

- The Presence and the Purpose

Romans 8:28; Genesis 29:31-32

Sunday, October 22, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- *I remember the Promise Keepers movement*

For some time there was a movement among Christian men in the United States called "Promise Keepers". Some of their books are still in our church library. Founded by a former college football coach, Promise Keepers was devoted to encouraging the Christian faith among men in our nation and to develop integrity among them. Conferences across the country were held, attracting thousands upon thousands. I went to two of them myself. The founder, Bill McCartney, will be honored at an event in Denver September 21, according to the official website. It promises that Promise Keepers continues as a ministry but it is not the movement it once was. I remember one of the conference speakers, years ago, saying that Promise Keepers was not meant to be forever, but was something for that particular season of time. I think it did a lot of good in the lives of many men.

- *God is a promise keeper*

We were motivated by God, who makes promises recorded in Scripture, hundreds of them, and keeps them. One of the most famous is Romans 8:28:

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

A literal translation is "to the ones who love God He works all things together unto good". It does not mean that every circumstance is healthy, happy or good thing. Much of this world is anything but that. For the Christ follower, the Holy Spirit is always at work for her or his benefit, and the ultimate benefit is to become more like the Christ we follow. Circumstances, however, are often messy and difficult.

Consider a case study from Scripture that may not often be associated with this promise, but I think it can show us some things about it.

- *The case of Jacob, Leah, Rachel and Laban*

My reading of Scripture indicates that God's will for marriage is that it be between one man and one woman, chaste before and faithful thereafter. It doesn't neatly fit into modern cultural mores, but then again, it didn't fit into ancient cultural mores either. Our reading from Genesis is a small part of a story about Jacob, a Biblical patriarch who, in collusion with his mother Rebekah stole the birthright of his brother, Esau. It was a serious offense in those days. He later falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Rachel, but has to work seven years for her father, Laban in order to win the privilege to marry her, only to discover that he is actually marrying Leah, Rachel's older sister. One cannot have the old sister not be married as well, explains Laban. Jacob can also marry Rachel, but it will cost him another seven years of labor for his father in law. He pays the price.

- *Nobody is happy*

Leah has children, a wonderful boon in that culture, but knows that her husband loves another more than her. Rachel is loved, but, for a season, has no children, which drives her crazy. Jacob the schemer learns the hard way that it is not fun to be deceived. It all culminates in a confrontation with Laban that results in a vow called the Mitzpah; "may God watch between me and thee while we are absent, one from another." Friends use it to bless each other today but then it was a curse between two men who didn't trust one another. It see the Holy Spirit working in all of it.

- *The Holy Spirit is at work*

The Holy Spirit works in Leah's life by giving her children, and letting her know that she is valued and loved by God. The Holy Spirit works in Rachel's life by having her experience the frustration and anguish her pampered life kept from her, thus developing some empathy and compassion for others. The Holy Spirit works in the life of Jacob by teaching him the value of integrity by having him give fourteen years to a boss who has none. It's hard and messy, but I propose that in all of it God was working for the good of those who love Him, who are the called according to His plan.

- *The Application to Us*

He has promised to make us like Him. It is not always easy, but it is worth it. Much of our response to this promise from God has less to do with expecting everything to turn out nice and neat for us and more to do with our response to disappointment and challenges. Ask yourself, "am I a person of deeper faith now than I was five years ago?" "Do I have a life of prayer that is richer than before?" If so, why? If not, why not? Jesus promised that He would give His followers abundant life. My understanding of abundant life is not that it is easy or always fun, but rather a life that you can look back upon it when you reach the end and say, "it was worth it." "It was worth it all."

- *Conclusion*

Our God is a promise making, and I believe, promise keeping God. He has made hundreds of such promises in the Scriptures and this one is one of the best known. "All things work together for good" means that the Holy Spirit is working to help us grow as Christians in the midst of all the circumstances of life, good, indifferent or otherwise. The question is not how easy is your life, but what kind of person are you becoming.

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