

God works in all things for the good

God works in all things for the good of those who love him

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on

“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”. (Romans 8:28)

Introduction

If you have been coming to this church for a few years I think you will have heard me speak from this verse before – maybe even more than once – but I am coming back to it today because, quite frankly, it is a verse that *I* need to hear again. And if I need to hear it probably you need to hear it as well.

What is this verse saying? In a nutshell it is saying that Almighty God is ruling over everything that happens in our world, and he is ruling over these things for the good of his people, for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose. Now, as we think about this verse this morning I want to do so by asking and answering four questions about it:

1. “Who is working in all things for good?”
2. “In what things does he work for good?”
3. “What is the good that comes from these things?”
4. “For whom are these things true?”

So let us think about these things together.

1) Who works in all things for good?

The first question, then, is “Who is working in all things for good?”

At this point I need to let you know that there is actually a slight difference between some manuscripts. The New Testament is an amazing book because there are thousands of ancient manuscripts for it that have come down to us through different sources. What is so amazing about all these independent manuscripts is that they agree with each other to a very large extent. There are, however, a few variations between them. In this verse we have one such variation. Concerning the phrase that is here translated “God works for good”, in some of the manuscripts the word “God” is missing, and so these manuscripts would be translated “*all things* work together for good”. This is in fact how the King James Version translates it, based on that manuscript variation. The King James Version reads “and we know that *all things* work together for good for them that love God”, whereas the translation we are using, the New International Version, says that “we know that in all things *God* works for the good of those who love him”.

Now quite frankly I do not know which of these two variations is what Paul actually wrote, but I think we can safely say that whichever you take to be the original, the essential meaning is the same: that it is *God* who is at work to make sure that all things work together for the good of his people. It is not that all things organise themselves for the good of God’s people. No. It is rather that *God* organises all things. So either this is implicit, as in one variation, or it is explicit, as in the variation that our NIV translation uses. It really makes no difference. The truth is that God is ruling over every event in the entire universe. That is really the truth that lies behind this verse.

This is not the only place in the Bible which says this; just in case you think I am building an entire doctrine on one slender foundation. Proverbs chapter 21 verse 1 says this: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases”. Some of us, when we go on holiday, like to redirect the stream that runs down the beach so that it flows in a different direction. Well, for God it is as easy as that to redirect the course of a king’s life. The decisions that a king makes are in God’s hand. He can do as he pleases with the decisions of men.

Again, Ephesians chapter 1 verse 11 says this “God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Every event is in conformity with the purpose of God’s will. Again look at Matthew chapter 10 verse 49, where Jesus is

recorded as saying, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father". When one of those little birds drops dead to the ground it will only happen according to the will of God.

So everything that is happening in our world is under God's control. God is ruling over every event in your life. Everything is under God's control. That is the truth that lies behind this verse.

2) What are the things in which God works for the good of his people?

The second question is, "What are the things in which God works for the good of his people?"

We see the answer in the verse. It says we know that in *all* things God works for the good of those who love him. In *all* things. I think we can safely say that when it says *all* it means *all*. In *all* things, in everything, God is working for the good of his people.

Now of course we know that will be true in regard to what we would call the good things of life. If you have a good night's sleep, you can say "Thank you Lord, I had a really good sleep". If you have a nice meal you will say, "I really enjoyed that meal". If you have got a good friend, you say "Thank you Lord for that good friend you have given to me". Concerning the blessing of fellowship, you say "Thank you, Father, I so enjoy fellowship with your people". On hearing God's word you can say "Thank you Lord for that". Of course we know the good things are working for our good. We can easily accept this. The good things that we experience in life are working for our good because as we experience these good things it reminds us of how good God is. It reminds us of his love for us. It makes us feel happy. Of course we can accept that the good things of our lives are working for our good.

However, it is not just the "good" things that God is using for our good, but also the "bad" things. When the car, if you have one, does not start in the morning; when you cannot find the child's shoes and you are already five minutes late for school; when that parking fine comes through for the vehicle you sold months ago but forgot to change the vehicle registration document: the frustrations and difficulties of life, these things are also ruled over by God for the good of his people. And this is true not just concerning the minor irritations and frustrations

of life but also the more serious things such as accidents, and injuries. All are ruled over by God for the good of his people. The illnesses, the weaknesses, the suffering, heartaches and the difficulty of living in a fallen world are all ruled over by God for the good of his people.

You may know that the Apostle Paul had an affliction which he asked God to remove from him. We do not know what that affliction was but he describes it as a "thorn in the flesh". Whether it was a physical illness or some sort of mental torment he went through, or whether it was persecution, we just do not know. This is how he describes his "thorn in the flesh", 2 Corinthians, chapter 12. He says, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing great revelations.." - he had had some great amazing visions of God but he says to keep him from becoming conceited because of these things - "there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." What was the answer when he asked God to take it away? The answer was effectively "No", because he goes on to say

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". Therefore I will all the more gladly boast about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me., That is why for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties, for when I am weak then I am strong.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that this messenger of Satan which was tormenting him - this weakness, this ailment, this affliction, whatever it was, we do not know - it was good for him because as he was in this state of weakness he was relying on God more and knowing his grace more. So he says "I delight in these things because when I am weak then I am strong".

We can also apply it to other things. For instance, relationship difficulties. What is harder for a person to bear than a difficult marriage? Of course some marriages are very easy, wonderful and happy but some marriages are very difficult, attended many arguments and disagreements, misunderstandings and sometimes periods of separation. It can also be very grievous to endure difficult relationships between parents and children or between siblings. But the Lord can and does use these things for the good of his people.

Also we can apply it to the matter of bereavement. We are all going to have to face bereavement as believers unless the Lord comes very soon. We are all going

to experience loved ones departing from us. Job, the great servant of God, had seven sons and three daughters taken away from him in one day along with all of his wealth and many servants, but he praised God and later on he was able to look back on his life and see that God used these things for his good.

Then we can apply it to the matter of desertions. What do I mean by desertions? I mean there are times when it feels for a Christian as if God is not there. He is there, but he does not feel there. Sometimes it can simply be because we are tired or ill and find it hard to be aware of his presence. Sometimes it can be for no known explanation. Whatever the explanation, we can know from this verse that times when God's presence seems far away are ruled over by God for our good.

We can apply it even to the matter of sin. Now by saying this I hope you will understand that the Bible nowhere encourages the Christian, or for that matter the unbeliever, to sin in order that good may result. People were saying that about Paul. They said Paul was saying that we should do evil that good may result. But he vehemently denied it. He said they were slanderously saying these things about him. He said people who said that sort of thing deserved condemnation. See Romans chapter 3 verse 8. So it is not that it is good for a person to sin. It is *never* good for a person to sin. Sin is always despicable. It is always catastrophic for the individual who sins. But God is able to take even wicked and foul acts and rule over these things in order to bring about good for his people.

There are numerous examples of this in the Bible. Take, for example, Joseph. Do you remember how Joseph was treated abominably by his brothers? He was sold as a slave and then his brothers went back and pretended to their Dad that he was dead. From there he landed up in prison in Egypt, through no fault of his own. When, later on in their lives, the brothers got worried about what they had done and came and pleaded with Joseph to be merciful. Joseph said this: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" ((Genesis 50.20). People may mean to bring harm to you and others of God's people, but God is ruling over it for the good of his people.

Then think of Pharaoh who was a wicked and evil man who would not let the Israelites depart from Egypt. He was acting according to his own evil desires, but God was ruling over things for good. God said to him "I have raised you up for

this very purpose that I might show you my power and that my Name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exodus 9.16).

Or think of Paul languishing in prison. There he was, locked away, and all the Christians were saying "Oh no, what's happened to Paul? What a disaster! Our great Apostle has been thrown into prison! What is going to happen now to our cause?" It was a wicked act; he had been thrown into prison through men's sin. Paul had not done anything wrong but people had sinned against him by wickedly putting him in prison. Yet he wrote this to his Christians friends:

Now I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result it has been clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains most of my brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the Word of the Lord more courageously and fearlessly (Philippians 1.12 – 14).

Here was a sinful and wrong act, but God was ruling over it for good.

The greatest example of all is the death of Christ. What a wicked act, that this perfect man, God in the flesh, should be so abused, mistreated and strung up on a cross like a common criminal! But God was ruling over it for good. This is how Peter put it, as recorded in Acts chapter 2 verse 23. He said, "This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross." The crucifixion was an evil act but it was according to God's set purpose and foreknowledge, for the good of his people.

3) What is the good that God brings?

Our third question is, "What is the good that God brings?"

Here there are many things that could be said and I will just simply sketch out for you some of the benefits which come to God's people corporately and individually, not just through the "good" things in life but also through the "bad" things in life.

First of all let me mention some of the good things that come to us corporately. God often uses events in history for the extension of the kingdom of God. Sometimes there have been great disasters that have come upon people

which have proved to be the precursors to revival. There was a great revival in 1858 which took place in the States and also in this country. It also coincided with great blessing upon Spurgeon's ministry at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Just a few months before this great revival broke out there was a terrible financial crisis, and many people lost fortunes. We can see the hand of God in this. God used it to shake people up and to turn their minds to spiritual things. Similarly, God can often use wars and distresses to take the whole church forward in its holiness and obedience to God, and to turn people towards spiritual things.

There are also many benefits that come to us individually as believers, not only through the good things of life but also through the "bad" things. Let me mention some things. For instance, difficulties tend to humble our pride. Is that not what Paul said about his "thorn in the flesh"? "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly revelations there was given me a thorn in my flesh". It happens so often. We start to see a bit of blessing and we start to get puffed up and then the Lord allows some difficulty to come into our lives to, as it were, pop that bubble, that ego that had started to get over-inflated. In goes the needle and the whole thing deflates, back down to the proper size. That is God's kindness to keep us humble.

Another thing is that the Lord uses our difficulties to teach us to hate sin. When you have suffered in this world it makes sin less attractive to you. This is how Peter puts it: "Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." (1 Peter 4.1). So our suffering and hardship turn our hearts away from sin.

Another thing that hardship does is to draw our hearts away from this world. We are told in the Scriptures, "Do not love the world or anything in the world" (1 John 2.15). We can and should rejoice in God's goodness and thank him for the nice things we enjoy. But we should not love them. Our natural tendency, however, is to love the gifts of this world and idolise them. So what does God do sometimes? He takes away the things that we have been setting our hearts on. He smashes our idols, so we turn our love back to him.

Another thing our suffering does is to teach us perseverance. What is perseverance? It is the ability to continue doing right in spite of hardship. How

do you learn this ability to continue doing right in spite of hardship? By being in hardship. You cannot learn how to persevere and how to continue through a period of hardship without being in the school of hardship. So God uses our hardships and our difficulties to teach us perseverance.

Our hardships also prove the genuineness of our faith. How can you tell a true Christian from a false one? Outwardly they might both look the same. They might both say they believe in Jesus. They may both say they want to serve Jesus. They may both come to church on Sunday. They may both sing hymns. They might even both pray out loud. The difference between a false Christian and a true Christian is this: when the trials come the true Christian perseveres in the faith, whereas the false Christian gives up the faith. The true Christian says "There's nobody else to whom I can go". Remember that is what Peter said. Many in the crowd had been offended with Jesus' teaching. Jesus said to his disciples, "You do not want to leave too do you?" Peter said "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6.67 – 68). True believers have got faith. They know Jesus is the only Son of God. They know that they are sinners and have got to be saved from hell. They know that only Jesus can save them. So they keep on with Jesus, even in times of difficulty. But what does the false Christian do when troubles come? Like the seed that was sown in shallow soil, the false Christian, grows up for a while and looks like a Christian, but when the troubles come he says "Oh, I tried Christianity but it didn't work. I used to be a Christian but I am not any more." Somebody who says "I used to be a Christian", almost certainly was never a true Christian. And so when we go through the trials it proves the genuineness of our faith. That is a wonderful thing because it gives you confidence and assurance. You can say to yourself, "I must be a Christian because if I was not a Christian, after all I have been through I would not still be following the Lord."

Also the Lord uses our trials to intensify our longing and expectation of future glory. As we find life harder here it encourages us to look forward to the life to come. That is what we should be doing because Scripture says we should focus our hearts and minds not on earthly things but on things above.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3.1 - 4)

God uses the hardships of this life to help us take our minds off this world and to turn them to the world to come.

Now these things I have just been saying are all spoken about in Romans 5. Verse 1 says, "Therefore since we have been justified through faith" - "Justified" means declared by God to be *not guilty*, made righteous in his sight - "since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character". The word the NIV translates here as "character" really means "proof". Perseverance produces proof that you really are a Christian. The apostle continues, "And character [proof] hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." The proof of being a Christian intensifies your hope of the glory to come.

On top of the benefits we get in this life from our sufferings, our sufferings also enhance the life to come. The apostle Paul says this:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4.16)

The troubles that God has given to us are ruled over by him. He is using them to add to the glory we are going to enjoy in the world to come. So as well as gaining from our troubles now in terms of growth and grace, troubles also benefit us in that they add to our future and inheritance.

4) For whom does God work all things for good?

Our fourth question is, for *whom* are these things true? Coming back to Romans chapter 8 and verse 28, we see the answer there. These things are true for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This begs the next question, "Who loves God?" The answer is, naturally speaking, nobody. So if it was down to us and our own moral performance all of us would be excluded from this verse. None of us would have the benefit of it. But thanks

be to God, he changes the nature of those he calls to himself, so that they do love him. He causes them to be born again so that they can truly say, like Peter, "Lord you know that I love you." You remember how Peter failed the Lord badly by denying him three times. After Jesus' resurrection, he spoke with Peter and said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter replied, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you" (John 21.15 - 16). Every true Christian will say the same. Not because of any moral virtue that we have naturally. We do not have any natural love for God but he has placed a love for him in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through causing us to be born again. So it is those people who love God, in other words those who have been born again, for whom God is working in all things for good.

The apostle says that those who love God are those people who have been called according to his purpose. Now when he speaks about those who have been "called according to his purpose" he does mean just that they have heard the gospel call in the general sense, but he means they have called with a call that sometimes people describe as the "effectual call". This is when God calls a person to himself the preaching of the Gospel, and at the same time works in his heart by the Holy Spirit to move him to receive the message. That is the sense in which Paul is using the word "called" here. Someone who has been called in this way by God can say nothing other than "yes" because his nature has been changed from being a God hater to a God lover. So when he hears the Gospel he says "yes, that's what I want".

This is the wonderful thing: we who are believers have been called, not because we decided to be called, but because God decided to call us. We have been called according to his purpose. When did he decide to call us? Before the creation of the world. This is what the apostle goes on to say in verses 29 and 30: "For those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the first born among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified he also glorified." So the people God calls are the people God foreknew. When the apostle says that God "foreknew" is own people, he is not just saying that God knew in advance who would receive Christ. He is saying that God loved his people beforehand. In the Bible to know someone is to love him. Those who are foreknown by God are those who are loved by God in advance.

Those God foreknew, he also predestined. He decided their destiny that they would be conformed to the image of His Son. And it is those ones he

predestined that he also called. It is those ones he called that he also justified. He declared them not guilty. And it is those ones he justified that he also glorified.

So we see that for those of us who are true Christians, our salvation goes back to the eternal purposes of God. That is why we can be sure that God is working in all things for our good. Paul says in the beginning of verse 28 “we *know* that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” He does not say “we like to hope that” or “we vainly hope that somehow everything might work out alright”, like unbelievers do. They say, “Oh well, please God it will be OK”. That’s the best hope they have. The true believer does not say “Oh please God may it be alright”. He says, “I know its going to be alright because it is already been planned by God. It’s already been worked out by him.” Billions of years ago, before anyone of us was thought of, he had already determined what was going to happen for our good. He has already worked out that we are going to be conformed to the image of his Son and nothing is going to stop it. Not even our sin is going to stop it. He *is* going to succeed; he *is* going to conform us to the image of his Son if we are believers. So we know that all things work together for our good.

Application

Some words of application now. First of all, for anyone who is not yet a Christian. Do you see what a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian? You say “I don’t know if God chosen me”. Well, neither do I, but the very fact that you are here gives me a very good reason to hope that you have been. Come to the Lord, look to Him and call upon him as your Saviour, that you might know his love.

For those of us who are Christians, here are some words of application. This truth means that we should be in a permanent state of peace. If we only properly and consistently believed this one verse in the Bible, we would always be peaceful. We would know that whatever happened God was working it for our good. So we see this verse gives us a cast iron reason for peace. There are no grounds for anxiety or fear if you properly believe this verse. Let us believe this and hold on to it and let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

Also we see that this verse shows us we should be thankful in every situation. Remember what the Apostle said, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say to you rejoice” (Philippians 3.1). If I know that in every situation God

is working for my good and the good of all other true Christians I can and I should rejoice in every situation.

This verse also means that we do not need to get up tight with other people who want to harm us. Remember what Joseph said to his brothers. He could have been so full of bitterness towards them. They plotted and schemed for his ruin. They did all they could to smash his life up but he would not allow that bitterness to stay in his heart. Instead he believed that God had a purpose in it. "You meant it for harm but God meant it for good". Now say that to yourself when you have got a work colleague who is deliberately winding you up. "You meant it for harm but God meant it for my good." That family member who is calculating to do the most annoying, aggravating thing imaginable at this particular time. He or she is deliberately trying to provoke you. He or she means to harm you but you don't have to get up tight. You can say "thank you Lord". If it's not too provocative you can say to him or her, "Thank you very much for winding me up. You might not mean to, but you are doing me a favour because you are adding to my treasure in heaven and you are being instrumental in my progress as a Christian". It might not be wise in every situation to say that out loud because it might provoke a further furious reaction but at least you can think it in your heart! You can be peaceful. This how Paul says it in Philippians "Let your gentleness be evident to all, the Lord is near." We can say "Never mind, this is for my good. This is a blessing. This person who is trying to be an absolute pain is, unwittingly, is being a blessing to me". Be nice to that person and sooner or later he will realise the attempts to wind you up are completely failing and he will give up.

So, let us rejoice in this truth. I hope and pray that all of us who are believers will remember this, not only for the rest of this day, but in the coming days, and that those who are not yet believers will come to Christ and rejoice in Him.

Our thanks to Sue Howell for typing up this message from the recording.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission, International Bible Society.

This typed up sermon is copyright © Henry Dixon 2008, Poplar Baptist Church, 2 Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, United Kingdom. It may be reproduced without permission, provided:

- It is reproduced in full,
- The author is stated and this copyright notice is reproduced exactly
- No charge is made for copies.

All other reproduction can only be with permission of the copyright holder.