

# *Can God Bless Even This?*

August 25, 2013

**PRELUDE – Blessed Be Your Name  
Worship Songs – Our God / Beautiful  
Things**

- Video

**Feature – “Everybody Hurts”**

**Drama – “Are You Done With Me Yet,  
God?”**

**Feature – “Blessings”**

Let's pray together.

Father in Heaven, I pray that what we do the rest of this service will burn that truth deeply into our minds and our hearts so that we will not be discouraged and defeated by the disappointments of this life. We

know that is your will for us in Christ, so we ask with confidence.

Amen.

*What if* the trials of this life are God's blessings in disguise?

About a month ago, that question came up in one of the messages I did in the "God &" series. If you were here the week I talked about "God & Gosnell" (the Philadelphia abortionist who was convicted of murder), you may remember it. We were looking at why Christianity has insisted – for centuries – that abortion *is* the taking of an innocent life. It's murder. But we also said that the issue is about much more than simply making a biblical case or justifying a moral and philosophical

position. It's deeply personal. It has an impact on real people with real lives, especially where a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or the mother's life is in danger, or it's determined that the baby is severely deformed.

In those cases, many Christians have argued, there is an exception ... which means that a follower of Jesus would have to wrestle with a very difficult question: "Can God bless even this? Is God present and at work in this kind of situation as much as He is in the situation where the baby is *expected* and everything is normal.

In *that* situation, everyone is quick to say, "Oh, what a blessing God has given!" But when a dark and evil act has been

committed; when the baby will *not* be healthy; when it's not clear that the mother *will* come through it safely ... can we say the same thing? Do we have reason to believe that God is in the tragic situation, too?

As I was writing that part of that message, I realized that the question – “can God bless even this?” – and, more importantly, what we believe about it applies to so many areas of life and situations beyond what we were talking about that day.

For example, I'm sure you've heard someone say things like:

- “I was terrified about the lump until the doctor said, ‘it's not cancer.’ God was really good to me.”

- “I prayed and prayed and I got the job. God has really provided for me.”
- “When I first met my wife, I knew we were meant to be together. God has blessed me so much.”
- “Fortunately, that small tornado went south of me and I only had a few limbs down in my yard. God was really watching out for me.”

Now, there’s nothing wrong with giving credit to God for when circumstances work out in a way that seems favorable to us. But when things *don’t* work out in a way that seems favorable to us ...

- When the lump *is* cancerous

- When we *don't* get the job
- When we still haven't met Mr. or Ms. Right
- When the tornado *doesn't* go south

... when things don't work out in a way that seems favorable, very rarely will someone think of crediting God. Very rarely will someone say, "Somebody else got the job ... it's going to cost me \$1,000 to fix my house because of that storm ... and it looks like I'm going to be single indefinitely. Praise Jesus, I am so blessed."

It just sounds weird, doesn't it? We don't think or say such things because, in our minds, only when circumstances are "good" is God truly at work. When circumstances are "bad" then God must *not* be at work ... or God maybe doesn't

care about us ... or maybe He isn't powerful enough to do anything ... or maybe He's not even there in the first place.

**Regardless of what we sing or say in church, when it gets right down to it in everyday life, we tend to believe that God is at work in *some* things but not in *all* things.**

That's the grid through which most of us interpret the things that happen to us and happen to those we love.

But it's a very different perspective from what we find in the scriptures. *That* perspective says that if we love God, if we belong to Christ, then God is not only at work in all things – even those things that we consider to be bad or unfortunate – He is actually *using* those things for our

benefit and the benefit of others.

**Paul writes that ...**

*God causes all things [not just “some things”] to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28 (NASB77)*

In addition, Paul writes, in all things and at all times – even the bad things and bad times, God is providing for us and sustaining us so that we can serve Him.

**He writes:**

*God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things [not just “some things”] at all times [not*



just “some times”], *having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

*2 Corinthians 9:8*

*(NIV)*

**And that’s why he encourages us to**

...

*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:18*

*(NIV)*

And not just a begrudging “Gee thanks, God.”

**Paul actually says to go so far as to**

...

*... sing and make melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all*

*things in the name of our  
Lord Jesus Christ ...  
Ephesians 5:18-20  
(NASB77)*

Bottom line, the Bible says followers of Jesus are to be open to all things, to welcome all things, to embrace all things, and to rejoice in all things ... *because we believe God has a purpose in ALL things* – not just those that feel good or seem good at the time. We are called to see “all things” as tools that God can somehow use to shape us into the people He wants us to become.

## **The Necessity of Lament**

Now, I can hear some of you thinking. “Wait a minute. Are you saying that God wants me to think of things like

disappointment, disease, divorce and even death as *good*? That's just craziness."

You're right. That *is* crazy. And that's *not* what I am saying.

So, let's be very clear about this: God is *not* asking us to call that which is evil "good." And He's not asking us to put on a fake happy-sappy Christian smile and say "praise Jesus, isn't that special?" about everything that happens to us. In fact, if you pay close attention to what the Bible actually models for us (and not what we think we *ought* to do as "good Christian boys and girls"), what we see is the exact opposite.

For instance, when King David of Israel wrote Psalm 13, he was going through a

very tough time.

**This is what he prayed:**

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?*

*How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.*

*Psalm 13:2-3 (NIV)*

By the way, two thirds of the biblical Book of Psalms (which some have called the “prayer and worship manual” of Scripture) are just like that. They’re *laments* where David and other writers

shout at God and pray wild and crazy prayers. They tell God exactly what they're feeling and without fear of retaliation.

The Book of Job models the very same principle. For reasons he is not aware of, Job suffers terribly and he does what David does: he complains loud and long to God. As the story goes, his three friends who have come to console him hear his lament and they counsel him to stop. They advise him to keep his feelings to himself and avoid committing blasphemy.

And then God shows up. But instead of squishing Job like a gnat, God speaks directly to one of Job's friends.

**He says ...**

*“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” Job 42:7 (NIV)*

And the truth about God is that God doesn't ask us to pretend that bad is good. The truth about God is that God isn't offended when we bring our lament to Him. The truth about God is that God can handle it when we pour out the pain and anguish without first trying to clean it up.

**That's why David encourages us to**

...

*Trust in Him at all times ...  
AND ... pour out your  
hearts to him for God is our*

*refuge.*

*Psalm 62:8 (NIV)*

What a picture! Lamenting those situations and experiences which are *not* good (pouring out our hearts to God – being honest about how we feel) while trusting that those same situations and experiences are tools that God can and will use *for* good – our good. That balance is what keeps the Christian faith from turning into something plastic, fake and inauthentic.

So, before we move on, I want to call a brief “time out” and create a little bit of room for those who might need to do some lamenting this morning. And I realize not everyone is in that place but some of us right now are dealing with

things that are painful or unjust.

- Maybe it's a health problem or a financial problem or a family problem.
- Maybe it's the disappointment of a dream that failed or 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 we loved and cared about.
- Maybe there's a painful scar from something bad that happened in the past.

Whatever it is, we've never poured it out to God, so we can't even begin to imagine how God might bring something good out



of it.

So, what I'm going to do is to stop talking for about 60 seconds and, during that time, I want you to see yourself standing before God holding those things in your hands. And then say to Him something like ...

*How long, O LORD? How long must I wrestle with these things and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will these enemies triumph over me?*

Just pour it out in lament, just you and God.

Ok, here we go ... let's have silence.

<60 seconds of silence>

Now for some of us, 60 seconds isn't near long enough for the lamenting we need to do. If that's your situation, I encourage you ... sometime today, make a list of these things and sit down and go through them one by one with God. And don't try to get on the solution side right away. Just pour out all the junk that is in you.

And once you've done that, then you'll be ready to think about how God might be able to "bless even this" – to bring good out of those bad situations ... which is what we want to look at next.

## **What God Can Do**

What exactly does that mean?

When followers of Jesus hear that God promises to bring good out of bad situations, often we think it means that God will intervene and turn the situation itself from bad to good. Sometimes that happens, but that's not what is promised. What's promised is that good will come whether circumstances change or not. So, the question, then, is what kind of "good" is that? What benefits come from suffering?

Truth is, it would take more time than we have this morning to go through all of them, so I want to focus on just four ... which means that I'm going to neglect some really good ones like:

- Suffering can make Jesus "real" to us.

A lot of Christians believe that Jesus went through life sort of like a Teflon-man: things would happen to him but they wouldn't stick because he was God. But the Gospel writers make it very clear that was not the case. Jesus suffered for real, just like you and I sometimes do.

- And suffering can remind us that this sin-cursed world is not our home and help us to look forward to the day when God will renew, restore and regenerate all things – including us; the day when Christ returns.

But I'm not going to talk about those today because of time (and because we've talked about them before at length). Instead, I want to give you four other

good things that God can do in your life through suffering – through pain, injustice, inconvenience and even abuse – if you belong to Christ and if you trust that God really is able to do that kind of thing.

And to illustrate these good things, I want to use an amazing event that happened last week. I'm sure you heard about it.

**(picture) Antoinette Tuff, a bookkeeper at an elementary school outside of Atlanta, prevented a massacre of dozens of schoolchildren.**

The long and short of it is that she met a 20-year-old mentally-disturbed gunman as he entered the school building and, after talking with him for 30 minutes or so, convinced him to lay down his

weapons and turn himself in. The gunman was so influenced by what she said and how she treated him that, at the end, he asked her to go on the school's intercom and tell the children and teachers he was sorry. It was an incredible outcome.

But what's even more incredible, at least to me, is that Antoinette Tuff is a Christian – a born-again follower of Jesus – who has experienced much suffering and pain in her life. And, from the recorded conversation with the gunman, it is clear that *her suffering and pain was instrumental in averting disaster*. As Tuff explained to him, she recently lost her husband of 33 years, has a son with multiple disabilities and a daughter who is preparing to head to law school. Last year she was so despondent that she

contemplated suicide. In addition, on the morning of the incident, she received a phone call with what she called “devastating news.” Though she didn’t say what it was, it was so painful she sat in shock for 10 minutes ... which turned out to be a very important 10 minutes.

Here’s what she told Anderson Cooper about that.

<<END SLIDE SET 1>>

**Video – Right Place Right Time (1.1 min)**

<<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>>

Later, when someone told her she was a hero, she responded:

“Nothing I did was special. I felt like I helped someone in need, that God

was able to use me and it was an honor to be used. I felt like I was in the right place. God needed me to be there to be the vessel for Him.”<sup>i</sup>

Of course, the question is ... how did Antoinette Tuff *become* a vessel God could use?

The answer is that God had been causing all things – even the pain in her life – to work together for good. God had been making grace abound to her in all things at all times – even the painful times – so that she was able to abound in the good work that needed to be done that morning.

As I listened to her tell her story to Anderson Cooper, I could see four good



things that God had developed in her from her suffering – four good things He will develop *in us* if we trust Him:

- Humility (and dependence on Him)
- Endurance
- Character
- And hope.

Let's take those one at a time.

**1. God uses suffering to create humility and dependence on Him.**

Most of us – followers of Jesus included – 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 on a daily basis.

The Apostle Paul – who was an incredible genius with an incredible testimony of how God intervened and saved him – was a great example of this.

**He wrote:**

*To keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from*

*becoming proud.*

We don't know what this thorn was but Paul knew its purpose: to create humility and dependence on God. He wrote:

*Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.*

**And ...**

*Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 2*

*Corinthians 12:7-9 (NLT)*

I thought it was fascinating in the

interview to hear Antoinette talk about being surprised that she actually had the power to do what she did.

Let's watch.

<<END SLIDE SET 2>>

**Video – Did You Know You Were Capable? (0.5 min)**

<<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>>

“God has a way of showing you what’s really in you.”

And when you have been humbled and you are dependent on God, what’s really in you is the power of Christ to do things you never thought you could. And that’s the first good thing.

Here’s the second:

## **2. God uses suffering to create endurance.**

And the Apostle Paul literally says that. He writes:

*We rejoice in suffering knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. Romans 5:3-4 (NET)*

In the life of a person who believes in Christ and trusts God, there is a positive chain reaction, Paul says, that is propagated by suffering and it the first element in that chain is endurance.

Again, it was fascinating to listen to Antoinette describe this quality. Check

this out ...

<<END SLIDE SET 3>>

**Video – Push Past the Pain (1.1 min)**

<<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>>

What a great way to describe endurance:  
“push past the pain.”

And did you hear what she said? “I know today that no matter what, I can push past the pain.” You don’t discover that unless you *have* pain.

So, God uses suffering to create humility and dependence on Him, and also endurance.

**3. And then – following the chain – God uses suffering to develop our character (particularly the**

**qualities of grace and compassion).**

Ever notice how, when you're going through something difficult or you've suffered in some way, you're much more aware of and compassionate towards 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 to accept the lack of peace and resolution – ever notice that you have a desire to encourage those folks?

Friends, that's God working in your life to bring good from evil.

**Again, 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)*

You can't share the comfort you received from God unless you have suffered.

To me, the most powerful part of Antoinette's interview was her describing how she was able to *relate her experience of suffering to the gunman's experience* – which clearly encouraged him – and saved not only the lives of those schoolchildren but his as well.



Let's watch.

<<END SLIDE SET 4>>

**Video – I Knew How He Felt (1.0 min)**

<<BEGIN SLIDE SET 5>>

That's amazing. "I knew that could have been my story but because of God's grace and mercy it wasn't."

And because it wasn't, as Antoinette said, she was able to offer him hope ... which is the final element in Paul's chain.

#### **4. God uses suffering to create hope.**

Hope because suffering doesn't need to define our lives. Hope because God really can bless "even this" – regardless of what "this" is. Hope because God has promised

that there is more to our lives than this life.

-----

Now, obviously, Antoinette Tuff has an amazing story and it's easy to look at the drama of what happened and think "that kind of thing will never happen to me."

And if by "that kind of thing" you mean that you will never talk a gunman out of shooting people, you're probably right. But if you mean that suffering cannot produce in you the qualities of humility and dependence on God as well as endurance, character and hope, you're wrong. They probably won't manifest themselves in the same way they did in Antoinette's life but they *will* manifest

themselves.

And you will find yourself more and more in the right place at the right time able to be the “vessel” God needs; able to do what God wants you to do.

## **Receive the Blessing**

Now, at this point, some of you might be thinking “This all sounds really great, Rick. I understand all those Bible verses and I think the story about Antoinette Tuff is really great. But, honestly, the bad stuff that happens to *me* feels so pointless. It never ends. It almost feels like I am cursed.”

Friend, if you are a believer in Jesus <define>, that is a lie from the pit of hell.

Don't believe it because nothing could be further from the truth.

**Paul writes:**

*Praise the God and Father  
of our Lord Jesus Christ!  
Through Christ, God has  
blessed us with every  
spiritual blessing that  
heaven has to offer.*

*Ephesians 1:3 (GW)*

Because of what Jesus did on the cross and in his resurrection, you have already been blessed with every blessing heaven has to offer. Yes, you still live in a sin-cursed world but that is not who you are and that is not your ultimate destiny. You are blessed not cursed.

And God knows that sometimes we just

need to have people tell us that and remind us of it.

In fact, right after delivering the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt, God spoke to Moses and told him that every so often, the leaders of the nation were to call the people of Israel together and speak a word of blessing over them. Even though they had experienced a miracle in their escape from Egypt, they had to walk through a lonely desert for a long time – far longer than any of them had ever expected – to reach the Promised Land. And, I think God knew that it would be easy for them to start thinking the deck was stacked against them and that they were cursed.

And so, to help them remember that was

*not the case ...*

*The Lord said to Moses,  
“Tell Aaron and his sons to  
bless the people of Israel  
with this special blessing:*

**Here’s the blessing:**

*The Lord bless you, and  
keep you;*

*The Lord make His face to  
shine upon you and be  
gracious to you;*

*The Lord lift up His  
countenance on you and  
give you [shalom].*

*Numbers 6:24-26  
(NASB)*

Most translations say “peace” in that last sentence but the Hebrew word is “shalom” which means so much more

(and I'll explain that in just a minute).

Actually, let me explain what the whole blessing meant ... and I've chosen a little picture that goes along with each phrase and idea.

**The Lord bless you, and keep you;**

“Don't forget that God's intention for you is good and not evil.” That's what “keep you” means; it's a way of referring to God's ultimate protection over the entirety of our lives – even the bad stuff.

**The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;**

“Don't forget that even though you're in the desert right now, God is crazy

about everyone who belongs to Jesus. His face lights up at the thought of you and He will freely give you everything you need.”

**The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you shalom.**

“God is holding you up like a cherished child, lifting up his face to you, because you matter to him. And his plan for you – for all who are in Christ – is *shalom*, which means “wholeness, completeness, abundance, prosperity, and fulfillment of every kind.”

That’s your destiny and your inheritance.

-----



Isn't that a cool blessing? Wouldn't it be cool if someone spoke that over us?

Well, that's what we're going to do as we close the service this morning (and if you are part of my "blessors," would you please get in place like we do at our communion stations?)

Here's what's going to happen. In just a few minutes when the music starts, I want you to get up out of your seat and come to one of the people at a station. And what they're going to do is to simply say the words of blessing that God told Moses and Aaron to say over the people of Israel. (They're not going to try to counsel you or pray over you). And then you can leave after that.

And I know some of you may be thinking, “I just don’t feel like I am worthy of being blessed. I think I’ll just skip out.”

I hope you don’t do that because this is not an issue of worthiness. All of us are sinners so none of us are worthy. Only Christ is worthy. But we are in Him, so this blessing is ours with no strings attached. This is what God has promised us not because of how we behave, but because of what we believe and to whom we belong.

So take a step of faith here. Be bold, and let God bless you through these words. Let me pray and then you come and receive the blessing.

< prayer >

## **Closing / blessing**

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.accessatlanta.com/weblogs/radio-tv-talk/2013/aug/22/bookkeeper-who-talked-down-decatur-school-shooter-d/>