



February 24 & 25, 2018  
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## *What a Promise*

Romans 8:28-30

On Tuesday night, Cyndi and I became residents of Gig Harbor! We made the final move into our new place. We'd actually slept there earlier but on Tuesday we moved the coffee maker. Which is a little like Cortez burning his boats when he landed in the New World. When you move the coffee maker, there is no going back! We even set up our new King size bed with memory foam. It is amazing to me how small the box is that can hold so great a mattress...and a little frightening what happens when you slice the final strap that holds it together. It's like Jabba the Hut filling the room. Anyhow, this is a thirty-year dream, actually living in the city, and we are so grateful to the Lord. In a few weeks we will host a coffee klatch and all of you are invited. You better car pool!

In response to my blog this week about the passing of Billy Graham, many of you shared YOUR stories about him. In 1951 Sheila Nesland stood next to Dr. Graham at his birthday party in a Seattle church! Someone baked a cake in the shape of a bible. Lowell and Dottie Hartkorn were married by him! And Kathy Berry remembers walking forward as a four-year-old between her brothers to receive Christ at a crusade. How about you? How many ever watched Billy Graham on TV? How many ever attended a crusade in person? How many gave their life to Christ at a Graham crusade?

I doubt we will ever see the likes of him again. He preached live to more human beings than any other person in history—215,000,000. He undoubtedly led more people to Christ than any other person in history. He was deservedly one of the most respected religious leaders in history. And best of all, he finished strong. Not a whiff of scandal.

Dr. Graham once said, "Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive, than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God." Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

Today we come to one of the mountaintop texts, not only in Paul's writings but in all of scripture: Romans 8:28. It is powerful, it is comforting...but it is also a passage that has been misunderstood and misused. The way to AVOID misusing this text is to pay attention to its context. So, listen to one of the greatest promises found in scripture:

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. 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. Romans 8: 26-30.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." There it is! A monumental promise. I memorized it as a kid. How many of you? Isn't that wonderful? Last week we learned how God uses suffering to conform us to the image of his son and fit us for heaven. Now Paul doubles down. Not just suffering...but every single thing we experience, no matter what it is, will work out for good. One commentator describes Romans 8:28 as "the pillow on which we rest our weary heads." All will be well. Everything will pan out in the end, right?

Well...almost. But that's not exactly what the passage says. It's easy to treat this as an exercise in wishful thinking. Keep your fingers crossed! Knock on wood. Everything will come out in the wash. That's not what the verse says. But here's good news; what it does say is so much better. Let's take a look.

I ordinarily like the ESV translation. But on this verse I don't. Because it seems to say that "things" will just sort of work out. "...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good..." See? If you love God, "all things" will just kind of sort themselves out. But the original Greek says something much stronger than that.

The Greek reads, "And we know that, to the ones loving God, God works together all things for good..." This is subtly different but tremendously important. It is not the THINGS that work themselves out. It is God who is working all things out. This is not an assurance that if you hang in there, somehow everything will be ok. It is rather a promise that if you love God...if you are one of his adopted kids, God is working all things in your life for good. All of them. Every one of them. Whatever you face, whatever you are going through, whatever part of your life seems out of control... if you love God...if you surrender your life to his purpose... there is nothing you are enduring that he cannot make use of; nothing you are suffering that he cannot use; nothing that seems wasteful that God cannot redeem.

I repeat: Romans 8:28 is a bold assertion that God is at work in every aspect of your life for his divine purposes. This is all about God. It is not about you, your plan...or some fingers-crossed, magical mumbo jumbo. This is about a sovereign God intimately involved in every aspect of his children's lives. And to make that point, all we need do is look on either side of this verse.

Verse 26: "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

I mentioned we are sleeping in our new home. But the halls are still lined with STUFF and I still have tools all over the place because we aren't done. But as I've tackled a seemingly endless punch list, I realize I'm not as young as I used to be. One of the proofs is my **old man grunt**. Know what I'm talking about? I lean down to pick up one of a thousand parts of the IKEA furniture I'm building, and I catch myself doing this: "Uhhhh." Old man grunt. It is a groan of weariness, fatigue ...sometimes of futility.

The theme of groaning appears 3 times in Romans 8. Last week we heard that creation groans as if in childbirth, longing for the time when we human beings finally get our acts together! And Paul says, we, too, groan. Why? Because we are half-saved! We have the Holy Spirit as God's down payment of our salvation. We are assured of our righteous standing before Him; that we are his adopted kids. But we are still captive to these bodies of flesh! Still battle sin. From time to time we GROAN because we are living between the "already" and the "not yet." We have already been saved but we have not yet been glorified. Not yet received our perfect bodies in a perfect heaven. Not yet!

And so, we groan! This week I got a call from one of my friends. A young dad. His cancer is back. After a long time in remission, it has returned which means a new course of experimental treatment. When I read the Email ...literally... I groaned. When I read some of the vile things said about Billy Graham on the internet... literally.... I groaned. When I watched an interview with a survivor of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia describing his torture and the murder of his wife and child... literally...I groaned.

You get it. We are all groaners. It's part of the burden of human life. But here's the amazing assertion Paul makes: there's a third groaner in the story. Who? The Holy Spirit! Last week we discovered that we enter into the sufferings of Christ. Today we discover that the Holy Spirit enters into our sufferings! The Spirit of Christ lives within us in our weakness and...get this... when we cannot pray... when we do not know how to pray... the spirit prays for us! Prayers that are so perfect...so profound... there are no words. The Holy Spirit prays for in groanings too deep for words.

Did you know that the third person of the Trinity... God the Holy Spirit... is praying for you? Interceding for you with God the Father? (By the way, so is the second person of the Trinity. Sneak a peek at verse 34 if you want.)

If Romans teaches us anything, it's that our salvation...our forgiveness... our adoption... are ALL the work of God. Not us! It is God who takes the initiative to save and love us. But here we discover that God the Spirit... even PRAYS for us. When we have nothing to say. When we are speechless. The Spirit says, "That's ok, Mark. I got this." And HE lays our lives and our needs before the Father perfectly. Did you know that God the Spirit was praying to God the Father for you? Wrap your brain around that one!

And then, jump to verse 29 and notice again the history of God's initiative in our lives. It is God who foreknew us...God who predestined us.. ... God who called us... God who justified us... God who will one day glorify us in heaven. Who is working? Whose plan is this? Whose initiative? God, God, God, God, God!

So, v. 27, God the Spirit is praying for us, and v. 29 God the Father is directing our life from beginning to end. And smack dab in the middle of these two declarations of God's care for us...like a big grace sandwich... we read, "For those who love God, God causes all things to work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." It is such a wonderful promise. Let's look a little closer.

First, notice the honesty. It doesn't say, "Only good stuff happens to God's people." We know that's not so. Many things that happen to God's people are horribly bad. I once attended the funeral of young Christian man killed in a car wreck. The pastor said, "It was God's plan that this happen." And I wanted to jump up and scream, "No! This is a sinful world. In a sinful world, horrible things happen that are not God's doing!" The two-year-old with cancer. Is that God's good plan? Your wife having an affair. Is that God's good plan? Your child caught in drug addiction. Is that God's good plan?

Only a fiend would see those things as good. They are not. They are bad. Horribly bad. But let me remind you what the text really says....again this is the MJT translation: "For those who love God, GOD causes all things to work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." The promise is that God will take every experience of your life...the good ones...and the horrible ones...and weave them together into something beautiful over which God can pronounce the word, "Good!"

And notice that! When God says something is good, that's a big deal. Think back to creation. When God created the earth and sun and moon and stars and vegetation and animals... when God created man and woman...what word did he use to describe his handiwork? Good. It was good. God doesn't just "cause all things to work out OK." God causes all things to work together for good! And when God says good, that's good!

The Bible is full of examples of how God uses apparent evil for his good purposes: Joseph, Moses, David. But there is no better example than Jesus himself! There has never been a more obviously evil episode than the crucifixion of Jesus. Looking from ground level, it was the most grievous miscarriage of justice in human history. The sinless son of God tortured and murdered. Yet God took this greatest moment of evil and worked it for good into the greatest act of redemptive love the world has ever known.

This verse is an extraordinary promise that can bring great comfort. It can also be misused if speak it into other people's life carelessly. We need to wield it cautiously. If you go to a young couple who just lost their baby and whip out Romans 8.28—"Don't worry...all things work together for good if you love God and are called according to his purpose." ...You will not be blessing them. You might be a curse to them. You tell the grandparents of that baby that this will work together in God's great plan...they probably will not appreciate your counsel...and may be deeply wounded.

When someone is in grief, the promise of this text needs to be discovered gently ... quietly...personally. It is the sort of promise that can pull their lives together after the shock of tragedy has begun to ease. Beating a suffering soul over the head with this verse may not be helpful. Sharing it tenderly... sensitively and only as the Holy Spirit prompts you ...that is the way you can use this text in the lives of others. You must wield it cautiously.

But *you*...*you* may yield to it carelessly. There is one person with whom you can use this verse with reckless abandon. You! In your own life. Store it away in your heart...memorize it...and when *you* find yourself facing things that seem out of control...evil or hopeless or harmful... you have full permission to yield carelessly to this great promise: "I know that because I love God, God causes *all* things to work together for my good, because I am called according to his purpose!"

One of the things we need to do in our new house is earthquake preparedness. I don't like the idea but when a crisis strikes, we will be ready. This verse is earthquake preparedness for your soul. Every Christian ought to store it away in their heart.

Just imagine: the worst that life can throw at you...the worst the devil can throw at you. The most awful, evil or rancid things ...OUR sovereign God is able to take those and work them into something good. How would that affect the way you look at your job loss? God can work this for my good. How would that affect the way you look at your struggling marriage? God can work this for my good. How would that affect the way you respond to your bad biopsy? God can work this for my good. Say it!

In my travels I've seen some incredibly beautiful tapestries. Light, golden, masterpieces. Some have eyes woven in such a way that they follow you. But turn these tapestries over and you will find dark, unattractive colors on the back. The lovely, bright threads are intertwined with the darker, somber colors to produce a work of exquisite beauty.

That is precisely what this text promises. If I love God, then everything in my life...the good choices and the bad ...the holy moments and my moments of starkest sin ...the most joyous moments and the moments of deepest, darkest tragedy...the good and the bad...the light and the dark...every single thing God will use to weave together in my life a work of exquisite beauty to the glory of Christ.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.