

Romans 8. 28. Nassau. 8 April 2015.

This evening I want to consider the familiar text of Romans chapter 8 verse 28 ...

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Which, following more closely the order of the Greek words, I believe should be translated more accurately as...

But we know that to those who love God He works all things together for good, to those who are called according to His purpose.

It will take only a few moments for us to get our bearings.

The whole closing section of Romans 8, from verse 17 to verse 39,¹ was written to encourage and sustain the saints at Rome in the face of 'suffering',² and to do this by lifting their eyes to the certainty of a coming 'glory' which is out of all proportion to anything which the powers of this world or the powers of darkness could throw at them³ – a prospect so 'glorious' indeed that the whole of creation can be said to stand on tiptoe, sighing for the time when it will have a share in that glory.⁴

Verses 18 to 27 speak of three forms of 'groaning' ... that of the creation; that of the believer; and that of the Holy Spirit. And the section more or less closes with Paul's expression in verse 26, 'we do not know what to pray for as we ought'. And it would be hard to miss that the opening words of our text for this evening stand in deliberate contrast to that acknowledgement – 'but we know' – and I am satisfied that 'but' is the correct translation.⁵

I have no doubt that we each find – and find often – that, as the apostle says, 'we do not know what to pray for', but, over against this, he insists (using the very same word translated 'know'), we do know something of immense (and heart-warming) importance; namely, that 'to those who love God He works all things together for good'.⁶

The apostle here characterises believers as 'those who love God', a description he had used twice in his earlier letter to the Corinthians,⁷ and which James used twice in his epistle.⁸ And it strikes me as particularly fitting that, in a letter which has earlier made much of God's love for them,⁹ that Paul should speak of believers as those who respond to God's great love for them by themselves loving Him.¹⁰

And to us who do, the apostle says, He (God) causes 'all things' to co-operate and mutually contribute to our 'good' – to our real and eternal blessing and well-being, that is – which is something very different of course to our present short-term pleasure and comfort. For God is working on a much larger canvas than we are as He skilfully weaves 'all things' together – fitting them into His perfect pattern as only He can.

Perhaps the first detail to note is that Paul is certainly not claiming that all things work for our benefit 'by and of themselves', in some mechanical and impersonal fashion. The apostle did not need to be told that it is God who operates – and, as the tense Paul uses conveys, who does so continuously¹¹ – that it is God who operates through that which befalls us to secure our best and highest good.¹²

But we need to be clear what Paul had in mind when he used the word we translate as 'all things'. For it is clear from the use of the word elsewhere¹³ – and even from the immediate context here¹⁴ – that it does not necessarily mean 'all things' *absolutely* and *literally*. It must always be understood in the light of the context in which it is found. And the overall context here is that of providing encouragement to the saints of Rome in the midst of suffering and trial.

As I understand it therefore, the 'all things' in view here refer to all circumstances and events which fall outside of our own control, and especially, given the context (both before and after), to all forms of adversity and affliction ... to all forms of persecution and suffering ... to all forms of anguish and distress ... in a word, to any trial or painful experience to which his readers were then – or ever might be – exposed.¹⁵

If I am right, Paul is not speaking here of things we do – and certainly not of bad things we do.¹⁶ For, make no mistake, God isn't mocked,¹⁷ and, ultimately – finally – I shall not be better off as a result of my own failings, sins and acts of disobedience.¹⁸

Even if God should deign to use these for the good of others – or even for my own short-term good – rest assured, He never approves of sin,¹⁹ and in the final analysis I must always be the loser.²⁰

The truth is that we are far more willing to attribute the pleasant experiences of life to the hand of God than we ever are the unpleasant experiences. But in our text the apostle insists that 'all things' which touch our lives – whether *in themselves* 'good'²¹ or 'bad' – that 'all things' fall under the control of God, and, as overruled by Him, mutually contribute to our good.

But this raises, of course, the all-important question, 'What does Paul mean here by "good"?' And, frankly, it is precisely here that many go astray, and in consequence, when faced with some great affliction or calamity, call in question whether the seeming iron-clad promise of our verse actually works out in practice.²²

I suppose that in terms of the outcome of God's providential dealings in the life of the Christian there can be said to be three possible dimensions to that word 'good'. First, there is what we might call temporal and earthly good – that which contributes to our present physical enjoyment and pleasure. Second, there is spiritual good – that which is concerned, not with our comfort, but with our character, promoting our devotion to God and drawing us closer to Him. And then, third, there is eternal good – that benefit which reaches out far beyond this present world.

More of this distinction a little later.

Paul, of all people, would have known²³ that this principle often worked out in the present life. And this because, to one so immersed in Old Testament history as he, there was no shortage of examples²⁴ – ranging from the classic case of Joseph in the first history book, right through to that of Esther and Mordecai in the last history book.²⁵

In Joseph's case, as some of us noted several years ago,²⁶ there was a chain of at least ten links stretching from Genesis 37 to Genesis 41, which brought Joseph all the way from the home of his loving father in Canaan to the very highest position open to him in all Egypt.²⁷

And, as we saw back then, Joseph's chequered experiences were each and all necessary, not only because (as, with the benefit of hindsight, Joseph saw clearly) he was God's appointed means of saving many lives in time of severe famine,²⁸ but also because he was the Lord's chosen instrument to move Jacob and his family from Canaan to Egypt – to a vast land where they could increase numerically (and how!) – to a place where they could expand and develop from a relatively small family numbering a mere 75 or so²⁹ into 'a great nation'³⁰ numbering in the region of two million.³¹

And, if just one link had failed and the descendants of Jacob had therefore never become that 'great nation', I tell you, the history of the world – and of heaven itself – would be very different!³² Without question God worked together 'all things' (ranging from the envy of his brothers, through the lust of Potiphar's wife, to the forgetfulness of Pharaoh's butler³³) ... God worked together all of Joseph's trials and sufferings spanning 13 years,³⁴ not only for his (Joseph's) own good, but for the good of countless others with him – up to and including us here this very evening.

But let me sound a note of caution. I said earlier that God never approves of sin, and that is true. Whether in the life of Joseph or anywhere else, God is never the author of sin. Control it, use it, and overrule it for His own wise and gracious purpose, yes; cause and instigate it, no!

Joni³⁵ has often quoted the wise words spoken to her by her friend Steve Estes as one day he rested his hand on her wheelchair: 'God permits what He hates to accomplish what He loves'. Well said, Steve.³⁶

There had been a time when Joseph's father would not have readily signed up to the truth of our text,³⁷ but there is no doubt that Joseph would certainly have done so.³⁸

Jumping from the first history book of the Old Testament to the last, we discover that, if God overruled events in the days of *Joseph* to enable Jacob's family to develop into the nation of Israel, He overruled events in the days of *Esther* to save that nation (His nation³⁹) from later being exterminated.

As was true of the life of Joseph, so of the life of Esther, it is possible to trace an all-important 'providence' chain of at least ten links – in her case a 'providence' chain by means of which God worked behind the scenes at every stage for the good and the salvation of His people.⁴⁰

If anyone wants to believe that Esther 'just happened' to win the royal beauty contest, that Mordecai 'just happened' to uncover the assassination plot, or that the king 'just happened' to suffer from insomnia the night before Esther denounced Haman, and 'just happened' to choose the right reading material, I leave them to their folly. For my part, I am content to believe that although the Lord stayed well and truly out of sight throughout the entire narrative, His people were never out of His. For, to me, although God's name is not mentioned anywhere in the book, His fingerprints are all over it!

And I cannot quarrel with the assessment of Warren Wiersbe, that 'The book of Esther is one of the greatest illustrations in the Bible of Romans 8. 28'.⁴¹

But the apostle had more recent evidence that, on occasions and as He pleases, God works 'all things' – even persecution and suffering – for good during the present life.

Paul had only to recall how God had brought so much good out of the martyrdom of Stephen, in whose stoning he himself had played no small part. For it was as a direct result of Stephen's death that – and I quote – 'there arose ... a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem, and they were all ('all', that is, except the apostles) scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria⁴² – into which vicious persecution this onetime Saul of Tarsus had thrown himself heart and soul.⁴³

And, likely as not, he could still remember the frustration and intense annoyance he must have felt when he had then discovered – as had the Jewish council – that their strategy of harsh and unremitting persecution of the Jerusalem church had badly backfired, both on him and on them, for, as Luke noted later, 'those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word'.⁴⁴ Now, as a Christian, he could hardly miss noting that the opposition and affliction which almost certainly had appeared at first to be very bad for the cause of the gospel had in fact turned out to be very good for it

Although when dictating⁴⁵ the words of our 'golden' text for the benefit of the believers at Rome he had no way of knowing it, he would later discover that his lengthy detention in that very city⁴⁶ would likewise 'turn out for the advance⁴⁷ of the gospel'.⁴⁸ When writing later of his two-year confinement, with the picture then in proper focus, he would be able to trace the hand of God in the events⁴⁹ which landed him in chains there and which enabled him to reach both to the Praetorian Guard⁵⁰ and to the Imperial Civil Service.⁵¹

And, as we look back at the apostle's service for God, we can see other instances when God brought that which was 'good' out of that which, at the time, seemed 'bad' to Paul. Take, for example, Paul's continually frustrated plans to visit Thessalonica.⁵² The apostle knew that 'the tempter' (as he described him) was active at Thessalonica – not least in orchestrating afflictions for the young church there, and that Satan had somehow engineered his prolonged absence from them.⁵³ Against this background, Paul not only sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the believers, but wrote to assure them of his concerns. As a result, future generations of Christians have derived untold spiritual profit from the epistle he sent. Satan certainly overreached himself that time, and God overruled for 'good' the devil's evil scheme.⁵⁴

And between Paul's day and ours there have been countless other such cases of God providentially bringing good out of seeming calamity.

I suspect that most, if not all, of you, know nothing of a sixteenth century clergyman by the name of Bernard Gilpin.

Mr Gilpin⁵⁵ was a godly Oxford theologian and preacher in the then-emerging Church of England, whose life spanned the reigns of no less than five English monarchs.⁵⁶ As a result of his Christian labours in the wilds of the North of England, he was known as the 'Apostle of the North'.⁵⁷ On one occasion, he was arrested to be brought up to London for trial on account of his uncompromising preaching.

At the time, Mary Tudor, the Roman Catholic queen, was on the throne, and during her reign over 280 Protestants were executed, the majority by burning at the stake.⁵⁸ It was the infamous Catholic Bishop Bonner who summoned Mr Gilpin to his trial, and who is on record as having 'promised that the heretic should be at a stake in a fortnight'. When informed of Bishop Bonner's intention, rather than flee into exile, Mr Gilpin 'ordered his servant (his steward William Airey) to provide a long garment for him, in which he might go decently to the stake'.

His family later reported that, on the way to London, Mr Gilpin had an accident and broke his leg,⁵⁹ which put a stop to his journey. The persons, in whose custody he was, it is recorded, took occasion thence, maliciously to retort upon him an observation he would frequently make, that "nothing happens to us but what is intended for our good"; asking him, "Whether he thought his broken leg was so intended?" He replied, in today's language, "I have no doubt of it".

And sure enough, while he was waiting for the leg to heal, Queen Mary died, her sister Elizabeth the First, a Protestant, came to the throne, and the persecution of Protestant preachers ceased. And so, when able to travel, rather than going to London to his death, Mr Gilpin returned safely to his home in Houghton-le-Spring near Durham.⁶⁰ I guess that Mr Gilpin could relate personally to the testimony of the psalmist, 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted'.⁶¹

Well, I'm confident that, if you had not previously heard the name of Bernard Gilpin, you are familiar enough with the name of a Christian preacher who lived one hundred years later. I speak of 'The Tinker of Bedford'⁶² – of John Bunyan.⁶³ Still with the words of our text in mind, I might well ask, 'Would this famous Baptist Puritan ever have written 'The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come' had he not been imprisoned in Bedford county jail for a considerable time?'⁶⁴ There are no prizes for guessing the answer.

Coming forward some four centuries, and still with the words of our text in mind, I want to remind you of a seemingly tragic event which took place less than 60 years ago. You may not be able to quote the names of all five young men⁶⁵ who gave their lives on 8 January 1956 when Waorani warriors thrust their spears into them on so-called Palm Beach in the rainforest of Ecuador.⁶⁶ But you will certainly recognise the name Jim Elliott. I don't suppose that their widows – or the Christian world in general – regarded their deaths as a particularly good thing *at the time*.

And yet, as we know well, their sacrifice has had an impact – to a greater or lesser extent – on an untold number of believers since.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the five young men, the brother of one of the five, Ken Fleming,⁶⁷ himself a missionary,⁶⁸ wrote, 'Their sacrifice has had a life-changing effect on tens of thousands, and has had some effect on millions of others'.⁶⁹ Mr Fleming reported that, 'During the World Conference on Evangelism at Amsterdam in 2000, Steve Saint (the son of another of the five) and his father's (now converted) killer, Mincaye, were among the ... delegates from all over the world.

'While there, Steve and Mincaye had opportunity to ask the crowd if any of them had made life-changing decisions as a result of the sacrifice made ... in Ecuador in 1956. They could hardly believe it when at least 3,000 stood to their feet!' And these were 'life-changing' decisions remember.⁷⁰

Do you recall the apostle's words (to which I referred a little earlier) that 'what has happened to me has turned out ... for the advance the gospel'?⁷¹ Just two days before the death of the Ecuador martyrs, they had entertained three Waorani at their campsite, following which one of the five, Pete Fleming, wrote in his journal, 'This is a great day for the advance of the gospel ...'.⁷² Little did Pete know!

Another of the so-called 'Five Ecuador Martyrs' was Nate Saint, the team's 'Jungle Pilot'.⁷³

Let me quote you the testimony of Nate Saint's son Steve, who was just five years old when his father was martyred. A few years ago⁷⁴ Steve wrote, 'I have personally paid a high price for what happened on Palm Beach. But I have also had a front-row seat as the rest of the story has been unfolding for half a century. I have seen first-hand that much good has come from it.

'I believe only God could have fashioned such an incredible story from such a tragic event. I could not begin to record the thousands of people who have told me that God used what happened on Palm Beach to change the course of their lives for good. ... If I could go back now and rewrite the script, I would not change a single scene. I have come to understand that life is too complex and much too short to let amateurs direct the story. I would rather let the Master Storyteller do the writing'.⁷⁵

Yes, many have been the times when God's people – both within and outside of scripture – have been able to trace something of how the Lord has brought good out of seeming calamity, often for the benefit of others.

But, although we may choose to apply the guarantee given in Romans 8 verse 28 in this more general way, properly speaking our text homes in on the assurance which God gives that 'He works all things (works all circumstances and experiences) together for good' specifically and personally for the benefit of *the individual* himself or herself.

And the apostle Paul certainly found this to be true in his own experience.

It is generally accepted that this Epistle was written shortly after Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians, and sometime after his Epistle to the Galatians. Interestingly, when writing both of those Epistles, Paul had occasion to recall his experiences of many years before – experiences which were anything but pleasant at the time, but in which, as he looked back on them, he could clearly trace God's hand at work.

In his letter to the Galatians, he had occasion to refer to a visit which he had paid to Jerusalem about three years after his conversion. His purpose in going was to see the apostles, and Peter in particular.⁷⁶ Initially, he encountered a little difficulty when he attempted to join himself to the disciples,⁷⁷ for he had spent the three years since his conversion in Damascus and Arabia,⁷⁸ and the

saints at Jerusalem still knew of him only as a persecutor and an enemy. They were therefore 'all afraid of him'.⁷⁹ Thanks, however, to the commendation of Barnabas the church received Paul.

The apostle's time at Jerusalem was spent in evangelism as well as in conference with Peter,⁸⁰ but his dispute with the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews) soon landed him in hot water.⁸¹ For his own safety⁸² the brethren 'sent him off to Tarsus' via Caesarea.⁸³

Personally, I suspect that there may well have been a measure of reluctance on Paul's part to leave. Certainly it must have been a great disappointment to the apostle to curtail his activities at Jerusalem, and to terminate his conference with Peter after only two weeks.

But when Paul wrote Galatians he was looking back on the events of Acts 9. His present problem was to establish beyond dispute that his apostleship was entirely independent of Jerusalem. And, in demonstrating that he was an apostle 'not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father',⁸⁴ he was able to point out, not only that the Jerusalem apostles recognized his independent apostleship,⁸⁵ and that so far was he from being an appointee of Peter that on one occasion he had actually rebuked Peter publicly,⁸⁶ but that for the first seventeen years⁸⁷ of his ministry he had visited Jerusalem only once, and then for no more than fifteen days.⁸⁸

The fact that the Lord had permitted Paul to see Peter⁸⁹ for little more than two weeks formed an invaluable part of his argument. And Paul could now see that what, on account of the fierce opposition of the Hellenists, had been a great disappointment to him at the time had indeed been worked by God for his good.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had occasion to refer to his 'thorn in the flesh', and the reason for it,⁹⁰ In chapter 12 of his letter, the apostle had felt compelled to raise the subject of visions and revelations,⁹¹ for it seems that one of the serious charges levelled against Paul at Corinth was that he never had any ecstasies or visions. He knew that the Corinthians, who had rather lost their heads over such things, would have regarded this as most important.

He felt constrained therefore to refer to an experience he had had over fourteen years before, when he had been 'caught up' into Paradise. It was following this experience that he had been afflicted with a 'thorn in the flesh' – which he had reason to attribute to the malice of Satan. Clearly, this 'thorn' was something physical, painful, and humiliating, and, above all else, was regarded by Paul as interfering with his service for the Lord. He had therefore prayed about it three times, specifically asking the Lord to remove it.⁹²

In response, the Lord had granted Paul two things. First, He gave him His 'sufficient' grace. Yes, the Lord dealt with the problem, but not in the way Paul had hoped. He had asked, in effect, that the Lord would remove the burden from off his back, but instead the Lord undertook to strengthen the back which bore the burden. And second, He gave Paul an explanation.⁹³ The Lord told Paul why He refused to remove the 'thorn'.

Paul's underlying concern had been with his future usefulness for the Lord, and the Lord taught him that his 'thorn', a source of his weakness, was essential if he was ever to remain 'a vessel ...useful' to His heavenly Master.⁹⁴ For there was a very real danger that, on account of the breath-taking revelations he had received, the apostle (a converted Pharisee remember) would become lifted as high in conceit and pride as ever he had been in his vision! The 'thorn' would therefore serve to keep him humble.

And, as Paul had looked back in 2 Corinthians 12 over fourteen years of later apostolic ministry, he realized that the Lord's way was best, and that, throughout, He (the Lord) had been working all things together for his good.⁹⁵

But, having said all this – and you will accept, I hope, that what I have said is soundly based in scripture and in history ... but, having said all this, we have to recognise that, *first and foremost*, our verse is *not* speaking about *any* 'good' *in this present life* ... about any good which, in His kind providence, God *may* choose to bring out of seemingly adverse circumstances or experiences – whether that 'good' be physical or spiritual.

It is clear from the context that what Paul has principally in mind is our *ultimate* and *eternal* good in a far grander world than this ... namely, the achieving of God's *long-term* purpose for us, that we should 'be conformed to the image of His Son',⁹⁶ and should be 'glorified'. That is, the 'good' which God has in view when He orchestrates all events on our lives is *not* our comfort, our wealth, or our health in the here and now. It is our conformity to a glorified Christ in heaven!⁹⁷

I'm sure that you don't need me to tell you that 'all things' – that 'all' circumstances and affairs in the lives of God's people – do *not* always 'work together for good' *in this world*. Nor has this *ever* been true.

The writer to the Hebrews knew this well. He made the point clearly when listing out some of the past exploits and achievements of faith in his chapter 11. Having spoken of some of the wonderful triumphs of faith – of those who 'through faith subdued kingdoms ... stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong' ... of women who 'received back their dead by resurrection' – he then added, '*But others* were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection, and others underwent trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword' and so on.

It would be hard to miss that, whereas 'through faith' *some* of God's people 'escaped the edge of the sword', others – equally 'through faith' – 'were slain with the sword' ... and in New Testament days we naturally think of Acts 12 – of the apostles Peter and James.

But neither can we miss the writer's reference to another – to a better – world than this ... 'that they might obtain a better resurrection' – 'better', that is, than the cases of resurrection in the days of Elijah and Elisha, to which he had just referred, in that the return to life of the two sons in view then was only temporary; they were still mortal and would therefore die again later. They were, if you like, only out on parole – required to report back to Death again in due course. But the 'better resurrection' for which the tortured and suffering saints looked will be no short-term release – for they, as we if we die, will be raised 'incorruptible' – never to die again.

Truly then, as the apostle expressed it just a handful of verses before our text, 'the sufferings of this present time *are not* worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us'.⁹⁸

But, alas for me, I am spiritually short-sighted, and need to remind myself constantly that, much as I may wish it did, my text for this evening does not commit God to make me happy, contented and successful down here⁹⁹ – it commits Him rather to pattern me after the image of His Son. What a thought! ... that, according to the opening section of the chapter, God's 'own Son' should be sent 'in the likeness of sinful flesh',¹⁰⁰ and this that, according to the closing section of the chapter, we sinners might one day be changed into *His* likeness¹⁰¹ ... that one day we should bear the image of Him who is heavenly.¹⁰²

Whenever we face adversity and trial we rest on God's promise that He will work it out 'for good' in the end. And if we find that it hasn't worked out 'for good', we must conclude this is only because it is not yet the end. And we are in no position to judge the '*good*'ness of God's working until His programme is finished. And meantime, although we cannot comprehend the mystery of His dealings with us, we can rest in the assurance which Jesus gave Simon Peter when He prepared to wash his feet in the so-called 'Upper Room': 'You do not fully grasp what I am doing *now*, but *afterward* you will understand'.¹⁰³

And those words, 'afterward you will understand' remind me of something I read some time ago about the late Dr. E. C. Caldwell, then Professor of New Testament at a Theological Seminary in the United States.¹⁰⁴

Dr. Caldwell had just completed his lecture for the day and informed his students of their assignment. 'Tomorrow', he concluded, 'I will be teaching on the eighth chapter of Romans. So tonight, as you study this chapter, I want you to pay close attention to verse 28—"all things work together for good to them that love God" ... He paused and ... added, 'One final word before I dismiss you—whatever happens in all the years to come, remember: Romans 8. 28 will always hold true'.

Later that day, Dr. Caldwell and his wife were driving their car over a railroad crossing, oblivious to the fact that a freight train was approaching the crossing. The train ploughed into the car, killing Mrs. Caldwell instantly. Severely injured, Dr. Caldwell was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. He survived but his injuries left him permanently handicapped.

Months later he returned to the classroom. Gripping his cane, he stood before the class. Not a sound could be heard. They remembered his last words about Romans 8. 28. Looking into the faces of his students, he said, 'Romans 8. 28 still holds true. One day we shall see God's good, even in this'.¹⁰⁵

Yes, Dr. Caldwell, 'one day' ... and that will be the *ultimate* happy ending ... when our God 'will wipe away every tear'.¹⁰⁶

And in that context I cannot but think of the third verse of George Matheson's masterly hymn, 'O love that will not let me go':

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That *morn shall tearless be*.¹⁰⁷

We can only imagine how much this evening's text must have meant to the believers in Rome¹⁰⁸ when, some seven years later,¹⁰⁹ they faced the full brunt of Nero's ruthless persecution.¹¹⁰

And what a joy it is for *us* to know this evening that our highest 'good' is God's sieve which He uses when permitting the 'all things' to enter our lives ... that nothing – but nothing – happens to us outside of His control ... that He is never taken by surprise ... that He never makes mistakes¹¹¹ ... and that, whatever appearances may suggest to the contrary, God's kind providence will always say to us, in the words of the prophet Balaam, 'Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it'.¹¹²

Yes indeed, 'we know that to those who love God He works all things together for good, to those who are called according to His purpose'.

Endnotes

¹ Paul wrote this section to provide the believers at Rome with encouragement in the face of opposition and trials. He had earlier said, 'we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings', Rom. 5. 3. He would later exhort the Roman Christians to 'bless those who persecute you... if your enemy is hungry, feed him', Rom. 12. 14, 20. To encourage the Christians, the apostle had spoken in verses 21-25 of the believer's glorious prospect and hope – a hope out of all proportion to present sufferings – a hope so glorious that the whole of creation can be said to stand on tiptoe, sighing for the time when it will have a share in it. And, should anyone be disposed to raise the objection, 'That's all very well for the future, but how are we expected to cope in the present?', he introduces two further factors. First, in verses 26-27, the ministry of the Holy Spirit within, both to help us and to intercede for us. And second, in verse 28 – not the glory of God ahead of us, nor the spirit of God within us – but the providence of God around us.

² Rom. 8. 17-18, 35-36. 'Many Christians in Rome had been expelled from their homes less than a decade earlier, and had returned only a few years before Paul wrote. A few years after Paul wrote Romans, the evil emperor Nero killed many of his readers due to false accusations against Christians'. <http://www.craigkeener.com/all-things-for-good-romans-828/>

³ Rom. 8. 17-18, 29-30.

⁴ Rom. 8. 19; cf. Rom. 8. 21b; 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God', literally.

⁵ The Greek word is *de* and not *kai*. As a transitional conjunction, *de* is often correctly translated "and"; (KJV), however, in context it proves to be a somewhat docile rendering in Romans 8. 28. Context sets the mood and the mood aids in translation.

⁶ Verse 22 similarly began 'we know'. Here then are two assertions of Christian knowledge, one about creation's birth pang groaning and the other about God's providential care.

⁷ 1 Cor. 2. 9; 8. 3.

⁸ James 1. 12; 2. 5.

⁹ Rom. 5. 5, 8.

¹⁰ 1 John 4. 19.

¹¹ The present tense of the verb (*synergei*) emphasizes that this is a continuing activity of God. God works all things 'continuously', rather than 'continually'. 'Continual ... typically means "happening frequently, with intervals between", as in "the bus service has been disrupted by continual breakdowns"... <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/continual-or-continuous>. 'Continuous' means without interruption in an unbroken stream of time or space. For example, 'The continuous dripping of the tap drove me crazy'.

¹² Paul is not claiming here that God works all things for His own glory. Of course, He does—and Paul knew it, Eph. 1. 6, 12, 14; Phil. 2. 11.

¹³ 1 Cor. 2. 15; 6. 12; 10. 23; Phil. 4. 13.

¹⁴ Rom. 8. 32.

¹⁵ 'In itself the term naturally includes all the experiences, whether sad or glad, that come into the lives of God's people. Yet in the light of the context (vv. 18–27) the primary reference of πάντα is to "every kind of painful experience in Christian lives, all those that press groans from our lips and make us groan inwardly in unuttered and unutterable distress. Some of the things that Paul has in mind he states in vv. 38, 39', Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, page 551. Cf. Rom. 5. 3-4.

¹⁶ 'The context shows πάντα to have especial reference to external circumstances of trial, and not at all to men's own sins', *Pulpit Commentary on Rom. 8. 29*.

¹⁷ Gal. 6. 6-7: 'Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap ...'.

¹⁸ 2 Cor. 5. 10.

¹⁹ God never causes sin, nor approves of it; He only permits, directs, restrains, limits and overrules it. People alone are responsible for their sin. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 'God the Father, God the Son', a series of sermons preached at Westminster Chapel, London, from 1952 to 1955.

²⁰ *'The great problem is this: if God does govern and control everything, then what is His relationship to sin? All I can do, in answer, is to lay down a number of propositions that are clearly taught in the Scriptures.'*

The first is that sinful acts are under divine control, and occur only by God's permission and according to His ultimate purpose. If you want proof of that you will find it in the case of Joseph and his brethren. 'It was not you that sent me hither,' said Joseph, 'but God' (Gen. 45:8). God permitted their sinful act and controlled it. You will find the same teaching about the death of our Lord as it is expounded by Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

The second is that God restrains and controls sin. In Psalm 76:10 we read, 'Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.'

The third is that God overrules sin for good. Genesis 50:20 puts it like this: 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.' God overruled the sin, and He did exactly the same in the case of the death of our Lord.

My last proposition is that God never causes sin, nor approves of it; He only permits, directs, restrains, limits and overrules it. People alone are responsible for their sin. The first chapter of James gives that particular teaching clearly'.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 'God the Father, God the Son', a series of sermons preached at Westminster Chapel, London, from 1952 to 1955 and was first published in 1996.

²¹ The verse does not say that 'all things are good', but that God 'works all things together for good' ... a very different thing.

²² During World War II a prominent preacher designated Romans 8:28 as "the hardest verse in the Bible to believe."

Bibliotheca Sacra . BSac—V148 #590—Apr 91—171

²³ 'We know'.

²⁴ Think of Naomi's triple bereavement in Ruth 1, and how that led, in the slow unfolding of God's purpose, to Ruth's conversion, marriage, and motherhood; the coming of David; and finally the birth of Christ.

²⁵ Cf. the case of Naomi, Ruth 1. 20-21 with 4. 14-17. Also the case of Job, Job 3. 1 with 42. 12. Also the case of the Old Testament Saul of Tarsus, King Manasseh, whose bronze chains and captivity worked for his good, 2 Chron. 33. 11-16.

²⁶ September 2008.

²⁷ Our Chain of Ten Links comprises:

1. The envy of Joseph's brothers, 37. 1-11
2. The anxiety of Joseph's father, 37. 12-14
3. The friendly inquiry of a certain man of Shechem, 37. 15-17
4. The timely intervention of Reuben and Judah, 37. 18-24; 26-27
5. The journeying of certain Arabian traders, 37. 25, 28
6. The domestic needs of Potiphar's household, 37. 36; 39. 1-6
7. The wickedness of Potiphar's wife, 39. 7-18
8. The injustice of Potiphar's decision, 39. 19-23
9. The falling from favour of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker, 40. 1-4 – and
10. The memory of the chief butler, 40. 20-23; 41. 9-13.

²⁸ Gen. 45. 5-9; 'God meant it *for good*', Gen. 50. 20.

²⁹ Acts 7. 14.

³⁰ Gen. 12. 1-2

³¹ Exod. 12. 37; Num. 1. 46.

³² Rom. 9. 5.

³³ Joseph had been HATED and then TRADED by his brothers; SEDUCED (at least in intention) and then FRAMED by Potiphar's wife; and NEGLECTED and FORGOTTEN by Pharaoh's chief butler.

³⁴ Gen. 37. 2; 41. 46.

³⁵ Born 15 October 1949.

³⁶ <https://answersingenesis.org/who-is-god/god-is-good/why-do-gods-children-suffer/>. See also ... <http://www.joniandfriends.org/radio/5-minute/god-permits-what-he-hates1/>. Again, 'God permits what He hates to achieve what He loves', Joni E. Tada and Steve Estes, *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), page 84 ... and 'Sometimes God allows what He hates to accomplish what He loves', Joni Eareckson Tada, *The God I Love*.

³⁷ Gen. 42. 36.

³⁸ Gen. 50. 20.

³⁹ Isa. 51. 4.

⁴⁰ God's providence is woven into the very fabric of the story of Esther:

1. Queen Vashti refuses to attend the king's feast.
2. The king accepts the advice of his officials both to remove and to replace Vashti.
3. Esther is chosen as the new queen.
4. Mordecai hears of, and reports, a plot against the king's life.
5. The king fails to reward Mordecai at the time.
6. The king's decree authorising the execution of all the Jews specifies a date 11 months later. (Thereby giving time for the subsequent stages of God's rescue programme.)
7. Esther is twice extended the golden sceptre which spared her life.
8. The king agrees to attend two banquets.
9. During a sleepless night, the king 'just happens' to have read to him details of Mordecai's part in frustrating the previous assassination attempt – and exalts Mordecai to be his First Minister.
10. When the day comes for the king's decrees to be put into operation, Mordecai's recent appointment swings the balance in favour of the Jews, who prevail over their enemies.

⁴¹ Warren Wiersbe, 'Be Committed: Doing God's Will Whatever the Cost', page 77.

⁴² Acts 8. 1.

⁴³ Acts 8. 3.

⁴⁴ Acts 8. 4.

⁴⁵ Rom. 16. 22.

⁴⁶ Acts 28. 16, 30.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, the word "advance" was the word which would have been used to describe the progress of an army. The soldier at the other end of Paul's coupling chain would have understood the reference – to cutting away trees and undergrowth to make way for the advancing forces.

⁴⁸ Phil. 1. 12-18.

⁴⁹ Acts 21. 26-33 etc.

⁵⁰ Phil. 1. 13.

⁵¹ Phil. 4. 22. See William Barclay, *The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, page 87. Also Ben Witherington III, *Philippians*, pages 283-284, and F F Bruce, *Philippians*, *Good News Commentary*, pages 133-134 ... http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ADQeypcGoSgC&pg=PT147&lpg=PT147&dq=caesar+household+philippians&source=bl&ots=SWCywuTFc5&sig=hqQNR-mFT_ZadnQs6bXtGaNsbA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rT77U7zzH4PEOerkglgM&ved=0CCMQ6AEwATgU#v=onepage&q=caesar%20household%20philippians&f=false

⁵² 1 Thess. 2. 17-18.

⁵³ 1 Thess. 3. 5.

⁵⁴ God is well able to turn Satan's stumbling blocks into stepping stones for His people.

⁵⁵ 1517 – 4 March 1583.

⁵⁶ Henry VIII, Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey, Mary and Elizabeth I.

⁵⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Gilpin

⁵⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_I_of_England#Religious_policy

⁵⁹ Apparently, he fell from his horse ... <http://www.stmichaels-hls.org.uk/visit-us/bernard-gilpin>

⁶⁰ Mr Gilpin 'ordered his servant (his steward William Airey) to provide a long garment for him, in which he might go decently to the stake'. His family later reported that, on the way to London, Mr Gilpin had an accident and 'broke his leg, which put a stop to his journey. The persons, in whose custody he was, took occasion thence, maliciously to retort upon him an observation he would frequently make, that "nothing happens to us but what is intended for our good"; asking him, "Whether he thought his broken leg was so intended?" He answered meekly, "He made no question but it was". And indeed so it proved in the strictest sense: for before he was able to travel, Queen Mary died, and he was set at liberty'. *The Lives of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury; and of Bernard Gilpin*, William Gilpin, 1809, pages 242-244. See also Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition, volume XII, page 25 – accessed at ...

<https://archive.org/stream/encyclopaediabrit12chisrich#page/25/mode/1up>

For a (probably embellished version) see also http://beaconoftruth.net/providential_workings/gilpin.html

By way of comparison, I was interested to read in the rabbinic teachings of the Jews that, and I quote, 'Rabbi Akiba was once going along the road and he came to a certain town and looked for lodgings but was everywhere refused. He said 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good', and he went and spent the night in the open field ... The same night some brigands came and carried off the inhabitants of the town'. Source: Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakoth, Folio 60b. (Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph lived 40-137 AD – a little later than Paul.)

⁶¹ Psa. 119. 71.

⁶² This is the title of Bunyan's biography by William S. Deal (1977). Bunyan actually worked as a tinker in the village of Elstow, a little south east of Bedford.

⁶³ 28 November 1628 – 31 August 1688.

⁶⁴ Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* in two parts, the first of which was published in London in 1678 and the second in 1684. He conceived the work during his first period of imprisonment, and probably finished it during the second. 'Early Bunyan scholars like John Brown believed *The Pilgrim's Progress* was begun in Bunyan's second, shorter imprisonment for six months in 1675, but more recent scholars like Roger Sharrock believe that it was begun during Bunyan's initial, more lengthy imprisonment from 1660–72 right after he had written his spiritual autobiography, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pilgrim's_Progress See too ... http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bunyan

⁶⁵ Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian. See brief videos on each at ... <http://www2.wheaton.edu/learnres/ARCSC/exhibits/huaorani/>

⁶⁶ See the article in this LIFE magazine ...

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gT8EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA10&source=gbs_toc_r&redir_esc=y#v=twopage&q&f=true

⁶⁷ See <http://provocationsandpantings.blogspot.co.uk/2006/01/other-end-of-spear.html>

⁶⁸ Among the Zulu people.

⁶⁹ 'Older readers of these pages will remember the five Wheaton College graduates in the 1950s who lost their lives in an attempt to bring the gospel to the Auca Indians. Among the excellent unforeseen results was the very high number of Wheaton graduates who year after year for the next decade or two offered themselves for missionary service. Because of the death of the "Auca five," many were "encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly"', D.A. Carson. *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*. Baker Academic, 1996. Pages. 22-28.

http://www.acts29network.org/mediafiles/uploaded/p/0e1560165_put-the-gospel-at-the-center-of-your-aspirations.pdf

⁷⁰ Quoted from the article 'What is the Point of this Waste?' by Ken Fleming, *Echoes* magazine, June 2006, pages 253, 255.

⁷¹ Phil. 1. 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, page 247.

⁷³ The title of Nate Saint's biography, written by Russell Hitt. RACHEL SAINT (sister of NATE) died 11 November 1994 – 20 years ago to the day.

⁷⁴ In 2005.

⁷⁵ 'The End of the Spear', Steve Saint, 2005, page 60. "God writes with a pen that never blots, speaks with a tongue that never slips, acts with a hand which never fails. Bless his name", C.H. Spurgeon, comments on Psa. 33. 4, in Treasury of David. For an update on Steve, see ... <http://www.itecusa.org/index.html>

⁷⁶ Gal. 1. 18.

⁷⁷ Acts 9. 26.

⁷⁸ Acts 9. 20-25; Gal. 1.17.

⁷⁹ Acts 9. 26.

⁸⁰ And James, Gal. 1. 19.

⁸¹ Acts 9. 29.

⁸² Cf. Acts 9. 25 and 17. 14.

⁸³ Acts 9. 30.

⁸⁴ Gal. 1. 1.

⁸⁵ Gal. 2. 1-10.

⁸⁶ Gal. 2. 11-21.

⁸⁷ Gal. 1. 18; 2. 1.

⁸⁸ Gal. 1. 18.

⁸⁹ And James, Gal. 1. 19.

⁹⁰ 2 Cor. 12. 7-10.

⁹¹ 2 Cor. 12. 1-6.

⁹² 2 Cor. 12. 8.

⁹³ Note the word 'for' in 2 Cor. 12. 9.

⁹⁴ Cf. 2 Tim. 2. 21.

⁹⁵ Again, as in 1 Thessalonians 2-3, a case where Satan overreached himself.

⁹⁶ They are conformed to His image; He is and remains distinct and unique as the Father's "first-born" (πρωτότοκον). This distinctive designation of Jesus Christ expresses His position of priority to and preeminence over all the other members of the family. He is 'firstborn' ... linked to creation, Col. 1. 15; to resurrection, Col. 1. 18; Rev. 1. 5; to the church, Rom. 8. 29; and to His Second Advent, Heb. 1. 6; Psa. 89. 27. (Cf. W E Vine, 'An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words'.)

⁹⁷ If I am honest, I will have to admit that my greatest problem with Romans 8 verse 28 is that *my* definition of 'good' does not square with *God's*.

⁹⁸ Rom. 8. 18.

⁹⁹ His aim for them now is not to make them happy, materially prosperous, or famous, but to make them Christ-like.

¹⁰⁰ Rom. 8. 3.

¹⁰¹ 1 John 3. 2; cf. Phil. 3. 21.

¹⁰² 1 Cor. 15. 49.

¹⁰³ John 13. 7. 'Knowledge as absolute and complete (οἶδας) is contrasted with the knowledge which is gained by ... experience (γινώσκειν - "understand")', B. F. Westcott. "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt understand hereafter" ... The R.V. brings out the distinction between the verbs, οἶδα, to perceive intuitively, and γινώσκω, to understand by learning', W. E. Vine, Collected writings of W.E. Vine.

¹⁰⁴ Union Theological Seminary, now (since 2010) Union Presbyterian Seminary. See ... http://www.upsem.edu/who_we_are1/history/

¹⁰⁵ Ron Lee Davis, *Becoming A Whole Person In A Broken World*, pages.118-119.
<http://calvarycsd.org/docs/Romans/PDFs/Romans%208-28-30.pdf>
See too ... <http://virginiachronicle.com/cgi-bin/virginia?a=d&d=RTD19150922.1.5#>

¹⁰⁶ Rev. 21. 4.

¹⁰⁷ 'From the ground there blossoms red life that shall endless be' ... does this mean that from the blood-stained ground at the foot of the cross – where the Christian lays this life's transient glory – there springs new and endless life?

"There was given to me a thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). "There was given to me..." Can, then, the thorn be a gift from God? I am in the habit of seeing God's gifts in the abundance of the things which my life possesses, and I call those things the dangers of life which diminish the sum of its abundance. But here there is a complete reversal of my thought; the abundance is the danger, and that which diminishes it is the gift. Paul has been exalted above measure; he has been standing on the heights of prosperity, and summering in the sunshine of a cloudless day. The cloudlessness of the day is his greatest danger, and there is sent a mist over the sun. His spiritual life has been fragrant with the breath of flowers. The thorn is, for the time, God's best gift to his soul; there is something protective in it. It has no fragrance, it has no beauty, but it yields one of the sweetest uses of adversity—it reminds a human spirit that it is, after all, only human.

My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorn. *I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorn.* I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross, but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Thou, Divine Love, whose human path has been perfected through sufferings, teach me the glory of my cross, teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. *Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.* Reveal to me that my strength was the product of that hour when I wrestled until the breaking of the day. Then shall I know that my thorn was blessed by Thee, then shall I know that my cross was a gift from Thee, and I shall raise a monument to the hour of my sorrows, and the words which I shall write upon it will be these: "It was good for me to have been afflicted" (Psalm 119:71).

George Matheson. This meditation is taken from the author's book, Moments on the Mount, XXVI, pages 60-62 – available from Internet Archive. Reprinted in The Prairie Overcomer 10/76.

¹⁰⁸ Rom. 1. 1, 7.

¹⁰⁹ AD 57 to AD 64.

¹¹⁰ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XV, 44 ... [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_\(Tacitus\)/Book_15#44](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Annals_(Tacitus)/Book_15#44). See also Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* II. 25. 5 – which mentions the tradition of the executions of Paul and Peter.

¹¹¹ The word 'Oops' doesn't appear in God's dictionary.

¹¹² Num. 23. 20.