

God is Good All the Time

Romans 8:28

“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.”

November has been a month of Thanksgiving for us. There are so many things to be thankful for. More than 2/3 of Americans use Facebook and the people there are able to crunch data on what on what we share that we are thankful for. What do you think came out at the top? We are most thankful for our friends and families, as well as the basic provisions that we have. They also looked at the thanksgiving topics that are distinctive for each state. People in Georgia are thankful for God’s word, in Texas they are thankful for rain, in Wyoming they are thankful for country music, and in California they are thankful for YouTube. In Illinois, we are disproportionally thankful for our mother and father in law. What are you most thankful for? It is good to remember many things to be thankful for because we so easily take for granted some of the best things in life. One of the things that I am thankful for now is that we can be here to freely worship. But still in spite of all of these things, it is sometimes very difficult to be thankful, especially when bad things happen. So through this passage today we want to remember to be thankful for the unexpected blessings. In particular, we want to think about our good God who is orchestrating everything for his good purpose. May we be genuinely thankful for who God is and what he is doing all the time.

Look at Romans 8:28 again. Paul starts off saying, **“And we know...”** Wow, how could Paul be so sure? It seems pretty presumptuous. But Paul’s certainty came from his faith in God. It was not a vague superstition, but concretely rooted in his experience. When Paul was young, Paul was very sure about himself. He was so sure that Christians were wrong that he violently persecuted them. But while breathing out murderous threats against Christians and going to arrest them, a light flashed around him, and he was knocked off his horse. A voice said, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** Saul said, **“Who are you, Lord?”** **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** When Saul got up, he was blinded, and then the Lord said, **“This man is my chosen instrument.”** Of all people, Jesus appeared to his #1 enemy, had mercy on him and called him to proclaim his grace. It had a profound impact on him. He was changed from an arrogant, ruthless, self-righteous religious nationalist to a man of grace who accepted all kinds of people in Jesus, just as Jesus had mercy on him. He had steadfast faith, tirelessly suffered to help thousands of people and wrote many

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letters including Romans. Eventually he was martyred, but his life of faith was remarkable and amazingly influential.

Paul said in Romans 8:28 that **“we know”**, not just “I know”. He didn’t think he was the only one who knew. Many others met Christ too. Even today, God works in people. I was brought up an atheist. I was from a nice family and went to college at Northwestern University. But in college, I was infected by 3Ls of sin: lust, lying and laziness. Because of their uncontrollable power, I didn’t study well. And I hated Northwestern. During that time I also was introduced to Bible study. Strangely, the God of the Bible was fascinating to me. I was mysteriously drawn to Isaiah 53, written 700 years before Christ: **“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”** I kept a Bible hidden and secretly read it. Then I was kicked out of college, but continued Bible study. During those Bible studies, I saw Jesus clearly through the gospels, and sensed his redemptive presence even though I was a professed atheist. I was too proud to ever admit my failures so I always pretended I had no problems. But I began to be honest about my sins and failures, and I started to see the grace of Jesus, who was pierced for my transgressions, crushed for my inequities. I came to Jesus as I was, and the peace of God entered my soul, while despair, guilt and deception was driven out. Gradually my sinful habits began to wane, and I wanted to share this grace. He changed my life completely and later I got a PhD from the place I had been kicked out of. Now I like Northwestern, and am a professor there to be around students. Like Paul and many others, I came to know God based on my life-changing encounter with Jesus. If you are not sure about God, please take some time to read about Jesus and consider who he is.

What exactly was Paul was so certain about in this verse? He said, **“...in all things God works for the good...”** Some translations say, **“all things work together for good.”** Not everything is good. Cancer is not good, abuse is not good, the death of a loved one is not good, racism is not good, drug addiction is not good, sexism is not good. By itself, sodium is poisonous to humans and so is chlorine. But if you put them together you get sodium chloride, plain salt. Salt flavors our foods. At proper levels, salt is absolutely essential for our health, in the transmission of nerve pulses and the normal functioning of cells. And we will die

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without it. In the same way, in God's chemistry, he is working in all things that happen to us, combining them to make something necessary and even remarkable.

God is good even though we make many sins and mistakes. Psalm 130:3 says, **"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?"** David said in Psalm 103:10, **"he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."** So God is always good, even though we are often not so good. Thank God for his goodness!

We often want to just forget about the seemingly bad things in life, but God is also good in those times too. Joseph experienced many evils. He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, unfairly treated by his boss, and betrayed by friends. He struggled with bitterness, hopelessness and depression. When Joseph remembered God during almost unbearable sufferings, God molded his character to be faithful, humble and empathic. And after many years, God made him prime minister of the world superpower nation. When he later saw his brothers who had perpetrated the crime he said, **"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."**

Many great people in the Bible suffered much, but God worked in them. Moses was in the backside of the desert for 40 lonely years before God called him to lead the people of Israel. Hannah was barren and her rival kept provoking her, but she prayed and the prophet Samuel was born. David was a fugitive running for his life before he became king. The most profound story of God's goodness in the midst of tragedy is Jesus. Jesus only did good things, but he was rejected by the religious leaders, betrayed by one of his closest disciples, disowned by the people for a murderer, abandoned by his disciples, and put to death by the Romans with their most painful and shameful execution method. Even the Father himself turned his back on Jesus when he cried out on the cross, **"My God, my God why have you forsaken me!"** His crucifixion was a pathetic sight. It was the ultimate travesty. But God was working for the good. While Jesus was suffering and dying, the Bible says that he bore our sins. Moreover, on the third day he was raised from the dead, overcoming the power of death and proving that he is the Son of God. He ascended to heaven to the highest place to be the judge, and has promised to come back and take those who belong to him. Thank God that in the midst of the most tragic situation, God was working redemption for the whole world through Jesus Christ!

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One person smashed his vehicle into a parked car in front of the Evanston Bible house. While many stood around gawking, someone came out of the Bible house and helped the bloody and injured man. The person was helped in many practical ways, and also invited to Bible study. Eventually he came out of his debauchery, has been coming to church for the last 25 years, and is striving to follow Jesus. The messy car accident in front of the Bible House actually was one of the best things to ever happen to him. One time my mother died in a car accident. It was a shock, and I cried for many days and weeks. Many times, we asked “why?” and “how?” this could happen. What compounded the grief was that when she was gone, I realized how much I took her for granted while she was alive. But strangely when I thought about it, I remembered that saw her the day before the accident. At that time, she asked me for a Bible and we had a conversation about Jesus when she never wanted to talk about that before. Also in the months before, a local pastor started visiting her, talking to her about the gospel. We realized in hindsight from God’s perspective, she was ready to go, and God who took her to be with him on his schedule. The end result is inevitably good for anyone who accepts the gospel.

Often in the New Testament, we are encouraged to thank God for sufferings. Romans 5:2 says, **“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”** Verse 29 says the same thing, **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”** Through all the things that happen to us, God wants to strengthen and mold our character to be like him.

Still, when sufferings come, we easily complain. Complaining is an expression of deep discontent. It is destructive to Christian character and spreads like a toxic virus. But we can’t just pretend that nothing is wrong either and try to suppress anger, frustration and bitterness. Instead we need to bring our struggles to God. King David had many hardships and he fell into depression, but he honestly brought his feelings to God. In Psalm 13:1-2 he cried, **“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”** But by the end of Psalm 13 he is actually praising God. In Psalm 142:1-2 he said, **“I cry aloud to the Lord; I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I**

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tell my trouble.” When David honestly cried out to God with his complaint, God gave him wisdom and strength, and he could be a blessing to others.

This verse is a promise, but it is not for everyone. The last part of the verse says who it applies to: **“...of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** It is for those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose. Who are they? Are they super people who have built up tremendous discipline to do spiritual things? No! 1 John 4:19 says, **“We love because he first loved us.”** Many people think that God is a controlling and demanding tyrant. But it is the devil’s lie. How can we possibly love someone like that? While people may be evil, God certainly is not. God loves us unconditionally, and he wants us to appreciate him voluntarily for who he is. When we really know God and his redeeming love in Jesus Christ, it is easy to love him from our hearts.

When we love someone, we like to listen to what they have to say. In the same way, when we love God we listen to his words. Also, if we really love God, we’ll not only hear his words, but we try to put them into practice. Jesus said in John 14:15, **“If you love me, keep my commands.”** So what are Jesus’ commands? The two commands that Jesus emphasized are to love one another and to preach the gospel to all creation. Jesus said in John 13:35, **“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** Jesus also said, **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”** Many people wanted to join the early church when they saw the genuine love. In the same way, when God’s people love God and love others, they can be a great influence to the world.

The religious wars of Europe always had a political cause, but religion provided the passion for fighting. Bloody violence in the name of God caused people to become skeptical, and Europe became more secularized. We see the same hatred in God’s name today sometimes. The non-religious are no better. More people, up to 100 million+, were murdered by atheist regimes in the last century. Even our nation is not 100% right. But though things are messed up, God is always good and working out his plan through the love of humble, seemingly insignificant people. One person’s family was a refugee from the Vietnam War in the 1970s. But missionaries served them and a church sponsored them to come to America. The person met Jesus and his life is so happy. Korea was colonized by Japan before WWII. Japan took control of most of the land, forced them to pay taxes and abused their women. Then the Korean War happened. Afterwards, an American pastor named Everett Swanson visited in the early 1950s to preach to the

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troops there and he saw so many orphaned, and dying children in the decimated country. Someone asked him, “what do you intend to do about it?” He prayed and got a check for \$50. It was the start of Compassion International, which helped orphans, provided food, clothes, shelter and medical supplies, and taught Bible lessons, and helps the needy all over the world today. Korean people responded to them and other sincere people who practiced the love of God. South Korea was changed from a devastated land of 2% Christians, to a prosperous land where 30% are Christians. Thank God that his light is shining in the darkness of the world in many ways like this. God is doing it himself and through those who love him.

Finally, verse 28 says that this promise applies to those **“called according to his purpose.”** God’s call is his one-sided grace through Jesus Christ. And his ultimate purpose is amazing. Do you know what it is? In verse 30 Paul said, **“And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”** God’s purpose ultimate purpose is to restore creation and glorify his children. That is why he could say in v37-39, **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** If the end is good, then everything is good. God loves us so much that by his grace we have eternal security in Jesus no matter what happens. Thank and praise God that in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!

I have served Northwestern ministry for 28 years. In that time, Pastor Kevin Albright has been the coordinator. He is a wonderful man who loves Jesus. But if given the choice, most people would rather be Han Solo rather than his sidekick Chewie. Sometimes I complained because I am older. Yet God helped me to struggle in prayer and serve Northwestern alongside Kevin and others for God’s glory. I learned so much and it has helped grow my character. Also God blessed in many ways. I found that my ultimate hope is not in this world, and I don’t need to struggle so much for small things, but struggle to love. So I am thankful to be like Chewie. God is carrying out his purpose today by calling young leaders, just as Jesus called disciples. So is ok for older people like me to step out of the way so younger people can grow. Thank God that we don’t need to struggle for stupid

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things. Let's trust God and continue to pray to pass leadership to the young generation.

Thank and praise God that he is good all the time! Although we don't understand exactly why everything happens and we still have many problems, we know he is doing amazing things in and through us, and he has given us an incredible future. May God bless us to look up to him and be abundantly thankful for who he is and what he is doing.