

God Working For Good

Scripture: Romans 8:28

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Evening Service

People of God: It's only one verse for our text for tonight. But what a verse it is. It is perhaps one of best-known verses of the Bible, perhaps one of the most loved verses of the Bible, perhaps though one of the most misunderstood and misapplied verses of the Bible. Still, it is a verse that we should all have memorized: *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.*

On the one hand, this is a comforting word. It has been compared to pillow on which to rest our weary heads. You know what that's like. After a busy day at work and then a hectic evening at home, it's so nice to climb into bed and put your head on the pillow. Finally, rest for the weary person. That's what this verse is like. It provides comfort to those who face difficulties in their daily lives. It offers strength to those who are weary. It speaks a word of reassurance to those who endure great struggles. God is working for our good.

On the other hand, this is a challenging word. For some, these words do not feel like a pillow upon which to rest their weary heads. Instead, it can come across as a sharp nail that is hammered into a thin piece of glass so that it shatters into a million pieces. Why do I say that? Because in the midst of the sufferings in our lives, it is so hard to see how this verse can be true. Because in the midst of the evil and injustice that pervades this world, it is hard to comprehend how any good can come out of the situation.

When someone is sitting in a doctor's office and they receive news of a terminal illness; when a tragic death occurs; when a major disaster hits a country, wouldn't a quick quote of this verse seem like a slap in the face? Cancer is not good. Death is not good. The destruction of an earthquake is not good. Yet quickly quoting this verse can make it sound as if they are good. It can be said as a way to dismiss the pain and the hurt of our lives. But that's not Paul's intention.

This verse is intended as a word of comfort in the midst of suffering and trouble. These are words we can hold on, despite outward circumstances. Paul makes this bold statement, right after recognizing the groaning of creation and ourselves. Verse 22 begins the way our text does, with the words "we know." *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

The creation is groaning out in pain. It is subject to the effects of the curse. Instead of being a place of blessing and security, it becomes at times a place of danger and hardship. Instead of being used to bring joy and happiness into our lives, it is used to bring sadness and misery into our lives. The creation becomes an instrument by which death touches our lives. As a result, the creation groans.

Paul immediately adds: we ourselves groan inwardly. As we experience the brokenness of life in this creation, we also groan. Our hearts become heavy with the burdens we encounter. Tears flow down our cheeks. We cry out to God: why O Lord must this misery continue? Why must there be broken relationships? Why must this disease ruin my life? In this life, we groan.

We know that. We experience it. We see it all around us. But there is also something else we should know. *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

But what exactly does this verse say? What is it that we know? Let's break it down in simpler terms so that we too can have the confidence Paul has in saying these words.

At its most basic level, this verse says: God is at work. God is not remote or distant from us. Nor has he left the creation to run on its own. Some picture God in this way. They think of him as the one who started things going; but after that, he is not involved in the world or in our lives. In the 19th century, this point of view was called deism.

Deism views God like a watchmaker. A watchmaker carefully assembles all the parts of the watch. But once the battery is in place, the watchmaker is no longer needed. He could die, but the watch will still work. Now if that is your view of God, then what use is there in crying out to God in the midst of our suffering? What hope is there for any good to be achieved from the burdens we bear?

But God has not left this world to run on its own. God is not far removed from our lives. Instead, he is busy. He is hard at work. He is at work, in the creation, ensuring there will be summer and winter, springtime and harvest. God is at work in history, ensuring the establishment of his

kingdom. God is at work in our lives, guaranteeing that his children will be heirs of this kingdom.

But even as we make these statements we stating more than that God is at work. We are also hinting at the quality of God's work. God is at work for good. God's work in the creation, in history, and in our lives is for achieving good.

Could we think of it otherwise? Would we dare say God has an evil purpose in mind when he is at work? That would be confusing God with the devil. The devil is working so that evil might triumph, but God is working so that good will triumph. After all, goodness is part of the character of our God. And what God does is a reflection of his character.

So in the creation, in history, and in our lives, God is working towards good. The devil, our sinful nature, and the effects of the fall all work against it. That's what we must also realize. That's why there is groaning in creation and in our lives. But God is working to overcome that so that good will result. And God's work will triumph. Good will be achieved.

But let us understand that this good is not something that is instantaneous or that it will completely remove groaning and suffering from the face of the earth—at least not until Christ returns. Then all things will be renewed. That's where too many people misunderstand this verse. They think of this good as something that will be fully achieved in the present. But the following verses point out that it is only in our glorification that God's plan for our lives be finished. Only then will good have the final say.

But in the meantime, God is working towards that end. Right now, God is busy securing the triumph of his kingdom. Right now, God is working in your life so that good will result. In fact, Paul is bold enough to affirm that **in all things** God works for the good of those who love him.

Now this is a very comprehensive claim. It's the one that raises some of the problems people have with this verse. It's easy to accept that God works good through worship, through the proclamation of the gospel, through obedience to his law. But how can God work good through my illness? What good can result from all the disasters that have taken place? Can any good really come from the groaning of creation? Yet Paul says in all things God works for good.

But don't misunderstand. It's not as if all these things are themselves good. Paul is not saying that our sickness and suffering, the wars and terrorism of our world, or the groaning of creation are themselves good. Far from it. On the contrary, they are expressions of the curse. We can call them evil. They are not things we should desire. In the end, they will be removed from the new creation. But in this present world, God will use them to

achieve his ultimate purpose of a restored creation.

For you see, God remains in control. He is the Creator, who governs and guides this world. Nothing is outside of his direction, not even evil. Yes, God will allow the devil to work his misdeeds. He will allow the curse to have its effect. He will permit humanity to feel the brokenness of life. But this is tolerated for the sake of achieving God's ultimate purpose, the salvation of his creation and his children. But evil is not just tolerated by God; it is used by him to achieve his goals.

That's not always easy to see. In fact, we may never understand how it is true for our lives or our present time. Sometimes it is only looking back in time, can we see how anything good came out of it. One of the classic examples in the OT is the story of Joseph. He was sold into slavery because of the hatred of his brothers. He was falsely imprisoned because of the injustice of Egypt. But as Joseph late on says: You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.

Of course, the cross is the prime example in all of Scripture. His suffering was not good in itself. His death was a miscarriage of justice. Yet through his suffering and death, God accomplished the greatest good possible: the payment for sin, the defeat of sin and the overcoming of the sting of death.

As for our own lives, I cannot always see how anything good may come out of disease or death, out of trouble or misery, or out of the disasters and wars I see in the world. But I can know that God is working for my good and that in the end, all things will be made right. All things will be made new.

Now there is a very important qualification to all what we have said. This good God is working towards is not for everyone. Paul is not expressing a feel-good optimism that everything works out in end for everybody concerned. Instead, this good of final and complete salvation is reserved for believers.

Paul uses two different phrases to describe believers. On the one hand, there is an expression of our commitment to God. God works for the good *of those who love him*. That's who we are as believers; those who love God; those who fulfill the first and great commandment to love God with our whole being.

On the other hand, there is an expression that expresses the divine initiative in our salvation. Believers are those *who have been called according to his purpose*. It is God who calls us. Salvation is ultimately a work of God. We are called according to his purpose. And those who God has called, he will glorify. He will make sure they make to the end. That's

what the next verses talk about.

And so, God is at work, in creation, in history, in our lives. It's a good work. It's a work in which God will restore the whole creation to its original goodness. Yes, we know about the suffering and groaning of creation. Yes, we know about the suffering and groaning of our personal lives. But we know more than that. *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

I pray that you will not hear these words as a slap in the face or that they would be quoted to you as a way to dismiss the pain and hurt of our troubled lives. Instead, may you hear these words as they were intended: a word of comfort in the midst of suffering and groaning. God is at work for good. It is not yet a completed work. But we do not have to doubt the outcome. As the final verses of this chapter remind us, *nothing--neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*