

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

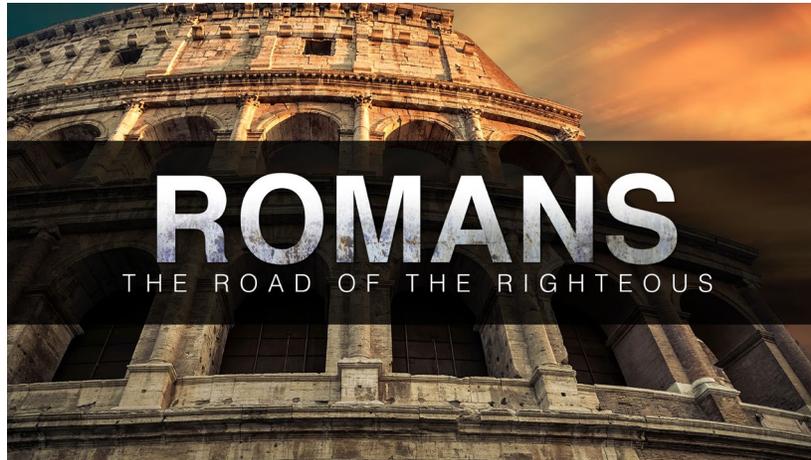
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 8:28

Written By

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George and Elsie Hopper stand in my mind as two of the greatest saints I've ever known. While members of the first church I served in, they shared their spiritual testimony one night during the worship service. I sat spellbound as I listened to this gifted former engineer and his lovely wife share about how they lost three of their four sons during the Vietnam war. Believe me, you could have heard a pin drop in the sanctuary. They were the real deal. Long before the *Saving Private Ryan* movie, the Hopper's knew what personal sacrifice for the country meant.

Listening to them share about how they received the news of their sons' deaths (two died in military service, and I think one who did not serve died in some type of accident), grabbed your heart and your mind. Their demeanor could not have been more peaceful and joyous as they shared their pain. Their faith was never shaken, either, despite the unthinkable happening. Through it all, they thanked God for their sons' lives and provision for them in their pain.

Truly, they had fought the world, the flesh, and the in a profound fashion, and they had stood strong and true for Jesus Christ despite the intensity of the fray. As a twenty-eight-year-old follower of Jesus, I could not help but find their words and example comforting and challenging. They experienced great, incalculable loss in their lifetimes, but through it all their radiant testimonies beamed the light of hope into many lives seeking to make sense of life's battle with the effects of sin and Satan.

How did they stay the spiritual course with such hope for so many years? How did they project they were blessed instead of bitter? They understood and applied the main premise of Romans chapter 8, verses 18 through 30.

Stay Hopeful In The Fight With The Flesh (Rom. 8:18-30)

Why should we hang onto hope even in our darkest, toughest moment as we engage evil? Paul, who had his share of internal and external wrestling matches with sin, gives us viable reasons to be full of hope when the unthinkable occurs.

- *Reason #1: Trials Lead To Triumph (Rom. 8:18).* One day our afflictions will pale into insignificance in the light of the glory of God Almighty. I'm sure George lived to see that day as liver cancer took his life in the late 1980s. Even as he battled this dreaded disease, he exuded hope and peace when I went to encourage him. I walked away being encouraged by him. What a saint.
- *Reason #2: Cosmic Degradation Leads To Cosmic Transformation (Rom. 8:19-22).* The words of the divinely inspired prophets is true: Paradise lost will be Paradise regained at the summation of God's kingdom program for mankind.
- *Reason #3: Personal Consternation Leads to Personal Transformation (Rom. 8:23-25).* The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:13-14), assures us that our full redemption of this body and its inherent sin nature will be realized in the eschatological future.
- *Reason #4: Your Praying Is Buttressed By His Praying (Rom. 8:26-27).* The Spirit also helps us as struggle in prayer to live godly lives. The fact He prays in accordance with the perfect will of the Trinity demonstrates God's perfect will, will be realized in our lives to our ultimate benefit.

Reason #5: Providence Always Provides Positive Provision (Rom. 8:28)

This reason naturally arises from Paul's teaching in Romans 8, verse 28. Since there is some translation variance, it is probably helpful to read it in several translations:

^{KJV} **Romans 8:28** 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.

^{NAS} **Romans 8:28** 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.

^{NIV} **Romans 8:28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

28 οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεὸν πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν, τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν.¹ (God omitted in the opening clause).

There is textual evidence (MSS) here for either including or omitting God's name in the opening clause. Here is how Bruce Metzger validates omitting God's name at the head of the first clause:

¹Kurt Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Morphology)* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993; 2006), Ro 8:28.

8:28 συνεργεῖ {B}

Although the reading συνεργεῖ ὁ θεός (Ɀ46 A B 81 copsa (eth) Origengr2/5) is both ancient and noteworthy, a majority of the Committee deemed it too narrowly supported to be admitted into the text, particularly in view of the diversified support for the shorter reading (Ɀ C D G K P Ψ 33 614 1739 Byz Lect itd, , vg syrps, copbo arm Clement Origengr3/5, Eusebius Lucifer Cyril-Jerusalem Chrysostom Augustine al). Since συνεργεῖ may be taken to imply a personal subject, ὁ θεός seems to have been a natural explanatory addition made by an Alexandrian editor.²

This is one view.

The late C. H. Dodd argued for a second view in his commentary on Romans in 1932, “It would not occur to Paul to look to ‘things’ to ‘work together’ for the salvation of man. What he does look for, and find, is God’s co-operation with us in things, even things which are hostile to us.”³ I lean this direction for purely logical purposes. But either way, the verse’s grammatical connection with Paul’s emphasis upon the Godhead in verses 26 through 27 demonstrates that God is the One who is working in all of the events of our lives, be they profitable or unprofitable, positive or negative, good or bad. After all, *all* (πάντα) means *all*, doesn’t it?

This one verse in Romans is known and quoted by most Christians. Why it is so well-known? Because it gives us a true and proper perspective of how to face the triumphs and tragedies of life with full, abiding hope, not hopelessness. The truth of the verse is so readily apparent Paul says, “We know, *oidamen* (Οἶδαμεν), which is a perfect active indicative denoting this particular knowledge is a stayed and steady fact of knowing and walking with God. Since He’s at the helm of the ship, there is no way we will not, one day, find calm seas and a haven of true rest.

Everything about this opening clause drips of the sovereignty and providence of God. Hence, in order to fully appreciate its theological import for our lives, we must, by definition, understand what divine sovereignty is so hope can flood into our lives as we seek to live for God in our godless age. If your hope, as a saint, is flickering in the winds of adversity and trial today, I pray this teaching about God’s sovereignty will turn your flickering flame of hope into an intense, powerful flame. To accomplish this hope-quest, I propose we give time and attention to studying four concepts related to divine providence.

Providence Defined. What do we mean by the theological term, which is, as we have said, firmly represented in Paul’s teaching in Romans 8, verse 28? Here a few definitions. The first is from the

Providence Defined.—The word “provide” (from Lat *providere*) means etymologically “to foresee.” The corresponding Gr word, **πρόνοια**, *prónoia*, means “forethought.” Forethought and foresight imply a future end, a goal, and a definite purpose and plan for attaining that end. The doctrine of final ends is a doctrine of final causes, and means that that which is last in realization and attainment is first

²Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 458.

³C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1932), 138.

in mind and thought. The most essential attribute of rational beings is that they act with reference to an end; that they act not only with thought but with forethought. As, therefore, it is characteristic of rational beings to make preparation for every event that is foreseen or anticipated, the word “providence” has come to be used less in its original etymological meaning of foresight than to signify that preparation, care and supervision which are necessary to secure a desired future result. While all rational beings exercise a providence proportioned to their powers, yet it is only when the word is used with reference to the Divine Being who is possessed of infinite knowledge and power that it takes on its real and true significance. The doctrine of Divine providence, therefore, has reference to that preservation, care and government which God exercises over all things that He has created, in order that they may accomplish the ends for which they were created.⁴

To this we should add the wise words of J. I. Packer:

[Providence is] The unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.⁵

Because God always “is,” ontologically speaking (Ex. 3:14; John 8:58; Rev. 1:8; 22:13), and because He possesses omnipotence and omniscience, He can, and is, providential over the all the facets and inner workings of the cosmos, down to the smallest events of our lives. Dr. Norman Geisler takes this basis of God’s providence and opens its meaning up by saying the following:

- God is all-good: He desires good for all things.
- God is all-knowing: He knows all things.
- God is all-wise: He knows the best way to the best end for all things.
- God is all-powerful: He can do all things possible.

Therefore, God provides the best means to the best end for all things He has created.⁶

Randy Alcorn defines providence in this fashion:

God’s sovereignty is the biblical teaching that all things remain under God’s rule and nothing happens without either his direction or permission. God works in all things for the good of his children (see Romans 8:28). These ‘all things’ include evil

⁴Wilbur F. Tillett, “Providence,” ed. James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2476.

⁵J. I. Packer, “Providence,” *New Bible Dictionary* (London: The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), 1050-1051.

⁶Unpublished class notes, *The Problem of Evil*, Southern Evangelical Seminary.

and suffering. God doesn't commit moral evil, but he can use any evil for good purposes.⁷

Mark this well: Nothing occurs in our bout with evil in our lifetimes that God cannot, and will not, use to accomplish lofty, eternal, and momentous purposes. Talk about reason to have hope in this sin-stained world. The old Devil, however, seeks to diminish this wonderful doctrine so people lose hope and drift through life in disillusionment, despair, and sometimes anger.

Providence Distorted. After the tragic death of his beloved son, Rabbi Kushner wrote the best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (four million copies sold). Because he just could not accept, as the Hopper's did, that a good God would permit the death of his son, he formulated the concept that while God exists, He is not in control of everything. Two statements from his book represents his position, which is the thinking of many God-fearing people.

But if we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible.

Are you capable of forgiving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect?⁸

Rabbi Kushner takes tragedies, like those of Job, and counsels God-fearing people to learn that God is limited in power to control adversities. This mindset surfaces as he writes about Job's personal dilemmas:

Let me suggest that the author of the Book of Job takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take. He believes in God's goodness and in Job's goodness, and is prepared to give up his belief in proposition (A): that God is all-powerful. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness.⁹

Kushner's view of God is progressive, meaning He is in a state of perpetual learning while He is subject to and restrained by the very natural laws He created.

Kushner's understanding of God does not just limit the power of God, it curtails the omniscience of God too. The third chapter of his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is titled *Sometimes There Is No Reason*. It highlights the tenuous theological truth that some tragic events have absolutely no divine meaning. They just happen. If this is true, then, by definition, God is not omniscient for foreboding events would simply suddenly crop up. As Kushner argues,

But suppose God didn't quite finish by closing time on the afternoon on the sixth day? . . . Suppose that Creation, the process of replacing chaos with order, were

⁷Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 2009), 225.

⁸Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 45, 148.

⁹*Ibid.*, 48-49.

still going on. What would that mean? In the biblical metaphor of the six days of Creation, we would find ourselves somewhere in the middle of Friday afternoon. Man was just created a few “hours” ago. The world is mostly an orderly, predictable place, showing ample evidence of God’s thoroughness and handiwork, but pockets of chaos remain. Most of the time, the events of the universe follow firm natural laws. But every now and then, things happen not contrary to those laws of nature but outside them. Things happen which could just as easily have happened differently.¹⁰

In Kushner’s cosmos, God’s power is at the mercy of unpredictable chaotic upheavals which appear to catch Him off guard. If this is the case, then, God’s omniscience is also called into question.

Such, however, is not the God revealed in the Scriptures. In Jeremiah, God underscores God’s omnipotence with a rhetorical question demanding “no” for an answer, “*Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?*” (Jer. 32:27). In Isaiah, God showcases His omniscience through His ability to give precise prophetic words about world history,

⁹Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me. ¹⁰Declaring 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 (Isa.46:9-10).

If either of these non-communicable divine attributes are limited in any way, as they are in Kushner’s theological system, then God is finite as opposed to infinite. And if this is the case, He is not God, nor is He capable of offering people like Job, or you, any lasting comfort or true purpose and meaning for your seemingly unjust adversities. But God does eternally possess these qualities as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and numerous other biblical writers state throughout both Old and New Testaments (Ps. 111:6; Rom. 4:20; 2 Chron. 16:9; Heb. 4:13).

Pragmatically, all of this means God is in total control of the chaos, be what it may, He knows what is going on throughout His creation, and at the end of the day His purposes for each person will be lovingly and completely fulfilled. Geisler’s articulates this truth well when he concludes, “Whatever good reasons we have for believing that God is God (i.e., infinitely good, knowing, and powerful), we also have for believing that he has a good purpose for allowing the suffering He allows.”¹¹ *A God possessing this nature is capable of comforting a person like Job, as well as providing him or her real, inexorable hope that all the seemingly unrelated tragic and triumphant threads of their life pulsate with divine purpose.* This is why we, along with Paul, can confidently say, “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.” We can say this because He is an infinite God, not a finite one.

I have purposefully spent a good deal of time on Kushner’s view of God and suffering because so many have, unfortunately, embraced it. And by embracing it, they not only water down the great character of the Almighty, they miss how all the events of their lives can, and should, pulsate with an abiding hope that God has even this. Do you have a diminished view of God which has negatively hamstrung your ability to process all the various events of your life? I trust this day

¹⁰Ibid., 59-60.

¹¹Geisler, *If God, Why Evil?*, 51.

will be a radical turning point in a whole new, and hopeful direction. Finite godism is a dangerous doctrinal stance. How could a limited god ever be God? He couldn't. How could a limited god ever, ultimately, overcome evil? He couldn't. How can we possibly know God is supposedly not perfect if we do not possess a perfect standard by which to measure Him? He couldn't. But God not limited, far from it. The only limits which exists for Him related to engaging in or promoting evil, or attempting to do something which is highly illogical, like making a square triangle. Other than these, God is unlimited, which means He can do what Paul says: He works in all circumstances, be what they may, to accomplish His eternal purposes for our individual lives.

Please, take a hard, honest look at your life and what you are currently facing. Take a look now at the living God and realize the following points:

- He was not asleep when the attorney served you with papers.
- He wasn't looking the other way when your husband deserted you and the children.
- He wasn't shocked when you discovered just how much other non-Christian teens have negatively impacted your teen.
- He isn't apologetic because he didn't see what your marriage issues would do to your lives.
- He's not preoccupied with other matters as you seek to move from single to married status.

On the contrary, He is at work in the hardness to turn your bitterness to blessing, to move you from being lost in a sea of adversity to being saved for His purposes.

Consider how God works from a story from WWII.

The *USS Astoria*, a heavy cruiser used for fire support, was sunk, along with three other cruisers, in the sea south of Savo Island early in the morning of August 9, 1942 by a surprise Japanese attack, thereby endangering American military movements on Guadalcanal. At 0200, a Japanese shell hit an eight-inch gun turret on the *Astoria*. The blast hurled Signalman 3rd Class Elgin Staples into the dark, churning sea. Jagged, hot shrapnel tore indiscriminately into the muscle tissue of his legs, making it difficult to swim, but he at least had a lifebelt to keep him afloat.

At 0600 hours, the *USS Bagley* picked him up in the water. Yet it wasn't long until this ship didn't make it either, resulting in Staples winding up in the water, again. Eventually, this weary seaman was saved by the *USS President Jackson*. While on board, he hugged his lifebelt tightly, and began to memorize all the writing on it: Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio. It also had a registration number. He put that to memory as well. He also thought it quite odd the belt had been manufactured in his home town.

The rest of the story is told well by *The National WWII Museum* in New Orleans on their blog called *SEE & HEAR*:

Returning home to Akron, Signalman Staples thought to bring along the life-belt that had saved him to show his family.

After a quietly emotional welcome, I sat with my mother in our kitchen, telling her about my recent ordeal and hearing what had happened at home since I had gone away. My mother informed me that "to do her part," she had gotten a wartime job at the Firestone plant. Surprised, I jumped up and grabbing my life belt from my duffel bag, put it on the table in front of her.

“Take a look at that, Mom,” I said, “It was made right here in Akron, at your plant.” She leaned forward and taking the rubber belt in her hands, she read the label. She had just heard the story and knew that in the darkness of that terrible night, it was this one piece of rubber that had saved my life. When she looked up at me, her mouth and her eyes were open wide with surprise. “Son, I’m an inspector at Firestone. This is my inspector number,” she said, her voice hardly above a whisper.¹²

How emotional, and rightly so.

Hard to fathom, isn’t it? Out of all of the lifebelts Vera approved, she approved the one which saved her son’s life two times. And you think this occurred by blind, random chance. I think not. Long before Staples boarded the doomed Astoria, God made sure he didn’t just have a lifebelt, but he had one made by mom. It’s a statistical anomaly pointing, naturally, to the greatness and goodness of the living God. More precisely, if a mother can produce, as Ravi Zacharias points out in his book *The Grand Weaver*, a lifebelt which would inadvertently save her son, what great things can occur in our lives from the hand of the living, omnipotent, omniscient, and providential God who is with us as we battle internal and external spiritual foes?

¹²SEE & HEAR: Museum Blog, “A Mother’s Life-Preserver,” The National WWII Museum: New Orleans, accessed March 7, 2019, <http://www.nww2m.com/2012/05/a-mothers-life-preserver/>.