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Confidence for an Unknown Future

Romans 8:1-30

Of all the books of the Bible, the epistle to the Romans emerges as one of its most thorough doctrinal treatments. It contains teaching on...

- The nature of God.
- General revelation.
- The gospel.
- Spiritual gifts.

- The nature of sanctification.
- Our responsibility to government.
- The place of the Jew/Gentile in the economy of God.
- And much more.

Now of all the passages in this epistle, Romans 8:28 emerges as one of its most quoted and yet misunderstood statements. On the one hand, this text has been the basis of comfort and assurance to countless struggling loss. Yet to others, the promise is spurned on account of its seemingly incongruent message in the face of trial.

On the one hand, the text sheds light and meaning on tragedy and evil. On the other, it has raised the ire of ones suffering when quoted in a hospital room or at a grave side. And this is NOT surprising for Romans 8:28 relates to a profound question asked throughout the ages: Why does God allow bad things to happen to His people?!

- Why did Lazarus die?
- Why did the apostolic church suffer so much persecution at the hands of the Jews?
- If God truly is in control of all things, why does He allow so much suffering and sorrow?

The specific answer for these questions may never be known on this side of the grave. Yet in and through it all we have this confidence as we face an uncertain future: "...God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God..." Romans 8:28a.

[Confidence as We Face an Unknown Future, Romans 8:28-30.](#)

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good... Romans 8:28

Let's consider this statement, expression by expression.

"And we know: generally speaking, there are two words for "know" in the Greek, γινώσκω (*ginōskō*) which speaks of relational knowledge and so partial knowledge and - οἶδα (*oida*) which references the fullness of knowledge... definite knowledge. This is word we would use if we said, "I know 2 plus 2 equals 4." Paul uses οἶδα (*oida*) in the perfect tense. What we have before us is a universal truth about God's providence and its purpose in the life of the child of God. What is that purpose? Notice the next phrase...

"That God causes all things": πᾶς (*pas*); this is an important statement. In vv. 26-27 Paul references the Spirit's help in our weakness, "...for we do not know how to pray as we should." And then in this text mentions "all things" which yields the following nuance: NOT ONLY in our times of greatest weakness does the Spirit give us aid, BUT God causes

ALL THINGS — trial, sorrow, suffering, tragedy, etc.- to work for good!

It is important that we give proper emphasis to the “all” in this text. It is easy to read this passage and think “*Some things*”- like when:

- God’s providence doesn’t cost too much.
- Inconvenient things arise in our lives.

BUT let a genuine need be thwarted, have our health wane, or lose a loved one and the temptation is to respond with questions of how and why God could allow this to happen. The focus of the “all” in this text is NOT only the inconvenient things that happen in life, BUT even the bad, the wicked, and the evil things... ALL THINGS!

Hannah prayed,

There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides Thee, nor is there any rock like our God... The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts.
1 Samuel 2:2, 6-7

Hannah understood that God’s sovereign will extends even to the bad things in life.

Isaiah said much the same thing,

I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these. Isaiah 45:6-7

And so it is with the promise before us. It encompasses the good as well as the bad, the righteous deeds as well as the evil deeds of man! And what is the message? God uses these things in a particular way to bring about His purpose and our good. How does He do that? Notice the next phrase.

“To work together.” The expression comes from συνεργέω (*sunergeō*) from which we get the word “synergy”. The word literally means to “work with” or “together”. It is an important qualification for it tells us that while the things that occur in our life may NOT be good (sickness, difficulty, trial, death), YET God can take these things and transform them in the life of the believer to produce that which is good! What specifically is meant by “good” here?

“Good” in the Bible there primarily are two Greek words for “good.” καλός (*kalos*) which though translated as “good” primarily focusses on the external. It is this word that is used to refer to someone or something that has outward beauty. ἀγαθός (*agathos*) like καλός (*kalos*) can refer to outward beauty. Yet its primary reference is to that which being good in character/essence has a good effect or result. Thus:

- A “good heart” is a heart that NOT ONLY is good before God BUT works to the benefit of others.
- A “good book” would be a book whose contents NOT ONLY are good in the eyes of God, BUT ALSO leads to the benefit of the reader.
- A “good Quiet Time” NOT ONLY is good before God, BUT ALSO leads to our spiritual maturation and growth in grace.

The word used here is ἀγαθός (*agathos*)! And so, for something to work “for good” in our lives implies that the net result will be beneficial in our lives!

Now putting it together, notice what Paul is saying: Each facet of God’s providential dealings in our lives “work together” to produce our “good” at all times! It is as the inner workings of Big Ben. If we were granted access to that which keeps the clock going, we would notice that it is comprised of hundreds of geared wheels, all interconnected. While one goes forward another goes backwards. One lever goes up while another moves down. Yet all of these parts work together to produce near perfect time. And so:



- God is able to use INJUSTICE to produce a good result that will be beneficial to the Christian.
- God is able to use TRAGEDY to produce a good result that will be beneficial to the Christian.
- And so it is with SICKNESS, SADNESS, SUFFERING, WANT, TRIAL, DIFFICULTY... in fact “ALL THINGS” that this world can throw at us. In and through these things God brings about that which is good in our lives!

And yet, there is an important qualification that must be made which is here assumed BUT easily overlooked. To see it we begin by recognizing that in this world there are two kingdoms which dwell side by side — at times working together, BUT most times working at odds. What are these two kingdoms? Consider John 18:36.

In response to one of Pilate’s questions, we read this:

Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.’ John 18:36

Clearly one of the Kingdoms that exists in this world is The Kingdom of God and so we

pray, “Thy Kingdom Come!” Matthew 6;10. Yet there is another kingdom that exists in this world, a kingdom which encompasses every world power and nation found in Luke 4. Speaking of the temptation of Christ we read this:

And he [Satan] led Him [Christ] up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Luke 4:5-6

Upon the fall of man, the kingdoms of the world were handed over to Satan. This is the second kingdom that exists today, the kingdom of Satan otherwise known as the city of man.

And so regardless of the national boundaries and people groups that might exist on this globe, all lay in one of two kingdoms: the kingdom of Satan and the Kingdom of God — the City of Man and the City of God. As that is the case, when Paul talks about “all things working together for good” he is NOT referencing “good” in relation to the city of Man, BUT “good” in relation to the Kingdom of God!

Accordingly, let us be careful NOT to measure “good” by the things of this age — for many times what is good in God’s kingdom is NOT good in the city of Man, right? Think of it, if you want to:

- Be FIRST in the kingdom of God, you must be LAST in the present, passing one.
- Be RICH in the kingdom of God, you must be SPIRITUALLY POOR in the present, passing world.
- Be EXALTED in the kingdom of God, you must BE HUMBLER here.
- REIGN with God in the kingdom of God, you must SERVE now!
- SAVE your life in the kingdom of God, you must LOSE your life in the present.

It is against the backdrop of the city of Man that many in Christ find Romans 8:28 to be trite, empty, and even insensitive! But what a glory to know that God in His greatness is able to use present suffering to “...produce for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17)! And thus, we are exhorted this way:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. James 1:2

How glorious! While in the city of Man tragedy is meaningless. God in His sovereignty and goodness uses it bring about eternal good in our lives! And so, Paul wrote this:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven

character, hope. Romans 5:3-5

Again, what an incredible God! He takes the worst that Satan can throw at us and uses it to advance our growth and maturation in Christ! He did it at the Cross! When you see this, you are able to say with the Psalmist:

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes. Psalm 119:71

That is the confidence we have as a benefit of the cross of Christ! God uses all that occurs in our lives to perfect us for life in the already/not yet kingdom of God!¹ And this raises a very important question: Is this promise for everybody? Do all have this confidence? The answer is “No!” - which brings us to the condition.

[The Condition, v. 28b.](#)

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

This further qualifies the benefit mentioned in this text! Those who are able to have the confidence referenced here are ONLY those who “love God” and “are called according to His purpose.”

You say, *“Well that excludes me! I don’t love God as I ought. And I rarely live completely unto His purpose.”* And that is true of everyone here! So, what do we do with this qualification? We recognize that Paul here is NOT talking about something we do BUT something we are! Paul wrote:

If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha. 1 Corinthians 16:22

The “love” referenced here is spoken in terms of a binary function. It is something you either have or you don’t. If you love God, you are saved. If you don’t, you are accursed. See, there are a variety of ways to refer to a child of God in Scripture.

- A believer.
- A Christian.
- A follower of Christ.
- A confessor of the Lord.

To these expressions we can add another: “a lover of God.” In scripture, this is a Christian! Peter utilized this expression when he wrote of the believer:

Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him

now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. 1 Peter 1:8

To believe in God is to love Him. We see it in John when he wrote this:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:7-8

Accordingly in our text when Paul references the condition attached to the promise of Romans 8:28 in terms of “loving God” we understand he is NOT talking about the quality or even the quantity of our love, BUT its mere existence! “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19)!

And so “loving God” is another way of referring to a genuine child of God — as is the next qualification Paul used in Romans 8:28, “...called according to His purpose.” This is NOT something we do, BUT something God does when it comes to those He has chosen to save. Who are the saved? Those “called according to His purpose.” (cf. also Ephesians 1:4b-5)

So, when it comes to the promise of God that “in and through all things He is working to bring about our eternal good,” Paul limits this promise to the child of God!

This raises two very important implications. If you are NOT a child of God, then the difficulties and hardships of this life have no purpose other than to warn you of a greater, more horrifying day to come when the wrath of God will be revealed from heaven against you on account of your sin.

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’ Luke 13:1-5

The promise of Romans 8:28 can be yours today, BUT you first must enter into the salvation that Christ purchased on the cross. I therefore exhort you: Turn from your sins to Christ, ask God to forgive you in light of Christ’s sacrifice, and so receive the forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, and so the assurance that God will work all things in this life for your Good!

If you are a child of God, then you have the confidence that the things of this world have

a greater significance- a significance that transcends the here and now. As such, though we encounter difficulties and loss in this life, we live, serve, grieve, and minister in hope- trusting and so living in light of the promises of God!

You say, “How can we hold on to such a conviction? How can our faith NOT waiver when we are in the crucible?” That brings us lastly to the basis.

The Basis, vv. 29-30.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. Romans 8:29-30

At some other time we'll return to this passage where we'll look at it in detail. However, for now notice that Paul begins v. 29 with “for” which tells us that He is explaining the basis for the confidence of v. 28. And what is that basis? The salvific elements which are part and parcel of our salvation: God's foreknowledge, His predestinating will, His call, His forgiveness, and so His glorifying of the believer! Consider just one word, “foreknew.” The word comes from προγινώσκω (*proginōskō*) which means to love beforehand! This tells us that before the world began God set His love on His people and so determined to bring them into a relationship with Him!

This is that which serves as the basis for all that is written and promised here, God's love, God's work, God's choice of you, God's salvific purpose — not us, nor conduct, etc! That means when you face a trial you do so knowing that God has NOT abandoned you! NOR is He getting even for something you've done! In the words of the Psalmist:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. [How is this so?] For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. [and so, God's disposition toward all in Christ is that of a father, NOT a judge...] Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are *but* dust. Psalm 103:10-14

Accordingly, God is intimately involved in the details of our lives in which He takes the worst that this world can throw at us and uses it to bring about our eternal good! In the words of Jeremiah:

‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’ Jeremiah 29:11

Everything God is doing in our lives has this purpose in mind, this end game! And therefore, while we may NOT understand the wheres and whyfores of a particular difficulty, we know that in eternity future it will all make sense. It is as the promise Christ made to Peter.

Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter.' John 13:7

May God give us the grace to stake our lives on the goodness, kindness, and sovereign purposes of God by and through which He is working in and through all things to prepare and equip us for glory!

End Note(s)

¹ Other passages that affirm the truth of this text are: 1 Peter 5:10; Genesis 50:20; Jeremiah 24:5-7; Job 23:10; Zechariah 13:8-9; Psalm 119:67, 71, 75; 1 Peter 4:11-12a.