

Can We Still Believe in Romans 8:28?



RAY PRITCHARD

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Do all things really work together for good? Consider the following:

- A seemingly healthy 12-year-old girl suddenly develops a fever. On Friday, she is taken to the hospital; on Saturday, she dies. Her father calls her “the sunshine of my life.”
- A young boy goes with his church youth group on an outing. The next morning, he has trouble breathing, and his mother calls the doctor. By the time the ambulance gets there, he has stopped breathing. The doctor does everything he can, but the boy dies from a bacterial infection.
- A man feels the call of God to go into the ministry. He leaves his good job and moves to a distant city to enter seminary. His wife works full-time to help him make it through. He’s in his last year now. In just a few months, he’ll start pastoring a church somewhere. But one day, his wife comes in and says, “I’m leaving you. I don’t want to be a pastor’s wife.” She walks out and never comes back.
- A policeman stops a man known to be a drug dealer. It happens on a busy downtown street, and a crowd gathers to watch the unfolding drama. There is a struggle, and somehow the drug dealer grabs the officer’s gun. Someone yells, “Shoot him, man.” And he does, at point-blank range, in the face. The officer was in his early twenties.

Do all things work together for good? Do they? Can we still believe in Romans 8:28? Let me give you the verse the way I learned it, in the King James Version:

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

Let us be honest and admit that we have at least two problems with these words by the apostle Paul.

1. *They promise something we have trouble believing.* Our text says, “**And we know that all things work together for good**” (KJV). Paul, how can you be so sure about that? Most of us are not as sure as Paul was. We hope all things work together for good; we believe they do. But do we really know that to be true?
2. *They include things that we think ought to be left out.* When Paul says, “**All things work together for good**,” that seems too definite for us. All things? We might go so far as to say that “some things” work together for good. We understand that out of difficulty we learn great lessons of faith that cannot come any other way. Yes, some things clearly work together for good. But can we be sure it is really all things? Perhaps these words are true in the theoretical sense or perhaps as a statement of faith. But are they true to every part of life?

Romans 8:28 is one of the most beloved verses in the Bible. *You know that.* Many of you could give testimony to that fact. You were sick, and this verse was like medicine to your soul. You lost a loved one, and these words somehow carried you through. You were crushed and beaten by the winds of ill-fortune, and this verse gave you hope to go on.

Therefore, it shocks us to learn that many secretly doubt it. They hear this verse quoted, and instead of a balm to the soul, it seems like a mocking, cruel joke.

They say, “What do you mean by good?”

- Sickness is not good.
- Murder is not good.
- Divorce is not good.
- Suicide is not good.
- The death of a child is not good.

This verse is sometimes misused by well-meaning Christians who throw it in the face of those who are suffering as if it could answer every question of life. When it is misused that way, it produces an effect opposite to that intended by Paul.

But like it or not, it's in the Bible. And it won't go away. Which brings us back to the fundamental question: Can we still believe in Romans 8:28?

Four considerations will help us answer that question. These are four perspectives we need to keep in mind as we read this verse. *They are not original with me.* During my doctoral studies forty years ago, I attended a seminar taught by Dr. Vernon Grounds, the longtime president of Denver Seminary. One afternoon, he shared these insights with us, and I am simply passing them along to you.

We Must Start With God.

Let's look at the first phrase in three different versions:

- *King James Version:* "All things work together for good to them that love God."
- *New American Standard Bible:* "God causes all things to work together for good."
- *New International Version:* "In all things God works for the good of those who love him."

Did you catch the difference? In the King James version, God is way down at the end of the phrase. In the other two versions, *God is at the beginning.* It is partly a question of text and partly a question of grammar. There is nothing wrong with the traditional version, but the modern translations bring out a proper emphasis.

We will never properly understand this verse as long as we place God at the end rather than at the beginning. But some people look at life that way. They believe that life is like a roll of the dice-sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. And they think that after a tragedy, God shows up to make everything come out right. But that is not the biblical view at all.

In reality, God is there at the beginning, at the end, and at every point in between. That answers the great question, "Where is God when it hurts? Is he there at the beginning, or is he there only at the end?" The answer is that Romans 8:28 begins with God. He was there before it all happened,

he is there when it happens, and he is still there after it is all over. That forever puts an end to the happy-ever-afterism that says, “No matter what happens, God will turn a tragedy into a blessing.” That’s fine for fairy tales, but not for real life.

What do you say when a little child dies? Or when a drug dealer kills a cop? Or when a man dies on the mission field? Or when a woman is cheated out of her inheritance? Or when a friend dies of cancer? Or when your marriage falls apart after thirty-eight years? It is hard to see how these things are good.

When we look at these situations, we must at all costs resist the cheap explanation. It’s too quick, too easy. Sometimes tragedies happen, and well-meaning people say, “That’s not a tragedy. It only looks that way. Just have faith.” If you believe that tragedy is not really tragedy, you will probably lose your faith altogether.

Suppose I have an accident and wreck my car. And suppose when I take it into the body shop, the man says, “Friend, you haven’t had an accident. Your car has just been rearranged.” So I turn and look at the cracked grille, the crumpled fender, the twisted bumper, and the shattered windshield. Then I say, “Buddy, you’re crazy. This car isn’t rearranged. It’s wrecked.”

The Bible never asks us to pretend that tragedy isn’t tragedy or to pretend that our pain isn’t real. *Romans 8:28 tells us that God is involved in everything that happens to us—the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, the happy and the sad.*

What happens to you and to me is not the mechanical turning of some impersonal wheel. It is not fate, kismet, karma, or luck. God is actively at work in your life!

Is Paul saying, “Whatever happens is good”? No.
Is he saying that suffering, evil, and tragedy are good? No.
Is he saying everything will work out if we have enough faith? No.
Is he saying that we will understand why God allowed tragedy to come? No.

What, then, is he saying? He is erecting a sign over the unexplainable mysteries of life, a sign that reads, “Quiet. God at work.” How? We’re not always sure. To what end? Good, and not evil. That’s what Romans 8:28 is saying.

Little children will often be afraid at night. They are scared because they can’t see in the darkness. They cry out until at last Daddy comes. He sits on the bed and takes them in his arms and holds them and says, “Don’t

be afraid. I'm right here with you." *The fear goes away when Daddy comes.* Even so, the darkness of life frightens us until we discover that our heavenly Father is there. The darkness is still dark, but he is there, and that makes all the difference.

Can we still believe in Romans 8:28? Yes, but we need to start with God.

We Need a Long-Term Perspective.

So many things in life seem unexplainable. Why does a tornado destroy one house and leave another untouched? Why does one brother excel while another struggles all his life? Why does a tumor come back when the doctor said he thought he got it all? Why do two soldiers go off to war, but only one returns? The list of such questions is endless. Seen in isolation, they make no sense whatsoever. If there is a purpose behind such tragedy, we cannot see it.

Our danger is that we will judge the end by the beginning. Or, to be more exact, we judge what we cannot see by what we can see. When tragedy strikes, if we can't see a purpose, we assume there isn't one.

But the very opposite is true. *We ought to judge the beginning by the end.* Here is where Romans 8:28 gives us some real help. Paul says, "**And we know that all things work together for good.**" The phrase work together is one word in Greek. We get our English word *synergy* from it. And what is *synergy*? It is what happens when you combine two or more elements to form something brand new that neither could create on its own. It's what happens when my wife goes into the kitchen and makes a big pot of John Madden's Super Bowl Stew. She puts in the potatoes, carrots, celery, rutabagas, turnips, spices, meat, and a few other secret ingredients I know nothing about. What comes out is the best stew I've ever had. Left to myself, I would never eat rutabagas or turnips. But in the Super Bowl Stew, they combine with all those other ingredients to produce a gastronomic delight. That's *synergy*—the combination of many elements to create a positive result.

That's what Paul means when he says that God causes all things to "*work together.*" *Many of the things that make no sense when seen in isolation are, in fact, working together to produce something good in my life.* There is a divine *synergy* even in the darkest moments that produces something positive. And the "*good*" that is ultimately produced could not happen any other way.

A few years ago, Toyota opened a new automobile plant outside of Tupelo, Mississippi. I got a birds-eye view when our plane flew right over the plant. What you see are two vast buildings that cover many acres. Day and night, the trucks bring in the raw materials and various parts of an automobile: the engine, the wheels, the chassis, the frame, the outer body, the windshield, the instrument panel, the seats, the carpeting, and so on. All of that goes into the plant and becomes part of the assembly line. At the end of the line, a new Toyota Corolla rolls out.

Suppose you decided to watch the process from the road. You would see the trucks arriving with the parts and the new cars rolling out the door. What happens in between? *From the outside, you cannot tell.* You hear the noise from within, but you cannot see the process. But you know this much: That new car did not happen by chance. Inside the building, intelligent minds and capable hands take the parts and fashion a vehicle from them. *What by itself seems to have no purpose is in the end indispensable.*

Paul is saying that our experience is like that. God begins with the raw materials of life, including some parts that seem to serve no good purpose. Those materials are acted upon by pressure and heat, then bent, shaped, and joined. Over time, something beautiful is created, not by accident, but by a divine design. And nothing is wasted in the process.

That is how we must look at life. We must not judge the end by the beginning, but rather the beginning by the end.

Can we still believe in Romans 8:28? Yes, we can. But we need a long-term perspective.

We Must Define the word “Good.”

This is the crux of the matter. Paul says that “all things work together for good.” But what is the “good” he is talking about? For most of us, “good” equals things like health, happiness, solid relationships, long life, money, food on the table, meaningful work, and a nice place to live. In general, we think the “good” life means a better set of circumstances.

Once again, that’s not necessarily the biblical viewpoint. In this case, we don’t have to wonder what Paul means. He defines it for us in the very next verse: **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son”** (8:29). That makes it very clear.

God has predestined you and me to an inevitable end. That certain end is the “good” of Romans 8:28.

Let me put it plainly. *God is at work in your life, making you like Jesus Christ.* He has predestined you to that end. He is at work in your life, making that happen. Therefore, anything that makes you more like Jesus Christ is good. Anything that pulls you away from Jesus Christ is bad. When Paul says that all things work together for good, he is not saying that the tragedies and heartaches of life will always produce better circumstances. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. But God is not committed to making you happy and successful. He is committed to making you like his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And whatever it takes to make you more like Jesus is good.

So it is in the providence of God that we learn more in the darkness than we do in the light. We gain more from sickness than we do from health. We pray more when we are scared than when we are confident. And everything that happens to you: the tragedies, the unexplained circumstances, even the stupid choices you make—all of it is grist for the mill of God’s loving purpose. He will not give up even when we do.

I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way.
But I was none the wiser,
For all she had to say.

Then I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne’er a word said she.
But, oh, the lessons I did learn
When Sorrow walked with me.

God is at work in your life. Right now, you are rough and uncut, and God is patiently chipping away at you. But remember this: He will never intentionally hurt you. *In the end, you will look like the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This, I think, is our greatest problem with Romans 8:28. *Our good and God’s good are not the same.* We want happiness, fulfillment, peace, and a long life. Meanwhile, God is at work in us, through us, and by everything that happens to us, transforming us into the image of his Son.

Does that include the worst that happens to us? Yes.
Does that include the things that hurt us deeply? Yes.
Does that include the times when we are heartbroken? Yes.
Does that include the times when we sin? Yes.

Does that include the times when we doubt God? Yes.

Does that include the times when we curse him to his face? Yes.

He is always at work. He is never deterred by us. *Nothing happens to us outside his control.* There are no mistakes and no surprises.

God can do that even when we can't.

God does it even when we don't believe it.

That is what Paul means when he says, "We know." We know it because we know God, and he has said it. His word is trustworthy, and that guarantees it. Indeed, his character rests upon it.

We know it not by looking at the events of life, but by knowing God. We know it not by studying the pattern of the cloth, but by knowing the designer of the fabric. We know it not by listening to the notes of the symphony, but by knowing the composer of the music.

There are many things we don't know. We don't understand why babies die, or why cars wreck, or why planes crash, or why families break up, or why good people get sick and suddenly die. But we know this: God is at work, and he has not forgotten us.

Can we still believe in Romans 8:28? Yes, but we must properly define what "good" means.

We Must Understand the Limitation of This Verse.

Notice the last phrase of Romans 8:28. It is a promise to "**those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose.**" That is an all-important limitation. *This verse is true of Christians and only of Christians.* It is not a blanket promise to the whole human race. Why? Because God's purpose is to make his children one day like his Son.

Therefore, we may honestly say that Romans 8:28 is an evangelistic verse. And we can ask two simple questions:

1. Have you ever responded to God's call?
2. Are you part of God's saving purpose?

You either answer “Yes” or “No” to those questions. There is no middle ground. Until you can answer “Yes”, this verse does not apply to you.

Here’s a prisoner letter we received not long after my book *An Anchor for the Soul* was published. I saw it for the first time in many years recently.

Dear Ray Pritchard,

I have some “Good News” and some “Not so Good News” that I would like to share with you. First, the “not so Good News.” This is not my first time, second time, or my fifth time, but somewhere around my tenth time that I have been locked up at the “County Jail.”

I have been to prison three times. I was released with two years of parole. A year went by, and I again was arrested and charged with burglary. So here I am, charged with burglary, on parole for burglary, and my entire life is burglary.

I am sure you would say to me that I need to change “careers.” I am looking at 6 to 30 years of prison time.

Now the “Good News.” My cellmate, Charles, offered a book for me to read. The title of the book is *An Anchor for the Soul* by (none other than) Ray Pritchard. I have read it from front to back. I have heard the “knock on the door,” I have “went to the door,” and “I have finally opened it.”

I HAVE LET CHRIST INTO MY HEART.

I wake to a morning prayer, and end my day with prayer. During my day I practice what you have preached. I know I will be distracted by the devil, and conflicts will arise most likely when everything is going smooth.

To end my letter to you, I cannot say “Thank You” enough for sharing the knowledge and encouragement to seek God. I truly believe your book will have a great impact on the rest of my life as long as I continue to “open the door” and let Christ in every day. I believe I will then never, ever have to be locked up physically or spiritually again.

He signed the letter “A grateful recovering alcohol/drug addict.” Then he added this P.S.: “I have thanked you, I have thanked Jesus. I believe it is time to thank my cellmate, Charles.”

Going to prison is not “good” in the usual sense of the word. But it is better to be in prison and to find Jesus than to be free on the outside and

trapped by sin on the inside. This letter shows how Romans 8:28 works even in the hard times of life.

Two Important Qualifications

Let's return to the fundamental question: Can we still believe in Romans 8:28?

It sounds good.

We want to believe it.

I say that we *can* believe in Romans 8:28 as long as we keep two things in mind.

1. We must not try to explain the unexplainable.

Sometimes in our zeal to protect God, we try to explain why bad things happen to good people. That's almost always a bad idea. We are like little children looking into the face of an infinitely wise Father. We can't understand all he does. It is enough that we love him and know that he is there.

It is right at this point that so much damage has been done. In the end, it is not this verse that has lost its credibility, but rather our feeble attempts to justify the mysterious ways of God. *Better to say nothing than to speak of things we know nothing about.*

2. We must understand that God's values and our values are not the same.

This is really like saying, "We must understand that we will often not understand at all." We are not called to praise God for evil, sin, and death. *But we can praise God for the good he can work in the darkest days of life.* Romans 8:28 is not teaching us to call evil good or to smile through the tears and pretend everything is OK. But it is teaching us that no matter what happens to us, no matter how terrible, no matter how unfair, our God is there. He has not left us. His purposes are being worked out as much in the darkness as they are in the light.

The Japanese art of *kintsugi*, shown on this booklet's cover, teaches that when a bowl breaks, it is not thrown away. Instead, the cracks are filled with gold, making the bowl even more beautiful than before. The scars are not covered up; they are celebrated.

Romans 8:28 shares a similar message. God does not promise a life without hardship, but he does promise that nothing is wasted. The places where we have been broken by loss, failure, grief, or disappointment are the very places where his grace shines brightest. What looks ruined to us is, in God's hands, being made into something stronger, deeper, and more beautiful than before.

“Where Was God When My Son Died?”

The story is told of a father whose son was killed in a terrible accident. He came to his pastor and, in great anger, said, “Where was God when my son died?” The pastor thought for a moment and replied, “The same place he was when his Son died.” *That’s the final piece of the puzzle.* He knows what we are going through, for he, too, has been there. He watched his own Son die.

Therefore, we can say with the apostle Paul, “We know.” Not because we see the answer, but because we know him, and he knows what it is like to lose a Son. He knows, and we know him.

Can we still believe in Romans 8:28? Let me answer that question with another. What is your alternative? If you don’t believe in Romans 8:28, what do you believe in? Fate? Chance? The impersonal forces of nature?

Yes, we can-and must-believe in Romans 8:28. It teaches us one great truth: *All things ultimately contribute to the ultimate good of those who love God.*

That does not answer every question. But it does answer the big question: Does God know what he is doing? Yes, he does, and we know him, and that is enough.

Going Deeper

1. When you hear the words “all things work together for good,” what experiences in your life make that promise difficult to believe right now?
2. How would your understanding of Romans 8:28 change if “good” means becoming more like Christ rather than having easier circumstances?
3. Can you identify a time when God used something painful or confusing in your life to shape your character or deepen your faith—perhaps in ways you didn’t recognize at first?
4. What does it look like to trust God with what you do not understand, rather than trying to explain the unexplainable?

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Please let us know how we can
pray for you and your family.

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