

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #35

September 26, 2021

The Most Powerful and Precious Promise in the Bible

Romans 8:28-30

I don't know if you have noticed this, but in the past few years I seem to have introduced quite a few of my sermons with a long list of all the tragedies, trials, and devastating events in our world. I've talked about earthquakes and tsunamis and hurricanes and pandemics and racial division and economic hardships and recurring diseases and raging wildfires and military conflicts and political upheaval, and countless other issues we face each day.

It's fascinating to observe how these sorts of events turn everyone into theologians! We all feel compelled to explain or account for the horrible things that happen on almost a daily basis. Everyone seems to have an answer to the questions: Did God cause it? Did God only permit it? Could God have stopped it? Is Satan responsible for it all? When these things happen, does that mean God isn't really good after all? Or does it simply mean he's incompetent and unable to do anything about it? Or do these sorts of tragic events mean that there is no God? Maybe he doesn't exist after all.

The problem intensifies when these instances touch us personally. We can all speculate with the best of them until tragedy, be it large or small, affects us personally. We find ourselves more bothered by such things as a fender bender in the Wal Mart parking lot or when our credit card is maxed out or when a son or daughter rebels and refuses to come to church. Or it may be the loss of a job or an insensitive and impatient spouse or a recurring illness or the betrayal of a close friend.

When these sorts of experiences hit home more directly, we understandably turn to Scripture for help. And the one verse that we recite more often than others is Romans 8:28. ***Sadly, people often treat this verse either like a sledgehammer or a pacifier.*** In other words, in some cases we beat people over the head with it, bludgeoning them with the forceful reminder that they shouldn't bellyache or complain too much because God is causing these events to work together for their good.

At other times we use this verse like a pacifier. We treat suffering Christians as if they were infants. We respond to their cries of pain and disillusionment by sticking Romans 8:28 into their spiritual mouths, hoping that it will pacify their pain and minimize their anguish. Whether as a sledgehammer or a pacifier we misuse and misapply this verse, hoping that it will help people get over their struggles and trust God more faithfully.

That will not be my approach to this passage of Scripture. I love Romans 8:28! I trust you do as well, even when people have used it to dismiss or minimize your pain and your problems. I genuinely believe that when properly interpreted and understood, this text of Scripture has supernatural energy to strengthen

and sustain Christians through all manner of trial and tribulation. This one verse has the power to give life and joy and renewed confidence in God's greatness and goodness.

In fact, this one verse may well contain the most precious and powerful promise in all of the Bible. It assures us that nothing, literally nothing, can derail God's purpose to fulfill all his other promises to us. After all, what good is any promise in Scripture if the troubles and tragedies and devastating circumstances in life can plunge us into despair and disrupt that for which God has sovereignly chosen us? Here is how John Piper put it:

“Once you walk through the door of love into the massive, unshakable structure of Romans 8:28, everything changes. There comes into your life stability and depth and freedom. You simply can't be blown over anymore. The confidence that a sovereign God governs for your good all the pain and all the pleasure that you will ever experience is an absolutely incomparable refuge and security and hope and power in your life. No promise in all the world surpasses the height and breadth and weight of Romans 8:28.”

So, let me ask you one more question before we dive into this text of Scripture. When bad things happen in your experience, do you envision God as an *active participant* in your life or as a *passive spectator*? Are you quick to thank him when good things occur but curse him when the bad things come your way? And how might Romans 8:28 help us in answering this question?

As I said a moment ago, we often use this verse either as a sledgehammer to pound people into passive submission or as a pacifier to silence their cries of anguish. My view of Romans 8:28 is that it is more like a loving, profoundly concerned parent who takes a hurting child into his or her arms, whispering words of reassurance and affection. Or to use different imagery, every word in this verse is designed to function like a boulder on which we can put our full weight of confident trust in God. These words are like steel girders that uphold and sustain us through the most difficult times in our lives. What I see in Romans 8:28 is a necklace of seven pearls that shines and glimmers brightly in the darkness of human suffering. Here they are, one by one.

(1) “*We know*”

You might think that as Paul pondered how to address this issue that he leaned back in his chair, with furrowed brow, stroking his beard, wondering what he might say to encourage these Christians in Rome who were in such distress over their suffering. No.

Paul speaks here with complete and unassailable confidence. He says that we “know” that God causes all things to work together for good. There isn't the slightest doubt in his mind about God's role in our pain and in our pleasure. There are no questions, no second guesses. He doesn't say “we wish” or “we hope” or even that we will “pray” for this outcome. He says without the tiniest tinge of doubt or hesitation: “we know”!

How does Paul know this? What is the source or ground of his certainty? I believe the answer is in the two verses that follow, vv. 29-30. There he tells us that since God's loving purpose for our salvation stretches from eternity past into eternity future, there is nothing that can ultimately do us any spiritual harm. Nothing can derail God's purpose for our lives. Nothing can undermine or interrupt his work in bringing us into greater conformity with his Son, Jesus. Not pain or persecution or financial disaster or disease or any trial or tragedy.

In other words, the reason we know that all things work together for our ultimate spiritual profit is that God loved us before the foundation of the world and predestined us to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. And those whom he predestined, he called. And those whom he called, he justified. And those whom he justified, he glorified! God has an eternal and personal stake in your spiritual welfare and will not permit anyone or anything to interfere with his plan for your life.

You may rest assured that nothing comes your way, no matter how painful, no matter how persistent, that can ultimately do you any lasting spiritual harm. God is determined to bring you safely into his heavenly kingdom and nothing can thwart his purpose. That doesn't mean you will always be able to "know" everything in life. Paul said in Romans 8:26 that we "don't know" how to pray as we should. That is why the Holy Spirit is given to us, to intercede on our behalf. But if we are ignorant at times about how and what to pray for, we are never ignorant of the truth of God's providential oversight of our lives.

(2) "that"

You've heard me say on numerous occasions that almost as important as what Paul or any other biblical author says is what they *don't* say. Nowhere is that more evident than here in Romans 8:28.

Observe closely that Paul does not say, "And we know *how*" God works all things together for our good. There is a massive world of difference between knowing "that" God does something and knowing "how" he does it. When Paul uses the word "that" instead of "how" he is telling us that although our knowledge in this matter is certain, it is not exhaustive. We may speak with absolute confidence concerning God's providential power to bring good out of bad. But we will rarely be in a position to explain how he did it. If I knew "how" God could pull this off, I'd be incredibly rich and famous. No more Dr. Phil or Oprah. Just Dr. Sam! But, alas, I *don't* know *how* he does it. I *do* know *that* he does it.

This, then, is a declaration of faith, not a description of understanding. It is an expression of confidence in God, not an explanation of the mechanics of God's providential oversight of our lives. If you and I knew how God works all things together for our good, there would be no need for faith.

This poses a very real problem, for the simple fact that few people are willing to settle for that kind of knowledge. It isn't enough to tell them "that" God will use their distressing circumstances for their spiritual profit and growth. They want to know "how" he intends to do so. They want to see for themselves precisely how and in what ways adversity and suffering and conflict and confusion work together for good. When tragedy strikes, we want to know right then and there why it happened and what possible good can come from it. And if it isn't immediately evident, we give up on God, we abandon him, we become hardened and angry and bitter.

Of course, there are certain occasions when we can figure out what God is up to. But it is usually only long after the fact, with the benefit of hindsight. Rarely do we perceive the divine purpose before it happens or while it is happening or even in the immediate aftermath of it happening. I would also suggest that knowing “how” God pulls this off is way overblown. We tend to think, “If only I knew with absolute certainty why this happened and in what way God is going to use it for my good, I would be satisfied. I would be at rest. I wouldn’t be angry with God.”

No, I don’t think you would. ***Knowing “how” is horribly overrated.*** One illustration proves my point, but I could give you countless others. Many years ago, when I was living and pastoring in Ardmore, a twelve-year-old boy suddenly, and without warning, dropped dead on the golf course. It was a tragedy beyond imagination. The family of this young boy did not attend my church, but a few months after his death his parents called and asked if they could come and talk to me.

We processed the event, and I prayed at length for them. We even wept a bit, as you might expect. I could tell that they had come to me hoping that I might be able to comfort them by explaining why this happened and how God would use it for their spiritual good. Of course, I couldn’t. Before they left, I asked the mother and father a simple question: “If you could know the why and the how of this tragedy, would it really make a difference in your lives? If you could understand precisely how God planned on using this for good, would it make the pain in your hearts go away? Would you feel any less of a loss? Would your sorrow diminish?” They looked down for a moment, and then at each other, and said: “No.”

We need to be careful lest we suspend our faith in God on our ability to understand his ways in this world. Our faith in him and our confidence in his goodness and our responsibility to serve and love him do not depend on our ability to figure out the mysteries of his providence. God is always worthy of our trust and devotion regardless of what may befall us, regardless of how much or little we may understand about it.

(3) “God”

That brings us to the third truth in this verse. But we have a problem. All along I’ve been saying that “God” causes or works all things together for our good. But the ESV translation doesn’t contain the word “God.” It simply says, “all things work together for good.” The NASB version includes a reference to God. So which is it? There are good Greek manuscripts that support both the exclusion of the word “God” as well as its inclusion.

So, why do I believe it is permissible to include “God” in this scenario even if we decide he is not mentioned in the best Greek manuscripts? I have three reasons.

First, Paul says later in v. 28 that we are called according to a “purpose.” But what is a “purpose”? A purpose is a conscious intent to accomplish a goal. A purpose, therefore, demands a “purposer” (even though there is no such word), someone who intends to take the seemingly random and senseless things of life and make of them something profitable and lasting. Things in and of themselves do not think or formulate a plan. Yet Paul says that all things work together for our good. How can that be unless it is God who providentially uses those things to accomplish his purpose?

Second, as noted earlier, the basis for Paul's confident assertion in v. 28 is the reality of the divine plan of salvation in vv. 29-30. The reason we are assured that the things in this life work ultimately for our good is that God is working to bring us into conformity with his son (v. 29). Thus, our faith and hope are in God, not in "things," be they good or bad.

Have you ever caught yourself saying to someone who is suffering through difficult times, "Hey, don't worry; I just know things will be all right"? Or perhaps you have consoled them by saying, "Don't despair; these things just have a way of working themselves out in time." If you have, you need to go back and apologize and set matters straight. "Things" have no such power. All "things" are subservient to God's providential will. If things do work out, if in time one's situation does improve, it is only because of God's marvelous, matchless, merciful control of every "thing" that exists.

Third, I simply remind you of Paul's statement in Ephesians 1:11 where he says this:

"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

How does it strike you to know that God is at work for you? What effect does it have on your heart to know that he is not a passive spectator or a disinterested observer but an ever-present providential Lord? If, as Paul says, God "works all things according to the counsel of his will," then surely the one who has a purpose in all our suffering and labors to cause all things to work for our good is God.

(4) *"all things"*

And that, in turn, leads to yet another crucial question: What precisely are the "things" that Paul is talking about? Does he really mean "all" things? Every "thing"? No exceptions? Yes. What an awesome God we have who could embrace within his providential design all things, both great and small, both good and bad!

You are probably familiar with the illustrations I'm about to use, but they are still relevant and helpful. The many events in our lives, both good and bad, both instructive and destructive, are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Try as we may, we can't make all the pieces fit into a coherent whole, a recognizable picture of something or someone. The good news of Romans 8:28 is that God has the box top! He knows where every piece fits, and in time will see that it is put there.

A related illustration is that of the tapestry. Life may at times seem like the underside of the tapestry, with no pattern, purpose, or coherent resolution. It looks like a confusing mass of loosely connected threads. We see only a mass of colors that make no apparent sense. But God sees things from the other side. From the vantage point of eternity, he sees the beauty of that portrait, which is your life, because it is he who weaves every random thread into a meaningful whole. After all, anyone can make good things come out of good things. That's no great trick. That doesn't require divine omnipotent power or wisdom. But God

does something immeasurably greater. He causes all things, even the really bad things, to “work together” for good.

Have you ever walked into a symphony orchestra only to hear a cacophony of sounds that don’t seem to be remotely related, all playing their instruments simultaneously with no discernible melody? But then the conductor stands to attention, taps his baton on the music stand in front of him, and all become silent. When they begin to play, it all comes together. It all makes sense. Well, that is a bit like our lives. Your experience at present may seem and sound like that mixture of instruments that is painful to hear. But you must understand that God is the consummate maestro who will bring everything into beautiful harmony.

But this raises an important question about our text. Just what are the “all things” over which God exercises control? The context answers this for us. In vv. 17-18 Paul said we are children of God and co-heirs with Christ “provided we suffer with him” (v. 17). The “things” God causes to work together for good are all the experiences that together constitute the “suffering” we endure for Christ’s sake. Whatever form that suffering may take, be it bodily affliction, financial adversity, emotional distress, rejection, slander, or the loss of a job, we are to be encouraged to know that God has it all under wraps.

In the context that follows, Romans 8:35-39, Paul also mentions numerous things that in one way or another threaten, but fail, to sever us from the love of Christ. Among the “things” that God causes to work together for our good are tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. And if that were not enough, there is death and life and demons and things present and things future, things above and things below. No created thing, anywhere of any kind, says Paul, can escape God’s overruling providential power.

(5) “*work together*”

Note well that Paul does *not* say all things *are* good, but that God is more than capable of causing them to *work together for good*. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that things like disease or poverty or pain are good things. God is not saying to us in this text, “Hey, those bad things aren’t really all that bad.” God doesn’t minimize or trivialize your hurts and the harm that comes your way.

Neither does he transform evil things into good things, in the sense that they cease to be evil once God has finished with them. What he says is that God can take something inherently evil and make it serve a higher, better, and more spiritually productive end. You may recall that Joseph’s brothers in Genesis intended to do him harm. They sold him into slavery. What they did was evil. Do you remember Joseph’s response?

“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” (Gen. 50:20).

By taking something that was evil and providentially using it for good does not mean that it ceased to be evil or that those who perpetrated this sin against Joseph won’t be held accountable for it. But God sovereignly intended this particular “thing” in Joseph’s experience to “work together for good.”

(6) “for good”

I’m sure that most of you have been anxiously waiting for me to get to this sixth point in the passage, namely, the “good” that comes from God’s providential oversight of our lives. Perhaps you have said to yourself, “It’s about time that God did something ‘good’ for me to make up for all the lousy and painful stuff he allowed into my life.” Perhaps you’ve been waiting patiently to cash in on the “good” that Paul confidently promises will come from the things over which God exercises his control.

In other words, many people have it in their heads that the “good” in Romans 8:28 is more money, worldly comfort, a long-overdue promotion at work, fame, possessions, power, consistently good health, or some such thing. Or perhaps you’ve read this verse to say that God causes all things to work together for the good that you *want*. No, much to your disappointment, that is not what Paul means.

Neither does this verse mean that if we lose one job God will always make certain that we get a better one. It does not mean that if we get sick this week, we will experience good health next week. The “good” that God brings out of the bad may not be recognizable as good, at least as we define the term. This verse is not a promise that God will bring riches out of poverty or laughter out of sorrow or pleasure out of pain. Paul is not saying that at the end of the day or at the end of life my ship will come in and I’ll get the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

The “good” that Paul has in view is clearly identified for us at the close of v. 29. There Paul says that God’s design is to bring us into *moral and spiritual conformity to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ*. God’s ultimate purpose in exercising providential lordship over the “all things” of our lives is to make us Christ-like! It is holiness, not merely health, and purity, not possessions, that God has promised. That doesn’t mean God won’t provide us with good health in response to our prayers. Many times he does. It doesn’t mean he won’t prosper us financially. Many times he does. But the primary “good” we get is becoming more and more like Jesus in what we love and hate and enjoy and understand.

Consider a silly game that we often play with one another. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.” If people do so, it is often with fear and trembling. They are anxious and somewhat worried. Their hand shakes. They recoil, all because they fear that you will put something squishy or harmful or ugly in their hand. But God will never do this! We need never fear what he gives. It will always prove in the long run to be for our spiritual good. It may be painful. It may not be what we expect or want or think we need. But God assures us that it will work for our greater conformity to Christ.

One more thing before we look at the seventh and final thing Paul says. The worst thing you can do as you reflect on Romans 8:28 is to conclude that Paul is minimizing your struggles and pain. Paul is no Pollyanna who is incapable of understanding or looking realistically at the suffering God’s people endure. No one suffered more than Paul did. Don’t ever think that this is his attempt to pat you on the back and say, “There, there, now. It’s not all that bad. Don’t wallow in self-pity. Chin up! God is using this for your good.”

Well, yes. God is in fact orchestrating your suffering and your heartache for your spiritual good. But that does not mean life won't hurt or that you should pretend that you are untouched or unaffected by the trials you are experiencing.

What we must remember is that for the Christian, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, ***there is no such thing as pointless suffering***. Your suffering and distress may be altogether random and unexpected. It likely will remain mysterious and unexplained. It may continue to be chronic and depressing, but it is never pointless. You may never in this life discover the point. You likely will not be told by God or someone else why it is happening. Don't come to me looking for an explanation. But as I said earlier, ***knowing the point is horribly overrated***. It won't do for you what you think it would. That being said, let's conclude with Paul's seventh and final statement.

(7) *“for those who love God” and “are called according to his purpose”*

As glorious and wonderful and reassuring as this verse of Scripture is, it's important to know that it is not universal in its application. Paul specifically says that God orchestrates all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. No unbeliever, no non-Christian can have any assurance that any good will come from any “thing” he/she experiences.

Of course, Paul is not suggesting that God is sovereign only over that portion of the world which pertains to and affects believers. God is no less sovereign over the lives of unbelievers than he is over ours. But that does not mean he is orchestrating their lives for their greater conformity to Christ. That happens only for those who by faith are in Christ.

It's also important to note that he does not say this promise is for those who ***believe*** that God exists. It is for those who ***love*** God, who desire his glory and exaltation above all else, who ***cherish*** his person and aim to please him in all things. We need to be careful that our “love” for God is not diminished or threatened when the “all things” that happen to us turn out to be painful or disappointing. Our love for God can never be dependent on the outcome of God's providential work in our lives. Our responsibility to love and praise God is neither reduced nor abolished when his providence yields adversity. Remember the words of Job:

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong” (Job 1:20-22).

“Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.’ But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:9-10).

Paul also wants us to understand that the only reason any of us loves God is because he first loved us and purposely called us to himself. It is not first because we love God that all things work together for our

good. Things work together for our good because God, in love, called us to himself according to his sovereign purpose, the fruit of which is that we then love him.

Conclusion

Many of you come here every Sunday absolutely convinced that all your problems are bigger than God. I come here every week to convince you from Scripture that God is bigger than all your problems. And I can do that without hesitation because of texts like Romans 8:28.