

A Purpose Behind Every Trouble

John 16:32-33

Imagine for a moment that your world is dark, safe, secure. You are bathed in warm liquid, cushioned from shock. You do nothing for yourself; you are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that someone larger than you fills all your needs. Your life consists of simple waiting—you're not sure what to wait for, but any change seems far away and scary. You meet no sharp objects, no pain, no threatening adventures. A fine existence.

One day you feel a tug. The walls are falling in on you. Those soft cushions are now pulsing and beating against you, crushing you downwards. Your body is bent double, your limbs twisted and wrenched. You're falling, upside down. For the first time in your life, you feel pain. You're in a sea of rolling matter. There is more pressure, almost too intense to bear. Your head is squeezed flat, and you are pushed harder, harder into a dark tunnel. Oh, the pain. Noise. More pressure.

You hurt all over. You hear a groaning sound and an awful, sudden fear rushes in on you. It is happening—your world is collapsing. You're sure it's the end. You see a piercing, blinding light. Cold, rough hands pull at you. A painful slap. Waaaahhhh! Congratulations! You've just been born.

(Adapted from page 202 in Living on the Ragged Edge by Charles Swindoll, in Where Is God When It Hurts? pp. 179-183, by Philip Yancey.)

In my more than 50 years of life, I have yet to find someone who has been trouble-free his or her entire life. In fact, trouble begins the moment we are born! What we find more often than not are people who seem to move out of one trouble and right back into another. Someone once pointed out to me that no one really solves problems—we just trade one set for another!

Once when I went to get a haircut a few years ago, I could tell that the young lady who always cut my hair seemed to be a little preoccupied and distressed. So I said to her, "Amanda, it looks as though something is bothering you." And then I just left it. I figured if she wanted to tell me, she would, and if not, she wouldn't.

But she almost immediately replied, "Well, I tend to take on other people's problems and carry them myself." When I didn't respond, she continued, mentioning a family in Yazoo County that had recently been killed. She didn't know them herself, but what had happened to them was upsetting her personally. She said, "It just seems that we are surrounded by so much trouble and pain, and it

really bothers me.” But then she said something I think we all feel about much of life: “And there’s not a thing I can do about it.”

Times of trouble are bad enough, aren’t they? But when you add the feelings of helplessness, it can be a little overwhelming. How we view these troubles has much to do in determining our quality of life. If we can only see difficulty as producing trouble in our lives then we are going to be sour on life. We all know people who have been made bitter because of adversity. However, if we can see some purpose for our problems beyond just the trouble itself, we can find meaning—and at least some degree of comfort.

Today we focus on one main thought:

Jesus is actively working in our lives during our troubles.

Jesus said in verse 33, “*In this world you will have trouble.*” That says to us that more often than not Jesus does not prevent troubles from coming across our paths. The trial comes—it swoops down into our lives often without any warning. What trouble was Jesus talking about? What troubles were the disciples facing? Verse 32 hints at it. He said to them, “*But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.*”

Let’s dig a little bit. The Greek word for “scattered” in that verse is *skorprios*. I tell you that because it should sound a little familiar. It gives us our word “scorpion.” And what does a scorpion do? It stings by piercing its victim. Sometimes trouble penetrates us so deeply that we can feel the pain physically. But the word Jesus used here has a fuller definition. It means “to cut into pieces and scatter the parts.” That was going to happen to them as a group. The disciples were going to be cut from each other and scattered.

That same word was used in John 10 where Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd. He told them that “*the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (v. 11). He also told them that “*the hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it*” (v. 12). The word “scatters” in John 10:12 is the same word used in John 16:32.

Picture that in your mind. A wolf doesn’t just run up in the midst of a flock of sheep and watch them run away. Remember the literal translation: “To cut into

pieces and scatter the parts.” That’s what a wolf would do to sheep in an attack. That’s what would happen to the group of disciples. That’s what happens to us.

There’s another reference to the trouble in verse 33. Jesus said there, “*In this world you will have trouble.*” Notice two things here. **First**, Jesus acknowledged the presence of trouble when He said “*You will have trouble.*” When trouble comes, it is not a surprise to Him, and should not be a surprise to us—He told us we would have it. Jesus was not ignoring it for them, and He doesn’t ignore it for us. But He also had a confidence in the ultimate purpose of God, and He knew that even the trouble was part of God’s purpose.

Second, the word used for trouble in verse 33 literally means “to come under pressure, to be pressed in.” A related word referred to what happens to grapes when they are crushed in a winepress. Life was about to get tough for them, but Jesus wanted them to know that in spite of the trouble, He was still actively involved in their lives.

But the disciples weren’t the only ones who were going to have trouble. We know that from reading the Scriptures. Jesus told them of His own troubles which were coming: His being falsely accused, His arrest, the flogging, the crucifixion. Here in verse 32 He said, “*You will leave me all alone.*” When we are going through a time of adversity, the feeling of being all alone is suffocating. Yet Jesus said something we would all do well to remember: “*Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me!*” What a wonderful truth to sustain us and give us courage!

But this verse also tells us that there is **no trouble that is greater than Jesus.** Troubles can and do sometimes overwhelm us, but they never overwhelm Jesus! He is greater than any adversity which forces its way into our hearts, and because He is, He can shape the trouble to fit His plan to work good in our lives. He is working constantly behind the scenes, perhaps even years and years before the actual event, getting us ready for the thing He is doing.

What resources does He give us to help during those times? We have some clues from these two verses:

1 Jesus offers us His forgiveness.

When Matthew, Mark and Luke told of the events of their last night together, they recorded that Jesus told them that they would all desert Him. He knew that was what was going to happen! Yet He still offered them His love, peace and forgiveness. When trouble comes, one of the first things that

happens is that Satan will attempt to use that trouble to convince us that we are no good, that we have really messed up this time, and that not even God would love us now.

The disciples were about to desert Jesus, and leave Him alone in His darkest hour—and He knew that!—yet He did not desert them. He knew they were going to do that, and He died for them anyway! Do you think the sins you’ve committed somehow escaped His notice beforehand? Do you think they caught Him off-guard? He knew that you and I were going to commit sin—and He offered His forgiveness to us and died anyway! It’s not about how good we are—it’s all about His “marvelous, infinite, matchless grace”!

2 Jesus offers us His peace.

He said to them, “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.*” It is a peace which the world cannot understand or take away. He had told them earlier on this same night, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid*” (John 14:27). It is a peace we can have even when death is knocking on our doors. It is a peace which abides even when health fails us, friends desert us, when life turns out woefully different than what we had in mind. The storms can come and beat upon the Rock upon which our lives are founded, but the Rock will not be washed out from under us. It is a peace which keeps us and protects us and holds us secure.

3 Jesus offers us His victory.

He told them “*Take heart! I have overcome the world.*” The word translated “overcome” literally means “to conquer.” The Greek word is *nike*, and you may recognize that word as being the name of an athletic shoe company. *Nike* means “victory.” In Greek mythology, Nike was the goddess of victory, and was often pictured with wings, since she was said to be able to run very fast. The idea in Greek mythology was that victory was swift to arrive, as long as Nike was in charge.

The meaning in the New Testament is not that the victory is *swift*, but that it is *sure*. But Jesus told them that His victory was their victory. That’s what He meant when He told them to *take heart*. In other words, His victory is our victory.

He wants us to know that in spite of the trouble or adversity which floods our lives, in spite of the crushing circumstances which threaten to squeeze the life and hope

out of us, we can have His peace. **In the world there is trouble. In Christ there is peace. What a contrast!**

So what are we to do? There are so many ways to respond to trouble, and some of them come naturally to us. But there are some positive ways you and I can choose to respond to adversity.

First, we must understand that God is at work; and that something greater can be accomplished through our troubles.

You know the verse, Romans 8:28—“*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.*” If God really is in charge of our lives, then there is nothing that happens which is beyond His mighty arm. If that is so, **then everything that happens has some special place in God’s overall purpose.**

Second, we must understand that God has our best interests at heart.

Psalm 138:8 reads, “*The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever.*” We need to know that whatever God is doing in our lives is for our good. He loves us so much, and operates in our lives at such an intimate level, that every single detail of our lives is either planned by Him or allowed by Him, to bring about ultimate good for us, even if we can’t see it in the meantime. And because He is God, He can take all the pains and heartaches, and the joys and victories, and weave them together to make something wonderful and beautiful in our lives.

Third, we must allow the trouble to run the full course, because that is where the benefit is.

Think about it: the benefit of every trouble is at the very end. James 1:4 tells us “*Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*” The benefit of any trouble comes at the end. If you cut the trouble off prematurely there is no benefit.

This seems like a good time and place to share with you my favorite quotation. It is from the English pastor Alan Redpath, who pastored the great Moody Church in Chicago many years ago:

There is no circumstance, no trouble, no testing, that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with a great purpose, which I may not understand at the moment. But I refuse to become panicky, as I lift up my eyes to him and accept it as coming from the throne of God for some great purpose of blessing to my own heart.

Dottie Rambo wrote more than 2500 songs in her lifetime, among them “*He Looked Beyond My Faults and Saw My Need*,” “*If That Isn’t Love*,” and “*We Shall Behold Him*.” But a favorite of many, many people is one called “*He Ain’t Never Done Me Nothin’ But Good*.” And that is exactly true. Everything our Heavenly Father has done in your life and in mine is for our ultimate good.

So, whatever you are facing, whatever you’re going through, whatever heartaches and challenges that may be looming—take heart! Jesus has overcome the world! And He is actively working in the details of your life *right now* to do good for you.