

Mike Tyson once said, everyone has a plan till they get punched in the mouth. Life is hard. Its going to punch you in the mouth, just might karate chop you to the throat. From small things like stumped toes, to bad backs, to bigger ones like chronic migraines and malignant tumors. From weeds in the yard to floods, the death of a loved one, loss of a job, an overbearing boss, being financially strapped, selfish spouses, inexplicable bouts with depression, wayward children, on and on. Life, east of Eden, is hard. The ground is full of thorns and thistles. Job 14:1: “Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.” We are broken people in a broken world.

The world is filled with suffering. To think otherwise is to be naïve or young. And we are a young congregation. Princess Bride: “Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.” Sometimes it is our own fault. It could be because of our sin (like the Proverbial sluggard). Sometimes we suffer and it has nothing to do with our sin (man born blind in John 9). / We should not assume all sufferers are innocent, nor can we assume they are all guilty. Often, we just don’t know. Sometimes people suffer precisely because they *are* righteous (think Daniel when he is thrown into the lion’s den, Paul facing persecution in the book of Acts, Job). Reality is messy. Life is messy - but God is good. / Scripture gives us a map to navigate suffering, but we have to be careful how we locate people on that map or we can do serious harm.

This morning I want to use a sermon outline that an 18-year-old preached – in 1720. Not your everyday 18-year-old. An 18<sup>th</sup> Century teenager. They were built different back then. In fact, there was no category of teenager. He was classically educated. And used to seeing death all around that gave some gravity. And hearing long Puritan sermons. Jonathan Edwards is the greatest mind America has produced. Not a perfect man (there’s only ever been one of those), but a gifted pastor-theologian, still worth reading today.

Did you know that his congregationalist church fired him? Churches can get things wrong on occasion. It was complicated but one of the last straws was when he exhorted some young people for looking at book on midwifery (would that that was our problem today!). Well, in 1750, just before being fired, he stood before a ten-church council. Only 23 of 230 present supported Jonathan Edwards. One pastor who was there at the trial wrote this, “I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week, but he appeared like a man of God, *whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies*, and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life, even to the astonishment of many, who could not be at rest without his dismissal.”<sup>1</sup> His *happiness was out of the reach of his enemies*. Goals right there, fam.

I want you to be able to be happy regardless of outward circumstances. Listen to JC Ryle: The converted man “feels independent of circumstances. Come what will, he is provided for: sickness, and losses, and death, can never touch his treasure in heaven, or rob him of Christ. What a blessing to feel *independent!* – He is happy, because he feels ready. Whatever happens he is somewhat prepared: the great business is settled; the great concern of life is arranged. What a blessing to feel *ready!* – These are indeed true springs of happiness. They are springs which are utterly shut up and sealed to an unconverted man. – Without forgiveness of sins, without hope for the world to come, dependent on his world for comfort, and unprepared to meet God, he cannot be really happy. Conversion is an essential part of true happiness.”<sup>2</sup> Happiness out of the reach of enemies. Happy independent of circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/straight-paths/out-of-the-reach/>

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, *Old Paths*, 314.

The earliest sermon manuscript we have from Jonathan Edwards is called “Christian Happiness.” His main point was that a Christian should be happy “whatever his outward circumstances are.” I want to steal his sermon outline by paraphrasing and unpacking his three points: For the Christian, our bad things will work out for good, our good things cannot be taken away, and our best things are yet to come.

**I. For the Christian, our bad things will work out for good.** The assumption here is that God is in control. Because he is sovereign, all things – including our bad things – will work out for good. Our trials are not accidents. It wasn’t as if they slipped by the throne room while God was taking a nap. Job 1:21-22: “And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” Phil 1:29. Lam 3:38: “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?” Ps 115:3: “Our God is in the heavens, he does whatever he pleases.” Isa 46:9-11- “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” Eph 1:11: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” There is not a single maverick molecule. *All* is ordained by the highest God. He is sovereign.

Not only is he sovereign, he is good.<sup>3</sup> He is for us. If we ever doubt that, we need look no further than the cross of Christ. What more can he do to show us? As we sing, “There is no more for heaven now to give?” “What more can he say than to you he has said?” Rom 8:32: He who did not spare . . . / In a book called *One Thousand Gifts*, Ann Voskamp shares how she struggled with losing her sister as a toddler. She struggled and in the end realized that it boiled down to whether or not she trusted God. She writes, God “gave us Jesus. . . . If God didn’t withhold from us His very own Son, will God withhold anything we need? If trust must be earned, hasn’t God unequivocally earned our trust with the bark on the raw wounds, the thorns pressed into the brow, your name on the cracked lips? How will he not also graciously give us all things He deems best and right? He’s already given us the incomprehensible.”<sup>4</sup> He is sovereign and he is good. Twin truths that serve as a warm blanket on a cold night. Luther said that suffering would be unbearable if we are not certain that God is for you and with you. In control, for you, with you. When the hard day comes, don’t ask why, but look to the *who*.

When suffering comes we know that it is not the devil getting past the Father and we know that it is not punishment because there is no punishment left for the children of God. Jesus took that in our place. As John Newton (pastor and author of *Amazing Grace*) said, “There is no sting in your rod, nor wrath in your cup.”<sup>5</sup> God uses hard things in our lives for our good, not punishment but discipline. Suffering is the sacred school of sanctification. Our bad things will work out for good: **Heb 12:7-11** (*gumnazō*), **Ja 1:2-4**, **1 Pet 1:6-7**.

God uses suffering to refine our character and make us holy. John Newton says, “A smith, when about to make a poker, puts his iron into the fire. The Lord, when he means to make his people more holy, puts them into the furnace.”<sup>6</sup> Rutherford said grace grows best in winter. Smooth seas never made a skilled sailor.<sup>7</sup>

**Rom 5:1-5.** Rom 8 is key here. **8:28-29**. This is home base. Like a fat kid in freeze tag, I stay here. This verse is

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<sup>3</sup> Jerry Bridges says that God, in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His sovereignty, He has the power to bring it about.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 154-55 quoted in Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* 122.

<sup>5</sup> Reinke, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Reinke, 186.

<sup>7</sup> CSL: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.”

worldview-forming. Gives you a mental map. Did you guys hear about Bill Gates and the omni processor he commissioned several engineers to build that gets rid of sewage? It is amazing. It turns sewage into clean drinking water. Rom 8:28 is the ultimate omni processor: you take all the muck of life and filter through Rom 8:28 and it becomes a fountain of life-giving goodness. He is for me, working all things for his glory and my good. Rom 8:28 turns lemons to lemonade. So the worst thing that can happen to you is the best thing that can happen to you because Rom 8:28 is true. All things! Do you believe that, church? Newton, again: "All shall work together for good: everything needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds." If we receive it, we needed it! He knows better than we do. If he withholds something, we didn't need it! He knows best and if we knew all that He knows we'd be quite content.

Charles Spurgeon: "It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity." How wonderful to live in a world created and sustained by a God like this! You are at every moment enveloped in his Fatherly care – in an environment where absolutely nothing can touch you without his gracious and wise permission.<sup>8</sup> He is our Father who loves us. He wipes our eyes with tears that we can see more clearly. God will allow pain in our lives to make us cry uncle so that we might then cry Abba. He brings us to the end of ourselves which is the only place to be. God's office is at the end of our rope.

You know, even some secular psychologists see how suffering can strengthen. For example, in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt says people need adversity, setbacks, and perhaps even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment, and personal development. (Parents, your kids need hard things). He points out three benefits of suffering: 1) you become more resilient: once you learn how to cope you can do it again with less anxiety and struggle, 2) it strengthens relationships, deeper friendships and family ties, 3) suffering changes priorities and philosophies.

Baptist pastor John Rippon wrote a hymn in 1787 that we still sing: "When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie, my grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine." God uses suffering to bring us to a point where we would not arrive if it has not been for the suffering. Fire refines. Purifies. William Cowper, a man who struggled with depression his whole life, wrote the hymn we just sang on 1/1/1773: "In deep unfathomed hidden mines, Of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will."

Suffering loosens our grip on the things of this world. It terminates triviality. It shreds superficiality. Newton: "Prosperity may cause us to rise in the world, but affliction is needful to raise us above the world." Spurgeon: "I dare say the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness."

Dearly beloved, you have to understand this. Because trials show us what we are really made of. The true taste of the tea bag comes out when the water gets hot. Suffering reveals. Often, people walk away from the faith because something bad happened. On that day, be ready and lean in to the Lord don't walk away. Trials reveal. My house is built on red clay. Recently I had to repair a sprinkler head and had to dig down in moist red clay. You let that stuff bake in the sun and it gets harder than a rock. The Puritans would say, "the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay." Oh church, be wax not clay. Know that God is sovereign and is good and he wastes no pain.

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<sup>8</sup> Ray, 117.

Be like Spurgeon: “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.” As we sing: “Who holds our faith when fears arise? Who stands above the stormy trial? Who sends the waves that bring us nigh; Unto the shore, the rock of Christ?” / There are no maverick molecules. Your Heavenly Father arranges every atom so as to be of most heavenly advantage for you and your ultimate good. “Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” / For the Christian, our bad things will work out for good.

**II. For the Christian, our good things cannot be taken away.** What are the Christian’s “good things:” salvation, adoption, justification, forgiveness, being sealed with the Spirit, union with Christ, inheritance, glory. Rom 8:1. So whatever happens in this life, its not ultimate. We are made for another world. When someone asks how you are doing – even on the worst day of your life – the answer should be “better than I deserve.” This life is not all there is. Whatever happens to these bodies, these are not our lasting bodies. Christians will receive resurrection bodies with no curse, no pain, no tears. Like Edwards, our happiness ought to be out of reach of our enemies. Like Ryle, we want to be happy independent of current circumstances. Dearly beloved, our good things cannot be taken away.

The Apostle Paul was able to get there. Phil 4:11b-12: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Charles Simeon comments on these verses: “The Apostle had within himself that which was abundantly sufficient for him, even though he should be reduced to the utmost possible state of destitution, so far as related to the things of this life. He was possessed of all that man could desire: he had God as his Father, Christ as his Saviour, the Holy Spirit as his Comforter, and heaven as his home. What could he want more? What could he desire, that could add to this? or what could he lose, that could detract from this? This which he had within him was altogether *out of the reach of men or devils.*”

There it is again. Out of reach of men or devils. Goals, family. / For the Christian, our good things cannot be taken away. Here is how young Edwards put it in his sermon, speaking of the Christian: “No worldly evils can do him any real hurt.” / If you are not a Christian, it is not true that your good things cannot be taken away. They can. And they will. You will lose everything. And that’s not the worst of it. Outside of Christ, you will face the fiery judgment of God Almighty. God is holy. We are sinful. The only way we can make it to heaven is to have our sins forgiven and the only way to have our sins forgiven is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Love to talk. / For the Christian, we cannot lose our good things.

**III. For the Christian, our best things are yet to come:** resurrection life with God on a new heaven and new earth. For the Christian, our best things are yet to come. Always. You know what one of the greatest verses in the Bible is? Hear Rev 21:1-4: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” This life is the only hell you’ll ever experience. Isn’t it a wonderful thing to be a child of God?!

Secularism (atheism) offers us no tools for dealing with hardship, but Christianity does. Just consider the basic doctrines of the Christian faith that all Christians hold to: Creation, Fall, Incarnation, Atonement, Final Judgment and the Renewal of all things. This mental map, this worldview, this philosophy, this theology provides effective tools for facing suffering. Classical author Cicero said that the primary task of philosophy is

to teach us how to face death. Christianity is the best philosophy. 2<sup>nd</sup> C theologian Justin Martyr this way of life alone is sure and fulfilling. It provides the tool we need to triumph through trial.

Creation: God created the world good and has plans for it. Fall: the world is now cursed. Incarnation: God has entered in to this fallen world. Atonement Jesus died to make us right. I know many of you love the hymn “It is Well.” When sorrows like sea billow roll. It is well. It was written by Horatio Spafford, a Chicago lawyer who lost everything in the fire of 1871. Two years later his wife and four daughters were in a ship wreck and all four girls drowned. His wife was found and cabled just to words to her husband: “saved alone.” On his way to get his wife he wrote this hymn.

Spafford got how the atonement makes it well with our soul. Second and Third verses: “Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control: that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and has shed his own blood for my soul. My sin oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”

Final judgement: God will return and make all things right. Renewal: he will renew the world and we will reign with Christ in the presence of God. Cowper: “Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break, In blessings on your head.” Christians have rock-solid hope. Newton: “The harbingers of death, sickness, pain, and conflict are frequently formidable to the flesh, but death itself is nothing else but a deliverance from them all.” / 2 Cor 4:16-18: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” Rom 8:18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” At the end of the introduction to his classic work, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*, Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote, “For a close, remember this, that your life is short, your duties many, your assistance great, and your reward sure; therefore faint not, hold on and hold up, in ways of well-doing, and heaven shall make amends for all.”

What is it that we want in the midst of suffering? We want it to stop. Yes. Pray for that. But if God doesn’t remove it, we want peace through it. Phil 4:8-9: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and *the God of peace will be with you.*” Right and noble things are truths. They are basic Christian doctrines. Think about these things. This word can be translated “consider, calculate, or reckon.” When the cloud comes, believe in the dark what you know to be true in the sunlight. You must be prepared before the suffering comes to endure well. And when it comes we preach to ourselves: “Why are you cast down o my soul? Hope in God!”

If you are not a Christian, where will you turn? Is your trial just fate, chance, meaningless, karma? Non-Christian worldviews offer no meaning no purpose no hope. Come to Christ. He will not spare you from suffering, but will use it to make you more like him. Newton: “The storms are guided by the hands which were nailed to the cross.”

Church, be independent of circumstances. Let your joy be out of reach of others. Your bad things will work out for good. Your good things – every spiritual blessing in Christ – cannot be taken away, and your best things: resurrection and the New Earth are yet to come.