

A Pastor's Word in Biblical Perspective
"A Pastor's Word from God's Word"
Selected Texts
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February 5, 2017 – Evening sermon

I will be looking at an Old Testament text and a New Testament text with five personal and pastoral comments to you as a pastor's word from God's Word. I will be looking at a few others as well. Let's start by looking at Isaiah 43. This is God's Word and God's Word is the truth. Isaiah 43:1–3a says [1] *But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. [2] When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. [3a] For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."*

This is a glorious text that we have sung on many occasions. It is a text that assures us of God's presence, power and days of adversity even to the point of extremity, lethal adversity where life is at stake. It is in those moments though the body can be destroyed God's purposes of giving us a new heart, new record, new life, new body and a new home cannot be thwarted because He will be with us in the waters and through the fire.

Now let's look at Romans 8. My favorite book in the Bible is Romans and I know I'm not alone on that with that glorious exposition of the Gospel. The first eleven chapters of Romans deal with the blessings of the Gospel in Christ and then the Gospel life for Christ from chapter 12 on. For me the 'hallelujah chorus' of the Bible is Romans 8, specifically starting at verse 28. Romans 8:28–39 says [28] *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [30] And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

[31] *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." [37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In the first text we see that even in the adversities of life the Lord is with us, His purposes cannot be thwarted and He will carry us through it, above it and beyond it. There are other texts that say 'the love of Christ constrains us' Paul says to the Corinthians. That love of Christ is so important because He also says through the Spirit of Christ through John that perfect love casts out all fear. Those are glorious truths but how I love this Romans 8 text.

He tells us that God causes all things to work together for good, not that all things are good. I know I say this a lot but to put it in context He is not saying that if you have enough faith nothing bad will happen to you. We're broken people in a broken world with broken bodies and that's a fact. Everything that can happen to an unbeliever can happen to us and does happen to us except God's condemning judgment. God has sustained us and upheld us therefore we go through this world and no matter what happens a Sovereign God is at work. He says that all things while they're not all good do work together for good.

Romans 8:28 is not a promise for everybody. God's common grace and sustaining grace does uphold everyone who lives. There is no one who will get to the judgment seat of God that will be able to say 'I never tasted of the love of God and the patience of God.' The rain falls on the just and the unjust but we get something in God's providence that is beyond that common grace blessing and that is God's sustaining hand in our life. These things that happen in a broken world are sovereignly ordained by His hand so that as we face them, even possible lethal adversity in life, He tells us we're not a victim in that moment. You have a sovereign God who makes you the victor for in these things we are more than conquerors.

This is just for His people in which He shows us this two ways. Romans 8:28 says *[28] And we know that **for those who love God** all things work together for good, **for those who are called according to his purpose**.* One is those who love God and who are those who love God? They are those whom God has first loved and how did He first love us? He goes on to say it is those whom He has called, those whom He has foreknown, predestined and justified for they will be glorified. These are what Calvin called the golden steps to God's triumphant, redeeming grace. They are unbreakable and are fastened one to another. From eternity past God's love was placed upon you with intimacy.

He foreknew you and the word foreknown is the word for intimacy. We even use it to describe marital intimacy between a man and a woman. This took place before we existed so notice that it is not based upon what God saw but that God knew you personally. It didn't say what He foresaw but it said whom He foreknew. Then He set in motion His decrees the work of His saving grace to bring us from death unto life. He predestined us. Then He did that in time by calling us. Then He did that by justifying us, making us right with God. Then He does that into the future by glorifying us so do you see how this goes from eternity past into time into eternity future and the same whom you start out with in foreknowledge you end up in glorification. Jesus says 'I lose not one' even in a broken world, because He is now for you. He has given His Son for you.

So if He has given His Son for us then who can be against us? That is the first question He asks. That doesn't mean there won't be people against you because Satan is against you, the demons are against you, the world is against you and there is an old man inside of you that is against you. But in comparison to your Savior, who can be against you? Here's an illustration for you. There is boy who has a brother who is an all-American left tackle at a well-known college who is 6 feet 5 inches 350 pounds and he comes home. His little brother had not been attending school because he was home sick with a belly ache due to a bully at school who would intimidate his little brother. His older brother asks him if he wants him to walk him to school the next day and his little brother says 'sure.' Do you think he had any problem walking by that corner that day? Look at my brother. We have an elder Brother. He is the Son of God and all adversities pale into insignificant enemies because of Him who is for us.

Not only can Jesus eradicate and defeat all of our adversaries but He can eradicate all charges against us. Romans 8:33 says *[33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is*

God who justifies. You didn't justify yourself. Religion didn't justify you. We're all here to point you to the One who does justify you and when He justifies you there are no charges. He has eradicated all charges against you with His blood.

The third question is in Romans 8:34 which says [34] *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* There is no condemnation because we're not innocent. Our charges are removed and His righteousness has been given to us. We are accepted in the beloved. He is now interceding for you just as He did for Peter when he denied Him and He brought him back.

Then comes the next question in Romans 8:35 which says [35] *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?* Cancer? Open heart surgery? No for in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him, not us, who has loved us. So where does that lead me?

My dear friend John Piper wrote a book when he went through prostate cancer that I read about four years ago. When I read it I was challenged because in it he says 'don't waste the times of adversity in your life, your cancer.' God has purpose in it and that's why you don't have to waste it. So find out what the purpose is and learn from it. In those times God has just rung the school bell in the moments of adversity. Not only should individual Christians do this, not wasting these moments of adversity, but certainly pastor should.

Although if as a pastor I had found out this I might have said 'no' and that was once you become a pastor you hardly have any private rights for you become a public person. Everything you do in life you have think 'you stand before a watching world as an examined representative of Christ' and therefore you ask God to never let you live in a cover up way in order to accomplish that but a transparent way. Although transparent doesn't mean that a pastor should lay all of their laundry out to you to discourage you but it does mean we need to be honest appropriately before God's people.

So what do you say when you have that annual doctor's check-up for prostate cancer while in your third year of remission who says 'you're doing great and you don't have to come back but I would come back if I were you because I think there are other benefits' and then he says 'what are you doing about your aneurism?' I said 'My what?' He says 'You have an ascending aortic aneurism.' Then you realize that is the same thing that took your dad and grandfather home to be with the Lord. I have become my father's son in more ways than one. How do you begin to work your way through that? Pastors are just like you particularly when the doctor says it's open heart surgery and you learn 6 to 10 percent don't make it off the table or through the first week. I am thankful for the 90 to 94 percent.

If I told you that 1 out of every 10 go down at an airport, how many of you will go out and buy a ticket? People wonder if I should consider all that and yes I should because that is the truth and that's God's general revelation talking to you. I feel as my pastoral responsibility I need to be utterly transparent about these things and how I work through this. For me I immediately go into research mode to work on it and know what I am facing so certainly that is part of it. More than know it, I have to deal with it. In dealing with it I realize I have a wife, children and grandchildren. I have wonderful mentors who have all reminded me that I always have a responsibility to God's people. So what is it I have learned in light of these texts?

Here are the things I have learned up to this point. One is life learning. What have I learned about life? I can't tell you the number of times I have stood before people who are facing life or death exigencies. I have said to them, "As your days are so shall your strength be." I have also said this to many who have come to my office with fears. You may think you

can't face those things now but when that day comes God won't allow it and send it without giving you the resources to walk through it and above it and He'll go with you. As your days are so shall your strength be. Your strength is the presence of the Lord that He will be with you. I have learned that in the years in various ways but seldom has it been facing the realities of life and death.

So I count this as a gift from God's grace. Why? It is because as a pastor I not only with confidence teach, preach, shepherd, disciple and counsel God's people from a Biblical conviction in God's Word that God's grace is greater than sin and God's power and presence is greater than any circumstance of life. Now I don't do it just out of a conviction that it's true in God's Word but now I can tell it's true out of experience. This truth I have shared I have experienced. As I approach this it is the Lord who has taught me each day that His grace will be sufficient and I have no doubt it will be sufficient at 5am tomorrow morning when I go through open heart surgery. So thankfully I have moved from where I ought to be. God's Word isn't true because I have experienced it. God's Word is true because it is true. Oh the blessing to comfort others with the same comfort whereby you have been comforted. This is life learning of God's grace.

Secondly, because of what I've gone through I have learned how to witness rightly to our faith and our confidence in God and His promises. What do I mean by that? I hear counselors say 'Oh you're practicing denial' and I think 'ok denial sounds like a pretty good idea to me.' Do you want to know how many times I've practiced denial? I go to bed at night and say 'God, this is not real' and I wake up tomorrow and it will be gone. That is not the way God's people deal with life – not denial, that it's not really there. I don't go around saying things like 'I don't care what the x-ray says, I don't have an aortic aneurism.' Denial is not a statement of confidence in the Lord.

Also, we not only have to say 'no' to denial but we say 'no' to claiming our own personal objectives through this and that God is bound to deliver it. I have a great doctor, a great care team and a church full of doctors that if this doctor falters they are liable to step in at any moment. So if there is anyone who can have a human confidence and a favorable outcome of this surgery it is me. I thank God for that but I don't go around telling people 'don't worry for I have faith that God is going to take me through this and heal me.' I am telling people that my good is coming out of this. God may decide the best thing for me and you is to promote me to His glory (heaven). If I tell everyone that the whole testimony of my faith is that I get through this surgery and He decides to take me home then what will that do to you?

I do not know God's secret will. I only know God's revealed will. I have some ideas about where this is headed and I have some ideas about why I think God is doing this but I do know what God will do. God will do His glory and my good in all of what is about to happen. I have told this many time to my children and they did not believe it. They would say, 'Would you mind telling me how this spanking is for my good? Would you mind telling me how you saying 'no' to this is for my good?' That's when I tell them I am their father and I love you. If this sinful father can come close to doing that how much more will my heavenly Father give me what is good. He says though if you ask for bread and eggs He won't give you a snake and you are absolutely right but many times when we think we're asking for bread and eggs we're actually asking for a snake and stones. God has a better plan. That is when you put your trust in Him. Our God does all things well. So you say 'no' to denial and to your own objectives and say 'yes' to God's promises.

I will tell you what will be true sometime around 11am tomorrow and that is God's perfect will, will be done. If He takes me home 'Praise the Lord', if He leaves me here 'Praise the Lord' and that is what Paul meant when he said in Philippians 1:21-26, [21] *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [22] If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

I do know that God does all things well and so I want to say 'God, yes I believe Your promises are 'yes and amen' in Christ. What You determine and what You do, You will do for Your glory, my good and Your unstoppable, relentless love.' Nothing will be able to separate me from the love of God in Christ. Will tribulations, tests, death, life, angels, or principalities? Absolutely nothing will separate me from Christ for Jesus has put His stamp on that promise. So whatever God determines I know He does all things well.

Thirdly, what do I know? How do you address these things? I want to share these five things with you because you are facing adversity and or will face adversity. There will come times that we face things that are lethal. I'm mainly talking about the everyday adversities but those things of extremity that we face will come and these are five things I want you to have to help you deal with those.

The first thing is that God is sovereign. Whatever you are facing is His appointment. What if it is a result of my sin? He is still sovereign. He draws straight lines with crooked sticks. This is not a fate. I sat down to talk with an author who wrote about the lifestyles of the Reformers and predestination where they all believed in a Divine fate. That is not the doctrine of predestination. The sovereignty of God through the doctrine of predestination is a personal God ordering all things freely for the benefit of His people. It is not a fate that is disposed upon us. It is a God who is unstoppable in His sovereignty working in us and through us. We also not talking about stoicism where you just grin and bear it or even fatalism. We're talking about a sovereign God who does that which is good in a broken world and what seemingly is a bad thing He works them together.

I love the way Tolkien and Lewis put them. They call these eucatastrophes. It seems like these things are catastrophes but 'eu' means good. They are good catastrophes and the greatest catastrophe in all of humanity was the death of Christ on a cross, but what a victory! If God can do that then that is what He will do time and time again because of that victory in our life. So God is sovereign and this is His appointment.

Two, God is with me and He will not forsake me even if it's in the valley of the shadow of death. So not only has He given me this appointment He is going to be with me. I'm not alone in this appointment.

Thirdly, God loves me. I am His and He is mine. It is not because of me but it's because of Jesus. I am in Christ, Christ is in me and Christ is for me. And if He is for me then who can be against me?

Four, is God will sustain me. I don't know how long the trial will last but He will be there through all of it. He is not only with me but He will stay with me even though I am prone to wander from Him.

Fifthly, God's promises are sure in Christ. Statistics are there and you deal with them as you ought to deal with them. You might think you have a big adversity. Yes, but we have a

bigger God. Keep praying that preachers will keep preaching God's Word so that we see a big God because that is what makes it meaningful for He is in you. Many times, to try and get people to feel good we diminish God. You have to have a big God because the big circumstances of life will then pale into insignificances as you see Him.

Here is another statistic for you. God never fails His people. His promises are sure and that is a one hundred percent true. We know God causes all things to work together for good. I went through this about four years ago when I was diagnosis with prostate cancer. I knew that had lethal implications as well. I prayed "Lord, how do I treat this?" I received about 14 possibilities and so I worked and prayed my way through it and got it down to two – combination radiation therapy or the robotic surgery. I prayed about it, got peace and went with combination radiation therapy. If I had done robotic surgery they would have taken it out and that would have taken care of it and it would have been a done deal. Because I went the other route I have to get checked every year and there are three tests I have to do every year for it. One of those tests is an MRI and guess what it uncovered? It uncovered an aneurism that killed my dad and grandfather because they didn't know it. Now I know it. So I praise the Lord for combination radiation therapy. I can even praise the Lord for the bad thing of prostate cancer that God worked together for good and that's just a little insight of what God has done. There are many more stories that come with that but I don't have time to give them all to you.

The point is that there are these amazing things God has done and done well so that we can be assured of that. I didn't thank the Lord for prostate cancer when I first got it but I worked my way through it by asking God "Ok God what am I supposed to do responsibly by faith?" I don't think faith is to act irresponsibly and say 'I don't really have cancer for I believe it's gone.' No, it was there and if God wants to take it He can take it. So what do I do according to God's law of general revelation and how do you handle it? I had 14 possibilities in front of me. So I took them on and worked my way through it. And God was working through that process so that four years later I got one that was even more lethal than prostate cancer and that was the aortic aneurism which was uncovered by all of that. Again, this is the providence of God even when you don't see it.

I have another illustration for this. You have to go back to the 1970s for this – Amway, Shaklee, La Leche League and Lamaze. Those were the four big ones in the 1970s that if you were a Christian you had to get involved with one of those. I went to teach this women's group during that time and I've never been so touched in all my life because all the women bowed down as I stood up. I thought 'this has never happened to me before' and then I realized they weren't bowing to me they were bending over to get their cross-stitching out just in case I was as bad as they thought I would be. Cross-stitching was the fifth big thing people did in the 70s. My wife was a cross-stitcher.

When she did that I would ask her what she was working on and she would tell me that it was a pattern she was following. I would be looking at the back side of her cross stitch that looked like a bunch of tangles threads but I could see there was some kind of pattern there but I couldn't really tell what it was. Then she would flip it around and I'd say 'Oh I see, that's great!' Then she would flip it back over to work on some more where all I could see were the tangled threads. That is God's providence.

On this side of eternity we are looking on the back side and we can kind of see some things happening. We can make out some of what is happening and every once in a while God will flip it around and let you see what He is doing. But wait till we get to heaven and we begin to see all of the strands of His tapestry in the perfect, glorious cross-stitch of God's glory secured

in Jesus. That is what we will see but it is already at work and happening right now. That is what we can be assured of.

That leads me to number four and that is, what are the blessings of this? There is no fear and no anxiety. I want to put a modifier here. The same Paul who said 'be anxious for nothing' is the same Paul who said 'I have concerns about the churches.' It is not a statement of faith to walk into this open heart surgery knowing what could happen and me not take care of my responsibilities. So I have sat down with my wife, my children and my grandchildren. I have sat down with the elders and pastoral staff of this church. I have said 'if God decides it's promotion day for me then here is what I would share with you.' So I have concerns that I am supposed to address. It is not a statement of faith for me to dismiss my responsibilities if God calls me home. Be responsible.

I want to be responsible as a man, a husband, a father and a grandfather. Do you what it is to be responsible as a grandfather? When you are facing the reality of life and death you get to buy more things for your grandchildren. Spoil them even more and that will put a burden on your children to realize what a great parent you were. I also have responsibilities as a pastor to I think the greatest church any man has given the privilege to pastor and in a denomination and a presbytery. So I am to address those but never from fear. Here is a quote from one of my saints, 'Never take counsel from your fears.' Never plan life from fear. The love of Christ casts out all fear. The truth of Christ casts our fear and anxiety even as you then with no fear or anxiety can address the concerns of life with confidence motivated and compelled by the love of Christ.

Here is my final word in regards to this. By God's grace I hope this is not my final word unless He decrees otherwise but my final word about this is very simple. Personally I am a blessed man. It doesn't matter whether it's 68 years or 88 years I am a blessed man. I am saved by grace. I have a Savior who has sought me and bought me and brought me. He gave me a wife that is incomparable. He gave me children that are astonishing and astounding and their love for Christ and how He has gifted them to serve Him. He has given me grandchildren that I have been able to enjoy and see and anticipate what God is going to do in and through them. He has given me a family with wonderful sisters and brothers-in-law who love Jesus. He has given me an extended family even beyond those that is absolutely extraordinary. He has given me life forever and Jesus Christ.

He has also given to me the enormous privilege to pastor this congregation because all of you know that everything I have just said to you I am somewhere between zero and one hundred percent effective. You have experienced that in my pastorate. You have been a wonderfully patient congregation as God continues to work in me even as you wait for Him to work through me in your life. I am grateful for your patience and your graciousness. I am overwhelmed by it. I am utterly astounded by it, not because of you but because I am unworthy of it. I am grateful for it to have experienced the love of the brethren that is so humbling.

I remember some of those things 18 years ago when Frank Barker was receiving some of those things from you as he passed the mantle onto me and I have been blessed by your encouragement, what you gave him you have given to me and it was probably a greater challenge to give it to me than it was to him. It was a greater challenge to give it to me than to him. We have some of the greatest elders in this church for you are a blessed congregation. None of us are perfect but these elders and their love for Christ, for His church, for the Great Commission, for the Great Commandment and their desire to grow in grace and lead you as shepherds and overseers, is absolutely amazing.

One of the reasons I know I can go meet the Lord is because of the maturity of this congregation that is reaching into the lives of the new believers to encourage them and the amazing gifts of leadership that are here among our elders and deacons. You are in the Lord's hands but He has given you some good hands to serve you with these men of God. Then we have an astonishingly faithful and effective pastoral staff from an executive pastor that constantly amazes me with his wisdom and energy all the way down to a senior staff and all the way down to 34 men and women who serve you with a whole heart. They are not hirelings for they lay down their life for the sheep. They love doing what they do. They are growing in what they are doing and I can't tell you what a great blessing it is to know that you are in the hands of God with elders, deacons and a pastoral staff that loves the Lord and His people. That is an absolute personal blessing that is beyond my ability to describe it because it humbles me so much to be a part of it and to see it.

Finally, it is simple for me. My sins are forgiven. I have a new record. I have a new heart. I don't know what He is going to find in my physical heart but I've already told Him I have a new one. I have a new home. I'll have a new body. That new home is astounding. Eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love Him. So whether it is here or it's there I'll see you for Christ has promised and we sing it often. It's from the song *In Christ Alone*.

*No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand. Amen.*