

Romans 8:28

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 October 2017

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0:00] Good morning, church. In September 1541, after having been expelled from the city three years earlier, John Calvin was asked to return to Geneva.

And on that first Sunday, back in the pulpit of St. Peter's, what do you think John Calvin did amidst this city that had sent him away and now begged for him to come back to fix all their problems? It would have been a great opportunity for Calvin to score some points, wouldn't it have been? You foolish Genevans, how dare you send me away and now grovel at my feet?

That's exactly what Calvin didn't do. Instead, he picked up his public preaching ministry exactly where he had left off three years earlier.

He had been preaching through the Psalms, and when he got back in the pulpit, he picked up right in the next verse as if nothing had ever happened. As if to show that he saw that there was nothing more important than his task of feeding God's people from God's Word.

[1:14] Today, as we've been saying, is the Sunday when churches all around the world are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And among many things, the Reformation was a recovery of the Word of God.

So, in honor of the Reformation, we're going to follow John Calvin's lead this morning, and we're just going to pick up with the next verse that we've been preaching through. We're in Romans 8, and we're going to trust that God's Word is going to do His work.

Today, we come to Romans chapter 8, verse 28. That's page 944 in the Pew Bible. Romans 8, verse 28, page 944.

And I'm going to read this verse in its broader context, starting actually in verse 16 and ending in verse 30, so we can really catch the scope of what Paul is saying here.

So, Romans 8, let's start in verse 16. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

[2:26] For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were saved. The hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

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. 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.

[3:40] And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those who are called according to His purpose.

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. And those whom He predestined, He also called.

And those whom He called, He also justified. And those whom He justified, He also glorified. Let's pray together. Father, we ask that You would give us, by Your Holy Spirit, hearts, ears, eyes, to see and hear and to know what You are speaking to us through Your Word.

Amen. Oh God, we pray that Your purposes would be accomplished in our time together this morning. For Christ's sake, amen. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

We've been seeing in the previous weeks that this whole section of Romans 8 that we just read is meant to give us courage and confidence in the face of suffering.

[5 : 11] Looking over this passage, we can see that Paul has shown us our future hope in verses 18 through 24. The creation set free from its bondage to decay and made new. Our own bodies set free from groaning in the resurrection.

And then last week, we saw that the groaning of creation and the groaning of our bodies is known even to God as the Holy Spirit groans within us as He right now intercedes for us.

But here in verse 28, Paul moves from this inward work of the Holy Spirit within us outward to the work of God right now in all things around us.

And we know, Paul says in verse 28, which is what he also said back in verse 22. Did you catch that as we read it? Verse 22 says, For we know that the whole creation is groaning in the pains of childbirth.

We know creation is groaning and we are groaning within it. But here in verse 28, we know something in addition to that, Paul says. We know not just that creation is groaning, but that for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose, we know all things work together for good.

[6 : 29] Friends, here is a promise that for countless generations, the church has clung to and found to be true. And here is a promise that if you and I can grasp it and internalize it and cling to it, it will be a comfort and a security and a foundation that will give us the greatest courage and confidence through the darkest moments, through the deepest groanings.

How merciful is God to give us His Word, knowing that we need confidence and we need comfort. And here this promise is given to us to do just that.

So to help us grasp, to help us internalize this promise this morning, what I want to do is unpack this promise in sort of three steps. So I want to take three angles on this promise in verse 28, and then we're going to conclude by considering who this promise is for.

So first then, let's look at this promise. What is it that we know here in verse 28? What do we know that will give us such a security, such a ballast for life in this groaning creation?

First thing is that this promise says that it is God who works all things together for good. We can know that God is at work no matter what circumstances we face.

[7 : 52] Now, if you look again at the verse, you'll see that it literally says all things work together for good. So you might think I'm sort of twisting Scripture right now by telling you that it's God who works all things. But what does Paul actually mean here? Does he mean that the events of your life just somehow in and of themselves magically happen to work together for good?

That the universe is conspiring for your happiness? No. It's quite clear for Paul, as for the rest of the Bible, that God is the one who is the real subject here.

In fact, if you look at the footnote in the ESV, or if you have the NIV, if you're reading that, you'll see that some manuscripts and some translators have made what's implicit explicit. It's God who is at work. All things work together for good because God works them that way.

You see, there is a very personal, purposeful, passionate God at work in all things. And contrary to popular spirituality, when you want something, all the universe is not conspiring in helping you to achieve it.

No, what do we know? We know that the creation is groaning. It's eagerly longing to be set free from its bondage to corruption. But in the midst of that groaning, God is at work.

[9 : 09] He is not some far-off watchmaker who set the wheels of the universe spinning like some great machine and now just watches it from a distance, uninvolved, detached.

No, what this verse is telling us is that God is intimately, actively, continuously at work. One of the most enduring statements of faith to come out of the Reformation was the Heidelberg Catechism written in 1563.

And this is how it speaks of this reality, this reality of God's providence. Verse 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism says this, what do you understand by the providence of God? You have to love catechisms.

They ask these just simple questions, you know, well, what's the providence of God? Go, answer. Well, thankfully, it gives us the answer because it's a catechism. What do you understand by the providence of God? And the answer is this.

It's the almighty and ever-present power of God by which God upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures. And so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand.

[10:41] For my money, that's one of the most beautiful definitions of God's providence I've ever read. Not by chance but by His fatherly hand.

You know, we may not ever know why, exactly, in the moment, God allows certain things to happen in our lives.

Why this chronic sickness? Why this hardship in my marriage? Why this particular dream I've had has been shattered? And the temptation is to think in those moments that God has abandoned you, that it's all meaningless, that there's no purpose and there's no plan.

But our verse this morning stands as a bulwark against that particular form of unbelief, saying that even though we may not know exactly why some things happen, we can know that God is still at work, that His fatherly hand is not tied behind His back, that God is still the Almighty Creator and Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, that God has a purpose for our good, even when we can't see it.

This is the first thing we know, according to this promise, that God is at work. Second, we know that God works all things together for our good.

[12:10] Now stop for a moment and let that sink in. All things. In the 17th century, an English pastor named Thomas Watson wrote an entire book on Romans 8.28, the way only 17th century Puritans can do.

And he called that book a divine cordial. Now it's usually published under the title, All Things for Good. And the first chapter in Watson's book is titled, The Best Things Work for Good to the Godly. Friends, have you considered for starters that all things means all the good things in your life? We often just take those things for granted. Or we give ourselves the credit.

Or we just assume that that's how the world is supposed to work. That's actually not the case. Yes, this world was created very good. But when sin entered the world, creation was subjected to futility, as verse 20 reminds us.

We Christians should not expect that the world is going to be a nice, comfortable place. So when events or circumstances happen to fall out beneficially for us, even something as mundane as getting a regular paycheck or having a church family to be a part of, we must remember that these are gifts of God's grace, that God is at work to bring about these things.

[13:51] These are not things we should take for granted or give ourselves the credit for. Instead, we should be responding with gratitude and joy to God. But of course, all things includes not just the good circumstances, but the bad as well.

Now, right up front, we have to be careful here. You'll notice that Paul is not saying that at the end of the day, all things are good. That's not what he's saying. No, no. Evil is still evil.

Injustice is still injustice. Suffering is still suffering. Sin is still sin. All things are definitely in and of themselves not good. But God in His infinite wisdom, power, and grace works all things for good.

So we're not meant to take some weird pleasure in suffering as if it's a good thing in and of itself.

We are meant to weep with those who weep as well as rejoice with those who rejoice. We're not supposed to run to suffering headlong as if it's not really suffering, and nor should we minimize the suffering of others, perhaps by quoting this verse to them.

However, what this promise enables us to do is to have courage and confidence in the face of suffering when it comes. We don't have to despair, thinking that all is lost.

[15:17] And we don't have to try to avoid suffering at all costs. Rather, we can stand firm, knowing that no matter what comes, it can't ultimately thwart God's good purposes for me.

And in fact, this verse is saying something even stronger than that, isn't it? It's saying not just that suffering and hardship can't thwart God's good purposes for me, but that God will work even in my

suffering for my good.

He will take it up into His fatherly hands and bring about my ultimate good. The great Old Testament example of this is Joseph in Genesis chapter 50.

If you remember that story, you remember that his brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy and hatred, leaving him functionally for dead. And yet years later, Joseph being reunited to his brothers can say, 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.

Because Joseph ended up in Egypt through his brother's cruelty, he was able to rise to a position of authority in the Egyptian empire and preserve his family along with many others from a devastating international famine.

[16:40] And in preserving his family, he preserves the promise of Abraham that one day God would send a Savior for us all.

His brothers intended it for evil, God meant it for good. God works all things together for good, the good and the bad events in our life.

That's the second thing we know according to this promise. The third thing is this, that God works all things together for our good.

God isn't just at work in all things, He's at work for our good. But here we need to stop and ask, what exactly do we mean by good?

Because we are very prone to define what's good in very short-sighted ways. Physical health, financial well-being, maybe relational fulfillment.

[17:47] But how does God define what's good? What is the ultimate and lasting good to which He's taking us? Well, verses 29 through 30 answer that question.

Did you catch it? And at the center of those verses is this, conformity to the image of His Son. The good that God will bend heaven and earth to achieve, the good towards which God is providentially working every good and bad thing in your life, the good that expresses His eternal purpose for you, expressed and unfolded and revealed in time and history is this, that you would be conformed to the image of His Son.

Now, if we put this in the context of all of Romans, this is what we see. What does Romans teach us? We read it earlier in Romans 3. The good news is that through faith alone you have been justified.

You've been given Jesus' righteous record as a gift through the redemption and propitiation of His blood. Apart from your works, through faith you share His legal status.

[19:13] You are an adopted child of God, an heir of God, freely and wholly. And now we see, here in Romans 8, that God is at work in all things to actually make you and conform you and shape and mold and transform you from the inside out into the likeness of Jesus.

His purpose is at work to make you what you are. Do you see what that means?

Have you considered that Jesus Christ, while at the same time being fully God, is the most fully, truly human being who ever lived?

If you and I were to go out this afternoon and find a basketball court in New Haven, there probably will be no one playing on it because it's raining outside, but let's pretend it wasn't raining and it wasn't cold.

And if we ask some of those young players who they wish they could be, who do you think they would say? Steph Curry, Kevin Durant, LeBron James.

[20:34] I mean, imagine being able to play like one of those guys. LeBron James has like a 61% field goal percentage this season. Imagine being able to make six out of every ten shots that you make.

They go in every time. Boom, boom, boom. That's one mess. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. 61% of the time. I mean, you might be good, but you're not that good. Imagine the freedom and joy of being that good.

Imagine how much fun it must be to play basketball when you're LeBron James or Steph Curry, even if you get mad and throw your mouth guard at a ref every once in a while.

Now, maybe basketball isn't your thing, but my bet is you know what it's like to long to be someone you admire. That musician who performs so effortlessly, that work colleague who always tops last quarter's performance marks, that friend who just seems to have it all together in all the ways you don't.

But friends, here in the gospel, we see one who doesn't just excel in the court or in the concert hall or in the performance review, here is the one who is not just the true artist or the true athlete.

[22 : 04] Here is one who is the true human who lives life at its best always and in every way.

Here is what you and I were always meant to be and what all our other longings to be like all those other people are just the shadow of.

All those other longings are just the shadow of our deep heart longing to be fully, truly human, to be like Him, to know real freedom, to know real joy.

So friends, here is the promise of verse 28, that God is working all things together to make you like His Son, to make you at long last truly, fully human, to make you noble and wise and loving and good and strong and joyful and resilient and kind, to make you into a fitting and proper heir of the new creation that God has in store where we will reign with Christ forever.

So you see, God working all things together for our good doesn't mean that we'll always see some sort of reversal of our bad circumstances into good circumstances in this life. Rather, many things that we suffer will not contribute to our material or our physical good.

[23 : 39] But all these things will work for our ultimate good. They will refine our faith. They will strengthen our hope. They will forge our likeness to Jesus. God isn't promising that believers are going to have more comfortable lives or experience less bad events than non-believers.

But this verse is teaching us that God will bring about through those events an even greater purpose and outcome that we will be like the King. We will be like the one who is most perfectly, joyfully, freely human.

That will be more and more like Jesus. So I wonder, friend, how do you define the good in your life?

Do you define it by the number of close friends that you have, the number of healthy children that you have, the financial security that you've amassed, the physical health that you enjoy?

Or do you define the good as radiating the character of Christ in all circumstances? And don't you see that that is where your real happiness is?

Jonathan Edwards in one of the first theological paragraphs he ever penned said that holiness, Christ-likeness, is like being a flower in a field with your petals open to the sun, releasing an aroma and a fragrance of joy and sweetness, of basking in the pleasure of being beautiful in God's creation.

[25 : 27] Don't you see that that is real lasting joy that will stretch into eternity? And if you see that, then don't you realize that Romans 8.28 is God's promise that He has our ultimate, eternal happiness in mind.

And that He is using all things to get us there, to make us like His Son so that the glory of the Son can be displayed like the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

So this is what we know, that God works all things together for good. But now with the time that we have left, we have to ask the question, who is this promise for?

Is this promise true for everyone? And if not, how do we get in on it? Because it sounds pretty good. Well, we see that Romans 8.28 is not talking about some superficial optimism that everything tends to everybody's good in the end.

No, this promise has a very definite scope. It's for a particular people, and the objects of this promise, the recipients, the ones for whom it is true, are described here in two ways.

[26 : 45] And both of these ways are ways of describing genuine Christians, but they each bring out something very important. What's the first thing that we see in verse 28? That this promise is for those who love God.

Now, as Paul has been saying over and over again in chapter 8, a genuine Christian is someone in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. That's what he's just been talking about in verses 26 and 27.

And if you go all the way back to Romans chapter 5, Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the one who comes and pours the love of God into our hearts. And here in chapter 8, verse 15, it's the Holy Spirit who causes us to cry, Abba, Father, in familial love to God.

And again, right here in the immediate context, verses 26 and 27, it's the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us with God, causing us to come to God in faith and hope and love, even when we don't have the right words to know how to pray.

And you see this across Paul's writings. In Galatians, the very first expression of the fruit of the Spirit is love. So love to God is the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

[27 : 54] All who place their trust in Christ are filled with the Holy Spirit, and because of the Holy Spirit, we can at last truly love God. But why does Paul choose this way of describing a Christian here?

Why not say that God works all things for those who trust in God or for those who hope in God? Why specify the love of God here? Well, think about it this way.

Without the genuine love for God that comes from the Holy Spirit, it's hard to see how all things could work together for our good. How could that be?

One writer made this observation. He said, outside of God, we have the illusion that we are self-made people who are in control of our lives. When an unbelieving heart experiences a string of successes and pleasures, it only reinforces that illusion that we are in control, that we've made ourselves.

And so it is that even good things can make the worst sins in the human heart grow and take over pride, overconfidence, self-righteousness.

[29 : 18] In other words, without real love for God, even good circumstances will produce terrible spiritual fruit in our lives. Not to mention bad circumstances, suffering, which apart from the love for God can produce bitterness and despair and a victim mentality.

But if there is genuine love for God in our hearts, then when good circumstances come, they won't reinforce our pride because we know that all our good comes as a gracious gift of our loving God. And when bad circumstances come, it will humble us and increase our dependency on God and to long and hope more fully for His coming redemption. So love for God is a critical piece in God working all things for our good.

It's the right disposition on our part created by the Holy Spirit for God to go about this work in our hearts. But that just presses the question, doesn't it?

Where does this love come from? You see, Paul is not talking about a love for God that we whip up in our own strength. If that were true, we'd all be goners because, friends, we know that even Christians don't love God as we should.

[30 : 34] Nor is Paul saying that the amount of good that God promises to work in our lives depends on how much we love God from day to day. It's not as if you wake up in the morning and you're only hitting like a 4.5 out of 10 on the love for God scale, so then God's probably only going to work some things together for your good, sort of.

It's not how it works. When Paul says those who love God, he's talking about a fundamental change that has happened when someone becomes a Christian.

In Romans 5, Paul says that we've gone from enmity with God to love for God, but how does that happen? The second phrase in Romans 8.28 puts it this way, we've been called according to His purpose.

Christians are those who love God because God has loved us first and because they've been called according to His purpose. Now, when Paul uses the word call here, he means something much more than just the general invitation or call of the gospel as in what I'm doing right now.

What I'm doing right now is the general call of the gospel. I am telling you that there is a God who is holy and just and good and who has made each and every one of us in His own image to glorify Him and love Him and enjoy Him.

[32 : 10] but because we have rebelled against Him and decided to find our glory and our enjoyment in anything else but Him, we stand under that holy and good God's just wrath for our sin.

But here, friends, is the good news that instead of judging us for our sin, God sends His own Son in love to live a perfectly sinless life on our behalf and to go to the cross to die as a substitute for us in our place bearing the wrath that our sins deserve.

And on the third day, Jesus rises from the grave demonstrating that the penalty that He paid paid the price in full and that there's nothing left for you and I that we owe.

There's nothing left that we need to come up with in order to win God's favor. All that we need to do is turn from our self-dependence and depend on Christ alone.

Friends, that is the gospel. That is what Paul says is the righteousness from God that is ripping history apart and creating a new people.

[33 : 25] It's His power for those who believe. And this gospel goes out to everyone everywhere with the call to repent and believe.

