

All Things for Good

By John Piper June 9, 2002

Romans 8:28-32

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Today we come to one of the most sweeping and most loved promises in all the Bible, Romans 8:28. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Perhaps more than any other promise in the Bible this verse has helped people trust God through experiences that seemed utterly pointless and painful and evil. People have held fast to the "all things" and believed the word of God - this too, this terrible thing, this seemingly pointless thing, will turn out for my good.

Years ago I taught the Bethlehem children—and all the childlike—to say,

*When things don't go the way they should,
God always makes them turn for good.*

Christians believe that, sooner or later, the sorrows and pains and disappointments and losses will work together for good.

I know that the translations differ here a little bit. But I don't think the differences are serious. The *NASB* makes God the subject of the verb and "all things" the direct object: "God causes all things to work together for good." The *NIV* also makes God the subject but makes "all things" the sphere of his working, not the object: "In all things God works for the good." The *King James* and the *English Standard Version* make "all things" the subject: "All things work together for good."

All these are possible from the Greek wording. And they are not in the end very different. When the *King James* says, "all things work together for good," it does not mean, they work that way on their own, or by some power of fate. It means that God makes all things work

together for good. So *God* is the one working in all three of these translations, and what he is bringing about is *good*, and what he is bringing good out of is "*all things*." Paul is not saying all things *are* good. He is saying all things are turned by God for good.

Next week when we go outside and worship in one great crowd on the parking lot in front of all the neighbors, I am going to try to unpack this promise with Biblical and historical and personal illustrations. How do all things work for good? Good now? Or good later? What kind of good? That's next week.

But today I want to focus not on the promise itself, but what it is that makes a person a beneficiary of the promise. Today we will ask: How can I know the promise is for me? And next Sunday we will ask: What does this text really promise me?

The Promise Is Not for Every Person

So the first thing we need to see today is that all things don't work together for good for everybody. The promise that God will turn all things for good is not true in everybody's case. There are two things that need to be true for this promise to apply to you. One is that you love God, and the other is that you are called according to his purpose. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good (1) *to those who love God*, (2) *to those who are called according to His purpose*." I will deal with the first one today and the second one later.

Paul says, in effect, if you don't love God, you can't claim this promise. If you are not called according to his purpose, you can't claim this promise. Or to put it another way, for the person who does not love God and is not called according to his purpose, final optimism is foolish and out of place. Pessimism is exactly the right state of mind for one who does not love God and is not called according to his purpose. Things are not going to work for his good, but for his harm.

Romans 2:5 describes the way this person's experience affects his future: "Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." In other words, the experiences this person walks through each day don't turn for good; they turn for wrath. The *pleasant* things that he does not thank God for, or make a means of worship, will condemn him someday. The *painful* things that he walks through, without trusting God's help, will store up wrath for the last day. He may look poor; or he may look prosperous in this world. But if he does not love God and is not called according to God's purpose, all his experiences are not leading to good, but to eternal misery.

What Must Be True of Us for This Promise to Be Ours?

That is not the way we want to be. We want to hear this promise as ours. We want to know that all things are working together for our good, not for our condemnation. So what must be true of us? Let's take them one at a time—one this week, one later.

First, Paul says that we must be people who love God. In the original, this is the first thing in the verse: "We know that *for those who love God* all things work together for good." What does he mean by loving God?

First, he does *not* mean that you go in and out of loving God, and if you have a bad experience when you are loving God it turns for your good, and if you have a bad experience when you are not loving God it turns for bad. We know he doesn't mean that, because he clarifies "those who love God" with the description at the end of the verse: "those who are called according to [God's] purpose." This calling (which we will talk about later) is not something that happens over and over. It is the effective, once-for-all work of God to call me from death to life, and from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, and from enmity toward God to loving God. The calling into love and faith is once for all, and so love for God is the mark of the truly called person - all the time. Of course, our love for God has moments of intensity and moments of weakness - just like every other love relationship we have. But in those who are called, love for God is what defines them. It's the abiding condition of our hearts - whether strong or weak.

So Paul is not saying all things work for good for Christians some of the time (when their love for God is strong), and all things don't work for good for Christians some of the time (when their love for God is weak). He is saying that for Christians - the called, those whose hearts have been brought from enmity to love for God - all things work for good all the time.

What the Love of God Is *Not*

So what does it mean to love God? How can you know if you are in this number? The best way I can think to make the answer clear is to say three things that love for God is *not*. At least the essence of love for God is not these three things.

Loving God is not meeting his needs. The way we love man is different from the way we love God. In Acts 17:25 Paul said, "He [is not] served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things." God is radically different from us. He is the source of all things and has no needs. He cannot be helped or improved. There are no defects to reverse or deficiencies to supply. We cannot love him by supplying his needs. He has none. Therefore the essence of our love for him must be an experience of receiving. (And I do regard joy as essentially receiving pleasure from the object of our delight.)

That leads to the second thing that love for God is *not*. Loving God is not, in its essence, love for his *gifts* - gifts like forgiveness, justification, escape from hell, resurrection to a

pain-free life, etc. Indeed if we love God, we will cherish these gifts and be thankful for them, because we would not have God without them. But loving God is treasuring God himself revealed in his gifts and treasuring God himself beyond his gifts. His gifts are precious to the degree that they bring us to God and show us more of God. When you love God, God is central in your affections, not his gifts.

This word "affections" leads us to the third thing that love for God is *not*. The essence of loving God is not the things that love for God prompts you to do. Love for God may prompt you to leave mother and father and forsake all that to declare his glory among the nations. But leaving mother and father and forsaking all are not the essence of love - they are the fruit of love. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." This does not mean keeping his commandments is love. It means love is the kind of heart that prompts you to keep commandments.

In John 21:15-17 Jesus illustrates this connection when he asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" When Peter says, "Yes," Jesus does not say, "Good, that must mean you are obeying my commandments, because obeying my commandments *is* love." No, he said, "Feed my sheep." In other words, if you love me, act like it. Love my flock and feed them. Feeding sheep is the fruit of loving Jesus.

In other words, what I am saying is that love for God is a matter of the heart's esteem for God before it produces anything else. It is something internal and involves spiritual emotions. It is not, in essence, a deliberated choice or a deed. It is more like a reflex of the heart to the perfections of God revealed especially in Christ. If you equate the deeds of love with the essence of love you will produce hypocrites - people who imitate the deeds and claim to love God when their hearts are far from him. If you equate love for God with love for his gifts, you produce hypocrites - people who are very glad to feel forgiven and declared righteous and delivered from hell and heaven-bound, but have no pleasure in God himself. They don't love God. They just don't want to have bad guilt feelings or go to hell.

What the Love of God *Is*

Therefore I think it is absolutely crucial that we clarify what the essence of love for God is. Let me grasp for the kinds of words that I think will help us know if we love God. Loving God is *desiring* God himself beyond his gifts. Loving God is *treasuring* God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *delighting* in God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *being satisfied* in God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *cherishing* God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *savoring* God himself beyond his gifts. Love for God is *valuing* God and *prizing* God and *revering* God and *admiring* God beyond his gifts. All these words are grasping for that essential response of the heart to the revelation of the glory of God,

especially in Christ through the gospel. It is a glad reflex of the heart to all that God is for us in Christ.

A Catch-22 Effect for Some from Romans 8:28

Do you love God in this way? Let me help you love him by exploding a certain Catch-22 effect that Romans 8:28 has on some people. Suppose you come to this promise in Romans 8:28 and feel yourself excluded. You say, "This promise must be true for me so that I can love God in response." But you see that this won't work, because the promise is not true for you unless you love God. "The promise must be true for me," you say, "so I can love God. I must love God so the promise can be true for me. Catch 22."

This is the trap of many people who think that the love of God is essentially gratitude for his blessings. I will love God when he treats me well enough, because, they say, love for God is essentially a response to receiving his gifts. There is no way out of that trap and that Catch 22 in Romans 8:28 if you hold on to that meaning of love for God. The promise must be true for me so I can love God in response; and yet I must love God for the promise to be true for me.

The escape from the trap - and I invite you to take it right now - is to look *through* the promise to God himself first, before he applies the promise to you, and behold God *himself* in and through his promise. Look first at all that he has done in history to reveal himself. Look especially at Jesus Christ and the glory that he had before he came, and the glory of his sacrificial coming and his servant hood and suffering. Look at the mercy and wrath and justice of God mingled on the cross for utterly undeserving sinners. Look at the power and righteousness of God in raising Jesus from the dead. Look at new-covenant, promise-keeping faithfulness that pours out the Holy Spirit on sinful people. Look at the triumph of God's grace to change hostile God-neglecters into humble God-lovers.

Look at God in all these ways, I say, and behold the God you were made for. Behold the fulfillment of all your desires. Behold the most satisfying treasure in the universe. And then when you see his glory and his worth, and when you treasure him, then the promise is yours. All things will work together for you good, because you love God.

And what if you say to me, "Pastor John, I don't feel like looking at God. I just want to go home and watch television. I just want to be with my friends. I just want to eat and work on my house. I don't feel any desire to look to God"? To this I respond, "If there is any remnant of fear, if there is any shred of desire to desire, O endangered sinner, use it to pray the promise of Deuteronomy 30:6, 'O Lord circumcise my heart—change my heart—to love you with all my heart and soul, so that I may live, and all things may work together for my good. Have mercy upon me that I may love you.'"

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