

Today we have in our readings one of the most loved and relied on passages in all of Scripture, Romans 8:28, which 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.” Now we know of course that its not the things that are working together, but God who *is working* the things together, so the NIV for instance says, “we know that *in all things God works* for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

God works for the good of those who love him – now that is a comforting thought isn't it? One author describes it as a pillow on which to rest our weary heads (Stott 246). And that's an insightful comment because it isn't in times of quiet and calm and general good that we tend to rely on this verse, is it? We pull it out more often in times of distress or tragedy, at a time of illness or grief. And this is, I think, appropriate for what Paul intends.

Yet I've often heard this verse used to convey meaning which I don't think Paul intended. So what I want to do in this sermon is to sort through the hopeful assurance that Paul did intend when he states that ‘God works all things for the good of those who love him,’ and in that context address some of the common misconceptions.

Romans 8:28 “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 first thing we want to note about this passage is that there is a limitation as to who this assurance is for. It is not for every person in the world, but it is for those who love God. This is for Christians only. Now some may take great offense to my saying that only Christians love God, and surely countless non-Christians do profess a love for God as they understand God. But as we seek to understand Paul's specific intent in saying that God works all things to the good of those who love Him, we must take it in the larger context of what Paul is saying in this letter. He ends chapter 7 by using himself as an illustration of the despair of human brokenness: “*I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? And the answer to this despair? Thanks be to God **through Jesus Christ our Lord!** There is therefore now **no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin*”

and death. I don't discredit the sincerity of non-Christians who profess to love God; but as Christians we stand with Paul in our belief that human love isn't capable of uniting us to God, no matter how sincere; rather, we know that we are united to God solely through the person and work of Jesus Christ – through His righteous **life** he fulfilled the law, through His righteous **death** He satisfied the law on our behalf, and by His **resurrection** we are raised to new life in Him. And so it's in this context that Paul is giving us the hopeful words of Romans 8:28. That if you love God, if you've been called to faith in Jesus Christ according to His purpose, then you can stand on the promise that in God's grace, He is working all things to your good. This doesn't mean that God doesn't love all people or desire that they come to faith (2 Pet. 3:9), but the promise of Romans 8:28 is not an umbrella for all creation; it is for Christians. And it's a promise that we as Christians can be greatly thankful for!

The next thing we want to ask is what Paul might mean by 'all things.' Now it doesn't take a lot of convincing that good things work together for good, right? We have things like Cursillo, Men's Hikes; there're times of success and prosperity – all these work for good in our lives. But for Paul to be assuring the Romans that 'all things' work to the good of those who love the Lord, he's clearly implying that God uses not just the good, but the bad and the ugly too. In verse 35 Paul asks, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?' He's not just pulling illustrations out of the air, this is what the Roman Christians were experiencing on a number of levels. But what about you, Who shall separate you from the love of Christ? Shall cancer, or the loss of a child, or a lawsuit, or temptation, or estranged family relationships or divorce? Its often harder to see the love of Christ in the midst of "*all things*"?

Now you've often heard it said 'everything happens for a reason.' The implication behind it is that there is some greater good underlying a tragedy, and it's *always* intended as a comfort and an encouragement. But let's think about that for a minute. Is it comforting to imply that God's unseen reason or some greater goodness motivates or initiates tragedy or suffering or broken relationships?

You know, I don't think that everything does happen for a reason. What I think is that we live in a broken world and things happen. They happen to Christians and they happen to non-Christians. Bad things happen to good

people; You and I can both rattle off 10 things that shouldn't have happened. And I wish I could tell you in 100 words or less why God didn't stop those things from happening. We live in a broken world, a world that's not as it was created to be, and that's why God sent Jesus to redeem it. But its not consistent with Scripture or the character of God to imply that God causes things that are evil. God's nature **defines** love and justice.

I don't believe that everything happens for a reason, but I do believe that *God can give reason* to everything that happens.

Part of the majesty and the mystery and the GLORY of God given to us in the Cross is that he *redeems* the tragic things in our lives and uses them, reassigning reason to what was once senseless and even goodness to what was evil, and that he does it, not just for some vague greater good, but for *our* good, that for those who love God, God works *all things* together for good.

But this is a terribly incomplete thought if we don't ask what Paul means by 'good'.

What is it that God is using all things for in the lives of Christians? Is it a promise that we'll all eventually be healthy? Or wealthy? Or happy? Do all things work together for pleasant circumstances for those who love God? Or for our convenience? We generally think of these things as 'good,' but our experience tells us that if any of these are the goal, then something's gone wrong with the promise. But since we know that God is faithful to His promises, what good do all things work together for?

The Gospels (Matt 19, Mark 10, Luke 18) tell a story about a rich young man who came to Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" To which Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." God alone is good. When we're talking about God working for good, we need to remember that God is the origin of good. God isn't good because of what He does, but what he does is good, because He's the one doing it! For example, God didn't look at creation and say 'it is good' because it was pretty; it was 'good' because it was God's. The goodness of God defines what *good* really is.

So anything that is truly good reflects the character and the nature of God. So for those who love God, all things are working together - *for the reflection of His character*. Look at the next verse, verse 29, For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be <catch it> *conformed to the*

image of his Son. Don't get bogged down on the word 'predestined;' what Paul is talking about is the will of God. It is the unshakeable will and purpose of God that He use all things in the life of every Christian to conform us into the image of his Son, that we grow in the reflection of His character. And when you see that the good that God is working towards is our own sanctification, our own Christ-likeness, it isn't difficult to see why God would use tragic or distressful circumstances to form his image in us. For it's in those times that we're most acutely aware of our need for him; it's in those times that we most desperately call on his name, callous our knees and search the Scriptures for answers. As a friend of mine who'd suffered a terrible tragedy in her family once told me, "there's such holiness in suffering." Our righteousness came at the price of Christ's suffering, so it only makes sense that when we suffer in the brokenness of this world that God will use it to conform us to His image.

I want to acknowledge, especially to those here who have far more experience with suffering than I do, that this is a hard teaching. It tests what our highest goals really are. It takes a lot of faith and trust in God to allow Him to form us in His image through suffering, rather than being overcome with anger at Him for letting it happen in the first place. I want you to know that it's OK to be angry. I also want you to know that God's worthy of our trust, and this is why Paul begins the verse with the words, "we know." Not 'we feel' because it doesn't always feel like God is working all things for our good. But even when it feels like God is a million miles away, *we know*. **We know** that God is working all things to our Good. Paul himself had been beaten, stoned, slandered, imprisoned, and shipwrecked, yet *he knew* that God was working all things for his good, and ultimately for the good of the entire Christian kingdom.

So Romans 8:28 isn't just a feel good throw away verse, is it? It's hard, and it calls for great faith in hard times. But through its steep demands there is deep hope and assurance of the steadfastness and faithfulness and *goodness* of God. There's great mercy in God using the fires of our lives to refine into precious silver for His Glory. For **WE KNOW**, that for those who love God, **ALL THINGS** work together for **good**. In **ALL THESE THINGS** we are more than conquerors *through HIM who loved us*. *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, not things present, not things to come, not powers, nor height nor depth not ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL CREATION will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* And it is this love through which God is working all things for good.

Amen!

I owe a great deal of credit to James Montgomery Boice and his commentary on Romans, vol. 2, for the points and structure of this sermon.