

## **SUFFERING AND GOD'S PLAN**

### **A Study on Romans 8:28**

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Why do the righteous suffer? Why do Christians suffer? Why does a God of love and power permit His loved ones to go through anguish here on the earth? These are some of the thorniest questions ever asked of Christians.

Any of us who have been in the place of pain and suffering, or who have watched others go through these times of heartache and anguish, have felt the force of these question come home.

In history, if ever there were a person who suffered, it was the Apostle Paul. He was shipwrecked and left afloat on the sea. He was beaten with rods many times. He was hounded and hungry. He was in prison often. He was beset with an incurable physical infirmity. And he struggled with indwelling sin to the point that he cried out, "Oh, wretched man that I am!" He graduated *magna cum laude* from the school of hard knocks, but he still had a positive outlook towards life.

Paul's secret to enduring and rejoicing in tribulation was that he felt that all his sufferings were part of the plan of God for him. He lived life with a conscious attitude that everything was happening according to God's purpose and everything had a divine design behind it.

#### **GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN SUFFERING — Romans 8:28**

"And." The "and" takes the reader back to the previous context. Paul has been talking about the sufferings of a Christian. These sufferings are not just providential sufferings. Rather, they are suffering because of indwelling sin in the Christian, and the Christian's suffering with Christ as he seeks to reach the world with the good news of the salvation in Christ Jesus. Paul has given two encouragements to those who are struggling with the world, the flesh and the devil, which are: (1) the Christian has the assurance that he will receive a glorified body; and (2) the Christian has the help of the Spirit who is making intercession for him. At this point Paul turns the struggling saint to God's unchangeable, irresistible and invincible purpose to encourage him in the midst of suffering.

This section of Scripture, which has long been a battlefield between Arminian and Calvinistic theologians, was designed by God to be a great comfort for the saints. This section is not for theologians to wrangle over but for saints to rejoice in!

“We know.” This is common experiential knowledge of a situation. The Christian can actually enter into an understanding through faith whereby he realizes that God has a wonderful plan for his life. Paul did not say “we hope” or “we think,” but “we know.” He had absolute assurance that behind all of his sufferings there was a God who was in control of everything.

“That all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” The “all things” in context must refer to spiritual sufferings specifically, but may certainly be widened to refer to all providential suffering and adversity that the Christian experiences. All things in heaven and earth, failures and successes, cheers and heartbreaks, sickness and health, calm and storm, life and death, all work for good to God’s elect and for the glory of the elect’s God. All things work for good to God’s people, not for the world. The unsaved world can never have this confidence and assurance because all things are not working for good for the non-Christian world.

The emphasis in this verse is upon the phrase “those who love God.” It is when Christians are loving God that they are conscious in their daily experience that all things are working for good.

Loving God emphasizes the Christian’s faith and obedience so as to have the subjective experience that he is part of the infinite plan of Almighty God.

Gen. Stonewall Jackson had as his lifetime verse Romans 8:28. He lived in the conscious reality that God was providentially working out all things for good in his life. General Jackson, after serving for several years as the commander of the Army of Virginia in the Confederate Army, was wounded in action by his own troops. In this wound he lost his left arm and a few days later lost his life. In his waning days, he was rejoicing in God’s providence. In a conversation with another officer, he said,

“You see me severely wounded, but not depressed; not unhappy. I believe it has been done according to God’s holy will, and I acquiesce entirely in it. You may think it strange; but you never saw me more perfectly contented than I am today; for I am sure that my Heavenly Father designs this affliction for my good. I am perfectly satisfied that, either in this life, or in that which is to come, I shall discover that what is now regarded as a calamity is a blessing. And if it appears a great calamity, as it will surely be a great inconvenience, to be deprived of my arm, it will result in great blessing. I can wait until God,

in His own time, shall make known to me the object He has in thus afflicting me. But why should I not rather rejoice in it as a blessing, and not look on it as a calamity at all? If it were in my power to replace my arm, I would not dare to do it, unless I could know it was the will of my Heavenly Father.”

A few days after losing his arm, General Jackson had a conversation with a Lt. Smith in which Jackson said, “Many would regard them [his wounds] as a great misfortune, but I regard them as one of the blessings of my life.” Lt. Smith, who was also a Christian, replied, “All things work together for the good of them that love God.” “Yes,” said Jackson, “that’s it, that’s it!”

No one can really rest in God’s purposes until he is convinced that God, in his sovereignty, has a plan for his life.

Those that love God are now further characterized or described as those that are called according to God’s sovereign purpose. This is God’s effectual call to salvation.

“But we preach Christ crucified, unto Jews a stumblingbock, and unto Gentiles foolishness; but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

It is according to God’s purpose.

“Who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal” (2 Tim. 1:9).

Now we are taken behind man’s subjective experience to God’s objective dealings with his children — not looking at man’s attitude but at God’s action. The reason why all things work together for good is because God has a purpose for every child of God. God called the Christian to salvation, and will one day glorify him. Therefore, he surely must be dealing with the child of Gal now in his experience. Nothing happens by chance. Everything that happens has a divine design behind it!

“Death and plagues around me fly,  
Till He bid, I cannot die;  
Not a single shaft can hit,  
Till the God of love sees fit.”

Mr. Roland Binoham, who founded the Sudan Interior Mission, went through great suffering when he first went to Africa. His three companions died there. Mr. Bingham came

home for a short while and he was in an accident in Canada. They carried him unconscious to the hospital. When he came to, the nurse was standing by him and he said, "Where am I?" The nurse said to him, "Mr. Bingham, you have been in a terrible accident. He quickly replied, "There are no accidents with God."

#### THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM — Does the Christian's sin work for good?

When a Christian sins, it is always his fault and God always holds him responsible for every act of sin. The wayward Christian always stands in line for God's discipline when he does sin. Therefore, for the Christian to sin willfully is pure folly and, as far as his present experience is concerned, this sin will never work for good. In his subjective experience, a Christian's sin cannot work for good but can only bring conviction, heartache and in some cases tragedy.

However, in an objective, providential sense God can bring good out from our waywardness according to his purpose. If we did not have this confidence, then we would lose our minds when we did sin because there would be no assurance that God could ever bring us out from a backslidden condition.

Joseph's brothers were exceedingly jealous of Joseph. They conspired against him, and after first plotting his death, sold him into the hands of the Midianites, who took him into Egypt. Not long after he was in Egypt he was thrown into prison for something that was not his fault.

Because God was with Joseph, he was delivered from prison, exalted to be governor of Egypt, and put in charge of all the economy of that land. Joseph, through the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, said a great famine would come on the land and surrounding nations. Egypt stored her grain and, when the famine came, Egypt prospered. This brought Jacob and his sons to Egypt for food where they were protected by Egypt through the kindness of the governor Joseph. Joseph saw that all these happenings were brought by the hand of God:

"And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and there are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a remnant in the earth, and to save you alive by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither but God: and he hath made me a father to

Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Gen. 45:4-8).

God used the evil of the brothers to bring about good for Joseph through Providence. God actually turned evil for good:

“And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Gen. 50:19-20).

Joseph recognized this to be so. This is a case where the evil of the brothers worked for the good of innocent Joseph and we can conceive how this might be possible.

We must also see that even the evil these brothers did ultimately saved their lives, preserved the posterity of the whole nation, and brought the full historical plan of God into its course of accomplishment.

These brothers were punished by the famine for their evil deeds, but God graciously brought this act around for good. Someone may say, “Well, then, let’s sin that good may come!” I am not teaching that men should sin, nor that sin will go unpunished, nor that sin will work for good in a Christian’s present experience. I am saying that in God’s providence He can bring good out of evil if he desires to do so. Paul was often accused of teaching “Let us do evil that good may come” (Rom. 3:8). Paul never taught this, but he did teach that God is sovereign so that nothing happens outside his permissive will, and that God can bring good out of evil.

## CONCLUSION

If this verse teaches anything, it teaches that while we may not comprehend why we must suffer in this life, we can rest back in the sovereign purpose of God and know that all things are working together for good.

As Stonewall Jackson said, “If we do not understand in this lifetime, we will certainly understand in eternity.” Our confidence is in our almighty, sovereign God who does all things well, and according to his purposes.

With our finite, limited and logical minds, we want everything to fall into a pattern now. But life isn’t like that. Often things happen to us for which we have no explanation, and we trust only in God and his plan for our lives.

We often get confused and puzzled about life, and are like a spectator watching a weaver weave a rug, seeing only the back of the rug and not the pattern. As we look at the back side of the rug we see nothing but a tangle of threads that seem to make no sense at all. But when the rug is finished, we step on the other side and there is a beautiful pattern worked out.

Suffering in life often is a maze or labyrinth with apparently no pattern at all. But when we step into God's other world for us, we will look back and see God's perfect pattern for our lives. And weaved on God's rug will be the words, "God loved me and cared for me according to his purpose!"

### CHALLENGE TO UNBELIEVERS

For those outside of Christ, there is nothing that will work together for good. There may be times of prosperity in material things now, but ultimately there is only eternal judgment for those who know not the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Saviour.

But if you will believe in Christ as your personal Saviour, it will be true that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. You can begin to rest upon the fact that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God's sovereign purpose."