

“ALL THINGS FOR GOOD — TRUSTING GOD AND SANCTIFICATION”
ROMANS 8:28-29

In his book *Rise and Shine*, Chuck Swindoll recounts a significant event from the past century:

When the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was opened by Queen Victoria in 1851, people flocked to Hyde Park to behold what they called the ‘marvels.’ The magic power back then was steam...steam plows, [the] steam organ, even a steam cannon.

Do you know what won the prize? It was a steam-driven invention that had 7000 parts — all kinds of pulleys, bells, whistles, and gears...gears that meshed with other gears that hummed in harmony and whirled in perfect synchronization. It was a sight to behold. Interestingly, it accomplished nothing.

Some of us feel the same way — that our lives are a complex web of activities and people and problems that have no meaning. Our lives feel, at times, futile. Our lives feel empty, or when they are full, they are full only of heartache and trouble that is “worthless.” Our lives may be inundated by burdens that have left us sad, depressed, angry, apathetic, relationally disengaged, disillusioned, and sometimes suicidal — or some combination of two or more of these. We have problems and we want out of them because we just don’t see any value or benefit to our circumstances. Life has become overwhelmingly difficult.

In two short verses, Paul gives tremendous hope to us when we are being especially troubled by life. Romans 8:28-29 is a gift of God to offer comfort, peace, and hope to us when we are suffering.

These verses are about sanctification in every kind of circumstance of life. The context of the chapter tells us they are about sanctification and the stated goal of what God is doing in these verses tell us that they are about sanctification.

While they are about sanctification, these verses are also about God. While all the Bible is God’s revelation about Himself, the book of Romans particularly emphasizes that. The name **God** appears 153 times in this book, approximately once every three verses, more than any other New Testament book except the much shorter books of 1 Peter and 1 John. These two verses refer to God by name, pronoun, or inference nine times, emphasizing the sovereign power and authority behind the believer’s sanctification. He not only has the power to sanctify, but He has the authority and right to sanctify us. Those references also serve as a means of encouraging the believer to trust the God who is accomplishing the reader’s sanctification.

As we look at these verses, we will find that Paul’s emphasis is —

GOD DESIGNS EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE OF OUR LIVES FOR OUR SPIRITUAL ADVANTAGE.

Or to say it even more concisely, God is sovereignly guiding our sanctification. As we consider this passage, we will find five components to our sovereignly-ordered sanctification —

1. The **REALITY** of Sovereign Sanctification
2. The **LIMITATION** of Sovereign Sanctification
3. The **EXTENT** of Sovereign Sanctification
4. The **HOPE** of Sovereign Sanctification
5. The **GOOD** of Sovereign Sanctification

As we consider this passage, let me remind you of the context in which Paul is writing these words.

There are five major sections to this book (apart from the introduction and conclusion):

- ✓ Sin — the gospel and the unbeliever (1:18 – 3:20)
- ✓ Salvation — the gospel and justification (3:21 – 4:25)
- ✓ Sanctification — the gospel and growth in justification (5:1 – 8:39)
- ✓ Sovereignty — the gospel, Israel, and the church (9:1 – 11:36)
- ✓ Service — the gospel and ministry (12:1 – 15:33)

Chapter eight is the culminating chapter on sanctification — a chapter that has been called by many, “the greatest chapter in the Bible.” It is great because it contains repeated expressions of hope for the believer and repeated declarations of the greatness of God, culminating in a great benediction of praise to God. In the middle of this chapter on sanctification, Paul deposits an encouragement for the kind of circumstances in which God sanctifies a believer and how those circumstances are good.

There are several key verses in Romans 8 for the reader to remember as he reads verses 28-29. Paul begins the chapter by reminding the readers that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:1; contrast 3:9-23; 6:23). While they had been under condemnation, because of Christ’s imputed righteousness (Rom. 3:21 – 4:25), there is no more condemnation for believers, even those who still struggle with the flesh (7:14-25).

Further, Paul reminds the readers that *in the flesh*, it is impossible *to please God* (8:8), but the confidence that the believer has is that he is no longer in the flesh if he has been justified (v. 9). Thus, having the Spirit of God, it is possible for the believer to please God in any and every circumstance (as he will emphasize in v. 28).

As believers, *Christ is in us* (v. 10), *the Spirit* is in us, we are *alive* (v. 11), and it is possible to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh (we can *put to death the deeds of the body* by the power of the Spirit, vv. 12-13). Again, Paul is emphasizing the possibility of change and transformation because of the indwelling Spirit who brings the power of the risen Christ.

Believers in Christ are adopted **sons of God** and **heirs of God** (vv. 14-17), pointing to our freedom from **slavery** to sin (v. 15). The believer does not have to sin because of the power of the Spirit and his position as a son of God.

We have a hope of a glorious life ahead (v. 18), but both we and **creation** endure sufferings now, awaiting full redemption that far surpasses and present troubles (vv. 18-25). There is trouble in the world that still emanates from Adam's fall. But there is confidence in a better life in Glory.

In our sufferings and weakness, the **Spirit** is our **helper** (vv. 26-27; fulfilling Jesus' promise of Jn. 14:16-17). He not only equips and empowers us (vv. 14-25), but He also prays for us as our intercessor. He is what we need in our troubling days.

Paul would have the reader know all the realities of God's provision for him in mind as he reads verses 28-29. Those verses do not stand alone, but they are positioned on the broad shoulders of theological truth concerning the work of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, the adoption of believers as sons, and the hope of eternity. It is particularly because of these realities that Paul is able to affirm what he says in verses 28-29.

Again, by way of reminder the theme of this passage is that —

GOD DESIGNS EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE OF OUR LIVES FOR OUR SPIRITUAL ADVANTAGE.

1. The **REALITY** of Sovereign Sanctification

- When Paul says, **we know** (v. 28) he means that what he is about to say is nothing new. Paul is not giving new revelation. In fact, the verb is better translated, “we have known (and still know).” The truths about God’s sovereignty and sanctification have been taught before, and as we all have looked at life, we have understood and perceived this to be true.
- But Paul’s point is not just that they have been taught these things before; they know this to be true because this is what they have experienced in life — they have experienced the grace of God in their lives in all the various circumstances of their lives — and in the context of these chapters, they have seen the grace of God to redeem the sin of their lives for good (**6:22; 1 Pt. 1:20-21**).
- One writer summarizes this verse this way — this is what we know: “The Christian knows that all things (including his sufferings) can have but one result, and that a good one, for those who love God and respond to the call which in the pursuance of His purpose He addresses to them.”
- There is a reality to the sanctification process that is currently true, has always been true, and has always been known and believed by God’s followers. The truth is that God’s goal is to sanctify believers and that the process of sanctification happens in all circumstances. *There is no circumstance which precludes sanctification.* And there is no situation in which God is not working. We know that to be true.

2. The **LIMITATION** of Sovereign Sanctification

- While we know that God sovereignly and powerfully sanctifies in every circumstance, there is a limitation to that principle. He only works good in circumstances for those who **love God**.
- This phrase is what Paul is particularly emphasizing in this verse, since it is first in order; the verse reads, “we know that to those who love God, all things work together to good...”
- In emphasizing those who love God, what does Paul mean by that term?
 - ✓ He explains what he means by the next phrase — the one who loves God is one who **is called according to His purpose**. As we think about God’s call, there are two general meanings:
 - The broad general call for all people everywhere to believe (**Acts 17:30**); but as we know, not all will believe (**Mt. 22:14**).
 - There are others who will believe, and they are those who have been called with what theologians refer to as God’s *effectual call* — He summons them, and they will respond in faith and be saved by Him (**Rom. 4:17; 1 Cor. 1:26-27**). **Verse 30** also says that these who are called *are justified*, meaning that Paul is talking about an effectual call.
 - A believer is not only one who has “made a decision” for Christ, but He has been summoned by God’s love (**1 Jn. 4:10**); he loves God because God is His Father, and he is God’s son (**vv. 14-16**).
 - When Paul refers to those who love God, he means that all things work for God only to those who are rightly connected to Christ as believers in Christ.

- There are at least two implications of these phrases. First, all things *do* work out for good for those who belong to God. This is a tremendous comfort for believers.
 - ✓ Chuck Swindoll captured this idea when he wrote:

Here is the first truth to claim when enduring the consequences of suffering: Nothing touches me that has not passed through the hands of my heavenly Father. Nothing. Whatever occurs, God has sovereignly surveyed and approved. We may not know why (we may never know why), but we do know our pain is no accident to Him who guides our lives. He is, in no way, surprised by it all. Before it ever touches us, it passes through Him. The second truth to claim is this: Everything I endure is designed to prepare me for serving others more effectively. Everything. [*Improving Your Serve*]

- ✓ Thus, this verse serves as a promise to believers — all circumstances are worked by God for the good of the believer. But that also means secondly, that “all things work out for good” is a promise made *only* to those who belong to God as His sons. This is the “limitation” of God’s good and the work of sanctification — it is a promise given only to believers.
- ✓ If you are not a believer, then this verse is no comfort and no hope to you. In fact, this verse is a warning that all things in your life will not work out for good and will eventually only work out for bad and to your detriment, because God will condemn you for your rebellion against Him. There is a hope, however, in that you can respond to the general call of God and believe in Christ —
 - Believe that you are a sinner deserving of God’s wrath because you can do nothing to please Him
 - Believe that Christ has pleased God in every way and that He died on the cross for your sin
 - Believe that Christ can free you from God’s penalty against your sin and can also free you from the power of sin so that you are not only pleasing to God because He considers your sin to be atoned for by Christ’s blood, but you are pleasing to God because you now can do things that are righteous and you don’t have to sin in everything you do.
 - If you are not a Christian, I urge and compel you to believe in Christ as your Savior. Life will never be good or work out for good without responding to God’s call on your life.
- ✓ This verse is a comfort for every believer — “do not fear;” and it is a warning for every unbeliever — “fear God!”

3. The **EXTENT** of Sovereign Sanctification

- There is a slight variation in the Greek manuscripts with the words ***God causes...to work together***. A few Gk. manuscripts read the way the NASB has translated it, “God causes...,” while more manuscripts read simply, ***all things work together***. It is likely that an editor added the subject, ***God***, to clarify who is behind the working of all circumstances for good. Paul likely wrote simply, “all things work together...”
- However, even without God as the stated subject, it is obvious what Paul’s intention is, and it is not some “evolutionary optimism” [Morris] as if the circumstances of life cannot make their own design or plan for things to turn out well. Our circumstances working for good is not accidental or coincidental.

- Paul doesn't have to explicitly say God is behind all things turning out for good because it is obvious that God is behind the transformation of all things to good. There is nothing that escapes the hand of His control. Even the most powerful rulers are firmly under His direction (e.g., **Ex. 10:20, 27; 11:9-10**).
- With the removal of God as the subject of this sentence, we see that with the words ***all things***, Paul is emphasizing the extent of ways in which God sanctifies, more than how all things are being used in the life of the believer. This phrase is a hopeful message that nothing is outside the bounds of God's control.
- Just what does Paul mean by ***all things***? He means, "*all things*." These words are comprehensive and complete, without exception. Typically we want to exclude something from "all things," but there is *no* exception to *all things*. He is talking about one of four circumstances:
 1. **The "good" (grace-filled) circumstances of life.** These are the happy and easy things of life — health and happiness, and promotions and profit. These are the events and circumstances that make it easy to get out of bed in the morning. These situations invigorate and excite us. They should also fill us with gratitude and dependence in the same way that difficulties are. (The danger of a "blessed" life is that it becomes a "forgetful" life — we are prone to wandering from God.)
 2. **Circumstances that arise from living in a fallen world.** These are the colds, cancers, and car accidents of our lives. No sin is directly involved in the difficulty, but we *are* suffering through the realities of the fall of creation. This is what Paul spoke of in **vv. 18-23** — the longings and groanings of the created world that because of Adam's sin doesn't function the way it was designed to function when God made it.
 3. **Circumstances that arise because of the sins of others against us.** We have not sinned against another person, but that person has sinned against us through things like robbery, gossip, and drunken anger. That's a life lived in the flesh against us (**vv. 9ff**). Sometimes it may not be a "personal" attack — we just happen to be a victim in "the wrong place at the wrong time," but most often it *is* personal as the person wants to persecute *us* and do evil to *us* and is *our* enemy (**Rom. 12:14-21**).
 4. **Circumstances that arise because of our own sins against others.** We have been bitter, greedy, covetous, prideful, adulterated our marriage, and spoken unkind words. What we don't want others to do to us, we have done to them, and those sins against others have created tremendous complications, difficulties, and heartaches in our lives.
- Everything in our lives falls into one of these four categories, and Paul says that they are *all* designed and used by God for our good. It is easy to see how the first category works for good; it is much harder to see how the other three categories, and particularly the final two, are used for good. Again, Paul is emphatic that it is *all things* that work for good for the believer. There are no exceptions to the assertion.
- That all these things fall under God's sovereignty also demands a slight clarification. **While God does not sanction or author sin (the last two categories), yet He is still sovereign over it and uses it to accomplish His purpose of transformation in our lives.** We are prone to being hesitant here. We rightly do not want to suggest that God initiated sin. Yet, Scripture seems less afraid to make strong statements about what fits into the sovereignty of God than we are. Consider these verses:

- *Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That both good and ill go forth? (Lam. 3:37-38)*
- *“For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?” (Is. 14:27)*
- *“The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.” (Is. 45:7; cf. also Is. 43:13; 44:24-38)*

- Moreover, of the greatest sin ever committed in the history of the world, the crucifixion of Christ, it is said to the people (and religious leaders) of Israel: “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (**Acts 2:23**). While not guilty of sin, God was behind the sin, using it to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Of another (though related) sin, John Piper writes,

“In the same period when it was a ‘great wickedness’ to ask for a king [1 Sa 12:17], God was preparing to give the people a king. We are meant to conclude that, without approving of sin, God governs the sinful acts of men for his own good and wise purposes. He was planning that Israel would have a king, though it was sin for the people to demand one. In fact, it was precisely through this sin that the kingly line was started, from which, in the end, the King of kings would come....God had mercy on the people and made their sinful act serve his eternal purposes — that there would be a kingly line and that his Son would be the glorious climax of that line.” [*Sweet and Bitter Providence*]

- There is a broad range of circumstances in which God accomplishes His sanctifying work in us who are believers. He works in *all* things. This is hopeful that there is no situation *in your life* that is beyond His redemptive power. We always have the opportunity for change and transformation. God wastes no circumstances of our lives, but uses them all for our good and His glory. Your situation may be hard, but it is not beyond the control of God or the redemptive power of God.

4. The **HOPE** of Sovereign Sanctification

- As noted above, **God causes** is probably better translated “all things work together.” The ESV may have the best translation: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together *for good*.” There is an orchestrator of all our circumstances who is making them work profitably for us.
- Paul is also clear that these things are not just “working together,” but they are working together **to good**. The word “good” refers to things that are good in character and beneficial in result. It is *moral* goodness (not aesthetic goodness). It is a “final good” or a “true good,” not merely the things we consider to be good, like our pleasures. For the believer, the ultimate expression of this good is the benefit of **glory that is to be revealed to us** (**v. 18**). The good worked in the believer is not just “happy circumstances” on earth, but the eternal good and righteous gift given to us in Heaven.

- The obvious question is, *how* are all things in our lives working for good? Here are some examples:
 - ✓ A couple comes in for counseling, he's at one end of the couch, she's at the other because of unresolved conflict. Is that a bad thing? Sure. But a good thing too — now they get a chance to see the grace of God at work in their lives like they never have before. How will they ever know how magnificent God's grace is if there is no sin?
 - ✓ "John Wesley's father, Samuel, was a dedicated pastor, but there were those in his parish who did not like him. On February 9, 1709, a fire broke out in the rectory at Epworth, possibly set by one of the rector's enemies. Young John, not yet six years old, was stranded on an upper floor of the building. Two neighbors rescued him just seconds before the roof crashed in. One neighbor stood on the other's shoulders and pulled young John through the window. Samuel Wesley said, 'Come, neighbors, let us kneel down. Let us give thanks to God. He has given me all my eight children. Let the house go. I am rich enough.' John Wesley often referred to himself as a 'brand plucked out of the fire' (Zech 3:2; Amos 4:11). In later years he often noted February 9 in his journal and gave thanks to God for His mercy. Samuel Wesley labored for 40 years at Epworth and saw very little fruit; but consider what his family accomplished!" Because of tragedy, the Wesleys were given the opportunity to learn to give thanks "in everything" — including tragedy and loss.
 - ✓ "Upon learning that their unborn girl suffers from the severe and possibly fatal abnormalities of a chromosomal disorder called Trisomy 13, Matt and Liz Thiessen of Colorado Springs responded: 'We don't need an explanation from God because we trust him. We wouldn't change this situation even if it were within our power to do so, because we don't think that it would be possible to have a better plan than God has. We have fallen in love with this little one and decided to name her Hope. It is our hope that she will make it to term so that we can hold and love our little girl, albeit briefly. Pray that we would have stronger hiking boots rather than an easier path.'" The illness of their child has caused this couple to lean into God more dependently on prayer. They know God and His hope more fully because of the impact of their daughter's disorder.
- As you hear this, your tendency is to say (though not verbally), "Yes, God works good in troublesome trials. That's true. But not in *my* circumstance. It's good for others. Not me."
 - ✓ In your circumstance, in the way others have sinned against you, in the incredible physical pain you are enduring, in the disappointment you have experienced, in your loneliness, in your ostracism and persecution, God is orchestrating it for your advantage and good.
 - ✓ Look at **v. 35** — that's Paul's suffering (2 Cor. 11). But notice also his response — **vv. 34, 38-39**.
 - ✓ In every circumstance, God is working and He is working advantageously for you.
- The question we must ask at the end of verse 28 is, "what is the good that is being accomplished in the ***all things of my life?***" Our answers will be various — as different as each of our circumstances will be, so different will be the good that God is working in us. Yet Paul also provides a broad and all-encompassing good that God is working in every believer's life in similar ways, which Paul explains in v. 29.

5. The **GOOD** of Sovereign Sanctification

- In verse 29, Paul builds on the idea of the calling of the believer, which we've already said refers to the effectual call of salvation. Related to that call is that God *foreknew* and *predestined* some to salvation.
- Both those terms relate to a sovereign choice by God of those who would be His, apart from any merit or work or decision of the believer. While Paul will include the truths of calling and predestination in the hope-giving "golden chain of redemption" in v. 30, his reason for including the terms *foreknew* and *predestined* in v. 29 is to emphasize that God is behind our circumstances and He is using them with intentionality in our lives. He has an *eternal* purpose in our circumstances, *and* in redemption and salvation.
 - ✓ The believer has been saved for the purpose of being *conformed* to Christ. The adjective "conform" means to have a "similar form, nature, or style" as something else. The word indicates "an inward and not merely superficial conformity." There is a genuine change and transformation in the life of the believer. That's what God wants in our circumstances — a renewed conformity (12:1-2).
 - ✓ Paul is also specific about the object of our conformity — it is *to the image of His Son*. The word "image" is the word *eikon*; it refers to a genuine correspondence between two objects. Perhaps Paul has **Genesis 1:26-27** in mind, that created man was made to bear the image and likeness of God and that reborn and redeemed fallen men are to particularly bear the image and likeness of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who redeemed them from sin. Christ, who bears the very image of the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) now also is the image-maker in redeemed sinners.
 - There is a sense in which WWJD is an appropriate question to ask — He is the goal of our lives; we are designed to look like Him, in every circumstance of our lives.
 - We particularly will want to emulate Him in our trials — cf. **1 Pt. 2:21-25**. He is our example: 1) no reviling, 2) no threatening, and 3) only trusting God.
 - ✓ Paul also explains the reason that believers should be sanctified to be like Christ — *so that He would be the firstborn of many brethren*. Here Paul is alluding to a unique relationship of Christ to the believer. Not only is He the Savior, Redeemer, and member of the triune Godhead, but He is also the brother of the believer (see also **Heb. 2:11**). He is One of *many brethren*, but as the God-Man who is co-eternal and co-existent with the Father, He is unique among all those brothers and is the *firstborn*. Like the firstborn son in a Jewish family, He has the rights of inheritance and position. We are brothers, but He is supremely different, and that difference is why we are to be conformed to look like Him and not Him to us.
 - ✓ We will ultimately and finally be made to look like Christ in Glory (1 Jn. 3:2), but it also refers to our progressive growth in Christ now — that we are increasingly looking more like our older brother, Jesus Christ.
 - ✓ Further, Paul is emphasizing that Christ already is, by position and nature, the *firstborn*. With his use of the phrase *that He would be*, Paul emphasizes that all the circumstances of our lives are being used to produce a conformity to Christ where Christ really is treated by us as the honored firstborn Son of God. He wants us to treasure Christ as the *firstborn*.

CONCLUSION: Every circumstance of our lives as believers is being used for the good of sanctifying us to look like Jesus Christ and have Christ perpetually have the place of priority in our lives (there is no circumstance that is not being used to sanctify us). This hope is only for believers; if one is not a believer and not known by God as His child, then that person has no hope that God is using things for good in his life but conversely, can be sure that those circumstances will only culminate in bad things now and terrible things (Hell) in eternity.

Let's summarize what we've learned with these four principles:

- ✓ **God is working good in our circumstances, but His good is often different than our "good."** What He knows is good and what we think is good in any given circumstance is likely quite (infinitely?) different. In every circumstance He ultimately wants us to look and act like Christ who redeemed us to look and act like Him.
- ✓ **God is interested in Christlikeness, not ease of life.** Our fleshly nature will often be inclined to want ease and simplicity; God always wants our sanctification. The puritan, Thomas Watson, rightly affirmed, "Rest in God's wisdom—in case of the loss of dear friends, a wife, or child, or husband, let us rest satisfied in God's wisdom. God takes away these, because he would have more of our love; he breaks these crutches, that we may live more upon him by faith. God would have us learn to go without crutches." [Watson, *All Things for Good*]
- ✓ **If you trust God in your trouble, life may not become easier, but you will be more satisfied.**
- ✓ **God is working all things together for our good and His glory.**

William Cowper is a man who struggled with his difficulties (attempted suicide 4x). Yet in a moment of clarity, he penned this song, recognizing the goodness of God's sovereignty:

God moves in a mysterious way	Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
His wonders to perform;	But trust Him for His grace;
He plants His footsteps in the sea	Behind a frowning providence
And rides upon the storm.	He hides a smiling face.
Deep in unfathomable mines	His purposes will ripen fast,
Of never-failing skill	Unfolding every hour;
He treasures up His bright designs	The bud may have a bitter taste,
And works His sovereign will.	But sweet will be the flower.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;	Blind unbelief is sure to err
The clouds ye so much dread	And scan His work in vain;
Are big with mercy and shall break	God is His own interpreter,
In blessings on your head.	And He will make it plain.

If you and I are going to thrive spiritually, we must not only acknowledge, but embrace God's sovereignty in all things so that we will be sanctified in all things. God really has designed every circumstance of our spiritual lives for our good and our spiritual advantage.