

God Cannot Waste Our Suffering

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” - Romans 8:28-30

In the familiar words of Romans 8:28, Paul tells us that “for those who love God all things work together for good.” Now, the “good” he specifically has in view here is not just any idea of “good” as we might like to define it, e.g., wealth, prosperity, ease, comfort, health, etc. Rather, the good which God has in store for his children--the good towards which he orchestrates all things in their life--is the “good” of their continual and final conformity to Christ. As Paul says in the following verses: What is this good purpose to which God has called (i.e., summoned; v.28) and predestined us (v.29)? Answer: Conformity to the likeness of Jesus. In other words, God has chosen and sovereignly pre-planned to make us like Jesus--to rescue us from the muck of our sin by rebuilding us to be like Christ. And it’s towards this end, Paul says, that God causes “all things” to coordinate and contribute (v.28).

This is a promise specifically for *believers*. As Paul says, it belongs to “those who love God...” (v.28). And what an amazing promise it is! Think about it: God promises to use every circumstance, every experience, every detail of your life--no exceptions--to the end of making you more and more like Jesus. And as Paul goes on to say, absolutely *nothing* can separate the believer from these loving, saving purposes of God (vv.31-39). If *God* has purposed to do, nothing can revoke His plan. If *He* has saved us in Jesus, nothing can challenge that redemption.

At this point, some of us are probably waiting for the asterisk. “What’s the catch? Where’s the exception?” Most of us have probably had the experience, where maybe we’re out to eat, looking over the specials, and our eyes spot a dish that catches our attention, only then to realize later an asterisk sitting next to it: “This special does not apply to this particular item.” Where’s the asterisk next to Paul’s promise here? Maybe there’s a footnote in my Bible that says, “...except for all the bad stuff that happens.” Maybe Paul’s just speaking in generalities here? “Presumably,” some of us might think, “there are obviously exceptions to this promise. For instance, what about all the suffering we go through? That obviously can’t be for our good.”

But what’s interesting is that when you look at this passage in its broader setting, suffering is hardly an exception to this promise; in fact, it’s the very context, the backdrop, even the *target*--we might say--of this promise (both what precedes - vv.17-18; and what follows - vv.35-39). You see, it wouldn’t mean much if Paul were to say, “all the good stuff works together for good.” Well, duh. No kidding. What’s surprising though, and it seems at

least partly the point of why Paul even goes out of his way to say any of this in this first place, is that God's good, saving purposes (unexpectedly) *include* suffering.

A couple years ago, my wife and I bought our first house. And to my great displeasure, as we were moving in, we discovered that the previous owners had failed to remove a good amount of their junk from the basement. In one room in the basement there were loads of old broken furniture, which proved to be a pain to move out. Most items were too big to fit through the doorway. So I had to disassemble most of it, and carry it out piece by piece, and then find a way to dispose of the massive pile of junk that accumulated. Now I wasn't very happy about all this. I just saw it as a huge waste of my time and energy. Let's just say, I didn't find much of anything redeemable in the situation.

I imagine, however, some of my friends who are more handy and resourceful than myself might have experienced this situation a bit differently. Some of them, in fact, may have been elated and quite grateful for all the material left behind. "Free wood. Furniture that maybe I can restore or resell. Oh, look at this! That could come in handy." For all I know, maybe the original owners thought they were doing me a favor by leaving me all this "junk" behind.

My point: We're not always the most resourceful. And even if you might be resourceful when it comes to finding junk in your basement, you're probably not so in every area of life. Furthermore, consider even those areas where you *are* resourceful. For instance, sometimes when you're cooking, you might make a mistake; but you're still able to salvage things and turn it into something else that's usable. Fine. But even that we still refer to as "making the best out of a bad situation." No matter how good it ends up being, it's still not what you originally had planned.

But remember, *God isn't like us*. God coordinates literally *everything* according to His pre-planned purpose of accomplishing our good (i.e., our continual conformity to Christ). Now if that's true, think about what this means for your suffering. This means, your suffering isn't somehow an exception to his otherwise good plan for your life. No. Rather, even your suffering itself fits within God's purposes for your good. For example, as both Romans 5 and James 1 tell us, we can actually rejoice in our suffering. Why? Because God uses our sufferings as a "furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10) to burn away the impurities and refine our character.

We want to be careful at this point. To be clear, Paul is *not* saying that everything we experience in this life is good *in and of itself*. Sometimes I'm afraid Romans 8:28 can get applied simplistically to people's situation in a way that's insensitive or discounts the very real suffering they've gone through.¹ It's an inaccurate leap when we twist the verse from saying, "God is working all things together *for our good*," into, "Therefore, all things that

¹ The nuance I'm trying to reflect in this paragraph can be particularly important for those who have experienced trauma in their life, where it can be very damaging and hurtful to deny someone the ability to label the evil or tragedy they've experienced as something genuinely evil.

God is working are *in and of themselves good.*” That’s just not true; and it’s not what Romans 8:28 is saying. It’s not as if this verse means we relabel everything that’s bad, and call it “good.” No, we can call evil what it is: evil. It’s unhelpful to do otherwise. In fact, Romans 8:28 assumes that not everything we face will be good in and of itself. That’s actually precisely the point! God works these things for our good *nonetheless, even though* they are bad! As Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 (paraphrase), “What you intended as evil for me, God intended for good.” God took the evil Joseph faced--e.g., being sold into slavery by his brothers, hauled away to a foreign land, falsely accused of rape, imprisoned for years, etc.; and God co-opted it for His good purposes.

In fact, at the very center of our faith, stands this truth’s greatest example: What sinful human beings performed as an act of unspeakable evil, crucifying and killing the very Son of God, God intended all along for good (see Acts 2:23-24; 4:27-28): that through Jesus, like Joseph, many lives would be saved (Gen 50:20) and “all the families of the earth would be blessed” (e.g., Acts 3:25-26; Gal 3:8-9; cf. Gen 12:3). In other words, God’s use of suffering for good is not some mere tangential doctrine within the Christian faith--something you encounter only now and again. Rather, it is at the very heart of the Christian gospel and what it means to believe in Jesus.

Here’s what this means then: All of us have to deal with the problem of suffering’s existence. The “problem of evil” isn’t unique to the Christian. And it’s not even unique to the Christian that believes in God’s sovereignty *over* evil (as I do; as the Bible teaches). I once heard someone remark that they thought it a more comforting idea that God is *not* in control of evil, that it falls outside the scope of His plan and purposes. The idea would be, God certainly cares about our suffering; and so he would do something about it if He could. But He can’t. I don’t find that comforting at all, and I don’t think you should either. What that effectively means then is that evil and our suffering are potentially, even likely, pointless--meaningless. They serve no purpose, in which case I’d frankly just have avoided it altogether. However, if in fact God is in control of my suffering (and He is), this means that none of it is meaningless. *All* of it has purpose.

And the fact that God works *all* things together for my good means that He won’t even let a single ounce of my suffering go to waste in His loving purposes for me. *None* of my suffering is pointless. *None* of it is the mere meaningless pain we thought it was in the moment of our trauma or abuse. *None* of it will be wasted. If I have to go through suffering in this life, I can at least rest assured that He will leverage absolutely all of it for my good. He will use every last drop of it. None of it will go to waste.

Prayer: Father, what a comfort it is to know that nothing I experience in this life is beyond your control or purpose for my good, that whatever suffering and evil I face exists as only on your leash. Help my wounds and past scars to heal under this ointment of believing in your good providence. Father, I anguish from past abuse, trauma, tragedy, even the pain

from my own stupid decisions. My heart and body feels ripped to shreds under its weight. But I know that you see my suffering. It's not hidden from you; nor is it an aberration from your good purposes for my life. Help me experience the relief of knowing that whatever suffering I face is not meaningless; but you will use it for my good. You will not waste my suffering. You will not squander a single ounce of my pain for my good. And I can find consolation in that even in the midst of my tears. Amen.

Reflection questions:

1. Consider: Is there an area in your life where you can find relief by entrusting to God an experience of past suffering, knowing God will use it for your good?
2. Consider any areas where you might be harboring bitterness or emotional scars from past pain or trauma. How does knowing that God will not waste your suffering help you process your pain?
3. Who is someone you can encourage with this truth, that God cannot waste their suffering? How might you best help them see the goodness of this truth while still remaining sensitive to their sorrow?
4. Does this promise cause you to think differently about suffering? If so, how?