



# Central Peninsula Church

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Romans 8:28-35  
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## Life Is Tough, God Is Good

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A few years ago a movie came out called *A River Runs Through It*. It was the story of the Maclean family who lived in Montana in the early 1900's. The father was a stern Presbyterian minister. The mother was more nurturing by nature. They had two sons; Norman, the oldest, and Paul. As the two boys grew up it was clear they were very different. Norman was cautious and studious. He went to college and became a writer. Paul was a reckless daredevil, a handsome and quick witted ladies man.

These are the main characters in the movie, but the real subject of the movie is the river that runs through their part of Montana. The river was the focal point for the family's life and the catalyst for everything significant that took place in their lives. It was the place the father forged a relationship with the two boys while on Sunday afternoons they waded in and fished its deep pools. It was to that river that the boys would run after their studies to nourish both sibling rivalry and brotherly affection. Even in times of pain and sorrow they would come to that river and walk its banks.

The Maclean family knew failure and success and laughter and heartache and even death, but the river was always there as a kind of symbolic center of their lives. In the movie, you get the sense that Montana would have just been a wilderness and their lives just chaos if the river were not running through it all.

I would like to suggest this morning that there is a river that runs through all of the tragic events of this past week and all of those individuals who put their trust in God. That river is God and His unchanging purpose for this world and for our lives. Scripture says, "**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose**" (Romans 8:28). Scripture says that in the midst of what appears to be chaos, God is in control.

But let's face it, not everyone believes that. Some say

that we create our own purpose. Collectively and individually we are in charge of our destiny. It is completely up to us to make the world safe and secure from this kind of evil. Others say that there is no purpose at all. Who's in charge? No one is in charge. We are simply victims of blind fate.

But Christians say, "No! God is in charge. We don't understand why things like this happen, but we believe God is still on his throne. He knows the answers. He is in control. Scripture says, "**It is he who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth.... It is he who stretches out the heavens like a canopy.... It is he who reduces rulers to nothing... No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff**" (Isaiah 40:22-24). That sounds to me like a God who is in control.

But this raises some questions of its own. If God is in control, why would He let this happen? How could God allow this and still be considered just and good and loving? How can we still trust Him when He doesn't even see fit to protect His own children from being victimized by tragedy and evil? How can it be that "God causes all things to work together for good...?"

## II. God's purpose in suffering and evil (Romans 8:28-30)

Don't misunderstand this. It does NOT say that God CAUSES all things. It says He causes all things to work together. God does not cause evil. He does not cause evil men to do evil things. He didn't cause the hatred in the hearts of those hijackers. He didn't cause those planes to fall on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. He didn't cause the towers to fall. He didn't cause children to be left fatherless or motherless. This is not God's judgment on individuals or on America as some say.

You ask, "Well then, who does cause these things?"

The fact is there are many forces at work which cause these things. There is a fallen angel called Satan. Scripture says, "He prowls around like a roaring lion." There is also this fallen world we live in. Creation itself is not what it was meant to be, and so people die in earthquakes and floods and famines. There are also fallen people like you and me whose hearts are bent towards selfishness and greed, and to whom God gives the terrible freedom to let hatred and violence rule our lives. If nothing else, this tragedy should remind us of the reality of evil and the enormous capability WE have for it. Yes, God causes all things to work together for good, but He doesn't cause all things.

There is something else about this verse. It does NOT say that all things are good; it says "all things to work together for good." The idea is that God can somehow orchestrate all the dissonant notes of this world and create something which is beautiful. But it is not the Christian position to wear a plastic smile and rejoice in tragedy. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn," and this is a time to mourn. It is not the Christian position to deny the reality of evil and suffering, nor to call it good. This is not a good thing; it is an evil thing.

Joseph's brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery and thought they had written him off from their lives forever. But years later they met up with him again and he was in a position to write them off forever. They were afraid, but Joseph said, "**Do not be afraid.... You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...**" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph doesn't candy coat what they did; he calls it evil; he calls it what it is. All things are not good, but He causes all things to work together for good.

I want you to notice in this verse that we are NOT told why these things happen; we are not even given reasons. We may never know the answers to our "why" questions. Instead of reasons, God's word speaks about a purpose. Reason hangs on to an event and insists on an explanation; purpose hangs on to God and trusts that in the bigger picture He will work through it all. We still might ask the question, how could something as awful as this serve a good purpose? Let me list a few things.

First, we come to understand anew the reality of

human frailty. How could it be that you can wake up one morning, grab a cup of coffee, kiss your family goodbye, take the subway to work, walk into your office, and perish when a jetliner flies into your building. But that's the game we play; those are the rules we live by every day. It just takes something like this to remind us this is the way it is. And we have to ask ourselves the question: am I prepared? Last Sunday we had about 20 people in our services who took a critical step in being prepared. They made the choice to trust in Christ as Savior. All week I've thought, what if one of them ended up on one of those planes this last Tuesday? I'm so glad they made that choice because they were prepared.

But that's not all. Second, suffering and tragedy make us more compassionate and humane people. More people said hi to me this week on the street. We've seen displays of selfless courage and generosity and sensitivity to others in the wake of all of this. Scripture says that when God comforts us in our suffering, we are then able to turn around and comfort others with that same comfort we got from Him. We become more compassionate and patient towards others who are suffering. That's a good thing.

Third, something like this helps us to see the evil and hatred in our own hearts. There is a lot of anger and rage that we feel towards those who did this. It's normal to feel that. There would be something wrong if we didn't feel that. It's right to want justice, and one day justice will be served. But we've been learning in the Sermon on the Mount how Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Some of us need to repent of our deep hatred. We also need to sort out who our enemies really are. Our enemies are not Arabs or even Muslims; they're terrorists. We have wonderful people from the Arab world in this church. They are not the enemy; they are brothers and sisters in Christ.

I could say so much more about what God's good purpose might be in all of this. I could make a long list. I could talk about the new opportunities we have to show the world in both word and deed that Jesus Christ really is alive and He really does care. I could talk about how this might force us to trust His protection despite the fear in our hearts. How can we ever learn He is a strong tower if we never have to run there? I could talk about how good it is when something like this makes us really long for heaven. There are so many things I could put on that list, and they might help you understand God's purpose.

### III. God's presence in suffering and evil (Romans 8:35-39)

But when you're hurting, when your heart is wrung out like a sponge, a list of ten good things God might accomplish through this stings like salt in a wound. Don't give a list of answers to the little girl clutching her dad's picture and hoping beyond hope he's lost in some hospital. Don't give a list to the young wives of all those fireman who bravely climbed the stairs of the World Trade Center only to have the whole thing collapse. When you are bleeding, you don't need answers; you don't need a list. Answers are great for an exam, but they often only reach the head, not the heart.

You see, the real answer to the problem of evil and of suffering is not about someTHING, it's about someONE. When you are suffering, when you are asking why, you are asking someONE. You are asking God; a person. And the answer is not some kind of dry, academic, theoretical list of answers; it's a person. When a child in tears looks up into the face of her father and says, "Why, Daddy? Why did that have to happen to us?" That child doesn't need answers; she needs daddy to reach down and pick her up and press her to his chest and pat her on the back and say, "I'm here. Everything is going to be all right. I'm here."

That's what we really need, isn't it. Our heartfelt desire is for our Heavenly Father to reach down and say, "I'm here. Everything is not out of control. I'm here." You see, God as our Father doesn't give us a list of reasons or answers, He gives us himself, and that's what we really need. That's why if you look a few verses down in Romans 8, Paul says, **"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.... (No!) But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, (nor hijackers, nor terrorists, nor buildings crumbling, nor war threatening) will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:35-39). You see, in the midst of all of this, He gives us himself. The promise is that we won't be separated from Him. We might not have all the answers, but we have Him.

That is why in Isaiah 54, God becomes the husband to the divorced woman. In Exodus 15, He becomes the healer to the sick. In John 6, He becomes the bread of life to the hungry. In

John 4, He is living water to a woman thirsty for love. In Isaiah 9, He is the Wonderful Counselor to the confused. In Psalm 10, He is the father to the orphaned. In Isaiah 62, He is the bridegroom to the woman grieving she'll never marry. And in Zechariah 2, He becomes the wall of fire to those who need protection. In each case, He gives not answers but himself.

And do you know how it is we really know that He is good and loving in spite of everything? We know He is good because, as Paul says in v. 39, His goodness and His love are seen in "Christ Jesus our Lord." God is good not because He explains why He allows these things to happen, but because He explained himself on the Cross. The spotless Son of God bore all the sins of the more than forty billion people that have ever lived. And not just the general sins of the general world in a general way, but your sins and my sins in one horrifying span of nine hours; sins like greed and lust and racism and even murder. As Peter Kreeft said, "Amazing love how can it be, that God should plunge a knife in his chest for me." God is not some cool and indifferent college professor writing answers on a blackboard; He is the God who suffered. He is, as the hymn goes,

*"Man of sorrows, what a name,  
for the Son of God who came.  
Ruined sinners to reclaim!  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"*

You see, God wrote the book on suffering, and He called it Jesus. That is why God is good. Because He gives himself.

### CONCLUSION

John Stott said, "I could never believe in God if it weren't for the cross." In his short play, *The Long Silence*, he wrote:

At the end of time billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back but some near the front talked heatedly with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration

camp. "We endured horror...beatings...torture...death."

In another group, a black boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn, "lynched for no crime but being black!"

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in this world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, hunger or hatred. "What did God know of all that people had been forced to endure in this world? God leads a pretty sheltered life," they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered most. A Jew, an African-American, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed child. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case and it was rather clever.

Before God could qualify to be their judge he must endure what they endured. Their decision was that God would be sentenced to live on earth as a man.

"Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him work to do that even his family will think he is out of his mind to try to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured. At last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died."

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. And when the last had finished pronouncing the sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. Suddenly they all knew that God had served his sentence.

*"Man of sorrows, what a name,  
for the Son of God who came,  
ruined sinners to reclaim.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"*

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
in my place condemned he stood,  
sealed my pardon with his blood.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"*

Who can deny His goodness and His love? Psalm 46 says, "**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.**" The river that runs through the water of our lives is God. In the midst of tragedy and confusion, He doesn't give a list of answers, He gives himself.