

OVERFLOW: GOODNESS AND LOVE WILL FOLLOW ME

By Andrew Wilson
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Romans 8: 28-39
Psalm 23

This church is full of great moms – and I’m not just saying that because it’s Mother’s Day... Well, maybe I am. But it’s true. It’s not easy being a mom. One of the Golden Girls once said, “If being a mom was easy, fathers would do it.” There’s probably something to that.

The moms in my family are amazing people. From what I’ve observed since I first opened my eyes, their jobs can be messy, painful and thankless. But they handle it with tremendous grace. They manage to love and accept the kids in their lives even when we’re acting like knuckleheads.

Every Mother’s Day I think about Hannah’s and Holly’s births. Hannah’s delivery was, hands down, the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced. Mary pushed with all her strength, but after 16 hours it became clear that Hannah’s head was stuck. I was afraid that Hannah had proceeded so far along that a C section would be impossible, but praise God, I was wrong about that.

Later that day, when Hannah was snoozing in Mary’s arms, I had a clearer picture of what we had just been through. I realized that, had we lived just a generation or two earlier, we would have lost Hannah, and possibly Mary as well. The same frightening scenario unfolded 2 years later during Holly’s delivery, but we were slightly less worried knowing that a C section could be performed.

Actually, the person who was most traumatized by Holly’s arrival was Hannah, who at age two was the reigning princess in our tiny castle. After Holly had been home for maybe a day, Hannah said to us, “It’s time to take Holly back to the hop-sittle.”

“No Han,” I said, “Holly’s staying here. This is her home now.”

That took some getting used to.

The other day I came across a “Pregnancy Q and A” that has nothing whatsoever to do with Psalm 23, but who cares? It’s Mother’s Day. This is for you younger couples.

Question: Should I have a baby after 35?

Answer: No, 35 children is enough.

Question: I’m two months pregnant now. When will my baby move?

Answer: With any luck, right after he finishes college.

Question: My wife is 5 months pregnant and so moody that sometimes she’s borderline irrational.

Answer: So what's your question?

Question: When is the best time to get an epidural?

Answer: Right after you find out you're pregnant.

The moms in my family have helped me to understand the verse that we're focusing on today. It's the final verse of Psalm 23:

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (23:6).

David is echoing the beautiful affirmations that he makes at the beginning of his psalm: God is with us – God loves us – God cares for us. But instead of presenting God as a shepherd and us as his sheep, now – here at the end – David presents God as a father and us as his children. We're feasting with him at our family table. After the meal God confirms his intimate love for us by pouring oil over our heads.

As I said, David is repeating the themes he started with: God is with us – God loves us – God cares for us. But now the message becomes multi-layered. David has reminded us three different times in the psalm that life isn't always a box of chocolates.

First David praises the God who "restores my soul." The implication is that we're emotionally and spiritually vulnerable, and that our souls are often in need of restoring. The burdens we carry and the difficulties we face can shake our faith in God. They can cause us to become anxious or deeply depressed. But David assures us that God won't leave us in that dark place. He'll fill us once again with his light.

Second, David thanks God for walking with him "through the valley of the shadow of death." David again is pointing to the harsh realities our earthly life. Lots of terrible things can happen to us. We can lose our job. Our reputation can be destroyed. Our friends or family can abandon us. We can be laid low by any number of diseases. But we know that God will always be with us. David implies that we can trust him to guide us to safety.

David had a lot of enemies. Sometimes they harassed him mercilessly, even as he was enjoying fellowship with the Lord. So third, David recognizes that God's children often face persecution in this life. Our enemies can threaten us even in those times when we're metaphorically feasting with God at his banquet table. David's advice to us, when we feel vulnerable to dark forces, is to remember who God is, and who we are. God is our Father, we are his children, and there isn't any power on earth or under the earth that can change that. God accepts us just as we are, and he never stops loving us. And that knowledge gives us comfort and hope.

In all three of these passages, David is wrestling with the problem of suffering. His answers aren't just bumper sticker pronouncements, or Pinterest postings to brighten our day. His wisdom is rooted in

experience. God can and does restore our souls when we're anxious or depressed. He does give us the wisdom and insight we need to pass through the low places. The knowledge that God loves and accepts us does strengthen us when our enemies attack. In this church family we've seen God do all those things again and again.

But if we're honest, we have to admit that David's answers fall short. They don't shed much light on the questions we ask in those times when life comes crashing in on us. And what we find, when we reflect on our experience, is that we ask two kinds of questions.

First we wonder: Why am I hurting like this? Why won't my loving Father reach down to rescue me? What purpose could possibly be served by this trial?

Second, we want to know: How can God help me to cope with the trouble I face in life? *What, exactly, can I count on him to do for me?*

David doesn't give us dense, complicated answers to those questions. Remember, he's writing here as more of a singer/ songwriter than as a theologian. Yet in the last verse of his psalm, David declares a simple truth that points us in a new direction. More than that, he offers us a key that unlocks some of life's deepest mysteries.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

When David affirms that goodness and love will follow him, he's revealing something immensely important about God. He's referring to God's relentless efforts to protect us, guide us and build us up. Earlier, remember, David spoke of God being *with us* in times of trouble. Now he's saying something that's infinitely more encouraging. He's saying that God never stops fighting on our behalf – that he's working at every moment of every day to counter the evil that comes against us and turn it to good.

It's hard for us, as Americans, to suffer even in small ways. We understand that suffering breeds toughness and other good qualities. But we also believe that hardship is incompatible with happiness. So we're afraid to suffer. We're afraid of the misery we believe would result from the loss of our creature comforts and daily indulgences.

Suffering looks different to us when we're walking with Christ. It looks different to us when we remember the higher purpose that God has for us – that of preparing us for life with him in his heavenly kingdom. We understand that when life is easy for us, we become lazy. We grow flabby, and we stop growing. More than that, we realize that God allows us to suffer because it's only through suffering that we can grow in the character of Christ. It's during periods of adversity that we discover our inner strength. Every mother learns that truth during the agony of childbirth. God uses our trials and tribulations like a furnace burn away our impurities and forge our character.

The Scottish novelist and theologian, George MacDonald, saw God's refining fire as the surest evidence of his love for us. He writes:

It is the nature of God, so terribly pure that it destroys all that is not pure...

Nothing but the burning love of God can rid sin out of anywhere. It is the law of nature – that is, the law of God – that all that is destructible shall be destroyed... Many a man's work must be burned, that by that very burning he may be saved... If still he cling(s) to that which can be burned, the burning goes deeper and deeper still into his bosom until it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him.

The one who loves God, and is not yet pure, welcomes the burning of God...

And MacDonald concludes:

The man whose deeds are evil fears the burning. But... (e)scape is hopeless. For love is inexorable. Our God is a consuming fire... Imagination cannot mislead us into too much horror of being without God – that living death...

- From *Discovering the Character of God*, chapter 25, "Our God Is A Consuming Fire"

Many of you are carrying heavy burdens. You're struggling with anxiety or depression. You've lost spouses. You're gotten scary news from your doctors. Your kids are in trouble and they've stopped listening to you. I can't tell you why God has allowed you to experience so much heartache. But God has proven to us again and again that he loves us with an undying love. He loves us so much that he'll go to any length to purify us, and to keep us and the people we love close to his heart.

We have to remember, when life crashes in on us, that it isn't in God's nature to be vengeful. He takes no pleasure in hearing our groans or seeing our tears. He disciplines us with fire, but does so because he loves us, and he wants us to be pure and holy as Christ is pure and holy.

All of this calls to mind Paul's bold words in Romans chapter 8, verse 28:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...

- Romans 8:28

Walking with Christ, we learn that much of what we think of as bad is actually good. God uses inconveniences to teach us patience. He uses financial trouble to make us more dependent on him. He uses seemingly impossible challenges to toughen us up and expand our capacities.

But Paul isn't just talking in Romans eight, verse 28 about nasty-tasting medicine we sometimes have to drink. He's also talking about things that really *are* bad – so bad that no one in their right mind would call them good. He's acknowledging that our world is in a state of decay, and is filled with evil things that threaten to do us in. And he's insisting that God uses those very things to bring about good for us.

How does that work? How can God redeem the millions of children who die of starvation every year? How can he save the drug addict who wants to be a Jesus follower, but doesn't seem willing or able to leave his habit? How can he use the terrible things that I've experienced, or the despicable things I've done, to bring about good for me?

Many people are quick to interpret suffering in terms of Divine retribution. If there's an earthquake in San Francisco, it must be because the people are debauched. If someone can't find a job it must be because her family is under a generational curse. Jesus reminds us that God's ways are not our ways, and that it's not our job to judge play judge and jury. That was his clear message to his disciples when they inquired about a man who was born blind.

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" the disciples asked.

And Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:2-3).

We rarely see God's hand working through time and circumstance. The great tapestry he is weaving through his church is mostly invisible to us from our vantage point in history. But one of the crucial revelations of the Bible is that God can use evil to bring about good.

Jesus was surrounded by evil his entire earthly life. His crucifixion was the most dreadful event in history. Yet God used every enemy and every challenge that Jesus faced to save us. Christ bowed in obedience to his Father and fulfilled every demand made by the Law. As a result, he set us free from our bondage to death and decay. And he offers eternal life to every one of us.

God is in the redemption business. When we find ourselves doubting him, we should remember what he has already accomplished for us in Christ. We may not see his loving hand at work now, next month, next year, or even a decade from now. But, as we place our trust in him, he works through all the nasty junk in our lives in order to bless us.

David ends his psalm by reminding us that God is saving the best for last. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (23:6).

In this life we're constantly subject to disappointment and frustration. Things tend to wind down and fall apart. We hang our hope on the next great thing – the next job, the next relationship, the next business cycle, the next president. But we all learn the hard way that disappointment lurks around every corner.

But that's not how God operates. That's not how things unfold in his kingdom. There things tend to go from bad to good. Frustration gives way to success. Disappointment is replaced with a growing sense of confidence and excitement about the future. Because what God promises his children is not a care-free life in the suburbs, but a joy-filled life with him.

Samuel Johnson suffered greatly throughout his extraordinary life. The great English poet and man of letters was convinced that happiness was within reach for anyone who truly loved God. Standing on the promise of future glory, Johnson wrote of "our prospect for life, a prospect which, as it is beheld with more attention, seems to open more extensive happiness, and spreads by degrees into the boundless regions of eternity."

Don't lose sight of that vision. Keep your eye on the horizon, and don't let the junk you're currently facing drag you down. God is working for your good. What he does for you isn't going to be undone. And he's saving the best things for last. He's preparing you to receive the abundance of joy that's found only in Christ.

Lord Jesus, some of us have been on a long search for joy and we've come up empty. Would you fill us with your joy, the joy that isn't dependent on circumstances, and that endures even when we're hurting?

Thank you, Lord, for standing with us in all our frustrations and disappointments. Thank you for using even the terrible things in our lives to bring about good. Thank you for adopting us as your very own children.

We long to be like you. We praise you for working inside our hearts to change us, and shape us into your image. Help us, Lord, to stop resisting you. Teach us to welcome our trials, knowing that you're using them to change us and give us a better life.

We love you, Father. We open our hearts to you, Holy Spirit. We seek to be your disciples, Lord Jesus. So renew us this day in our walk with you. Amen.