

September 5, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Romans 8:28

Title: All Things Toward the Good

I invite you now to focus with me on one of the most well-known and much beloved verses of the Bible. I invite you to focus with me on the 28th verse of the 8th chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans 8:28 "And we know that God causes all things to work together for the good to those who love Him, and who are called according to His purpose."

All things toward the good?

Of all well known and much loved verses of the Bible, this one must be seen and heard in context. So I am going to read Romans chapter 8, verses 18 through 39.

Hear the Word of God. [reading followed by prayer]

Romans 8:28 – "For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." Or, better, "For we know that God causes all things to work together for the good to those who love Him, and who are called according to His purpose".

All things? God causes all things to work toward the good? All? Does the apostle Paul really mean "all"?

Like many of you, Sharon and I have hung on to this verse as a life preserver in turbulent, troubled waters. Like many of you, we do not know how we would have coped over the years without this great affirmation.

Each of us brings to this text problematic, puzzling, painful events and circumstances. I look around the room and I think: infertility, miscarriages, loss of jobs, unjust treatment at work, cancer, bouts of depression, caring for the invalid, automobile accidents, crippling diseases, loss of spouses, premature death of children, crushing stress. And I also think today of the people of Pakistan and New Zealand. And, like many of you, I ask the question: "All? All things? Paul you are a brilliant thinker and courageous believer. Do you really mean 'All?' God causes all things to work together toward the good?"

Which is why I bothered to read Romans 8:28 in context.

This well known and much loved verse comes in the context of Paul wrestling with the brokenness of creation and making a great declaration of hope. Roman 8, verse 18 "For I consider the sufferings of this present age are not worth being compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." "The sufferings of this present age." The "all things" of Romans 8:28 include "the sufferings of this present age" of Romans 8:18. In verse 35 of the chapter, Paul names some of what such suffering include: "... tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword." J. B. Phillips translated the verse: "Trouble, pain, persecution, lack of clothes and food,

danger to life and limb, the threat of force of arms.” All things Paul himself experienced!! (see also 2 Cor. 11)

And the apostle claims that such things, such “sufferings” are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us. And the apostle claims that God causes such suffering – all of it – to work together toward the good in the lives of those who love God.

All? All such things?

What helps me understand and then embrace Romans 8:28, is being clear about what Paul is not saying. Many people have been led astray ... and therefore experienced disappointment and disillusionment .. by one of the following six misunderstandings of the text. I have heard variations of each of these six throughout the years ... both spoken by others about their circumstances ... or spoken by others to me and Sharon about our circumstances.

1. First of all, Romans 8:28 does not say “all things are somehow good”. Just be patient ... you will see that this suffering is actually good. The Bible nowhere calls us to deny the reality of bad. God does not ask us to call natural disasters or disease or child abuse or gang violence or airplane crashes or war or hiking accidents “good”! Indeed, through the prophet Isaiah, God says: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” On the contrary, God calls us to see the world from God’s perspective. As marvelous as this world is, this is a broken world. Things do not work they way they were originally designed to work. The original harmony and order are constantly on the verge of chaos. This is not the “best of all possible worlds”. When Jesus wept at the grave of His dear friend Lazarus, He was feeling the sorrow of Lazarus’ sisters. But He was also saying “this ought not be ... death ought not be ... this is not good”. We live in a broken world. Romans 8:28 does not ask us to believe “all things are somehow good”.
2. Secondly, Romans 8:28 does not teach that all things are inevitable. It does not teach that everything that happens was supposed to happen. As though every single event was written into some script which we are all programmed to act out ... and which even God cannot change. That all things are inevitable is fatalism, not Biblical faith. The Bible reminds us that this is not only a broken world ... it is also a rebel world. “spiritual forces in the heavenly places”, as Paul puts it in Ephesians, have free will and they can and do exercise their free will against the will of God. And human beings have free will, and we can and do exercise our wills against the will of God. Men and women, not God, made bows and arrows, handguns and rifles, tanks and bombs. It is because human beings violate God’s good commands that we have sexually transmitted diseases. It is because of human greed that we have slavery and hunger, poverty and prostitution. In 1999, when our son whom we adopted from Russia fell off a 120-foot cliff, and went into a coma, suffering severe brain damage, he and his friends had left the marked trail. They should not have attempted to negotiate so difficult a terrain. All things are not inevitable.
3. Thirdly, Romans 8:28 does not say all thing will “work themselves out” for good. The Bible does not teach what we might call “evolutionary optimism”. Humanity and human

history do not on their own move “upward” towards redemption and wholeness. Physicists know this. It is affirmed in the so-called “second law of thermodynamics”. Given a closed system where no energy is exchanged – no energy goes out, no energy comes in – given a closed system entropy will increase. Entropy is the measure of disorder. Left to itself, a closed system moves toward greater and greater chaos, not toward greater order. Parents observe this phenomena in their children’s bedrooms all the time: left alone, without our outside-energy input, entropy will increase ... the room will go to maximum disorder. Left to itself, life runs down. It decreases. It moved toward disorder. Toward death. Many try to encourage one another by saying, “Just hang in there, things are going to work out”. On what basis can anyone make that promise? All things do not by themselves work out for the good.

4. Fourthly, Romans 8:28 does not say that for those who love God nothing but good will happen. Oh how I wish it said that! Belonging to Jesus Christ does not automatically insulate us against the consequences of living in a broken, rebel, decaying world. Some forms of the faith are setting people up for profound disappointment, promising what God has not promised. Romans 8:28 does not say that if you love God you will find only good things happen.
5. Fifthly, Romans 8:28 does not say that those who love God will one day look back and see that in spite of how it appeared at the time what happened was in fact good. Paul is not saying that one day we will understand that that accident, that disease, that stress, that terror, that war was, after all, good.
6. And sixthly, Romans 8:28 does not say “one day it will all make sense ... the suffering ... it will one day make sense.” Some of it will, as does Jesus’ suffering on the cross. By grace it begins to make sense as the way of grace. But some suffering may never make sense. At this point in my processing the death of our Russian-born son last summer, it does not make sense: his taking his life may never “make sense”.

Well then, what does Romans 8:28 say?

It says that in the lives of those who love God, God works. God works together with. God works together with all that happens ... orchestrating and engineering it all ... toward the good. Romans 8:28 says that in this broken, rebel, decaying world, the God we meet in Jesus will and does work with everything causing it all to move toward the good.

One of the most dramatic Biblical illustrations of this promise is the experience of Joseph, one of the patriarchs of Israel. The story is told in Genesis, chapters 37-50.

Joseph’s brothers were very jealous of him; largely because of the way their father Jacob gave Joseph special attention. Joseph aggravated their jealousy by playing up this special attention. He could be quite snooty, arrogant, about his place in his father’s heart. He even had two dreams in which he saw his eleven brothers bow down to him! He shared the dreams with his brothers ... not a wise move (!) ... fueling the resentment.

At one point the brothers had had enough. So they decide to get rid of him, to kill him. (Sounds sadly like the plot of some contemporary films!) On advice from one of the more sane brothers, they throw Joseph into a deep, dark, empty pit ... and leave him to starve to death.

But along came a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt. To ease their guilt, the brother pull Joseph out of the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites as a slave. They then tell their father Jacob that a wild beast had devoured Joseph's body.

When the Ishmaelites reached Egypt, they sell Joseph to a man name Potipher, a high-ranking official in Pharaoh's government. Potiphar quickly recognizes Joseph's administrative gifts and make him his "right-hand man". Things were looking up for Joseph. Until one day Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. Joseph would not give in (unlike the plot of some contemporary films!) So she, out of wounded pride, lies to Potiphar, claims that Joseph had tried to seduce her. Joseph is thrown into jail.

About two years later, the Pharaoh has a disturbing dream. He was told of a man in jail who could interpret such dreams. Pharaoh's assistants call for Joseph. Joseph listens to the dream and was able to interpret it for Pharaoh. So the Pharaoh made Joseph a chief legislative ruler over all of Egypt.

Meanwhile, back in Palestine, Joseph's brothers and father were facing a terrible famine. Having heard that Egypt had an over-supply of grain (thanks to Joseph's wise leadership!), Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to trade for grain. And with whom do they have to barter ... but Joseph! At first they do not recognize him. When they finally do, they fear for their lives! They confess their sin to Joseph and beg his mercy. When he forgives them, they fall at his feet.

Then Joseph says: "... You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, and preserve many people alive." (Genesis 50:20)

God had worked "together with" Jacob's favoritism, Joseph's pride, his brothers' jealousy, his brothers' evil intent, an unsuspecting caravan, a deceptive woman, a Pharaoh's dream, a famine ... to bring about good. Not only for Joseph. But for Israel and Egypt.

It took years before the good was achieved. I am sure Joseph would have wrestled with Romans 8:28 while a slave to the Ishmaelites and while in jail.

"You meant if for evil ... God meant it for good."

Now, not all stories work out as redemptive as Joseph's. What about the stories ... many in this room ... that do not yet appear to be working toward the good?

So we come to the heart of the matter.

What does Paul mean by "the good"? What is "the good" toward which the God who loves us is orchestrating our mistakes, our sins, our misfortunes, our disappointments, our pains?

Again, context.

Romans 8:29 ... the next verse. “For whom God foreknew He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.” The “good” is to become like Jesus Christ the Son. It is our pre-destiny, our inherent destiny, says Paul. E. Stanley Jones argued that Christ-likeness is built into the very fabric of the universe. Christ is before all things; all things came into being through Him all for Him; Christ holds all things together. The who universe bears the stamp of His personality and ways. “The good” is to realize this inherent destiny. “The good” is to become like Jesus Christ.

In what sense? In what sense are we to be conformed to the image of the Son?

Well, what about the Son in His incarnation stands out to you? Besides His miraculous deeds and His astounding claims, three things stand out to me.

1. First, Jesus lives in total dependence upon the One he calls “Abba, Father”. Jesus trusts His Father. Jesus really trusts His Father, which is why we never see Him panicked, never frozen by fear.
2. Second, Jesus find His significance in Abba Father and in Him alone. Jesus finds His identity, His security, His worth, His purpose, His joy in His Father in Him alone. “My food,” says Jesus, “is to do the will of the One who sent me”. Jesus’ one concern is to be what the Father calls Him to be.
3. Third, Jesus lives, like His Father, giving Himself away. Jesus is “the man for others”.

Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary, is what true humanity is all about. Becoming like Jesus is the good toward which everything is moving. And Romans 8:28 is teaching us that God will and does use all things – good and bad – to cause us to become

- more dependent upon the Father;
- more consistently finding our security and significance in the Father ...
- and more freely living for others in self-giving love.

Given Paul’s understand of “the good” we can understand why God might allow certain things to happen in our lives. The Living God is all powerful. The Living God can prevent things from happening. God could have kept our Alex from falling off that cliff. The fact is, God prevents more falling than we are aware of! Why does God not prevent some of the things that happen to us?

Paul told the Corinthians about his and Timothy’s awful experiences in Asia. How they were burdened beyond their own resources. Ever felt that way? Burdened beyond your own resources? Paul says it was so bad that – quote “we despaired even of life”. (2 Cor. 1:8) Ever felt so burdened beyond your own resources that there seemed no way to keep going? Now, why would God allow that to happen to the Apostle Paul, to Christianity’s greatest missionary and theologian? Paul’s answer – 2 Cor. 1:9 – “in order that” ... yes ... “in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead”. God sometimes allows unpleasant and even

painful things to occur to bring us deeper into reality, into the place where we have no other alternatives but to trust the God who raises the dead.

I first learned this 30 years ago in 1980, the year I lived through a painful battle with depression. A friend gave me an article by Robert Sabath, a member of the Sojourners community in Washington, DC. In the article, Sabath identifies a number of causes and cures of burnout, a close cousin of depression. Sabath argues that the chief cause is not workaholism, but great expectations. “Burnout cannot develop without dedication, without high ideals”, he writes. “It has its roots in the unrealistic enthusiasm of determined idealists who have unlimited commitment to whatever they undertake. Burnout-people are the caring ones among us,” he says, “who have a sense of mission and are especially vulnerable to the excessive demands made on them”. Such people are candidates for exhaustion and depression.

Now you ask: Why would God let people, disciples of Jesus, who care and dream and labour for the Kingdom, burnout? Sabath writes this liberating insight: “Burnout consumes our illusions and false expectations. God alone is our hope and expectation, our vision and joy. Burnout is a refining fire that can detach us from an excessive identity with the results of our work and the impact we make on the world. Burnout can teach us a deeper trust in God by forcing us to withdraw all hope, ideals, visions, and expectations from every other object, situation, thing, or person except God. Burnout disestablishes our illusions and establishes true faith.”

This is not to say that burnout is good. This is not to say that burnout is inevitable. This is not to say that burnout itself will work towards good. This is not to say that one day we can look back and call the burnout “good”. It is simply to say that in it, with it, through it, the One who loves too much to let us live in our illusions, is working towards bringing us into reality where we have no choice but to depend on God himself.

One man who was freed by Romans 8:28 in very painful circumstances is Dehqani-Tafti, the Bishop of the Christian Church in Iran. Bishop Tafti’s son was murdered by a group of fanatics. yet, in the face of such horror, he was able to offer this prayer: “O God, we remember not only our son but also his murderers, not because they killed him in the prime of his youth and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow; not because with this savage act they have brought further disgrace on the name of our country among the civilized nations of the world; but because through their crime, we now follow Your footsteps more deeply in the way of sacrifice. The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness and possessives in us. Its flame reveals the dept of depravity and meanness and suspicion, the dimensions of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature; it makes obvious as never before our need to trust God’s love as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection – love which makes us free from hate toward our persecutors; love which brings patience, forbearance, courage, loyalty, humility, generosity, greatness of heart; love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death, O God. Our son’s blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls. [Then this line] So when his murderers stand before Thee on the Day of Judgment, remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives. And forgive”. (quoted by James Houston in The Transforming Friendship: A Guide to Prayer, p. 293-4)

Bishop Tafti is not saying that the murder of his son was somehow “good”. He is not saying that the murder of his son was somehow inevitable. He is not saying that somehow the murder of his son would by itself bring forth good. He is not saying that one day he will look back and heroically declare it “good”. He is not saying that one day the murder will make sense. He is saying that with it and through it the One who loves him is working toward the good of him, Bishop Tafti, becoming like the Saviour of the world.

And so too with you and me. The assurance may not remove the pain, it may not change the circumstances ... but it can give us perspective which can cause that “peace that passes understanding” ... a peace that has no other explanation but grace.

Romans 8:28 is not saying that somehow the sufferings of this present age are good. Romans 8:28 is not asking us to believe that the sufferings of the present age are inevitable and part some grand scheme that everybody has to fulfill. Romans 8:28 is not asking us to marshal up courage, and believe that the sufferings of the world are somehow going to work themselves out. Romans 8:28 is not asking us to transport ourselves to a future day when we will look back and say the sufferings were good.

Romans 8:28 is asking us to trust a Person. To trust a person who loves you and me and our families and friends. For somehow the Person is in all that we are going through ... and at work ... at work ... bringing us to the good.

- to the good of trusting the Father the way Jesus does,
- to the good of being centred in the Father the way Jesus is
- to the good of discovering the joy that only comes when we give ourselves away in the service and love of the Father the way Jesus does

Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch Christian who spent time in the Nazi concentration camps, clung to the image of the weaver weaving a tapestry. If you look at the tapestry from the under-side, all you see is the tangles web of string and yarn, the tangled web of hurt and shame, failure and disappointment. But if you can see the tapestry from the top-side, if only for a moment, you can see an exquisite work of art taking shape. THAT is the affirmation of Romans 8:28. The Master Weaver ... blessed be His Name! ... is taking all the tangled mess, all the apparently discordant, disconnected strings of our experience and weaving the most beautiful work of art imaginable ... men and women conformed to the image of Jesus of Nazareth.

One more time. Romans 8:28 “And we know that the God who has come to us in and as Jesus of Nazareth is good and faithful ... and is intentionally and strategically causing all things to work together for the good”. All things? All?

Thank God ... all!

