



This week we deal with a question submitted by a member concerning Romans 8:28 and its key phrase, “All things work together for good.”

Question: I see this Bible verse cited many times to comfort people going through tough times, with the idea that these bad things are happening for a reason and eventually everything will work out for the best. In my personal experience, the folks referencing this passage actually went from bad to worse! I'd appreciate your interpretation of this verse.

Over the years, I have seen people hurt by a misapplication of this scripture. The key challenge is found in the problematic phrase pointed out in the question, “Everything happens *for a reason*.” As if every event in my life was orchestrated by a puppet master, God, a micromanager, who controls every tiny event from my twisted ankle keeping me out of basketball, to the flu that freed me from taking the test I was ill prepared for in the 7th grade. But when we apply this thinking to tragedy, it feels like we are calling evil good and that God is the author of horrific events like apartment fires in the Bronx or supreme challenges including job loss, birth defects, and pandemics.

Such problems over the years led me to reassess scripture. I used to believe things in

scripture simply because they were written there. If it was in the Bible it was true, or so I told myself. But these were beliefs that stayed in my head, but did not get down into my gut. Then over time, I became skeptical. Did a donkey really talk to Balaam, as Numbers suggests? Did the sun stop dead in its tracks as Joshua indicates?

And then I began to question not only the strange events, but to subconsciously put the throttle on some of its bold promises like “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33), or “Ask and it shall be given to you.” (Matthew 7:7), and our verse today, “All things work together for good.” (Romans 8:28) I told myself it was an exaggeration. Paul didn’t truly mean *all* things.

Seminary, which I loved, taught me, perhaps inadvertently, to regard such passages as exaggeration, best to be avoided when people are struggling. That Paul’s approach was a Pollyanna one, not fit for conversations about the deep personal pains and injustices people experience in our world.

But over the years things have changed. Frankly, I still don’t believe we are meant to think a donkey actually talked to Balaam. But as to the promises, I believe them more now than I ever have. Not because of some textual analysis, but because of the power of God at

work in the lives of those who put their trust in the Lord; trusting not when it is easy, but when it is hard and risky.

There are some things I now know are true because I have seen them born out in the world – not because I can make rational sense of it!

When my drive on the golf course was getting shorter and shorter, my father told me to loosen my grip on the golf club. I thought he was crazy, “Grip and rip it!” had always been my motto! But if you know a golfer, you know they are willing to try anything for a few more yards off the tee! So I decided to trust him (since nothing else was working), and suddenly ten more yards on the drive!

When I saw people trusting this verse, I saw their lives changed. Not because circumstances improved, but something deeper. Over the years, I have come to truly believe that God works together with all things to bring about goodness, even though I cannot make sense out of it.

Not simply because it says so in Romans 8:28, but because the people I hear repeating it are not coming with minor problems like a hangnail, but problems that are as harsh and severe as any have experienced. Problems as desperate as Paul’s, who endured shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment, and betrayal. Problems such as the deep weight of profound guilt for the evil he himself had committed. But Paul wrote this verse not because his life was great, but because no matter what the crisis he found, it brought him closer to God.

Thus in this same chapter Paul could say, with utter conviction, “I do not consider the sufferings of this present time worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18)

I do think we need to be careful with this verse. It is not a verse we can force on people because that can produce shame for some, and not allow them to express the anger or grief they need to. That is where this verse can be troublesome, so as with anything powerful, we need to wield it with caution, but not with timidity or excuses!!! The error of some conservatives would be forcing this on someone who simply was not in a place to hear it; the error of liberals is glibly dismissing it because they might not find it helpful or because they knew of one person that it brought guilt upon. The Bible is a powerful book; but we must not use it lukewarmly, or with stipulations and provisos, and rob it of all its power as if we are too timid to believe in God’s word!

In reading such powerful verses, we need not be timid but we must be careful and precise. All things work together for good is simply not the same as saying, “All things happen for a reason.” It does mean that whatever happens to us, God can bring something good out of it. Let’s look at a word-for-word translation from Greek, “We know that to those loving God, all things God works together for good to those according to his purpose being called.”

First, note there is nothing in this verse indicating God makes all things happen, but rather, God works with them...for those who love God. At first, this may feel exclusive, that God only does this for those who love the Lord.

But it is our love that drives us to God, enabling us to receive this work. There may be a great teacher who can show me how to play the piano with expertise, but if I never seek them out, I won't ever gain from their wisdom. It is our love that allows us to receive God's work. A key word in this text is the Greek word, *sunergos*, which means, "Works together", and does not simply indicate God working with the event itself, but with us. It means that God and we are co-laborers in all events, and that is how the goodness comes through.

That God "synergistically" (*sunergos*!) works with us in such a way as to bring good from bad events. It does not mean the event itself is good, but that God brings something good out of it. This goodness is not only for ourselves but for the community. The verse tells us it happens according to *His purposes*. And God's purpose is that you and I would know God's love and that the world would discover divine justice and divine grace. In chapter 8, Paul is talking about the redemption not only of humankind, but of all creation. Thus the goodness spreads wider than our own immediate needs. Perhaps more than any other, one woman in South Carolina convinced me of the power of this passage. Her daughter was born with special needs. This is her story:

That night I was holding her, I remember that feeling, "What was happening?" And I felt a voice that was clear, "I will take care of her; it is going to be okay." Over the years, it did not seem okay, but I always tried to do the right thing. However, whether a teacher at school or somewhere else, wonderful people turned up in my life and, for 24

years, she was wonderful, chatty, and happy...

But little things cropped up. They did not know what it was, her kidney and heart... She was diagnosed at 24 with a rare disease... She died suddenly at 25.

I could tell by the way she described the moment, even in her daughter's death, she found a moment of knowing God's grace. I was hesitant but desperate to understand, and so I asked her to explain. She shared, "We never had to tell her there was nothing we could do for her; it gave me a lot of strength."

This woman found comfort in never needing to tell her adult daughter that there was no hope, that there was nothing more the doctors could do, because the daughter died before they could have that conversation.

This woman's faith was exceptional, and I wanted to know more. I asked her to share with me that faith she grew up with and the faith she was taught. She described it as a resilient faith. From the beginning, she was taught to expect that life would be hard and that, at times, God would demand almost more from us than we think we can give. She was taught of God's profound love in Christ, but also that God does most of the shaping and teaching of disciples through trials. She said, "I learned so much from her... I am committed to using my experience to help others. I feel committed to the idea... What is the point if I don't use it for something good?"

God worked together to bring good out of these tragic events. By enabling it so that this mother would not have to tell her daughter

there was no hope and that this mother would be able to share her faith to others in the land of deep darkness.

I must say I have seen exactly what our original question refers to when they wrote, “In my personal experience, the folks referencing this passage actually went from bad to worse!” Yet I have seen these very same people continue to know the good love of God in those very awful circumstances. And so I, and I hope you, as Paul said later in this chapter, “I (too) am convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!” That is ultimately what this verse is about. Amen.