

All Things Work Together for Good

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Bad things happen. When they strike and we seek orientation, comfort and hope from the community of faith, inevitably someone will quote the first half of Romans 8.28: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God” (KJV). And they would be quite right to do so, for believers in all ages have received great reassurance from these words. They draw on our deeply held beliefs and speak comprehensively about the human condition; they are simple and address our situation directly. In our heart of hearts we believe that the omnipotent creator of all things will work all things for our ultimate good, and these words remind us that we really believe this.

In one sense the affirmation of Romans 8.28 needs no commentary. Believers at all levels of education, of all ages and from every culture have found these words comforting even apart from sophisticated analysis. Like all texts, however, these familiar words can be misunderstood and abused. You will forgive me, then, for departing from the contemplative mode for a time to examine Paul’s words a bit more analytically. I promise to return to a practical and contemplative stance.

Translation and Meaning

The Greek text reads: *oidamen de hoti tois agaposin ton theon panta sunergei eis agathon, tois kata prothesin kletois ousin*. The NIV translates it as follows: “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.” Other possible translations are (1) We know *that all things work together for good to those who love God...* or (2) We know *that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good...* or (3) We know that for those who love God, *in all things it [the Spirit] cooperates for good with those...*¹ The chief matter at dispute among these translations is how to translate *hoti...panta sunergei*. What is the subject and what is the object of the verb “work together”? Does God work with or in all things or do all things work together? Good scholars disagree. My sense of the meaning is: “God works all things for good.” God is the subject of the verb and “all things” is the object of the action. I think the translation “God works *in all things*” could be misleading. The emphasis is not that God works inside the things that happen to us, although that may also be true, but that God works *with* them, that is, externally but comprehensively, to reorder them to God’s chosen end.

Some things are clear in all proposals. (1) The verse begins with “we know.” Paul expects no argument on this point. Confidence that God works all things for good is part of the common faith of the Christian community and, hence, can serve as a presupposition for what follows. (2) The word translated “all things” (*panta*) covers everything, no exceptions no matter how good or bad they appear. Were this not so the text would be of little comfort. Its universality is the ground of its applicability to each person in every circumstance. The all-inclusive scope of “all things” is confirmed by that list of frightening events and mortal enemies recorded in

1. For the sake of space I must omit my reasons for rejecting (2) and (3). Briefly, the emphasis of the context falls on what God does with the “stuff” that happens to us, not on what we do with it.

8.37–39. (3) The verb “work with” (*sunergei*) refers to a hidden process of reordering all the bad things that happen to us—destructive if viewed apart from God’s working—to a good end. Between the “all things” of our experience and the ultimate achievement of God’s good purpose lies the divine working. (4) The prepositional phrase “for good” (*eis agathon*) should not be taken to mean a little temporal amelioration and softening of the bad things that have befallen us. The “good” may not become apparent tomorrow or next year or even within our lifetime. As is clear throughout the eighth chapter of Romans, God’s goal for us (hence our “good”) is our glorification (8.17–18, 21, and 30). The “good” becomes manifest in eschatological achievement of “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (8.21).

(5) The promise is addressed “to those who love God.” Why? Paul does not deny God’s general providence, but his objective in this text is calling to mind the sure ground of the hope Christians cherish (8.24–25). Those who love God place the highest value on becoming like God and living with him forever. And this is precisely why God allows us to suffer, that is, to suffer with Christ that we might share all things with him (8.17). If we love God, suffering the loss of property, social standing and even life is nothing compared with the glory of attaining eternal communion with God (8.18). As long as we love God supremely we cannot lose what we supremely love. However if one does not love God, one holds a different view of what is “good.” For those who love the world, the thought of losing worldly goods and suffering pain and scorn looms as an unbearable and unredeemable evil. God does not work all things for our worldly comfort.

The Broad Context in Romans

Now we will back away from narrow focus on 8.28 to place this verse in the flow of Romans as a whole. Chapters 1–4 speak of a new basis on which we can be judged as acceptable to God. As Paul finishes his introduction to the book, he announces his theme: the gospel is “the power for the salvation of everyone” because in the gospel “a righteousness from God is revealed.” (1.16–17). Paul then declares that God’s coming wrath and judgment are already being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness. Although in Paul’s thought “salvation” is a broad term encompassing rescue from everything negative in the human condition, including sin, death and ignorance, in these theme verses it is the judgment of God that is being contemplated. How can we survive God’s just judgment? How can we be saved from the wrath that will fall on wickedness? In chapter 1, Paul demonstrates that the Gentiles deserve divine condemnation, and in chapter 2 he examines the claims of the Jews. Simply having the law and possessing knowledge of God will not suffice to guarantee a favorable verdict before the divine judge. We must keep the law, and not one person has kept the law. God’s judgment is coming, and there are no righteous people on the earth. What a terrible thought! Who can be saved?

Good news! In the gospel a “power” for salvation has been revealed (3.21ff.). A new kind of righteousness has come to light, a righteousness grounded in God’s action, not in ours. God accepted Jesus Christ’s faithful obedience unto death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. And God accepts our trust in Jesus as our righteousness so that we no longer stand under the condemnation of God. Faith binds us to Christ in such a way that the just judgment God passes on Christ includes us also. And what is faith? Look to Abraham who trusted God against reason and custom; his *faith* was “credited to him as righteousness” (4.5). Abraham believed God’s promises and obeyed God’s commands for no reason other than basic trust in God. We too can be counted righteous if we “believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (4.24).

Chapter 5.1–11 summarizes the preceding argument about the basis of our acceptability to God and begins to turn toward the theme of how we live as those justified by faith in Christ. Paul now speaks of the quality of life of faith: “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God...” (5.1). In the ten verses that follow, Paul introduces themes that will not be treated in detail until chapter 8: peace, suffering, joy, hope, glory, the Spirit and love for God. Before he can speak so directly about these existential aspects of the Christian life he must deal with two opposing misconceptions: on the one hand, that God’s grace liberates us to continue to live in sin (6.1–23) and, on the other hand, that faith in Christ is compatible with accepting the obligation to keep the law by sheer self-determination (7.1–25). To prepare us for dealing with these two misconceptions and for grasping the proper understanding of the Christian life, Paul sets before us two models,

two ages and two ways of life (5.12–21). Adam represents the way of sin, sorrow and death. In contrast, Christ brought righteousness, joy and life. There is no middle ground between these two ways, and the law, which, of course, is on the side of good, cannot give us the inner power to become good. The function of the law is to flush out into the open the inner corruption and rebellion in the human heart (5.20), so that the absolute necessity of grace becomes obvious.

Chapter 6 begins with a rhetorical question Paul hesitates even to frame: “Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?” The question should evoke a chorus of loud “Nos!” without further argument. But Paul lays out the reasons that the life of faith in Christ is completely incompatible with a life of sin. Drawing on the opposition between Adam and Christ developed in the preceding chapter, Paul contends that we cannot have it both ways. In baptism we died to the old life of slavery to sin and death and were raised to a new life of righteousness. The goal of God’s grace is deliverance from sin *itself* and not merely from *punishment* for sin. Sin is its own punishment, identical in essence with death. In Chapter 7, Paul deals with a different mistake. Instead of following the seemingly easy course of self-indulgence, these Christians think they should fastidiously observe the law, and, in so doing, they make legal vigilance and self-discipline the central ethos of Christian life. But Paul destroys this approach by demonstrating its superficiality and ineffectiveness. Law, even divine law, merely informs us of what we ought to do and be. It cannot change a bad person into a good one or give a weak person the power to obey. Hence, rather than helping us attain righteousness, the law excites rebellion, facilitates self-righteousness and existential blindness, or evokes despair. Only Jesus Christ, only the Spirit can deal with sin at its root (7.25).

With the two mistaken views of the Christian life refuted, Paul now can set before us a vision of the new life empowered by the Spirit and modeled by Jesus Christ. In Chapter 8, Paul shows how the work of Jesus Christ and the Spirit actually accomplish what the law could not. Through faith in Christ we participate in his righteousness, and the Spirit empowers us for living as Jesus did. Paul opposes the Spirit to the “flesh” or “the mind of the flesh.” By flesh he does not mean simply the body but the spirit of selfishness and indulgence, over which the law has no power. But the Spirit can deal with our weaknesses at the most fundamental level. The Spirit can change us into “children of God” (8.14), “control” the mind (8.6), “give life to our mortal bodies” (8.11) and “help us in our weaknesses” (8.26). Each of these works of the Spirit is internal and spiritual; they cannot be accomplished by the law, which works externally. But Paul reminds us in 8.17 that sharing in Christ’s victory necessitates that we share also in his sufferings. And with this idea we move from the broad context of 8.28 to its narrow context.

The Immediate Context

In 8.18–27 Paul follows up on the warning voiced in verse 17 that because Christ suffered, we must suffer in this world. Even as those who are justified by faith in Jesus, who stand firm in God’s grace and who are led by the Spirit in the way of righteousness, we experience suffering, weakness, groaning, frustration, divine hiddenness and bondage to decay. But in all these negative experiences the Spirit gives to our spirits comfort, hope and patience. Then in 8.28 Paul answers a question that may have arisen in his readers’ minds: “How can our present situation of suffering, confusion and weakness lead to the glorious destiny that we have been promised? How can all this stuff work out for my good?” The answer rings out in verse 28: “We know that to those who love God, God works all things for good.” In the next eleven verses (8.29–39) Paul draws out and illustrates what he means by “God works all things for good.” God’s knowledge, decisions, planning and working stretch from eternity to eternity. Nothing and no one can separate us from “the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8.39). In light of all these considerations I offer this paraphrase of 8.28 as an interpretation of its import: “For those who love God and have been called in fulfillment of his purpose, God works with everything that happens so that in the end everything turns out right; it leads to our glory.”

Two Mistaken Interpretations

I need to address two of the most common mistaken interpretations of Romans 8.28. The first reads the text as saying that each and everything that happens to us is good. It’s good that you suffer financial loss, good that

you got cancer, or good that your spouse died. But the text does not say that “all things” are good. Such an interpretation ignores the preceding context. Paul’s readers do not experience the events he mentions in verses 18–27 and 35–39 as good. As isolated events they are destructive and frustrating. Only if God weaves them into his plan can they work out for good. And this is what is asserted in 8.28: No matter how bad things look from the eye of the storm, God will work them for good. A second misinterpretation makes the opposite error. For these interpreters it is very clear that such things as the death and destruction brought by natural disasters, children dying of cancer and car wrecks that wipe out whole families are really bad. And in this I believe they are correct. But their gaze is so fixed on the badness of these events that they cannot believe that even God can reorder them for good. They complain, “If God used ‘bad’ events for a good end, such occurrences could no longer be considered bad; they would be good! But we know from experience that some things are so bad that they cannot be made good. No good end is worth the suffering of one innocent child!” Hence, for the second group, Romans 8.28 cannot mean that God makes all things “turn out right,” as my paraphrase would have it; rather it means that God does the best God can to bring some good from them or to heal those wounded by them. But this interpretation fits the context no better than the first mistaken interpretation. Of what comfort would such weak assurances be? The context, as we have seen, affirms a well-founded hope for triumph over all enemies and safe passage through the worse possible events. Nothing but full confidence that no event we can conceive or enemy we can imagine can deter God from bringing us to the glory God promises can do justice to this great text.

Practical Lesson

What is Paul attempting to do for us, and what is he asking us to do? He does not say explicitly. But I think we can be pretty sure of what he would say. As we saw, the first part of Romans shows how we can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ from impending divine judgment and from destructive powers of sin and death. In 8.35–39, Paul lists some of the most dreaded possibilities human beings can imagine and concludes that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8.37). Paul is well aware that we are tempted to keep silent in the face of persecution, to give up hope in times of trial, to lose faith at the prospect of hardship, to feel abandoned in sickness and death and to indulge in self pity in loss. But in this great text he urges us not to give in to despair, but to summon our courage, maintain hope and walk confidently through the darkest valley. We can live a victorious life...because we know that *God works all things*—no matter how terrible they seem—*for good*.

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