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Teaching: Carlon Tschetter
Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: What We Know

Transcribed Message
June 13, 2021
Romans 8:28

It has been said that over time people begin to look like their pets. Or is it that maybe pets begin to look like people? I think it's probably true mainly of dogs. I don't know if it's true of other pets but I think there could be something to it in terms of how dogs might start looking like people or maybe people start looking like dogs. The principle behind this is you begin to look like people that you spend time with. That's why Proverbs, at least in part, warns us about the friends that we keep. That's why parents are diligent in praying for and encouraging their children with regard to friendships. We understand this principle that the more time we spend with someone the more we begin to look like them.

I think that principle is really in play here in Romans 8:28. I think in Romans 8:28 this statement is best understood in light of the statement in verse 29 when he talks about God's purpose being to conform us into the image of His Son. The more time we spend in the presence of our Lord, the more time we cultivate that friendship and that relationship, the more like Christ we become. Verse 28 I would suggest is best understood in light of verse 29 and God's eternal purpose. God's eternal purpose we are told is in fact to make us more like Christ. Just think about that for a minute. God's eternal purpose in our lives is to ultimately conform us into the image and likeness of His very own Son. This morning our look at this verse is going to reveal to us that God is at work in every circumstance and in every situation to accomplish His divine purpose which is to make us more like Christ.

We've been out of Romans for a couple of weeks. Lowell did a great job in Judges and so we come back and we look at the context by way of review. The preceding context. When I talk about the preceding context, this time I'm talking about all 27 verses of chapter 8. To understand what's going on in verse 28 we're going to tie it all back to the rest of the verses in the 8th chapter. I will give you four words to do that.

The first word is the word righteousness. Righteousness. It is taken from the very first verse of this chapter. There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ. That verse tells us because we're clothed in the righteousness of Christ we're on our best day no closer to Christ, and on our worst day we're no farther from Christ because every day we're clothed in the righteousness of God's Son. That's the promise that he makes to us.

Secondly, the word Holy Spirit. I'm counting that as one word. Holy Spirit. This is a chapter about the Holy Spirit. This 8th chapter of Romans is the Holy Spirit chapter. There's more about the Holy Spirit in the 8th chapter of Romans than any other chapter in the Bible. You're going to make note of that because that's going to be on the final exam. I'm telling you right now.

The third word is adoption. Adoption. J.I. Packer says this is the high point of theology in the New Testament. The idea that God adopts us into His family. All the things that God does in redemption culminate in this adoption of His children into His family.

Then that unwelcome word that really has occupied much of our attention for these weeks in the 8th chapter is this word suffering. It all began back in verse 17 and what I want you to remember is when he does that in that 17th verse and he brings us into this picture where he's developing for us this doctrine of suffering, one of the principal things to remember is Paul is constantly encouraging us to look to the future, to look ahead. In fact, a look so far into the future that we look all the way into eternity and we see the glory of heaven and we walk through the doctrine of suffering undergirded by what we know is yet to come. That's one of the great things that he does in this chapter.

The other thing I want you to see by way of review is both the connection and the contrast that is going to unfold in this verse that is before us this morning. Verse 28 begins with the word "and". And. When we come to the 28th verse the very first thing Paul does is he wants us to look back to what we just did. He wants us to look back to 27 previous verses in this 8th chapter because it's all going to be tied together. He does that by starting off this 28th verse with the word "and".

Then the contrast is what he says next. And we know. The contrast between what we know and what we don't know. remember in our last study in the 26th verse when he was talking about the ministry of the Holy Spirit he says and we don't know. We don't know what to pray, so the Holy Spirit comes and He prays and intercedes for us. That was "we don't know". Now verse 28. And we know. What is it that we know? Let's look at that.

What we know is all about the purpose and the plan of God. What we know has to do with the purpose and the plan of God. I want to start off before we jump into this verse. I want to start off by suggesting to you what this verse is not teaching, what this verse is not saying. I want to put out a few things to help guide us in this process of understanding this 28th verse. The first thing I would say. This verse is not saying that God is going to remove the suffering. That's not the promise of verse 28. When he talks about what God is doing by way of this good work, the promise is not that He is going to lift us out of suffering. if we just have enough faith, we aren't going to be suffering. If we're just living right, obviously we're not suffering. And if we're not suffering, we must be living right. That's not at all what this verse is teaching.

Secondly, this verse is not the first thing you share when someone is suffering. Now listen carefully to this. I think so many well-intentioned people are quick to quote Romans 8:28 when they step into a circumstance with a friend or associate or somebody who they know is in a point of suffering and hardship. As we're going to see, there is a great truth and great comfort in this verse but I would just personally encourage you this is not the go-to verse to step into when somebody is walking through a dark time in their life. I remember 40 years ago. It was a pastoral ministry practicum and the professor was sitting there with a few of us. He was just walking us through scenarios that he thought at some point someday we might face in pastoral ministry. One of the scenarios that he threw out was something along the lines of you're in a hospital room or in some situation in which a family has found out some very tragic, very hard news. He threw it out there and then he asked what might we might say to them. I remember one guy immediately piped up and said I'd quote Romans 8:28. The professor very graciously, very kindly said I would suggest you not. We don't know what God is doing in all the particulars of those situations. There is probably at that point a

greater need for your presence than there is for your words. Just store that away for whatever it's worth. I don't think Romans 8:28 is the go-to verse that we put out there to somebody that is walking through this immediately challenging time.

Thirdly, I certainly don't think that he's telling us to deny our suffering. Paul is not a sentimentalist. This man knew hardship. This man knew suffering. This man knew difficulty. He's not saying to us to just pretend. He's not calling us to deny. In fact, he's the one in 1 Thessalonians 4 that says to us that we sorrow. We cry. We're heartbroken. But we don't sorrow as those who have no hope. He is speaking truth into our lives and not asking us to deny the very existence of what may be happening.

With that in mind, let's look at what this verse is in fact teaching. I just want to underscore four important lessons that I think we can draw out of Romans 8:28. The first one is there is truth to know. There is truth to know. The very first thing we should see is we can know this for sure. That's the way he starts off. And we know. The word that he chooses here in the Greek for this word "know" is not a word that is related to experience, although we can know many things by experience that are helpful. But this is much more of a word that speaks to a knowledge gained. We're going to see how that knowledge is gained, but he's pressing into the fact that we can know and we can know something for sure.

I'm right at the front end of this going to say I'm so glad that Paul didn't start off and say we sure hope. Or I sure wish. Or I feel that this might be the case. There's a huge difference in all of those things and being able to say we know. There's a huge difference between saying I feel like this is what's happening and being able to say we know, especially when we're going through hardship, especially as we're developing this doctrine of suffering because it is at that point that oftentimes our feelings betray us. It is at those points that we often feel that God doesn't love us. It's at those points that we're not so sure that God is with us. It's at those points that we're not so sure God is in control of what's happening. How good is it for us to realize that our feelings can in fact deceive us. Feelings are okay. They're good. God has given them to us, but there's always that balance because they can in fact deceive us. Paul's not starting off this amazing 28th verse by giving us his personal opinion. He is telling us we know these things to be true.

Now notice this. Because God said so. Because God said so. Deuteronomy 29:29 is one of my favorite verses in the Old Testament. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that He has revealed belong to us and to our children for ever so that we may obey the things in the law." That is a verse worth memorizing. The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed belong to us and to our children. Why do you suppose Moses says they belong to us and to our children? Surely he means that we're teaching them to our children. They belong to us and we're teaching them to our children so that we can walk in obedience to these things. This astonishing affirmation that Paul makes in Romans 8:28 is an affirmation of God's revelation to us. The Holy Spirit of God revealed this to the apostle Paul for the express purpose of reporting it in His Word so that we today, this morning could be undergirded and affirmed in this astonishing statement that starts off the 28th verse that says this is one thing that we can absolutely be confident in. We can know this for sure. This comes from God Himself. This isn't my personal opinion. This isn't something I'm wishing for or hoping for. No, he says this is what we know because God said so.

Listen. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Do you see, my friends, why it is so important that as a child of God you are in the Word of God every day? I hope this isn't your only meal, because if it is your only meal out of seven days you're in starvation mode. God has given us this Word to affirm and give us hope in the midst of these things that come into our life. How vital it is that we be in God's Word every day. This is why we read it. This is why we memorize it. This is why we meditate on it so that with Paul we can say we know. We know this to be true because God has said so. There is truth to know. He's going to tell us what this truth is.

The next thing he says. This truth that we know is secondly God is at work. God is at work. What I want you to see is that God is the subject of verse 28. God is the central focus of this verse. It's not me. It's not you. It's not the circumstance that we find ourselves in. It's God who is the focal point God, who is the center of this truth that we know. He is the one who is always working. He is working at the beginning. He's

working at the end. He is working all the way in between. God is the one who is at work. He is ceaselessly, energetically, purposefully at work. God is in control.

God is at work. and what He is doing secondly, Paul says, God is working for good. God is working for good. When you hear that statement what do you want to ask? God is working for good. I want to raise my hand and ask: What is meant by good? God is working and He is working for good. I want to say two things about that but then Paul is going to develop this as we go along.

The first thing I want you to see is that this promise is not that everything will turn out in a way that we think is good. That's not what he is saying here. The promise is not that everything will turn out in a way we think is good. This is not a promise of health, wealth, and prosperity. This is not a promise of good health, success, and happiness and everybody liking me and affirming me. That is not what's going on in this verse. That's not what he's saying here. If that's our thought, we need to disabuse ourselves of that idea because that's not the good thing he is talking about.

I think secondly it certainly is not a promise that only good things happen. It is not a promise that only good things happen. We live in a sinful, fallen world. Terrible things happen every day. Tragic things happen every day. Terrible things happen every day to God's children. I'm sure most of you read that tragic story of a few weeks ago of that mom driving her six-year-old son to school that morning and in an act of road rage senseless tragedy unfolds and someone in the other car, angry at whatever happened, shoots into her car and her six-year-old son is struck and ends up dying hours after. Come to find out that I believe she's a believer, attends a Bible believing church in California. It is just a senseless, tragic circumstance. So he is not saying here that only good things are going to happen to God's people. That's not it at all. The Bible never asks us to pretend that tragedy isn't a tragedy, that hardship isn't a hardship. The Bible doesn't require us to put on some kind of plastic banana smile and act as if everything is okay when inside we're being torn apart. That is not what the Bible asks us to do. That's not the center truth of this verse. The pain is real and God never asked us to pretend that it isn't. He never suggested if we have just enough faith it'll go away, again if we're just living right that we wouldn't be experiencing this. That's not what the Bible teaches. He is saying that we can know this truth that God is at work. How and what exactly He

may be doing in any given circumstance from our earthly perspective it's often impossible to tell.

To what end is he working? He tells us to the end that it would be for our good. Now we're going to see in a little bit with that looks like. But here's the next thing he says. God works all things together for good. It's not enough for Paul to say God works for good, but he adds now God works all things together for good. Again, we might want to raise our hand in Pauline Romans class and say Paul, all things? That sounds way too broad. That sounds too open ended to include everything in this category.

Notice first of all that this is a comprehensive promise. There are no qualifiers to that statement. There are no limits. He doesn't say God works in some things. God works in a lot of things. God is working in almost everything. No, he said God works in all things. If you've been with us, as we said at the beginning back in verse 17, this litany of verses begins and speaks of suffering and the hard things of life and the corruption of sin and the groaning of all of that. Then you come to verse 28 and right in the middle of all that, he says all things work together for good.

Paul, what about bad things that aren't even my fault? God is at work. Paul, what about bad things that are my fault? God is at work. What about the things that I don't have any control over? God is at work. What about the things that I do have control over? God is at work. What about the sinful choices that other people make that greatly impact my life? God is at work. What about the sinful choices, Paul, that I have made, the foolish things that I have done? God is at work. This is a comprehensive statement. Paul would likely say at some point would you please go back and read the verse because it says all things. All things means all things.

When I look at that, behind that comprehensive promise I believe is the doctrine of divine providence. The doctrine of divine providence was defined in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 in answering the question: What do you understand by the providence of God? This is the answer that was given: "Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God by which He upholds with his hand heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them, leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty. All things in fact come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand." I love the doctrine of the providence of God so

much that I do not allow the word “luck” to be used in my presence. Those of you that know me have been corrected perhaps in some experience, and some of you say that word just to see if I will react and you know I will. That's what God is saying here. All of these things.

A few weeks back we mentioned Joseph. The providence of God in the life of Joseph is probably the supreme example of this doctrine. We step back into Joseph's life and we say Paul, when Jacob was treating Joseph with such favoritism that it was isolating him from his brothers, was God in that? Yes, He was. What about when out of a spirit of hatred and jealousy his brothers sold him to slave traders and they take them to Egypt, was God in that? Yes, He was. Was God in the fact that he got bought by Potiphar and in Potiphar's home there was going to be a woman who was going to seduce him and falsely accuse him of rape and have him sent to prison for what could've been a life term? Yes, God was in that too. All of it. All of it. God was in all of it.

What about Job? Job wakes up one morning, a man walking with God, a man as righteous as any man in the Old Testament, a man whom God had prospered. He wakes up in one day and he gets news within minutes of each setting in which all of his possessions, all of his livestock, and all of his servants have been killed or captured. No sooner does he process that than he receives word that a tornado or some kind of cataclysmic natural weather event has knocked down the home in which all of his children and perhaps grandchildren had gathered and all of them had perished. God, are you in that? If that were not enough, then we know the story. His own health is taken to the bottom of whatever could be experienced and even his wife is encouraging him to curse God and die. God, is that part of all of these things? Yes, it is.

What about Daniel, the young teenager 13 or 14 years old? God, were You there when the Babylonians came and wrenched him from his parents and his siblings and carried him off to Babylon 1600 miles away? All these things. What about Peter? Peter, a man boasting of all the disciples he was the most trustworthy, he was the most courageous, he was the least likely to ever leave Jesus's side. What about the fact that Peter denies the Lord three times, plunging him into self-hatred and depression. God, were you around with that was happening? In all things.

What about this one? Evil and sin. False accusation. Injustice. Broken relationships. Betrayal. Pain. Hatred. Jealousy. Abandonment. Death. Jesus experienced all that in that last night. And you know what the Holy Spirit told Peter to say in Acts chapter 2 about that? "Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst as you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." That's the providence of God. God in the secret things that we do not know, in the mystery of His divine sovereignty can take even the acts of sinful men and women and somehow in His divine purposes He can weave those things for good. I wonder if in heaven after all these shouts, exclamations of praise and worship and adoration, if there aren't going to be more than a few statements of just – wow. I never saw that. I never imagined that. I never could have seen that because God is doing this work for good in all things at all times.

Now there is a very important third truth here. Everything we've said at this point has kind of had a universal emphasis, but here now we come to a condition. Here now we come to a limitation. This third thing that we see is that God is at work for good to those who love Him. God is at work for good to those who love Him. This promise, listen carefully, this promise then does not apply to everybody. This promise is not given *carte blanche* to everyone. There is a limitation here. It is limited to those who love Him.

The first thing you want to notice is this is used only here. This statement that Paul makes. It is the only time in all of the book of Romans that he talks about our love for God. Isn't that interesting that in 16 chapters of the book of Romans one time and only one time does Paul talk about our love for God. He talks often about God's love for us, doesn't he? Romans 5:5, Romans 5:8, Romans 8:35, 37, 39 reminding us of God's love for us, but this is the only time that he speaks about our love for God. John of course tells us in his epistle that we love Him because what He first loved us. We know that to be the case. It's almost to me as if Paul knows the fickleness of my heart that he doesn't just leave it at this. he doesn't just say this promise is conditioned for those who love God because what I might find myself doing immediately is to wonder: Boy, I sure

hope I love God enough. I don't feel like I've loved God today the way I should. I don't even know if I love Him at all.

We begin to allow the fickleness of our own mind and heart to take us places that we shouldn't be going and so Paul says it's not just to those who love God, but it is to those who are called. To those who are called. Our love for God might very well be the subjective side of this picture, and God calling us is the objective side. It's what Paul says back in Romans 1. Remember way back in verse 5: "...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ to all those in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be saints Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ to those who love God..." listen. "...to those who love God and to those who are called." They're one and the same. They're one and the same.

God's effectual call is what is in view. It is the call of the Holy Spirit. We're going to see this developed further in weeks to come, but this is talking about the inward call of God's Spirit. John 1:12, right? John says, "But as many as have received Him [that is Jesus] to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe on His name." That's how you respond to the call of God. If you're sitting here this morning wondering I don't know if I've been called or not. Do you want to know for sure that you've been called? Just apply John 1:12. But as many as received Him to them He gave the right, the power, the opportunity to become children of God, even to those who believe on His name. If you believe on His name, you're called of God. Those who love God, to those who are called according to His name.

Now here is the last truth of this verse. God is working. God is working for good. God is working for good in all things. God is working for good in all things to those who love Him. Now look at this last thing. There is an ultimate purpose to it all. There is an ultimate purpose. The good of verse 28 comes into greater view in verse 29: "For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son." The good is the ultimate purpose of our being conformed to the image of His Son. In all of these things in which God is working, all of the things in which He is working for good, the good that is in view is revealed in this 29th verse and it is that ultimately God is using

all of these things and is orchestrating all of these events for the good of our becoming more into the image and likeness of His Son. There is no higher good. There is no greater purpose than to be made into the image and likeness of the very Son of God. That is what is in view ultimately in this 28th verse. God is at work making you as a child of God and me as a child of God more into the image and likeness of His Son.

That makes Joseph's words ring even clearer, doesn't it? You, my brothers, did all of this thinking that it was going to end up being really bad for me. You meant it for evil. God, in the secret things of God, in the unrevealed things of God, intended it all along for good. God is working, my friends. He is working out a grand and glorious purpose that nothing can thwart, that nothing can hinder. The end result of it all is that you and I would be made into the perfect likeness of His Son, Jesus.

What do we take away? We may not know for sure what God is doing. He doesn't tell us those things, does He? But He is at work. He has told us that. The more we look at the end, the better we see the beginning. At the end is the promise of God that Paul is going to rehearse for us in these verses to come that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God. We have this assurance, we have this promise of God doing a good work to make us into the image of His Son.

My friends, if you're not a follower of Christ this morning, if you do not know for sure if you're in the family of God by faith, our invitation to you this morning, my external call to you is that of the gospel. The gospel says I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The gospel says I can't do anything to earn favor and merit before God. I can't do it. He requires perfection and that perfection is found only in His Son. For that to be realized in my life, it is going to take trust. It is going to take faith and I'm going to have to believe that what God has said about His Son Jesus is true and it's enough. If you will believe that this morning, you'll enter into the truth of this promise and you'll be given the gift of eternal life. God will give to you all that He has provided in His Son, the very righteousness of Christ.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, by Your Spirit take these words and seal them to our heart. Father, thank You for the glorious work of Your Spirit in each of our lives. We pray this morning if there is someone within the sound of my voice that has not yet trusted in Christ alone for their salvation that your Holy Spirit would give understanding

and open their hearts and open their minds and open their eyes to this glorious truth and they would simply believe and trust that what Jesus did for them on the cross in the forgiveness of their sins is all that needed to be done, and You will give to us this gift that is life that is everlasting. We thank You. In Jesus's name, amen.