

Our Groans and God's Good **Romans 8:28**

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The whole Bible is holy hence the name *Holy Bible*. But if there is a holy of holies in the Bible, it most certainly is where we are now in Romans 8:28 through the rest of the chapter. It is the sweetest section of the sweetest chapter of the sweetest book of the Bible. I urge you to savor it each week. Read it in your personal time over and over. How often will you have this kind of opportunity again?

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Romans 8:28–30)

There are some big doctrinal words here and they rightly indicate that we are moving toward the deep end of the doctrinal pool. Our attention today is on a verse that is certainly one of the most famous verses in the Bible. We will delight in it today and again for Easter weekend as we see how the resurrection forever assures us that God works all things together for good.

Romans 8:28 is brief and succinct. It is easily memorized. And yet there is also a danger here. The promise is so glorious that we can apply it in wrong ways, to wrong people, with wrong outcomes. Hopefully after this message, we will apply it in right ways, to the right people, toward the right outcomes.

Read it out loud.

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

This verse sits right between the previous section dealing with creation's groans, our groans in this broken world, the Holy Spirit's groans of prayers for us, and following, is the solid rock foundation of God's forever love for us. Between these two is the doctrinal foundation upon which these other truths stand and are nourished.

What is it? Two truths. The *sovereignty of God* and the *providence of God*. God's sovereignty is the focus from here through the end of chapter 11. What does it mean? It means God is the ultimate authority and power in the universe and his will is always fulfilled. We use words like King and Lord. These are as close to sovereign as we get in our world. King of kings and Lord of lords is a title given to Jesus, which indicates this absolute sovereignty. There is none higher, greater, or more glorious than him. God's sovereignty extends even into the future, which is also under his sovereign control.

"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." (Ephesians 1:11)

Notice, "*all things*." Romans 8:28 says the same, "*all things*." Scripture doesn't limit God's sovereignty to the spiritual world or to only Bible things. The scope of his sovereignty is all things. All things past. All things present. All things future. His will is never frustrated. God is never surprised by anything. All history, big and small, is according to his purposes. The underlying truth of Romans 8:28 is the sovereignty of God. The evident truth is the providence of God. What is providence? It is God's sovereignty exerted in the real world. Providence is God orchestrating all circumstances in alignment with his will. Providence is God's sovereignty on the street level of life. Your life. My life. All lives. Nations. Kingdoms. But also, homes, families, and our personal lives. You have never experienced anything that was not tied to the providence of God.

"The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand." (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 27)

"Providence is the transit of God's wisdom, power, justice, goodness, faithfulness, out of heaven and himself into the visible world: governing, protecting, caring for, directing and ordering all, for the most excellent ends worthy of God." (Peter Lewis)¹

We could say, nothing is random. All things are under his sovereignty and all things occur according to his providence. R.C. Sproul wrote a book on providence and calls God's providence the invisible fingerprints of God. Detectives take fingerprints to figure out who did it. Providence is when we take tape and a black light to all our circumstances and discover divine fingerprints. Not just the big things or what we deem wonderful things, but the small things and yes, even the hard things.

How Does God Exert His Sovereignty in the World?

This is important to understand as it explains God's relationship to his creation. Commentators point out that if we don't get this right, our theism can morph into something else, like *pantheism* which fails to maintain the difference between creation and creator. God is the rock, the sun, the whatever thing. This also isn't *fatalism* where our decisions don't matter. Nor is this a *deism*, which says God put into creation everything needed and then stepped away. He wound up his toy and let it go. In the words of the old Bette Midler song, *God is watching us from a distance*. God is not the creation nor is he distant from creation. No, he is at work in creation to fulfill his purposes. But how?

God typically works through secondary causes to accomplish his purpose

For example, God's will is to feed the earth and provide for our needs. The growth potential in a seed and fertile ground is God working through his own secondary causes. I'm sick. I pray for healing. White blood cells attacking my illness is God working through secondary causes. These causes are so consistent that it provides a basis for science and scientific method. They can test, and retest and they say, *Look, these are the laws of nature, there is no God in this*. If only they realized why the universe operates with such consistency. God is a God of amazingly precise order.

I drive a 2009 Honda Accord. It's 10 years old. It just keeps going. Do I conclude from this that Accords are inherently consistent, or does it say something about Honda engineers and

¹ Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, p. 112.

their ability to design amazingly reliable cars? Creation's laws and properties praise a God of engineering precision and order.

Can God NOT work through a secondary cause? Yes, we call that a miracle. God setting aside the natural order and exerting his power in creation. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a prime example. But how he normally works is through secondary causes. That's why if you tell me you have cancer and ask me what to do, I will say pray and go see the doctor. It's no less faith in God to see a doctor than to pray.

But we must see God's providence in the normal things. We tend to only identify God working in the extraordinary circumstances. We say, *God really worked*. Yet God is working all the time all around us through secondary causes to accomplish his purpose. He meets our needs in so many ways and ordinary people doing ordinary things. Perhaps we should praise God for meeting our needs via the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker.

Who Should Claim This Promise?

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

See the parallel between the first clause and the last clause,

Those who love God

Those who are called according to his purpose

"Those who love God." Don't make the mistake in thinking, if I love God more, then more things will work out for good. *"Those who love God"* is code for authentic Christians. Loving God is a mark of those saved by God. To make that clear, the last clause shows who is doing the saving, *"those who are called according to **his** purpose* (emphasis added)."

We will get more into God's effectual calling another week, but suffice it to say, this isn't the general call to be saved but the specific and powerful call of God to those he wills to save. See that in how it ends, *"those who are called **according to his purpose*** (emphasis added)."

I've never spear fished, but I've done a lot of surface fishing. Surface fishing is where you put out a bait and you pull in whatever gets on the line. Spear fishing is where you dive down and select the fish you are going to catch.

God is both. God says, *whosoever will may come*. All who believe will be saved. But the effectual call is God fishing according to his purpose, saving according to his will. This promise is clearly for those who are true believers in Jesus. The truly saved. For us and only us, God works all things together for good.

This is important because only Psalm 23 rivals Romans 8:28 in being offered to people for whom the promise doesn't apply. Will God work everything together for good for those who are not under his grace? No. In fact, God guarantees the opposite. For those who are not saved, God is working all things together for an eventual horrible conclusion.

When we give a coffee mug with this verse on it to a non-Christian it may make them feel better about their trial, but it is a false assurance. It only applies to Christians.

But what a wonderful promise it is IF we are those called by God, those who love God through his Son Jesus. If that's not you today, Romans 8:28 is one of a thousand reasons

that you should repent of your sins, turn to Jesus and his work on the cross in faith, and place all your hope in Christ for salvation.

What is the Assurance From our Sovereign God?

"All things work together for good."

The extent - all things

How we need to see this! Not so much when everything seems to be coming up daisies in our lives. *Yes, Oh I see how things are working together for good.* This verse's relevance seems to fade when life's fantastic.

The power of this verse is when it's hard to believe the verse. When things are not going well in life. When hard things happen. When evil happens. When tragedy strikes. Then "all things" seems difficult to comprehend. Our temptation is to think, it certainly can't apply to _____ in my life. It certainly can't apply to _____ in human history. Yes, it applies to that. All things means all things.

The mystery - work together

Yet we must get comfortable with a word that is going to come up many times through chapter 11, **mystery**.

Mystery in the Bible isn't something that is unknowable. It is something that is hidden. How can tragedies in life end up at some good? It's impossible for we finite humans to comprehend.

Mystery acknowledges that God is far greater and wiser than we are. His ways are higher than our ways. As I talk about this, many of us are no doubt thinking about something in our past or maybe present that we shake our heads and say, there's no way "all things" applies to that.

Yet this is precisely where this promise is needed the most. It takes faith in God's promise to believe that tragedies in our lives fall within God's sovereignty and that God's providence will use the evil for some ultimate good. How is a mystery.

The guarantee - for good

What is the greatest evil or injustice ever done in human history? The murder of Jesus. This Friday we gather at our campuses and celebrate what we call "Good Friday." Why would we call it Good Friday? The death of Jesus. The suffering of our Savior. Of all the senseless names for a day, Good Friday would have to rank first, unless we see through the death of Jesus an ultimate good. What good? The ransom price paid for our sins. Victory over Satan and death. Life brought out of death. Beauty from ashes. A death that brings eternal life.

Somebody in the past pondered, *what should we name the day Jesus died?* In isolation, there's nothing good about Good Friday. But from the perspective of the bigger picture, if there's something wrong with the name Good Friday it's that it is understated. It was a great Friday. An amazing Friday. A forever fantastic Friday.

Here's the reality of our struggles: only God has the big picture. We have our Mondays and Tuesdays. To us, they are Monster Monday and Terrible Tuesday. But to God who is

sovereignly working out everything according to his purpose, all our Terrible Tuesdays end up being Good Fridays. Or in the words of the famous sermon, *It's Friday but Sunday's coming*.

I recall a dying man coming to a men's group I was a part of. He said, "I have cancer. I have only a few weeks to live." That will get a room quiet and it did. He talked about Romans 8:28 and his struggle with how his cancer could possibly work out for good. He said, "Then it dawned on me that I don't get to define what is good."

If there's any word in Romans 8:28 where we need to modify our definition, it's that one. *Good*. All things work together for *good*. We think "good" means, good health. Good wealth. Good marriage. Good kids. Good and happy days without end.

God's definition of good is much different from ours. Let's be honest, we interpret good as self-happiness. How does God define good? Look at the very next verse. "*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*" (Romans 8:29) How does God define good for us? The closest possible resemblance in attitude and action to Jesus.

We think good is happiness. God thinks, good is holiness. We think good is a trouble-free life, God thinks good is a purified faith through pain. We think good is everything perfect today. God thinks good is everything perfect someday.

How do you define good? Good for you? Glory for you? Or good for God and glory for him? Life will test our definition because pain and trials force us to wrestle with our expectations of God. Therefore, many people try Christianity and then depart. It didn't provide them the happiness they expected. There are churches and pastors that prey on human narcissism. They draw a crowd, but their people are ill-prepared to handle suffering, pain, or even death.

But for those who see Christ-likeness as the greatest good we can experience, and God's glory as the ultimate purpose in life, when disappointment inevitably comes, we rest in knowing God's got this too. He is in control. He is not surprised. And someday we will see how God worked in and through all these sorrows to accomplish his purpose in us. Until then, we must put this in the category of mystery and trust all things will eventually work together for good.

William Cowper was a man who knew suffering. He lived with deep depression in life. He responded with poetry. Perhaps his most famous turned into a hymn. It is entitled, "*God Moves in a Mysterious Way*."²

*"God moves in a mysterious way,
his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines,
of never-failing skill;
he treasures up his bright designs,
and works his sov'reign will.*

² William Cowper, "*God Moves in a Mysterious Way*" (1774)

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break
in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence,
he hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding ev'ry hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flow'r.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain."*

He says it well, but not better than Romans 8:28, "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

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