

The Promise of Security, Part 1

Scripture: Romans 8:28

Code: 45-64

LESSON

If the whole of Scripture were a feast for the soul, Romans 8 would be the main dish. The wonder of this chapter is summarized in verse 28: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose." That is the most glorious promise imaginable, and deserves our close attention.

Let's examine four elements of the promise of security in verse 28: the extent, recipients, source, and certainty of that promise.

I. THE EXTENT (v. 28b)

"All things work together for good."

Nothing could be more reassuring than that. Nothing could bring more hope, joy, trust, confidence, happiness, and freedom "to them that love God" than knowing their pain, problems, and trials all "work together for good."

"All things" tells us there is no limit to what works out for our good. Romans 8:28 is not limited to "all suffering," "all trouble," "all good things," or "all righteousness." Neither is it saying that all things are in themselves good. Many things are bad, but even they "work together for good." No matter what happens to us, it works out for our good.

The Greek word translated "good" in Romans 8:28 (agathon) refers to something that is morally or inherently good. Another common Greek word translated "good" is kalos, which means "good on the outside" or "nice to look at." Agathos refers to what is intrinsically good, not to what is just superficially good. In fact, it refers even to things that don't look good, yet are inherently good. Paul's use of agathon indicates the purest, truest kind of goodness.

In saying all things work together for good, I believe Paul had two things in mind: our current circumstances and our future glorification. No matter what happens in our lives, God will work things out to produce something immediately and ultimately beneficial for us. And since everything in our lives ultimately works for our good, nothing could ever cause us to lose our salvation.

Deuteronomy 8:15-16 tells us God worked out difficult circumstance for the good of the Israelites: "[God] led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might test thee, to do thee good at thy latter end." God didn't send Israel through forty difficult years in the wilderness to do them evil; He did it to refine them. Everything ultimately works for the good of God's children.

That doesn't happen automatically, however. The Holy Spirit and the Son are constantly interceding on our behalf (Rom. 8:26-27; Heb. 7:25).

A. Good Things Work for Our Good

1. God's attributes

God's power supports us in the midst of trouble. As Deuteronomy 33:27 says, "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." God supported Daniel when he was in a lions' den (Dan. 6:21-23), Jonah when he was in a fish's belly (Jonah 1:17--2:10), and three Hebrew men

when they were thrown into a furnace (Dan. 3:12-28). The apostle Paul said that God's strength is on display in our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9). He infuses us with His power. Christ told the apostles, "Ye shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you" (Acts 1:8).

His wisdom and goodness are also at our disposal. Romans 2:4 says that the goodness of God leads us to repentance, which certainly is a good end.

2. God's promises

When we repent of our sin, we are reminded that the Lord God is "merciful and gracious" (Ex. 34:6). When we have been disobedient, we can remember Hosea 14:4, where God says He will heal our backsliding, or Micah 7:18, which says, "Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity?" (NASB). Psalm 91:15 reassures us that God is with us in all our troubles. Philippians 4:19 promises, "God shall supply all your need." As David said, "I [have] not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Ps. 37:25).

3. God's Word

The Bible works for our good. Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

4. Prayer

Prayer releases God's power in our lives.

5. Angels

Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."

6. Fellow Christians

Paul said to the Corinthian church, "[We] are helpers of your joy" (2 Cor. 1:24). As Christians we are to help one another. That's why Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works."

While God's attributes, God's promises, the Bible, prayer, angels, and other believers work for our good, Paul was not focusing on those things in Romans 8:28.

B. Bad Things Work for Our Good

That's not to say bad things are good--bad things are always evil. We don't want to redefine them as good and invent a new theology. Sin is sin, evil is evil, and that won't ever change. Bad things are never good, but God uses them to work for our good. God's sovereignty extends over both bad things and good things. He can overrule the vilest things and work them out to our good. If you are in God's family, you can be confident that no matter what happens to you, God will work it out for your good now and in future glory.

Let's look at three categories of bad things that work for our good.

1. Suffering

Suffering is a result of the curse. If sin had not been introduced into the world, there would be no suffering. There would be no pain, sorrow, or death. Although suffering itself is not evil, it is the result of an evil world.

In Ruth 1:21 Naomi says, "The Almighty hath afflicted me." Job, in the midst of terrible circumstances, said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away" (Job 1:21). God said of the Israelites, "I [will] acknowledge those who are carried away captive of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans for their good" (Jer. 24:5). Just as God allowed the Israelites to suffer for their good, so He is using our suffering for our good.

a) Reasons for suffering Sometimes our suffering is God's chastening for sin. But not all suffering is the result of sin. Sometimes God allows us to suffer so He can refine us. Suffering purifies us like fire refines gold (1 Pet. 1:7). It also has a way of making us focus on God. While suffering has many purposes, God uses it all to achieve good results. James said, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials, knowing this, that the testing of your faith worketh patience" (James 1:2-3).

Peter said, "After ye have suffered awhile, [the Lord will] make you perfect" (1 Peter 5:10). God uses suffering to help us grow spiritually. Through it we learn kindness, sympathy, compassion, patience, and gentleness. It leads us to look to God, trust Him, and depend on His power, grace, and mercy.^{b)}

Examples of suffering

(1) **Joseph** Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit and then sold him to some men on their way to Egypt (Gen. 37:20-28). Later he was imprisoned (Gen. 39:20). God, however, worked out all his suffering for good. Joseph interpreted a dream for Pharaoh and warned of a coming famine (Gen. 41:1-44). As a result Pharaoh made Joseph prime minister of Egypt. If that had not happened, Joseph's brothers would not have received grain from Egypt when they went there to buy it (Gen. 42:25; 44:1). Joseph sympathetically gave them what they needed. God worked out the evil done to Joseph to for his good and the good of those around him (Gen. 50:20).

(2) **Manasseh** The Assyrians took evil King Manasseh of Judah captive. Manasseh's suffering brought about a good result: "When he was in affliction, he besought the Lord, his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers" (2 Chron. 33:12). The Lord responded to Manasseh's humility. Suffering can bring us closer to God and purge the sin in our lives. It teaches us what other people go through when they suffer, enabling us to more compassionately minister to them.

(3) **Job** Job lost everything. The only thing he didn't lose was his wife, but she didn't help him much (Job 2:9). His barns were destroyed, his cattle were stolen, and his children killed (1:14-19). Job had sores all over his body (2:7). Yet after all the suffering he endured, he was still able to say to the Lord, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Although his suffering cost him everything, God gave him back more than he ever lost (42:10).

(4) **Paul** The apostle Paul was burdened by "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). He asked God to remove it, but came to realize that thorn enabled him to see God's power through his weakness. When Paul was afflicted with blindness on the Damascus Road, it worked for his good in drawing him to Christ.

c) Benefits of suffering

(1) It teaches us to hate sin The Puritan Thomas Watson wrote an entire book on Romans 8:28 (All Things for God, originally titled A Divine Cordial [Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986]). He observed that Martin Luther said he never understood the imprecatory psalms until he himself had suffered. Luther didn't know how David felt when crying out for vengeance on his enemies until he too was in affliction. Watson commented, "Affliction teaches what sin is.... A sick-bed often teaches more than a sermon. We can best see the ugly visage of sin in the glass of affliction" (p. 27). When Jesus went to Lazarus's tomb, He "groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" (John 11:33). He agonized over the tears, pain, and sorrow that sin and death brings. When you experience suffering, you learn to hate the sin that brings it about.

(2) It helps us see our own evil When you suffer, you find out what is really going on inside you. When everything is fine it's easy to feel pious. But as soon as things collapse and troubles come your way, it's even easier to shake your fist at God. You can become impatient and begin to doubt God. That's when you find out if you really trust Him. Suffering will expose any evil in your heart.

(3) It drives us to God In prosperity the heart is easily divided. That's why God warned the Israelites not to forget Him when they went into the Promised Land (Deut. 6:10-13). Suffering forces us to stop focusing on the world. When everything in your life is great, you're apt to be preoccupied with your house, car, job, business, and wardrobe. But suppose one of your children became terminally ill. That would change your values and drive you to God. And that is a good response.

(4) It conforms us to Christ When we suffer, we enter into "the fellowship of [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). Suffering helps us identify with Him. That's why Paul was happy to say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). He knew what it was like to be beaten up and pummeled by rocks and rods. He identified with the reproach of Christ, bearing it in his own body. Suffering helps us to better understand Christ's heart, pain, and suffering. It brings us into deeper intimacy with the One who suffered for us.

(5) It drives out sin Suffering is a fire that burns away our dross and reveals the pure gold and silver. As Job said, "When he hath tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Suffering drives out sin. Zechariah 13:8-9 tells us God will use the terrors of the tribulation to refine the nation of Israel in the

end times.(6) It reveals that we are sons of GodHebrews 12:6-8 says, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, of which all are partakers, then are ye [illegitimate], and not sons." When you suffer because the Lord is refining you, be glad because He is making you the child you ought to be.I have four children. My wife and I disciplined them because we wanted to refine them into the people the Lord would have them to be. They have no question that I'm their father because they know I'm the source of discipline and the loving purpose for it. I hope that is true about your family. God disciplines His children to refine them. When you suffer because God is chastening you, praise God for that sign that you're His child. Job 5:17 says, "Happy is the man whom God correcteth."The psalmist said, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept thy word.... It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.... I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Ps. 119:67, 71, 75). Suffering is a direct result of sin in the world. But God overrules it for the good of believers.

2. Temptation

a) It makes us prayerfulTemptation drives us to God in prayer. When an animal sees a hunter, he runs for safety. When a believer sees the devil coming with temptation, he should flee into the presence of God that God might overrule it.b) It devastates our prideWhen you struggle with sin and temptation, you see who you really are and realize you have no reason to be proud of yourself. You find out how weak you really are.c) It enables us to help othersSatan tempted our Lord three times in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). God recorded that event to show us how Christ handled Satan's attacks. Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "We have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Because Christ experienced temptation, He understands what we go through and is therefore able to help us in our struggles. That enables us to help others in their struggles.d) It makes us depend on ChristWhen we struggle with temptation, we are forced to lean on the strength of Christ. That's similar to running into God's presence. The apostle Paul lived in utter dependence on Christ's strength (Phil 4:13).e) It makes us desire heavenHave you ever wanted to get away from the world? I'm sure you have--especially when you struggle with temptation. Like Paul you may cry out, "The good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.... Oh, wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:19, 24). At times like that you'll long for heaven and glory, saying with Paul, "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.... I am in a strait between two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:21, 23).

3. Sin

Romans 8:28 declares that "all things work together for good," and that includes sin. No matter what happens to us as Christians, God will ultimately work out for our good. Now that doesn't lessen the ugliness of sin or the beauty of holiness. Sin deserves eternal hell. But God in His greatness overrules it for the believer's good.

a) The sins of othersWhen we see sin in other people, we sense a holy indigence against it. That leads us to be stronger in our opposition to sin, as does seeing what sin does to other people. I also become more thankful for the sins the Lord has delivered me from.b) Our own sinsGod is so powerful that He overrules the sins we commit. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not that the Christian doesn't sin, but that ultimately his sin and the consequences of his sin are eliminated. In the interim, however, the Christian will experience temporary chastisement from the heavenly Father. Because Christ already paid the penalty for our sin, God overrules the ultimate consequence of damnation (Rom. 6:23).Our sins work for our good by making us look to glory. As we studied earlier, our sinful flesh groans for the day of its redemption (Rom. 8:23). When we recognize sin in us, we cry out for deliverance. Another thing we do is run to God to confess our

sin and repent of it. That brings us into communion with Him.

CONCLUSION

All things work together for our good because of what God teaches us through them. That good is not just temporal but eternal. All the attacks we receive from hell and all the mistakes we make can never alter the ultimate glory that is ours in Christ. Romans 8:29-30 says, "Whom [God] did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Our salvation is a sure thing!

All things work out for the believer's good because God has predetermined that to happen. We who were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world will become like Jesus Christ no matter what. God doesn't merely promise that temporal good will come out of difficult situations; He also affirms that all the bad things of this world can't keep us from glorification and heaven. What a great truth!

Focusing on the Facts

1. Is there any limit on the wonderful promise in Romans 8:28? How do we know?
2. What is significant about Paul's use of agathon in Romans 8:28?
3. Does the working out of everything for our good happen automatically? Explain.
4. Give some examples of how God's power worked out for the good of His children.
5. What are some promises from God that work out for our good?
6. Can bad things be good? Explain.
7. Why do believers suffer? What can we learn through suffering?
8. How did Joseph's suffering turn out for his good and the good of those around him?
9. What effect did suffering have on King Manasseh of Judah (2 Chron. 33:12)?
10. List and explain the ways that we can benefit from suffering.
11. What did the author of Psalm 119 say about suffering (vv. 67, 71, 75)?
12. How can temptation work out for our good?
13. How do we know Jesus is able to help us when we are tempted (Heb. 4:15-16)?
14. How can the sins of other people work for our own good?
15. How can our sins work for our good?

Pondering the Principles

1. Paul knew God would always work things out for the good of His people because he knew how God had dealt with Israel in the past. Read Joshua 24:1-15 and Nehemiah 9:7-32. What evidence do you see of God's care for the Israelites? What difficult circumstances has God worked out for your good that show His care for you? How did He use the suffering you endured for your benefit? Thank God for all the good and bad things you know of that have worked out for your good. Praise Him for working out those things for your good in the future.
2. Read Deuteronomy 6:10-13. Are you in prosperous circumstances now that could distract you from seeking God wholeheartedly? Think about all the things that frequently occupy your mind. Are any of them taking up more time than they should? How much of your time is devoted to communing with God and studying His Word? Don't wait for difficult circumstances to arise before you run to God for help; seek Him constantly. Instead of becoming complacent when things are going well, praise God for all the blessings He has bestowed on you.
3. When you are tempted, what is your usual response? Do you think God is pleased with how you handle temptation? Review the section on the reasons that temptation works out for our good (see pp. 9-10). Are all those elements present in your response to temptation? Try to think of specific examples of when you responded in one or more of those ways to a temptation. What effect did your

responses have on your relationship with God? On your growth as a Christian? Looking back at what has happened in your life when you have been tempted, can you wholeheartedly thank God for how He has worked out things for your good? Don't ever become discouraged when you are tempted; rather, look for how you can benefit from your situation. Thank the Lord that all things truly do "work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28).

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