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ALL THINGS FOR GOOD FOR US

Romans 8:28

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Romans Lesson 51

All Things for Good for Us Romans 8:28

One of the most helpful things that you can learn with regard to your Christian life is how to handle the trials that inevitably will come your way. Jesus explained that there are some who receive the word with joy, but their faith is only temporary. When affliction or persecution because of the word hits them, immediately they fall away (Matt. 13:20-21). They didn't expect affliction or understand how to handle it. They signed up for success, not suffering. They wanted prosperity, not persecution. So they fell away when the trials hit. It is especially in times of suffering that Satan, whom Peter describes as a roaring lion, seeks to devour you (1 Pet. 5:8-10). So it is essential for your spiritual survival that you know and apply what the Bible teaches about trials.

Romans 8:28 is one of the most familiar verses on this subject. The NASB reads, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Due to a textual variant, the ESV translates it slightly differently and, I think, more accurately: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." But either way the sense is the same. All things don't just *happen* to work out for good on their own. Rather, *God* providentially works all things together for good for His people according to His purpose.

But while Romans 8:28 is a source of great comfort when it is properly understood, it is often misunderstood and misapplied. Some think that it teaches a Pollyanna positive outlook on life, that everything will turn out for our happiness in this life. But this denies or greatly minimizes the reality of suffering and evil. It insensitively says to those who are suffering: "Don't worry, be happy, your loss isn't really so bad." But the verse isn't saying that.

Sometimes well-meaning Christians recite Romans 8:28 to a person in the throes of grief, trying to help or comfort. But at the moment of loss, the grieving person mostly needs your presence and your help with practical matters. Later, if need be, you may be

able to help him understand and apply this verse. But it will help us all to weather suffering better if we understand this verse *before* the storm hits.

In the context, Paul has given us encouragement and hope with the truth that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us (8:18-25). He has also encouraged us with the truth that the Holy Spirit is helping us in our weakness by praying for us according to the will of God (8:26-27). But that raises the question, "If the Spirit is praying for the saints according to the will of God, then why do we suffer? Why are we persecuted, sometimes to death? Can such suffering be according to God's will?" In response, Paul affirms,

God works all things together for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.

Note the contrast between (8:26), "for we do *not know* how to pray as we should," and (8:28), "*we know* that God causes all things to work together for good...." In our weakness, we often do not know what to pray for, but we can know, even in such times, that our sovereign God is working all things together for our ultimate good. Paul goes on to explain how this is so in 8:29-30. Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 530) paraphrases the flow of thought in 8:28-30 as follows:

"We know that all things are working for good for those of us who love God; and we know this is so because we who love God are also those who have been summoned by God to enter into relationship with him, a summons that is in accordance with God's purpose to mold us into the image of Christ and to glorify us."

To understand and apply this verse, we need to think through four truths:

1. God has an eternal purpose and He is able to accomplish His purpose.

This truth is foundational to the truth of Romans 8:28. If God doesn't have a purpose, then He couldn't work all things according to that purpose. Or, if He has a purpose, but He's not able to pull it off, then your trials might be sabotaging His purpose. A heretical view held by some professing evangelicals called Open Theism

argues that God is not sovereign over the terrible things that happen in the world. They're trying to get God off the hook for suffering, but they rob Romans 8:28 of its comfort for us in times of suffering. We must affirm three things about God's purpose:

A. God has an eternal purpose that cannot be thwarted.

If a man is going to do anything of significance—build a house, found a company, or take a trip—he has a purpose and a plan to accomplish that purpose. It's unthinkable that the Sovereign God created the universe with no purpose or no plan to achieve that purpose. But we don't need to infer this by logic; the Bible often affirms that God has a purpose that can't be thwarted.

In the oldest book of the Bible, after all his suffering, Job replies to the Lord (42:2), "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted." In Isaiah 14:24, with regard to the eventual downfall of Israel's enemy, Assyria, the prophet states, "The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, 'Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.'"

Later, regarding God's purpose to raise up Cyrus to free Israel from captivity, Isaiah (46:10-11) cites the Lord as saying, "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it."

Or, in Ephesians, after stating how God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world and predestined us to adoption as sons (1:4, 5), Paul adds (1:11), "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." (See, also, Eph. 3:11.)

Thus God has an eternal purpose to glorify Himself by saving a people through His grace, so that Christ would be preeminent in all things. And nothing can thwart His purpose. This means that...

B. Sinful people are not able to thwart or frustrate God's purpose.

After speaking of God as the almighty Creator, who spoke the universe into existence, the psalmist adds (Ps. 33:10-11), "The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation." So, rather than sinful people frustrating God's purpose, God frustrates their purpose!

This truth is all through the Bible, but let me give you two examples. Genesis 37-50 unfolds the moving story of Joseph and his brothers. Their father Jacob favored Joseph, which caused his brothers to hate him. They sold him into slavery in Egypt and lied to their father that a wild beast had killed him. In the providence of God, Joseph rose from prison to the position of second in command to Pharaoh. In that role, he was able to save his extended family during a long famine. He later explained to them (Gen. 50:20), "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." Joseph's brothers' sin could not thwart God's greater purpose for His people.

The New Testament tells of the greatest evil that has ever been committed, when sinful men crucified the sinless Son of God. But did these evil men, acting under Satan's influence, thwart God's plan? In Acts 4:27-28 we read the prayer of the early church when they faced persecution: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." The wicked men were responsible for their sin, but their sin fulfilled rather than thwarted God's plan.

This means that no sinful person can thwart God's purpose or plan for your life. The sinful mate who left you for another woman didn't ruin God's plan for your life. The drunk driver who killed your loved ones can't frustrate God's purpose for their lives or your life. The evil person at work who lied about you and got you wrongfully fired didn't divert God's purpose for your life. But maybe you're thinking, "But, what about free will? God gave eve-

ryone free will, didn't He? Couldn't these people mess up God's plan by their free will?"

C. "Free will" does not thwart or frustrate God's purpose.

I don't like the term "free will," because it's misleading. No one has perfectly *free* will. You were not free to choose when or in what country you were born, to whom you were born, what gender you were born, or what genetic traits you were born with. All of those factors, which greatly influence your choices, were determined apart from your will. If you had been born to a Muslim family in Afghanistan 500 years ago, you would not have been "free" to choose Christ because you never would have heard of Him. And even if a missionary had come to your village and preached the gospel (and survived!), there would have been tremendous social pressure to keep you from turning against your family by believing in Christ. The will is not totally "free."

In addition, as we've seen all through Romans, you were born "in Adam," with a fallen sin nature. You did not seek for God because you hated Him. You were not able to submit to God's holy law, but rather suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. Sin has blinded all of us toward the things of God. As Charles Wesley put it, our will is "fast bound in sin and nature's night."

But this invokes the question, "If God is absolutely sovereign and our will is not totally free, then are we puppets or robots? Aren't we free to make choices for which we are responsible?" The Bible is clear that God is sovereign *and* people make choices for which they are responsible. We must affirm both. But the point is, no choice of the worst sinner, even of a man like Hitler, can thwart God's purpose to save and glorify His people. Romans 8:28 only works if God has an eternal purpose that He is able to accomplish in spite of sinful people and their so-called "free will."

2. God's eternal purpose includes calling to salvation a people for Himself.

In 2 Timothy 1:9, Paul says that God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." In our text, Paul describes those for whom God

works all things together for good as “those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”

Note that Romans 8:28 does *not* promise that all things work together for good for all people. It is not a verse for universal optimism. For those who hate God and are not called according to His purpose, the future holds condemnation and eternal punishment, if they do not repent. So the promise that God will work all things together for good is only for His elect, whom He purposes to save. Paul describes them in two ways:

- A. Those for whom all things work together for good love God.

This is the human side of things, although God is behind it. None of us would love God if He had not first loved us (1 John 4:19; Eph. 2:3-7). But when we heard the gospel, that in love God gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him has eternal life (John 3:16), we responded in faith so that now we love Him. He changed our hearts from being hostile toward God to wanting to please Him because we love Him.

Also, loving God (in Rom. 8:28) is not a condition, but a description. In other words, Paul is not saying that as long as you really love God, He will work everything together for good for you, but if your love for God grows cold, He won't work everything for good. That wouldn't be much comfort! Although at times our love for God may need reviving (Rev. 2:4-5), it can still be said of every true Christian that we do love God. It's the bent of our lives.

Paul only refers to our love for God in three other places (1 Cor. 2:9; 8:3; Eph. 6:24). So you have to ask, why did he mention it here? Perhaps he mentions it here in the context of trials because at such times we need to affirm our love for God. During trials the devil tempts us to doubt God's love for us. We need to be reminded not only that God loves us, but also that because He gave His Son for us, we now love Him. He is our chief treasure.

Also, in a time of persecution, love for God (and His love for us) is the one thing that can't be taken from us. This evil world can deprive us of our possessions. It can torture us and kill our bodies. But it can't take our chief treasure. As Psalm 73:25-26 puts it, “Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire noth-

ing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." So those who have tasted God's love through the gospel love Him. They are the ones for whom God is working all things together for good.

- B. Those for whom all things work together for good are called according to God's purpose.

This is the same group that loves God, but described from God's point of view. Paul adds this description so that no one will mistakenly think that his own love for God is the primary thing. Rather, our love for God stems from His sovereign calling us. As Bishop Moule put it (*Romans* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 237), "Not one link in the chain of actual Redemption is of our forging—or the whole would indeed be fragile."

In the New Testament epistles, *call* (or, *calling*) always refers to God's *effectual* call, which accomplishes His purpose. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Answer 31) states, "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel." When God effectually calls us to salvation, He does not drag us kicking and screaming, against our will. Rather, when we come to Christ, we come freely because He has made us willing by His grace (John 6:37).

How can you know whether God has called you? When you heard the gospel, that Christ died for sinners and that God offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who believe in Christ, did you believe? Did you come to Jesus? Did God change your heart? Before, you didn't love God, but now you do. Before you didn't care about the Bible, but now you treasure it as God's very word. Before, you loved your sin and made excuses for it, but now you hate it and fight against it. If so, then be assured that God is working all things together for good for you. But, what does that mean? Are we supposed to view tragedies in our lives as good?

3. God's purpose for those whom He calls to salvation is their ultimate, eternal good.

"All things" includes the good things that God gives us, but it also includes "the sufferings of this present time" (8:18), as well as

tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword (8:35). It includes big catastrophes—tornadoes, tsunamis, wars, plane crashes, and terrible accidents. But it also includes the relatively minor frustrations of life—daily hassles, problems at work, car trouble, traffic jams, relational problems, and discouraging situations.

Does it include our sins? Hear me carefully: “Yes, in the sense that our sins cannot thwart God’s ultimate purpose of being glorified in our salvation and sanctification.” But, we should *never* sin with the thought, “God will work it together for good for me.” As David’s sin with Bathsheba shows, sin *always* results in terrible consequences for us and for others. But if we have sinned and we repent and submit to God’s loving discipline, He can use our sin to teach us not to trust in ourselves, as He did with Peter after his denials of Christ.

We need to be clear that the bad things that happen to us are not good in and of themselves. We shouldn’t call them good or pretend that they’re good. They’re difficult. If someone sinned against us, he did us evil (Gen. 50:20). The death of a loved one is hard. But in His gracious providence, God will work these terrible things together for our good as we submit to Him and trust in Him. He uses them to show us His grace and love in ways that we otherwise would not have known. He deepens our faith in ways that we never would have learned, except for the trial. In all of it, He is working for our ultimate good, to conform us to the image of His Son, who learned obedience through the things that He suffered (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 5:8). Though we may carry heartaches to our graves, we know that an incomparable glory awaits us for all eternity. The bottom line is:

4. Knowing that God is working all things together for our good brings great comfort in the midst of difficult trials.

Paul doesn’t say, “and we *feel*,” or, “and we *hope*,” in the sense of uncertainty, but rather, “and we *know*.” Why can we know that God is working all things together for our good? Because He has an eternal purpose that includes our salvation and He will accomplish that purpose. He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son, and nothing can thwart His sovereign will.

Some say that the doctrine of God's sovereign election is just divisive, impractical theology that we should avoid, because it upsets people. But God didn't inspire Paul to write this to upset us! This truth is intensely practical, especially when you face trials. Whether it's a minor irritation at work or a major, life-changing catastrophe, you can trust God to use it in His sovereign purpose to conform you to the image of Christ. There is no comfort in the view that God is not sovereign over the terrible things that happen to us. But there is great comfort in knowing that the sovereign God is working all things together for good for His people.

Conclusion

In a message on Romans 8:28 that he gave at the 2010 Desiring God National Conference, Randy Alcorn mentioned Scott and Janet Willis, who were driving behind a truck when a piece of metal flew off the truck and punctured their gas tank, causing their minivan to explode. They escaped, but six of their children burned to death in the inferno. Alcorn interviewed them 14 years later and they both affirmed that in spite of their great loss, God's goodness and sovereignty are now more precious to them than before.

He also mentioned Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident at age 17. Because of that accident, she has had a powerful ministry with disabled people. But now, in her sixties, she has breast cancer. She told Randy, "I've had a ministry to disabled people for many years. But now I have a ministry to people with cancer!" Do you believe that God is working *all your* trials together for your ultimate good and for the good of those to whom He has called you to serve?

Application Questions

1. What are the most difficult trials that you have been through? How might God be working them for your ultimate good?
2. Why does Romans 8:28 only work if God is sovereign over all the evil that happens? Why does denying that truth not help?
3. Someone taunts, "If God predestined everything, then we're just robots." How would you respond biblically?
4. What does it mean to love God? Is it primarily a feeling? If it includes feelings, how can we keep our feelings passionate?

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