

In All Things, God Works

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[0:00] Romans chapter 8, verse 28.

In fact, I'm going to read verses 28 and 29. But the focus tonight is going to be on one verse.

Perhaps, if not the most quoted, verse of Scripture in the Bible is certainly one of them.

It would certainly appear in the top ten anyway. Usually, I think, number one, most quoted. And so we're going to focus on just that verse tonight.

Now, verse 29 certainly comes into play in our understanding of verse 28, the go-together. And what Paul says in verse 28 is explained in verse 29 and following.

But I'm going to focus primarily on verse 28. So here it is. Romans 8, 28, and 29. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.

[1:17] For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn, that is, Jesus, his Son, might be the firstborn among many brethren.

All right? Now, let me ask you a question. Do all things really work together for good? Do they? Well, it's not a trick question. But it is thought-provoking. And hopefully you would answer that from truth.

That is how you really feel about it. Okay? That's a good way to begin. Someone has said that Romans 8, 28 is either a soft pillow or a hard problem.

And let me explain. Because if we're honest, and we're all honest people, I can tell by looking at you, you're very honest. If we're honest, we would admit that sometimes this beloved passage poses a problem for us.

[2:28] A hard problem. And just admit it. Now, I know all of you are sitting out there, real pious and very spiritual. And you're thinking, Pastor, you're the only one who has a problem with this.

But if you'd be honest, I think you would admit this. And strictly from a human vantage point, let me just point out a few problems we have. In the first place, this passage seems too dogmatic.

I mean, just on the face of it, as you look at it. I mean, how concise a statement. And how bold a statement. And how dogmatic a statement. Paul said, And we know, we know, that all things work together for good.

Now, my question is, how could Paul be so sure about that? Now, we're just approaching it, not from a doctrinal, theological perspective, or even from a spiritual, biblical vantage point.

Now, we're going to approach it from that direction, and that's the way that we learn and understand what it means. But I mean, just strictly how we feel about it. This passage seems too dogmatic to us.

[3:45] How could Paul be so sure about it? When, if we would be honest, most of us are not that sure about it. Now, we are in principle, and, you know, we put on that face, especially if we are asked about it.

But we're really not deep down inside, not really that sure. Not as sure as Paul seemed to be. Now, we hope, are hoping things are going to work out together for some good in the end.

We're hoping that, aren't we? And we might even go so far as to say that we believe that to be the case, humanly speaking. But we are not really that dogmatic.

We don't know it so dogmatically as Paul clearly knows it. Would you agree with me on this? I'm not trying to rattle your faith here.

But the passage seems too dogmatic. I'm just kind of highlighting some of the problems that we have with this passage, if we would be honest.

[4:58] I keep using that word honest because I'm not convinced that you're ready to be honest here tonight. Number two, the passage seems too inclusive. Too inclusive.

Paul said, and we know that all things, all things work together for good. All things? Really, Paul? All things? Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear the phrase all things, that's inclusive. That means everything.

Now, we would readily admit that some things work together for good. For example, we understand the concept of spiritual maturity and the process of that.

For example, that, you know, when hard things happen in life, our faith grows. We'll go that far. Our faith grows and our faith matures and so forth.

[6:03] But we are not as sure as Paul that absolutely all things work together for good. Don't really looking at me like, Pastor, you have lost your faith.

We're just being honest, just looking at it from a human perspective. I think we need to in order to be ready to delve into what God is actually saying to us here.

We might as well admit some of our weaknesses, some of our concerns, some of our doubts. We might as well admit them, if to no one else but to God, because He certainly knows them.

And so, too dogmatic, too inclusive, and I would say a third problem we have. The passage appears way too vague for our liking. And this is where part of the problem is.

Or at least our problem, not God's, not the Bible's problem. But it seems too vague. Like, what things, Paul? Maybe Paul just forgot to qualify things here.

[7:17] You know, maybe he doesn't mean all things necessarily, but certain things. What things? It's very vague. And also, it's vague just with the term good.

at least from our initial look at the text. Like, what do you mean good? Good. And that's vague.

And another thing, the passage seems too platitudinous. Now, write that word down. Some pious platitude.

You know, and, to be fair, it is all too often used in just that way. It's kind of a platitude. And there are perhaps some here tonight who, at certain times in life, did not want to hear this verse quoted. In fact, it was the last thing you wanted to hear in some time of hurting and suffering. And so, instead of it being a kind of a healing balm to your soul, instead, it was more like some mockery, some mocking cruel joke.

[8:37] You know. And, you know, you might have said, what do you mean by good? Huh? I mean, a terminal illness is not good.

A violent murder is not good. A divorce is not good. A rape is not good. The death of a spouse or a child is not good. Is it? And that is your reaction.

And so, some, you know, well-meaning Christian will come up and use this verse and lay that verse in your face and say, you know, as if somehow that it could be the answer for every question of life. Well, you know, all things work together for good. you know. And so, it lends itself to be a platitude. It lends itself to abuse, really. Now, having said that, what are we to understand about this famous verse? And it is a famous verse, isn't it?

[9:48] Well, four things. first of all, if we're going to understand the meaning of this passage, then we must begin with God. We must begin with Him, and not with us.

We're going to understand what Paul is telling us here. And if we're going to apply it correctly, then we must begin with God in our thinking.

The New King James Version, I read it just a moment ago because that's the translation that I'm using. That version translates the Greek text this way, all things work together for good to those who love God.

That's exactly how it's worded in the New King James. And if you have a King James, the wording there is much the same. All things work together for good to them that love God. All right?

But now, listen to the New American Standard. Some of you have that translation. A much more literal translation that is in crossing over from the Greek into the English, word for word into English.

[11:00] In fact, sometimes it's a little too literal so that the translation is kind of wooden. It's awkward. Now, it's not awkward in this case, but listen to how they translate it.

God causes all things to work together for good. You notice any difference between those two translations? Even the NIV, by the way, and not a literal translation by any stretch of the imagination, offers a similar translation as the New American Standard, and it puts it this way, God works for the good of those who love Him.

All right, now, the point that I want to make here is not which translation is better than another, and so forth.

Now, I prefer one over another sometimes, and I kind of would rather look at the original text and see how they translate it. But my point is not to pit one translation against another.

The point is that the King James, the New King James, put God at the end of the phrase, and the New American Standard Bible puts God at the beginning of the phrase.

[12:19] And by the way, in the original text, the Greek text, God is in the middle. All right, now, you say, what in the world? Where are you going with this?

Here's my point. the point is we will never accurately understand the meaning of the verse as long as we put God only at the end and not at the beginning.

And fail to understand these also in the middle too. That means it's all about God from beginning to end. the truth is God is there at the beginning.

And God is there at the end. And He is there at every point in between. And the truth of Romans 8 28 begins with God, begins with Him, and ends with Him.

And we don't have any problem with the idea of it ending with Him. You know, we perhaps have come to the place in our spiritual maturity where we know that all things are going to work for the ultimate good.

[13:33] That God is out there at the end of it and He's going to work some great wonderful thing out there somewhere. But we fail to see that He's at the beginning of it too. He's there even before the thing happens to you.

And He is there while these things are happening. And He's there after it's all over. You understand what I'm saying? Hopefully this is helpful not only in understanding the thrust of the text, the thrust of this truth, but help us also to correctly apply it when it needs to be in our lives and at certain junctures in life as well.

You know, sometimes tragedies take place in your life. And as I said a moment ago, well-meaning people will come at you with this verse.

And they might even say, erroneously, that's not a tragedy. That's not a tragedy. Worry about that. It's not a tragedy.

It only looks that way. Just have faith. Does that sound good? If you're in a time of real trouble, real hurt, is that going to help you?

[15:05] I don't think so. Suppose I'm on top of a ladder trimming some tree limbs there at my house. I need to. And suppose I fall off the top of that ladder, fall to the ground, and break my leg in four places.

And so I go to the doctor, and he looks at my leg, and he says, your leg is not broken. It's just rearranged. And so don't worry about it.

Give it some time, and it may work out even better for you. In the end. Huh? How ridiculous. And I'm going to look at my leg, and it's swollen, and it's hurting, and it's twisted, and all kinds of awkward directions, and I say to the doctor, you're nuts!

My leg's not just rearranged, it's broken. Fix it! Now, see, the Bible never, ever demands, or even suggests, that we should pretend that tragedy is not real tragedy, that a loss is not a real loss.

The Bible makes no demand like that of us, that somehow we're to think that our pain is not really pain, that our hurt is not really a hurt. But the Bible does tell us to trust in the active involvement of God in the worst of things, the darkest, darkest of times, to trust in the involvement of God.

[16:47] Someone has said that what happens to you and to me is not the mechanical turning of some impersonal divine wheels. It's not fate or kismet, the will of Allah, or karma, or luck.

God is actively at work in your life. So, is Paul saying, whatever happens is good? What? You're wondering, is this a trick question?

No, he's not saying that. Everything that happens to you is not good. Is he saying that suffering and evil and tragedy and those kind of things are good? No.

Is he saying that everything will work out if you just have enough faith? He's not saying that. So, is he saying that we will be able to understand what God is allowing to happen in our lives?

He's not saying that either. We may never understand it in this life. So, what then does he say? I like the way Donald Gray Barnhouse put it.

[17:54] He said, Paul is erecting a sign over the unexplainable mysteries of life. A sign which reads, quiet, God at work. How?

We're not always sure. To what end? Good. and not evil. That's what Romans 8.28 is saying. Is that helpful?

Is it helpful for us to see that Romans 8.28 begins and ends with God and God is there even in the interim? Try this illustration.

Little children will often be afraid at night. And it scares them because they can't see in the dark and they're afraid of the dark. And so children will cry out until at last daddy comes or mommy comes. And he or she sits on the bed and takes the child in his or her arms and suddenly the fear is gone.

[19:01] You know, daddy says, don't be afraid. I'm right here with you. Right here. And the fear goes away when daddy comes or mommy comes. And even so, in the darkness of life, when the darkness of life frightens us, we discover that even in the darkness, our heavenly father is there.

He's there. The darkness is still dark. It doesn't change that. But he is there. And that makes all the difference. That's the point that he's making.

So we need to begin with God. Number two, we must judge the present by the future. What does that mean?

You know, there are a lot of things that happen in life that are unexplainable. Like, you know, a tornado destroys one house and leaves another untouched.

a tumor comes back when the doctor said, I got it all. Or an infant stops breathing and dies for no apparent reason at all, no medical reason.

[20:18] Unexplainable things. And if there is a good, is good to come out of such tragedies, we can't see it. Because we're human. We can't see it.

But here is what we typically do. we judge the future by the present. By what's happening right now. Or to put it another way, we judge what we cannot see by what we can see.

That is, when tragedy comes, if we cannot see a purpose, then we assume there isn't one. But there is. So we ought to judge the present by the future.

See, when Paul says, and we know that all things work together for good. You ought to underline those two words, work together. That phrase of those two words is just one word in the Greek language, and it's the word, synergy.

We get our word synergy from it, from that word. What is synergy? Some of you know. Synergy, just put it in simple terms, synergy is what happens when you put two or more things together together to form something new.

[21:31] Like baking a cake, you know, and you've got all the ingredients, you put it together and form something new. Two or more things put together to form something new, something that neither element by itself could produce.

Like the materials for building a new house. You've got the lumber and the nails and you've got, you know, what, the concrete and the paint and the shingles and the electrical wiring and all sorts of other things.

And not any one of those things by itself could make a house. Box of nails, good to have when building a house, but you can't have a house with just a box of nails.

And electrical wiring, you know, can't make a house. Even a pallet of two-by-fours, you might be able to lean them up and make something, but it would make a pretty poor house. If just by itself.

And that's what Paul means when he says that God causes all things to work together. That is, there are so many things that happen in life that make no sense by themselves when we look at them separately.

[22:43] They don't make any sense. But the fact is, they, all of them, are working together to produce something good in your life. good. And that is, there is a divine synergy that's taking place, and it's taking place all the time in the life of a believer.

So we must judge the present by the future. We must begin with God. Number three, we've got to correctly define the word good.

And this is crucial. Very crucial. And so what is the good Paul is talking about here? And this is where we usually make our mistake.

Because, you know, and we can't help ourselves, but we usually equate good with things like health. Good health. Or some, you know, broad term like happiness.

And God wants me to be happy, you know. And so the good, you know, must be happiness. Or it must be health. Or it must be good, healthy relationships. Maybe marital relationships and friends and so forth.

[23:59] That's good. Those are the things that God wants in my life. That's the good here. Or long life. Or money. Or financial things. Or material things. Or food on the table. Just basic things like

that.

Or good and well-paying job. Or maybe a nice place to live. You know, good shelter and so forth. So we equate the word good with those kinds of things and many others that we could list. And yet, we must admit that this is not necessarily the biblical definition of good. Is it? Now, we don't really have to guess what Paul is talking about here.

What Paul means by the word good, we don't have to guess that. Because he tells us. And it's plain to see. Though we typically miss it. In fact, the very fact that we usually quote verse 28 without verse 29 attached to it tells us that we've missed something that goes with this great wonderful promise in verse 28.

Now, some of us guys are accused of selective hearing loss. You know, because we only hear what we want to hear. But all of us have a selective blindness when it comes to scripture. See? And we're short-sighted here.

[25 : 19] And so Paul defines the good he's talking about in the very next verse. Doesn't he? Verse 29. Look at it. For whom he foreknew. You know, this goes with verse 28.

For, for, we're continuing the thought here. For whom he foreknew, he also predestined, what? To be conformed to the image of his Son. That he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

To be conformed to the image of his Son. Now, I'm sorry if this ruins Romans 8.28 for you.

we have all kinds of different conceptions about what it means. And certainly a host of different applications of the verse where it was never intended to be applied.

God. But this shouldn't offend you. Shouldn't ruin Romans 28. It shouldn't at all. Because, listen, God is at work in your life making you like Jesus Christ.

[26 : 22] And that's a good thing. Very good thing. He has predestined you to that end. I know a lot of people don't like the word predestined.

But it's right there in the Bible. You can't escape it. God has predestined you to be like his Son. And he is at work in your life making that happen.

And he's not going to fail in that. And therefore, anything that makes you more like Jesus is good. It's good. Even if we would not define it as good.

Now, I'm sorry, but Paul is not saying that tragedies and heart aches of life are always going to produce a better set of circumstances for your life.

Sometimes they do. And sometimes they do not. But I can assure you of this. God is not committed to making you healthy, wealthy, and wise.

[27 : 24] Contrary to what you hear from a lot of the TV preachers today. God's not committed to do that. He has no desire to do that.

He has a greater desire. He's committed to making you like his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he's going to do whatever it takes to accomplish that. And use everything in your life to accomplish that. That's how Paul can say all things work together for good. good. I ran across this little poem, and I think it fits here, because we, again, have the mistaken notion that good always means good, pleasurable things.

Here's this little poem, short little thing. I walked a mile with pleasure. She chattered all the way. But I was none the wiser for all she had to say.

Then I walked a mile with sorrow, and ne'er a word said she, but oh, the lessons I did learn when sorrow walked with me. God is making you into the image of his son Jesus, and he's predestined you to be like Jesus Christ, and that includes everything that happens to you, everything in your life, tragedies, unexplained circumstances, even the stupid choices you make.

[29 : 00] E. Martin Lloyd Jones put it this way, consider the work of a great sculptor. He begins by choosing a rough chunk of marble. He intends to make from it a beautiful statue.

In his mind, he knows exactly what he will do. He predestines that unsightly stone to become an image of breathtaking beauty. That determination guides everything he does.

He cuts and chips and chisels, but he will not harm the stone or allow anyone else to harm it. He will remain at the task until it is finished.

And in the end, what started as an unsightly stone has become a thing of beauty. In the same way, God is at work in your life. Right now, you're rough and uncut, and God is patiently chipping away at you.

He will never intentionally hurt you. In the end, you will look like the Lord Jesus Christ. All right, so if we're going to understand this verse and apply it correctly, then we must begin with God.

[30 : 09] We must judge the present by the future, what God is ultimately going to do, and we must correctly define the word good. And then fourth and finally, and we're about done, we must see and rejoice in the limitation of this verse.

And just very quickly, he says, the last half of this verse, and by the way, is a part of it that we don't normally quote either.

And we know that all things work together for good. to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.

Now, the last half of this verse is going to figure into the verses that follow, and we'll cover this in more detail next time. But the point here is that this verse, Romans 8, 28, is for Christians only. you're special. It's just for you. This verse is not a blanket promise to the whole human race.

[31 : 26] And why is that? Well, because God's purpose is to make his children, only his children, like his son Jesus Christ.

Thank you.