child is uniquely equipped to minister to the grieving parent, but you don't have to have gone through it to demonstrate genuine compassion.

Having said that, there is no question that suffering can tenderize you like nothing else. It was a little different for our family when my mom died. Because she suffered with Alzheimer's for 14 years, most of who my mom had been was already gone. She had not recognized our family for the last seven years of her life. So when she died, it was more of a relief to see her suffering come to an end. But it was different when my dad died. Even though he had suffered physically to a great extent, he was still fully my dad, my friend. And I noticed that the first time I went to a funeral after this, I could actually feel a rise in my level of compassion. My compassion tank was more full than it had ever been. Now if you compared my compassion tank to someone who has tons of compassion, you might think I was running on empty. You might think, "Dude, how does your compassion engine even run? You are just running on fumes!" That may be true, but I know that for me, there was a noticeable difference, and by the grace of God, I think my tank has filled a tiny bit more over the years.

So Job's friends had enough compassion to see his great suffering. They were clearly pastoral first and theological second. Unfortunately, the theological advice that they leveled at Job was severely flawed. Had Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had access to Romans 8:28, they could have been far better comforters for Job. But instead, they applied a form of prosperity theology to the suffering saint. They comforted Job for three verses but they proceed to attack Job for the next 21 chapters. Everything was fine until they opened their mouths, right?

I am guessing that more than half of you have never read all the way through the book of Job. admittedly, it's not an easy read, but it's a necessary read. The whole message is one that we need to understand and it is also filled with endless little gems in the mix. To help you along, here is a very simple outline on the book of Job.

Ch. 1-2            Satan asks-God permits-Job responds 2x  
Ch. 3-31          Eliphaz, Bildad & Zophar speak-Job responds 3x  
Ch. 32-37        Elihu speaks  
Ch. 38-42        God speaks-Job repents

Job's friends really did stop being friends once they started talking. Here are two examples of their horrible advice, all of which is built on a faulty view of God.

*If you will seek God  
and plead with the Almighty for mercy,  
6    if you are pure and upright,  
surely then he will rouse himself for you  
and restore your rightful habitation.  
7    And though your beginning was small,  
your latter days will be very great (Job 8:5-7).*

Can you see the flaws here? This is prosperity theology. You did wrong, so God punished you. If you do right, God will richly prosper you. His friends had no room in their thinking for the suffering of a righteous person. Here's another doosey.

*Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves (Job 11:6).*

Tell me again why they are called "friends?" Can you imagine telling a guy like Job that God actually went easy on him? As the story informs us, the only thing that Job did not lose was his own life. We are told that he lost all of his wealth, all of his children. What we are not told exactly we can read between the lines. Job was perhaps the most respected man in town and if Job's "friends" are any indication, he completely lost his reputation. No one respected him anymore. They looked at him as an utter failure. Sure he was prosperous because he hid his enormous sin from everyone. Everything was fine until God leveled his judgment upon him. It turns out that Job was just a gigantic hypocrite. To be clear, I don't believe this, but this would have led to Job losing his reputation.

And then of course he lost his wife, at least temporarily. I mean, if your wife is telling you to curse God and then go kill yourself, how much of a marriage is left after that? It's likely that she meant that if Job did openly curse God that God would in turn end his misery and kill him. This would have still been a form of suicide. So Job lost absolutely everything except his own life, yet his friends tell him that God took it easy on him? It's no wonder Job defended himself.

*Miserable comforters are you all (Job 16:2).*

*How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words? (Job 19:2)*

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were like two, separate kinds of friends. In chapter 2 they were wonderful comforters, seemingly filled with compassion and a full seven days of patience. But for the rest of the book it was like they repeatedly stabbed Job with verbal knives and twisted hard. It makes you wonder if their compassion in chapter two really was compassion after all. But if you take the words of the Bible at face value, their actions seem genuine. In fact, even their twisted, harmful words were well intended. I really don't think they were trying to harm Job. They did not set out to pour salt into his many wounds. I don't think they conspired together to destroy Job. But their theology was so far off, that this was the final result.

This reminds us how harmful false teaching can be. Good doctrine is never an end in itself. Either as a church or as an individual, you can never pat yourself on the back and declare, "We've got a corner on the truth and everyone else is wallowing in the theological mud." Truth is not an end in itself but a means to a good end. Good theology and right truth lead to worship and living in the presence and joy of the Lord. However, bad teaching and wrong teaching can be incredibly harmful.

Here's a practical example of how these verse sin Romans 8 can be used like a billy club. *28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* Here is how some people interpret this verse: If you love God, all things will work for good. Now does it actually say that? In a very literal sense, it kind of does. *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.* It could sound like the way things turn out is dependent upon how much you love God. Do you see the potential for this meaning? And there is a school of thought that interprets it this way.

But it's a wrong interpretation. This is horrific because it puts all of the burden on the suffering person. Not only are they suffering but the implication is that they are suffering because they did not love God sufficiently. This is exactly the bad advice that Job's so-called friends offered him.

*if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation.* Words are like a surgeon's scalpel. In the right hands, they can bring healing but in the wrong hands, they cut deep and wound further.

### **3. Just show up**

This principle is related to the other two but put a little differently for emphasis. remember, Job's friends were great until they opened their mouths. Again, I am NOT saying to never say anything. That would just be silly. Did Job need to be rebuked? Absolutely. He started off really well with several faith-filled declarations.

*"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD"* (Job 1:20)

*"Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.* (Job 2:10).

He started off well but said way too much himself and got himself in trouble. he needed to be rebuked. Job was rightly rebuked by Elihu and with great power by God. Job most certainly needed to be corrected and put in his place. So there is always a place for correction but especially when suffering is involved, we should think about three simple words--just show up.

This is the answer to the most common objection to helping others: "I don't know what to say." If a friend receives a diagnosis of cancer we can unthinkingly avoid the person because we don't know what to say. Sometimes we'd rather not attend a funeral because we don't know what to say to the bereaved person. We might know that someone is struggling with some area in their life but we never pick up the phone and call them because (finish it with me...) we don't know what to say.

The simple answer to this all too common feeling is to just show up. Think about a time when you were one of the close family members at a funeral. Maybe it was your dad or mom or other close relative who died. How does it make you feel when people line up at the visitation to greet you? Isn't that the best medicine in the world right then? Do you ever recall what anyone said to you when they greeted you? For the most part, it's all a blur. What really matters to you is that they showed up on your behalf. They cared enough to make the drive, stand in line, shake your hand and maybe give you a hug. They might say something like, "I'm so sorry for your loss" but the real joy is just to see them. They ministered to you by being present.

So be pastoral first and theological second. Always speak the truth in love but when it comes to the matter of suffering, always lead with love.

Be a Job 2 friend. See how great their suffering is. If you don't have eyes to see it, ask the Lord to fill up your compassion tank.

Just show up. Minister by being present. You won't regret that you did.

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