

God's Providential Care

Romans 8:28

Pastor John Miller

Our text is Romans 8:28, but I first want to give you its context, so I'll read Romans 8:28-31. 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. 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? If God is for us, who can be against us?" The answer is "No one."

Romans 8:28 is one of the greatest verses of the Bible. It contains a promise that has been called "a soft pillow for troubled hearts." When you are discouraged and all looks dark and dim around you, you can lay your soul and your heart on this verse and rest in God's providential care.

As a child of God, you not only have a new hope, Romans 8, and you have a new help, the Holy Spirit, but you also have a new knowledge. Notice that verse 28 says, "And we know." So Paul is talking about something that we can be sure of, something that "we know."

Verse 18 mentions "sufferings of this present time [that] are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." It doesn't mean we don't suffer, it doesn't mean we don't have pain and it doesn't mean we don't face problems and difficulties. It means that in the midst of them, we know something, that we have assurance. Verse 28 is so very clear that "We know."

A great cross-reference for this is Philippians 1:6, where Paul 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." God begins a work in you, God continues the work in you and God completes the work in you. And we can be confident that God finishes what He begins. Also, 1 Peter 5:7, which is one of my favorite verses, says, "...casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." So God starts a work, God cares for us, we can trust Him and we can rest in His providential care.

There are five facts about God's providential care of us in Romans 8:28 that I want to point out. First is the certainty of His care; that we can be assured of God's providential care. Verse 28 says, "And we know." This is the believer's blessed assurance. This is not just Paul's opinion; it is God's Word.

Notice in verse 25 that Paul uses the phrase, "We do not see." And in verse 26, he says, "We do not know." Now we have the contrast, in verse 28, about what we do know; that God works "all things...together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." And those He calls, He will complete the work He began in them.

Sometimes we don't know what God is doing. That's a given. When Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, and He came to wash Peter's feet, "Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me'" (John 13:8). Jesus also told Peter, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (John 13:7).

I've always thought that verse was pretty interesting. How like heaven that verse is; we don't know now in this life what God is doing, but afterwards we'll know when we get to heaven. When we get to heaven, "I shall know as just as I also am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). So when we get to heaven, we'll see all things clearly. We won't need faith because we'll have sight. We're going to see Jesus face-to-face. Everything will be understood.

But right now we have to know by faith. That's how we know. So how do we know? Not by feeling and not by seeing. Notice that he doesn't say, "And we see," because we don't. Sometimes we look around and everything is dark; we can't see what God is doing. It makes no sense to us. And he doesn't say, "And we feel." We don't live by our emotions, because they can fluctuate. But Paul says, "We know."

And how do we know? By faith. Not by sight. We must take God at His Word. The focus of verse 28 and the verses following is not us but God. This is what God is doing; this is the work of God. So our focus, as believers, must be on God.

I like that old hymn,

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus;

Look full in His wonder face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,

In the light of His glory and grace."

So we need to get our eyes fixed on the Lord; not on our feelings or circumstances.

He says, "And we know." And how do we know? By faith. And there are three facets of God that we need to focus on. The first is His Person: God is all-powerful, He is all-present, He is all-knowing, He is all-loving, He is holy, He is righteous, He is compassionate, He is kind. Acquaint yourself with God and be at peace. Know God.

Also, there are God's promises. Jesus made the promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). So be content with what you have.

Have you ever been forsaken by anybody? We've all been forsaken. But God will never forsake you. God will never disappoint you, He will never let you down, He will never harm you; He only has your good and His glory in mind.

So focus on God. The Bible says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Focus on His promises, His power and His Person. God can do anything; there is no limit to His power. That is one of the attributes of God called “omnipotence.” It’s all-power; no limits to His power. We need to realize that God is all-powerful.

Someone 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.”

I like that. You must be assured of that.

Let me give you a word of advice. Whenever you don’t understand something that’s going on in your life—you can’t see what God’s doing, and your emotions are running wild—step back and stand on what you do know about God, about His promises and about His power. Stand on what you know. So when you don’t know something, fall back on what you do know. You stand there by faith. It’s so very important.

The second fact of God’s providential care is its extent. It covers “all things,” verse 28. It means “everything,” that there are no limitations. It covers everything, even what we would call “bad things”; it’s all under the umbrella of “all things.” God uses it for our good and for His glory. This is the limitless facet of this verse.

Every event of our lives, good or bad, is under His loving, beneficent, sovereign control. Our sufferings, verses 17-18, our groanings, verse 23, our disappointments, our bereavements, our illnesses, our children who break our hearts, loss of wealth, loss of health, lack of fruit in Christian service—all of this is under the umbrella of “all things.” So we need to keep our eyes on the Lord. Everything that comes into our lives is under His providential care.

Jesus said to us, in His famous sermon on the mount, that we should look at the birds when we get discouraged and start to worry. He said, “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matthew 6:26). He didn’t say “the birds’ Father” or even “the birds’ Creator”; He said, “your heavenly Father.” You are a child of God. God “feeds them.” So if God feeds the birds, “Are you not of more value than they?” He said, “You are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:31). Someone said, “God attends the funeral of every sparrow.” And if He cares about birds, He cares about you.

I’ve often thought God created fast-food restaurants to feed birds French fries. If you get discouraged, just go down to In-N-Out and sit on the patio. Check out the little birds with these big French fries in their beaks. We have to pay for them, but they get them for free. If God

provides for the birds, He'll provide for you.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:28-30, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." God provides for the flowers, and He'll provide for you. He says, "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul says, "In everything..." again, it's in "all things" "...give thanks..." why? "...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." You're not thanking God for everything; you're thanking God in the midst of everything, even in a painful, difficult or even in an evil thing that happens. God is greater than those things. God is in control. The extent of His care goes into every area of life. So we can give thanks unto the Lord.

The third fact is the harmony of His care. It is seen in the phrase "work together," in verse 28. "And we know..." the certainty of His care "...that all things..." the extent of His care "...work together." Note that this is God who is working. That's why I quoted Philippians 1:6 where Paul said that God would complete the work He began in you. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

William Barclay translates verse 28 as, "We know that God is intermingling all things together for them that love Him." So God mixes it all together. He takes the good, the bad, the pain, the problems, He mixes it all together and out of that, He produces good for us and others and it brings glory to God.

Someone said that it was like baking a cake. I've never baked a cake, but I like to eat them. I like baked goods. If I see a donut shop, I have to say, "Get behind me, Satan." If I see a sign that says "Bakery" I have to ask God to give me strength to resist. But I know that when you make a cake from scratch, you put several ingredients in it. You put in flour, sugar and eggs and other things. If you ate that before it was cooked or if you ate the uncooked, raw ingredients separately, it wouldn't be any good. But if you stir all the ingredients together, put it in a pan and bake it, out comes a beautiful cake.

So God takes every circumstance of our lives, mixes them together, puts us in the oven and it comes out perfect, because God's ways are perfect. He is still "making" us; He hasn't yet "made" us. If you are discouraged right now, God's not finished with you yet. Some of you have a long way to go. God is "making" you. And what is He trying to make you? Into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. So He is working together for your good; working continuously, working purposefully, working lovingly—even when you can't see and you don't understand. Even evil and bad things. God works to bring good things out of them and from them.

The fourth facet of God we need to focus on is the result of God's care, verse 28. It is seen in the phrase "for good." "And we know that all things work together for good." God is working for our good and for His glory. And He's also working for the good of others around us. If God is

working in the heart of your husband, ladies, be thankful. If God is working in your wife's life, be thankful. What He is trying to make us is to be more like Jesus Christ.

When the Bible says that we are being sanctified in our Christian life, the goal of that is likeness to Jesus. Everything that God is doing in our lives is producing likeness to Jesus. He's not working to make you rich, not working to make you happy in the worldly sense, not working to make you famous. He's working to make you like Jesus. That includes humility, meekness and love. So He is trying to produce Christ in us. That's the "good" that God is working out.

To understand what His purpose is, we have to move down in the text to verses 29-30. "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son..." that's what He's trying to do "...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."

There are five links in a chain in these two verses that I believe are unbreakable. They are links of love that God works in our lives. Number one, "He foreknew" us. So this "work[ing] together for good" ties into God foreknowing us in eternity past.

I happen to believe that this "foreknew" is more than just a reference to God's omniscience. That's a given fact; we know that God knows everything. But the idea of foreknowing is that that God sets His love upon us.

It would be the same concept as election. Some people don't like to talk about that doctrine, but it's in the Bible. And God sets His love upon us. This doesn't mean that God does not love some people and that God doesn't call all people. He says that whosoever will can come and be saved (1 John 4:15). I believe that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

If you are a Christian, God first set His love on you. The Bible says that "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). He set His love upon Me. That's what it means to be foreknown.

And then, number two, He "did predestinate," the King James translation says. What does that mean? Predestination is not the same as election. Election is God setting His love upon you. Predestination is God determining ahead of time what He's going to do with you. When you get saved, God doesn't look at you and say, "Now what am I going to do with you?" He's already got a plan and a purpose for you. He's going to conform you into the image of Jesus, verse 29. So He predetermines to make us like Jesus, to make us holy.

Number three is that He calls us, verse 30. In time, God calls us by His Spirit. We must not resist that call, we must submit to that call, being convinced by the Spirit that I am a sinner, I need a Savior and then I believe in Jesus Christ by trusting in Him.

Number four, those who He calls He has "justified." Justification is our legal standing of being

declared righteous before our holy God. It is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner to be righteous, based on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

So if you're a Christian, He set His love on you, He predetermined what He was going to do with you, He called you by His grace and then He justified you. Then that leads to "glorified," number five. He will glorify you. It begins with His foreknowledge, His love and grace and it ends in glory.

This is why I read Philippians 1:6: "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." And that's what Romans 8 is all about: the blessed assurance of the believer. And nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Those are the five links in the chain that cannot be broken.

I like what Oswald Sanders said. He said, "Every adverse experience, when rightly received, can carry the quota of good. Bodily pain and weakness causes us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reverses point to how limited our resources are. Mistakes and failures humble our pride. All these can be included in the term 'good.'" I like that.

I like Paul's thorn in the flesh text in 2 Corinthians 12. It is so apropos to my own life. I think you could call Paul the greatest Christian who ever lived. He's not Jesus, nor is he divine, but as far as Christians go, to me Paul would rate right up at the top. Yet Paul said that "A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

You think, That's not very good. Paul, the super saint?! Paul, the Christian?! Who gave him the "thorn in the flesh"? I believe it was God. He allowed Satan to afflict Paul. I can't be absolutely sure, but my guess is that the "thorn in the flesh" was a physical infirmity. It was to keep him humble, so he wouldn't be "exalted above measure," because of all the revelations that God had given Paul. He had been "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2). So when he returned to earth, he had to be kept humble instead of being boastful or proud. As a result, the Lord allowed Paul to be afflicted, just like Job.

God puts a hedge of protection around us that Satan can't get through, but God is in control. God tells Satan how far he can go and what he can and can't do. God will use Satan to serve His own purposes.

Christians get all freaked out about the devil. You're a child of God! "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). God has a plan and a purpose. God is in control.

Job was able to say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). That's faith.

So Paul said that God wanted to keep him humble, which is a good thing. If you become proud,

the Bible says that "The proud He knows from afar" (Psalm 138:6). If you're proud, God cannot use you. So He wanted to keep Paul humble in order to keep Paul useable. Thus, He allowed him to be afflicted.

Paul said he prayed three times and asked God to take away the thorn in his flesh. And three times the Lord said, "No."

Have you ever prayed, and God said, "No"? We don't like those answers. I've had people tell me, "God never answered my prayer!"

"Yes, He did; He said, "No."

"Well, I don't like it!"

"You're not God."

"Yeah, but I would have done things differently, if I were God!"

God told Paul that he wouldn't take away his thorn in the flesh. But He gave Paul something: His grace. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And when Paul heard that, 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" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). You can turn that around and say that when I am strong, that's when I am at my weakest. But when I am at my weakest and it drives me to God for strength, I am at my strongest.

So the result is that God will always use everything for my good, for the good of others and for the glory of God.

The fifth fact about God's providential care is the objects of His care. Verse 28 says that it is "to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." So there are two qualifications: if you love God, and if you are called for His purposes. This describes a Christian, a child of God.

The text does not say, "All things work for good," period. I've had people quote it to me that way. That isn't right. This is exclusive. We have "all things," which is limitless, but now we have "to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose," which is restrictive. Only those who fulfill these qualifications can say that "All things work together for good."

Do you love God? Are you a child of God? Have you been "called according to His purpose"? If so, then "All things work together for good" in your life.

Matthew 22:37 and 39 referring to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind....You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.” So it starts with our love for God. “We love Him because He first loved us.”

If you really love God with “all your heart, all your soul and all your mind,” nothing can really go wrong or go bad with you. It’s only when you don’t love God, when you resist God, when you rebel against God. Everything that comes into our lives can be used by God for our good and for His glory if we surrender it to God. We say, “Lord, I don’t understand. I don’t see. But I know You love me, and I’m going to trust You.” That takes all the bitterness out of the hard things of life. So you must love God to stay tender, submitted and obedient to Him.

So being “called according to His purpose”—remember that His purpose is to be like Jesus Christ. We are called by His love and called by His grace. And His purpose is seen in verses 29-30.

“We know,” because God has promised in His Word, the Bible. There are many examples in the Bible of people who went through hard times and God was working in them. Think about all the problems Jacob had. Joseph was gone, Reuben was disgraced, Judah was dishonored, Simeon and Levi broke his heart, his daughter Dinah was defiled, Simeon was now in prison, beloved Rachael was dead, famine threatened the family and then came the demand from Egypt that young Benjamin must appear before the awesome governor before any further supplies would be released. So Jacob wept and 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” (Genesis 42:36).

Whenever I read that I think, Jacob, no! Just wait ‘till the next chapter, dude! I’ve read the story! It’s amazing what’s gonna happen! How many times have we said, “All these things are against me”? But the Lord says, “No; just wait for the next chapter! I’ve got a plan. I’ve got a purpose.”

How about Jacob’s son, Joseph? He was thrown into an open pit—a cistern, no doubt—and his brothers sold him as a slave to the Midianites. How many of you have had your brothers sell you as a slave?! He then was purchased by Potiphar. He was doing pretty good until Potiphar’s wife got her eyes on him and tried to seduce him. But he resisted. He did the right thing, but he got falsely accused and was thrown into prison where he rotted for years.

You talk about a case for saying, “Where is God? Why did God let this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?!” But every time Joseph speaks on the pages of Scripture in his story, he praises, glorifies and honors God.

Then God exalted him out of the prison and made him second only to Pharaoh. He was ruling over the kingdom with Pharaoh when his brothers came before him. He could have taken revenge on them, but he said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). Isn’t that great? Even when people mean evil against you, God can use it for good.

I think of Jesus, who went to the Cross. That’s a bad thing; He was beaten, whipped, crucified,

suffered and died—all for the glory of God and all for the salvation of man. God took the darkest event in history and turned it around with the Resurrection, the Ascension and the exaltation of Jesus Christ. God was able to turn darkness to light. God is working for greater glory. God has a purpose and a plan. We just need to set our affections and our eyes on Him.

The sister, Betsy, and father of Corrie ten Boom, the author of the well-known book, *The Hiding Place*, were arrested by the Nazis for hiding Jews in Holland during World War II. They were put in Ravensbruck concentration camp. Her sister and father died there. As a result of a clerical error, she was released. Then she became what she called “a tramp for the Lord”; she traveled around the world telling her story about God’s love, God’s grace, God’s plan and God’s purpose in her life.

Quite often when she spoke, she would hold up an embroidered bookmark. She showed the people the back of the bookmark, pointed out that you couldn’t read it and it didn’t make sense. All you could see were the threads. But when she turned the bookmark around, embroidered on it were the words, “God is love.” She said that so often we are looking at the back side, so we don’t see what God is saying or doing. We don’t know.

But we do know that God is working all things together for our good, because we love Him and we are “called according to His purpose.”

Corrie ten Boom put it in a poem. It’s called *The Divine Weaver*.

“My life is but a weaving

Between my God and me.

I cannot choose the colors

He worketh steadily.

Off’ times He weaveth sorrow;

And I in foolish pride

Forget He sees the upper

And I the underside.

Not ‘til the loom is silent

And the shuttles cease to fly

Will God unroll the canvas

And reveal 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."