

Title: LIVING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY, PART 2

Text: Romans 8:28

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on April 1, 2007

When hurricane Katrina hit, in the aftermath of great suffering, one news reporter interviewed a well-known Christian speaker, and asked some of the hard questions, and this Christian was quick to explain that God definitely has absolutely nothing to do with natural disasters like this, but that this was just a tragic accident we cannot explain – and the message coming across very clearly is that God is not completely sovereign over things like this.

In contrast, Christians through the centuries have always affirmed God's control and providence in the world. Although they have often wondered *why* God ordains or allows various calamities, it's been a more recent phenomenon for many within "Christianity" to deny that God is really involved at all in anything we do not define as good. Superficial and sloppy thinking that is not comfortable with God's sovereignty in suffering or salvation has led many to insist that not only the natural realm but man's heart and will is off-limits to the sovereign purposes of God. You get the impression that some want to get God off the hook – but in so doing they have completely undercut the foundation under Romans 8:28 and they really have no right or reason to believe the truth of this verse.

Before we look at Romans 8, I want you to turn to Ephesians 1

As you turn there, I want to share with you a quote I came across at Shepherd's Conference by John Piper, on the opening page of his new book "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God":

'The impetus for this ... comes from the ultimate reality of God as the supreme value in and above the universe. God is absolute and eternal and infinite. Everything else and everybody else is dependent and finite and contingent. God himself is the great supreme value. Everything else that has any value has it by connection to God. God is supreme in all things. He has all authority, all power, all wisdom—and he is all good "to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him" (Lamentations 3:25). And his name, as Creator and Redeemer and Ruler of all, is Jesus Christ.

In the last [few] years, 9/11, Tsunami, Katrina, and ten thousand personal losses have helped us discover how little the American church is rooted in this truth.

David Wells, in his new book, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World*, says it like this:

This moment of tragedy and evil [referring to 9-11] shone its own light on the Church and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual gravitas, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness.

Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore. (p. 4)

In other words, our vision of God in relation to evil and suffering was shown to be frivolous. The church has not been spending its energy to go deep with the unfathomable God of the Bible.

Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, much of the church is choosing, at this very moment, to become more light and shallow and entertainment-oriented, and therefore successful in its irrelevance to massive suffering and evil. The popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too affable to hold a hurricane in his hand. The biblical categories of God's sovereignty lie like landmines in the pages of the Bible waiting for someone to seriously open the book. They don't kill, but they do explode trivial notions of the Almighty.' (from www.desiringgod.org)

Ephesians 1 is one of those landmines that demolishes trivial and shallow thinking about God's plan and purposes. READ v. 3-11

Notice the repeated phrase "to the praise of His glory" (3x, in v. 6, 12, and 1, in v. 6, 12, and 14) – everything God does is to the glory of God ultimately. This is the foundation of my philosophy of ministry. And notice that verse 11 says that God works "all things" according to His will to this end.

With that in mind, turn to Romans 8:28:

"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. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

Big Idea: God works all things together for His glory and our good

I don't know what God in His sovereignty has in store for us, or for my own family as far as trials in the future, or for you, but I know He is working in all things. Some in our midst are undergoing serious struggles and difficult times this very day (discouragement, disease, death in family) – I want you to know how much I care for you, and more importantly that God is God.

THE TEXT

"all things work together for good" (KJV, NKJV, ESV)

ESV has footnote "Some manuscripts *God works all things together for good, or God works in all things for the good*"

"in all things God works for the good" (NIV)

"God causes all things to work together for good" (NASB)

NASB is more helpful but whatever way you slice it, this is not just optimism that all things will work out by themselves – have a positive attitude, hakuna matata, or some fortune cookie promise

No matter what wording is in your Bible it is very clear that the only way all things can possibly work together for good is because God is absolutely sovereign over all things and involved in all things in His Providence.

Notice that it does not say all things MAY or WILL work together (in the end / in the future) but that right NOW (present tense verb) all things are currently and continually working together for good for believers, this very day, and yesterday, and tomorrow, all things in the life of those who love God are working together in the Providence of God to the ultimate glory of God and the ultimate good of God's people.

Whether you can see it or not, the tapestry of God's workings is being weaved, and although from down below it may look like a mixed mesh of different colors and directions, from a higher perspective of the weaver, there is a beautiful cross-stitch being weaved that one day we will be able to see in God's artwork.

I want to structure out study around 3 questions:

1. What does "good" mean in this verse?
2. Who is this promise for?
3. How can "all things" really work for good?

Question #1 – What does "good" mean in this verse?

'Most of us have probably heard someone (perhaps ourselves!) applying Romans 8:28 something like this: "Yes, you may have lost your job, but you can be sure of getting an even better one; because 'all things are working for good.'" Or, "Don't be upset about your fiancé breaking off your engagement, because God must have an even better life partner for you; Romans 8:28 promises... ."

The difficulty with this application is that it interprets "good" from a narrow and often materialistic perspective. From God's perspective, "good" must be defined in spiritual terms. The ultimate good is God's glory, and he is glorified when his children live as Christ did (v. 29) ... The "good" God may have in mind may involve the next life entirely. He may take us out of a secure, well-paying job in order to shake us out of a materialistic lifestyle that does not honor biblical priorities, and we may never have as good a job again' (Above adapted from Douglas Moo in his *Romans* commentary)

1. This is NOT a promise that we will avoid great suffering
 - READ V. 17-18. The preceding context also talks about how all of creation is suffering due to sin, and sometimes we are in so much pain we don't even know how to pray, we can only groan and trust the Spirit to intercede
 - READ VS. 35-36. The following context mentions things like peril, nakedness, sword, etc. The promise is that these things cannot separate us from Christ's love, even *when* we go through them

Neither is it to be seen as grounds for believing that "everything will come out in the wash" because God has committed Himself to sorting out the mess of our lives and relieving us of the consequences of our actions. (*Preacher's Commentary*, 29:174)

The "good" of which Paul spoke is not necessarily what we think is best, but as the following verse implies, the good is conformity to the likeness of Christ. With this in mind it is easier to see how our difficulties are part of God's total plan for changing us from what we are by nature to what he intends us to be. (Mounce, *New American Commentary*, 27:187)

Another writer says it this way: ‘We must, however, define *the good* that God is working to produce for us in his terms and not in ours. God knows that our greatest good is to know him and to enjoy his presence forever. He may, then, in pursuit of this final ‘good’, allow difficulties such as poverty, grief and ill health to afflict us. Our joy will come not from knowing that we will never face such difficulties—for we certainly will (17)—but that whatever the difficulty, our loving Father is at work to make us stronger Christians (*New Bible Commentary*).

2. It does not say all things *are* good, in and of themselves

- It is not a good thing when a drunk driver tragically runs over little children or when someone is raped
- When someone suffers a horrific tragedy, this verse is not teaching us we should glibly quote this verse and rebuke them for their grief and tell them “rejoice, this was a good thing that happened.” People in the midst of mourning, need sympathy more than a sermon preached heartlessly at them like Job’s friends did. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent, Scripture says, we are to weep with those who weep, as Jesus did with Mary and Martha, we are to follow our Savior’s example of compassion and care
- READ V. 29. The promise is that all things work together *for* good for His people, and even that is not good by human standards, but is ultimate good, which in the next verse is primarily conformity to Christ. The ultimate good is to be more and more like Jesus, and circumstances and sufferings are the tools God often uses to chisel away whatever is not Christlike in our lives.

Rather than pray: “Lord, get me out of this” perhaps we need to pray more “Lord help me to see how I can glorify you and where I need to be more like Jesus”

Ray Pritchard writes: *When Paul says that all things work together for good, he is not saying that the tragedies and heartaches of life will always produce a better set of circumstances. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. But God is not committed to making you healthy, wealthy and wise. He is committed to making you like his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And whatever it takes to make you more like Jesus is good.*

So it is in the providence of God that we learn more in the darkness than we do in the light. We gain more from sickness than we do from health. We pray more when we are scared than when we are confident.

I walked a mile with Pleasure, She chattered all the way.
But I was none the wiser, For all she had to say.
Then I walked a mile with Sorrow, And ne'er a word said she.
But, oh, the lessons I did learn When Sorrow walked with me.

Question #2 – Who is this Promise For?

This promise is NOT for all people (this is not teaching us to assure unbelievers that God has a wonderful plan for their life)

- From a human side it is only for those who love God, which is a description of a believer.

How do you know if you love God?

- Do you think often of Him?
- Do you talk with Him?
- Do you long to be with Him?
- Do you love what He loves?
- Do you hate what He hates?
- Do you seek to please Him?
- Do you seek to obey Him, turn from sin?

If you cannot answer yes to these questions, you cannot have any biblical confidence that you are a Christian. None of us can claim *perfection* in these areas, but all of should see the *direction* of our life demonstrates affections for God in tangible ways, and when we fall short true believers repent and seek to please the one they love

- From the divine side, v. 28 says those who love God are those who were called by God

This word for “called” in the NT epistles never means just invited – it is always a divine summoning that only applies to those who will love God, in other words those who become believers.

Definition in immediate context: in 8:30 – the called ones are all the predestined (sometimes called God’s chosen in the Bible or the elect), all of these called ones are justified (moment in time faith put in Christ alone, judicially declared righteous) and all of these justified ones are glorified (in heaven).

The word “called” and all these words emphasize God’s sovereign choice and working to make sure they not only believe but remain in the faith to the end. As Derek Zahnd said a couple weeks ago, being chosen or called speaks of God’s initiative in bringing us to Him, not the other way around. He said “You are the recipients of a choice, not the cause of it.”

This concept of “called” in Romans 8:28 is sometimes called the internal call or God’s effectual call. This call only applies to those who are believers, as the verse says, those who love God. We know this because the called ones Paul says will be justified and glorified in heaven, and we know that those who don’t love God are not a part of this group and will not be in heaven.

Paul says in Romans 8:28 that we are “called according to His purpose” – it’s not according to our purpose or our choice, or based on man’s free will or decision, or us making the first move to God and then because we call out to him, he decides to call us.

Paul knew this firsthand from his own testimony in how he was called and saved on the Damascus road. If God waited for Saul of Tarsus to make the first move or to come to him of his own will, he would have never been saved. God instigated, God intervened, God interrupted Saul’s plans, God initiated, God irresistibly and invincibly and incredibly graciously changed Paul’s sinful life and by regenerating Him into a new man, no longer Saul but now Paul, he was now following and loving the Christ he formerly hated.

Note the connection of v. 28 and v. 29 (“because / for”), we know that all things work together for good to those who are called BECAUSE God is sovereign over salvation, which includes the wills of men. This is one area many are hesitant to give over to God’s sovereignty, but it’s the whole hinge of the argument.

You cannot consistently and confidently trust verse 28 if you do not believe in sovereign election, and the rest of these verses. If God’s sovereignty is really limited and hindered by man’s will as many Christians teach, then we cannot fully trust Romans 8:28 that God is actually in charge of all things and will work them for our good.

Logically, if God is only sovereign over things where man’s will is *not* involved, there’s a lot too to be worried about that’s outside God’s control.

God is the only subject, the One doing all the actions – “He predestined, He called, He justified, He glorified” – Paul doesn’t even mention “we” or “us” until verse 31.

Everyone who is called is also justified (saved) and everyone God justifies are glorified in heaven. There is no slippage, no one is lost along the way, the language does not allow for that. No one gets saved and then unsaved, none in this group miss out on heaven. The same group all along the way is saved all by God’s doing. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith.

A guy named Arminius taught it was possible to lose your salvation and he redefined and denied sovereign election and some of the other things we’ve talked about. Those who believe like Arminius are called Arminians in their theology and their influence has permeated modern Christianity’s thinking. It’s logical in that system if salvation in any way depends on man’s will or works, then we may lose our salvation when our faith and following falters along the way.

Sometimes people ask me “do you believe once saved, always saved?” or some use the expression “eternal security.” I do believe that a true believer, who is regenerated, born again cannot lose salvation, and I reject Arminian theology. But I prefer the classic expression “the perseverance of the saints” because this emphasizes that all true saints / believers *will persevere*, they will not ultimately or completely flake out or walk away from the faith, and those who do fall out were never true believers, according to 1 John 2:19. Perhaps an even better expression is “preservation of saints” which emphasizes it is GOD’S power that keeps us persevering, not our own efforts.

I don’t say that if you said the sinner’s prayer that you should be instantly assured of salvation – a lot of people *say* Lord, Lord, who will not enter the kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus. And James says it is useless if you *say* you have faith, but your so-called faith doesn’t produce works. True regeneration causes transformation. So it’s vital we know that we saved by biblical standards, and examine ourselves. I’ll talk about some of that next week, but yes, God is in charge of making sure all His own will be saved, no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand, Jesus said.

And our passage (v. 38-39) makes very clear that nothing can separate believers from the love of God, not things in the past or to come, not even fallen angels, not anything at all.

You cannot lose your salvation because it is all of God, not dependent on you. And logically, if it is somehow dependent on us, we could lose it – but Paul is very clear that it is all God’s work from eternity past to eternity future. Notice again that in verses 29-30, it is “He” doing each of these steps, not man. God is the only subject. What does man contribute to salvation? The only thing we contributed was our sin!

A young boy once gave his testimony to a pastor when interviewed for baptism. He said: “I did my part, and God did his part.”

The pastor was a little alarmed and said, “Excuse me, you did what?”

The boy replied, “My part was rebelling, His part was rescuing me. I did the sinning, He did the saving.”

That’s not bad theology for a young person – as adults we need to make sure we know that our salvation is all of God’s doing and not at all attributed to us.

Question #3 – How can “all things” really work for good?

1. Because there is no real chance or accidents

"The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the Lord." (Proverbs 16:33)

Perhaps you’ve heard of the cowboy who applied for an insurance policy. The insurance agent asked, "Have you ever had any accidents?"

After a moment's reflection, the applicant responded, "Nope, but a bronc did kick in two of my ribs last summer, and a couple of years ago a rattlesnake bit me on the ankle."

"Wouldn't you call those accidents?" replied the puzzled agent. "Naw," the cowboy said, "they did it on purpose!"

*What looks like just an accident When viewed through human eyes,
Is really God at work in us--His blessing in disguise.*

2. Because there are no “little things” outside God’s sovereignty

"Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29)

Not only will no hair on our head be lost unless God ordains it, but the Bible also says no stars in the most distant galaxies will ever be missing. Whether things in the telescope to the smallest things in a microscope, nothing is outside His sovereignty. There are no “maverick molecules” in the universe, no runaway riboflavins, or free flaggelum – God is sovereign over all things big and little.

3. Because God is sovereign over nature and calamities

It was said of Jesus “even the wind and the seas obey Him.” We saw in Job 38 a few weeks ago that God is the one who governs floods and the sea, He commands storms, He sets precise limits for the ocean and its waves, he holds back or sends snow and hail, he guides thunder and lightning and sends rain and hail. Psalm 89:9 affirms that God rules the raging of the sea and controls the waves, and Psalm 104 and 147 reinforce this truth.

Amos 3:6 - *If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?*

This is a little hard for our finite minds to fully understand, but there is a sense in which even disasters and calamities are ordained by God (yet without Him ever being the author of sin or direct agent doing anything morally evil)

4. Because God is sovereign over what people or Satan do to us

"So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging." (Jonah 1:15)

"For You had cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me." (Jonah 2:3)

Job said "the Lord takes" not only weather and natural disasters, but Job also says "the Lord takes" about acts of terrorism, stealing and murder of his family and Satanic oppression.

"For it is better, *if God should will it so, that you suffer* for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong." (1 Peter 3:17)

5. Because God ordains even the most sinful acts of men

Man is completely responsible for His sin, yet God is still sovereign over it

Acts 2:23 and 4:26-29

Gen 45:5-8; 50:20; Ps 105:17

These things are hard for us to fully understand, but we believe what the Bible says. And we know that "in all things" God is working for His glory and our good because He is indeed sovereign over all.

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