

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

Maurice W. Lusk, III

In All (These) Things: A Summary (8:28-31)

All that Paul has been discussing in this section of material titled "Messianic Deliverance" (3:21-8:39), he now brings to a conclusion. He introduced this section with a discussion of God's righteousness, which he set in contrast with a righteousness that is according to the Law (3:21-31). He then moved into a development of God's deliverance of his creation from the powers which had enslaved it by the sending of his Messiah, whom Paul insisted was none other than God himself in the incarnate role of "the Son of God," who was historically known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul develops this *schema* of God's Messianic deliverance in a series of five treatises: (1) a treatise on faith (4:1-25), (2) a treatise on the death of Christ (5:1-21), (3) a treatise on freedom from the power of sin (6:1-23), (4) a treatise on freedom from the Law (7:1-25), and (5) a treatise on freedom from death (8:1-27). Here, in the remaining lines of this section of material, Paul brings his whole development of thought to a conclusion (8:28-39).

(1) All Things God Is Working for the Good of Those Loving Him (8:28-30)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified;

those he justified, he also glorified.

A very literal translation of verse 28 evidences something of its complexity. It reads literally, "But we are knowing that to the ones loving God all things he is working for good, to the ones being called according to his purpose." The primary problem here is that the adjective *panta* (all or every) stands alone in the sentence with no clear indication as to what it is referring to. Most English translations add "things" after "all" (i.e., "all things") because the adjective is neuter in gender. The question yet remains, what things is he talking about?

Drawing from the context there are at least two possibilities. The first is, "all things in a universal sense;" i.e., all things that pertain to this life. This would have Paul saying that all things that happen in life will turn out for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

All Things in a Universal Sense

The primary problem with this interpretation is explaining why Paul would insert a comment on God's daily care for those who love him in his introductory comments of this section which, compositionally, appears to be the conclusion of all that has gone before from 3:21-8:27 (the section on messianic deliverance).

Then there's the issue of whether this understanding of how God works in our lives is true. Does he, in fact, make all things that happen to us turn out for good? There are consequences that result from certain actions that can never be called good. This is not to say that God doesn't help us survive the difficulties, hardships, and sufferings of this life, but surviving or overcoming the crises and tragedies of life does not mean that God turns evil and/or suffering into good.

God provided Paul with grace to endure suffering and he promises us strength to overcome the evil of our world, but many things that happen to us in this life can never, by the remotest possible interpretation, be called good. Much suffering in this world results from the evil that men do. Good people are often the victims of the evil deeds of others. God doesn't make the evil that men do turn out for good. Evil is evil and remains evil. If surviving it can be called good, that is the only sense in which "good" can

be used with reference to it.

The fact that many Christian's survive evil, learn from their experiences, and even become stronger emotionally because of their struggles, does not mean that God has somehow turned the evil they have suffered into good. The parent who has lost a child as the result of the actions of a drunken driver can never call the loss of their child good, no matter how much they love God. The fact that they cannot interpret what has happen to their child as good does not mean that they do not love God nor does it mean that they do not believe the Scriptures.

A Christian who has suffered a rape, a brutal beating, theft, or has been the victim of any moral wrong may never be able to see God working for their good in these things. This does not mean that they don't believe this Scripture, what it does mean is that they do not see that this verse of Scriptures teaches that God makes everything that happens in life turn out "good," if we will only love him.

This world is a vale of soul-making and it is full of evil and suffering. God helps us to overcome or survive the evil of this world, but that doesn't mean that God will turn the evil that happens to us into good if we will only love him. The fact is that all things don't turn out good for us (or for our good). Some things turn out very badly, and that's the way life is. There are bad consequences associated with bad choices, and sometimes bad choices cause innocent people to suffer bad consequences. That doesn't mean that God is not there, nor than he doesn't care. It only means that sin has entered our world through the actions of man and the problem of evil and human suffering has been with us ever since.

All Things God Has Done - God's Redemptive Activity?

I mentioned two possible interpretations of this verse. The first is that Paul is talking about all things in a universal sense. The second interpretation, which far better fits the context, is that he is talking about “all things within the foregoing context;” i.e., all these things about which Paul has been speaking from 3:21-8:27; viz, that God has entered into human history to redeem the human race, which has been effected by the creation of a new existence for those who were condemned, by making it possible for them to die to their old existence “in Adam” and enter into a new existence “in Christ.”

Is this not what the Apostle Paul has been talking about for the past five chapters? Why would he, in his summary to all that he has written to this point, insert a statement that has little or nothing to do with all that he has been laboring to make his readers understand?

This interpretation of verse 28 is more consistent with the context in which it is found. All of God's redemptive activity (3:21-8:27) has been undertaken for our good, i.e., for those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose (i.e., his plan of salvation for the human race). In this view it is God's actions that are under consideration. It is all things God has done (the work of redemption) that work together for our good. Paul isn't talking about all things that we do daily that God makes turn out for our good, which is an interpretation that has cost untold numbers of people their faith.

All things God has done in this context, extends from 3:21 to 8:27 and are contained in the five different treatises developed throughout this section of material. This interpretation is consistent with what follows in this text. Following this statement in 8:28, Paul goes on to further explain in verses 29-30,

*For whom **he** foreknew **he** predetermined that they should be conformed to the image of his son, to the end that Christ may be the firstfruit (i.e., the first being of resurrection existence - cf. 1 Cor 15:20-23) of many brethren; and whom **he** predestined **he** also called, and whom **he** called, **he** also justified, and whom **he** justified **he** also glorified.*

It is God's activity in the interest of our salvation that is under consideration here in these verses, not our activity that God somehow makes turn out good. "All things" here are all things that God has done: **he predestined us** (decided beforehand to redeem all those "in Christ"), **called us** (through the gospel of Christ - the good news of God's deliverance "in Christ"), **justified us** (through transforming us from existence "in Adam" to existence "in Christ"), and **glorified us** (by restoring us to the status of beings created in the image of God). Then in verse 31 Paul asks, "What shall we say to all this?" His answer: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" His question concerns our redemption from the powers that had enslaved us - the satanic forces of darkness and evil.

Of major importance to our exegesis here is the question, "What activity of God is Paul discussing?" Throughout this whole passage running from 8:27-39 (as well as 3:21-8:39) Paul is talking about God's redemptive activity, not the day-to-day affairs of life. That God cares for us in the daily affairs of life is not at issue here, but whether this is what Paul is talking about in these verses.

Conclusion

The first interpretation is the more popular, the second the more exegetically sound. Of course, people do not tend to opt for that which is "exegetically sound" at the expense of a theological viewpoint in which they are emotionally invested. On the issue of God's care for those he loves and those who love him, there is far more information to be found in the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount than in this one line of text of Rom 8:28. In Matt 5:3-16; 6:25-34 and 7:7-27, Jesus has much to say on God's care of us and his concern for us. In fact, much of the teaching of Jesus as well as his miracles, have to do with the issue of God love and care for mankind. It is our suggestion that one should place his faith in what Jesus does say on this subject, rather than in what Paul is not saying in Rom 8:28.

MWLIII