

Colossians 3:16

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teaching and admonishing one another
in all wisdom,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*



While on vacation this week I will be sharing some devotionals written by others. This devotional is by Pastor Sam Storms from Oklahoma City, OK. You can find more of his meditations at: <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog>.

THE THREE MOST ENCOURAGING BIBLICAL WORDS FOR 2020 AND 2021

The day after the horrible events that took place in our nation's capital, I shared with our church staff what I believe are the three most important words from the Bible as we leave behind 2020 and enter into 2021.

Those three words aren't what you would expect. They aren't, "God is love," although he certainly is. They aren't, "Christ is risen," although he certainly is. They are three simple words that I've grown to celebrate, three words that bring encouragement and hope in the midst of all the chaos and corruption that surround us.

Those three words are: "***in order that.***" That's right. "In order that." Why are these three words so important?

They are important and encouraging and hope-filled because for everything that happened in 2020, both in your local church and in our society, and for everything that will happen in 2021 and beyond, there is an "in order that." I can't tell you in every instance what the "in order that" was, but I know with absolute certainty that nothing that happened was meaningless or purposeless.

These three words remind me that there is always a divine, God-glorifying purpose in everything. As I said, we may not always be able to discern what it is, but the Scriptures assure me that there is design in all our distress.

All of us have struggled this past year with trying to discern some purpose in the events that have rocked our world. We want to know if God is behind it, and if so, what is it that he is aiming to accomplish.

2020 has been confusing, disheartening, frightening, frustrating, infuriating, depressing, and discouraging all at once. But through it all I think God wants us to understand and to confidently rest in the truth that in everything there is an "in order that." I say that because of what the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9.

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:8-9; NASB).

Sometime between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, most likely no earlier than the spring of 55 a.d. and no later than the summer or fall of 56 a.d., Paul had what he considered a singular and altogether unique brush with death that transformed his perspective on life and ministry and, above all, his relationship with God.

We don't know what it was. Some believe it was a literal and quite physical confrontation with “beasts” in the arena at Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:32)? Was it the life-threatening circumstances of the riot at Ephesus, instigated by Demetrius the silversmith (Acts 19:23-41)? Was it exposure to extraordinary persecution and peril from his enemies, or perhaps a sentence of death passed against him by a civil court, or possibly some unidentified hardship like extended hunger or a near-death experience during the course of one of his many imprisonments?

Perhaps Paul is describing some recurrent illness, a painful and obviously life-threatening affliction, the burden of which was so severe as to expel all hope of survival. Of course, we'll never know for sure. What's most important is how it transformed Paul's perspective on life and the lessons we should learn from it as well.

Whether we face physical illness, such as Covid, or financial stress or relational disappointments, we find it hard to see in it anything remotely approaching a “purpose” or “reason”. Such disillusioning experiences strike us as random and senseless and lacking all value. Often the best we can do is write it off as an attack of the enemy, never discerning the divine design in our distress.

But as overwhelming, excessive, and burdensome as this brush with death was for Paul, he knew that God was in it! The point of it all, says Paul, “was in order that we not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead” (v. 9b).

The explicit “in order that” of v. 9 (NAS; the ESV renders it “but that was to”) ought forever to silence those who doubt whether God is sovereign over the troubles and afflictions of life. There is always design in our distress. God so values our trust in him alone that he will graciously dismantle everything else in the world that we might be tempted to rely on: even life itself, if necessary. His desire is that we grow deeper and stronger in our confidence that he himself is all we need.

The pandemic, the political chaos, the racial hostility, the disruption of life, the loss of income, the pressure of trying how best to educate our children when schools shut down, everything, was “in order that” we might be compelled by God's grace to learn how not to rely on ourselves or anything else but on God alone.

If you still can't discern or see God's hand in what has happened to you this past year, that's ok. Just know that there was a divine design in your distress. If nothing else, it was in order that you and I might learn not to trust in our own resources, talents, wealth, or work, but in God alone.