



It's All Good
Romans 8:28-30

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"It's All Good"

The 8th Sermon in the series on Biblical Interpretation entitled,
The Most Misused & Misunderstood Verses of the Bible!

If you would turn with me in your bibles to Romans 8, we'll be reading verses 28-30.

28 *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* *29 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. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

So when we hear this verse used, it's usually in the context of suffering, pain, or something like that. So imagine the scene. You find Sarah and I huddled on the couch in the living room crying our eyes out. I manage to poke out that the doctor mentioned that the neurologist had read Nathaniel's EEG and diagnosed him with severe brain damage due to oxygen deprivation during delivery. And so you pull us into a big hug and whisper, "God works all things together for good. He'll be ok." Now, I get that you're well-meaning and trying to say something to comfort us. But there are some significant problems with this approach. So first I want to deal with how we use this verse. Then I want to talk about 2 errors we make that totally blow up the common usage. And then finally I want to talk about how reading this verse properly in its context is far, far better comfort.¹

Well let's dive right in. How do we normally use this verse? What are we saying when the phrase "God works all things together for good" pops out of our mouths? We could mean that God will work it out, that things will turn out for the better. But what does that even mean? What is the

¹ The background and exposition of this text is adapted from the books, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible*, by Dr. Eric Bargerhuff, pages 63-70; *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, by Tim Keller, pages 130-146; *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home*, by Derek Thomas, pages 91-103; *Romans 8-16 For You*, by Tim Keller, pages 41-55.

“better” that we’re talking about? Do we mean that we’re going to be delivered from this particular suffering? Do we mean that we’re going to get something bigger and better? It’s a pretty vague, general “things will get better”. I would bet that most of us would get kind of squeamish about getting specific about what we mean when we say this. Because in reality, most of the time, we use it as a Christian version of “It’ll be ok.” But it’s far more than just saying, “It’ll be ok.” because we’re using Scripture with a clear promise to extend comfort. When we say “It’ll be ok.”, everyone knows that we don’t **actually mean** that. It’s a platitude. No one in their right mind would think that saying “It’ll be ok” to someone who’s just received a cancer diagnosis constitutes saying that they are sure that the only outcome will be positive. Often times the end result is “not ok”. And so, when we use this verse as a stand-in for “it’s ok” as our default comfort, we claim big things. We set the Lord up to do something that He doesn’t promise. In reality, we are setting ourselves up on unbiblical expectations of what the Lord is going to do in our circumstances. Then, when things don’t go the way we want them to, the Lord is a convenient scapegoat, even though we have essentially put words in His mouth.

And so I’ve said that we are essentially putting words in God’s mouth when we use this phrase wrongly. And there are two errors that commonly crop up when using this phrase. **The first error is that we apply it to the wrong people.** We want to ground our words of comfort in something meaningful when talking to our non-Christian friends. We often want to say something more than “I’m so sorry” or “It’ll be ok”. We often want to say something that calls attention to God’s control over circumstances because you want them to see God’s hand at work in their lives and then point them to God when things work out. But this obviously goes against what Paul had in mind. It’s not even a defensible error. It’s quite literally in the verse. **Twice.** “And we know that for those who love God” starts the verse. “For those who are called according to his purpose” ends it. You can’t get away from it. This promise that God will work all things together for good is only **FOR CHRISTIANS.** If I promise Sarah flowers, her sister can’t claim that I promised her flowers too. The promise is not transferable. Sorry.

The second error is that redefine “good”. We tend to think of “good” as better circumstances and the like, but Paul has a very different definition of “good”. The “good” that he is referring to doesn’t deal with circumstances, but deals rather with changing who we are. The Good that God is working toward isn’t our eternal bliss and comfort of life in heaven, but rather conforming us to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. It’s very plainly in verse 29. “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.” Being like Christ is the end. It’s **THE** good that God is working toward. This good, in Paul’s eyes, is far better than better circumstances here in this world. For the deepest desire of a Christian’s heart, whether they know it or not, is to be free from the sin that so easily entangles, to reflect the perfect holiness, righteousness, and glory of their savior. Earlier in Romans 8:22-23, Paul says that “the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Notice that the groaning of Christians is in anticipation of adoption as sons and redemption of our bodies. It is not to enjoy the eternal awesomeness of our circumstances in heaven. It is a distinct difference. Paul craves not the ease and glory of heaven, but rather to be fully one with his savior, to have his whole self redeemed and perfect. We have to be mindful of what God actually promises us. We can’t just reinterpret what He means by “good” however we want. It’d be like promising to get my son a cat, and him turning around and saying that I’ve promised to get him a tiger. A tiger is a kind of cat, but not at all what I meant.

Mistaking what is good is really at the heart of why we misuse this verse. We want to be free of suffering. Who likes to suffer? No one! We are consumed with ease, comfort, and security. Especially in this day and age, we have a million ways to try to escape suffering. We go to great

lengths to avoid hard realities, suffering, and pain. But what did we expect? Did we expect that when we became Christians, we would have preferential treatment from God? Did we expect that when we became Christians, the Lord would then richly bless us with a worry and pain-free life? Jesus had a radically different expectation for how his followers would fare. Jesus said in John 15:20, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'a servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name..." Look, we've been doing this sermon series for 8 weeks now. You're probably waiting for me to say at some point that it's important to consider the whole counsel of God. Well, this is it. It is important to consider the whole counsel of God when interpreting a passage. In John, Jesus expects his followers to be persecuted because he was persecuted. What kind of a savior do we have? We have a risen savior because he first had to die. Think about it. You can't be resurrected unless you first die. I mean come on, there are so many verses about how Jesus would be the suffering servant. You've got Isaiah 53 where Christ is prophesied to be called a man who was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Just a few verses later are the famous words about his being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. If you want NT evidence that being conformed to Christ meant that we would be suffering, you wouldn't have to look farther than the Gospels. But for fun, we could turn to Colossians 1:24 where Paul rejoices in his sufferings because he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, we are called to carry in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. The idea is that our light and momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Hebrews 2:10 says that it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. 2 Corinthians 1:9 reminds us that our suffering was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. We could go on and on quoting verses that presuppose suffering in the Christian experience. Christians should expect suffering. The escape from the pain of the moment doesn't seem to be high on the priority of Paul and the other apostles. Rather, the apostles, and especially Paul, seem to come at suffering from a different direction and start point. Their expectations for deliverance from suffering and hopes in the midst of suffering are very different.

For Paul, he might not understand why things are working out the way they are, but he is willing to trust that the Lord is faithful to His word. Later in Romans 8, we get in verse 32. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" As with Paul, we might not know what's going on, but we do know that God is in control and that He is using both the good and the bad for His glory and for yours as well. It's a subtle distinction that we are making here. And it gets tricky because the common usage seems to affirm two same big Christian doctrines that Paul does. The common usage seeks to affirm the sovereignty of God over all things and that God will bring things to a positive end. Paul also affirms these doctrines, but again the directions of the exercise of God's sovereignty are radically different. The aim is vastly different. One is earthly, and one is heavenly. For Paul, Christ is at the heart of his focus. Everything in his life points him toward Christ. For those who misuse this phrase, circumstances are at the heart of their focus. Everything in their life points toward them.

But this is me! This is why the misuse of this verse is so tempting. I desperately want God to give me promises about Nathaniel's development and safety. I desperately want God to reassure me that no harm will come to Sarah. I desperately want God to promise me an easy life free of suffering and sorrow not only for me, but also for the ones that I love the most. I want to rationalize what I'm doing as, "Well, I'm just affirming God's sovereignty over all things." "Well, didn't God say that he would make all things good for me?" But all that is simply a lack of trust in God. Do we trust God with everything? Do I trust him with the life of my son? Do I trust that whatever happens, that

God will work it out for His glory and my ultimate good, even if I can't see how it can possibly work out? Before us is the kind question that Jesus put to Martha in John 11. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" He is asking her to hold onto him in the midst of her anguish, to cut through the pain, and to anchor into the truth that He is everything.

Well now that we've blown everything up about this verse, it's time to rebuild it. Up to now, we've been talking about exegetical errors. We aren't using the verse in line with the text. We've left parts out, and we've not read it in its immediate context. And up to now, we've basically just been talking about how this phrase produces expectations that are not in line with what God actually promises from a textual accuracy perspective. I now want to talk about why I think that while we get the promises wrong a lot of times, I think that we, in fact, **undersell** what God promises to us. I think that what we have here in the text is far better to comfort us in our horrible circumstances than this obviously cherry-picked platitude that is clearly not in line with Scripture in its common usage.

Let's back up and take a wider view of what Paul is saying here in chapter 8. Back in verse 22 and 23, we saw that Paul is anticipating the redemption of his body. But the emphasis is not on the redemption but on the present struggle that he has against his sinful flesh. We are groaning for redemption, and it is in this hope for redemption that we are saved, verse 24. But Paul doesn't see the fruition of this hope. Because of the veil and corruption of sin, we don't see clearly what God is doing. But he hopes with patience, waiting for the time to come when all things are revealed.

It's in this waiting through suffering, sin, and less than ideal circumstances that Paul gets to verse 26. In this world, we need the Spirit. The world is so broken, and our groaning is often all that we see and all that we experience. The bitter taste of suffering is often in our mouths, and we struggle against it. And so when we don't know what to do, in the midst of the chaos and storm, in the despair and helplessness, the Spirit himself intercedes. The Holy Spirit is said to intercede for us with groanings too deep for words. When words fail us, we still have the Holy Spirit to cry out and communicate our hearts desires to the Father. And that is a great comfort in unspeakable sorrow and suffering. But it is in this sea of pain and suffering that Paul speaks a truth that anchors us to Christ. We might **not know** how to pray in times of trial, but we **do know** something. And that something is this: "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 my 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."

For some, this word that God is working for Christians to conform them to Christ, it seems to be **only future**. And so many of the great promises of the faith are. We are looking forward to a future reality to help us in the present. That is why in 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul talks about the light and momentary afflictions of this life preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. There are future aspects that motivate us to persevere through the pain and anguish of the present. The idea of being without sin, without sorrow, to have a new body that doesn't break down and decay. The idea of having a full and open relationship with the Lord. There is much for the Christian to look forward to.

But this is where I think I get frustrated with the misuse of this verse. The common usage pushes everything to the future. It's an "Oh, don't worry now, God's got this. Just you wait and have faith now, He's going to turn this around." But my problem isn't that I think that I've somehow gotten off of God's plan. My problem is that my situation really, really stinks. My problem is that my heart feels broken, and I'm weeping because I'm in pain. My problem is that I feel like I'm alone and abandoned, and the common usage doesn't speak at all to that. In fact, it minimizes the pain.

The common usage insinuates a dismissal that this pain is manageable in light of what God is going to do. You just need to wait on God to arrive and do His thing.

But the Gospel has present value in addition to future promises. It has a robust answer to the pain and the anguish of the present. From a different angle, Romans 8:28 says that your pain is not meaningless. Even this pain is being used for the Kingdom. In the midst of your pain and struggle, God is right there with you working. He's using this for something that we will rejoice in. We might not know what that is. We might not ever understand how this horrible thing fits into the Lord's working toward conforming us to Christ's image, but what we do know is this: God has not abandoned you. God has not forgotten about you. God is not idle, but rather He is working even in this to conform you to the image of His Son.

It is this solid knowledge that enables Paul to write the passage that comes immediately after our passage today. It culminates with verses 38-39. "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." In the midst of yours and my suffering, in the midst of uncertainty and worry, this is what we are sure of: That we are loved beyond compare and that he is with us. He who not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He who was well acquainted with grief knows our pain. That is a glorious truth that we can hold onto in times of trouble and tribulation. For those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Let us pray:

Father, in the midst of life's sufferings, we cling to you. Where else can we go? For you are life. You know the fears, the worries, the needs that we have, and you promise to conform us to your Son. Would you remind us of the glorious security that we have in you: That because you are faithful to complete the work that you have started in us to conform us to Jesus' image, nothing is able to separate us from the love of god in Christ Jesus our Lord. And it is in name that we pray, amen.