

Sermon Notes

All Things for Good? – Romans 8:28

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August 16, 2015

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” – Romans 8:28, ESV

Introduction: A famous, often misunderstood and misapplied verse

We come this morning in our summer series through Romans 8 to one of the most famous- and perhaps most misunderstood- verses of the Bible. Sometimes, the more familiar something is, the less we really and clearly understand it. Before we dig into this wonderful verse together, I'd like to clear up some common mis-understandings, mis-interpretations and mis-applications of this wonderful verse:

1. Some people think of Romans 8:28 when they say to someone, “Everything will work out fine in the end” That is to say: the road may be rocky and bumpy and many bad things may happen along the way, but in the end everything will be fine. This is, in a sense, trusting God for the distant future, for our eternal destiny, but not having full confidence in the goodness of what God is doing today. This verse is not saying that all things will work together for good, but that all things work together (or are working together) for good, now. It is in the present tense, and this is where it can be most challenging to really trust God.
2. Some people make the mistake of applying this verse universally, to all people in every circumstance. But the verse clearly says, right up front, “for those who love God” and that’s not a universal statement.
3. Some people have been guilty of using the verse to minimize or trivialize suffering. This verse doesn’t mean that nothing bad ever happens to us or that we don’t really suffer or struggle. “All things work together for good” doesn’t mean that each individual thing is good in itself, but that they work together for our good, if we love God and are called according to His purpose.

And now just a quick note about translations: The ESV of Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” The NIV says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . .” The New American Standard says, “And we know that

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God . . .” The major difference in the translations stems from the fact that some ancient manuscripts say “God works all things together” and others say “All things work together.”

The NIV’s translation is weak – “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” It’s not that just that God is at work in all things, but God is so absolutely sovereign and in control that He causes all things to work together for our good. In both types of manuscripts, God is understood as the agent causing all things to work together, whether He is explicitly named or not. This is a bold and absolute statement Paul is making here, that ALL THINGS work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.

With those introductory clarifications out of the way, let’s look carefully at this verse, phrase-by-phrase:

I. And we know

Notice first the confidence with which Paul begins this wonderful verse. He says, “And we know . . .” – not “And we hope . . .” or “But I feel . . .” (as our generation is so prone to say)

Paul has been talking about some difficult things in Romans 8, taking a hard and honest look at suffering with Christ and at all of our sufferings in this present age. He has said that all of our sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed in us. He has said that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Those are both very good and helpful reassurances: No matter how bad your suffering is in this present world, glory will far outweigh and outshine it all. No matter how weak you are in your sufferings, even when you can’t find the words to pray, the Spirit helps you and intercedes for you.

But Paul now takes things deeper. Not only can we have confidence that the coming glory will so far outweigh and outshine our present suffering that the two cannot even be compared. Not only do we have the Spirit’s help in our present weakness, but furthermore, we know that for those who love God all things are working together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

Now we live in a skeptical age, when people doubt that you can really know anything, especially about God or spiritual things. When it comes to spiritual realities, we feel more comfortable with verbs like believe, hope, trust or feel. But Paul says we know. How can he say this?

- I. Paul says “we know” based on the nature of God’s revealed character. God has shown Himself to be holy, to be absolutely pure, to be almighty, all-powerful and absolutely in control, to be good and kind and loving, especially to His own people, but even to all

people, to be perfectly wise and perfect in understanding. Nothing is lacking in God's spiritual purity, moral character, power, control, wisdom or love. If we know this God to be our God and we know this to be His character than we can know what Paul knows –that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

2. Paul also knows based on the testimony of the people of God from previous generations. Joseph was sold by His brothers into slavery but when he saw them again, he was able to say to them, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." (Gen. 50:20) And many others could add their testimony to that of Joseph.
3. Paul also knew based upon his own life experiences. Now we need to be careful about how much we rely on our own life experiences for our knowledge of God. We can easily mis-understand or mis-interpret our experiences. But Paul placed his life experiences in the light of God's word and God's character and he could see with confidence that all things were working together for his good.

II. That for those who love God

Paul says, "*And we know that for those who love God . . .*" He is, right up front, placing a limitation and qualification on this principle. It is "for those who love God" that all things work together for good.

Those who love God are the children of God, His people, His own. Lest we boast and become puffed up with pride that we are "those who love God," the Apostle John reminds us in *1 John 4:19*, "*We love because he first loved us.*"

God's love for us is the cause and source of our love back to Him. He initiates and shows us love, and we respond and love Him back.

Some people might say that everyone loves God, in their own way, but this is not the teaching of the Bible. The one true God, the God of Scripture, is not loved by everyone. In fact, the natural condition of all people is described very vividly by Paul earlier in Romans, in chapter 3, verses 10-18:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

¹³ *“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”*
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
¹⁴ *“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”*
¹⁵ *“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,
¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”*
¹⁸ *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

So far from being naturally lovers of God, Paul even describes people in their rebellion against God and His rule as “haters of God” in Romans 1:30.

So our love for God is not something which we have by nature; it is not something which all people have. Our love for God comes from His love for us and is our response to His initiative, His love.

Those who love God are called the children of God and it is for His children that “all things work together for good.”

III. All things work together for good

So what exactly is the promise made in this verse for those who love God? Paul says that for those who love God, all things work together for good. Now, what exactly does Paul mean by “all things”? Well, believe it or not, this has actually been a point of debate regarding this passage. Some interpreters have said that when Paul says “all things,” he means all of our suffering. After all, Paul has been talking a lot about suffering in Romans 8. But while Paul certainly is including and emphasizing suffering under the bigger heading of “all things,” I think when Paul says “all things” work together for good, he actually means ALL things.

To see how this works, let’s take a look at the life of Joseph the Patriarch from the Book of Genesis. Joseph’s story is told in Genesis 37-50. We’ll take a quick look at the short version:

Joseph was his father Jacob’s favorite son. Jacob showed his preferential treatment, including giving him a coat of many colors. This made Joseph’s older brothers jealous. They hated Joseph. Joseph also had dreams as a boy, dreams that his older brothers and his mother and father would all bow down and serve him. He foolishly shared these dreams with his brothers and his father, making them all a little irritated with him.

Joseph’s brothers were so angry at him and jealous of him that they decided to kill him, but Reuben stopped his brothers from killing Joseph and Joseph was sold into slavery instead. Joseph was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Potiphar trusted Joseph and was

blessed because of Joseph, so Potiphar put Joseph in charge of all of his household. Potiphar's wife thought Joseph was very handsome and she tried to seduce Joseph, but Joseph was righteous and resisted. She ended up grabbing him by the cloak, but Joseph ran out from her, leaving his cloak behind. Joseph was wrongly accused by Potiphar's wife and ended up in prison, in a pit, for years.

While in prison, Joseph met Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, who had been thrown in prison by the Pharaoh. They both had dreams, which Joseph rightly interpreted for them. The cupbearer, who was restored to Pharaoh, promised to remember Joseph and recommend his release to the Pharaoh, but he forgot. Two more years passed with Joseph in the prison pit.

Finally, Pharaoh had a dream and no one could interpret it. The cupbearer remembered Joseph and recommended that he be brought to interpret Pharaoh's dream. Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh's dream correctly, which predicted seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe drought. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's ability to interpret the dream as well as his wise advice as to what Pharaoh should do that he put Joseph in charge of all of Egypt.

Years later, as the predicted famine hit, who should show up in Egypt but Joseph's brothers, looking for grain. To make a long story short, Joseph's whole family came down to Egypt and because they were shepherds, Pharaoh assigned them the land of Goshen to live in, which was a separate area of Egypt good for pasturing animals. Genesis explains that they were put in this separate area because the Egyptians did not like shepherds.

In the end, all the Israelites and the members of their household were saved, seventy persons in all, and they would be in Egypt for 430 years where they would grow to a huge multitude to be led out later by Moses.

In Genesis 50, after their father, Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were deeply concerned that he would want to seek revenge on them for selling him into slavery.

But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21, ESV)

Now, did God use Joseph's brothers' sin of selling him into slavery to save His people? Yes, of course!

Did he use Jacob's favoritism to provoke Joseph's brothers to envy so that they would want to sell him into slavery? Yes!

How about Joseph's dreams? Were they part of the "all things" that worked together? Yes!

How about Potiphar's trust in Joseph? How about Potiphar's wife's dishonesty? How about Joseph's good looks? What about the cupbearer's dream? What about the cupbearer's forgetfulness, so that Joseph remained in prison until Pharaoh had his troubling dream? What about Pharaoh's dream? What about Joseph's administrative gifts and wisdom?

How many of these things worked together for Joseph's good and for the good of God's people? Some of them? Most of them? No, ALL things worked together for good!

Scripture is full of stories like Joseph's. Every detail of Moses' life 400 years later was orchestrated for the deliverance of God's people. David's life is full of detail after detail that worked together for his good and for the good of God's people.

These Old Testament stories are not just stories. But Paul says later in Romans 15:4, *"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."* (ESV) Paul had read these stories of Joseph, Moses, David and more. From them, he learned that God does not waste anything. Which means that everything that happened in their lives was not just for their good but also for our good, for our instruction, to give us endurance and hope. That means that even the lives of Old Testament saints is part of the ALL things working together for our good.

But what about our sin? Well, we need to tread carefully here, because our sin displeases God, hurts us and those around us, costs us more than we could ever know and needs to be put to death by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But when God says "all things," He really does mean ALL things, even our sin! Our sin humbles us, leads us to repentance and receive forgiveness, helps us identify with the struggles of others and keeps us dependent on the grace of God.

David's infamous sin with Bathsheba led him to pain and sorrow, but it also led him to repent and out of his sin and repentance, we got wonderful psalms like Psalm 51 and Psalm 32 and David got assurance of God's forgiveness and abundant mercy, while we got encouragement to turn to God in repentance and faith, no matter how bad our sin is.

So . . . when God says "all things work together for good," He really does mean ALL things!

But we also need to understand what He means by "good." This is good as God defines it. It doesn't mean that everything is pleasant or easy, enjoyable or fun. God has our ultimate, eternal, spiritual good in mind. We have all known over-indulgent parents who have given their children their every heart's desire and have seen them become thoroughly spoiled – weak,

selfish, complaining, demanding and worse. God is not such a foolish father, but He fathers us with perfect wisdom and love in all things. They work together for our good, our real and true good, always.

IV. For those who are called according to His purpose

And then Paul adds a further clarification, “for those who are called according to His purpose.” This clause transitions us to the next two verses, 29-30, which we will study next week, but let me briefly explain what Paul means here.

Paul is further clarifying who it is who receives the promise that all things work together for good, saying that those who love God are those who are called according to His purpose. You don’t love God by accident. We know that 1 John 4 says that we love because He first loved us, but Romans 8:28 is here saying that we love God because we’ve been called according to His purpose.

So, what does it mean to be called? Does God call everyone? In a sense, yes, but not in the sense Paul is using here. Those who are called according to His purpose are called in a special way, according to the unfailing purposes of God.

At the end of the book of Job, when God confronts Job and speaks to him out of the whirlwind, Job replies to God in Job 42:2, “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*” (ESV)

In Psalm 57:2, David prays, “*I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.*” (ESV)

And Proverbs 19:21 says, “*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.*” (ESV)

In Isaiah 14:24-26, God says –

*As I have planned,
so shall it be,
and as I have purposed,
so shall it stand,
²⁵ that I will break the Assyrian in my land,
and on my mountains trample him underfoot;
and his yoke shall depart from them,
and his burden from their shoulder.”*

*²⁶ This is the purpose that is purposed
concerning the whole earth,
and this is the hand that is stretched out
over all the nations.*

*²⁷ For the LORD of hosts has purposed,
and who will annul it?
His hand is stretched out,
and who will turn it back?*

The point of all these quotes is that when the Bible speaks about God's purpose, it is describing what God has planned to do, determined to do and what He will do without fail, overcoming whatever opposition there may be with ease and absolute certainty.

If you truly love God, you need to know that you have been called – called by God to faith in Jesus Christ – according to His purpose. God's purposes always stand.

Next week, we will learn that God's purpose in calling us stretches all the way back to eternity past and all the way forward to eternity future. As Psalm 103:17 says, "*the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him.*" (ESV)

Application: Absolute security and confidence for the children of God

The point of what Paul is saying is Romans 8:28 should be abundantly clear: Those of us who have come to love the Lord because He first loved us have, in fact, been called by God to Himself according to His eternal purpose, which cannot fail. In the meantime, all things work together for our good.

We are secure in God's purposeful calling and we are blessed and we benefit from all things which work together for our good.

How committed is God to His purpose in calling us to Himself? He is committed enough to pay the highest possible price for our salvation: To secure us for Himself and to secure all good things for us, He sent His Son, Jesus, to live a sinless life, to die for our sins on the cross, to conquer sin and death in His resurrection on the third day and to ascend into heaven where He makes intercession for us at the Father's right hand.

What was God willing to do to secure our eternal and ultimate good? As we will learn in a couple of weeks when we examine verse 32 (the next "all things" promise in the Bible): "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will He not also with him graciously give us all things?*" (ESV)

Such all-encompassing power and purposes and such all-sacrificing love should fill us with great confidence and strong hope, should give us endurance in the trials of this life and joy and peace when life would otherwise overwhelm us with sorrow and despair.