

God's Providential Care

In Romans 8:28, Paul says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

This is one of the greatest verses in all the Bible. It contains a promise that has been called "a soft pillow for troubled hearts." I like that. When we are troubled, filled with worry and filled with fear, you can always go to Romans 8:28, to that blessed promise and rest your head upon it.

Another parallel passage is 1 Peter 5:7: "...casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." The New Living Translation renders this passage, "Give all your worries and cares to God, because He cares about you." I like that.

When we, as believers, are going through difficulties, we can rest assured that God is in control of all that is going on in our lives. As a child of God, you not only have a new hope and a new help from the Holy Spirit, but you have a new knowledge. Verse 28 says, "And we know..." We have a confident assurance that God is providentially watching over us and taking care of us.

Philippians 1:6 is another great parallel passage. Paul says, "...being confident..."—there is that "we know"—"...of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."

The Bible teaches this, and I have experienced it. When God saves you by His grace, God starts a work in your life. All that comes into your life—whether good or bad, sunshine or sorrow—God is in control of it, and God is working it together for our good and for His glory.

I want to share five facts about God's providential care. The first fact is that we have a certainty of God's care. We can be absolutely sure that God will take care of us. It says, "And we know..." This is the believer's blessed assurance. This is not just Paul's opinion. He doesn't say, "I think so," "maybe if you're lucky or a really good Christian," or "maybe if you're a 'super saint' who goes to Revival Christian Fellowship," that you'll be taken care of by God. No; he says that we can be assured, that we know this.

In context, Paul had just mentioned a few things that we don't know. In verse 25, he said, "We do not see," and in verse 26, he said, "We do not know." So there are some things we can't see or know. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul said, "Now we see in a mirror, dimly." Right now we don't see things clearly. But one day we will be with Jesus, and all will be understood.

I believe that when we get to heaven, we're going to say, "Wow! Now I see perfectly clear why God allowed that in my life for my good and for His glory. He was working to bring me to this place and bring Him glory." So I know that God is working all things together for my good.

In John 13, Jesus is washing the disciples' feet. Verse 6 says, "Then He came to Simon Peter....Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet!'" And Jesus said to Peter, "What I am

doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.” So there is a lot we don’t know right now. We don’t understand what we can’t see and what we don’t know. I don’t know what God’s doing. I can’t see what God’s doing. But I do know this: that God is working, and He’s working everything in my life for my good and for His glory.

The question is, how do we know? The answer is by faith. We don’t know by sight, because everything looks pretty crazy. We don’t know by feelings, because my emotions go up and down. We don’t know by other people. We know by God giving us His Word and then believing in His promises.

I discovered that the focus of verse 28 is all about God. God loves us. God called us “according to His purpose.” God works in our hearts. God does it for our good and for His glory. It’s all about God. The verse is not about us; it’s about what God does for us.

So there are three areas we want to focus on: God in His person, God’s promises and God’s power. When we are certain of God’s care, it comes about because we have faith in who God is, His person. He’s a God of mercy, He’s a God of love, He’s a God of compassion, He’s the Father of mercies and the God of all kindness.

He’s also a God who gives us “exceeding great and precious promises.” One of those is here in verse 28, “that all things work together for good.” So it’s a promise of God I must believe by faith.

And we focus on God’s power. Theologians call it His “omnipotence.” He’s all powerful, omnipotent. There is no limit to what God can do. I may love my wife, and I may love my children, but I am limited in my abilities, in my knowledge and in my power, but God’s power is unlimited.

So if something you consider bad comes into your life, rest on God’s character, on God’s promises and on God’s power. It all focuses on God. Rest on the fact that God is in control of everything that happens to you.

John Greenleaf Whittier put it in a poem like this:

“I know not where His islands lift,

Their fronded palms in air;

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care.”

I like that.

So there are a lot of things I don’t know, but what I do know—and I will never doubt—is that

God loves me, God's has made me promises, God will take care of me and I can rest in those facts.

The second fact about God's providential care in this verse is the extent of His care. It's found in the phrase "all things." "We know that all things..." In the Greek, "all things" means "all things."

You ask, "Pastor, you mean bad things?"

"Yes." Things that in and of themselves may not be considered good, God can turn around. God can mix them together. God can change the situation. If I respond by trusting in God, then God will take care of even bad things and circumstances in my life and use them for my good and for His glory. So every event of our lives, good or bad, is under the loving, beneficial, sovereign control of God.

Back in verses 17 and 18 of the same chapter, Paul says that "...if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Notice that we will suffer in this world. We will have difficulties and adversities, but we can know that we are going to go to heaven and have His eternal purpose fulfilled.

Even the groanings mentioned in verse 23—our disappointments and bereavements such as illnesses, children who cause us pain, loss of wealth, loss of health, lack of fruit in Christian service—can be under the listing of "all things."

Jesus told us, in Matthew 6:26, that when we are worried and filled with anxiety, we should go bird watching. He actually said, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" If God is going to take care of His creation, little birds, God will take care of you.

I remember years ago when I was worried about our finances—paying the mortgage and bills we had—it was a rainy day, and I was sitting in the living room looking out the front window and I saw huddled under the eaves of the house on the porch a bird with a huge French fry in its beak. It was as happy as a little bird could ever be. I thought, That's not fair. God, you provide French fries for the bird, but I'm your child! Jesus said, "Yeah, that's the point. I take care of my creation; I'm certainly going to take care of my children."

God provides. He clothes the lilies of the field, so He will take care of us. So the next time you're freaking out, that you're bummed out and you're worried, go out and bird watch for a while. Notice how God takes care of them, and He will take care of you. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul says, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

So we see the certainty, we know by faith. We see the extent that everything which comes into our lives God can use for our good and for His glory. Then thirdly, we see the harmony of His providential care. It's seen in the phrase in verse 28, "work together." "We know that all things

work together.” So it’s God who is working, and it’s God who is orchestrating together all things for our good. William Barkley says, “We know that God intermingles all things for good to them that love Him. Taken by themselves, they may be considered bad.”

A few years ago, it struck me that what we call bad, God might call good. What we call good could be bad. It all depends upon your perspective. Are you looking at life from God’s perspective? God can even use a bad thing for a good purpose in our lives. So He’s working them together, taking the items in our lives and packaging them for our good.

I don’t bake. I don’t cook. But I do eat. One of my weaknesses—this is a confession; pray for me—is baked goods. Some of you know I love donuts. If you are what you eat, I’d be a donut right now. Anytime I see a bakery or the word “bakery,” I start to just praise God. They smell good when they bake bread, rolls or cookies. I just love that stuff.

But when you bake a cake—which I don’t do, but I watched my Mom and my wife bake cakes—you have all these ingredients to put in. I don’t know what they all are, but I saw them thrown into the bowl. Then they stir them up. But if you tried to eat the ingredients separately, how good would it be? It would be terrible. Put some flour in your mouth and see if you like it. Or put a raw egg in your mouth—yuuk! But when you put all the ingredients in a bowl, stir them around, put it in a pan, put it in the oven, set the timer, you keep an eye on it and it pops out—hallelujah, thank you Jesus!

So God takes all the ingredients of our lives, which by themselves might be considered bad things, puts them all together and puts us in the oven. When God puts us in the oven, He always keeps an eye on the temperature and the time.

Many times my wife has asked me, “Can you watch the oven? I have to run an errand. Can you take out what’s cooking? The timer will ring. It’s going to just be about 40 minutes. Can you take it out of the oven?” That’s a dangerous thing. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard “ding,” and I thought, That’s weird. What the heck was that? And a few minutes later the fire department’s pulling in my driveway, and smoke is billing out the windows. “Oh, yeah, I forgot!”

Aren’t you glad that when God puts us in the oven, He keeps an eye on the temperature and on the timer? He knows just how hot and just how long, and He’s working all together for our good and for His glory. I believe we can rest on that marvelous promise that He is working cautiously, continuously, purposely and lovingly in our lives. We can trust Him.

We have the certainty, the extent and the harmony of His care. Now notice, fourthly, the results of His care. The result is “for good.” God is working for our good and for His glory. The ultimate purpose why God allows these adverse circumstances in our lives, good or bad, is for His glory.

What is the good that God is working in our lives? Let me tell you what it is not. This verse has a couple of incorrect ways that some interpret it. One of them is that if my car blows up, God’s going to get me a better car. You might have to ride your bike for a while. Or if I lose my money,

God's going to give me more money. If I lose my job, God's going to get me a better job. That's not what this verse is about.

The good that God is working in your life is to make you like Jesus. It's not to make you rich, not to give you things. He does that, and praise God for that. You may get a better car or a better job or a better house if something happens. But God is trying to make you more like Jesus Christ.

I want to show you that in the text, in verses 29-30. Everyone quotes verse 28, but they take it out of context. Verse 29, "For..."—there's the conjunction—"...whom He foreknew..."—this refers to God's elective purpose in setting His love upon you—"...He also predestined..."—or "predetermined what He is going to do with those He's called"—"...to be conformed..."—here it is—"...to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." So the good, in verse 28, is to conform you into the image of His Son.

You say, "Well, I don't want to be like Jesus!" Okay, that's fine. But if you want to be more like Jesus, if you want to grow in the likeness of God's character and nature, then He's going to have to work in your heart to produce your good for His glory.

Verse 30, "Moreover..."—it doesn't stop—"...whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." So He foreknew us, He predestined us, He called us, He justified us and He will glorify us. This has been called "the golden chain of God's redemptive plan." Who he foreknew, who he called, who He justified, He will one day glorify. What begins with grace ends in glory.

And I'm absolutely convinced that this is what the Bible teaches. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." God doesn't stop and start.

Have you ever started a project and didn't finish it? "I'm going to join the gym." And that's all you ever did—join. "I'm a gym member. Okay, I never go but I'm a gym member. I'm going to start exercising." You go once and then you're done. "I'm going to go on a diet." You go on a diet for a couple of days, and then you break your diet.

Do you know how many books in my library are half read? People come to my office and ask, "Did you read all these books?"

"Half of them." And I have all these half-read books on my nightstand in my bedroom at home. "Lord, help me finish a book!"

Aren't you glad God doesn't just start with you? "Oh, I'm tired of John Miller; just throw him away. Start all over." Aren't you glad God doesn't just throw you out and start another project with someone else? God began, God will continue and God will complete that good work that He started in you.

J. Oswald Sanders said, "Every adverse experience, when rightly received, can carry its quota

of good. Bodily pain and weakness cause us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reversal points up how limited our resources are. Mistakes and failures humble our pride. All these can be included in the term 'good.'"

Remember Paul's thorn in his flesh, in 2 Corinthians 12? It was "given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure." The thorn was a messenger of Satan and it buffeted Paul. But Paul said, "Look what happened! It kept me humble. And keeping me humble, it kept me useable." The Bible says, "The proud He knows from afar." God cannot use the proud; He uses the humble.

So Paul said, "I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

But God said to Paul, "No," three times.

"Thanks a lot God, I thought you loved me."

God said, "I do love you, so I'm going to give you something. I'm not going to take away your pain. I'm not going to take away your problem. I'm not going to take away your suffering. I'm going to give you My grace."

Then He went on to say to Paul, "My grace is sufficient..."—I like that word; it means "everything you need"—"...for you. My strength is made perfect..."—or "complete"—"...in weakness." When Paul heard that the Lord's grace would be sufficient and His strength would be complete, he said, "Okay; then I'm going to glory in my weaknesses. For then the power of Christ will rest upon me. For when I am weak, then I am strong." You can turn that around also: "When I think I am strong, then I am weak." But when I realize my weaknesses, and it drives me to Jesus Christ for strength, then am I strong.

Someone put it in a poem:

"I thank God for bitter things;

They've been a 'friend to grace';

They've driven me from paths of ease

To storm the secret place.

I thank Him for the friends who failed

To fill my heart's deep need;

They've driven me to the Savior's feet,

Upon His love to feed.

I'm grateful too, through all life's way

No one could satisfy,

And so I've found in God alone

My rich, my full supply!"

Have you lived long enough in your Christian life to be able to say, "Thank You, God, for the thorn. Thank You for this loss, this bereavement, this pain"? Not because it's a good thing, but because He's using it for good in your life and He's making you more like Jesus. That's what God's doing in your life, so we need to rest in that and trust in that, that God is in control.

There's another fact I want to point out in verse 28, and that is the object of God's care. Who is the object of God's care? It is, "Those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

The text does not say, "All things work for good." That's another mistranslation, misinterpretation and misapplication of Romans 8:28. All things do not work together for good universally for anyone. There is a very select group of people to whom this promise is given. First, they are Christians. Second, they "love God" and are "called according to His purpose." Now this group is not made up of some elite, superspiritual, deeper-life saints. They are just Christians. Christians are described as those who love God, and they are the ones who are called according to God's purpose.

We always get the idea that this is for the supersaints, that this is for the deeper-life club, this is for the guys who are really hard-core Christians. "And I'm not one of those," you say. No. All God's people have this same promise given to them; God is working in every affair of their lives for their spiritual growth, for their good and for their maturity and to make them more like Jesus. If you are a child of God and you are loving God, then you are called by His purpose, and that's His plan for your good and for His glory. So don't misapply this verse.

Now it doesn't mean that God doesn't take care of unsaved people. He gives them food, water and shelter; He takes care of others. This is the general, providential care of God. But God has a particular group of people who love Him, are called by Him, they are Christians, who are His children, who He takes care of.

If you are a child of God, you can rest in His love. Years ago, I had quite an experience. I was going to fly out of Los Angeles late one Sunday night to Australia in order to preach. I was with my assistant pastor and a man from the church. We stopped at a Carl's Jr. on Century Boulevard to get something to eat. When we came out, we were abducted at gunpoint. There were two guys with guns hiding behind our car. They abducted us, got us back in the car, robbed us and had us drive around with their guns at our heads for over two hours, threatening to kill us. They had us stop the car, lined us up execution style, cocked their guns like they were going to shoot us, before they finally left us and slipped away.

But I'll never forget the peace and the assurance that I had in that car. If I moved a little bit, I felt that gun right at the back of my head. I knew I was a child of God, that God was watching over me, that nothing would happen to me except what God allowed and that God was in control. God met us in that car. I'm here today to testify of God's care and God's goodness.

Now I might have been killed and gone to heaven, but I believe God would somehow use it for good and for His glory.

Whenever you're facing a difficult or challenging situation—if you just happen to get kidnapped in LA, which I don't recommend—you're a child of God. He's watching over you. He'll take care of you. You can trust Him. He'll provide. He'll work in your heart for your good and for His glory. So the point I want to make is that we're the objects of His care. We are children of God.

Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." That's so important. And we are "called according to His purpose" by His love and by His grace.

Charles Swindoll took verse 28, and based on how it should be arranged in the original Greek, gave his own paraphrase. He said, "For those who love God..."—and that's where the Greek starts with the emphasis on; those who love God—"...the Lord sovereignly weaves the strands of every circumstance, every influence, every atom or idea they encounter for the purpose of creating moral good within them. These He has called to join in His redemptive plan for the world." So God is working for your good and for His glory.

The implications of this one verse are mind-boggling. All through the Bible there are multitudes of examples. Let me give you a few. How about Job? Have you ever read the book of Job? In one day, he lost everything. You talk about having a bad day! He lost his children, all his cattle and sheep, all his possessions, his house—everything was destroyed. All he had left at the end of the day was his loving, supportive, encouraging wife, who said, "Curse God and die!"

"I appreciate that, sweetheart. I really appreciate the encouragement." Nothing better than to be beaten down and then have your wife encourage you. "Curse God and die!" Okay.

But do you know that God was working? Do you know that God gave the devil permission? And the devil had to get permission from God to touch Job. God put a hedge around Job; nothing would come into Job's life except what God would allow. The same is true of you, and the same is true of me. God allowed Job to be tried and tested, for his good and for God's glory.

Satan said to God that Job only serves Him because He blessed him. Satan said, "Let me afflict him and punish him, and he will curse You to Your face."

God said, "Go for it!"

So Job was actually used to vindicate God, that God is worthy to be worshipped apart from the gifts that He gives us. But Job didn't know that, see that or understand that.

I think of the story of Jacob. He had lost several of his children. He thought Joseph was dead. And he had a lot of trials and troubles. His sons were going to Egypt to get grain since there was a famine. They returned to tell Jacob that Benjamin had to go back to Egypt to the man who was in charge there. They had already put Simeon in prison there. So they told all this to Jacob, and he said, "All these things are against me."

When I read what Jacob said I think, Jacob, just read the next chapter! Duke, you're gonna to be blown away by what God has planned!

Someone said, "Big doors swing on small hinges." Many times God will open up a marvelous door with the slightest, small circumstances. Your life could change in a moment, and God could turn things around.

Maybe you are discouraged right now; go to the next chapter. God has a plan.

And if you value character over comfort, which we should, then your trials will not upset you. It's all what you value. If you value character, Christ-likeness, over earthly comfort, then your trials will not upset you, because you know that God is using it to make you more like Jesus Christ.

So how marvelous this promise in Romans 8:28 is.

Then I think of Joseph, whose brothers sold him as a slave. He was forgotten in prison. But when his brothers bowed before him, he didn't retaliate. He told them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

And the greatest example of God taking evil and turning it to good is the Cross of Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the Cross, it was a terrible thing, but out of that came salvation for the entire world. Someone put it in a poem called The Divine Weaver. The author is unknown.

"My life is but a weaving

Between my Lord and me;

I cannot choose the colors

He weaveth steadily.

Oftentimes He weaveth sorrow

And I, in foolish pride,

Forgetteth He seeth the upper

And I the underside.

Not till the loom is silent

And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned."