

In all things God works

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 Romans 8:28

Theme: *"Even during the darkest times of our life, God continues to work God's purposes out"*

Introduction. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 28, Paul writes, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose".

In 1992, 16 years ago, I began to remember and had to confront some painful and traumatic experiences from my childhood. For a period of a year or so I was molested by a man at my church who had taken on a father role in my life. I spent the rest of my youth ignoring these memories, pretending they had not happened. But in 1992 I met other people who had also been abused by this man and finally had to face these experiences. Those of you who have had similar experiences will know just how painful and difficult this was. I had also to deal with the betrayal of this father-figure.

As I worked through these experiences, I became increasingly depressed, until I ended up in a psychiatric hospital for a month with a Major Depression. This was the darkest period of my life. I felt the world pressing down and crushing me. It was like my insides were being torn open. An experience I would not wish on anyone else and that I have no desire to experience again.

One day, while I was in hospital, a well-meaning person from my church visited. I shared with her what I was feeling. Then she said, "Adrian, you know that God has a good purpose in all of this. He will use this experience for good. You know, the Bible says that God works all things together for the good." You can imagine what I thought about that! I was in no place to hear what she said.

How sad it is when we take beautifully meaningful and good Scriptures and turn them into clichés. We apply them like plasters over other people's pain in the hope that their pain will just go away.

And so, I thought that we needed – or I needed – to think more about this text and figure out how we can understand it more deeply and use it more responsibly. And so let us open in prayer.

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Context of Paul's Letter. I'd like us to place this text in its broader textual context, and then zoom in to the immediate context of the verse. We need to understand the broad purpose and story that Paul presents in his letter. In Romans 1:16, Paul sets forth his main concern. He nails his colours to the flag: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes ... For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."

So Paul's letter is all about the gospel message, that everyone – anyone – who believes will be saved. We become righteous. This doesn't necessarily mean we become holy and perfect. Righteous in Paul's letters means that we are made right with God. I often find it helpful to replace 'righteous' with 'rightness' when I read Paul's letters. The gospel of salvation is all about God making us right with him.

¹ This sermon, like most of my more recent sermons, may not work very well on paper. It was, as you will see, quite personal, and required the spoken voice and immediacy of presence to convey the message.

And having given us his main point, his conclusion, Paul like a good teacher goes back and tells us the whole story in detail. It may be helpful to think of Paul's letter as a kind of tapestry in which the threads run horizontally. Paul weaves and embroiders this tapestry to describe to us the journey of faith, a journey from death to life.

In the first few chapters, Paul creates a vivid and often disturbing of the brokenness of humanity. Especially in the second half of chapter 1, Paul describes in detail the sinful and arrogant attitude of humanity as we turn our back on God. This reaches a climax in Romans 3: 23, where Paul says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". We all know this. That we are not all that we could be. We do not live up to the glorious and beautiful way in which God created us to be. We fall short of that possibility. This first part of the tapestry is dark and messy, with clashing colours and jagged shapes – not something beautiful to look at.

And then Paul offers us the hope of change, having said in verse 23 that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, he immediately continues in verse 24, "and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus". Inasmuch as everyone is fallen and sinful, everyone can be saved. And this salvation, this justification, is a free gift. There is nothing we can do or need to do to acquire it. God offers it freely, based on the work of Jesus Christ. We just receive it. There is a dramatic change in the tapestry now, as the colours become lighter – yellows, oranges and red, with streaks of blue and emerald, and threads of gold weaving in-between.

The next few chapters describe what life is like from this point on. In chapter 5:1-2, Paul says, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Once we have been made right with God, once we are righteous, we experience peace and joy and hope and glory. Sounds fantastic, doesn't it. As we journey on in life, from the time we are redeemed, we can experience these good things.

And it leads towards hope – a hope for the glory of God. This is a key concept that will help us understand Romans 8:28, so keep your eye on it. Paul is not saying that we glorious, like we put on a white sequined jacket and God puts a spotlight on us. No. Rather, God is glorious. It is like his shines, like the sun, and we bask in the radiance of God's light. God's glory is reflected onto us. We experience this now in glimpses from time to time, don't we. But later we will experience it all the time – the intimate fellowship with God.

Paul describes this further in 8:15. When we are made right with God we receive the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, father'. The Spirit himself testifies that we are God's children." Isn't this an amazing image of intimacy with God – the Holy Spirit in us enabling to relate to God as a Abba, father. Think of the most intimate and good relationship you have ever had – this is just a shadow of what we can experience with God.

So, this is Paul's Gospel message, that we move from death, darkness and sin, into life, light and the Spirit. And Romans 8:28 describes this continued journey of faith.

Immediate Context. But the tapestry is not yet complete. So far, everything sounds fantastic and perfect. But in fact, life is not always like this. And Paul knows this. There are times in our lives when things are not great. Times when we suffer, when we experience pain, difficulties. Paul begins to weave into this beautiful tapestry dark threads, black threads, that interweave the other threads, even those golden ones.

He first talks about suffering in chapter 5. Having just said that we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, he continues "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings". Now I don't know about you, but I have not managed to rejoice in suffering. In my experience, suffering is something to be gotten through. Afterwards I rejoice that the suffering is over! But during the suffering, I just try to survive.

So how does Paul say we rejoice in suffering? He says, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope" (5:3-4). Hope in what? He's just told us – hope in the glory of God! So we can rejoice in suffering because it leads, as

we journey through it, towards glory. Somehow, suffering and hope are closely associated. Paul is not saying that suffering is necessary for glory – a ‘no pain, no gain’ theology. No, rather Paul is saying that suffering is inevitable. We live in a broken, fallen world, and suffering is just part of life. There it is. What can we say? There is suffering. But in the midst of suffering, we continue to journey on towards glory.

In fact, each time Paul talks about suffering, he also talks about glory. They are always brought close together. For example, in 8:17, having just told us that we are co-heirs with Christ, he says, “we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”. The two are closely related. And in 8:18 he says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”. The dark threads of suffering are interwoven with the golden threads of glory. We journey through life’s sufferings towards life’s glory.

Romans 8:28. And this finally brings us to 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.” In all things – in all of these experiences we have talked about. The good experiences of joy and peace and hope, but also the bad experiences of suffering. In all of these experiences, in the whole of our lives, God works. God works! God is present and intimately engaged with us in all of these experiences. He is not remote, somewhere far off. No! He is present and his is working. Working for what? For the good. God is working to transform bad experiences, suffering, into something good, something positive, something meaningful and worthwhile. It is not that the bad becomes good, and it not that God sends the bad things to achieve good outcomes. Rather, God transforms the bad, he transfigures them, so that good comes out of them.

God has a purpose for our lives, and that purpose will come to fruition. Suffering cannot detour that plan or foil God’s purposes. There are times when we feel like we’ve fallen off the tapestry of our lives, when the black threads are hanging loose and God has abandoned us. But the tapestry continues to grow and God continues to weave the dark threads back into the overall picture.

Listen to what Paul says in the next two verses (8:29-30) – those God foreknew he also predestined ... and those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified”. Do you see how all these paths lead to glory. Our life journey always leads to the glory of God. No matter how dark our present. No matter the suffering we experience. No matter the detours we take. God’s plan continues to stretch forward and we continue to move towards the glory of God.

Conclusion. When I was in hospital, I did not feel close to God. I didn’t experience a sense of God’s purpose for me. But I had a sense of still small voice in the back of my heads saying, “I am here with you”. It was tiny, like a mustard seed, but I sensed that God was there and somehow journeying with me through the dark. And I hung on to that for dear life – a fragile thread in the tapestry of my own life.

And with 16 years of hindsight, I can see how God transformed those experiences for good. In many ways my life would be much less complicated if I had not been abused, had not been so depressed as to require hospitalisation. But I can see now how God has woven those experiences into the tapestry of my life. I am who I am, in part, because of those painful experiences. And so I treasure them. I would not be the man you know me to be without them.

When you arrived you received a card with this verse printed on it, in a spiral. I did that to remind you, when you look at it, that we on a journey through life. And that journey is seldom in a straight line. Rather, it is meandering and circuitous. Sometimes we feel that we have detoured from a good, straight path, and this is true. Yet, God continues to draw us inexorably towards his great goal for us, to share in the glory of God. And nothing, nothing can hinder God’s achievement of his goals.

As we close, listen to what Paul says at the end of this chapter (8:35-39): “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or

danger or sword? ... No! 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 or 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.” Amen.