

God's Providential Care
Romans 8:28
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Our text is Romans 8:28, but I want to read to verse 31.

Paul says, "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." There's our text. "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things?" "These things" is what we just read from verse 28-30. What we should say is, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Romans 8:28 is one of the greatest verses in the Bible. It is one of the most common verses put to memory by Christians, but I fear that a lot of people misunderstand it or misquote it.

Many times as a young Christian I would quote half of it. I would say, "All things work together for good," but that's not what the verse actually says. And my Dad was always there to correct me. He would say, "John, that's not the verse; you have to quote the whole thing." It says, "And we know..."—don't forget that first part—"...that all things work together for good..."—to a particular group of people—"...to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." So there is a category of individuals for whom God is working out their good and for His glory.

Verse 28 contains a promise that has been called "a soft pillow for troubled hearts." I can look out over the congregation and know that there is cancer here, there is heartache there, there is grief here, there is a prodigal child there. I know that there are many who are suffering and going through sorrow. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," John 16:33.

Some of you are suffering, some of you are sick, some of you have lost jobs, some of you have lost a loved one. It's so difficult in bereavement if you have lost a wife, a husband or a dear family member.

But we know something. Paul says, "...that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." So the believer in Christ has a new hope; a new help, the Holy Spirit; and now the believer in Christ has a new knowledge. And that is significant—"And we know."

Yet there are many things in this life we don't know. The Bible says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly..."—so there are things we don't know; our understanding is limited—"...but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known," 1 Corinthians 13:12. So we know that verse 28 is true.

There is a great parallel passage to verse 28. In Philippians 1:6, Paul says, "Being confident..." And in Romans 8:28, it says, "And we know..." Philippians 1:6 says, "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." So what God starts, He foreknows, He predestines, He calls, He justifies and He glorifies, Romans 8:29-30. What begins with grace will end in glory.

Have you ever started a project and didn't complete it? "I'm gonna join the gym." Yeah, that's all you do is join the gym. Well, great; you joined the gym. "I'm gonna go three times a week." You end up going once a year for three years. You start to read a book. Do you know how many half-read books I have on my nightstand? My wife says, "Why are all these books on the nightstand?"

"I'm gonna read them."

"You've been saying you're going to read them for 20 years."

"I'll read it! I'll read it!" So we start but we don't finish.

Aren't you glad that God finishes what He starts? If God saved you by His grace, He's going to take you to glory. And in between, God is providentially watching over you. I titled this sermon, God's Providential Care, but the word "providence" is not in the Bible. Yet God's providence is all through the Bible. It means that God is working, God is protecting, God is providing, God is guiding, God is nurturing and God is watching over us from heaven. Especially as a child of God, you have this "pillow" or verse to rest your weary head on in times of trouble, difficulty and adversity.

I want to give you five facts about God's providential care found in Romans 8:28. Number one, is the certainty of God's providential care: "And we know." This is the blessed assurance that we know God is working "for our good" and for His glory. Verse 25 says, "We do not see," and verse 26 says, "We do not know." So there are things that we do not know or understand.

When Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, in John 13, and He wanted to wash Peter's feet, 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."

How true that is in our lives. Jesus is saying that to you right now. "I have allowed what's happening in your life, but I am working in your life right now. You don't understand now, but you will know afterwards when you get to heaven." Then you will see clearly and understand that God's ways were perfect.

And notice that he didn't say, "We see." He didn't say, "We feel." He said, "We know." It's not seeing or feeling but knowing. The Greek word "know," in verse 28, is "oida." It means "to know experientially, powerfully, personally" in our lives. It's not just head knowledge that we acquire, but it's a life experience.

I can testify by my own life experience—not just from the Word of God but from life—that I know God watches over me. I know God takes care of me. I know He loves me.

And how do we know that? How do “we know that all things work together for good”? By faith. Not by sight or by feeling, but by faith. And I want to give you three things to put your faith in. Number one, in God’s Person; number two, in God’s promises; and number three, in God’s power. The list could be quite long, but I shortened it to these three things. Simply, it is to trust in God. The Bible over and over says, “Trust in God.”

Nine times out of ten when people come to me for counsel, I basically end up saying, “You just need to trust the Lord.”

Then they say, “Well, can’t you give me something else to do? ‘Trust the Lord.’ What good is that gonna do?”

“Just trust the Lord.”

The Bible says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths,” Proverbs 3:5-6. If you trust God, you’ll be fine. If you freak out and don’t trust the Lord, then you’ll have problems. “Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame,” Romans 9:33. God will never let you down. God will never disappoint you. God will never shortchange you. God will take care of you. So put your trust in God.

So trust God’s Person—His nature, His character. And number two is trust in God’s promises. God has given us “exceedingly great and precious promises,” in His Word, 2 Peter 1:4. One of the reasons why we need to read the Bible is to discover the promises in God’s Word.

If you need to, get a promise book. They make books that give you categories of the promises listed in God’s Word, such as sorrow, suffering, strength, peace, and so forth, and the promises that correspond to those categories. For every need that we have, there is a promise of God that meets that need.

Familiarize yourself with the promises of God. And then, number three, remind yourself of the power of God. There is nothing too hard for God. Surprise, surprise. Over and over in the Bible, it says, “Is there anything too hard for God?” Jeremiah 32:27 says, “I am the Lord...is there anything too hard for Me?” The answer is “No.”

So whatever difficulties you are facing or whatever problems you’re confronted by, God’s power is able to deliver. John Greenleaf Whittier put it in a poem:

“I know not where His islands lift,

Their fronded palms in air;

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care."

So I "know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." That shows the certainty of God's providential care.

The second fact about God's providential care, verse 28, is its extent, as seen in the phrase "all things." "And we know that all things...."

You may say, "Well, I don't know about that." Then you don't believe God's Word.

"All things" means no qualifications or limits. Every event of our lives—good or bad, as determined by us; sweet things or bitter things—is under the loving, beneficial, sovereign control of our Father in heaven. You may not fully see that, but you need to know that and believe that God's Word is true.

In the context, if you go back to verse 17, notice the phrase "we suffer with Him." And verse 18 says, "The sufferings of this present time." Then verse 23 says, "We ourselves groan within ourselves." So all through the chapter, which is so glorious, opens with "no condemnation" and ends with no separation. And as believers in an unredeemed body, we still live in a fallen, broken world. Satan is a liar and a murderer; he comes "to steal, and to kill, and to destroy," John 10:10.

There are some things we don't know, but what we do know is that all the things that come into our lives, as people of God, as children of God "who love God...who are the called according to His purpose," are under His control. All our disappointments are His appointments.

I don't know how anyone functions without this knowledge. The events of our lives are no accidents. Everything that happens to you as a Christian God is in control of. Job suffered so much, but Satan had to get permission from God to afflict Job, because God had put a hedge around Job.

I believe that's true of us. So I know that whatever goes wrong in my life, I can say, "Okay, God. I know You love me. I know You're in control. I don't quite see what good is going to come out of this or what your purpose and plan is, but I'll trust You and look to You and hope in You. You're in control, so nothing comes into my life by accident."

When there is bereavement, when there is illness, children who cause us pain, prodigal children, the loss of wealth, lack of fruit in Christian service, God's still in control. Maybe you set out to serve the Lord and found it harder than you thought, people turned against you and you were stabbed in the back by other believers. Don't let that disappoint you; God is in control. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that if we are worried about tomorrow, we should do some bird watching. In verses 26 and 30, it says, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father..."—He's the birds' creator and your Father

—“...feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? O you of little faith.”

Have you ever seen a bird with a French fry in its beak? One time before I was married, I was having a difficulty paying my rent. I had taken back all the Coke bottles and done anything I could to scrounge up money. I said, “Lord, what am I going to do? I can’t pay my rent.” It was a rainy, winter day, and I looked outside, and under the eave of my porch, there was a little sparrow with a big French fry in its beak. And instantly the light when on—He feeds the birds. I believe fast food was created by God to feed the birds. It’s for the birds. And I remember the song:

“I sing because I’m happy,

I sing because I’m free,

For His eye is on the sparrow,

And I know He watches me.”

What a beautiful song that is. Ethel Waters used to sing this song at the Billy Graham crusades.

Think about this: God attends the funeral of every sparrow. And He says that “The very hairs of your head are all numbered,” Matthew 10:30. God knows you personally, intimately and individually. Remember “all things” from our text. And in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul says, “In everything...”—same concept—“...give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I don’t know what you have going on in your life right now, but in the midst of the problem, be thankful that God is working it for your good.

So we have the certainty, the extent and, number three, we have the harmony of God’s providential care, seen in the phrase “work together,” verse 28. “And we know that all things work together.” God is working things together. William Barclay translates this, “We know that God intermingles all things for good to them who love Him.” So God takes what we would call the good things, He takes the bad things—the heartache and disappointments—and He mixes them all together, and out comes something beautiful.

The Bible tells us that, as Christians, “We are His workmanship,” Ephesians 2:10. The Greek word for “workmanship” is “poiéma,” and we get our word “poem” from it. It means “a work of art.” So if you’re a Christian, you’re His poiéma, His work of art, something made. God is working for your glory, putting all things together for your good.

It’s somewhat like baking a cake. I don’t bake cakes but I eat cakes. I praise God for baked goods! When you make a cake from scratch, you have flour, sugar, egg—and whatever else you put in there. And if you took the ingredients separately and tried to eat them—yuk! But if your whip the ingredients together in a bowl and put it in the oven and bake it just right, out comes a beautiful, baked cake. Yum!

So God takes the ingredients of our lives and bakes them together. He weaves together a pattern for our good and for His glory. And the Greek tense of the verb “work” means that God is “continuously, purposefully and lovingly” working for our good.

Fourthly, the result of God’s providential care, verse 28, is “for good.” It says, “And we know that all things work together for good.” Individually we may not be able to call them good, but when they are working together, we can call them good.

God is working for our good and for His glory. Every time that you would say that something is bad in life, remind yourself that this is for my good and for God’s glory. And that’s what we should want. We should want God’s good work in our lives, and we should want God’s glory in our lives, as well.

And what is the “good” that God is working in our lives? This is where the context of the passage comes in. There is no break between verse 28 and verses 29-30. Paul says, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined...”—and here’s what He’s doing for good—“...to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

This is where a lot of people misinterpret this passage. They quote it as, “All things work together for good” and stop right there. The Bible doesn’t say that “All things work together for good.” It says that “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

So what is the “good”? The single, primary purpose and goal of God working in your life is likeness to Jesus Christ. It’s making us, as His children, into the very image of Jesus Christ. This is called “sanctification.” It’s a lifelong process. It begins the moment you are born again, and it doesn’t end until you get to heaven and see Jesus face to face. Then “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is,” 1 John 3:2.

Someone said to me, “I’m a Christian, but I keep messin’ up.” Welcome to the club. But after you’ve walked with God for a few years, you should mess up less and less. A Christian is not sinless, but he should sin less and less. We should be growing in holiness and likeness to Jesus Christ. And not in order to be saved but because we are saved. We’ve been justified and now God sanctifies. So there is salvation past—we’re declared righteous or justification; there is salvation present—He’s making us righteous or sanctification; and there is salvation future—one day we will have glorification and be face to face with Jesus Christ in heaven. He is working to make us like Jesus.

So some misinterpreted this verse by saying, “‘All things work together for good.’ I lost my job, so I’m going to get a better job with more pay!” It doesn’t say that. “My car blew up. Praise God! So I’m going to get a better car, a newer car, a nicer car. I’ve been driving this beat up, old car, and now I’m going to get a Porsche! In Jesus’ name.” No. I’ve met so many Christians who say that if something bad happens to you, God is going to do something really good for you. No; He’s going to make you more like Jesus. He wants you to trust Him more and have

more faith, to be more reliant on His power and to be more holy.

J. Oswald Sanders is one of my favorite authors. He said, "Every adverse experience, when rightly received, can carry its quota of good. Bodily pain, weakness, cause us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reverses point up how limited our resources. Mistakes and failures humble our pride. All these can be included in the term 'good.'" I like that. Don't forget that.

So when the Bible says, "All things work for good..." this is what God is doing. He's trying to make us more like Jesus Christ.

When the Apostle Paul had a thorn in his flesh, 2 Corinthians 12, he asked God to take it away. God said that He wouldn't but that "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And when Paul heard those words, he said, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me....For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Your weakness, your adversity, difficulty and pain and sorrow can be your greatest asset. It can make you or break you. It depends on how you respond; it can make you better or bitter. There are some old people who are crabby, cantankerous and bitter. Don't be that person. The secret is to go through bitter experiences and not become bitter. It's like the old saying, "If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade." God wants to make you sweeter, softer and more like Jesus. Even though we have a thorn in our flesh or a problem, God allows it to humble us, to teach us and to make us stronger.

The fifth and last fact about God's providential care in our lives is the objects of His care, verse 28. You must read the whole verse, but the second part of it says, "...to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." It's interesting that the text does not say, "All things work together for good." It works for a particular group of people. And it doesn't say, "to those who God loves," even though that's true. It says, "to those who love God."

And it struck me that what's most important is that God's love for me is sure. He demonstrated it when He gave His Son to die on the Cross for me. There is no question about that. No matter what comes into my life, I know God loves me. So the question is, "Do I love 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." If I do that, then nothing bad can happen to me. I didn't say things won't go wrong. I didn't say you wouldn't have hardships in life. But nothing can go wrong in your heart, because your heart is stayed on God. So love God.

If I were to speak to young people, I would tell them, "Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength....Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these," Mark 12:30-31. And Jesus said, in Matthew 22:40, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." If I love God, I'll keep His commandments. If I love my neighbor as myself, I won't lie, steal, cheat or abuse

others.

So what a beautiful thing it is to say, “God, I love You. I know You love me.” Then I’m not going to get hard, angry or bitter.

Many times people have gotten mad at God. They ask me, “Why would God allow this to happen?!” They think I’m omniscient. We don’t know many things. But we do know that if we love God with all our strength, soul and mind, “All things work together for good.” God has allowed that circumstance for a purpose and design in your life.

Again, notice these two categories: “those who love God”—and not those who God loves—and “those who are called according to His purpose.” So don’t be like the believers in Ephesus, Revelation 2, whose love for God had grown cold.

Verse 29 says, “For whom He foreknew.” The word “foreknow” means that He set His love upon them. This is what we call “election”; God chooses you. It doesn’t mean that God is omniscient, and He knows you’ll believe Him—which is true. But it means that God has set His love upon you.

This may be hard for some people to accept, but I believe it’s Biblical: if you’re a Christian and you’re saved, it’s because God chose you. It wasn’t because you’re good looking, intelligent or charismatic. The Bible says, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence,” 1 Corinthians 1:27-29.

When I stop to think that God reached down in His love and chose me, it’s hard to believe. That’s where it all started.

Verse 29 also says, “He also predestined.” Predestination applies only to Christians. And God does not predestine anyone to go to hell. The Bible says, “Whosoever will” can repent and believe in Jesus Christ. God says, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,” Ezekiel 33:11.

But if you’ve been chosen and you’ve accepted Christ, then God has predetermined or predestined what He’s going to do with you. And what He’s going to do with you is to glorify you, verse 30. “Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

So He set His love upon you—He foreknew; He predetermines what He’s going to do with you—He’s going to conform you into the image of His Son; He called you—this is in time when we repent and believe in Jesus Christ, so we must not resist the grace of God; whom He called, he justifies, which means that we’re declared righteous; and then He glorifies us. So what begins with grace will end in glory. We are the object of God’s care—He has foreknown us,

predestined us, called us, justified us and He will bring us to glory in heaven.

So back to verse 28—“And we know.” How do we know? Because God has promised it in His Word, the Bible. God has promised that “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

An example of this is Jacob, in the Old Testament. Jacob had everything in his life fall apart. He lost his beloved son Joseph. He had a daughter who was raped. He had a wife, who he loved, die. His son Simeon was in prison. When his other sons came back to him from Egypt, they told Jacob that the master of Egypt said that they had to return with his youngest son Benjamin in order to get Simeon out of jail. In Genesis 42:36, Jacob said, “You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me.” He’s singing, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.”

When I read that I think, Jacob, Jacob! Hang in there! Just read the next chapter! The story turns! He doesn’t know that he is going to be reunited with his beloved Joseph. All his boys are going to be back together again. God’s going to provide for all of them. God has a plan.

Maybe you’re saying, “All these things are against me.” Rather say, “All things work together for good” if you love God and you’re “called according to His purpose.”

How about Joseph, the son of Jacob? Can you imagine him in a group therapy session?

“So what’s your story, young man?”

“Well, when I was 13, my brothers sold me as a slave. Then I got a good job, and this woman tried to make a move on me. I said, ‘No,’ she lied and I got thrown in prison for quite a while.”

“Bummer, dude!”

But when Joseph was on the throne next to Pharaoh, and his own brothers, who had actually sold him as a slave, were kneeling before him, Joseph said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good,” Genesis 50:20. He said, “What you meant for evil, God turned it for good.” That’s awesome!

And how about Jesus as our example? He died on the Cross. It was the worse day in human history; the Son of God was dead. It grew dark, the earth shook, the rocks were rent. He was buried; the lifeless body of the Son of God was put in a tomb. But then on Sunday morning,

“Up from the grave He arose,

With a mighty triumph o’er His foes.”

So God even takes the wrath of man and turns it and causes it to praise Him, Psalm 76:10. God can take Satan and use him for His own purpose. We have to rest in His promise that “All

things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

Here is one of my favorite poems. It’s 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.”