

**Romans 8:14-28: All Things for His Good!**

APNTS “Baccalaureate Chapel” – April 26, 2018

Welcome to the final chapel of this academic year. It is the tradition here at APNTS for the President to speak at the opening of school chapel (which we call the “convocation”) as well as the final chapel, which has not had a specific name. After last year’s chapel in which I challenged graduates to “build bridges” of reconciliation as Christ’s ambassadors in the world, Dr. Cunningham commented that my message sounded much like a baccalaureate sermon, and I agreed. Many of you may have participated in a baccalaureate service at the end of your program in Bible College or University and know that the baccalaureate sermon is indeed a farewell to a graduating class, usually of a bachelor’s degree, hence the similarity of the two words. We have not done a baccalaureate service at the seminary, but the significance of the baccalaureate sermon fits those departing with masters and doctoral degrees as well. Since one of the roles of a president is to embrace and enhance the culture of a school, the honored and meaningful symbols, perhaps even begin new traditions, may we institute a new tradition at APNTS, that the final chapel of the academic year serve as a Baccalaureate chapel with a sermon that honors and challenges the outgoing class of students! And all of God’s people at APNTS said “Amen!”

And may I begin your final chapel service by saying “Congratulations” to those who will be graduating. A few more assignments to complete, a final exam or two (or four), and a loving embrace for your professor as you complete each class, and you will be on your way to commencement day next Saturday. It has been an honor for me to share this time these two years with you who complete your degrees and depart to follow God’s calling for you with diploma in

hand, to be a part of these significant days in your life at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

The ceremony next Saturday is called “Commencement” for good reason. We often think of graduation as an ending, of a degree program, but we call it “Commencement” because it is actually a beginning, where your focus shifts to the future, moving from what you have accomplished here to what you will become as you depart. In my first year as President last year, I handed folders to students graduating with master’s degrees, graduate diplomas, and certificates, signifying that they have completed requirements and are qualified to serve. Many of those students shared at the graduation banquet the night before that to be able to attend APNTS was indeed a blessing for them. I agree; the education that you receive here is not available to many young people around the world, and to receive it in a Christian environment where teachers and staff love you, from the perspective that they believe in God and believe in you, is a blessing.

Yet in a school where our motto is “Bridging Cultures for Christ,” our vision is that our graduates will go throughout this region and around the globe to be Christlike leaders sharing the gospel and making disciples of every people, culture, and language group --- that each one will BE a blessing. As God’s covenant with Abraham articulated in Genesis 12, “I will bless you and you will be a blessing, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you;” as Jesus instructed his disciples in Matthew 20 as He sent them out to serve, “Freely you have received, freely give;” so it must be with you. Commencement is not where the blessing ends, but where the blessing begins.

I wonder if, in Christian circles today, we have too often misinterpreted the word “blessing.” We hear it in song lyrics, use it in social media, sprinkle it in conversations when we talk about

what God has given to us --- a home, a family, an education, a good grade, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a new motorbike --- something to enjoy, that assures us of His love, that benefits us or protects us --- as if a blessing is an end in itself, having an inward focus rather than an outward mission, being a *cul-de-sac* (or a closed off passageway) for our own needs and desires, rather than being a road that takes us out into a needy world.

How easy it is fall into the trap of *spiritual role reversal*! Here's what I mean. We recognize God's power and know that He loves us, and we conclude that He wants to provide for us what we need to be happy. But if we aren't careful, being happy can subtly shift to selfishness, and soon His priority of holiness is replaced by it. It finds our way into our prayers --- bless my food, bless my travel, keep me safe, help me with this big test, get me this job, then another job with a bigger salary, bless me with this and with that and soon we find ourselves giving the orders to God for what He needs to do for us, instead of our prayers focusing on what we can do for Him, and --- you got it --- *spiritual role reversal* happens. We become the master and Him the servant, rather than the other way around as it should be.

It shows up in our interpretation of Romans 8:28: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good.*" We often stop with the word "good" and apply that to ourselves --- God works in all things for my good because I love Him and He loves me. It's a handy verse to use when we have a need or a problem or an obstacle, when something is not going as it should. It reminds me of Aladdin from the Disney film, his struggle with Jaffar, and his love for Princess Jasmine, who he believed would never fall for him unless she thought he was a Prince. Trapped in a cave, Aladdin found a lamp and when he rubbed it, the lamp released a genie, who explained that Aladdin had become his master and he will grant him three wishes. Of course, he uses his first wish to become a prince to be near Jasmine. Though Aladdin realized near the end that he could

not keep pretending to be something he is not, it's tempting for us to hang on to the idea of God serving us. The song the genie sang, "*You ain't never had a friend like me*" sounds familiar enough; we can so easily be tempted to keep God in "our corner," and never fully grasp His power to change the world --- to bless the world --- through us!

What about Romans 8:28? Let's read it again: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . . who have been called according to his purpose.*" There is that important phrase at the end --- those who have been called according to his purpose. What does it mean to be called according to His purpose? Could being called to His purpose have something to say about what is good in the lives for those who love Him? Could it be that God is calling us far beyond our own perspective of what is good for us alone toward what is good for His mission in the world, to a much greater good, a more complete blessing, than we might ever imagine otherwise?

What is God's purpose to which we have been called? First, some historical background. As I mentioned earlier, God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12 included the promise of blessing ("your descendants will become a great nation") but wrapped within a mission to bless the world ("all peoples on earth will be blessed by you"). In the years that followed, the children of Israel certainly embraced the promise of being a blessed people, but too often misunderstood their calling as one of privilege rather than of mission. To use images from Aladdin, all they had to do was sing songs of praises, offer the right sacrifices, rub the lamp the right way, and poof, our wish was His command. God kept reminding them through the prophets that obedience was more important than rituals, and Micah affirmed that what the Lord required was justice, mercy, and a humble walk with God. God had called the children of Israel to reflect His love and His character and in doing so to redeem the world. Jesus calls us as His church to do the same, that whatever we do for the

least of these --- the poor, the downcast, the lost), we actually do the same to Him. The call to God's purpose --- to reflect His love and to redeem the world --- is the same today for us today, those who follow Jesus, those who have received His Spirit and who are called as ambassadors to reconcile the world with the love of Christ.

So, what does that mean for you, soon-to-be graduates and continuing students of APNTS?

## **I. Live as His children**

First, God's purpose in your life is to live as His children. It's not just the phrase at the end of Romans 8:28, but it's the entire context of chapter 8 that draws us into God's purposes in our world. I love verse 19, which I think is the focal point of this chapter: The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. When I first read that verse as a young man I thought at first that the verse was talking about heaven, that someday way out there the Son of God would be revealed, and all creation is waiting for that. But then I realized that the word is plural – the sons of God (other verses use “children” so daughters included) --- the creation is longing in eager anticipation for those who have been born again to show themselves as God's children. Verse 22 compares this expectation to the pains of labor, then he says six very powerful loaded words: right up to the present time. It's as if the apostle Paul was telling them, “This is it! The world needs you, it is groaning as if in childbirth, knowing that something better is coming, and if they can see Me being revealed to them in your life of love and total commitment to God and His good purposes on earth, their lives will be changed forever.” As we live Christ-like lives as God's children, as Jesus' disciples, the world will see His glory revealed in us.

How are the sons and daughters of God to be revealed? Verse 14: Those who are led by the spirit of God are the children of God. We have received his spirit; we cry out, Abba, Father!

We share His identity. His Spirit testifies through us that we are His children. We are co-heirs with Christ to that family image and purpose. What was Christ's purpose? To redeem the world! His resurrection ushered in the kingdom of God. His kingdom is not off out there somewhere; it has now begun! And we are called to be its first fruits, and to usher in His kingdom and reign on earth. Verse 21 says it this way: "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." God's purpose for us is to give ourselves to that liberation, that glorious freedom that He gives to those who will receive Him, and as we share His life as His children, His blessing and His love will be revealed in and through us.

## **II. Live to Serve**

Secondly, for our lives to be lived according to His purpose, we must live to serve. And we serve God by serving others. That's not always fun; it's a lot easier to just take care of ourselves, pray that we get what we need, and consider that a blessing. But the real blessing comes as we bless the lives of others, even when it's difficult. Verse 17 says that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory. In Philippians 3:10, Paul wrote that knowing Christ involves both the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 16:24 that anyone who would follow him must take up his cross. It will take sweat, sacrifice, even suffering. Serving as Jesus did, even when it hurts, gets us in touch with how He thinks, how he feels, what his passions are, how deeply he cares for those separated from Him.

Jesus' baptism was a preview of His death and resurrection, and our own baptism is a symbol of our commitment to die out to selfishness and be raised to a new way of living that focuses on

loving God and loving each other with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Too often we think of a cross in our own lives as something that accidentally happens, a circumstance that we must bear. But that was not how Jesus approached the cross. He chose it! Luke 9 says Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. The disciples told him the Pharisees were out to get him, that there was nothing there but trouble, but He went anyway. If you have been called to serve as God's purpose in your life, then whatever suffering goes along with that is just part of the deal.

Superficially the sufferings of the present may seem to hinder God's purpose. Rev. Chuck Swindoll said it this way: "It is a truth that God gave me at a time when I was bombarded with unexpected and unfair blow. Everything I endure is designed to prepare me to serve more effectively. If I am a servant, I may feel used, unappreciated, and disrespected. Yet if He has ordained me to follow in the footsteps of his Son, he knows what is necessary and valuable. If God is directing the events of my life, they are right. And I will serve Him because I love Him, no matter what the cost." Perhaps it's serving even when it hurts that convinces the world that we're not in it for ourselves, but in it for the One who has called us. Can we go forward into difficult situations, take the risks to love and to serve, and count it as a blessing suffer for the right? Jesus did, and so can we.

### **III. Live to Save**

Finally, we must live to save. Let's go back to Genesis. God's purpose in creation was wrapped up in His nature of love. He is a God who creates covenants, who gives himself to others even when it's risky. If not, he certainly would not have chosen Israel. He could have chosen the powerful. Yet he chose slaves to show that what would be accomplished could only be through his

resources. Then through Jesus' radical obedience and His life of love, God revealed His plan for all of us. From the shepherds to the Prodigal Son to the repentant tax collector to the poor widow, the life of Jesus extended the kingdom to sinful nobodies who have nothing to give but themselves and their brokenness, and God's love changes them. And that's the purpose He is calling us to.

Now we know that only God can save. But we are called to be *His ambassadors*, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5, *as though God were making his appeal through us. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* Just as Jesus gave the disciples his authority in Matthew 10 and His presence in Matthew 28, He gives us His message and His mission. As His body, His hands and feet, He will do His work of salvation through us!

Paul admitted in verses 23-25 that we often find ourselves groaning through the redemption process for our own salvation and growth in holiness, yet we wait for it patiently as His Spirit works within us. Verses 26-27 assures us that the Spirit is there to help us in our weaknesses, as we pursue God's purpose in our lives, as we go about His work in the world. Even when we don't know how to pray for someone, when we don't know what to do that would make a difference, the Spirit who abides in us takes over and intercedes for us in all the situations we face, as we minister to others and share the gospel with them.

I realize that one can also read this part of the chapter from that "magic genie" perspective. "Lord, you know where I am weak so help make me strong --- so I can do what I want to do." But remember the context: the creation is waiting for the children of God to be revealed, and even when we don't know how to reach someone for Christ, the Spirit will help us. He searches in accordance with God's purpose, and He intercedes when we think we can do nothing but fail. Just



stay with it and trust Him; step out even when you're not sure you have an answer for the problems and pain you see around you. He is saving the world through you!

## **Conclusion**

Just as the Word has become flesh and lived among us in John 1, His World becomes flesh and lives on in us. The more we focus on his way of life, the more we reflect His image and what He is all about in this world. Oh, I'm still groaning through this redemption thing within me, and you don't have to watch me long until you see imperfections and where I struggle; that's what makes a walk with God a humble one. But I am His child, committed to serving him even when it means sacrifice and suffering, to a life devoted to His work of salvation so that His purposes can be accomplished through me. A world needing redemption depends on that!

Perhaps the Good News translation interprets Romans 8:28 best: *We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.* Oh, it sounds like a lot more work and risk than the magic genie thing, but here's the good news: down in verse 31, it reads: If God is for us, who can be against us? In verse 39: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. If you are one of those whose blessing will come by allowing Him to use you to change the world for Christ with the love of Christ, nothing can stand between you and God's good purposes. Nothing can stop you!