

Romans 8:28

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 June 2015

Preacher: Bruce MacLeod

[0 : 00] Well, this evening we're going to focus in on Romans 8, 28 through 30, and in particular the truth, the promise that's set out in verse 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. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those he predestined, he also called. And those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified.

What a fantastic verse 28 is. 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.

This is one of the great New Testament statements concerning the providence of God, the way in which God governs the world to achieve his purposes. Not so much in a supernatural way, not so much in a miraculous way, but by directing ordinary circumstances and ordinary means and combining them in such a way as he achieves his purposes.

[1 : 38] Well, we're familiar with God's providence for his people collectively. If we think of the story in Genesis concerning Joseph, where at the end of all of those circumstances, and you must have Joseph in the midst of that, must have wondered what was going on, what the purpose of God in all of this was.

And at the end of it, he was able to say to his brothers, it was not you who sent me here, but God. So in a sense, you know, the brothers' action was the, it was about the secondary cause, but the primary cause was God.

God was behind all of this, directing the, and sending, and God decided to send Joseph ahead of time. And having decided to do that, God used his brothers and others in that.

And so at the end, Joseph was able to say to his somewhat worried brothers after the death of his father, you intended to harm me. So that even the brothers at that point had no intention to good towards him at the time they sold him.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. You can think about the story of Esther as well.

[3 : 02] And, you know, this is, this was no sort of William and Kate meeting at university and wandering off into the happiness of wedded bliss. There was a sort of brutality about what was involved in Esther moving into the position of influence with the king.

And yet God used that so that at the time when it was required, she was in that position of influence and such that the plot of Haman was able to be thwarted, and the irony of Haman meeting the fate that he had intended for Mordecai.

So we're familiar with God's providence for his people collectively, just trying to set this passage in a sort of wider, more general context. And perhaps too for God's providence for us individually, since that God has a particular purpose for you.

We sang in Psalm 57, I cry out to God most high, to God who fulfills his purpose for me. And we'll sing later on Psalm 138.

Similar sentiment, similar idea. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. This idea that God equips for the purpose he has for us. And then so moves circumstances that we fulfill that purpose, that we're giving the opportunity.

[4 : 25] I think probably one of the great examples of that in the Old Testament is Moses. Moses and, you know, Pharaoh's intention was to harm the people. And yet through that, Moses was given the best education that he could have been given.

And then when he had grown and he'd had that education, through actually, you know, Moses' lack of wisdom in which he dealt with the situation, he ended up in the wilderness for many years.

And he learned there all the things that were required. So that when the time came for God to take the people out of Egypt, here was a man who had the best education Egypt could give.

And a man who had the knowledge of life in the wilderness and so being ideally equipped. So God has a purpose for us. And I suppose in all of these examples, Joseph and Esther and Moses, God turned bad circumstances into something which produced good.

Well, against that, you know, quite general sense of God's providence, of his directing, of his moving circumstances, we come to this verse 28.

[5 : 44] I see one of the great biblical promises. And Paul, I think, even in the first couple of lines there, first couple of words, is picking this out and emphasizing it, even when he says, and we know, it's almost signposting the importance of this.

And we know. Now, you've probably heard this verse many times before. And there's a danger, isn't there, that when we hear things often and things are familiar, that they can lose their impact.

And so let's go through this tonight and try and pick out some of the detail and the implications and wonder afresh at the extent and the unqualified nature of this promise.

So I really wanted to look at this through, there were three parts, to think, first of all, in general terms, what is the particular good for which God works?

And it's specifically stated to be here for the good of those who love him and who have been called by God according to his purpose. So what is the good?

[6 : 54] Secondly, what did Paul mean by all things? You know, did he really mean what those words appear to mean? All things. He works in all things.

And lastly, go through some, try and get some specific examples drilled right down into the detail. You know, if we can understand what the general good is, let's try and pull out some of the specifics that might be for our encouragement.

So in general terms, what is the good for which God works? Well, I think we find that, I say, in the very next verse. You know, God will have a different purpose for each one of us, but we have one great common purpose, that God has, in the words of verse 29, predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.

Now, it's worth reflecting, or trying to reflect on, what would that actually be like if today we had been conformed completely and totally to the likeness of his Son?

Can you imagine what that might be like? That throughout the day, you would have sort of no inclination whatsoever to sin, no heart that was prone to go astray, no words that were ever unkind, no actions which were ever thoughtless.

[8 : 25] And not only is it the absence of sin, I mean, we probably think about that, but more than that, can you imagine what life would be like if all of your inclinations were always perfectly righteous all of the time?

That your only thoughts were, and attitudes and motives were one of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness? Because that is the promise of God, that one day, one day, he will make us like his Son.

Verse 30 expands on that, as he says, that those he predestined, he also called. Now, we know God has so worked in our hearts and changed our hearts, that we came to a point where we declared and we confessed him as our Lord, and we committed ourselves to seek to honor him imperfectly, you know, for none of us are perfect, but that was the desire of our heart.

He brought us to faith. We come to God because God has made us willing. Of course, just to say, that's the great motivation, isn't it, to fulfill what David was challenging us to do last Sunday evening, to go out and to share our faith without the promise that God changes hearts.

That is not something that we're capable of doing. There's no motivation to do that, but when we know that God calls and God draws to himself, that gives us the confidence and the motivation to reach out to others with the message to which we have in the past ourselves responded.

[10 : 22] So all he called, he also justified. So that God now treats you as if you had the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Now, he knows that we don't, but he treats us as if we already had that character, we were already like Christ. And that's a great message in earlier in Romans, isn't it?

That this righteousness is from God, it's by faith, it's not by our own actions, it's not by our own merits, it's a righteousness of Christ which he credits to us, he treats us as if we were already like Christ.

Those he called, he also justified. Those he justified, he also glorified.

So that God will glorify you one day. One day you will actually be like Christ in perfect righteousness. Difficult as, or strange that may sound as we struggle here and now.

[11 : 32] There's a couple of wonderful verses in Corinthians and in 1 John. 1 Corinthians says exactly the same thing. Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man referring to Adam, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

In 1 John 3, one of my favorite verses, dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known in the sense of what will our heavenly bodies, our spiritual bodies be like.

The detail of that, we don't really know the detail and the full extent of that. But what we know, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure. Demandous assurance that gives us. A sense of security and peace.

Of course, we're sitting in verse 28 in this period, as it were, between our justification and our glorification. Sitting in this period between what God has declared us to be and what God will one day make us.

[12 : 56] And the point of verse 28 is that now God is working in all things to make us increasingly like what he has treated us as being, what he has declared us to be.

Or to put it, as it were, from the other end, God is working in all things to make us increasingly like what one day he has promised that we will be.

In other words, he is working in all things to make us more like the Lord Jesus, to conform us more to the likeness of his Son.

This is the good that's referred to in verse 28. God often blesses us with good health. I had a friend of mine who had an accident and he had to go to hospital to get it checked out.

There were some symptoms that came out of that. And when he was in hospital, they discovered, they did some tests and they discovered that he had a tumour. And as a result of that, they were able to operate and to remove the tumour and he made a full recovery.

[14 : 12] And so the circumstances that started this was such a falling off a ladder. Actually, it was used by God to identify a different problem, identify a different problem from which he was able to get medical help that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

That's not always the case. God doesn't always work all things together that we might have good health. God often blesses us with material prosperity.

Sometimes we may not get a job or a business thing won't work out or exams won't work out or university places may not be what we hope them to be.

And we can look back and say, well actually, that worked out in retrospect for my good because there was something better that God had in mind.

Actually, that's not always the case. And sometimes we can walk through things which are difficult circumstances. but what is always the case is that God works in all circumstances to conform us more and more into the image of the Lord Jesus, the likeness of his Son.

[15 : 37] And because he loves us, he's decided to do that. And because he knows all things, and because he is in all places at once, and because he is all powerful, he is able to do that which he has decided to do.

He's able to put into practice and achieve the purpose that he might conform us more and more into the image of his Son. Now, we see the same promises, not just in this passage, we see that in other scriptures as well.

one of the best love is Philippians chapter 1, verse 6, which says, he who began a good work in you, it's good work of sanctifying us, he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Not that he may continue, but he will continue, and continue that until it's completed again. What an assurance that is in the midst of some of these different circumstances.

So, if that's the good that God works towards his purpose for us, what does Paul mean by in all things? And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him.

[17:04] Well, if you have an ESV rather than an NIV, it puts it in slightly different terms. It says, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. That's a slightly different translation, but it's the same point.

All things don't work together for good accidentally. They work together for good because God is directing them and causing them and moving them and combining different circumstances together. So, what are the in all things? Well, there are good things things that God uses for our good. There are several, the word of God, the reading of that, the meditating upon it, and there are several passages in the scriptures that talk about that.

It could be the song worship as we come and we sing through praise to God. That's a blessing to us. It could be prayer, our own prayers, prayers of others.

It could be other Christians. When we gather together, one of the things that we're called to do is to stir one another up towards love and good deeds.

[18:11] It could be other things, it could be education or job, in fact, it could be a whole range of good things. It seems to me that the all things that Paul has in mind here, just looking at the context, are actually not so much the good things that God uses for our good, but actually things that we would not have chosen for ourselves, things which are, they were bad things.

Verse 18, he says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us, the glory that will be revealed in us, the sense of God attributes and character which one day will be revealed in us.

So the context of this whole passage is starting off with suffering and difficulty. Then in verse 35, Paul is saying, what can separate us from the love of Christ?

There's obviously a concern here about the difficulties that the Romans are going through and you list some of them, trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, a whole range of bad circumstances, circumstances we would never have chosen for himself.

And so in the passages or in the words just immediately prior to verse 28 and immediately after verse 28, these are bad circumstances. So in Paul's referring here to in all things God works for our good, that all things must include the things which are mentioned just before and just after, bad things, things that we would not have chosen for himself.

[19:49] And in fact in verse 37 you'll see where he says, in all these things we are more than conquerors. How can that be? How can we be more than conquerors in the midst of all of this difficulty?

And it's because of this that the great purpose of God is to so change our hearts that more and more we become like Christ to develop us spiritually, to mature us as his people.

The bad things are still bad, but God works in them for your spiritual good. And I'm not saying these things in some way to minimize the pain or the difficulty, but to try and give us a different perspective on them, that it might lift our eyes up out of the detail, the temporal detail that we're in, and into something which is the eternal purposes of God, and things which are of incalculable value, to us.

And to challenge you, as I felt challenged as I've prepared, about how I view these circumstances, and to ask yourself, as I've asked myself, even in the middle of preparing for this, how do I view these circumstances that I come across?

How can I respond to them in a way which is consistent with the purpose for these things that God has declared? I've noted some specific examples, and I wanted to share these with you.

[21:38] Now, these won't be comprehensive, and some of them will overlap, but just to try and get in, drill down into a level of detail. Now, when I talk about these things, I'm in no way minimizing the importance of the Word of God.

Rather, these circumstances, the importance of the Word of God as a means to sanctify us, even as Jesus said, sanctify them by the truth, your Word is truth. But actually, I think the point is that these circumstances give us the opportunity not just to hear the Word of God, but to put it into practice in our daily lives, and the combination of hearing it and having to put it into practice, particularly in difficult circumstances, matures us in a way which we cannot be matured otherwise than merely by hearing it, or merely in good circumstances.

I think it's a great example to think of a desert, you know, where it's just sunny all the time, and there's no rain, and nothing grows.

And, you know, I'm sure like any illustration it's an imperfect one, but sometimes we learn more in the difficult times, in the rain as it were, than we do when it's just sunny all the time.

So, what would be some of the things, what would be some of the examples? Well, God can work in bad things to remind us of his promises, to lead us to rest in his promises.

[23 : 10] I think that's often the testimony of those who have maybe been through illness, for example, the promises of God that I will never leave you or forsake you, some of the promises in the Psalms, can be particularly precious to people who are going through illness or it may be other circumstances.

The comfort, as it were, and the temporal difficulties about God's promises about the here and now, as well as about the promises of the future to come. Secondly, God can work in bad things, in circumstances we would not have chosen ourselves to renew our obedience.

We sang Psalm 119 or part of Psalm 119 verse 67, Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

In fact, verse 71 goes further, it says, It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. Now, sometimes, this may not just be my experience, but sometimes when everything's going well, it's easy to become careless, it's easy to be less attentive, to take our eyes off, to lose, to focus, to start drifting, to maybe forget about our dependence upon God.

And for whatever reason, bad circumstances sometimes remind us of the need for God and brings us back into a clearer focus, even as the psalmist was saying there.

[24 : 50] God can work in bad circumstances to enable us to better understand our own hearts. When things are going well, it's easy to be full of love and joy.

It's easy to be at peace, to be patient. But when things go badly, do we sometimes use words which are unloving words?

When things go badly, is it easy to be anxious rather than to have a sense of peace? Is it easy to, do you see temper flaring up instead of self-control and composure?

Is it easy to be angry instead of gentle? And perhaps sometimes in the midst of those circumstances we learn something about our own hearts which we don't learn when things are going well, when the pressure is on, and in those circumstances we can be humbled by God and God is able to do a work which is deeper in our hearts when everything is going well.

It's a refining process. Everything comes out in the first refining, the first heating of the metal. As it goes again and again you find actually something that looked pure isn't and requires to go through the heating process again to purge more dross out.

[26 : 46] Fourthly, God can work in bad things to increase our desire for heaven. When there is death or mourning or crying or pain, it can give us a longing for the fulfillment of the promise in Revelation 21 that one day all of those things will pass.

There will be no more death or mourning suffering or crying or pain. Fifthly, God can work in bad circumstances to develop our spiritual perseverance, to develop our character.

Early in Romans, Paul says, we also rejoice in our sufferings. It's not always our first reaction to suffering. we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope.

You see the same thing elsewhere in the scriptures in James. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Imagine, you know, the need for wisdom in those circumstances.

[28 : 23] James says, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him.

So bad circumstances can be used by God to develop a sense of perseverance and to develop character. Sixthly, God works in good things to develop a gracious spirit.

If you think about people that irritate you, maybe you don't feel that way towards people, maybe you never have this feel. It's one thing about preaching, you end up and you come and just share all of these things about which you've been convicted yourself.

people who irritate you. What a fantastic opportunity that is to exercise patience and to develop patience in your life.

You can give thanks for people who you find difficult because without them you wouldn't be able to develop that patience. And each time in the face of that you exercise patience.

[29 : 38] You build the heart's capacity under God for patience. Thanks to God for the circumstances in which you're offended because if you're offended, if people do things which are wrong against you, those are all things that God can use as well.

an opportunity to forgive because without that opportunity how do you ever develop a forgiving heart? Now I'm not suggesting that you should be deliberately irritating towards each other, please, you know, but there is a different way of looking at these things which I think is more consistent with verse 28 of Romans 8 than perhaps in truth I often think about.

We want to act graciously so that we can grow in grace and so that in the words of 2 Corinthians where it says, we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed, are being continued, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord which is the spirit, the sense of the maturing, of becoming more like Christ.

Well, seventhly and lastly, God works in bad circumstances, bad things, to develop our capacity to help others. There's a point in 2 Corinthians 1-4, God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Going through difficulties ourselves can give us a greater compassion for those who have gone through similar or other difficulties and an understanding of what they're going through in a way in which if we've never suffered that ourselves, we've never gone through, it's difficult to really understand.

[31 : 59] And so God builds into us through that the capacity to help others. Well, to try and bring some of that together, Romans 8, and in particular this verse 28, means there's a reason that we can give thanks joy in all circumstances, even circumstances we would never have chosen for ourselves.

It means that we can be joyful in all circumstances, not by denying that those circumstances are somehow sad or difficult, but by seeing God's purposes in those, and the way even in the midst of those difficulties, we can say, it is well with my soul.

Romans 8 means that we can be encouraged in all circumstances, because nothing can separate us from the love of God. And sometimes in difficulties, we're sort of tempted to think, well, is God distancing himself from me?

Is this a sign that God is distant? Well, actually, the promise of Romans 8, 28 is, no, it's not that God is distant, but rather he's using those circumstances to draw you closer to himself, that you may, in an increasing measure, be conformed to the likeness of his son.

Romans 8 means that we have a hope and an assurance and a certainty and a security, because there are no circumstances that God cannot use for our good.

[33 : 52] And when we go through all of those things, it's difficult not to end, at the end of chapter 11, with, oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out, who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor, who has ever given to God that God should repay him.

Then verse 36, for from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be the glory forever. Amen.

well, we're going to close with Psalm 138. to me and go into Ph Barns