

God Works All Things Together for Good

📖 Romans 8:28-30

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We're coming toward the end of Romans 8. When we finish we will have completed the first four divisions of the book. Romans 1:18-3:20 covers the doctrine of condemnation. We found that all are under sin and justly condemned. In Romans 3:21-5:21 Paul covers the doctrine of justification. We found that Christ was condemned in our place so that God is just in justifying us by faith. In Romans 6:1-8:17 Paul covers the doctrine of sanctification. We found that living by the Spirit is the only way to have the righteous requirement of God fulfilled in us. In Romans 8:18-30 Paul covers the doctrine of glorification. Actually the division we are in is detailing glorification but truths of sanctification are interwoven. The context is set by the end of Romans 8:17 as "suffering." We all endure suffering because we live in a fallen world. In order to help us deal with the suffering Paul reveals three truths. First, the truth in Romans 8:18-25 that our present suffering cannot compare to the glories to follow. Second, the truth in Romans 8:26-27 that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf because we don't know how to pray. And third, the truth in Romans 8:28-30 that God has a purpose for everything that happens in our life. Last week we developed the second truth, that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf and so let's review as we prepare to move into the third truth.

We said that Romans 8:26-27 is a unique passage in the NT in that it reveals a ministry of the Spirit that is known from nowhere else in the NT. Of course, the ministry Spirit has a number of well-known ministries during the present age. These include regeneration, indwelling, baptism and sealing. But here we find an equally important ministry, intercession. Intercession refers to going in between or arguing someone's case. The Spirit's intercessory ministry falls somewhere under the auspices of His ministry as revealed by Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse to be our Helper. The occasion was Jesus' revealing that He was leaving soon. His disciples began to fear so He assured them that when He left He would not leave them as orphans, all alone and without help, but He would ask the Father and the Father would give them another Helper. He identified the Helper as the Spirit and told them that He would be with them forever (John 14:1-3; 16-18). The Greek word used of the Spirit as a Helper is *παρακλητον* and refers to "one who comes alongside to help or comfort." It seems that the Spirit's intercessory ministry fits under this word because it is one in which He comes alongside of us to help us because we don't know how to pray. In 8:26 Paul introduces it with the word *ωσαυτως* which in this context means

“likewise” or “in addition to” signaling that he is revealing an additional help to deal with the suffering of this present fallen world. “Likewise” says Paul, “the Spirit also helps our weakness.” The word “helps” means bear the burden with and it is the Spirit who bears our burden in our weakness. The word “weakness” is a description of human frailty. Our particular area of frailty in this context is our lack of knowledge of how or what to pray. Paul says, “For we do not know how to pray as we should.” In other words, we don’t know how to pray in line with what is needed in the suffering situation. The reason is lack of omniscience about all that God is orchestrating through our suffering. There are several reasons we may be suffering. All suffering is directly due to the Fall but we may be suffering because we did an idiot thing or we live with someone who did an idiot thing or we may be suffering as a nudge to spiritually advance or as a witness to an unbeliever or to resolve something in the angelic conflict or some combination of all these reasons. It is because of the complexity of what God is doing through our suffering that we don’t know how to pray in line with what is needed. Because of this “the Spirit himself intercedes for us.” The word intercede means He doesn’t leave us an orphan. He doesn’t leave us alone to deal with it. He comes alongside of us and pleads our case because we don’t know how. He is our Paraclete. The manner in which He is said to do this is “with groanings too deep for words,” a controversial expression. The word “groanings” refers to an involuntary frustration, they may be expressed audibly or inaudibly. Here they are the groanings of the Spirit because of His personal attachment to us. The NASB says they are to “too deep for words.” That is misleading because the word means “without sound,” not something beyond words. Some have connected this concept with the tongues of angels in 1 Cor 14 but the contexts are entirely different. What Paul is saying is that the Spirit groans words silently to the Father. So it is a private correspondence between the Spirit and the Father that He utters from within us. In 8:27 we are told that God is the one “who searches the hearts.” He is omniscient and know our thoughts. He also knows “what the mind of the Spirit is” The perfect tense “knows” means He has exhaustive knowledge of what the Spirit is thinking, which means He has access to the silent prayers of the Spirit. Then Paul says that the Spirit’s intercession is “according to the will of God.” His intercession is always in accordance with the will of God and so always meets our need of the moment. These needs are issues in the secret will of God and do not stem from needs that are in the revealed will of God. The revealed will of God can be known through study and we can pray for those things. But as for the details of our life we can’t know, they are part of the secret will of God for our life. Because they are important and we don’t know how to pray for them then the Spirit prays for them so that when all the details come together they all work together for good. So you may be suffering, you may suffer more than others or less than others but the encouragement is that the Holy Spirit is interceding on your behalf from within you in order to bring all things together for good. We pick up today with Romans 8:28 and the third truth that helps us deal with our sufferings; namely, that God has a purpose for everything that happens in our life.

With all the suffering and catastrophes we experience in life how can they all be working together for good? Only a biblical view of God and His purpose can account for how all things work together for good for believers. I want to make five observations before we look at the verse-by-verse and word studies we have to do to

appreciate this passage. First, Rom 8:28-30 should be approached by looking at Paul's conclusion in 8:31 and then backtracking to see if Paul actually proves his conclusion. One tip on reading technical books or articles that I always use is reading the author's conclusion first and then tracing the argument as you read to see whether the author builds a case that proves his conclusion. So we want to look at Paul's conclusion, which is verse 31, and see if Paul proves that in Romans 8:28-30. Paul's conclusion is, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" What then is the basic idea we are supposed to get out of Roman 8:28-30? The basic idea is that God is for us. That is a powerful truth to help you through suffering because if God is for us then who can be against us? Does Paul prove it? Paul's point with these verses is to move us into a position of strength by the awesome realization that God is our ally. Second, the basic principle in Romans 8:28-30 is God's **purpose**. At the end of verse 28 it is stated that those **who are called** are called **according to His purpose**. Then in verse 29 and 30 he begins to unfold that purpose in terms of foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification and glorification. But the basic idea is that God has a purpose and the other words explain that purpose starting in eternity past, moving into time and ending in eternity future. Third, Rom 8:28-30 has a number of controversial words such as **foreknow** and **predestined**. We will have to look at these words in some detail. You may not agree with my conclusions but one thing we must observe is that God does all these things without deliberation concerning what man will do. In other words, God is the one who foreknew. He foreknew certain people, not something about people, such as what they might do; God is also the one who predestined; the one who called; the one who justified and the one who glorified. This is because all these things are included within His purpose. The passage is about God's purpose and not man's will. Newell said it this way, "We have been dealing in the first part of this chapter with the human will and its consent to walk by the Spirit. Not so from the 28th verse to the chapters end. It will be *all God* from now on!"¹ It is all God and this is the most important point of all to understanding the words in these verses. To bring man's will into the passage and condition God's works on man's will would be a terrible infringement upon God's sovereign works. Man doesn't do any of these things, nor does he enter into their deliberation. These verses are designed to teach us that God is for us and why nobody can be against us, not even ourselves. Let us keep it that way. Fourth, verse 29 presents the golden chain of redemption. The golden chain of redemption means that there is a linkage between all who are foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified. In other words, all who are foreknown are predestined and all who are predestined are called and all who are called are justified and all who are justified are glorified. Repeatedly Paul uses the formula, "these whom God X...He also Y...and these whom He Y...He also Z." So if you are on this train there is no getting off. There is not one person who God foreknows who will not end up glorified and there is not one who God does not foreknow that will be glorified. The verses deal only with a subset of humanity and not all of humanity. As Stifler says, "...the very ones He foreknew, these, without the loss of one, He glorified." As a brief aside, sanctification is not included and this is probably because it is the only venture that includes our cooperation/willingness. All these mentioned are works of God alone. Fifth, all five of the words in the golden chain of redemption are viewed as already accomplished. Each verb is an aorist tense, simply referring to an accomplished action. We have been foreknown, we have been predestined, we have been called,

we have been justified and we have even been glorified. The reason all five of these are looked upon as accomplished actions is because they are so certain to be accomplished that they can be spoken of as accomplished. So the five observations are first, that verse 31 tells us that what Paul must prove in these verses is that God is for us, second, that the main idea is God's purpose, third, that words like foreknow and predestined are things God does without respect to human choices, fourth, that all who are foreknown will ultimately be glorified and fifth, that all are spoken of as accomplished because they are so certain to be accomplished.

Verse 28 begins with a connective $\delta\epsilon$ translated **And**. In other words we are not to isolate 8:28 from the Spirit's intercession in 8:26-27 but we are to connect it. Somehow the reason that all things work together for good is related to the Spirit's intercession for us in silent prayer which is accessed by God who answers it according to His purpose.

The next words we find are that **we know** something or we have come to know something. The Greek word is *οιδαμεν* is in the perfect tense. The perfect tense refers to something we have come to know with the effect that we know it. What we know is stated to be **that God causes all things to work together for good**. There are three ways people think we have come to know this. First, some think that we have come to know this because the Holy Spirit impresses it upon us. This idea is somewhat tenuous. It tries to get the idea from the previous verse where the Spirit intercedes for us but since that is a silent prayer then it is not something we have access to and so could not come to know this from the Holy Spirit impressing it upon us. Second, others think that we have come to know this by experiencing it ourselves. This idea is also somewhat tenuous. In reality many Christians struggle to see how God can work all things together for good. Most would agree that some things work together for good based on their experience. But all things is pushing it. Third, some think that we have come to know this from examples of believer's lives in Scripture. This is the best view. When, as Christians we consider the lives of people like Joseph who was sold into slavery by his own brothers, taken as a slave by Midianite traders to Egypt, falsely accused and imprisoned for over two years in Egypt. All along the way Joseph must have wondered, how can God allow this to happen to me? I haven't done anything wrong? I am suffering unjustly. And yet from Scripture we can see that God did work it together for good, at the last He raised him up to be the most powerful man in Egypt next to Pharaoh for the preserving of many lives. As Joseph himself concluded in Gen 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." Or we might take the example of the dispute between Paul and Barnabas over whether to take John Mark on the 2nd Missionary Expedition. Barnabas wanted to take Mark. Paul kept insisting that they not take Mark because he deserted them on the 1st Missionary Expedition. The disagreement was so sharp that they separated from one another; Barnabas taking Mark and sailing to Cyprus and Paul taking Silas and going elsewhere. And yet God caused that sharp disagreement to work together for good, because while the disagreement in itself was bad, the result of two missionary expeditions instead of one was good. Or we might take the example of Job and his suffering. All ten of his children were killed in one day in the same house, all of his possessions were stolen, his health was stripped from him and his wife turned against

him and how can any of these terrible things work toward anything good? And yet in the end James 5:11 says, "You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful." The way that believers have come to **know that God causes all things to work together for good** is because we have come to know the examples of believer's lives in Scripture. That is how we know and that is how we must know because we are not to the end of our lives yet, we cannot see how many things in our lives will work together for good. But we can look back on the completed lives of those in Scripture and we can see that all things do work together for good.

Now there is a little textual dispute in verse 28 as to who works all things together for good. The NASB adds the word **God** as the subject and there are some early manuscripts which have God as the subject (*ο θεος*). Metzger has a good summary. "Although the reading *συνεργε θεός*... is both ancient and noteworthy, a majority of the Committee deemed it too narrowly supported to be admitted into the text, particularly in view of the diversified support for the shorter reading... Since *συνεργε* may be taken to imply a personal subject, *θεός* seems to have been a natural explanatory addition made by an Alexandrian editor."² In other words, most likely the text does not say **God causes** but it is natural to understand that God is the One who causes so there was no reason to say so explicitly. Every Christian knows that it is God who is orchestrating things together for good. A. T. Robertson says, "A B have *θεος* [*ho theos*] as the subject of *συνεργει* [*sunergei*] (old verb, see on 1 Cor. 16:16; 2 Cor. 6:1). That is the idea anyhow. It is God who makes "all things work together" in our lives "for good" (*εις αγαθον* [*eis agathon*]), ultimate good."³ It is a natural thought.

Now the things that God works together for good relate only **to those who love God**. Who are **those who love God**? Is this a special subset of believers or is this all believers? Surely some believers love God more than others. However, that is not really what is in view. Here all believers are **those who love God** because Paul also says they are **those who are called according to His purpose**. Since all believers **are called** then all believers in this context **love God**. Romans 5:5 says that the Spirit pours out the love of God within our hearts. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love God because He first loved us." So the reason we love God is because He first loved us and the Spirit poured out His love in our hearts so that we would return love to Him. So God works all things together for good for all believers. We make a special note of pointing out that God does not work all things together for good for unbelievers. That is not the promise and all things do not work together for good for unbelievers. This is a promise that only relates to believers. Now who could so orchestrate every event so as to cause them to all work together together only for believers? Only God could do that.

Now what do the **all things** refer too? **All things** refers to **all things**, whether good or bad things, though in the context he is specifically talking about suffering and suffering is composed of bad things. As Constable says, "In the context these things include the adversities the believer experiences."⁴ Three notices are important relative to understanding the truth. First, he does not say that all adversities are good. The adversities are bad in and of themselves. They are sin or the results of sin. God is not calling sin good. What the verse says is that God is able

to work all things, including sin together for a good end. For example, in the Joseph story the events along the way, what his brothers had done to him and the injustice of Potiphar's wife were all sin, Joseph says so, but God was able to work those events together for a good end, the preserving of many lives. Second, he does not mean that everything that happens is God's will. God's will is always for righteousness. It is not God's will for you to sin or for anyone else to sin. That is what you will or someone else wills, not what God wills. We must not claim that God's will is always done in this present world. Only when the kingdom comes will God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Right now that is not the case. Third, the **good** refers to what is good from God's perspective, not necessarily our perspective. Though when a believer's thinking is aligned with God's perspective then he is in agreement with God about what is good.

In conclusion to this part of the verse, the entire concept that God causes all things in the believer's life to work together for a good end is a powerful and comforting truth. One prominent pastor from the WWII period remarked that "Romans 8:28 is the hardest verse to believe in the Bible."⁵ But when you come to know the Scriptural examples of people who faced great suffering and also see the end, how the Lord turned it for good, then you see that it is one of the powerful and important verses in the Bible to believe.

Now at the end of 8:28 Paul adds, in addition **to those who love God**, the words **to those who are called according to His purpose**. Those who **are called according to His purpose**, of course, are believers. As mentioned before, the overarching idea in these verses is God's **purpose**, everything else is just an outworking. In other words, you might think of God's purpose as a box and everything else like foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified as things contained within the box. The entire thing together is God's **purpose**. This makes it the greater concept. The Greek word for **purpose** is *προθεσις*. It is used 12 times in the NT (Matt 12:4; Mk 2:26; Lk 6:4; Acts 11:23; 27:13; Rom 8:28; 9:11; Eph 1:11; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9; 2 Tim 3:10; Heb 9:2). Four of these references relate to God's purpose (Rom 8:28; 9:11; Eph 1:11; 2 Tim 1:9). The word means "that which is planned in advance, *plan, purpose, resolve*." There are five things to note about this plan. First, the plan is **His** and not a joint product. He made the plan. He did not make the plan with respect to what He foresaw we would do. If He did it would not be His plan but a joint plan because our foreseen choices would be considered in the planning. But the text says it is His plan. It is therefore a plan that was made without respect to man's will. What we are to gather from this is that history has a meaning and a purpose and if history has a meaning and a purpose and your life is a part of history then your life has a meaning and a purpose. God is the one who gives that meaning and purpose. Second, according to the definition of the word the plan was in place before time. This concept is an accommodation to human language because God is omniscient and therefore doesn't plan anything in the way that man plans things. Man has to acquire information before he can plan. This takes time. God knows immediately and therefore He has always had every conceivable plan in His mind from all eternity. Therefore we might say that there was never a time when God did not have a plan. We could not say that God made a plan at a point in time because time itself is part of the plan. God had the plan from all eternity. This was before time began. When God created time began and the plan began to unfold in time.

Third, according to Eph 1:11 the plan includes everything, including sin and evil. The verse uses this same word and says that “according to His purpose God works all things after the counsel of His will.” The “all things” has no limitation but includes things in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:10). This does not mean that God causes sin and evil. He certainly does not. Angels and men are the cause of sin and evil. God permits sin and evil for a while. Because sin and evil are included within His plan then He is sovereign over them so that they are not beyond His ability to use, contain and finally judge. In other words, God is sovereign over sin and evil and this is why God can work them into the equation such that for the believer they work together for good. If God was not sovereign over them then God could not work all things together for good. So His plan includes all things, both good and evil but He is not the cause of evil.

Fourth, God called us according to His plan. The text of Romans 8:28 says **according to His purpose**. The construction is *κατα* with the accusative which always refers to a standard. The standard by which God called us is His plan. We’ll talk more about the calling in a moment but for now another passage teaches the same truth. 2 Tim 1:9 states, “who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose.” It was on the basis of God’s plan that He called us. We are also saved on the basis of God’s plan.

Fifth, the plan or purpose has as its central component the death of Christ. We are saved in connection with Christ. 2 Tim 1:9 goes on to say, “but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” Our salvation in accordance with His purpose from all eternity was to grant us grace in Christ Jesus. Eph 3:11 reiterates the same truth when Paul says, “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord...” So the Lord Jesus Christ is the central element of the plan and our salvation in the plan is derived from our connection to Him.

So verse 28 is saying that we have come to know that God causes all things to work together for good from the personal stories in Scripture like Joseph, Job, Jesus, et al. The all things constitute good and evil things. God is not the author of the evil things. He is sovereign over them so that He can use them to bring about a good end. This only occurs for those who love God because He first loved us. The expression refers to all believers. Finally, this same group are those who are called according to His purpose. His purpose refers to His plan which He had before time and which includes all things and is the basis upon which we are called and saved in connection with the death of Christ. This is meant to comfort us. The entire conclusion this line of argument is taking us to is verse 31, “If God is for us, who is against us?” If God is able to take all things and work them together for good in your life then who is there really who can be against you? That is why this is such a great verse. It makes you bullet proof.

¹ William Newell, *Romans*, p 330.

² Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 458.

³ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 8:28.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 8:28.

⁵ *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991).