

"ALL THINGS WORK TOWARD THE GOOD"

(Romans 8:18-25)

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Christians in every generation have found inestimable comfort in the wonderful promise of Romans 8:28, and rightly so. This is surely one of the greatest promises of God to his people anywhere in the Bible. But it is also one of the most misunderstood. To appreciate what God promises here, we must first clear away two misconceptions about the meaning of the verse.

(1) As we briefly noted in the Original Meaning section, this verse may not be promising that all things will work *together* for good. I have heard the verse preached with just this point as the central emphasis. God, so the preacher argued, does not promise to bring good to us in every situation. Rather, as a cook combines ingredients to make a tasty dish of food, so God mixes together the circumstances of life in such a way as ultimately to bring good to us.

There are two reasons for hesitating to embrace this "mixing" idea. (a) The verb used here (*synergeo*) may not mean "work together." To be sure, in its three other New Testament occurrences, it does seem to have this meaning (see 1 Cor. 16:16, 2 Cor. 6:1, James 2:22). But the verb often lost the "with" idea in the period when Paul was writing. Unlike the other places where the verb occurs in the New Testament, the context here does not readily supply an object for the "with" idea. (b) Even if we do translate "work together," it is by no means clear that "all things" are working with each other. It is equally plausible that Paul means that all things work together with the Spirit, with God, or with believers to produce good. On the whole, then, an application of 8:28 that focuses on the "with" idea is built on an uncertain foundation.

(2) A second common misunderstanding of this promise is more serious. Most of us have probably heard someone (perhaps ourselves!) applying Romans 8:28 something like this: "Yes, you may have lost your job, but you can be sure of getting an even better one; because 'all things are working for good.'" Or, "Don't be upset about your fiancé breaking off your engagement, because God must have an even better life partner for you, Romans 8:28 promises...." The

difficulty with this application is that it interprets "good" from a narrow and often materialistic perspective. From God's perspective, "good" must be defined in spiritual terms. The ultimate good is God's glory, and he is glorified when his children live as Christ did (v. 29) and attain the glory he has destined them for (v. 30, cf. vv. 31-39).

As we have seen in 5:3-4, God uses suffering to build Christian character in us, conform us to Christ, and prepare us for final glory. What he promises us in 8:28, then, is not that every difficult experience will lead to something good in this life. The "good" God may have in mind may involve the next life entirely. He may take us out of a



secure, well-paying job in order to shake us out of a materialistic lifestyle that does not honor biblical priorities, and we may never have as good a job again. He may want to set us free from an engagement to be married because he wants to use us in a ministry that would be difficult or impossible for a married person. Remember that it is by sharing in Christ's sufferings that we eventually will be able to share in his glory as well (8:17).

This is not to say that material blessings cannot be included in the "good" of Romans 8:28. As the Old Testament especially makes clear, God delights to give his people good things in this life as well as in the next. In an effort to avoid a materialistic interpretation of 8:28, we must not succumb to the opposite extreme of denying God's interest in the material world. This would be to fall into a dualism far removed from the biblical perspective of a God who is both Creator of this world and Redeemer. Rather, the point I am making is that we tend to apply the promise of this verse in a purely materialistic way. This clearly fails to take into account the spiritual realm that is ultimately more important than the material.

We have suggested a couple of things that Romans 8:28 does *not* mean. But I do not want to leave this magnificent promise on a negative note. So let me conclude by reflecting again on what it does mean. Essentially, it promises that nothing will touch our lives that is not under the control and direction of our loving heavenly Father. Everything we do and say, everything people do to us or say about us, every experience we will ever have—all are sovereignly used by God for our good. We will not always understand how the things we experience work to good, and we certainly will not always enjoy them. But we do know that nothing comes into our lives that God does not allow and use for his own beneficent purposes. Paul's overarching purpose in Romans 5-8 is to give us assurance for the life to come. But verses like 8:28 show that he also wants to give us assurance for the present life as well. God has ordained not only the ends but the means.