# God’s Purpose and Goodness: Lent Sermon (4) 30th March 2014

**Preamble**

This is our 4th session in the lent course on Christian Basics.

* Session 1 we looked at God and learnt that God is Good
* Session 2 we saw how God created a good world.
* Last week Roger shared how Gods good world has been spoiled by us.
* Today I am thinking about ‘Providence.

Providence is defined in my dictionary as *“The protective care of God or nature”*

* So the word to describe divine foresight is ‘providential’
* Providence is the belief that God is continuing to work for good in his world.

You see when God had finished creating the world he didn’t just leave it

* When we spoilt his creation he didn’t leave us to get on with it
* He continues to be involved
* He is actively caring for us and for this world

Last week Roger talked about how we can continue to believe God is good

* Despite the evil and suffering we see around us
* We find God working for good
* This morning we are thinking about how he does that
* And how we can respond and participate in this work
* Paul sums all this up beautifully in his letter to the Roman Christians

**Reading: Romans 8:18-39** Present Suffering and Future Glory

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. 20For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

22We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

26In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

28And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29For 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. 30And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

31What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?32He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
    we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Introduction**

So Paul’s message is

* We face suffering and pain in this world
* But that’s nothing compared to the joy to follow
* Because God is at work in us and in this world
* And he will eventually sort it out.
* And nothing can stop him.

It is a message that God is in control

* He has a purpose and plan
* So there is a good future for us and for our world

After all, if he went to all the trouble and heartache of sending Jesus to die for us

* If he was capable of raising him from the dead
* Then he certainly isn’t going to just give up on us
* We can be confident in his work in us and in his world

And that, in a nutshell, is the doctrine of Providence

* That is really all it is
* It’s very simple and straightforward
* So I could stop here
* But I’m not going to

Because, despite it being quite simple in essence

* It is also one of the most misunderstood concepts in the world
* And, if we’re honest, in the church.
* We can easily end up blaming God for things that go wrong
* There are two basic errors we are very prone to.

1. We are to blame for bad things that happen to us
2. We cannot know why things happen to us.

**Two Big Errors**

So let’s look at these briefly for a few moments

* Like much of the deceit of the devil there is an element of truth to them
* But the truth has been distorted and deformed

1. **We are to blame for bad things that happen to us**

The argument goes like this

* If God is in control He must have some purpose for what has happened to me
* Then we either end up presuming that God is punishing me
* Or worse we sit in judgement saying – “God is punishing them for their sin”
* Or we feel that God is ‘teaching me a lesson’
* And it’s my refusal to learn that causes the suffering.

Both of these ideas are completely wrong

* Obviously there are consequences to sin and we are not immune from them
* And God can use trials to help us grow and mature
* James mentions this in his letter
* In vs. 2&3 he tells us

*“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,**whenever you face trials of many kinds,****3****because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*

* But he goes on to say in vs. 13

*“When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.”*

The big problem with this is that it makes it sound as if God is against the sufferer.

* The truth is completely the opposite
* God cares deeply for the hurting, deprived and abandoned
* In fact he favours them.

That is repeated time and again in the bible

* In the Old testament there are the stories of Hagar,
  + Who is bullied and flees into the wilderness.
  + But God finds her there and she realises he is watching over her
  + And God is revealed as Jehovah Roi - The God who sees
* Job, who’s friends are told off by God for blaming Job for his suffering
* and Ruth the immigrant shown love and compassion

Jesus ministry was to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-19)

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

The Sermon on the Mount expresses God’s favour on those who suffer and mourn

* Throughout the New Testament we are told to care for those in need
* For example James tells us (James 1:27)

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*.

1. **The second error is to think we can never know why things happen to us**

We know the phrase *“God works in mysterious ways”*

* We might even have used it
* But that does not mean we can know nothing of God’s purpose in our lives
* Even if we can never fully understand him

We know from Isaiah 55:8-9

* *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The problem is that if we are not very careful

* we end up believing in a ‘God of the Gaps’
* What I mean by that is anything we don’t understand we attribute to God
* It’s like Roger was saying last week about disasters being called ‘Acts of God’

We see this idea of the God of the Gaps in the evolution/science debate as well

* If we see God merely as the answer to questions we don’t know the answers to
* Then science and faith are opposites
* If, however we see God as the origin of everything
* Then our logical reasonable creator God has created a world where logic and reason can understand the workings and intricacies of the universe.
* And our faith encourages us to delve into science and to seek understanding.

Remember Jesus told his disciples in John 15:15

*“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”*

* The whole of the Bible is a history of God revealing himself to us
* As we read through it we discover more and more of God, his nature
* And his purposes

This, of course culminates in the coming of Jesus

* The ultimate revelation of God
* He who is Emmanuel – God with us.
* And that is what Roger will be talking about next week
* The Incarnation – God coming to be one of us.

**Living in the light of God’s Plans for us**

So if we can know something of God’s plan for us

* If his purposes are good and for our benefit
* It should affect the way we live
* And that is what I want to think about now
* We’ve looked at the misconceptions
* Now let’s think about the true understanding of providence
* Of how to live in God’s purposes in the light of his goodness.

1. **God plans allow for us to work with him**

Firstly God’s plan allow us to work with Him

* He takes account of our decisions and choices.
* Our lives are not predetermined beforehand
* God chooses to balance his sovereign will and power with our choices.

How He does this no-one really knows

* Back in the 16th Century John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius argued about this
* And Christians have debated between Calvinism and Armenians ever since
* So I think it unlikely we will resolve the issue this morning
* But we know that God somehow weaves our free choice into his plan to achieve his purpose

This is what Paul was talking about in the passage in Romans we read at the beginning.

* vs. 28-30)

*“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29For 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. 30And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*

Note God’s ultimate purpose is not a healthy happy life

* He has destined and called us to be conformed to the image of his son.
* And those he has called he will justify and glorify
* God’s plan is ultimately for our salvation

So what does this mean for us?

* Firstly it means we have a part to play in God’s plan
  + Our actions and choices make a difference.
  + We should seek to find and follow God’s will for us
* Secondly it means we are responsible for our actions
  + For the good or evil that results from them
* And finally that we can influence what God chooses to do
  + Our prayers make a material difference to events

1. **God uses everything for our good**

As we’ve just noted our lives are not fated beforehand

* What we do makes a difference
* Equally we are not purely at the mercy of chance
* We live in a fallen broken damaged world
* And bad things happen to all people
* And there is an element of chance involved

God may be sovereign

* He doesn’t bring these bad things
* And neither does He always protect us from the misfortunes of life
* But he does use them for our good

Note in the passage we’ve just read

* It doesn’t say God gives good things to those who love him
* But that in all things
* Good, bad and indifferent
* God will work for our good
* So even when terrible, unfair circumstances occur
* God will work in them for our good

1. **God’s plans are always against evil**

Having said God does not always prevent bad things happening

* He always works against evil in his world
* We learn from the story of Job that God permits evil to happen to people
* But he limits what the devil or circumstances can do.
* He is never the cause of evil but he allows it
* Partly because he allows free choice
* Partly because he is patient in the way he puts the world right

God did put the world right once before

* That is the story of Noah
* The cure was drastic
* God now has a better way
* Evil has been conquered by Jesus
* And God will not jeopardise peoples opportunity to find salvation by putting an end to all evil too soon.

But despite this we can be sure God will one day destroy all evil

* Because Jesus has already won the victory
* Our role is to work with Him for good
* In Romans 12:21 Paul tells us

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

If we think about it that is what Jesus did

* He overcame evil with good
* This leads us to another thought
* God also suffers from evil
* Jesus came not just to save us
* But to share in our pain.

So when people ask where is God when terrible things happen

* He is there with us
* Sharing our grief and pain
* Calling out with us “God, where are you, Why have you abandoned me?”
* This brings us to the next point

1. **God can be trusted with what we don’t understand**

Although we can know something of Gods plan

* Very often we can only guess at the details
* That was the fault of Jobs comforters
* They tried to explain Jobs suffering
* And ended up misrepresenting God

We should be very careful in attributing reasons to God

* It is not our role to justify God
* But to be like Jesus and stand with people in their pain
* To work for their good despite anything they might do
* Because

1. **God plans are for everyone’s good**

God’s plans are for the whole of his creation

* God does not only work for Christians
* As he did not only care about the Jews
* His plan was for the Jews to be the means by which the whole world was blessed
* In the same way we are to be God’s blessing to our neighbours

1. **God’s plans are fulfilled in Jesus.**

Finally I want to finish with the thought

* All of God’s plans are fulfilled in Jesus
* Everything God wanted to do has already been achieved by Jesus.
* This is Pauls response in Romans 8
* His conclusion to understanding God’s purpose and goodness in the light of the problem of suffering.

Read verses 31- 39

31What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?32He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36As it is written:

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**Amen**