

God Works for Our Good

How His Sovereign Purpose is Our Ultimate Good

Romans Series
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Text: Romans 8:26-29; Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 8:26–27 *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.²⁸ **And we know** that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.***

Genesis 50:15–21 *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died:¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him.¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?²⁰ **As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.**²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." **Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.***

Introduction

As we move through the marvelous terrain Paul has mapped out for us in this chapter, we have come upon two stunning realities we never anticipated, which Paul uses as the foundation for our confident assurance and triumphant endurance!

First, we can rest in confident assurance when we don't know what to pray **because we know** the Holy Spirit intercedes with God the Father on our behalf! Put differently, God is constantly talking to God about us and for us according to God's perfect will! (8:26-27; cf., 8:34).

Second, we can endure triumphantly and joyfully even in the most excruciating circumstances and painful suffering **because we know** that God the Father is working with God the Holy Spirit on our behalf to use all things that happen to us and in us to bring about **a particular good** He intends for us (8:28-29).

And Paul begins verse 28 by emphatically stating that we know these realities – *“And we know!”* (8:28a)

But the reality for most of us is that we don’t know this truth the way Paul seems to know it, much less with the confidence he seems to have about it! We may know this theologically in our heads because we have heard sermons, read brief devotional comments, or even seen it on a bookmark or wall hanging – but when pressure comes, we need more than head knowledge or casual familiarity – we need experiential reality and unshakable conviction about the truth in this text.

- We don’t know exactly what Paul is talking about in this text.
- We are not sure who this knowledge is intended for.
- We wonder what the “good” God has in mind, since it seems to be remarkably different from anything we would consider “good.”
- And we certainly don’t have this as an unshakable conviction that settles our lives in the most difficult and turbulent times, the way Paul seems to have it and the way he seems to expect us to have it.
- Moreover, it doesn’t help matters when we consider how often this verse surfaces in our lives – it surfaces often. It is one of the most quoted verses in the NT!
- We quote this glibly to people in horrific pain or deep sorrow.
- We abandon this regularly in our own season of pain and sorrow when what we think is good does not materialize over time.

Because of these two unfortunate realities, this verse fails to accomplish the immense purpose God intends for it in our lives, nor does it provide the deep comfort and unshakeable assurance Paul intended it to bring.

NOTE: The truth of this verse is the fifth argument Paul offers. When properly reckoned (*logizomai*), it instills unshakable confidence in our souls and sustains triumphant endurance in our lives! After carefully evaluating all the information (ours and God's), we have concluded that:

1. Present suffering is not worth considering compared with the future glory God is preparing for His people (8:18).
2. Creation's groanings are actually birth pangs, not death throes (8:19-22).
3. Our groanings are eager longings to fully experience what we have tasted of the down payment and first fruit God has given us in the Holy Spirit (8:23-25).
4. God speaks to God on our behalf to accomplish what is necessary to conform us to the likeness of His Son, to glorify God and magnify Christ, and to advance the gospel (8:26-27).
5. God works with God on our behalf to bring about the good He has purposed for us in accordance with His will (8:28-29).

And Paul begins by stating in categorical terms, "*We know this!*" In other words, Paul is saying that mature believers have an unshakable conviction about something God has told them in His Word and has repeatedly verified in the lives of His saints.

So, what is it that Paul says we know?

I. The Nature of this knowledge: What is this knowledge like?

A. A Deep Experiential Conviction

- The word "know" (οἶδα) describes someone who has reached a settled conviction about something observed over time – they

have come to realize it as true and are convinced and settled in that knowledge.

- Paul uses this phrase to remind believers that we have come to an unshakable confidence – not merely a theological belief but an experiential conviction – that we have both seen in Scripture and experienced ourselves.

B. About things God has revealed to us in His Word.

Examples in Romans where this grammatical construction occurs 5x:

- 2:2 – We know that God's judgment rightly falls on those who practice such things (hypocrites who judge others but do the same things).
- 3:19 – We know that whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God.
- 7:14 – We know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.
- 8:22 – For we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pangs until now (in this present messianic age).
- 8:26 – We know that all things are working together for good.

II. The Subjects of this Knowing: Who has received this knowledge?

There is a specific group of people who have experienced this knowledge, and they are described in three ways.

A. They are in Christ Jesus – 8:1.

- They are removed from being under divine condemnation (8:1).
- They are the first-fruits of a new creation (8:14-17).
- They have received an unshakeable confirmation in the form of a downpayment of the future glory that God has promised them (8:18).

B. They are those who love God – 8:28

- They are described from their vantage point.

- They have responded to the love of God that He first showed them.
- They are fiercely loyal to the God they love.

C. They are those who have been called by God according to His particular purpose – 8:28-29

- They are also described from God's vantage point.
- God has a very specific purpose for these particular people, and He called them according to (in light of) this specific purpose.
- The term Paul uses for "purpose" (πρόθεσιν) emphasizes God's sovereign plan or intention, which he is bringing about in accordance with the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11).
- And the term for "calling" (κλητός) describes people who have been summoned or invited into a transformative, personal relationship and a lifelong vocational partnership with God in a mission He has purposed to accomplish for His glory, one that involves them. In other words, they not only are the recipients of this purpose – they are called to partner with God in bringing this purpose about in the world.

Just as the kind of prayer Paul exhorts us to pray in 8:26-27 demands spiritual maturity from us, so this particular knowledge comes to those who are spiritually mature and have come to fully trust God to determine and define what is "the good" in all things and under all circumstances that touch their lives.

They are fully persuaded that God meant what He said to His suffering people in Jeremiah 29:11 – *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."*

What keeps us from this kind of mature trust?

- Unrestrained carnality – being driven by the desires of our flesh.
- Spiritual immaturity – we don't really know the Scriptures.
- Sinful Attractions – we love and desire what God prohibits.

- Idolatrous Affections – we look to others or to things to get what we should only seek from God. We elevate our plans and expectations above God and reduce Him to the One we turn to in order to procure the things we want or desire.

This is why Paul states that this promise is limited to those who “love God” – the idea here is not merely fond affection or personal affirmation of God, but a deep, committed, loyal love that values Him above anyone or anything in our lives. ***He doesn’t just matter more; He matters most!***

III. The Revelation of this knowledge: Who is working?

Question: Is there someone behind the scenes, not immediately visible, who is orchestrating and directing circumstances (πάντα συνεργεῖ) so that all things work together for good? If so, who? Are these random circumstances, or is there intentionality driving what happens around me and to me?

God is the one doing this work – but we have to look carefully and thoughtfully to see it in the text! In other words, God’s silent and invisible sovereignty is built right into the design of this text! And we are going to have to work thoughtfully and reason carefully to spot this reality – just as we do when God’s sovereignty so often seems invisible in our own lives.

Answer: Paul gives us the answer in the verses before and after 8:28.

- In verse 27, we learn that the Holy Spirit is going to God the Father with our groanings and longings when we don’t know what is “the necessary thing” to pray for in certain circumstances, and that the Spirit is interceding for us according to someone else’s will – God’s!
- In verses 29-30, we discover that someone is foreknowing, predestinating, calling, justifying, and glorifying a people according to His purpose – and that someone is God!

- Therefore, whoever is willing things in the lives of certain people in 8:27, and calling, justifying, and glorifying these same people in 8:29-30, is the very same One who is working all things around and within them for His purposes. ***And that person is God!***
- His purposes constitute and define what is “good” for those people because their highest good is to discern and do His good (*spiritually beneficial*), acceptable (*morally right*), and perfect (*biblically aligned*) will (Romans 12:1).

1. He does this silently.
2. He does this sovereignly (Eph 1:11).
3. He does this constantly (present active indicative).
4. He does this cosmically (on a universal and cosmic scale).
5. He does this collaboratively – working together (συνεργέω) with someone or something. ***So, who or what is God working with?***

Options: All things

Believers

The Holy Spirit* – who has just been interceding with Him on our behalf in 9:27.

So just as God the Spirit is speaking to God the Father on our behalf, God the Father is working with God the Spirit on our behalf in response!

IV. The Object of this Knowing: What exactly do we know?

What knowledge has been given to these people who love God and have been called according to His purpose? What exactly have they come to know about God’s sovereign work unfolding around them, to them, and within them?

God the Father is working with God the Spirit to use all things to bring about an ultimate good that is perfectly aligned with what He has purposed in the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11).

A. God is working “all things” for His ultimate purpose.

1. He works through Suffering. (examples in vs. 35)

- *Tribulation* (θλίψις) – deep trouble, extreme hardship, life-crushing, painful suffering and outward pressure.
- *Distress* (στενοχωρία) – calamities, problems that cause deep inner anguish and internal stress.
- *Persecution* (διωγμός) – relentless opposition and ruthless persecution verbally, economically, socially, and even physically. Refers at times to violent harassment.
- *Famine* (λιμός) – deep, sustained hunger – not enough food to sustain physical life.
- *Nakedness* (γυμνότης) – not enough of the vital necessities needed to sustain physical life safely (clothing and shelter).
- *Danger* (κίνδυνος) – mortal peril.
- *Sword* (μάχαιρα) – violent death by execution or war.

2. He works through Human Sinfulness (examples in vs 34)

- Sins done against us (cf., Joseph).
- Sins done by us (cf., David).
- Haldane: “Anything that is part of this life – even our sins – can, by God’s grace, contribute toward this good.”

B. The ultimate purpose of God defines what is “good” (ἀγαθόν) in and for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

- Paul is not saying that everything wrong in this life will eventually turn out well or be made right in this age.
- Nor is he saying that the trials, afflictions, and sufferings will make us better and stronger and lead to greater rewards (although this is not entirely wrong-headed, based on other texts Paul wrote elsewhere).
- There is ***a particular and very specific good*** that Paul has in mind in this verse, toward which God the Father and God the

Spirit are working together, using all things around us and in us to bring this particular good about in us and through us.

This brings us to the main question Paul wants us to ask and answer: ***What constitutes “good,” and who gets to define it?*** There are only two ultimate answers to this question. Either we trust God to define what constitutes “good” according to His good pleasure and in line with His purposes, or we define it ourselves according to our own will and desires.

V. The Design of this knowledge: What are God’s ultimate purposes?

2 Timothy 1:9 is the cross-reference that points us in the right direction. Paul reminds us: *“God saved us and called us to a holy calling (vocation), not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.”*

So, if we let God define what the “good” is that He is working out through all things, we discover that it is constituted by two massive purposes God ordained before we and the world came into existence. In other words, these two purposes have been in God’s mind since before the world’s creation.

And just as our own suffering and sins do not thwart these purposes, neither does the suffering and sin that have been such a devastating part of creation's history since Genesis 3!

Put differently, the “good” God purposes for us and through us is NOT the elimination of suffering or sin in our lives. Nor is it the alleviation of pain and affliction. In fact, those are the very things God uses to bring about His two big purposes for us (in us and through us).

And this text calls us to adjust our values, align our lives, and refocus our expectations to God’s definition of what is “good” for our lives

A. “Good” is defined by the sanctifying purpose that He is working out in us (8:29a)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,

- God the Father is working with God the Spirit to transform us so that we look like Christ; just as we bore the image of the “Man of Dust” (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the “Man from Heaven” (Christ) – 1 Cor 15:49.
- And the way he is doing it is by using all things that happen around us, to us, and within us to transform us into the image or likeness of the “Man from Heaven.”
- He is presently transforming us into this image in our inner character (morally and ethically), and ultimately He will transform our physical manifestation (2 Cor 3:18 – right now transforming our inner character; Phil 3:21 – one day will transform our physical appearance and body).

Examples/Illustrations:

1. A testimony from an OT Saint – *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.” (Psalm 119:67) “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” (Ps 119:71).*
2. A testimony from a NT Saint – *“... but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.” (Heb 12:10-13).*

B. “Good” is measured by the salvific purpose that He is working to bring about through us (8:29b)

... in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

- God is working to bring many sons to glory so that His Son can be the firstborn among many more who look like Him, belong to Him, love Him, and serve Him.

- That is the ultimate reason that He called us. That is the reason behind the reason He is sanctifying us. And that is the primary reason why He gives and sustains our lives now.

Let's consider one final example from a very familiar OT story:

Joseph is one of the primary examples of a person who was called by God, loved by God, and ordained by God to accomplish an incredible mission that resulted in two massive blessings for the world:

1. He saved his own people (nation) from devastating famine.
 2. He saved the nations of the world from that same famine.
- But for most of his life (some twenty to thirty years), neither of these glorious purposes seemed remotely present in His life.
 - He was despised and abused by the very brothers God intended to deliver one day through Joseph's kindness. He was maligned and unjustly treated by those he served faithfully, to their great profit (Potiphar and the Head of the Prison). He was forgotten by those he served and helped when he was in need. Most painful of all, God seemed silent and absent throughout it all!
 - However, we find out that God was in fact neither silent nor absent. His presence was orchestrating all the events that happened to Joseph, and His voice was heard in Pharaoh's dream and in all that was said to Pharaoh about Joseph.
 - At the end of the story, we learn what God was really up to in all that happened to Joseph. After Joseph saved both His people and the world, His brothers came to him and said, *"Please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father who did evil to you."* And Joseph said, *"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today!"* (Gen 50:17-20)

And this is exactly what God is doing in our lives today. Just as He used all the pain and affliction to prepare Joseph to be a gracious, kind, and good, albeit temporary, savior of the world, He is using all things to make us look like the true Savior of the World.

And just as He orchestrated all things to put Joseph in the exact right place where he could keep many people alive, God is using all the events and circumstances of your life to use you to bring many sons and daughters to life so that Jesus might be the firstborn and preeminent among many who are just like Him!

Conclusion:

So the question for each of us is this: Do we define what we consider “good” in these terms? Are these the two defining criteria by which we determine what is good? Or have we adopted an entirely different set of values and criteria to decide what is good for us?

In 8:26-27, we had to decide whether we were willing to trust the Holy Spirit to pray for us by asking God to bring about “the necessary thing” when we don’t know how or what to pray for.

In this text, we must determine whether we are willing to trust God to determine and define what is “the good” that will best accomplish His purposes in and through us. BUT this will demand a radical reorientation of our own purposes, desires, and definitions of what we think is “good.” We are going to have to align with God and His will rather than demanding that He align with our will and purpose.

Are you willing to let God the Father work with God the Holy Spirit to determine what is “good” in your life, so that His purpose, rather than your own, is accomplished in you and blessed by Him through you?