

“God Causes All Things To Work Together For Good”
Romans 6-8
“*Citizens of Another Country*”
Part VI

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Title: God Causes All Things To Work Together For Good
Text: Romans 8:17b-30
Theme: Our lives are the outworking of God’s eternal purpose and thus has significance even in the most trying moments.

Why am I teaching this?

Life is a shadow of the greater substance that is found in Christ Jesus. Creation, although cloaked by the fall, is declaring the glory of the Godhead. Our failure to see this shatters the picture and pushes us to live fragmented lives. In the absence of His picture, we live a splintered existence. We cannot see how the death of a loved one or loss of any kind has any deeper significance. We live with enormous doubt and regret, believing that somehow had we only made a different choice we would be living happier lives. The bondage of such thinking exists because we do not see God in the details.

This study is not random. Neither is your reading of it. Everything about this moment has weight. It is my prayer that God would open your eyes to see Him in it and open your ears to hear Him speak.

The eternal view:

Many people have died with a life time of regret crushing them. Poor decisions, wrong decision, even sinful decisions haunt them and plague them at every moment of every day. Whatever repentance was needed happened, but still they struggle in the grip of a relentless foe. Listen carefully to these words, **“The believing see sovereignty as a source of comfort, whereas the unbelieving see sovereignty as a defense for failure. The sovereignty of God is never an excuse for sinning, but it is a comfort inside of sin’s victimization.”**

Romans 8:17b-30 assures me that every moment of every day is filled with the meaning of God.

Introduction:

“Neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer lets us forget that believers have no easy path. This is not some perverse accident but an integral part of discipleship. Our sufferings are not meaningless. We suffer *in order that we may also share in his glory*. The path of suffering is the path of glory.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 318 [emphasis his]).

Before we unpack the thoughts contained in this paragraph let us review the larger context of what the Holy Spirit has been speaking to us.

The big picture:

The message of Romans 6 through 8 is directly connected to what has preceded in Romans 3:21-5:21 and what will follow in chapters 9 through 11. Here the primary idea is that our present sanctification is the necessary expression of our present justification; the two ideas are inseparably linked. If sanctification as described in chapters 6 through 8 is not a reality for the believer, then the justification as described in 3:21-5:21 is also not a reality. Consider with me the grammatical structure of these three chapters.

- 6:1-14 Q1 “Should we continue in sin?”**
6:15-7:6 Q2 “Is grace lawless or does grace reign?”
7:7-12 Q3 “Is the law sin?”
7:13-8:30 Q4 “Is the law a measurement of and means to sanctification?”
- **Our relationship to the old nature and the Law (7:13-25)**
 - **Our relationship to the Holy Spirit (8:1-17a)**
 - **Our relationship to the eternal purpose of God (8:17b-30)**
- 8:31-39 Q5 “Can anything separate us from the love of God?”**

As noted, our present paragraph (8:17b-30) is a part of a larger paragraph (7:13-8:30). So far we have noted the two leading ideas. The first was in 7:13-25. Here we noted how the law must not be looked to as a measurement of or a means to our **sanctification (i.e. the outworking of our identity)**. Since sin uses the Law as a means of creating more lust in us and deceiving us, we should not look to the Law to be anything other than a revelation of God’s character (7:7-12 [esp. vv. 8, 11]). Our old nature desires for us to look to the Law and thus live according to the reign of sin, but our new nature looks only to the sufficiency of Christ for deliverance from “this body of death” (vv. 24, 25).

Chapter 8:1-17a shows the standing of either a believer or an unbeliever. Paul wants the believer to see what life in the Holy Spirit truly is. The idea of 7:25a is not different than the thought of walking according to the Spirit (v. 4), minding the things of the Spirit (v. 5), or being led by the Spirit (8:14). Because of their union with Christ (6:1-14), believers are at peace with God and are pleasing to God. They no longer work from a position of deficiency, but of sufficiency (8:7-9). As the justified, believers have the indwelling Christ and are being led by the Spirit, are intimate with the Father, and are joint-heirs of Christ’s work and the consequences of it (8:12-17a). Believers would be foolish to live after the dictates of the flesh, when they are no longer in the flesh.

The final installment of Paul’s answer to the question raised in 8:13 is found in our present passage (8:17b-30). There are three thoughts that have one fundamental idea behind them. The sufferings of the created have the support of the Holy Spirit behind it and are a part of God’s overarching purpose for them. The first thought in this final installment is the sighing of creation.

Breaking down our present paragraph:

I. The sighing of creation (vv. 17b-22).

“For Paul the great thing is that this is not meaningless pain, and he could look forward with confidence to the final unfolding of the purpose of God.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 318). Notice the complete continuity between what follows and what Paul is saying here.

“The ‘if’ here is similar to the ‘if’ in verse 9, the hypothesis being assumed to be an actual fact.” (John Phillips, Exploring Romans, 129)

The “if” takes for granted that what is stated exists (i.e. eiper). As believers in union with Christ, we groan against the sin that surrounds us. Everything we see is stained by sin’s coloring. In the created order there is solidarity between image bearers and non-image bearing elements. Both wait for the full expression of God’s redemptive activity. As a means of encouragement, suffering is placed in a biblical perspective.

A. The imbalance between suffering and glory (v. 18)

“Paul is realistic; there is no reason to think that Christians will be free from troubles in this present life.” (Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, PNTC, 319). Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do we have natural devastation? Why is there suffering, sin, and sorrow all around us? The most fundamental answer is that we live in a world that sits in the clutches of the fall into sin.

Does verse 17 make the suffering a condition to the glory? What if I do not suffer? Are the previous statements then not true? Verses 18-25 provide a working definition of what it means, “to suffer.” To live in this body of flesh that is warring against my soul is to suffer. Truly, “we ourselves groan within ourselves as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Verse 17 ends with a statement that opens the way for verses 18-30.

Our present suffering, regardless as to its expression, cannot compare with the glory that awaits us. When our present suffering and future glory are placed on the scales of God’s justice, we will see the complete incompatibility of these two items.

“All the weight is on the other balance; and all the values of life are on the other side. Life is to be lived with reference to the future.” (J.P. McBeth, Romans, 194).

When God swallows up time and brings to pass the fulfillment of His purpose, whatever suffering we might have encountered will be erased from our memory. It will be as nothing when compared to the glory that awaits us. None of us are capable of comprehending the glory of that moment.

The dangerous conformities and seductive patterns:

The Spirit's intent is not for you to simply "grin and bear it," but to see Him in this moment and to see this moment against the backdrop of eternity. All of us have come to moments in life when we simply wanted to throw in the proverbial towel, but for whatever reason we got out of bed and faced another day. God does not desire for us to live a numb life. He does not want you to find whatever you are looking for in anything other than Him. You will never be happy apart from a life lived in relationship with Him.

Believe me, the world and the flesh persistently seek to conform you to its philosophy. It wants you to believe that you deserve better than this and that your personal happiness is God's goal. In light of such thinking, whatever is making you unhappy must be corrected. This thinking is of the devil and it is the mindset the world portrays and your flesh delights in, but it is completely contrary to God and His purpose for you. Do you really desire to be happy and contented and satisfied? Then find it in God and in God alone.

Everything we do to block this idea robs us of the richness that is found only in Him.

B. The expectation of the created order (vv. 19-22)

1. What does creation eagerly long for? (v. 19)

The language used is graphic. "Eagerly longing" is a compound word that communicates intense anticipation. The only other time this compound word is used is in Philippians 1:20.

"It is a double compound, hence to watch eagerly with outstretched head." (A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures) The air of anticipation and immediate appearing is pronounced.

ILLUSTRATION:

When my children visit from out of town, Kirsten and I are eagerly longing for their immediate arrival. As soon as they appear, we jump up and everything comes to a stand still. Everything we do from that point on is focused around them.

Creation's deliverance is directly tied to the sons of God being revealed in their glory. When this happens the redemptive purpose of God will come to its conclusion.

A.T. Robertson correctly notes how,

"This mystical sympathy of physical nature with the work of grace is beyond the comprehension of most of us. But who can disprove it?" (A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures)

2. Why is creation in “bondage” and when will it be set free? (vv. 20-22)

Creation, through no fault of its own, shares in the fall of man into sin. Although creation sits in involuntary bondage, its placement is by God.

“The subjector was not Adam but God. The middle voice denotes volition, will, and consciousness. This is evidence that God subjected nature rather than Adam, who would have been an unconscious subjector.” (J.P. McBeth, Romans, 195).

Creation right now groans in its bondage to sin.

“The word ‘futility’ occurs in the New Testament only here, in Ephesians 4:17, and in 2 Peter 2:18. It means ‘disappointing misery’ in this passage in Romans. The same Greek word is used frequently in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew for ‘vanity’ in Ecclesiastes. It describes something which does not measure up to that for which it was intended. So creation groans.” (John Phillips, Exploring Romans, 130)

Think about this statement for just a moment.

“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps. 19:1).

¹⁹ “Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:19, 20).

Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:19, 20 tell us that the design of creation is to declare the glory of the eternal Godhead. This it does even though muted and veiled; it is still fulfilling its purpose. But it groans under the weight of its captivity. It lies buried beneath the heavy cloak of sin’s impact. Creation groans as a mother birthing a child (v. 22). Yet there is coming a day when creation will in an unimpeded manner trumpet the glory of God. It shall not only declare, but shout the unbridled glory of God, and this day will happen when the purpose of God in the redemption of man comes to its culmination. Heaven shall stand as a vocal witness to the untarnished testimony of God’s faithfulness to bring to completion that which He began.

Creation will join with redeemed humanity in openly declaring the glory of God (v. 21).

- C. The patient waiting for future fulfillment (vv. 23-25)

Just as creation, so also believers groan in their wait for the full installment of God’s eternal purpose. All who are saved are sealed with the Holy Spirit and have been given His gifts (1 Cor. 12). All of these are first fruits, initial expressions of His ministry in us and through us. There is, however, more to come.

Verse 25 is loaded with words that speak of endurance, perseverance, and patient waiting. Paul uses the word three times in our present paragraph (8:19, 23, 25). He also uses it in 1 Corinthians 1:7, Galatians 5:5, and Philippians 3:20. Elsewhere it is used only once (Heb. 9:28). In all of its occurrences it refers to waiting that is associated with the return of Jesus Christ.

The idea of perseverance is that of patient waiting. The certainty of the event is not in question. What He has promised will come to pass. Because of what is promised and who did the promising, His people wait patiently.

There is an aspect of God's redemptive activity that is still yet future. Although we have been freed from the penalty of sin and the power of sin, there is still yet future a freedom from the presence of sin that awaits us. In that day, the redemptive plan of God will be brought to its conclusion. When we appear before God at the Bema seat judgment, we will lose forever the presence of sin.

1. A fuller expression of God's redemptive purpose is coming (v. 23)

There is a fuller installment of God's redemptive activity in creation at large and in His people specifically. As such His people wait for the fuller expression of God's purpose for them. The connectivity of the various pieces is played out for us in verses 26-30.

What we have right now is a piece of a larger whole. There is still more to come. It is this hope that moves us to press ahead and to wait patiently for its fuller expression.

2. Presently, we live in hope believing His promises (vv. 24, 25)

Because of who God is, we can wait patiently for the fulfillment of His promises. Verse 24 addresses the nature of hope.

This brings us to the second point inside of our study.

- II. The ministry of the Spirit (vv. 26-27).

There are three ideas inside of these two verses.

- A. The weakness of man (v. 26a)

The word "weakness" speaks of inability, of disease. This weakness is directly tied to our fallen flesh. The restriction placed on us with our old nature, and in the context of a fallen world, causes us to groan greatly. This state of being is described as a weakness. Inside of this external and internal world of conflict the Holy Spirit expresses a ministry of intercession. For all of us who labor in prayer, our weakness does not need confirmation. It is because of our weakness that we celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit in our behalf.

B. The work of the Holy Spirit (v. 26b)

1. The Holy Spirit helps us

“Only twice in N.T., here and Luke 10:40 in Martha's plea for Mary's help. Here beautifully Paul pictures the Holy Spirit taking hold at our side at the very time of our weakness (associative instrumental case) and before too late.” (A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures)

“Sunantilambanomai strictly *grasp hold of with* someone; hence (*helpfully*) *take up a matter with; generally help, come to the aid of.*”

This verse tells us that the Holy Spirit is always working in the life of His people. Even when I believe I have been cut off from the working of God, He is behind the scene helping me in my weakness.

2. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us

The word used in verse 26 has a prefix whereas the word in verse 27 does not, but both words are the same. The root word is used in the following New Testament passages (Rom. 8:27 [the Holy Spirit], 34; Heb. 7:25 [Jesus Christ the Son]). Let us not draw too sharp of a distinction between these two ideas. The second and third members of the Godhead are speaking to the first member in our behalf. The idea is that of mediating, of coming in between two people or parties.

This passage has nothing to do with the grace gift of tongues. It has everything to do with non-verbal communications between you and God. I am so thankful for the unconditional activity of God in my behalf. In the absence of such intervention, all would be lost.

C. The will of the Father (v. 27)

What the Holy Spirit does for those in union with Christ is incapable of being done by them. He is the one who aligns our lives with the will of God. Because I am living the exchanged life, the Holy Spirit is working in me and through me the perfect will of God. Right now, I am in the will of God.

The statement “will of” is added. There is no corresponding word in the original language. The Holy Spirit intercedes for the saints according to God. It is according to His will that is assumed and perhaps rightly so. But the statement is more dramatic when we understand the Spirit molds us according to God.

The Holy Spirit is causing me to live in accordance with who He is in the purpose of God. The previous thought of Romans 8:1-17a is true because the Holy Spirit is doing it. He is living His life in me and through me to those around me. What this life looks like is Jesus Christ, who is the visible bodily expression of the Godhead.

This brings us to the third point inside of our study.

III. The purpose of God (vv. 28-30).

The following three verses are significant statements. Consider what has proceeded this moment. The suffering of the saints in a fallen world and the intercessory ministry of the Holy Spirit is all according to the purpose of God. Nothing is accidental or incidental. All of it is working together for good.

The purpose of God will come to pass. This is the hope in which we live. The Holy Spirit is making sure that the outworking of our lives is in accordance with God's will. There are two thoughts needing to be explored.

- A. There are no accidents or incidentals in the redemptive purpose of God (v. 28).

All of the suffering attached to living as fallen beings in a fallen world are but pieces of God's master plan. Nothing is accidental and nothing is arbitrary. All of it is a part of His master plan. Verses 28-30 are assuring His people that what they are presently encountering has eternal significance. God will bring all of His people to the state of glorification. He will complete that which He began.

Everything we do is a necessary part of a larger whole. Nothing we do is accidental. Everything we have in our lives is noteworthy in the purpose of God. Our failure is in our inability to see each of the parts in light of the whole. Because we are small in our view of things, we fail to see how each of the details fit into the larger outworking of God's purpose. In our context, what is the purpose of God to which we have been called? Verse 27 speaks of God's will or purpose. The purpose of God's redemptive activity is for His people to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, and it is to this end that they will be fully revealed in the magnificent and majestic glory of God. In the fulfilling of this purpose, Jesus Christ becomes the firstborn among many brothers.

In our understanding of what God is doing in the world, we have a strong tendency to remove Him from our suffering regardless as to how or why we got there. Yet this passage assures us that even in our suffering, God is working. How tragic it would be if suffering was meaningless, if somehow it simply did not "fit" into the eternal purpose of God.

Although I do not embrace the following ideology, what if God's control in the world was only backward-looking or reactionary? What if God simply permitted you to do what you want even if such action on your part was completely contrary to what He desired? What if He allowed you to make certain choices that would completely destroy your life for days, weeks, months, years, and decades with no real purpose other than personal suffering? What if what you endure in this life has no necessary connection to the next? God does win, and He will bring His children to glory, but

what if nothing you do in this life has any genuine relationship to the larger program of God?

If such thinking were true, then would you not seek to change what was currently causing you heartache or pain? What if the problem was disappointment in a spouse or child? What if it was an unplanned pregnancy? What if an accident caused by a drunken driver took your only child? What if your employment opportunity was complete drudgery with no prospect of future release? What if you simply desired to run away from all of your responsibilities and abandon all those who look to you for support?

But what if there is a God who loves you unconditionally, and what if His forgiveness is without limit? What if this God were so wise that He always uses the best means to accomplish the highest good? What if He was so gracious and loving that He always did what was best for those He loves? What if He was so working in each of the details so that nothing in this life was without purpose? What if you could live a life without regret? This would not mean hurt did not happen or every choice had pleasant consequences, but that somehow even when we rebelled against His loving hand, He was still working even that moment for good.

God is working every event in our lives for the outworking of His eternal purpose. The mystery behind this is “how?” How does He work His will through me without me “feeling” like I am a robot? For me this is a great unknown. In the midst of hundreds of daily personal choices as well as living from the impact of others daily choices, God is working out His purpose.

This is a truth that can give rest to all of us who live inside of a fallen world. God has not abandoned us to ourselves or to the capricious will of others. It is His will that is being worked out in every detail of life. It is my prayerful desire that each of us in our struggles would find Him to be enough in this life and in the life to come.

- B. God’s redemptive purpose is intentional and immutable and unstoppable (vv. 29, 30).

The means by which His likeness is formed in His people is through His actions of foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. Some ask the question as to why sanctification is not listed between the words justification and glorification. I respond by saying that the intent of this listing is not to be exhaustive, but suggestive. He does not mention adoption, Spirit baptism, indwelling, sanctification and the like, but all of what God does in the cross is to be included in this sweeping generalization. From “A” to “Z” God will fulfill His promise to complete what He planned.

1. God knows and determines who are His (i.e. foreknowledge and predestination).

Let us not confuse foreknowledge with omniscience. God knows everything all at once. Yet in the knowledge of God, He knows His people differently than He knows those who are not His people. This knowledge is intentional.

The dialogue as it exists between God and man cannot be neatly categorized into our finite compartments. I love the discussion when the sovereignty of God is celebrated. One commentator in the discussion of this passage concludes with the following statement.

“Each of us has a free will and we exercise that will in a thousand ways. The choices we make determine the way we move through life. But above and beyond us and our choices is God. He overrules our every move to make each one conform to His own sovereign will.” (John Phillips, Exploring Romans, 136)

Though my thoughts as to God’s sovereignty might be contrary to yours, I do believe regardless as to how you believe you received salvation, the outcome of that act is unchanging and unstoppable. Once you are justified, you will be glorified.

2. God powerfully calls those who are His (i.e. calling and justification).

Because God knows and determines who are His, His calling and justification of the called is unchanging. Those whom He calls are the predetermined and foreknown. This is not a general call or generic call; it is extended only to those who are predestined and foreknown. This much comes from the text.

3. God finishes what He begins (i.e. glorification)

There is no possible way for the purpose of God in the redemption of His people to be stopped. Those whom God justifies will be glorified. The verbs of verse 30 are all grammatically aorist active indicatives. This speaks of a past tense and point in time. In eternity past, God laid out this idea. **There is no impediment to the purpose of God being fulfilled in the people of God. In the purpose of God, your glorification is certain. There is no possible way for this not to happen. There is nothing you can do to undo what God has done and is doing.**

“He uses the past tense for the present time, as the Hebrews use, who sometimes describe something that is to come by using the past tense, to signify the certainty of it: and he also is referring to God’s continual working.” (The Geneva Bible)

As we think on these things let me close with this thought.

Is it possible for me to make God bigger than He is? Of course not, yet it is possible in my understanding of foreknowledge, predestination, and calling to make God smaller than what He is. In our quest to understand these ideas, let us not bring God down to our level but rather let us pray that the Holy Spirit will bring us up to His level.

APPLICATION: (What is the NEXT STEP?)

1. See the glory of God veiled in the created order. Do not overlook the presence of God in the immediate or mundane.
2. Know that everything has significance. Nothing is accidental or incidental.
3. Rest in God knowing that He will keep His promises.
4. In the midst of life remember that the best is still yet to come.