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Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual Discipleship

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Spiritual Leadership

PRINCIPLES OF EXCELLENCE FOR EVERY BELIEVER

J. OSWALD SANDERS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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An Honorable Ambition

To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition.

1 TIMOTHY 3:1 NEB

Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

JEREMIAH 45:5

Most Christians have reservations about aspiring to leadership. They are unsure about whether it is truly right for a person to want to be a leader. After all, is it not better for the position to seek out the person rather than the person to seek out the position? Has not ambition caused the downfall of numerous otherwise great leaders in the church, people who fell victim to “the last infirmity of noble minds”? Shakespeare expressed a profound truth when his character Wolsey said to the great English general:

*Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambitions,
By that sin fell the angels; how can a man then,
The image of his Maker, hope to profit by't?*

No doubt, Christians must resist a certain kind of ambition and rid it from their lives. But we must also acknowledge other ambitions as noble, worthy, and honorable. The two verses at the beginning of this chapter provide a warning—and an encouragement—for sorting out the difference. When our ambition carries out a burning desire to be effective in the service of God—to realize God’s highest potential for our lives—we can keep both of these verses in mind and hold them in healthy tension.

Part of that tension is the difference between Paul’s situation and ours. We may understand his statement (1 Timothy 3:1, above) in terms of the prestige and respect given to Christian leaders today. But such was far from Paul’s mind. In his day, a bishop faced great danger and worrisome responsibility. Rewards for the work of leading the church were hardship, contempt, rejection, and even death. The leader was first to draw fire in persecution, first in line to suffer.

Seen in this light, Paul’s encouragement does not seem so open to misuse by people merely seeking status in the church. Phonies would have little heart for such a difficult assignment. Under the dangerous circumstances that prevailed in the first century, even stouthearted Christians needed encouragement and incentive to lead. And so Paul called leadership an “honorable ambition.”

We ought never to forget that the same situation faces Christians today in certain parts of the world. Leaders of the church in China suffered most at the hands of Communists. The leader of the Little Flock in Nepal suffered years in prison after church members had been released. In many troubled areas today, spiritual leadership is no task for those who seek stable benefits and upscale working conditions. It remains true that any form of spiritual warfare will inevitably single out leaders who by their role present obvious targets.

Paul urges us to the work of leading within the church, the most important work in the world. When our motives are right, this work pays eternal dividends. In Paul's day, only a deep love for Christ and genuine concern for the church could motivate people to lead. But in many cultures today where Christian leadership carries prestige and privilege, people aspire to leadership for reasons quite unworthy and self-seeking. Holy ambition has always been surrounded by distortions.

And so we find the ancient prophet Jeremiah giving his servant Baruch some very wise and simple counsel: "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Don't do it!" (Jeremiah 45:5 NLT). Jeremiah was not condemning all ambition as sinful, but he was pointing to selfish motivation that makes ambition wrong—"great things for yourself." Desiring to excel is not a sin. It is motivation that determines ambition's character. Our Lord never taught against the urge to high achievement, but He did expose and condemn unworthy motivation.

All Christians are called to develop God-given talents, to make the most of their lives, and to develop to the fullest their God-given gifts and capabilities. But Jesus taught that ambition that centers on the self is wrong. Speaking to young ministers about to be ordained, the great missionary leader Bishop Stephen Neill said: "I am inclined to think that ambition in any ordinary sense of the term is nearly always sinful in ordinary men. I am certain that in the Christian it is always sinful, and that it is most inexcusable of all in the ordained minister."¹

Ambition which centers on the glory of God and welfare of the church is a mighty force for good.

The word *ambition* comes from a Latin word meaning "campaigning for promotion." The phrase suggests a variety of elements: social visibility and approval, popularity, peer

recognition, the exercise of authority over others. Ambitious people, in this sense, enjoy the power that comes with money, prestige, and authority. Jesus had no time for such ego-driven ambitions. The true spiritual leader will never “campaign for promotion.”

To His “ambitious” disciples Jesus announced a new standard of greatness: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42–44). We will consider this amazing statement at length in a later chapter. Here at the outset of this study of spiritual leadership, we will simply highlight Jesus’ master principle: True greatness, true leadership, is found in giving yourself in service to others, not in coaxing or inducing others to serve you. True service is never without cost. Often it comes with a bitter cup of challenges and a painful baptism of suffering. For genuine godly leadership weighs carefully Jesus’ question: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38b). The real spiritual leader is focused on the service he and she can render to God and other people, not on the residuals and perks of high office or holy title. We must aim to put more into life than we take out.

“One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass on each other,” said Samuel Brengle, the great Salvation Army revival preacher. “The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.”²

“Let it once be fixed that a man’s ambition is to fit into God’s plan for him, and he has a North Star ever in sight to guide him steadily over any sea, however shoreless it seems,” wrote S. D. Gordon in one of his well-known devotional books. “He has a compass that points true in the thickest fog and fiercest storm, and regardless of magnetic rocks.”

The great leader Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) was tempted by rank and riches; indeed, he is most widely known by the title of honor noted here. But his attitude toward ambition was summed up in one simple statement: “I have one passion: it is He, He alone.” Zinzendorf turned from self-seeking to become the founder and leader of the Moravian Church, Methodist Church. His followers learned from their leader and circled the world with his passion. Before missionary work was popular or well-organized, the Moravians established overseas churches that had three times as many members as did their churches back home—a most unusual accomplishment. Indeed, one of every ninety-two Moravians left home to serve as a missionary.

Because we children of Adam want to become great,

He became small.

Because we will not stoop,

He humbled Himself.

Because we want to rule,

He came to serve.

FOR REFLECTION

How would you illustrate the differences between self-centered and God-centered ambition from your own life?

Who has been your most influential example of godly leadership?

What are some areas of honorable/holy ambition in your life?

The book cover features a series of concentric circles in shades of red and pink, creating a ripple effect. The circles are centered on the page and become more transparent as they expand outwards. The background is a solid, deep red color.

*Spiritual
Discipleship*

PRINCIPLES OF FOLLOWING CHRIST
FOR EVERY BELIEVER

J. OSWALD
SANDERS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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The Ideal Disciple

Blessed are you . . .

MATTHEW 5:11

It is more than a coincidence that whereas the last word of the Old Testament, which enshrines the Old Covenant, is “curse,” the first word of our Lord’s first recorded sermon under the New Covenant is “blessed.” This latter word is the keynote of His kingdom.

The Old Covenant of law could pronounce only a curse on those who failed to fulfill its demands. The New Covenant, which was sealed with Christ’s blood, does not reduce the law’s demands but imparts the desire and the dynamic to fulfill them. The “thou shalt, thou shalt not” of the Old is replaced by the “I will, I will” of the New.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12), Jesus set forth the characteristics of the ideal subjects of His kingdom—qualities that were present in perfection in the life and character of the One who announced them. It is a fascinating exercise to match each of those virtues to the life and ministry of the Lord.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed His words primarily to His disciples but did so in the hearing of the crowd (v. 1). “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” So this is a message for disciples.

He directed their attention away from the idea of being satisfied with mere outward presentability to an immeasurably higher and more demanding lifestyle. The standard He set is so high that no one can live the life depicted in the Sermon who is not the one depicted in the Beatitudes. The whole Sermon is revolutionary, but nowhere more so than in these verses. They cut right across the popular idea of the definition of blessedness and happiness.

Many think that if they had abundant wealth, absence of sorrow and suffering, good health, a good job, unrestricted gratification of appetites, and kind treatment from everyone, that would be blessedness indeed. But Jesus completely reversed that concept and substituted many of the very experiences we would like to sidestep—poverty, mourning, hunger, thirst, renunciation, persecution. True blessedness is to be found along this path, He told them.

The word *blessed* can be rendered “O the bliss!” or “to be envied, to be congratulated,” and it is applied to eight conditions of life that divide into two groups.

FOUR PASSIVE PERSONAL QUALITIES

Christ begins by calling four passive personal qualities blessed.

Spiritual Inadequacy. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3), or “O the bliss of those who feel inadequate!”

On the surface those words have a hollow ring to those whose

lives are plagued by that debilitating condition. Of course it is to the poor in spirit that our Lord is referring here, not to the poor in pocket. There is no virtue in poverty per se; it is certainly not an automatic blessing.

There are two words for “poor” in Greek. One means someone who has nothing superfluous; the other, one who has nothing at all, is bankrupt, and has no resources. It is this second meaning that Jesus referred to. The lesson is clear. The person who is to be envied is the one who, in consciousness of his spiritual bankruptcy, is cast back on God and draws on His limitless resources. As Luther said, “We are all beggars, living on the bounty of God.” But such poverty leads to spiritual affluence. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Spiritual Contrition. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (v. 4), or “O the bliss of the penitent!”

This is another paradox. It is as though one said, “How happy are the unhappy!” This quality is the product of the poverty of spirit of the first beatitude. It is not bereavement that is primarily in view, although that need not be excluded. The word *mourn* conveys the idea of grief of the deepest kind. It is mourning over sin and failure, over the slowness of our growth in likeness to Christ—mourning over our spiritual bankruptcy.

There are two mistakes that the disciple may make. One is to believe that Christians must never be happy and laughing; the other, that Christians must always be happy and laughing. As a wise man said, “There is a time for everything . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4).

No one attains full maturity without the experience of sorrow. There is room for the disciple to mourn over the slowness of his growth and the paucity of his spiritual attainment altogether apart from any actual sin in his life.

Mourning and bliss are not incompatible, for Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). The blessedness is in the comfort God gives, not in the mourning itself. “They will be comforted.”

Spiritual Humility. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (v. 5), or “O the bliss of the humble!”

Humility is an exotic flower in our sooty and smoggy world. It is no native of earth and is little esteemed by man in general.

The word *meek* is more than amicability or mere mildness of disposition. Its meaning has been weakened by the line in the children’s hymn “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” He was meek but was far from mild. The impression the hymn leaves is that Jesus was rather weak and ineffective. In fact, He was the very reverse of weak.

Was it mildness He displayed when, alone and with uplifted whip, He drove the materialistic traffickers with their sheep and cattle out of the Temple? He was anything but servile and spineless. When He asked the disciples who men said that He was, they replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah”—two of the most rugged characters in the Bible! The word *meek* was used of a horse that had been broken and domesticated, giving the idea of energy and power, controlled and directed.

In heaven, the seven angels sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3)—Moses, the meekest man on earth, and Jesus who said, “I am meek and lowly in heart” (κἰν). But both could blaze with sinless anger when the interests of God were at stake. Meekness is no spineless quality.

This virtue challenges the world’s standards. “Stand up for your rights!” is the strident cry of our day. “The world is yours if you can get it.” Jesus said, on the contrary, that the world is yours if you renounce it. The meek, not the aggressive, inherit the

earth. The meek have an inheritance. The worldly have no future. “They will inherit the earth.”

Spiritual Aspiration. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (v. 6), or “O the bliss of the unsatisfied.”

The blessing promised here is not for mere wistfulness or languid desire. It is for those who have a passionate craving not after happiness alone but after righteousness—a right relationship with God. The truly blessed person is the one who hungers and thirsts after God Himself, not only the blessings He gives. David knew that aspiration when he wrote, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

The discovery that happiness is a by-product of holiness has been a joyous revelation to many. We should therefore “follow after holiness.” God is eager to satisfy all the holy aspirations of His children. “They will be filled.”

FOUR ACTIVE SOCIAL QUALITIES

The ideal disciple will have four active social characteristics.

Compassionate in Spirit. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (v. 7), or “O the bliss of the merciful!”

It is always to the undeserving that mercy is extended. If it were deserved, it would no longer be mercy but mere justice.

It is possible to have a passion for righteousness and yet lack compassion and mercy for those who have failed to attain it. Mercy is the ability to enter into another’s situation and be sympathetic toward his plight or problem. Like meekness, this is a distinctively Christian grace. We are naturally geared more to criticism than to mercy.

Pity can be sterile. To become mercy, it must graduate from mere emotion to compassionate action. Although mercy does not condone sin, it endeavors to repair its ravages. Mercy encourages the one who has fallen to begin again.

Our personal experience will be the rebound of our attitudes and reactions. Just as in physics, where action and reaction are equal and opposite—those who are merciful will be shown mercy, and if we are shown mercy, we will be merciful. “They will be shown mercy.”

Pure in Heart. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (v. 8), or “O the bliss of the sincere!”

Cleanness of heart brings clearness of vision. The emphasis here is on inward purity and reality in contrast to external respectability.

The revelation of God envisaged here is not granted to the mighty intellect unless that is accompanied by purity of heart. It is more than an intellectual concept that is in view; it is not a matter of optics but of moral and spiritual affinity. Sin befores the vision. The word *pure* here means “unadulterated,” free from alloy, sincere, and without hypocrisy. “They will see God.”

Conciliatory in Spirit. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (v. 9), or “O the bliss of those who create harmony!”

It is not peace lovers or peacekeepers who qualify for this beatitude, but peacemakers. Nor is it those who maintain an existing peace, but those who enter a situation where peace has been broken and restore it. The beatitude speaks not of a pacifist but of a reconciler.

Very often peace can be made only at a cost to the peacemaker himself. It was so with our Lord. He made peace by the blood of His cross (Colossians 1:20). He achieved it by allowing His own

peace to be broken. The disciple is to follow in His train. To be a lover of peace is good. To be a promoter of peace is better. “They will be called sons of God.”

Unswerving in Loyalty. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (vv. 10–12), or “O the bliss of the sufferer for Christ.”

What was done to the Savior will be done to the disciple. But even insult, reviling, injury, and persecution can work blessing—not in the persecution itself but in the divine compensations it brings.

The tense of the verb conveys the sense, “Blessed are those who *have been* persecuted.” The blessing is in the results that flow from it. Suffering is the authentic hallmark of Christianity. “Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed,” said Peter (1 Peter 3:14).

But not all persecution is blessed. Sometimes Christians bring it on themselves through unwise and unchristian actions. For persecution to bring blessing, there are three conditions:

1. It must be for righteousness’ sake, not as a result of our angularity or fanaticism or tactlessness.
2. The evil-speaking must have no basis in fact; it must not be something that is the outcome of our sin or failure.
3. It must be for Christ’s sake—suffering that arises from our consistent loyalty to Him.

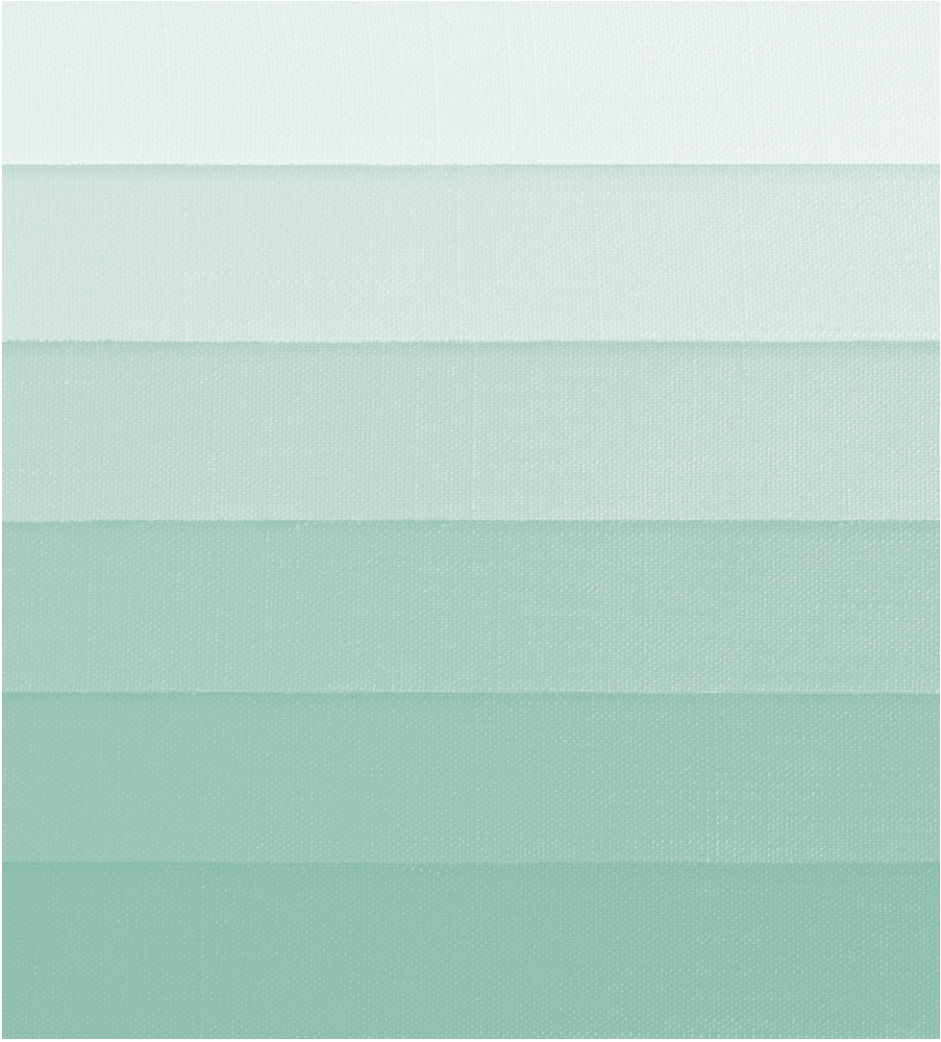
“Great is your reward in heaven.”

FOR REFLECTION

What does it mean to you that the Old Testament delivers a message of “curses” and the New Testament delivers a message of “blessing” (p. 11)?

Give yourself a progress report on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 high) for each of the four passive personal qualities of discipleship (pp. 12–15).

Which of the four social qualities in the Beatitudes are you most tempted to ignore? Why?



Spiritual Maturity

PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR EVERY BELIEVER

J. OSWALD SANDERS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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The Overruling Providence of God

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.

ROMANS 8:28

Reading: ROMANS 8:26-30

This sentence, interpreted in its context, can bring unlimited comfort and cheer to the Christian in time of testing. With Paul it was a matter of profound conviction: “And *we know* that all things work together for good.” No room for question here. He had unwavering confidence in the overruling providence of his God. He believed that “God makes everything turn out for the best” (Scholefield). For him this conviction rendered complaining unthinkable since every event of life was either planned or permitted by God. It made possible of achievement his counsel of perfection, “In everything give thanks.” It turned sighing into singing. It was a practical embracing of this truth which enabled him and his companion to sing at midnight even when plans

seemed to miscarry and they were immured in a dungeon with bleeding backs. To him it mattered little whether physical conditions were propitious so long as he knew he loved God and was called according to His purpose. Everything, whether seemingly adverse or advantageous, would certainly turn out for the best. The important question is, Do we share Paul's joyous assurance?

Paul couches his statement in such categorical terms that it is impossible to remain neutral in the face of its astounding claim. If it were somewhat qualified or expressed in less dogmatic fashion, it would be easier to accept. When faced with devastating sorrows or reverses, it sounds rather glib and divorced from the grim reality of experience to say that it is all working together for good. But is it really so? Must this assertion be viewed with secret skepticism, or can it be embraced with joyous realism? Interpreted in its context, with full value given to each word, there is no verse in the whole of Scripture which will give such poise and serenity in the midst of tragedy, trial, or disappointment.

The key to the interpretation of the central statement, "All things work together for good," is that it must be neither isolated from its context nor divorced from its two conditional clauses—"to them that love God" and "to them that are called according to his purpose." These two clauses determine and limit its application. The simple fact is that all things do not without qualification work together for good for everybody. Nor does this verse claim that they do. Two things are presupposed. First, there must be correct *relationship* to God. The beneficiary under the promise is a member of God's family, enjoying and manifesting the family affection. Such a person is persuaded that He who did not spare His own Son would never permit or ordain anything which was not for his ultimate good. Love trusts even when it cannot discern. Then there is *partnership*. He is

one of “the called” according to God’s eternal purpose, and his plans have given way to God’s plan. To him it is inconceivable that God’s perfect design could be thwarted by anything really adverse to him. God is intermingling all things for his good. With his God, “accidents are not accidental and adversity is not adverse.” The conclusion is that God’s purpose unfolds to those whom He has called and who love Him in return. The promise has nothing for the man in rebellion against God and out of sympathy with His purposes. It is to the cold heart that this verse becomes a stumbling block. It glows with comfort when the heart is warm with love to God. But to be entitled to the comfort of the verse we must come within the category laid down by Paul.

The question inevitably arises, Can tragedy be good? Is ill health good? Is bereavement good? Is frustration good? Why does God permit these to strike us? In Paul’s day there were four characteristic reactions to adversity. The attitude of the Epicurean was, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” The Cynic defied fate to do its worst. The Stoic set his teeth and steeled himself to accept the divine will. Epictetus wrote:

Have courage to look up to God and say, “Deal with me as Thou wilt from now on. I am as one with Thee; I am Thine; I flinch from nothing so long as Thou dost think that it is good. Lead me where Thou wilt; put on me what raiment Thou wilt. Wouldst Thou have me hold office or eschew it, stay or flee, be rich or poor? For this I will defend Thee before all men.”

But in the text Paul epitomized the Christian attitude, not defiance or indifference or even resigned acceptance. The Christian joyously embraces adversity or sorrow, knowing that all things, whether propitious or adverse, are working together for his highest good.

Four truths full of comfort and encouragement emerge from this verse.

GOD'S PLAN IS BENEFICENT

*“All things work together **for good.**”*

The crux of the problem involved in the practical application of this verse lies in our interpretation of the two words “for good.” The “good” promised by God in His long-sighted love may not always seem good and acceptable to us. Indeed His providences sometimes appear disastrous when viewed from a materialistic, temporal viewpoint. The good promised by God is *spiritual* rather than temporal, and some time may elapse before we discern its true beneficence.

It took years before the strange providences in the life of Job had their vindication. His afflictions had their rise in the malicious mind of Satan, but Job did not attribute them to blind chance or even to Satanic agency. He expressed his philosophy in the noble words, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” When taunted by his wife he maintained his confidence in God. “What! Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” His stand of faith was abundantly vindicated by subsequent events. He emerged from his trials enriched and not impoverished. Through Job’s cooperation, God took the evil acts of Satan and made them work out for good without in any way condoning the evil.

“We tend to interpret good in terms of animal comfort,” writes Vernon Grounds.

If we are exempt from disease, if our bodies are never stabbed by pain, if we always have money in our pockets or reserve in the bank, if we live in modern

homes and enjoy the latest luxuries, if we can dress well and take long vacations at the seashore . . . that we consider good. Unfortunately we find ourselves victimized by a materialistic civilization, and despite our Christian faith we subtly equate comfort and goodness. In the same way we tend to equate success with goodness. . . . Or yet again we tend to equate pleasure with goodness. . . . And yet such equations are a million miles removed from Paul's basic teaching. And because all of these are false equations, we have trouble with Romans 8:28. Our failure to grasp Paul's conception of the good, changes what ought to be a soft pillow for our hearts into a hard problem for our heads.

*Whate'er my God ordains is right;
He taketh thought for me.
The cup that my Physician gives
No poisoned draught can be,
But medicine due,
For God is true.
And on that changeless truth I build
And all my heart with hope is filled.*

Few tragedies have highlighted this truth more than the fire at Serampore, India, on March 12, 1812. Within a few moments the sacrificial translation work of years of William Carey and his colleagues went up in smoke. The loss in paper for Bibles was immense. The newly cast Tamil type and Chinese metal type were a total loss. Portions of manuscripts, grammars, and dictionaries laboriously compiled perished. William Carey wrote, "Nothing was saved but the presses. This is a heavy blow,

as it will stop our printing the Scriptures for a long time. Twelve months' hard labor will not reinstate us; not to mention the loss of property, mss, etc., which we shall scarcely ever surmount."

The loss of manuscripts referred to included portions of nearly all his Indian Scripture versions, all his Kanarese New Testament, two large Old Testament books in Sanskrit, many pages of his Bengali dictionary, all of his Telugu Grammar and much of his Punjabi, and every vestige of his well-advanced Dictionary of Sanskrit, the *magnum opus* of his linguistic life.

But there follows his affirmation of faith in words akin to those of our text. "God will no doubt bring good out of this evil and make it promote our interests." Before the ashes were cold, Carey's colleague, Marshman, wrote that the calamity was "another leaf in the ways of Providence, calling for the exercise of faith in Him whose Word, firm as the pillars of heaven, has decreed that all things shall work together for good to them that love God. Be strong therefore in the Lord. He will never forsake the work of His own hands."

In the midst of this desolating reverse, God's servants' grasp of this truth kept their hearts at peace. "It stilled me into tranquil submission, enabling me to look up and *welcome* God's will," said Marshman. Carey told how he had been hushed by the verse, "Be still, and know that I am God." Ward, the third of the famous trio, was found while the fires were still smoldering, not just submissive, but jubilant.

But how could this possibly be working together for good? It did not take long for the strategy of God to appear. "The catastrophe unstopped the ears of British Christendom. In the blaze of the fire they saw the grandeur of the enterprise; the facts were flashed out. And thus the destruction proved a beacon, and multiplied the Mission's zealous friends." So loud a fame it

brought them as to reverse the nature of their risks. “The fire has given your undertaking a celebrity which nothing else could,” wrote Fuller in a faithful warning. “The public is now giving us their praises. Eight hundred guineas have been offered for Dr. Carey’s likeness! If we inhale this incense, will not God withhold His blessing, and then where are we?”

Then what is the nature of the good which Paul had in view? The answer is found in the context: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to *be conformed to the image of his Son*” (Romans 8:29). Paul’s conception was that anything which made him more like Christ was good, altogether irrespective of its reaction on his comfort or health or success or pleasure. Christlikeness does not always thrive in the midst of material comforts. Many of the most Christlike Christians have been plagued with ill health. Success in business has in many lives been the death knell of holiness. Seeking after pleasure often defeats its own ends.

GOD’S PLAN IS ACTIVE

*“All things **work** together for good.”*

The heart that loves God discerns Him busily at work in even the most heartbreaking and unwelcome happenings of life. All things are turning out for the best because God is at work in them, transmuting bane into blessing and tragedy into triumph. His operation is not always clearly discernible. Indeed, it not infrequently seems that He is doing nothing. Carlyle, meditating on the enigmas of life, in the anguish of his heart said, “The worst of God is that He does nothing.” But God is often most active when all seems most still. The working of God in nature

is unseen but nonetheless effective. Under His invisible control the stars maintain their predestined courses and the restless ocean keeps within its appointed limits. We should never, in impatience at the seeming inactivity of God, take things into our own hands and try to be our own Providence. The daily happenings, whether tragic or joyous, are the raw material from which God is weaving the design of life. “This dance of plastic circumstance, machinery just meant to give the soul its bent.” Introduce God into the events of life, and order emerges from chaos. “He is too kind to do anything cruel, too wise ever to make a mistake.” No conceivable circumstances could better prosper God’s plan or further our highest good.

GOD’S PLAN IS INCLUSIVE

“All things work together for good.”

“All things” means exactly what it says. Everything in every sphere is under the beneficent control of God. It is the comprehensiveness of this statement which is so breathtaking. Bereavement, illness, disappointment, blighted hopes, nervous disorders, children who are giving concern, lack of fruit in service despite earnest endeavor to fulfill conditions of fruit-bearing—surely these are not working together for good. Paul quietly asserts that such is the case. We may be willing to admit that life as a whole is subject to the overruling providence of God, but often we hesitate to believe that every detail of life is the object of His loving concern. Yet our Lord asserted this to be the case. Even the sparrow did not fall to the ground without His Father’s knowledge. The circumstances of the Christian’s life are ordained of God. There is no such thing as chance. Love

refuses to believe that God is not interested in every detail of life. Everything is permitted and designed by Him for wise purposes. He will not cease His supervision for a moment.

Every adverse experience when rightly received can carry its quota of good. Bodily pain and weakness cause us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reverses point up how limited are our resources. Mistakes and failure humble our pride. All these things can be included in the term “good.”

GOD’S PLAN IS HARMONIOUS

*“All things **work together for good.**”*

They work into a preconceived pattern. The events of life are not related. The physician’s prescription is compounded of a number of drugs. Taken in isolation, some of them would be poisonous and would do only harm. But blended together under the direction of a skilled and experienced pharmacist they achieve only good. Barclay renders the verse: “We know that God intermingles all things for good for them that love Him.” The experiences of life when taken in isolation may seem anything but good, but blended together the result is only good.

In adverse circumstances unbelief queries, “How can this be working for good?” The answer is, “Wait until the Great Physician has finished writing the prescription.” Who cannot look back on life to see that things considered disastrous proved in the ultimate to be blessings in disguise? The artist blends colors which to the unskilled eye seem far removed from his objective. But wait until he has finished his mixing.

Life has been likened to an elaborate tapestry being woven on the loom. For the beauty of the pattern it is imperative that the colors must not be all of the same hue. Some must be bright

and beautiful, others dark and somber. It is as they are all worked together that they contribute to the beauty of the pattern.

*Not until each loom is silent
 And the shuttles cease to fly
 Will God unroll the pattern
 And explain the reason why;
 The dark threads are as needful
 In the Weaver's skillful hand,
 As the threads of gold and silver
 For the pattern He has planned.*

In time of severe trial there is always the temptation, while assenting to the truth in general, to feel that our present circumstances are an exception. If that were so, the text is null and void, and the truth of the overruling providence of God in the affairs of men has no meaning. As tragedy upon tragedy overwhelmed Joseph—banishment from home, sale as a slave, unjust imprisonment—it was difficult for him to see these untoward events working together for his good. Yet in retrospect he said to his brothers, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; *but God meant it unto good*” (Genesis 50:20).

In the events of life, “God has an end in view which is worthy of Him, and will command our fullest approbation when we cease to know in part.” Even if called upon to face the wrath of man or devil we can confidently rest in the assurance that it will ultimately praise God, and that which cannot do so will be restrained.

*Whate'er my God ordains is right;
 My Light, my Life is He,
 Who cannot will me ought but good,*

*I trust Him utterly:
For well I know
In joy or woe
We soon shall see, as sunlight clear,
How faithful was our Guardian here.*

FOR REFLECTION

What are the differences between having a relationship with God and a partnership with God?

How would you explain and illustrate Sanders' phrase, "strange providences" (p. 14)?

Sanders describes God's plan (providence) as beneficent, active, inclusive, and harmonious. Which of these characteristics do you find most challenging to accept? Why?