All Things for Good

Romans 8:28

Intro: Purposeless Pain

What makes suffering difficult? Surely the main reason is just the sheer pain of it. It hurts! But there's another reason. It's not merely the pain itself; it's the apparent *meaninglessness* of the pain. It feels like a waste.

Many of you know that I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was five (it felt more like three, because that's when they separated). I have ONE memory of parents together. 99% of what I knew was separation.

Me and my siblings alternated weeknights and weekends between mom and dad's houses. A lot of back-and-forth. I was often bitter.

I remember, in my childlike simplicity, asking my dad, "Can't you and mom get married again?" And I suggested that my stepdad could just sleep on the couch. It hurt not only because of the loss I felt, but because it the purposelessness I felt.

Is there really purpose to our suffering? That's the natural question most ask when they're in it. And that's why Romans 8:28 has been one of the most comforting/reassuring/run-to promises God has ever given. "All things work together for good." John Stott says, "Romans 8:28…has been likened to a pillow on which to rest our weary heads." (Stott, 246)

You weary of all you're going through? Romans 8:28 is what you need for rest. It's the pillow for your soul. Don't brush it off. Don't say, "Yeah, yeah…I know God works all for good, but…" Don't do that! This is what you need!

No doubt, it's been misused by well-meaning Christians to downplay the pain of suffering, like, "I know you're going through a hard time, but hey, God works all things together for good." This verse is not meant to downplay suffering. It's meant to undergird with real purpose.

We're gonna spend the whole time on this one verse because it deserves that much attention. So let's pick apart every single phrase and find comfort in our suffering.

Phrase #1: "We Know" **[v28a]**
Verse 28 begins with the word "And," which means Paul is giving us another reason why we can endure suffering. That's what the context of Romans 8 is about! He's already given two reasons why we can endure suffering: 1) We have a hope of future glory when all the suffering will go away (vv18-25), and 2) We have the present help of the HS who is praying for us in the midst of our suffering (vv26-27).

And now he provides a third reason why we can endure suffering, and it's this: "WE KNOW all things work together for good." Do you KNOW it? Do you really KNOW that God works all things for good…because there's A LOT we don't know when we're in the thick of suffering.

We don't know all the specific reasons why we're going through what we're going through. That's why Paul said in v26 that there are times when we don't even know what to pray because we're so confused and distraught and aimless and at a loss. Confusion and unclarity are close companions of suffering.

So, it is VITAL that we cling to what we KNOW. When you don't know anything else, know this: "All things are working for good…" For whom?

Phrase #2: "For those who love God" **[v28b]**
The phrase "for those" is mentioned twice in this verse. It indicates specificity. The promise that all things work for good is NOT given to everyone. The working of all for good is a promise for a specific people. Whom? Notice two descriptions.

First, it's for *those who love God*. Another way to say it: This promise is NOT for those who DO NOT love God. All things do NOT work together for those who do NOT love God. Only those who love God benefit from this promise. So the natural question is: *Do you love God?*

The question is NOT: Do you believe he exists? Do you believe in a higher power? Do you believe in a Creator? It's *not even*: Do you believe everything in the Bible is true about God? The question is: Do you LOVE him?

Now, we gotta be careful here. Paul is not using this phrase as some kind of condition you must

meet for this promise to work. Like, “All things will work together for my good as long as I love God *enough*. And if my love for God is weak/frail, then things will be bad.”

If that was his point, then this promise would be TOTALLY empty, because NONE OF US love God like we ought. The point is NOT that this promise is effective when *people in general* have a certain amount of love for God at any given time. *The purpose of this phrase is simply to provide a description of the* ***category of people*** *to whom this promise is given.*

“Those who love God.” In other words, *Christians* love God! Of course, not perfectly! That’s got nothing to do with what he’s saying. It’s simply a description of the Christian. If you are a Christian, then you love God.

So when I ask, “Do you love God?” I’m asking, “Are you a Christian?” Because one key evidence of being a Christian is that you love God. You have any longing for his Word. You want to know him more. His holiness, his perfection, his goodness, his glory brings you delight.

If you don't love God, then you're not a Christian …because Christians love God. [**Appeal to non-Christian:** If you know you don't love God, then would you consider his love for sinners like you? **GOSPEL.** Christians love God only because he first loved them.]

So the point Paul is making is that this promise of all things working for good is specifically for Christians. We know that because of the next descriptive phrase whom this promise is for…

Phrase #3: "For those who are called" **[v28f]**
Who loves God? Those called by God. What does that mean? According to the context of this passage and the way this word is used in Romans, it CAN'T mean: a generic kind of calling that has no real effect. **[v30]**

Notice, each point of our salvation *necessarily leads* to the next. There's no break in the chain link here. If you're *predestined*, you're *called*. If you're *called*, your *justified*. If you're *justified*, you'll be *glorified*. Therefore, *called* is effectual, which means, the reason you believed in Jesus and were justified is because God CALLED you!

Now, why is this important? How does the description of you as *called* by God bolster your confidence in the promise that all things work together for your good? Think of it like this: If God powerfully awakened you from spiritual death and effectually overcame your willful rebellion to him when he called you to himself, don't you think he has the power to work all things for your good? That's the point of…

Phrase #4: "According to his purpose" **[v28]**
God has a PURPOSE for those he *called*. What is it? It's what he goes onto say in **[v29, "For"]** There's the purpose: Being conformed to the image of Jesus! Which means, your holiness!

The purpose of our suffering is to make us look more like Jesus. That may not sound satisfactory, but it is what you most need. What you most need is NOT comfort, ease, worldly pleasure. What we most need is to look like Christ.

God is working ALL THINGS according to that purpose, which takes us to…

Phrase #5: "All things"

Now we're getting into the heart of the promise. What does "all things" include? It includes (catch this) ALL THINGS. Not *most things* and certainly not *some things*. ALL THINGS.

There is not one thing that' happened in your life…from the smallest, most insignificant event —like the drop of a crumb from your plate—TO the greatest trauma or loss you experienced— like the death of a loved one or the abuse at the hands of wicked people…

There is not one thing that has happened in your life that God is not working for your good, if you're a Christian. ALL THINGS for good. Listen to what that includes: **[vv35-39]**

"WHY? Why are you so convinced of that, Paul?" Because God is working ALL OF THESE THINGS— tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword—ALL THINGS… including the bad things, for our good. That's why you will never be separated from the love of God in Christ—GOD IS WORKING for that NOT to happen. And that leads to…

***Phrase #6: "Work together"* [v28]**
How is it that all things *work together*? Does it just happen? Is it just fate? Are we trusting in chance? Now, some of your translations might say, "GOD causes all things to work together." And though the phrase "God causes" is not in this verse, that is SURELY the point Paul is making. Are we really to believe that all things *on their own* just so happen to work for good?

Of course not! Here's how Spurgeon put it:
*"There is [a] difference between fate and providence. Fate is blind; providence has eyes. Fate…is just an arrow shot from a bow, that must fly onward, but [has] no target. [But with] providence...There is a design in every thing…all things are working together; and working together for good. They are not done [merely] because they must be done, but they are done because there is some reason for it….God [has] not arbitrarily marked out the world's history; he had an eye to the great architecture of perfection...."(*Spurgeon, "Providence," 378)

In other words, *stuff doesn't just happen*. There is design in it because God is behind it.

Ephesians 1:11 puts it like this: *"God works all things according to the counsel of his will."* He works! It's a proactive working. He doesn't TRY to work with the cards he's been dealt, like, "Ok, this is what I got. Let me figure out what to do with this! Let me try to make good come from this—*lemons into lemonade*."

God doesn't have his hands tied behind his back when things go bad, and THEN he *starts* working to bring something good out of it. NO! This text says, he IS working—present active indicative—which means he's currently working and continually working!

Oh that would have a bigger view of the providence of almighty God! What a difference it would make in our suffering!

Do you view God as passive/helpless/out of control in SOME THINGS, yet he works with what he's got? If so, what makes you think he's powerful enough to bring good out of it, if his hands were tied in the first place?

Now, we must admit, a God who works all things according to his purpose would be very scary were it not for the final phrase…

Phrase #7: "For good" **[v28]**
This phrase is the key to comfort in this promise. A sovereign God who is not good would be terrible! And, a good God who is not sovereign, would be terrible! But a God who is both good and sovereignly working, is comforting.

Yet, sometimes our experience seems to contradict that truth. Things don't look good! They look bad! They can look so bad, we might think there's NO WAY any good can come out of it! Isn't that how it feels at times?

Some of you have been through some horrific stuff. Some of you are going through it now. Some of you WILL go through it at some point. And you'll be tempted to believe the lie that either God is *NOT working at all*—he's hands off because he doesn't care—OR he's working for your BAD. If so, you'll be mad at him and you're certainly not gonna trust him. It feels too vulnerable.

That's why this promise is in the Bible. And that's why the fight is to KNOW/BELIEVE this promise, even when you can't see it in your experience.

The Story of Joseph, Jesus, Mine, and Yours
Remember story of Joseph in Genesis? He was sold into slavery by his own brothers. He was exiled to Egypt, away from his family and homeland for 20yrs. Much of that time was spent as a slave, until he was falsely accused of assault by Potiphar's wife, and thrown into jail for 2years! Horrible injustice done to him!

What was Joseph's view of all it? Was it just a series of unfortunate events? Maybe he believed God was out of control in his suffering, and had to work with the cards he'd been dealt—make some lemonade out of the lemons of his life?

Listen to what he says in Gen. 50:20 to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, [brothers,] you meant EVIL against me, but God meant IT [the evil of his brothers] for good." Notice he does not say, "God USED it for good." It says, "He MEANT it for good."

When Joseph's brothers were working evil against him, God was working at a deeper level, in and through their working, to bring good from it. It was a global good. The whole known world came to Egypt for food during the famine, after Joseph was put in charge. And he would not have been put in charge had his brothers not sold him into slavery.

Moreover, the Jewish people would've died off. Why is that important? It was through the nation of Israel that the Messiah would come! Joseph endured such suffering so that, many centuries later, Jesus would come to save the world!

The story of Joseph is the story of Jesus. Even in Jesus' coming, he experienced absolute horrific evil done at the hands of horrible people with horrible motives. But what does the Bible say? Acts 4:27, "…gathered together against…Jesus [was] both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever [God's] hand and plan had predestined to take place."

Beneath their working, God was working. God did not simple *use* the lemons of Herod and Pontious Pilate that he was given to do his best to make the lemonade of salvation! The cross was not an accident! It was God's plan from the beginning, that he worked for our eternal good.

I shared my story about of the difficulties of growing up in a broken home. And at the time, I couldn't see how good could come from it. But you know what happened? Through the brokenness of my own home, the Lord put in my heart a desire to help broken marriages.

When I was a senior in HS, I wanted to be a professional marriage counselor. Then in college, I started to see how much the Bible emphasizes the local church, and so I thought I would get trained in counseling so I could do it as a ministry of the church. Then in seminary I got exposed to the power of preaching, and I saw the unique opportunity of proclaiming God's word, and I thought, "I wanna do that too!"

So I got to serve in a church for 8years, doing counseling and preaching and pastoring.

And then 8 years ago, Kinney Avenue called me to be their Lead Pastor. Moral of the story, I can say without a doubt in my mind, that I would not be standing here before you as your pastor, heralding the glories of the truth that God works all things for good…had I not come from a broken home…because God was working IN that to bring me to where I am today.

I'm not saying this about me! This is about GOD! This is what he does! He works good for his people. And therefore, if you're a Christian, this is your story too.

Look back on your life. Look back on your sufferings. Do you see God's work? Many of you see it! Some of you still don't. So we gotta cling to what we know…

"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Let that be the pillow upon which you find rest for your weary soul in suffering.

[Pray—*Behold Our God*]