

*Victory*

*1 Samuel 7, Romans 8*

*September 27, 2009*

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*Year of the Bible*

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*Where is God in victory and defeat?*

*That's the question I see in this text and I've noticed again and again as we've read the Old Testament.*

*Is God with us when we succeed?*

*Is God angry with us when we fail?*

*Clearly the writers of the Old Testament understood it that way. When they were successful in battle, it was because of the actions of God. In this case, the Lord thundered a mighty voice that day and threw the Philistines into confusion.*

*But previously, the Israelites had been subject to the Philistines because they were sinning against God and worshipping Ba'al and Astarte and other false gods.*

*We may not have the Philistines camping outside our gates, so this battle imagery may not transfer into our lives as easily as some other biblical stories might. But consider the questions—is God with us when we succeed? And is God angry with us when we fail?*

*Let's start with the failure question. Today we don't tend to explicitly connect failure to God's punishment. Or most of us don't. But a number of televangelists blamed Hurricane Katrina on God's judgment of the sinful New Orleans lifestyle. Last month, when the Lutheran Church was having their annual meeting in Minneapolis, a tornado went through town. Conservative Christian commentators blamed the tornado on God's judgment against the Lutheran Church for considering giving more inclusion to gay and lesbian Christians in the church.*

*When you read the Old Testament, you can understand how such people justify their judgmentalism. But my problem is I'm not sure who appointed Pat Robertson as God's spokesman. In the Old Testament, the prophets, like Samuel, were the ones to speak for God. But the office of prophet undergoes a change after John the Baptist. Once the Spirit descends upon Jesus and then, after his resurrection, it descends on the church, you don't see prophets. There are apostles, disciples, teachers, evangelists, elders, and deacons, but the role of prophet is given to the church as a whole. It is disconcerting to me when people presume that their thoughts are God's thoughts.*

*Most Christians don't blame entire subgroups of humanity for natural disasters. But I have heard well meaning Christians say things to people that are just as questionable. A number of years ago, after a friend had a miscarriage, one of her good friends told her that if she improved her prayer life and got closer to God, she'd have a successful pregnancy. Friends, I do not believe that woman was correct. My experience of God does not support her claim.*

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*How about the idea, though, that God is behind our success?*

*Initially, this one seems easier to see. Sure, we believe that the blessings in our lives come from the God who made us. We may or may not see God's action in our lives quite as clearly as the Israelites did when the Philistines were thrown into confusion, but consider this example.*

*Shortly after 9/11, stories started circulating about people who were supposed to be in the towers that morning, but weren't. One man took his child to their first day of kindergarten and was late. Another person stopped to tie his shoe and missed the train, getting him to New York late enough that he wasn't at his desk when the planes hit. Another person missed their flight that later crashed into the pentagon because they were stuck in traffic.*

*While I imagine that those people who weren't in the towers that day did feel very thankful, I have a problem with circulating those stories as if God was looking out for those particular people.*

*Because we know the reality. Thousands of people died in those buildings and on those planes. Was God not looking out for them? Was God punishing them?*

*This punishment/reward understanding of God is something we should guard against. I believe it to be unhelpful and untrue. While it is how the Old Testament writers understood their experience of God, it is not how we have to. Because we experience God most clearly through the person of Jesus Christ.*

*I am not saying that Jesus made the Old Testament invalid or that God changed between the First and Second Testament.*

*But I am saying that because we know of Jesus of Nazareth, we can't read the Old Testament without that knowledge. And our experience of God through Jesus is one of sacrificial love. God gave God's very own child to the world in love.*

*So, where is God in our suffering, when the Philistines are at the gates? Well, one answer is that God is suffering with us. Jesus became human, fully human, and lived and died, and succeeded and suffered. So, in all of the moments of our lives, God is present with us, and knows our pain. Because as Jesus, God suffered our pain.*

*We also could answer that God is re-creating and redeeming the world in both the good and the bad experiences of our lives. One of my favorite passages in Scripture is Romans chapter 8, but particularly this verse—"for we know that in all things, God is working together for good*

*for those who love God and who are called together according to his purpose”.*

*This doesn't mean that God is only present with us when we succeed. And it doesn't mean that God causes bad things to happen as punishment. But it means that God's redemptive powers are greater than the worst human suffering.*

*Listen to the rest of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans:*

*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*

*He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?*

*Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

*Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.*

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

*As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all day long;*

*we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.*

*The truth is, there has been suffering in each of our lives, and there will be more. And there may be days when it feels like you are being punished for no good reason. And well meaning people might even suggest ways for you to earn God's favor.*

*But the truth is, we have received God's favor. Through the unexplainable grace of God, we have received the gift of new life in Christ. It isn't because we earned it or because God likes us more than God likes someone else.*

*It is because God so loved the world that God gave his only son.*

*So as we're reading through these Old Testament texts, keep reading them through your knowledge of the grace we've received, and remember that God doesn't cause suffering, but God is present with us in our suffering. Amen.*