

Everything That Happens is Good – Romans 8:28

Introduction

This morning we are starting a new sermon series called, “Sometimes, what you know just ain’t so”

When I was hatching the idea for this series I kept thinking of the quote by former president Ronald Reagan when he said, “Well, the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they’re ignorant; it’s just that they know so much that isn’t so.”

Unfortunately, the same phenomenon exists when it comes to Bible knowledge and there are many things that even very smart people mistakenly believe are said in God’s Word

I remember a time some years ago when I was talking with my pastor about debt and borrowing and I said, “Well, as it says in the Bible, ‘Neither borrower nor lender be’”

And I was quite proud of myself for finding the precise quote from Scripture that supported the point I was making

The only problem is, that quote doesn’t come from the Bible – it comes from Act 1 Scene 3 of Shakespeare’s Hamlet

Just goes to show it can happen to anybody no matter how smart and good looking they are

Listen to some other teachings people believe are in the Bible that really aren’t

And don’t be surprised if you hear one or more that perhaps you have thought are in there too

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” – at best this is a very loose paraphrase of Proverbs 13:24

“Hate the sin, love the sinner” – that’s a loose quote of something Mahatma Gandhi wrote in 1929

“Money is the root of all evil” – nope, that’s a misquote of 1Timothy 6:10 which says the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils (plural)

“This too shall pass” – that’s a Muslim saying not a Bible quote

“Cleanliness is next to godliness” – Francis Bacon said it in 1605

“God moves in mysterious ways” – that was the British poet William Cowper

“God helps those who help themselves” – that was said first by Algernon Sydney and later repeated by Ben Franklin

“The lion shall lay down with the lamb” – close but no cigar, Isaiah 11:6 and Isaiah 65:25 say something close though

I was transparent with you just a few moments ago so be transparent with me and let me know if any of those surprised you

This morning we are going to be looking at a verse that is actually in the Bible but generally misunderstood so that many people think it says something it doesn’t

It’s a verse that we all love to quote as we try to make sense out of the trials of life and it may be the most quoted verse by Christians and non-Christians alike

It’s a verse that contains a great promise but it doesn’t mean what many, if not most, people think it means and that can lead to all manner of unfortunate outcomes

The verse is **Romans 8:28** which says –

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

Most people who quote this verse really only quote that middle part – *all things work together for good*

We pluck it right out of its context and repeat it to ourselves or throw it out there to others whenever something bad comes along

Because it seems to imply that everything that happens is either a part of God’s master plan or that the things themselves will align properly in and of themselves and everything will work out in the end when we will see that everything that happened was really good no matter how bad it seems now because they all led to good in the end

By way of warning: some of the sermons in this series may be difficult for some people to accept

And that's because we're conditioned to think in a certain way about the various topics we'll be discussing

We tend to cling tightly to what we've believed for a long time and to be shown differently can rock our worldview

But let me encourage you to open your eyes, ears, and heart to what God's Word actually says regarding these difficult topics and take some time to consider whether the ideas and views you have are in line with it

This morning, we will begin by looking at how people tend to view the promise found in Romans 8:28

Then we'll take some time to consider some wrong ideas that we have that cause our misunderstanding

And we'll finish up by looking at the clarity that comes from a proper understanding of Romans 8:28

So without further ado, let's get started

I. How people tend to view the promise of Romans 8:28

1. That somehow things will work out right and if we just wait long enough, things will be good in this life

Although we would never come right out and say it most of us have this idea that there should be some sort of karmic balance that exists in the world where good and bad at least reach a kind of equilibrium

That thinking is what causes us to expect that the next flip of the coin will be tails if we've seen a series of heads

Or that a sports team is "due" for a win if they've endured a string of losses

And when it comes right down to it we think that good should prevail over bad because everyone deserves the good

So, even though we don't like to admit it, we all tend to carry around a little bit of a utopian outlook that tells us all will be well one day – all we have to do is wait for it

Unfortunately, our English translations of the Bible can lead people to adopt that kind of mindset if they aren't careful

But we need to understand that Paul wasn't an overly optimistic naïf and he wasn't saying that "all things" tend toward good in and of themselves according to some form of "evolutionary optimism"

Paul knew that God was responsible for working all things for good

And that leads us to our second way people tend to view the promise we find in Romans 8:28

2. That something bad coming into our lives means that God has a better thing coming right behind it

That's what we tell each other isn't it?

We say, "Oh, I'm sorry you didn't get the job you interviewed for. But don't worry, that just means God has a better job in mind for you" or something like that depending on the situation

Again, that's the whole cosmic balance thing coming into play again only this time we put the responsibility for keeping things trending toward the good with God

I suppose there is some kind of encouragement in that way of thinking and it *is* better than the third way we tend to think of Romans 8:28

3. That the bad things in life are really good things

Anyone who has ever suffered a personal tragedy or gotten a bad diagnosis or had some other evil befall them has likely heard someone assault them with some sort of "happy talk"

They are told that what they are suffering is really a blessing in disguise and all part of God's plan to bless them

People are prone to say things like:

"God must be up to something really special in your life."

"God doesn't make mistakes and isn't it good to know everything happens for a reason?"

"You must be very special for God to trust you with this."

Or "Won't it be wonderful to see how God uses this?"

I'm not saying that people who use such phases are deliberately being insensitive but they do tend to have a wrong view of Romans 8:28

And I doubt that any of those who are so quick to pronounce that someone else's tragedy is a "blessing in disguise" or a "blessing in waiting" would be all that eager to have God bless them in the same way

Why? Because deep down we know better

Some things are simply not good and that's all there is to it

Losing a loved one is not good

Getting a diagnosis of terminal cancer is not good

Being in chronic pain is not good

Losing a job is not good and losing all you have financially is not good

Abuse is not good, murder is not good, and the list goes on...

No matter how we might want it to be different, bad things happen because we live in a fallen world and when we try to put a smiley face on those not good things and call them good, we look foolish

And experience tells us that better things don't always follow bad things and there is no guarantee that good will prevail in our lives

We only need to open our eyes and look around us to see those truths So, why do we think that way, what are some of the wrong ideas that lead to a misunderstanding of Romans 8:28?

II. Wrong ideas that lead to a wrong understanding of Romans 8:28

First, we'll consider how a wrong understanding of God contributes to wrong ideas about Romans 8:28 and we tend to err in one of two ways when we consider **God's role in the events of this world**

1. We believe that God only "permits" the bad things that happen

This is a common belief among Christians and I can understand it somewhat but it isn't accurate

While God is not responsible for evil as the Bible clearly informs us in passages such as **1John 1:5** which tells us there is no darkness in God and **James 1:13** which tells us God is not tempted by evil or even **Genesis 1:31** which tells us that when God completed his creation it was "very good", that doesn't mean that God never sends or causes things that we would consider "bad"

Because we have abundant evidence in Scripture that God has openly stated that he has done so

Consider **Jonah 1:4** where we see that God, "*hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up*"

Or **1Chronicles 5:26** where we see that it was God who incited the king of Assyria to take the Israelites captive into exile

Or how about **Genesis 6:17** where we see God say, "*I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.*"

For the sake of time we will let those three verses suffice but it should be clear that God can and has actively brought about what we would consider "bad" and yet he does so without committing evil

And in **Isaiah 45:7** we see God declare that it is one of his sovereign functions to do so – God says:

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things.

So, the first error we can be guilty of is to believe that God only permits things that we consider to be bad but we can also err in the other direction if:

2. We believe that God is the direct cause of everything that happens

We testify that God is sovereign which means that he is the King of the universe and nothing happens that is outside of his control – but that doesn't mean that he causes everything that happens

God did not cause Satan to rebel, he didn't cause Adam to sin by eating from the forbidden tree, and he didn't cause Cain to kill Abel – and God didn't cause any of the sins of mankind that have occurred since those earliest days

Adam tried to blame God for his sin and it didn't work and it won't work as a defense for anyone else either – Everyone is responsible for their own actions – I freely admit that reconciling God's sovereignty with man's responsibility is a mystery

But the truth is that we simply cannot blame God for the evil that is in the world even though it only exists by his permission

Clearly, God is sovereign and active in the world today and he *may* send or bring about things that we think are "not good" or he may simply permit those things

Either way, we must recognize that God is actively in control over all things and to believe otherwise can lead us to conclude that he is merely along for the ride so to speak and making the best of bad situations as they occur

And just as we can have a wrong idea about God's role we can also have a wrong idea about what is "good"

We need to recognize that we have a wrong idea about what is meant by "good"

How would you define "good"?

If you're like most people you would say a thing is "good" if it is pleasurable or if we find it beneficial to us in some way

In other words, "good" is whatever we prefer whether that be health, wealth, or just an agreeable life that is free from pain and hardship

But, we must understand "good" in the sense of "ultimate or final" good or the "true good"

That is to say, we need to understand the "good" that Paul speaks of here as God defines it

Remember that we need to be diligent to understand each verse within its context and we see what God's idea of good is in the next two verses that follow our verse – **Romans 8:29-30** as the word "for" ties these thoughts together

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

I don't want to get bogged down in the whole idea of predestination and foreknowledge because those are topics that would require a great deal of time for us to explore and would take us far afield from our focus today

What I want you to notice is a phrase found in **verse 29** that reveals what God considers good and what he is promising to bring about through the circumstance or the "all things" of life

God means for us to be "*conformed to the image of his Son*"

God says that what is "good" is becoming like his Son, Jesus Christ, and that he will use all things to bring about that good end

God is working in all things for the ultimate good of conforming people to the image of his Son whether we consider them to be good or not good in themselves and whether sends them or only permits them

That is God's declared purpose and it won't be obstructed

And that brings us to the final wrong idea that I want us to consider this morning

We need to realize that we have a wrong idea about who can claim this promise

Romans 8:28 is often used as a blanket promise that is applicable to all people in all circumstances but it's not

It actually has a very narrow application

First, Romans 8:28 only refers to those who are trusting in Christ for their salvation – it's only for believers; for Christ-followers

As much as we might want it to, Romans 8:28 doesn't apply to our neighbor who has no interest in the things of God and just found out they have cancer

God loves them and he has a preferred future for them but Romans 8:28 doesn't speak to that neighbor's present situation

And while assuring them that God surely has something better in mind or that God is working to make their situation turn out for their advantage may make everyone feel better – But it's only a verbalization of our wishful thinking that isn't backed up by the promise of God we find in Romans 8:28 if the person isn't a believer

Now, I want to hasten to say that nothing in Romans 8:28 *precludes* God from using any and all circumstances to draw someone to himself and to bring them to a saving knowledge of his Son – God often does that very thing

I'm just pointing out that there is no *promise* that the good we see in this passage – conformity to the image of Jesus – will come out of any situation for an unbeliever – Romans 8:28 only applies to believers

Now, let's turn our attention to the **clarity that comes from a right understanding of Romans 8:28**

III. Clarity that comes from a right understanding of Romans 8:28

First, we will have a clearer picture of God's role in the circumstances of life

God has not promised his people immunity from the reality of life in this fallen world – he has promised us eternity and ultimate conformity to the image of his Son – and we all know all too well that bad things still come our way

And even though we recognize that God has sent those kinds of things in the past because he says he did, we need to be careful about attributing them to God absent a clear word from God that he has done so

Still, while we can never be certain of whether God sent a particular trouble or difficulty into our lives we can know he is using it for our good

And with that in mind, we can stop worrying about whether or not God sent something into our lives or only permitted it and focus on his promise that he is working in and through it to move us toward our ultimate good

Second, we will have a clearer picture of our part in what we experience

We tend to overlook or downplay the role our own sinfulness plays in our suffering as we try to forget that actions have natural consequences that often must be lived

And there are times when we just do dumb stuff – times when we just simply mess up in some way

I'm not talking about doing anything sinful here – just the times we miss a key piece of information or make invalid assumptions in the course of making a decision or we just do something boneheaded and bad stuff follows

Natural consequences are a reality and we have no reason to expect that God will make us immune from them or keep us from suffering accordingly

But we do have the promise that God will continue to use even those things to move us along the path toward the good that he has purposed for us

And isn't it great to know that anything that is a part of this life – even our sins and our stupid mistakes – can, by God's grace, contribute toward our ultimate "good"?

Third, we will have a clearer picture of what to expect

Far too many people look at Romans 8:28 and come away with wrong expectations that leave them disillusioned and dissatisfied with God – and that includes both Christians and non-Christians alike

Because when their own personal experience and the reality of the world around them is that not everything is good, things don't always work out, and sometimes things just stink they blame God and say he is either a liar or incompetent

The reality of this life is that sometimes triumph doesn't spring from tragedy, justice doesn't always prevail, and the race doesn't always go to the swift – sometimes we get knocked flat, stomped on, and left to lie there

But when we recognize that God is using everything that happens to mold us and shape us into the image of his Son we realize that he is fulfilling his promise to us to work all things together for our eventual, ultimate good

And with the knowledge that “good” in God’s sight means a much higher good than we have been expecting, we will stop looking for immediate benefits of the wrong sort and rest secure in the knowledge that God is working even in our suffering just as he promised he would be

Conclusion

As I said earlier, some of the ideas we are going to dispel in this series might prove to be troubling to some of you but I encourage you to go back and consider the evidence from God’s Word and let the Holy Spirit speak to you through it. God’s desire is that you will be conformed to the image of his Son and he is working through everything that happens to you in this life to further that end.

So, just know that whether God sends a particular calamity into your life or simply permits it or whether it is a natural consequence of your own sin or a mistake you have made is somewhat of a moot point in the end.

Because God has promised to work *all* things together in such a way that you might become like Jesus if you have accepted him as your Savior regardless of how they came to be

Let’s pray