

# **"Do All Things Work Together for Good?"**

*Romans 8:28*

'All things work together for good'.

So we've heard and may even have said thinking we were quoting Scripture, when in fact we were misquoting Scripture. When we misquote Scripture it's because we've misunderstood Scripture. And the reason we misunderstand Scripture is because we failed to observe what it actually says. Remember when we were in school and the teacher warned us to read all the instructions or questions carefully, only to dismiss their words and rush through a test only to find out later we lost marks on something simple, because we didn't read it as they said.

'All things work together for good' is a misquote because we've left out the context of the whole verse and its surrounding context. I was blessed to be disciplined early in life and I had it drilled into me when studying the Bible that context is king.

For example. The other day while walking through the church, I picked up a folded piece of paper making sure it wasn't garbage. As I opened it to see what it was it read on the top of the page, *'What's in the Diaper!'* And there were 12 blank spaces that someone had written different things in and beside each blank was 1 point or 2 points. And if I didn't know the context of that I might have wondered what is wrong with people! Were they comparing what their babies pooped out and awarded points for it? Were they trying to guess what the baby was eating and if they were why would they feed a baby tuna, molasses, an O Henry chocolate bar, hot sauce and keener mustard!!!!? These people are sick!!

However, because I knew the context was that we had a baby shower in the church last week and a popular game for the new moms is to put different foods into diapers and they have to guess what they were, I did not misunderstand what was written.

Our bibles did not originally come with chapter and verse divisions. It was written in paragraphs. While the verse system is wonderful for finding verses and quoting verses, it can be a detriment when we isolate a verse from its paragraph and make it stand on its own which it was never meant to do. And yet, we find strength in many individual verses and memorize them and apply them to us. Sometimes we don't apply them as well as we should.

Our first example this morning comes from a very popular and important verse, Romans 8:28. This verse has become the go to verse when we are going through difficulties. And it should – but let's understand it in its original context and make sure we're using it properly in the right context.

Romans 8:28 is in the middle of a paragraph from 8:22-30. And this of course is in the longer section of a chapter where Paul concludes a large section of material began in Ch. 4. He traced the origin of faith in God's Word for salvation alone back to Abraham (Ch. 4). He explains how everyone needs to have that kind of faith because through Adam we all sinned (Ch. 5). However, in Ch. 6, Paul explains that being justified by faith does not give us a license to sin. Sin is not to be our master. We do have power over sin when we submit to Jesus and the Spirit. However, as Ch. 7 illustrates often we fail and don't do what we should. While we might be tempted to quit because we are failures, Paul now reminds us in Ch. 8 of our great security in Christ. We are not condemned because we're in Christ, had sins forgiven and indwelt by the Spirit. But having security in Christ doesn't mean we won't have difficulties and suffering in life. Just as the creation groans because of the affects of sin in

the world, so too do we groan in our own sufferings because, as secure as we are, we are not in God's eternal presence yet where we will be healed completely and have our sins removed.

The context then of Romans 8:28 has to do with understanding how secure we are in Christ even though we may be going through difficulties or suffering. V. 28 begins,

*“And we know that ...”*

But if we don't know the context, we'll miss that in v.26 Paul said there's something we don't know. So then v.28 is a response to vv.22-27. In v.22 we read,

*22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. 26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

The most important step to understanding the Bible is observation and to ask questions of the text. Here's our first question:

## **What Don't We Know and What Do We Know?**

Paul says just as the creation looks forward to its release from sin's affects one day, so too are we; which is the redemption of our bodies. Our hope is resurrected bodies. Our faith in Jesus gives us a sure hope that we will be like Him and be with Him one day. Redemption of our bodies and adoption as sons. But in the meantime, we groan when we hurt. And when we hurt physically or emotionally or spiritually,

### ***We don't know how to pray in difficulties (vv.22-27)***

This is the context of the whole section. While we wait for our hope that we know is true, we face various difficulties in life because sin is still present around us and within us. And it can be difficult to know exactly how to pray. Do we pray for the removal of the difficulties? Do we pray for wisdom to understand? Do we pray for God's glory to be shown? Do we pray for God's will to be done? Yes! All those things. But sometimes we forget those things that we are to pray for and we obviously don't know what God is specifically doing through them. But there is something we do know and that is the focus of v.28;

### ***We do know that God has a good purpose in them (v.28)***

See now why he begins v. 28 with 'And we know'? When we don't know why difficulties are happening in our life, we do know God has a purpose in them and that His purpose is a good purpose. *28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

We often turn to this verse when we don't know why we're suffering to remind ourselves that God does not waste any trial or difficulty or suffering in our life. Wouldn't you be discouraged to find

out that the trials for a believer were without purpose? What if half of them had no purpose? What if one out of 10 had no purpose? Then we wouldn't have the same confidence, would we? This is why this verse is so special to us. Even when we experience difficulties in life, we know God uses it for the good of those who love Him who have been called according to His purpose. But what,

### ***We don't know is how they work together (v.28)***

Every major translation adds the word 'together' except for the NIV. The word is implied in the word 'work' because it has a prefix 'with' attached to it which describes how 'all things' are working with each other to accomplish 'good' in us. That's we and the creation groan when we suffer. Not because we don't know what the future holds but because we don't understand how much longer this will continue or how this is accomplishing something God calls good. And God isn't just working things in our life but in all of our lives simultaneously and we don't know how our situation and your situation and this problem over here are going to come together yet. This is why we groan, yet we have to trust God's words that He is doing something good in all these things.

Which brings another question:

### **What are the 'All Things'?**

When trying to understand a word or a phrase in the author's mind the best way is to work ourselves from the inside out. For example, where else does Paul use the phrase 'all things'? We first look elsewhere in Romans. He actually uses it twice, in 8:32 and in 11:36. In 8:32 he reminds us of what we have waiting for us:

*<sup>31</sup> What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

All the 'these things' – trials, difficulties and suffering – are only temporal and remind us that we have waiting in store for us 'all things' that God wants to give us in Christ Jesus. Jesus suffered in the flesh; we will suffer in the flesh. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God receiving the blessing of 'all things' and that's waiting for us too.

Let's go to Rom. 11:36 where we read at the end of another great doxology,

*<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

The "all things" that God allows into our life – negative and positive – are under His sovereign umbrella. Again, reminding ourselves that God has a purpose in our difficulties. They went through Him before they got to us. He has power over them and has a plan in them. And they are for Him; for His glory. Somehow the 'all things' that come into our life can be used to glorify God if we're walking with Him and believe they can be used for that. We do not know at the time, but sometimes we can know more even in a short period of time. It's when we start to see how all these things come together. We'll also see it more quickly when we acknowledge Him in them.

When we've finished looking for other references in Romans then we look where Paul uses 'all things' elsewhere. Two helpful places.

*Eph. 1:11 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, <sup>12</sup> so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.*

The NIV uses 'everything' instead of all things but in the Greek it is the same as the Romans 8:28, 32 and 11:36. Note the similarities. In the context of our secure relationship with God He causes all things to work according to His will so that we will to the praise of His glory. God not only allows all things in our life, when we understand their purpose and respond accordingly, we draw people to glorify God. One more important 'all things' that impacts our understanding in Rom. 8:28.

In 1 Cor. 3:21-23 we read this,

*<sup>18</sup> Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. <sup>19</sup> For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; <sup>20</sup> and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." <sup>21</sup> So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*

The Corinthians had sadly divided themselves over leaders. Some favoured Paul, others Apollos, some Peter. Paul says stop! You're all equally blessed and have 'all things'. Boast in knowing Jesus and nothing more he says. The all things include the present, future, life and death. 'All things' also includes death. Should our suffering be so severe that it results in death Paul includes that in 'all things' as what God can use for the good of those who love Him. When those who love Him die, it is good in God's eyes because it completes the good work He's going to do in us.

Which raises another question,

### **Who's Good?**

*<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Who defines what is good here, God or people? Since God is the producer of the good then He defines what's good. But who's good? Some have suggested that since Paul says 'the good of those who love Him' isn't referring to all believers but to those who are loving Him at the moment. The problem with that limited view is it isolates a phrase in the verse from the rest of the context of the verse. Paul went out of his way to make sure when he says 'those who love Him' he means

#### ***All believers (vv.28-30)***

Those who have been called are also those who are foreknown, predestined, justified and glorified. And all those verbs are spoken as completed actions – even our glorification – because in God's good purpose it's already secure. This is why we can trust God in whatever 'all thing' we are going through because God directed their purpose for our good. And one more question then,

### **What is the Good?**

*<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>30</sup> And*

*those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

The good that God is doing for us is

### ***God's purpose is to make us like Jesus (vv.28-30)***

*<sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

God defines the good and all things are good for us because they can help us become more like Jesus. This is what we need the most. So no, the good is not circumstantial or material or physical but spiritual. This is why we cling to our hope that we know we have but don't see yet. This is ultimately what we're groaning for even though we don't know it. When we pray for relief from our difficulty (which is natural) are we not indirectly praying for our future, our completeness in Christ when all suffering and difficulties will be gone?

Another way we can word this is that the good that God always wants to do in us, and uses the difficulties in our life to get there is

### ***Spiritual maturity***

The calling of God to salvation then begins the process of sanctification (a 14-letter word for spiritual growth!), the fruit of our having been justified by faith in Jesus, which ultimately ends in our complete holiness, glorification. Paul elaborated on this process through difficulties back in Ch. 5,

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;<sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup>And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

So, whether we realize it or not when we are facing difficulties, we go to Romans 8:28 believing by faith that God has a purpose in them. What He is doing is using them to make us more like Jesus, a process that He has already planned ahead for us, our circumstances working together with other people and other circumstances that we can't see at the time, so that we grow and will glorify Him.

That the believer will glorify Him. Because this verse does not say all things work for everyone's good. It is only for disciples whom God is making more like Jesus. Yet, it can work for the unbeliever if they in their difficulties call upon the Lord for salvation. And this is how we pray this verse for our unbelieving friends and family members. That in the difficulties of life they might be drawn to God through faith in Jesus Christ because they know they can't solve their problems in their own strength. And that's a good thing God is doing because too many people live as if they can solve all their own problems with their own intellect or resources.

Romans 8:28-30 has always been and always will be a go to verse when we face difficulties. But now perhaps we have a little better understanding of the difficulties we face because of this verse. God knows all our problems. He can use all our problems to make us more like Jesus if we submit to His plan and believe this is the good He is doing. It won't be pleasant but it also isn't wasted or meaningless. While at the moment we can't see how all these unrelated circumstances and

problems will work together for our maturity we can rest in the hope we have in God through Christ that when we submit to His will He is working on our character, our attitude, our speech and our witness to be a little more like Jesus today than we were yesterday.

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