

All Things for Good

by Albert N. Martin

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Now will you turn with me, please, in your Bibles to the chapter from which, God willing, we will be reading in our consecutive reading next Lord's Day morning-- Romans 8. And I shall read in your hearing verses 15 to 30.

"For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified."

Now let us again ask the help of the Spirit of God on the ministry of the Word, that God may enable us to have that alertness of mind and that teachableness of spirit, and that He by His own Holy Spirit will attend the proclamation and the reception of this His own Word. Let us pray.

Our Father, we would hear again the words of our Lord Jesus address each of us, saying, "Without Me, you can do nothing." We confess that we are slow to unlearn the ways of creature confidence. We would acknowledge in Your presence that again and again our own barrenness has been the humbling testimony of our creature confidence. And we would now repudiate all confidence in ourselves or in our ability to understand or to proclaim Your truth. And we pray that the Holy Spirit will be

present in our midst, enabling preacher and hearer alike to receive the Word with understanding and faith. We ask through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

According to the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments, there is always a frightening possibility that men and women may be deceived concerning the true state of their souls before God. The warnings against self-deception are found in both the Old and New Testaments. The accounts of those who were deceived and others who engaged in the wretched work of aiding in their deception, concerning such matters, the Scriptures are not silent. And out of genuine love for your souls, lest any of you be deceived, I preached a series of some two dozen messages throughout the summer months under the title, "Are You for Real?" And having received many solid reasons to believe that many of you have come through that series with a renewed conviction that you are for real, that you have indeed, by the grace of God, come through the narrow gate, and that you are upon that restricted or compressed way that leads unto life, out of the same pastoral concern that reciprocated the series of sermons seeking to enable you to search and try your professed experience, I have been bringing a briefer series calculated to encourage, comfort, strengthen, and fortify those who are indeed upon that compressed way which leads unto life. Together we've considered Philippians 1:6, Psalm 37:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, and Hebrews 7:25, which in turn gave birth to several other sermons dealing with various aspects of the high priestly, intercessory ministry of Christ which secures our ultimate salvation.

Now this morning we take up another of these texts for tried and tested saints. One servant of God said, "If a Christian had only two texts to accompany him in his earthly sojourn, these two would be sufficient: one taken from the Psalms in which God says that He is a sun and a shield to His people; no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly, and the text that, God helping us, we'll consider this morning, Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." This is a text which embodies one of the most fundamental but astounding realities connected with the experience of the true people of God as they make their way along the restricted way that leads unto life. It is a text which has, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit when mixed with faith, quieted many a torn and grief-stricken pilgrim upon that narrow way. On the other hand, it is a text ignorance of which or unbelief with respect to its assertion can only render the true child of God in great measure unstable, confused, and vulnerable to the attacks of his archenemy the devil. And so I want us this morning to come to this text with dependence upon the Spirit of God, that He would write it upon our hearts, that we may be able to enter in as one mighty chorus and say as a affirmation of intelligent faith, "And we [here in this place today] know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

Now before we examine the main teaching of this text, let me take few minutes to put it in its proper setting. And this why I read the relatively lengthy passage in your hearing. In verses 15 and 16 of this chapter, the Apostle has asserted that all true Christians have received the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption. And as the Spirit of adoption, He enables us to cry from our hearts. And you have the word "Father" in Aramaic and in Greek. It's not two different things, but He enables us to cry Abba, that is, Father. And to cry that cry, not as something learned from someone else, but that which is induced by the Spirit's own work in us, enabling a soul to lay hold of the reality of our redemptive privileges in Christ, that we do indeed believe that through

the merit of the Lord Jesus, God has given us the status of sons and daughters, and has given us the very Spirit of His Son enabling us to call Him our Father. And that same Spirit, then, bears witness with or in conjunction with our spirits that we are indeed children of God. The Holy Spirit's ministry here is underscored in terms of His enablement that we may address God in terms of our true relationship to Him (He is our Father) and of given us that heightened confidence that we are indeed His children.

But then in verse 17, he goes on and says, "if children, then we are heirs." We are those who are legally marked out to receive an inheritance. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. There is an inheritance yet to come to us. And it is God Himself who has appointed us to obtain this inheritance. And according to this passage, that inheritance will be fully ours, and we will come into the realization of it in our experience when we are glorified with Christ. He has already been glorified. He is at the right hand of the Father. When He comes at His second coming, we shall be glorified with Him. However, between our present status as the children of God indwelt by the Spirit, who enables us to address God in terms of that reality, we call Him Abba, Father. He bears witness with our spirits, enabling us to clear our title to true status as sons and daughters. We are marked out to receive a full inheritance to be glorified with Him.

Notice the language: "...if so be that we suffer with him, that we be also glorified together." As surely as every true Christian has received the Spirit of adoption, as surely as the Spirit of adoption in every true Christian enables him to cry, "Abba, Father," as surely as every true Christian has to some degree the Spirit bearing witness with his spirit of his true identity, and as surely as every true Christian will be glorified with Christ, every true Christian will suffer Him between now and his being glorified with Him. Do you see that in the passage? If you don't see that, I'll pack up and go home. All the rest is meaningless. If you're convinced from the Word of God that in that narrow road, in that compressed and restricted way that leads to life, whatever joys (and there are many); whatever blessings (and there are many); whatever heights of ecstasy (and there are many); whatever seasons of abounding and overflowing exaltation in God and in His mercy (and there will be many), there will also be inevitably accompaniment of suffering. It is only those who suffer with Christ, according to this text, that will be glorified with Him. Now if that's so (and it is), then the Apostle, as a sensitive pastor, desires to buttress and nerve the people of God for their portion of suffering while they await their glorification. And so in this section of Romans 8, he gives three solid grounds for encouragement to the people of God in their sufferings while waiting to be glorified with Christ.

Consolation number one is covered in verses 18 to 25 and is summarized in verse 18: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Paul says, as the first ground of consolation, there is a vast disproportion between the sufferings connected with our way to the celestial city and the glory that awaits us when we arrive at the celestial city. There not even worthy to be compared. He doesn't say they can't be compared as apples and bananas. It's even unworthy to attempt a comparison. That's the first ground of comfort. My present sufferings, whatever they may be, in whatever combination, for however long they may come upon me, they are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed. Hence, he can say of them in a parallel passage in 2 Corinthians 4:

"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal [including our sufferings]; but the things which are not seen are eternal [that is the glory that awaits us]."

But then the second ground of consolation for the suffering saints as they make their way to glory is given in verses 26 and 27:

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities [the word for infirmity is the general word for weakness. And Paul points to our present state as one of weakness. Some would limit this infirmity to the inability to know how we ought to pray as we ought. But I cast in my lot with the expositors who say no, our infirmity is the present state of our pilgrimage. It is the state in which infirmity marks our steps. And as true children of God who have the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry 'Abba, Father,' what does a child of God instinctively do when he's made conscious of a concentrated eruption of a given infirmity? He calls upon God, doesn't he? Yet there's a great problem]: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

Here is the second great ground of consolation. We not only have what the Apostle says is this disproportion between the sufferings of the present and the glory that awaits us, but in our perplexity of learning how to pray in the consciousness of our infirmity, we have an Intercessor within as well as an Intercessor above. We've contemplated together the intercession of Christ at the right hand of the Father. Here is an intercession of the Spirit in the theater of our own hearts. And I say it reverently, you have God praying in us, being heard by the God who knows the mind of God and answering according to the will of God. Tremendous consolation in a period of suffering when trying to be submissive to God, and yet recognize that this particular infirmity may be there as a trial to our faith to be removed by aggressive importunate prayer of which we heard in the previous hour. Or is it there to be a discipline as in the case of Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9)? We know not how to pray. And in such times, it's not our groaning. But there is the Spirit's indictment of yearnings that cannot find articulation in words. And it is the Spirit Himself making intercession with groanings which cannot be uttered.

We have the consolation of this dimension of the Spirit's ministry shrouded with much mystery, and it's not my purpose to even attempt to expound it. But setting the framework for this third ground of consolation--and what is it? It is the marvelous encouragement that we know that while in this present stage of our pilgrimage with its suffering, with our felt infirmity, with the very things we read about in Romans 7 (our remaining sin plaguing us, a hostile world seeking to trip us up, providences that baffle and confuse us; were we to read the heart of God in what the hand of God dispenses, surely we would utterly misread His heart); yet in the midst of that, we have the consolation of knowing that if we are indeed the true people of God, every single thing is working together, working in concert, working according to a divine prescription and design to produce good in the life of the child of God. So here, then, in this text, we have the third strand of Paul's encouragement to the true saints who know that suffering will be their portion until they are glorified.

Now as we come to the text itself, I want you to consider with me the text under two heads. First: the distinctive identity of the true people of God. For whom is this text given? Who has the right to take this text as a scroll from God and to place within his own bosom as his companion throughout all of his earthly pilgrimage? Who has a right, as it were, to take this check that comes down from heaven and to place his name in it; make out to the order of. Well, in this passage, the distinctive identity of the true people of God is set before us in two ways: one with respect to their own subjective activity, and one with respect to God's sovereign activity. In a sense, the text is like a sandwich. And the meat of the sandwich, that which the deli piles up between the two slices of bread is the wonderful assertion, all things are working together for good. But for whom are those words intended? Well, let's look at both slices of bread, for those words are bounded on the one hand with the words "to them that love God," and on the other, "to them that are called according to His purpose." There's more words in the text identifying the true people of God than there are to set out the great blessing that is held out in the text. So it must be important.

The first thing we learn about them is they love God. And these words come first in the original as reflected in the 1901 translation: "And we know that to them that love God...." The prevailing disposition of the hearts of the people of God is one of loving God. God is their chief delight. God is the supreme object of their affections, the fountain of their greatest joys. And they love the God who is, not a god who is the stuff of their own imagining. When Paul writes, "And we know that to them that love God...", that word (four letters in Greek, three letters in English) is a word into which the Apostle is packing all that God has revealed about Himself as He really is, and not as men would seek to shape and to form Him.

Think of what he has asserted about God in this epistle alone. He began in chapter 1, by focusing in verse 18 and following, that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The God whom Christians love, whose love to God is an identifying mark of their true state, is a God who pours out wrath upon ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. They do not love this idol of whom people speak, "I can't imagine God harming any of His creatures whom He has made." You may not be able to imagine such a God, but He exists, my friend. And any other god is a idol of your own imagination. He is the God described throughout chapter 2 who will judge in the last day all of the unrighteous and the impenitent who store up for themselves wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds. He speaks of tribulation and anguish upon every soul of him that does evil.

Who is this God whom the true people of God love? He is the God revealed in the opening chapters of Romans as a God of inflexible holiness and righteousness, a God who is of purer eyes than to look upon iniquity, a God who will judge sin and transgressions. Thank God, He is also the God who is unfolded to us in beginning in verse 21 of chapter 3, this God who is now revealed in the Gospel of His Son, a way of righteousness, the God who so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son, that His Son might, in the language of the Psalm with which we opened our worship this morning, become the sin-bearing substitute to propitiate, to turn away the wrath of God by taking that wrath upon Himself. In the language of chapter 5, "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." This is the God who sent His Son, and sent His Son to die in the room and stead of sinners; raised Him from the dead. This is the God who says, "I have conceived and will implement a way whereby guilty hell-deserving sinners can be brought back

into My favor and acceptance at no expense to My holiness and righteousness. I will conceive and implement a way whereby I will remain just, and yet the justifier of those who believe in My Son."

That's the God, when Paul comes to Romans 8:28, this distinctive identity of the true people of God is that they love the God who is. As Octavius Winslow states the case, "There is nothing in God and nothing from God for which the saints do not love God." Now this was not always true of them, for in this very chapter, he said in verse 7, "For the carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be." The mind of the flesh does not love God. It's enmity against God. Whatever polite, religious expressions it may give of tipping its hat to God, get down through the crust of externals, and you find in the heart of every unregenerate man, woman, boy, or girl one massive clinched fist raised in the face of God. The carnal mind, the mindset and disposition of everyone who is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit is one massive clinched fist against God. And it is manifested by the resolute refusal to have one's heart and life and affections and desires and thoughts and time all of life regulated by the law of God. The enmity to the person of God is manifested by insubordination to the law of God. And it can never, never be otherwise unless God Himself comes with a gracious intrusion and changes the state of affairs. But thank God, He has come, and the distinguishing identity of all the true people of God is that they love God. And my friend, you need look for no further index of whether you're a child of God or not than this: do you love God?

You children, especially who by parental discipline and by the education of your conscience have not, and many of you will never be able to abandon yourselves to the grosser forms of sin that mark our society. The question is not whether you do this or that or don't do this or that. The question is, do you love God? If you love Him, why do you sit there and refuse to sing His praises in this very building Sunday by Sunday? You love your favorite football team; you love your favorite basketball team. I've seen you kids out on that playground get excited with your mouth and with your lips. Why? Because you love the game you're playing; you love to win. And there's nothing wrong with that, but you stand here mute. Why don't you praise God? Because you don't love God. You love what your friends will think. "It aint cool to sing out and praise God." If one of your friends should see you, they'd say, "Are you becoming a Mr. Goodie Two-Shoes?" If you love God, you manifest it by wanting to praise Him, by delighting when the Lord's Day comes. You don't look at Sunday as bummer day. You look at Sunday as the best of all the week; you can be in the midst of those whose mouths are not full of language that you have to hear at the school and on the playground. You long for the day when you can read your Bible; when you can be with your mom and dad and read your catechism, and have more time to spend with those who love the same God. And that's true of any child, teenager, adult.

The mark of anyone who is among the true people of God is they love God. Do you love God? That's what I'm asking. Do you love God? If you don't love God, then this promise has nothing for you. This promise does not apply to you. This marvelous text is the possession of those who love God.

But now if we ask the question, how did they come to love God?--look at the last part of the text. It moves from their subjective experience (they are lovers of God), and they are described as the ones who are called according to purpose. And the word for "called" is used in the same way "saint" and "believer" are used to describe

true Christians. It doesn't simply mean those who have been summoned through the Gospel, but those whom God has powerfully, not only summoned, but by the secret but certain operations of His Holy Spirit actually brought to partake of the blessings of Gospel grace in the Lord Jesus. They have been brought to repentance and faith. This is why in passages like Jude 1 and Revelation 17:14 and Corinthians 1:24, this same word is used. And it's clear in those contexts that it's referring to believers and to believers only. And here the Apostle in giving the distinctive identity of the true people of God moves from their subjective expression of their identity (they are lovers of God) to that marvelous objective activity of God, which made them lovers of Himself: they have been called by God, and called according to purpose.

This word "purpose," with but one exception in the New Testament, refers to God's eternal, sovereign design of grace to His own. 2 Timothy 1:9 is perhaps the best commentary: "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." They are the called according to purpose. This God who calls in the Gospel, the Gospel which sets out the love of God to sinners, this Gospel that calls sinners to repent and believe, this Gospel that God makes effectual in those whom He describes in the subsequent verses, the same group of people. The called according to purpose are those who are foreknown and predestined and eventually are called. Calling here is the result of God's foreknowing and foreordaining. And having called them, He justifies. And having justified them, He also will glorify them. So you see, this distinguishing identity of the people of God is that whatever differences there may be (and there are many), this they have in common: they are lovers of God, and they have been called by God according to purpose.

Now consider, secondly, the exalted privilege of the true people of God. What is the privilege of everyone who is a lover of God, who loves God because God first loved Him, and he's come to know of that love by the effectual call of God that has brought him to repentance and faith? What is the exalted privilege of everyone of them from the most immature to the most mature, Godly, Christ-like saint? What is the exalted privilege? Well, look at the text: "And we know that all things work together for good...." The essence of the privilege is to possess a present and certain knowledge that all things that transpire in this life of present suffering and infirmity are constantly and infallibly working together in concert for my highest good.

How is that expressed? Well, look at the text: "We are knowing," the Apostle says. And the particular construction in the original refers to a fact that is well known and generally accepted. He used it in verse 22: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." We know that this world has been cursed by God and is under a curse. And it is yearning for its liberation that will come in conjunction with the glorification of the saints, particularly when they are given their resurrection bodies. It's used earlier in 7:14, the very passage read in our hearing: "For we know that the law is spiritual...." This is a fact acknowledged and recognized. It is not something that merely touches external deeds, but it touches dispositions and attitudes of the heart and mind. The basis of that knowledge for Paul and all who with him can say we know is ultimately the Word of God. We do not know this primarily by experience. We know it because God affirms it and illustrates it profusely in the Scriptures.

And then--thank God--every Christian who has any experience on the narrow way more and more validates it in his own experience. But it's one thing to know what I have validated by my experience; it's another thing to try to learn it from my experience. And Paul says, "We know...." And what are we knowing? "We know that all things...." Now whenever you find the word "all things" in Scripture, just like the word "everyone" and "all" and "the world," you've got to look at the context and see what the limits of the terminology are. And in this context, obviously the primary reference would be to the all things of our sufferings and our afflictions that mark us in this present stage of our pilgrimage. But unless there is some compelling reason to limit the all things to that in the remainder of Scripture, then we are warranted to see in those words "all things," not only that which is immediately under consideration, but when the rest of the Scripture indicates all things means every created reality under the sovereign, providential care of God is indeed working together for our good. "We are knowing," Paul says, "all things are working together." Now notice, he doesn't say all things are just working, but working together. He uses a compound word, the word "to work" with a prefix that means together. This is the same word used in 2 Corinthians: "We are workers together with God and the Gospel. He calls us alongside to be workers with Him. And the text says that all things are working together.

As I sought for something to illustrate it, the only illustration that came to my mind--and for you who have never seen this, I'll just have to describe it. It would be a transmission, not an automatic transmission, but a 5-speed transmission. If you were to loosen the bolts that would enable you to put that transmission upon the table, and you were able to take away the outer casing without dismantling any of the gears, what would you see? You would see an amazing combination of gears of different shapes and sizes, which when a drive shaft is connected to them, they all turn and work together to move that car from zero to whatever the legitimate speed might be when he's up in the 5th gear so that it may accomplish its purposes as a motor vehicle.

Now it's in the combination of those gears and precisely the shape and size that each one has been made in relationship to all of the others precisely as it has been placed by the engineers in the transmission, that when it is properly put together and mounted on the car and a man gets in, it moves smoothly through the five gears. They are all working together for a certain end. However, if I simply drop the transmission, take off the casing, then take apart all of the gears and spread them according to size and weight on the table, they may cause me to be amazed that all of that stuff was in there when I worked through the gears, but they are not working together for any good. Spread out on the table, they're just a bench full of gears. But put together according to a wise design and an intelligent plan, they accomplish a marvelous thing. They enable the power transmitted from the engine to the drive shaft to propel that car along the highway.

That's the picture here. Paul is not saying we know that every single thing isolated as an event is working together for good. No, the gear in itself is just a gear. But it's in the coming together and the meshing of all of these things that the privilege of the true people of God is to be seen that all things are working together for what? Look at the text: "for good." It doesn't say for immediate comfort, for immediate joy, for personal advantage and promotion. But all things are working together for good. They are for our benefit. They are not detrimental, but beneficial.

Paul uses the word "good" in Romans 13:4 in a way that may help us to grasp what he is saying. Speaking of the civil authority, "he is the minister of God to thee for good." His presence is designed to be beneficial. Again, in chapter 15 and verse 2, "Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification." Let us seek to please our neighbor by doing the beneficial thing that will result in his being built up in his Christian faith. And here is this marvelous statement that I as a child of God, one who loves God, called according to divine purpose in the path suffering, infirmity, and affliction as I make my way to the Celestial City, it is my privilege to have a present and certain knowledge that all of the things that transpire in this life are constantly and infallibly working together in concert for my highest good however intense the present pain and disappointment may be.

Now what are the implied realities that make such a knowledge possible? Well, obviously God's absolute sovereignty over everything that comes within the orbit of the all things that touch my life. How can I know that all things are working together, let alone working together for my good, if someone is not controlling the working of all things? This text alone would be one on which we could rest the absolute sovereignty of God over every single atom and subatomic particle in God's universe. How can every single thing be working together at all, let alone working together for a specific design that God says will always be my ultimate good, unless God is controlling all things? He must control them. There must be an engineer designing the gears if ever we're to hope that throwing them together in a transmission casing is going to mean that the car can move smoothly through the five gears and attain to highway speed.

If everything's up for grabs, if everything's at the mercy of brute chance, or as one leading Christian writer recently said, "God will never, never force His will on any one of His creatures. Our prayers may influence God to do that, but God would never take the initiative to do it." You see, if we have man in control, worse yet, one who is far more mighty than we are, the prince of darkness, then this text could simply never have been written by the Holy Spirit. As the shorter catechism says, "God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions." And it's because of that truth that Paul can write as he does. He is implying this reality in asserting this. God's absolute sovereignty over all things is expressed in His specific providential control of all things.

The second implied reality is God's unchanging love and purposes of grace toward His own. When Paul says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose," he can make that assertion because everywhere God reveals He has an unchanging love and immutable purposes of grace toward His own. That's what launches Paul into verse 29 and 30, which I'm not going to attempt to expound this morning.

People say, "You know, Pastor, when I come to church, I don't want theology. I just want nice little...." My friend, this is one of the most well-known promises in all of Christendom, and yet it is packed through with the highest theology imaginable. It has the theology of God's effectual calling. It has implicit in it the theology of God's absolute sovereign control over all things; the immutability of His purposes of love to His people.

This is the stuff of which real Godly, holy shouting is made. When these truths grip you, shout as long and loud as you want in the appropriate places. Jump as high as you want in the appropriate places. But when you come down, you've got something

more than mush under your feet. You've got these granite blocks of solid Biblical truth of a sovereign God who orders everything in His world; whose heart is towards His people with immutable purposes of love and grace, and therefore, and therefore alone, we can say with Paul, "We know that to those of us who love this God, all things are working together for our good."

Now by way of application, what does this say to us in practical terms? To the true people of God, this is the first thing it will do if by the grace of God we lay hold of it: it will impart a deep settled peace with respect to all of the unknown things of my future. Many a child of God wastes spiritual, mental, and emotional energy wondering, "What if in my family history, I will most likely be unusually vulnerable to this or that illness. In terms of this, that, or the other, it appears to me that I may well be...." And you're constantly anxious about the future. Child of God, if you get hold of this truth, "I know that whatever things will comprise the all things of my life, for however long God keeps me on the restricted way that leads to eternal life, all along the way, all of those things will be like a well-meshed gear box over which God's presides always moving to my ultimate good. Therefore, when God places something before my eyes that seems to have written all over it "evil," "destructive," I can say, "No, it will work together for good, because God has declared it." It's not my ease, my pleasure, my material prosperity God is committed to, but my good. If we read on in the passage, that greatest good is conformity to the likeness of His dear Son. You timid saints who cannot think of the future without deep disruption of you peace, pray this text in until God weaves it into the very texture of your soul.

Secondly, it will enable me to render a principled submission and believing response to the dark providences that presently accompany me. I'm sure there are not a few of you sitting here this morning with dark providences accompanying you. Now what are you going to say? Are you just going to render a reluctant sort of stoical submission? "God's boss, and I know I can't throw Him over, and I know somehow He's in control." What a difference when you can say, "Lord, I don't have a clue how any good can come out of this, but You have said (and you are worthy of my trust) all things are working together constantly for my good. Otherwise, we're going to be like old Jacob. Right at the time when things in the plan of God were never better, he said, "All these things are against me. You want me to go down into Egypt. I already lost one of my sons, and the other one is being held hostage." And never was he ever closer to being able to say by sight, "All things are for me." But it didn't change reality. God was ordering everything from that spirit of envy that caused Joseph to be sold into slavery and all of the events. Just going through that portion yesterday, I told my wife there's something thrilling, it's like I've heard it for the first time, listening to those chapters in Genesis on the life of Joseph.

Well, dear child of God, if you get hold of this text, whatever dark providences are presently pressing in upon you, you can look them straight in the eye and say, "I know that all things are working together; they're meshed, they're in sync because I love God. And I love God because He first loved me and effectually called me into the orbit of a saving response to His love in Christ. And if that God did that for me, then surely He can't have a gram of meanness in His heart. He's worthy to be trusted. And to say through your tears and through the bitterness and pain of that present dark providence, "All things are working together for my good."

Then thirdly, child of God, it will effect a blessed liberation from the crippling effects of vain regrets over my past failures and sins. You see how we've covered the future,

present, past. Am I speaking to some who are crippled because you lived with vain regrets. I didn't say periodic renewed penitence and humiliation for your past failures and sins. That's Biblical. David as a man long since forgiven said, "Remember not against me the sins of my youth." And Ezekiel said, "You will put your hand upon your mouth and never open it again for shame when I have forgiven you all of your sins." There is an aspect of an ongoing disposition of brokenness, that upon the remembrance of past failures and sins, there is a deepening of our humiliation and a reaffirmation of our repentance. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about vain regrets, vain regrets looking back and saying, "O God, if only I hadn't. O God, if only I had. Lord, if only I could." Those are vain regrets. You can't go back. You did it. You left undone what you should have done. It's vain regrets that paralyze and cripple you for present duties. And child of God, without in any way attributing to God anything of the moral defilement our sin in its origin or its performance, if I can't believe God overrules my sins for good, then I've had it. Isn't that what we studied last week?

"And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted [clearly indicating, Simon, you're going to turn away, you're going to sin, you're going to need a new conversion, you're going to need a fresh turning from your sin of denial of Me], strengthen thy brethren [a clear implication being the experience of your denial and its humiliation and its subsequent self-revelation and repentance and appropriation of My pardoning grace is going to make you more fit to strengthen your brethren]."

All things, all things--stop your vain regrets. Learn from the past. Apply the Biblical principles that you will be wiser from past failures and follies. But dear child of God, abandon vain regrets. They are in fact a negation of this truth: all things are working together for good. God often grows some of His most exotic and beautiful flowers on the dunghill of our sin. The dunghill is all our doing; the flower is all His grace. Where would you and I be without Psalm 51, Psalm 32, and Psalm 6? Those are some of the exotic flowers God grew on the the dunghill of David's horrible sin. Where would you and I be without Peter's denial and his subsequent repentance and restoration to usefulness? Where would we be without the record of John Mark who folds under pressure and goes back to Mama and to Auntie and to home base. Later on Paul says, "Bring Mark with you, for he is profitable for the ministry." Where would we be without those exotic flowers God has grown on the dunghill of human failure?

This text enables us, without in any way turning the grace of God into lasciviousness and thinking, "Well, then, let's sin that grace may abound." No, because a man who loves God, according to 1 John 5:3, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments." And a man who truly loves God does not contemplate willfully sinning against God in order to bring glory to God. That's blasphemous. So you see, God has hedged up this truth just by the way He describes His own. If you love God and have been called according to purpose, you've been called unto holiness; your heart is set upon a life of holiness. But you do not attain what your heart desires. When you've gone in true repentance and sought forgiveness, according to the promise of God, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," lay hold of the promise; ask the Spirit of God to seal it afresh to your heart. And with a fresh scent of His pardoning kiss upon your cheek, go forth to serve Him unhindered by vain regrets.

But you say, Pastor, "What does the text say for those who don't love God?" It says nothing. You've got to live in this cruel dog-eat-dog world, not only with men ready to consume you, but with this very God having a controversy with you this morning. For my Bible says the wrath of God is abiding upon those who believe not--right now. It is abiding. It hasn't come down upon them, but it abides over them like a mighty boulder hung by a cable that is being strained to its capacity. And just one added pressure on that boulder would snap the cable and bring it down upon your head. So the wrath of God hangs upon your head if you don't love God; if you don't embrace His general overtures of mercy and pardon in the Gospel. My friend, in a very real sense, your existence is a life of dodging the bullets of divine wrath. But you won't dodge forever.

Can't we make you jealous to become a Christian? O, if we could through jealousy alone make you see what a wonderful thing it is to be in such a place where you know that every single thing that transpires in your life is conspiring for your good, not because of your cleverness, not because of your ability to plan it all out, but because there's a sovereign God who lives and governs the heavens, and He is putting it all together and managing it for my good. O, that we could make you jealous to go to our God. And the only way you can go to Him is through the Savior He sets before you, who is willing and able to receive all who will come to Him and embrace as their all, as their only hope of mercy, as their only mediator between God and man.

Well, dear people of God, I feel a text like this, all I can do is preach around it. May God preach it into the depths of your being until it becomes one of your constant companions at the level of consciousness. "All things are working together for good. I can't see how, but I know it because Almighty God upon His throne who loved me in Christ and called me by His grace has said it, and there I rest." God help us to take that posture. If we do, then the carking worries about the future will be buried in the wonder of this truth. And with respect to my own present status, I will give principled submission and a believing response to those dark providences that are galling to me now because I've not embraced them as part of the all things that are working for good. And then I will not be crippled by vain regrets about the past. I'll be able to say with Paul, "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

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