

What It Is!

Part II

Romans 8:28

Introduction

In her book *Mystery on the Desert*, Maria Reich described a series of strange hills and valleys made by the Indians in Peru, centuries ago. These hills would go on for hundreds of yards and then, abruptly stop, or turn suddenly or smoothly to the right or left. There was seemingly no pattern. For centuries, these hills were believed to be the ancient remnants of some sort of irrigation system. Or perhaps, ancient boundary markers for some sort of mystical religion.

However, in 1939, the mystery was solved. Dr. Paul Kosok of Long Island University, discovered the true meaning by simply observing those hills from high in the air, as he flew over the territory in an airplane. The seemingly random hills and valleys, forming straight lines, then curving this way and that, were actually lines which formed enormous drawings of birds and other animals.¹

Imagine, creating art that you could not really appreciate on earth. In fact, you could not even make sense of it on the ground – you had to gain a higher perspective to see the beauty of these works of art!

Paul is saying, in our text for today, that the beauty and art in your life is most often impossible to fully appreciate from earth's perspective. You need a higher altitude to put the pieces together.

Romans 8:28 says a lot about that kind of higher perspective. Paul writes to the Roman believers, struggling to make sense of the difficulties of the Christian life now that they have come to Christ, these incredibly encouraging words. And, by the way, he is writing not only to them, but to us!

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

Let us read further to verse 29a.

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son . . .

Review – Romans 8:28

What It Is Not!

Now, in our last discussion, I spent the entire time exposing what Romans 8:28 does not say. Let me review what this verse is not!

Romans 8:28 is not a precise explanation for suffering

1. Romans 8:28 is not a precise explanation for suffering.

There are other passages that explain the fallen nature of mankind and that God allows mankind the freedom to make moral decisions. That leaves open the freedom to do immoral, evil, and violent things.

Many of us, I am sure, have been watching the story unfold in Lakeland, Florida, of the eleven year old girl who was abducted and killed. Every Mommy and Daddy's nightmare came true for that poor family.

Romans 8:28 is not the verse to quote – it neither explains the evil of mankind, nor does it promise some sort of special protection from evil men. It

does promise, as we will see in a moment, to take the evil of men and turn it into the good and glory of God's children.

What deeply concerns me is the way this verse has become a, sort of, Christian's rabbit foot. They superstitiously wear it around their hearts and then, when it does not seem to work, they walk away from God, disillusioned and defeated.

Romans 8:28 is not a prohibition against sorrow and grief

2. Furthermore, Romans 8:28 is not a prohibition against sorrow and grief.

You are not embarrassing God by grieving and weeping over your loss or your pain or by asking your questions.

Romans 8:28 is not a pretext for avoiding the disciplines and challenges of life

3. Thirdly, we learned that Paul does not intend for this text to provide a pretext for avoiding the disciplines and challenges of life.

There is the thought that, "God's gonna work everything out, so I won't get involved. I won't work . . . I won't confront . . . I won't sweat . . . I won't evangelize . . . I won't sacrifice . . . I won't risk anything . . . God's gonna work everything out anyway."

That is not what this verse is saying.

Romans 8:28 is not a permanent ticket to comfortable living

4. Finally, Romans 8:28 is not some sort of permanent ticket to comfortable living.

My friends, do you know what these four things are attempting to do? They are trying to make sense of the twisting hills and valleys on earth – from earth's perspective.

What we need is an elevation of perspective! We need to see below from heaven's point of view. And that is exactly what Paul had in mind, as he wrote Romans 8:28.

Paul provides an aerial perspective into the sovereign purpose of God for His children. And we discover our security, not in the events and circumstances of life, but in the promise that God is managing and moving everything according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

What It Is!

I want to point out six things that Paul reveals to us about God's purposes in Romans 8:28.

Romans 8:28 reveals the certainty of God's purpose

1. First, Romans 8:28 reveals the certainty of God's purpose.

Paul writes,

And we know . . .

Earlier, in verse 26, Paul wrote,

. . . for we do not know how to pray as we should . . .

Now, in verse 28, Paul says there is something we do know. *We do not know* how to pray . . . *we do know* God has a purpose!

Would you notice that Paul did not write, "And we think," or "And we hope," or "Oh we wish . . ." In fact, aren't you glad that Paul did not begin this verse by writing, "And we feel . . ."? There is a huge difference between feeling and knowing.

The truth is, we might be *feeling* exactly the opposite of what God is actually doing! We might not *feel* that God is in control. We might *feel* that God does not love us. We might *feel*, at times, that God has abandoned us. But, in this fallen world, as fallen human beings, surrounded by fallen humanity, we must recognize that our feelers are fallen too!

Would you notice as well, that Paul did not write, "It is my personal opinion . . ." Listen, when the clouds of life roll in and the pressures and problems of life seem to overwhelm us; when the hills and the valleys in our lives take strange turns and make abrupt dead ends, we do not need anyone's opinion – not even Paul's!

Paul writes, "And we know! We know!"

In the New Testament there are several Greek cognates translated "knowledge, know, or knowing".

One Greek cognate for "knowledge" is "ginosko," which is a word that relates to knowing something by means of personal experience. Paul used it when he wrote to the Philippians, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .".

Paul was saying, "Oh that I might know by means of personal experience. I want to be involved

in knowing by experiencing His power and His sufferings.”

This same thought, by the way, is expressed when a wife tells her husband, “I don’t know if you really love me.”

And what do most men do? They remind her by saying, “Listen, I made a vow to you on our wedding day – 7, 10, 20, 30 years ago – that I would love you no matter what. You should know that!”

She says, “You don’t understand . . . I need to know you mean it.”

If she knew some Greek, which is so clearly expressive, she could make herself perfectly understood and save a lot of frustration by simply saying, “I need to ‘ginosko’ you love me.”

In other words, “I need a little reassurance . . . I need to know by means of experience . . . I need to see that vacuum cleaner making its way across the living room floor . . . that trash making its way outside to the garbage can . . . let me *experience* your love!”

There is another Greek cognate for “knowledge or knowing,” which is “oida”. This is not knowledge gained by personal experience; this is knowledge gained by propositional truth.

You do not experience $2 + 2 = 4$, you just learn it, Lord willing! When you take a test this week in school, they are going to test your “oida” – how well you memorized what the teacher said in class; how well you remembered the propositional truth of that math formula or history lesson.

That is the word Paul uses in Romans 8:28. He is not saying, “We know God is in control because we personally experienced something; because we see evidence of it.”

Paul is elevating our perspective in the very first three words of this promise. He is saying, in effect, “We know God is in control because He said He is. And we have been listening to the Teacher.”

There are times in your life when that is all you have – God said so! Whether you feel it or not; whether you see evidence of it or not, you know it is true because God said it is true. And it is impossible for God to lie!

That is the certainty of God’s purpose.

Romans 8:28 reveals the controller of God’s purpose

2. Secondly, notice that Romans 8:28 reveals the controller of God’s purpose.

Paul continues to write,

And we know that God causes . . .

In other words, we not only believe, but we believe that God is behind what we believe. God is the cause and controller of His divine purposes.

That is great news . . . because if the purposes of God depended on you and me, we would bankrupt heaven’s gold and create chaos in the universe within the first twenty four hours. If the purposes of God depended on our cleverness, or perceptiveness, or diligence, or strength, or wisdom, or desire, or anything at all, the purposes of God would look like our list of New Year’s resolutions, which are already beginning to fall apart.

The believer’s confidence in God’s purpose is directly related to the cause of God’s purpose being none other than God.

Romans 8:28 reveals the comprehensiveness of God’s purpose

3. Thirdly, Paul refers to the comprehensiveness of God’s purpose.

Read further in Romans 8:28.

And we know that God causes all things . . .

I looked this up in several Greek texts and discovered something amazing. Do you know what the word “all” means in the Greek language? Write this down – it means, “all”.

You could render it, “God causes *everything* ultimately to fulfill His purpose . . .”

“All things” is utterly, totally, absolutely, entirely comprehensive.

Paul is not saying that God prevents His children from experiencing things that can harm them. He is rather attesting to the fact that the Lord talks all that He allows to happen to His children, even the worst things, and turns those things into [pieces of His purpose].ⁱⁱ

Dear friends, even when God seems to be doing nothing, He is doing everything!

Our temporary handicap is that we are earthbound. We cannot see from the startling heights of heaven, but we can believe it by faith.

“All” means “all”.

Romans 8:28 reveals the continuity of God's purpose

4. Fourthly, notice that Romans 8:28 also reveals the continuity of God's purpose.

Paul writes,

And we know that God causes all things to work together . . .

The phrase "work together" is the word "sunergeo" in the Greek. It gives us our English word, "synergism".

Webster defines synergism as, "the combined action of two or more things which have a greater total effect than the sum of their individual effects".ⁱⁱⁱ

What a powerful word.

Any one thing in your life may not seem to work anything out. Perhaps only later, you realize how that one thing brought about another thing, which consequently affected a different thing, resulting in the final thing being worked out.

Remember, however, you realizing, seeing, or understanding that the final result is being worked out, is not what Paul is saying. Paul is simply saying this is exactly what God is doing.

I read recently, of a pastor who returned to his pulpit a few weeks after his son committed suicide. With great emotion he read his text – which happened to be Romans 8:28.

Then he looked at his congregation and said, "I cannot make my son's death fit into this passage. It is impossible for me to see how anything good can come out of it. Yet I realize I only see in part. I only know in part. It's like the miracle of the shipyard. Almost every part of our great ships are made of steel. If you were to take any single part of that vessel – be it a steel plate from the hull or steel from its rudder – and throw it into the ocean, it will sink. Steel doesn't float! But, when the shipbuilder is finished, when the last plate has been riveted in place, that massive steel ship floats!"

He then concluded by saying, "Taken by itself, my son's suicide is senseless. Throw it into the sea of Romans 8:28 and it will sink. But when the Divine Shipbuilder has finally finished, even this tragedy will build together God's unsinkable purpose."^{iv}

What incredible faith . . . in the continuity of the purposes of God.

Romans 8:28 reveals the context of God's purpose

5. Fifthly, there is the context of God's purpose.

Paul then writes,

. . . all things . . . work together for . . .

(what?),

. . . good [!] . . .

Paul did not say, "all things are good," he said, "all things work together for good."

You might say, "You mean even evil and sin and false accusations and injustice and failure and broken relationships and cruelty and betrayal and pain and suffering and hatred and jealousy and abandonment – you mean even that?"

Everything I just listed was a part of the last few hours in the life of Jesus Christ. And it all worked into God's plan for your good and His glory.

Are any of those things in your life?

God is currently managing their movement for your good. God is presently weaving them together for your good. Why? So that, as verse 29 tells us, we can become just like Jesus Christ.

Paul says, in effect, that, "God will intertwine and merge and fuse and blend and mingle and combine everything for your ultimate good, so that you begin to reflect your Savior, Jesus Christ."

You know what? I am going to step out on a limb and say that I think the phrase most often repeated in heaven will be, "Well, what do you know!"

I think we will say, "What do you know! Would you have ever guessed that?! Wow! Can you believe it?!"

That missed appointment . . . that introduction . . . that teacher . . . that tragedy . . . that accident . . . that neighbor . . . that program . . . that hospital visit . . . they are the hills and valleys of Divine art!

"Well, what do you know! God in His overall plan for my life, used everything for my good . . . and for His glory."

Now, I need to warn all of you that there is one condition to experiencing the glory of God's purpose.

Romans 8:28 reveals the condition to God's purpose

6. Finally, I want you to see the condition to God's purpose.

Paul writes,

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

You might ask, “Does this mean if I don’t consistently love the Lord; if I fall slack in my affection; if I don’t follow Him faithfully, then I’ll miss it – God will stop His consistent, comprehensive work on my behalf?”

No.

The titles, “those who love God” and “those who are called according to His purpose,” are two of the many titles or descriptions of the New Testament Christian.

One author said, “‘those who love God’ is written from our perspective, while ‘those who are called according to His purpose,’ is written from God’s perspective.”

In other words, the condition to being the recipient of God’s divine purpose is simply becoming one of His children.

How do you become a child of God?

John wrote in his gospel, chapter 1, verse 12,

But as many as received Him [Jesus Christ], to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name

Acts, chapter 4, verse 12, records,

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

The world has not received the promise of Romans 8:28. One of the great tragedies of the unbeliever is that he will never see how God made it all work together for good.

Only the believer, who has become a member of that body who loves the Son of God, can experience

the full measure of God’s providence, which ultimately will lead to heaven.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers, in chapter 2, verse 10,

. . . we are His workmanship . . .

We are His “poiema,” in the Greek, or His “poem”. You are literally God’s work of art!

You may not see it now. So often the hills and valleys do not make sense on earth – the way they twist and turn or suddenly stop or turn back – but you will see it!

We know we will see it . . . one day!

That is the promise of Romans 8:28.

Let me ask some questions for you to answer quietly in your heart. In light of what we have learned:

- Do you know Christ personally? Have you ever received Him into your heart? Are you ready to place your faith in His work on the cross for you?
- For those of you who have received Christ and have become the children of God, are you willing, even when He does not provide the most favorable experiences, to obey Him?
- Are you willing, even when His timetable is not even close to matching yours, to trust Him?
- Are you willing, even when He does not explain Himself, to keep worshiping Him with your lips . . . and with your life?

Are you willing to say, in the way you will live tomorrow morning, God is God – sovereign, loving, in control, working all things toward His ultimate purpose – and I am His surrendered child?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/8/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Timothy George, “Big Picture Faith,” Christianity Today, (Sept. 23, 2000).

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans (Moody Press, 1991), p. 473.

ⁱⁱⁱ New Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus (Danbury, Lexicon Publications, 1995), p. 1003.

^{iv} Richard Exley, “Decent Exposure,” Leadership, (Fall, 1992), p. 118.