

Reformation
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To neglect God's work in the past is to neglect his Word in the present, for throughout history God has raised up men and movements, whose great work was to expound and apply that Word to their own generation, and by implication to ours also. Such men were the Puritans and such a movement was Puritanism.

Peter Lewis

Ministers never write or preach so well as when under the cross; the Spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them. It was this, no doubt, that made the Puritans . . . such burning and shining lights. . . . Though dead, by their writings they yet speak; a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour

George Whitefield

Without attempting an exhaustive definition we may say that essential Puritanism grew out of three great areas: the New Testament pattern of personal piety, sound doctrine and a properly ordered Church-life, and it is the mingling and blending together of all three of these emphases which made English Puritanism the astonishment and the inspiration it was and is still.

Peter Lewis

The Puritans were impatient with [the] halting of the Reformation. In their view, the English Church remained "but halfly reformed." They wished to "purify" the church of the remaining vestiges of Catholic ceremony, ritual, and hierarchy. . . . Horton Davies says that "puritanism began as a liturgical reform, but it developed into a distinct attitude towards life."

Leland Ryken

Puritans Living in Relationship to Affliction, Desertion, and Sin

Joel R. Beeke

The Puritans were renowned for preaching. Their prolific literature consists largely of sermons made ready for print. Their preaching was nicknamed "plain style" preaching for its biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical manner. They aimed, in the words of Robert Burns, "to bring Christianity home to men's bosoms and business." In what follows Dr. Joel Beeke aims to expound Romans 8:28 as the Puritans might have preached it in our day; hence the title of this article as well as the large number of Puritan quotations. We hope your appetite will be whetted to dig more deeply into Puritan writings. For this purpose consult Dr. Beeke's annotated Puritan bibliography supplied later in this issue. In keeping with the Puritan tradition Dr. Beeke's textual citations are from the King James Version.

Paul states a profound, comforting truth for the genuine Christian in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

The life of a Christian resembles the works of a watch. Open a watch, and what do you see? You see that certain wheels which turn in a counterclockwise direction are attached to other wheels that are working in a clockwise direction. Your first thought may be that the watchmaker is either foolish or confused. But he is neither.

Rather, he has so arranged the works of this watch and put in a mainspring to govern all its wheels, that when wound, though one wheel turns clockwise and another counterclockwise, all work together to move the hands around the face of the watch at precisely the right speed. Many wheels appear to counteract each other, but they all work together for the identical purpose of revealing accurate time.

Such is symbolic of the life of God's people. Some wheels

in their life run clockwise, which provides hope that the events of their lives directed by God's providence are good for them, but other acts of God's providence seem to run counterclockwise, that is, they seem to run against them. Only when their eye of faith is fixed on the great "Watchmaker" (and "Watch-preserver"), who has planned everything in His all-wise decree, do they see and understand that He has placed the mainspring of free grace within their "watch-life" so that all providential and spiritual wheels work together for their welfare. Yes, believer, though much often seems counterclockwise and against you when you see one wheel of providence work within or against another wheel of grace in various afflictions and riddles, your wise God knows exactly what He is doing. Therefore, follow the advice of Peter, "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). He shall work all things together to produce a divine and blessed result according to His sovereign good pleasure and eternal counsel.

Paul allows for no exceptions to the radical promise of Romans 8:28. He writes, "*All things*"—that is, all *good* things and all *evil* things—"shall work together for good." The best things—including the attributes and works of God, the promises and providences of the Father, the work and Person of the Son, the graces and labors of the Spirit, the everlasting covenant of grace with all its accompanying benefits of salvation, and all divine ordinances, such as the Word and the sacraments, prayer, the communion of saints—shall all work together for your real good if you are one who genuinely loves the God of the Scriptures. Even the worst things—including divine desertion, sin, Satan, infirmities, temptations, afflictions, persecutions—shall all work together for your welfare and God's glory. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* states, "He will make whatever evils

He sends upon me in this valley of tears turn out to my advantage, for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing, being a faithful Father" (Question 26).

No doubt some of us will say, "It is easy to understand how good things will work together for good, and I know that evil things are supposed to serve the spiritual welfare of God's people. But how affliction, divine desertion, and even sin can work together for their good I cannot comprehend."

It is my purpose in this article to show you in good, typical Puritan fashion several ways how even these three things—*affliction*, *divine desertion*, and *sin*—work together for the spiritual welfare of God's children, and from this we shall be able to safely conclude that "all things work together for good to them that love God." Let's focus first on the good that flows out of affliction for the believer, and then consider how good flows out of even divine desertion and sin for the believer.

Affliction Overruled for Good

No one naturally enjoys affliction. Afflictions can be very heavy and difficult to bear. "If sin is the head of the serpent," Ralph Erskine wrote, "affliction is its tail." And yet, dear believer, do not afflictions also serve as medicine for you in the hands of your great Physician, Jesus Christ? "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11). Let's look briefly at nine ways in which in Christ's hands your afflictions serve your spiritual welfare and eternal health.

First, through affliction doesn't the Lord humble you deeply, showing you who you are and what you remain in yourself—nothing but sin and corruption apart from divine grace? Does not the Lord teach you through affliction the

identical truth He taught Israel in Deuteronomy 8, “I led thee through the great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, and I fed thee in the wilderness with manna, that I might humble thee, to prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end” (v. 2)?

Affliction not only makes us as Christians humble before God, but it keeps us humble. As Puritan Richard Sibbes wrote, “Affliction takes away the fuel that feeds pride.” Puritans were fond of comparing afflicted believers to fruit-laden trees, and then adding that those trees which hang lowest to the ground are usually the trees that bear the most fruit. If God uses your afflictions to humble you before Him, do not your afflictions work together for good?

Second, through affliction God’s people learn what sin is in its God-dishonoring, defiling, and damning nature. Through affliction they learn, as the Puritan Thomas Watson aptly stated, that “sin has the devil for its father, shame for its companion, and death for its wages.” They learn through affliction that sin is actually an attack upon the very heart and being and attributes of God, as the Puritan John Bunyan wrote, “Sin is the daring of God’s justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeering of His patience, the slighting of His power, and the contempt of His love.” They learn through affliction, in the words of Puritan Thomas Adams, that “sin is the strength of death and the death of strength.”

In affliction the believer’s soul is, as Puritan William Bridge puts it, “searched with candles” (Zeph. 1:12) for secret and open sins. When affliction is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, sin is dragged out of its hiding place in the heart and set in the light of God’s holy and all-searching eye. “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance” (Ps. 90:8). Affliction strips off the Adam-like fig leaf covering God’s child who strives to cling to it by nature. “The sins of God’s people are like birds’ nests,” Bridge adds; “as long as leaves are on the

trees you cannot see them, but in the winter of affliction when all the leaves are off, the bird nests appear plainly.” When affliction is sanctified, sin becomes heinous and hated. Sin becomes exceeding sinful in its very nature. It becomes hated more for its nature than for its consequences.

Third, the Holy Spirit uses affliction as a medicine to destroy the deadly disease of sin in the children of God, causing them to bring forth healthy and godly fruit. When sin causes the believer to backslide from his Savior, the Lord Jesus as Good Shepherd must send the rod of affliction to set the crooked believer straight. Affliction is the Shepherd’s dog sent out, as Puritan Daniel Cawdray noted, “not to devour [the sheep], but to bring it in again; even so our Heavenly Shepherd.” Sanctified affliction cures sin. “Before I was afflicted I went astray,” David confesses, “but now have I kept thy word” (Ps. 119:67).

It is as good for a child of God to be chastised with affliction as it is for a young tree to be pruned (John 15:2), for the pressure of affliction not only presses out the awful stink of sin, but also sends forth the fragrant smells and fruits of divine graces. “It is said,” as Bunyan has pointed out, “that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit because there is no winter there.” The Christian needs wintertimes of affliction if he is to experience springtimes of blossoming, summertimes of growing, and autumntimes of harvesting.

“A sanctified person [is] like a silver bell,” wrote Puritan George Swinnock. “The harder he is smitten, the better he sounds.” True believers, as Puritan Stephen Charnock wrote, “often learn more of God under the rod that strikes us than under the staff that comforts us.” The Good Shepherd, as Puritan Richard Baxter notes, is not drowning His sheep when He washes them nor killing them when He shears them. Rather, His washings are needed cleansings;

His shearings are necessary strippings; His corrections are essential lessons.

Affliction reaps golden fruit. It mines, smelts, refines, and forms the believer until the divine goldsmith can see His reflection in the work of His own hands. Then the Christian experiences with Job, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job. 23:10). "Affliction," wrote the godly Robert Leighton, "is the diamond dust that heaven polishes its jewels with."

Fourth, the Lord uses affliction as a means to cause His people to seek Him, to bring them back into communion with Himself, and to keep them close by His side. As sheep will stay close by their shepherd in storms, so the Lord said of Israel, "In their affliction they will seek me early" (Hos. 5:15). The storms and stones of affliction only force God's sheep closer to their Shepherd. As Puritan Thomas Brooks quipped, "All the stones that came about Stephen's ears did but knock closer to Christ, the corner-stone," and opened heaven all the more for his soul. Brooks adds that affliction drove a woman of Canaan to the Son of David and a dying thief to a dying Savior; "Manasseh's chain was more profitable to him than his crown," for his chains were used to bring him to the knowledge that "the Lord was God" (2 Chron. 33:11-13).

Fifth, the Lord uses afflictions for good to conform His flock to Christ, making them partakers of His suffering and His image. Christ suffered on our behalf so that the Father might chasten us for our profit to make us partakers of His Son's righteousness and holiness (Heb. 12:10-11). Puritan John Trapp has noted that God had but one Son without sin, but none without affliction. The Father's afflicting rod is, in Thomas Watson's words, "a pencil to draw Christ's image more fully upon us." Through the way of suffering to glory we become followers of the Lamb of God who walks before His flock. Every path of affliction we encounter has

already been traveled, overcome, and sanctified by our Shepherd whose stream of substitutional blood, from His circumcision to the cross, is our sure pledge that no affliction or trial shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:39). Our deserved suffering leads us to Christ's substitutional suffering, which in turn, makes us exclaim, "His yoke is easy and his burden is light" (Matt. 11:30).

Dear believer, are not the occasions of your sufferings usually the times when you have most communion with Jesus Christ in His sufferings—whose entire life, as John Calvin says, was nothing but "a series of sufferings" (cf. Isa. 53:4-7)? Can you then complain for the light crosses you have to bear as guilty sinners (2 Cor. 4:17) when you meditate on the heavy cross Christ had to bear as the innocent sufferer?

Sixth, spiritual afflictions work for good because the Lord balances them with spiritual comfort and joy. David wrote, "For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). "Your sorrow," Christ told His disciples, "shall be turned into joy" (John 16:20). God brings His people into the wilderness to speak comfortably to them (Hos. 2:14). Where godly suffering abounds, godly consolation abounds (2 Cor. 1:4-5). "God gives gifts that we may love Him, and stripes that we may fear Him," wrote Puritan George Downname; "yea, oftentimes He mixes frowns with His favours."

The Shepherd's rod has honey at its end. God's Pauls have their prison songs. The sweet shall follow the bitter. The Lord turns their water into wine. Samuel Rutherford once wrote, "When I am in the cellar of affliction, I look for the Lord's choicest wines." In affliction, God's sheep sometimes may experience sweet raptures of divine joy which lead them, as it were, to the very borders of the heavenly

Canaan. At such moments they may confess with Eliphaz the Temanite, “Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: for he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth and his hands make whole. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee” (Job 5:17-19).

Seventh, affliction also works for good by keeping God’s children walking by faith and not by sight. If sensible enjoyments were always allowed to believers in this world, they would begin to love this life and live off of their spiritual provisions instead of the Provider Himself. Therefore, as one Puritan noted, “with their sweet meals the Lord orders some sour sauce to help their digestion,” in order that they may live not by sense, but by faith. In prosperity God’s people talk of living by faith, and often darken counsel by words without knowledge; but in adversity they experience what it means to live by faith.

Eighth, affliction works for good in weaning Christians away from the world. Thomas Watson points out that a dog never bites those who live in its home, but only strangers. So affliction bites God’s children deeply because they are too little at home with the Word and ways of God, and too much at home with the world and ways of man. If they were more often at home with their Master and Shepherd in heavenly places, the afflictions would be far easier to bear. “God,” Watson adds, “would have the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, doth not much trouble us.”

Finally, affliction is profitable in preparing God’s people for their heavenly inheritance. Affliction elevates their soul heavenwards, to look for “a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). Affliction paves their way for glory. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and

eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). “He that rides to be crowned,” Puritan John Trapp wrote, “will not think much of a rainy day.”

Dear believer, is not this enough to convince you that affliction is for your spiritual welfare—that you “shall not want” anything necessary or good for you, both temporally and spiritually? Though the wind of affliction is contrary to your flesh, yet it pleases God to use this crosswind to blow you toward heaven. Your afflictions are tailor-made to fit you with divine precision all the way to glory. As George Downname profoundly points out, “The Lord does not measure out our afflictions according to our faults, but according to our strength, and looks not at what we have deserved, but what we are able to bear.” We must learn to trust God with the amount of affliction He deems fitting to place upon us. Therefore, “in *every thing* [even in affliction], give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Divine Desertion Overruled for Good

By now I trust you are persuaded that affliction works together for your good if you are a believer. But what about the dreadful burden of divine desertion, that is, the burden of feeling that God has withdrawn Himself and become silent in my life? How can the groan of Zion, “The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me” (Isa. 49:14), ever work for good? If Thomas Watson called divine desertion “a short hell” and Samuel Rutherford called God’s silence (which lies at the heart of experiencing apparent divine desertion) the most bitter ingredient that the believer has to drink in his cup of sorrow—how can such desertion work for good?

Perhaps the best way to persuade you, if you are a true Christian, that even God’s apparent desertions of you are intended for your welfare, is to ask you a series of ques-

tions—the kind of questions seventeenth-century Puritans would ask you if they were alive today:

Does not divine desertion drive you to prayer to seek after and prize communion with God more than ever, causing you to knock at heaven's gates with unceasing petitions?

Does not the Lord use divine desertion to cause you to examine your own soul in order to discover, pull, and cast away the accursed weeds of sin which have caused you to desert God and Him to desert you?

When the Holy Spirit teaches you that the most common cause of divine absence is your own sin, does this not cause you to hate sin with a holy hatred?

Does not God use His own withdrawals in your life like a rough file to scrape off spiritual rust—rust which all too quickly develops on your faith, hope, love, and other graces when they are not used regularly?

Does not God's desertion serve by the Spirit's secret influences to purge you of remaining infirmities, weaning you from worldly thinking, worldly conversations, and worldly actions?

Have you not experienced that the Holy Spirit uses the withdrawals of God to cut off your reliance upon anything within you, such as your experiences, your humility, your prayers, your faith, and your conversion, so that you may learn to more fully believe in and rely upon Jesus Christ alone?

Has not the Holy Spirit used divine desertion to cut off

your relying upon even the gracious benefits God has given you, so that what God gives does not lord over your soul over and above the Lord Himself?

Through God's apparent desertions are you not often taught that His delays in your life are not denials, but rather, that at His time and in His way He will again draw close to commune with you through His Word?

Does not the Lord sometimes hold Himself back in order to teach you that He would be righteous never to commune with you again on account of your continued sinning against Him?

Through divine desertion does not God persuade you that He must be honored in His presence and His absence?

If you are honest, are not these Spirit-taught fruits of divine desertion profitable for you even though you often fight against many of them? Can you not see that the Lord brings you, in Watson's words, "into the depths of desertion before you die in order to keep you from the depths of damnation after you die"? At times you may even fear that He holds you above hell by desertion, but afterwards must you not confess that He does so to keep you from hell for eternity? Your desertions work for your spiritual welfare to prepare you for heaven, and to make heaven all the more heavenly when you shall finally enter into glory. Truly, even when God appears to absent Himself from you, He is still secretly present with you, as the *Heidelberg Catechism* says, with His Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit (Question 47).

Dear believer, keep courage. God's temporary, apparent desertion of you is just that—temporary and only apparent. As Puritan John Flavel wrote:

Christ's desertion [by God] prevents your final desertion. Because He was forsaken for a time you shall not be forsaken for ever. For He was forsaken for you. . . . [Moreover,] though God deserted Christ, yet at the same time He powerfully supported Him. His omnipotent arms were under Him, though His pleased face was hid from Him. . . . So, Christian, just so shall it be with thee. Thy God may turn away His face, [but] He will not pluck away His arm.

Puritan Timothy Cruso put it this way: "He who hath engaged to be our Christ for ever, cannot depart for ever."

Even Sin Overruled for Good

"All things," Paul wrote, "work together for good to them that love God." All things include not only affliction and divine desertion, but even sin. Even sin shall work together for good—not for them that love sin, but for them that love God. Augustine has rightly written, "God would never permit evil, if He could not bring good out of evil." Here, of course, we tread upon dangerous ground, for there is nothing worse than sin; we must do all in our power to discourage, and not encourage, sin.

We have to maintain at least three important guidelines when considering how sin works to the good of God's people. First, we have to maintain there is nothing good in sin itself. Sin is the evil of evils; in and of itself it can work nothing but death and damnation. Thomas Watson wrote, "Sin is like poison, which corrupts the blood, infects the heart, and without a sovereign antidote, brings death."

Second, we have to maintain that those who encourage themselves in sin by the argument that good will come out of it, wrest the Scriptures to their own damnation. Paul is clear that to do evil that good may come is only to make our damnation just (Rom. 3:8). One of the primary marks of being a Christian is to hate all sin and to love holiness and

godliness.

Third, only corrupt human nature can abuse the doctrine of good resulting from sin, for true grace can never play lightly with sin. Sin will work for good only to them that hate sin. It will work for good to them that love God and abhor themselves on account of sin. It will work for good to those who are humbled by sin, who flee to Christ to be saved from it, and who dare not allow themselves the least sin to gain an entire world. It will work for good to those who count the least sin worse than the greatest affliction. It will work for good to those who, knowing their own weakness, fight earnestly against sin, using the Word of God, the blood of Christ, the strength of the Spirit, and fervent prayer to wage holy war against it.

Yet, though sin is, as Thomas Watson notes, "worse than hell" in its essence, God, through Christ, and by His mighty overruling power, directs even sin to our spiritual welfare if we are true believers. Let me explain four ways in which this is so:

First, God causes the sinfulness of sin to bring us to true self-examination and self-knowledge. Scripture tells us that the Lord permitted Hezekiah to fall to teach him that which was in his heart. When we are in our right place before God, we will not shrink from knowing the worst about ourselves, just as a cancer patient requests to know the worst of his sickness. Therefore Job prayed, "Make me to know my transgression" (13:23). By nature our sins will find us out, but by grace we find our sins out. This leads us by the Spirit to a deep and profitable self-knowledge, causing us to confess with Paul, "I am the chief sinner," or with Martin Luther, "In myself I am not only miserable, but misery itself."

Second, God uses the sinfulness of sin to bring us to genuinely condemn ourselves. True Christians are led to pronounce a sentence of condemnation upon themselves, taking God's side against themselves. Thomas Watson pro-

foundly wrote:

When a man has judged himself, Satan is put out of office. When he lays anything to a saint's charge, he is able to retort, "It is true, Satan, I am guilty of these sins, but I have judged myself already for them; and having condemned myself in the lower court of conscience, God (for the sake of Christ) will acquit me in the upper court of heaven!"

God will never step upon a self-condemning beggar who casts himself exclusively on divine mercy. Rather, the owning of my sin as a child of the first Adam works for good by making room for the righteousness of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. God uses the greatest evil of sin to make room for the greatest good of communion with Himself. He uses condemnation to unlock the door to salvation.

Third, the sinfulness of sin works for good in the believer by keeping him engaged in the good fight of faith. The Christian not only leads a *wayfaring* life, but also a *warfaring* life. His heart is a castle that is in danger of being assaulted every hour. Daily a heavy duel is fought between two seeds, for "the spirit lusts against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). "Watch and pray" should be the daily, yes, hourly motto of our lives as believers.

Fourth, an awareness of the sinfulness of sin can also yield the profitable fruit of spiritual reformation. When God permits His people to fall into sin, His normal design is, according to one Puritan, "to break the back of that sin they have fallen into." Abraham stumbled in faith, but became a champion of faith. Moses stumbled in meekness, but was a champion of meekness. Peter stumbled in zeal, but became the champion of godly zealously. God makes His children's maladies their medicines when He gives grace to them not only to find out their sin, but also to drive out their sin.

I cannot conclude without a serious warning: Remember, Christian, though the Lord directs even sin to end in good, allow me to warn you never to make light of sin, nor to become bold in sinning. Sin will always cost you a high price. Just as grace is always amazing, sin is always dreadful. Remember David. Sin cost him peace, a broken family, and the terrors of the Almighty. Though the Lord shall never damn His children, He will have them taste something of the bitterness of hell in this life when they tamper with sin. He chastises sin by placing them into such bitter agonies and soul-distress that they can sometimes be filled with horror and be drawn to the brink of despair. Oh, that the dread character of sin, as well as its consequences, might serve as flaming swords to keep you and me from eating of the forbidden tree of iniquity!

Dear unconverted friend, if you are not born again, no affliction and no sin—in fact, nothing will serve your good. Affliction is a blessing to the child of God; it is only a scourge to the children of this world. Sin can only work death and damnation for you unless you learn to flee to God by faith and in repentance, casting yourself upon His mercy in Jesus Christ. By nature, through sin we ask God for the shortest way to hell. We would rather sleep our way into damnation than sweat our way into salvation. Do not forget that the damned shall live in hell as long as God Himself shall live in heaven. If you refuse to believe in Christ, you will end in hell one day. And there you will be constantly dying without ever being dead. In hell there is no relief, no intermission, no end to the wrath of God.

Dear friends, allow me to ask you a final question: Can you answer on one hand with Chrysostom when sent a threatening message from the empress, "Go tell her that I fear nothing but sin," and can you answer on the other hand with a godly forefather when offered promotion by King George III, "Sir, I want nothing but more grace"? For

those who hate sin and love grace, God shall fulfil His own promise, notwithstanding affliction, desertion, and sin: "All things work together for good to them that love God."

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