

“I Will If You Will”

I Will Redeem Your Suffering

November 6, 2016

PRELUDE – Rejoice

Feature – Sounds Like Life to Me

Announcements – Video

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said today we are talking about God’s promise to redeem our suffering.

And this is the fourth of six promises that we are looking at in this series “I Will If You Will” – places in the scripture where God says to us “I will do *this* if you will do *that*” – and of these six promises, I think

the one we are looking at today is probably the most difficult to understand intellectually and to embrace emotionally.

I say that because this particular promise touches on questions of God's *sovereignty* – the idea that God is all-powerful and in control of everything that happens; questions such as ...

- What things (some things? all things?) does God *cause* to happen in our lives and in our world?
- And what things (some things? all things?) does God *allow* to happen?
- How much does our free will as humans impact things?
- Do we even have free will or is that just an illusion?

Those kinds of questions are incredibly complex and difficult to answer just on the face of things but they are even more complicated by the fact that God is eternal and we are not. In other words, God exists *outside* of time and is not constrained by time (that's what it means to be "eternal"), while we exist *inside* of time.

That's why Psalm 90 says:

*Before the mountains were
born or You brought forth
the whole world, from
everlasting to everlasting
You are God. A thousand
years in your sight are like
a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
Psalm 90:2,4 (NIV)*

Now, if you've been around church for

very long or you have some acquaintance with Christianity, I'm sure that you've heard this before: *God is eternal*. But I suspect you've not spent much time thinking about what it means, especially as it applies to understanding God's sovereignty; His activity in our lives and in our world.

So, imagine there's a line that contains all of the events that have ever happened and will ever happen in this world.

B -----<us>----- E

There's a beginning point to this line (B) and not just because Genesis says "in the beginning, God created." Quantum physics tells us that there was a beginning point to our universe and therefore to time. It

also tells us (as does the Bible) that there will be an ending point (E).

So, we have a timeline. And because you and I exist within time, we're are like microdots on that timeline.

But God, being eternal (which means being outside of time) is all around it.

GOD GOD GOD GOD
GOD b-----<us>-----e GOD
GOD GOD GOD GOD

That means that while you and I experience the events of life in linear, sequential progression – we have to go down the timeline to experience life and reality, God (being not on the timeline, standing outside of time) experiences everything that *has* happened, *is*

happening and *will* happen – all at once!
He comprehends all of it from its
beginning point to its endpoint.

In addition, He interacts with and
intervenes in all of it from beginning to
end.

**This is why (speaking through the
Hebrew prophet Isaiah) He says:**

*I am God, and there is no
other; I am God, and there
is none like me. I make
known the end from the
beginning; from ancient
times what is still to come. I
say, "My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I
please." Isaiah 46:9-
10 (NIV)*

And it's easy to see how that could be

true.

Now, the point I'm making here is not so much what an amazing, incredible, worthy-of-worship Being God is (though that certainly is the case!) There truly *is* "none like Him."

And the point I'm making is not so much that the Big Bang theory (which only a few short years ago destroyed the universally-accepted scientific dogma of a timeless universe) ... my point isn't so much that the Big Bang theory supports biblical revelation (though, as someone with both a scientific and theological background, I find that to be outrageously awesome!)

The point I'm making is that as beings

who live on the timeline – beings who, by nature, experience things progressively and sequentially – *our comprehension of what God’s reality is like is infinitesimally small*. We cannot know what it would be like to experience all of history at once; to interact with and to intervene in all of history at once. Therefore – and this is crucial to understand – *we cannot comprehend fully God’s specific interactions with our lives and our world*.

As the Apostle Paul once put it, because we are on the timeline, our knowledge is only partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture. We see reality imperfectly, like a poor reflection in a dull mirror.ⁱ

And that may not matter all that much

from day-to-day when things are running smoothly in our little bubble of suburbia, but when that bubble pops ... when bad things happen to us and to those we love – a job is lost, a marriage ends, a diagnosis isn't favorable, investments fail, children rebel, robbery happens, rejection happens, rape happens, death happens – when bad things happen to us and to those we love, it matters.

And it also matters when bad things happen even to those we don't know – when dictators abuse their people and their resources, when terrorists strike, when famine or disease takes the life of innocent children, when natural disasters kill and displace thousands. When we see things happen “out there” that seem unfair and unjust given the (supposed)

existence of a loving God who is all-powerful, it matters that we cannot comprehend fully God's specific interactions with our lives and our world.

It matters because there's never going to be a note on the pillow that says "the reason *your* child died in that accident is ... the reason *you* were abused as a teenager is ... the reason *your* body is diseased and will never be healthy again is ... the reason *you* were singled out and ridiculed because of your faith is ... the reason this terrible, unfair thing happened to *you and yours* is ..."

Which is why I said at the beginning that of all God's promises we're looking at in this series, the one we're looking at today - "I will redeem your suffering" - is

probably the most difficult to understand intellectually and to embrace emotionally.

When it comes to suffering (whether it's personal or global):

- God does not promise to explain (even though we think we want answers).
- And He doesn't promise to wave some kind of spiritual magic wand to undo whatever has happened (as much as we would like to escape the pain).

Instead, what God promises ... is to redeem our suffering and our pain ... *if* we meet the conditions.

Defining the Terms

Of course, that statement itself raises a few questions, the most obvious being “what are the conditions?” And we’ll get to that shortly. And then there is the question of what exactly we mean by “suffering” which is a pretty broad word.

But I think probably the most important question is “what is meant by the word *redeem*?” So, let’s talk about that.

According to Webster, to redeem means “to buy back; to free from distress or captivity by payment of a ransom; to exchange for something better.”

Several years ago, we decided that we to exclusively use a Chase Southwest Airlines Visa for as many of our purchases as possible (and pay the balance off at the

end of the month) so that we could rack up points. You know how this works, right? Some of you do the same thing. On the Southwest Visa you get two points for every dollar spent on travel-related expenses, one point for everything else. And it's really cool to see our point total go up every month. You can see it right there on the Chase website.

But, in reality, just having a lot of points displayed on my computer screen is meaningless. I mean, nobody goes around saying "Oh, I'm so special. I have more points than you do." Even if they grow to a very high number, points, in and of themselves, don't really matter. They have no intrinsic value.

What makes points valuable and worth

talking about is that *they can be redeemed*. They can be exchanged for something far better than numbers on a screen. Collect enough of them and you can get a ticket to fly somewhere.

And *that* is valuable. *That* is worth talking about.

So, when we talk about God redeeming pain and suffering (which doesn't seem to have any intrinsic value), we're talking about it being exchanged for something far better.

But to redeem also means to buy back something that has been captured or is in distress. And when we suffer, when we go through trials and tribulations, we often lose something valuable in the process: our hopes and dreams, our faith in God and in others, the ability to fully engage

with the world around us, and sometimes even our dignity. Those kinds of things are held captive, so to speak, by the pain of our experience.

I remember years ago my parents buying their dream home. About six months after they moved in, they were robbed. They didn't lose very much monetarily speaking. And there was no physical damage to their property. But their home and their experience in that home was never the same. What was stolen and what was damaged was far greater than money and property.

So, when we talk about God redeeming our pain and our suffering, we're talking about regaining emotional and psychological wholeness.

Ok, now, what do we mean when we say “suffering?”

That word can seem a bit dramatic when we think about our standard of living compared to the rest of the world. And the fact that we live in peace and safety when compared to people so many parts of the world where there is constant war or strife (like in the Middle East and many parts of Europe and North Korea), it feels a bit over-the-top to describe whatever challenges and difficulties we have as “suffering.”

But those differences are merely a matter of degree because, no matter you live, no matter how well-off you may be, no matter how shielded you are from violence, as a member of the human race

you are going to experience, at some level

...

The physical and emotional pain that results from living in a sin-cursed world. That's what we mean by "suffering."

And that pain could be the product of major events of the kind I've mentioned already.

It can also be from relatively minor things like plans that don't turn out the way you'd hoped, having to deal with unreasonable expectations of others, or situations that reveal your own immaturity. We live in a world where things are not the way they're supposed to be in big ways and small, and that reality sometimes leaves everything from

bumps and bruises to gaping wounds.

- And sometimes we suffer because of seemingly random bad things that “just happen” to us. Somebody backs into your car and you have to pay \$1,000 to get it fixed. You go to the doctor for a routine checkup and discover things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be.
- Sometimes we suffer because of the foolishness and sinfulness of other people. Somebody breaks into your home. Somebody attacks your character on Facebook.
- And sometimes we suffer because of our *own* foolishness and sinfulness.

Last week, Jetta and I were talking about how people grow and change over time and she said, “When I first met you, I thought you were a naturally compassionate, easygoing, laid back kind of guy – pretty much the opposite of my dad. So,” she said, “I was surprised to discover after we’d been married a few years that you were almost *exactly like* my dad in your personality.”

Of course, back when she and I met, I was a college dropout, unemployed and there were no children involved. Why wouldn’t I be laid back and easygoing?

But once we got married and I got serious about college (getting three degrees in the process) and I got a job and we had little kids running around, I *wasn’t* laid

back and easygoing. I *wasn't* compassionate. Instead I was impatient, short-tempered and demanding.

My situation squeezed me enough that my immaturity – the “sin within” (my sin nature) – finally bubbled up to the surface in all of its ugliness. And the day-to-day experience of that produced a lot of emotional pain for both of us. It never got to the point where it was unbearable, there was just an underlying tension that would repeatedly grind against each us. We suffered because of my sinfulness and immaturity.

And I'm sure you can think of situations and experiences like that in your own life.

The Promise Explained

So, that's what we mean when we talk about suffering: it's the physical and emotional pain that comes from living in a sin-cursed world.

And when we talk about God redeeming our suffering we're talking about it being exchanged for something far better and regaining some sense of emotional and psychological wholeness (if that's been lost).

Now, with all of that said let's take a look at the promise along with its primary conditions.

It's found in one of the Apostle Paul's letters; Romans chapter 8 verse 28 which reads:

*In all things God works for
the good of those who love
him, who have been called
according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28 (NIV)*

Now, as we have done pretty much every week in this series, I'm going to ask you to read this aloud with me so we can maybe get it deep into our brains if it's not already there.

So, are you ready? Here we go ...

*In all things God works for
the good of those who love
him, who have been called
according to His purpose.
Romans 8:28 (NIV)*

If you love God and you are called according to His purpose (that's the

condition), God promises to use everything that happens to you – including your suffering (whether it’s big or small, whether it’s caused by random events or malicious actions of others or your own foolishness and sin) – God will use all of it for your benefit.

Now, just to be clear, in this promise, God is not saying “all of those things in your life that are bad, well, I’m here to tell you that they really aren’t. They’re actually good.” God is not telling us to somehow pretend that what is evil really is good. It’s not. God can and will use it for good but it is *not* good.

In addition, in this promise, God is not saying, “Don’t worry. Things always have a way of working out. I’ll see to that”

because, sometimes, things *aren't* going to get better.

- Sometimes, your body is not going to recover from the disease.
- Sometimes, your spouse is not coming back.
- Or the years that you lost because of your foolishness and sinfulness, they're still lost.

This isn't a promise to turn a tragedy or disappointment into some kind of prosperity or preferred outcome.

So, then, what exactly *is* God promising? What exactly *is* the “good” that God is working towards for those who meet the condition?

The answer is in the very next verse which, I have to say, is a little confusing at first. But hang with me. I'll try to make it clear.

Here's what Paul writes in context.

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. Romans 8:28-29 (NIV)

Now, to understand what Paul means in that second statement, go back to the timeline in your mind.

Remember, you and I are *on* the timeline

but God is *outside* of that timeline. He is seeing everything in all of history, including the events of our lives, from beginning to end *and* also intervening in that timeline from beginning to end as He chooses.

- So that means that God knows before we do whether or not we are going to believe in and receive Jesus when we hear the Gospel. That's what Paul means when he writes "God foreknew."
- But Paul says that not only does God foreknow, He has also *predestined* the ultimate outcome for those who believe in and receive Jesus. That means, if we're Christians, in some way that we cannot understand

because we're on the timeline, God is intervening in our personal history. We can't know if He is *causing* some things to happen or *allowing* some things to happen or something else altogether because He doesn't tell us that. But what He does tell us and what we can know is that His interventions lead to a definitive result.

- And that result is the ultimate good which Paul tells us is to be “conformed to the image of God’s Son” – Jesus of Nazareth. God’s primary goal isn’t necessarily to make us happy or successful (at least as you and I define those things). His goal and his promise is to make us like Jesus in our hearts, minds and

even our bodies (which will, in the end, make us *wildly* happy and *wildly* successful).

And He is able to use all things that happen to us – good, bad, ugly, even our own foolishness and sinfulness – to bring that about.

Furthermore, there's nothing that can stop it. It's guaranteed to happen. In fact, from God's viewpoint it's already happened. Remember, He sees the end from the beginning. If you're a believer in Jesus, He looks at you as completely holy and justified and glorified *right now* ...

... which is why Paul continues:

Those he predestined, he also called; those he called,

*he also justified; those he
justified, he also glorified.
Romans 8:30 (NIV)*

Past tense! From God's point of view, this is a done deal. He has already worked all things for the ultimate good.

Now, what's really cool is that, at this point in his letter, Paul shifts his focus back to the timeline. And he lays out the implications of knowing *not the specifics of God's involvement every little detail of our lives* (which we cannot know) but knowing that God has predestined – He has literally already worked out – the good outcome for His children.

This is what Paul says:

What, then, shall we say in

response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31 (NIV)

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.

And who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the

*future, nor any powers,
neither 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. Romans
8:33,35,37-39 (NIV)*

... because in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose ... which, by the way, is the primary condition of the promise.

Now, *there's* a potential can of worms to open ... because it sounds like this whole thing could get messed up if you have a day or a week or a month or a year or two or three in your life where you don't love God. It sounds like this could be an on again off again deal: "I love God today so it

all works together for good. I don't love God today so this isn't working for my good."

But that's not what this means. What it *does* mean is that this promise isn't for everyone.

For the person who does not love God and is not called according to his purpose, final optimism is foolish and out of place. Pessimism is exactly the right state of mind for one who does not love God and is not called according to his purpose. Things are not going to work for his or her good, but for their harm.

So, what does it mean to love God and to be called according to His purpose? It means simply that we respond to the

Gospel. It means that at some point we say “yes” when we hear that “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whosoever believes would not come to eternal harm but would receive eternal life.” It means that at some point, we respond in love God because He first loved us.

So, the promise and the condition could be stated like this:

“I will redeem your suffering – I will bring about the ultimate good in your life – if you belong to Me.”

In the Present

Now, to say that all of this is wonderful news – that nothing is ever, ever, ever going to get in the way of the ultimate

good that God intends for us – would be a massive understatement. And I hope if you're a believer in Jesus that this would encourage you to lift up your head and be conscious of the plan and vision God has for you.

And if you're not a believer in Jesus, I hope this would encourage you to take that step. This is an amazing promise in which you can participate by faith. We talked about that in the first week of this series: I will save you if you call on Me.

However, as great as all of this is, there's one slight problem. And that is ... *you and I still have to live on the timeline*. Even though it's a done deal from the viewpoint of eternity, we still have to experience life sequentially and

progressively. We still have to slog through whatever trials and tribulations we're currently facing and the ones that are still ahead of us.

So the question is ... can we experience God redeeming whatever suffering is caused by those trials and tribulations *right now*? Can we experience all things working together for good *today* and *tomorrow* and the next day? Can we see our pain exchanged for something better in this life? Can we regain some sense of emotional and psychological wholeness? Can the bad stuff help us as Paul put it, "be conformed to the image of Christ" in the here and now?

The answer is "yes, we can" but it's a qualified "yes." It's a "yes" with a

condition.

There's an incredible passage in a New Testament letter written to Jewish Christians. We call it the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the 11th chapter the writer talks about great saints of God who suffered in this life. And he recounts story after story for the purpose of encouraging his readers – who themselves were suffering – to not quit and to not give up. And then he tells the story of Jesus in the beginning of chapter 12 for the same purpose.

But then he makes this most amazing statement.

*Have you completely
forgotten this word of*

encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says (Prov 3)

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Now, here’s the important part. This is where the condition comes in.

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?
Hebrews 12:7 (NIV)*

What the writer is telling us is that we can react to hardship – suffering and pain – in one of two ways. We can think of it as discipline as a father or mother would discipline their children. Or we can lose heart. We can become bitter and give up.

And that's the condition and the promise.

“You can experience a taste of redemption now *if* you are teachable and do not become bitter.”

And that's a real danger, isn't it? That we become angry and bitter because God isn't Santa Claus. And our hearts become hard and we don't learn anything about God and ourselves and what we've gone through.

I've seen it happen again and again and,

quite frankly, I've experienced it myself because I don't like the idea that I need someone to discipline me. I'm a grown man!

But the truth is that I do need a good kick in the rear every so often. And the hardship I suffer in life, whatever it is, whether God has sent it or merely allows it or some other category of Divine Providence we don't know about; my suffering can have that effect of making me more like Jesus if I'm open-hearted and willing to learn.

“Well, Rick, what does that look like in real life?”

The NT writers give us lots of example and I wish we had time to go into all of

them, but let me give you just two.

1. Suffering can develop in us a unique compassion which God uses to comfort others.

Ever notice how, when you're going through something difficult or you've suffered in some way, you're much more aware of other people who have the same problem?

And if you've experienced God's comfort in that situation – if you've come to some peace and resolution or even if you've just learned how to work through the lack of peace and resolution – ever notice that you're able to encourage those folks way better than anyone else?

Friends, that's God working in your life to

redeem your suffering.

As Paul writes ...

God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NLT)

2. Suffering can produce a spirit of humility which allows God to give us greater influence.

Here's what I mean. Humility is the attitude that says, "The challenges of this life are bigger than the resources I can bring to bear in my own strength,

therefore I need God.”

Now, most of us don't start out thinking that way. Instead, we start out thinking, “I'm big enough, smart enough, pretty enough, wealthy enough, tough enough ... whatever enough ... to make it on my own.”

It's not until we're broken in some way – not until we experience a level of pain or injustice or abuse that *we can't fix* by being big, smart, pretty, wealthy, tough or whatever – it's not until we experience *that* do we realize that we really do need the power and strength of God. It's usually not until we're broken by hardship that we realize our absolute need to depend on God.

And when we do realize our need for God – when we do humble ourselves - that’s God bringing redeeming our suffering; trading something bad for something far better.

And when we humble ourselves, we’re in a place where God can finally use us in His service.

“God opposes the proud but favors the humble.” So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. 1 Peter 5:5-6 (NLT)

See, God wants the right person in the right place for the right reasons. And the way God gets that person is to allow hardship and pain to humble us so that

we will depend on Him instead of ourselves.

Conclusion

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.

If we belong to him, He promises to redeem our suffering. The end game is already decided. It all counts. You win.

And in the here and now, He promises that we can experience redemption if we are teachable and do not become bitter.

Now at this point, I want to call a short timeout. In just a minute, we're going to have silence for about 20 seconds and

during that time I want you to think about the less-than-desirable side of “all things” in your life.

Maybe for you that includes a health problem or a financial problem or a family problem. Maybe it's the disappointment of a dream that failed or the injustice of a decision that's gone against you. Maybe it's just a nagging inconvenience or irritation. Maybe it's the loneliness that comes from the loss of someone you loved and cared about.

Whatever it is, in the next 60 seconds, just try to get a mental image of some of those things while we have silence.

And then the band is going to do a song and then I'm going to come back and

we're going to do one more thing, so please don't leave during this part.

Ok, here we go.

Feature – Blessings

God on the Timeline

Transition to Communion

Now one of the things that I feel like I always need to stress at the end of a message like this is that what we're talking about is not some kind of feel-good thinking or positive philosophical orientation towards life. What we believe about God redeeming our suffering is not pie-in-the sky wishing and hoping.

It's actually rooted in historical reality.

Earlier when I told you that God was outside the timeline, I didn't give you the whole picture.

Yes, that much *is* true but about 2,000 years ago, in a backwoods village in Roman-occupied Palestine, God was born into human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

And at that point, God literally joined the timeline with us and became subject to its limitations, just like we are.

And on our timeline, He experienced suffering in every way and more that we do.

- Jesus suffered injustice;
- Jesus suffered pain;
- Jesus suffered loneliness;
- Jesus suffered misunderstanding;
- Jesus suffered the rejection of friends;
- Jesus suffered the death of a close friend;
- Jesus suffered physical abuse.

And then He suffered the ultimate of all human suffering: death. But not just any death, the most humiliating death of all – death on a Roman cross.

But God redeemed that all of that suffering. God traded his death for something far better – His glory and our salvation. Because Jesus lived the perfect life that you and I ought to live, He was

able to die the death we should have to die. And in that he paid for all of our sins.

But that suffering did not determine his ultimate fate or destiny. He rose from the grave in the flesh on third day. And then he taught his disciples and commissioned them to spread the good news and then he ascended to His Father.

So, he is the ultimate example of the Father using all things – things that are intended for evil – for His good purposes and ours.

And that's why we can trust what God says. That's why we can know that what the Father has promised for those who believe, will really happen ... because it already did. On the timeline. In Jesus.

We have a way of remembering that and being encouraged by that. It's called communion.

Communion / Jesus Paid It All

Congregational Songs – Jesus Paid It All / 10,000 Reasons

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Offering at door

Endnotes

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:9,12 (NLT)