

Romans (44)
The providence of God for His people's good

In the paragraph before us, Romans 8:26-30, we read of the assistance that God gives us through *the intercessory prayer of the Holy Spirit*. This is another basis and source of hope for the Christian. After Paul expressed the certainty of the Holy Spirit praying for us, he expressed the confidence that God so governs the lives of His people that *the Lord brings good for them through everything that occurs in their lives*. Let us read Romans 8:26-30.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:18-30)

The truth of Romans 8:28 is perhaps one of the most difficult claims of the Word of God to embrace in faith. When one considers the intense and sometimes prolonged suffering that the people of God have endured, how can one affirm such a statement? The unbeliever would not entertain such an idea. He would not be as Job, who responded to his sufferings by submitting himself to the sovereign purposes of God: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). Rather, the unbeliever would tend to respond as Job's wife who advocated abandonment of all hope in God, when she counseled her husband, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). And so, even in the face of what seems to be overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Christian, if he is thinking rightly, affirms in faith, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

Let us attempt to understand precisely what Paul was assuring and some implications of this truth. **First, this statement is not the claim that everything that happens to the Christian is good.** There is great evil in the world, and evil by definition is contrary to and void of all that may be described as good. Christians who live in a fallen world are always engaged with, and often suffering under, the evil that takes place. "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:12f). And so, we do not claim that everything that happens to us is good. Rather, we are saying that God is so able to work in His world and using even the evil actions of men (and satan and his demons), that the result is our ultimate benefit and the furtherance of the purposes of God.

The classic biblical illustration of this is God working together the events in Joseph's life to bring about the preservation of God's people, Israel. The brothers of Joseph treated him cruelly. They stripped him of his robe that his father had given him, they cast him into a pit, and then they sold him into slavery to the Ishmaelites who were traveling to Egypt (Gen. 37:25). Years later the brothers thought that Joseph would retaliate upon them using his authority as the prime minister of Egypt. We read in Genesis 50:15, "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him'" (Gen. 50:15). But Joseph responded to them,

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, *you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. “So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (Gen 50:19-21).

A second point that we might make is that the Lord will deliver His people out of all the evil that they encounter. Paul could say, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:18). This is not a statement that the evil deeds toward him would cease in this life. Rather, Paul voiced his assurance that God would bring him through this life of much evil and bring him safely into His everlasting kingdom. Later in Romans 8 Paul will assert, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:37f).

Thirdly, Romans 8:28 affirms to us that *God will bring about His good purposes in us even through the most difficult experiences that we encounter in this life.* There are happenings in the lives of unbelievers that result in their despair and perhaps destruction. But due to the grace of God and the purpose of God the same events in the life of the Christian will result in his betterment.

What are some of God’s purposes in our sufferings? We may cite several. (1) We become more able to minister to others through the grace that we experienced having received from God while in our trials. Paul could write of this in 2 Corinthians 1:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (2 Cor. 1:3-60).

(2) God takes us through extreme difficulty in order that we would learn to trust Him. We read on in 2 Corinthians 1:8ff

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. *But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* ¹⁰He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.” (2 Cor. 1:8-10)

(3) God will allow us to encounter “evil” and difficulty in life in order for us to reassess our values and reprioritize our desires so that they conform to God’s purposes for us. We may read an Old Testament prophecy of God’s work of grace among His people. “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD” (Mal. 3:3).

(4) God allows us to encounter evil in order that we might learn to be strong and steadfast in adversity. In this way we become stronger Christians prepared to face and overcome greater difficulties in the future.

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2f)

Fourthly, Paul's assertion in Romans 8:28 is not for all people indiscriminately. [This may seem to be rather patently obvious, but today we cannot assume anything.] Paul makes his assertion with respect to Christians only. ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”*** For those who are not Christians, it cannot be said to them that all things work together for their good.

In Romans 8:28 Paul described the people of God in two ways. **First, Christians are ones “who love God.”** This is a characteristic of the true people of God. They alone love the one true God. Consider these verses:

1 Corinthians 2:9. “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared ***for those who love him.***”

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised ***to those who love him.*** (Jam 1:12 ESV)

James 2:5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised ***to those who love him?*** (Jam 2:5 ESV)

1 Peter 1:6-9. “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ***Though you have not seen him, you love him.*** Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

In contrast to Christians who love God, the Bible describes all non-Christians as God haters. They hate the true God. When Paul was describing mankind as sinners in Romans 1, he wrote of them:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, ***haters of God,*** insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Rom. 1:28-31)

The Lord Jesus once said, “The world cannot hate you, but ***it hates Me*** because I testify about it that its works are evil” (John 7:7).

Unbelievers hate the true God because He is holy and they are unholy. They hate His laws by which He demands that people live. When people are not permitted to indulge themselves in their sin, they hate the One who would restrain them or condemn them in their sin. This is why fallen people are at heart God haters. When God comes among them they resist His laws and refuse to submit to His rule over them. They would sooner crucify a King who would rule over them according to God's laws rather than submit to Him and His laws.

Not only does Paul describe Christians as ones who love God, but ***secondly,*** they are ones ***“who are called according to His purpose.”*** This speaks of God having effectually called them unto salvation. When did God make this determination? When did He purpose that they would be called unto salvation?

We will see later in this passage of Romans 8 that God had chosen them from eternity to be saved. And so, when the predetermined time arrives that God had purposed long before to bring His elect unto salvation, He calls them unto Himself one by one.

When the Bible speaks of God's "call" or "calling" to salvation, two different kinds of calls may be discerned. They have generally been described a *general* call and an *effectual* call. Sometimes they are referred to as an *external* call and an *internal* call. Let us consider these. First, the Bible teaches that there is a **general call** of God to Salvation.¹ It is a call of God given to all people everywhere to come to God for salvation. This "call" of God is a universal call of all men to serve and worship the living God. This call is made by the understanding of God derived from *nature* and in the *human conscience*. The testimony of the creation to the reality of God and our accountability to Him "calls" us to honor Him and serve Him. This general call of God also comes through the message of the *gospel* to everyone everywhere, inviting them to come to Christ and receive freely the salvation that is in Him. When we witness to others, or preach to others, we are extending a call to them to turn from sins and believe on the Lord Jesus. This general call is indiscriminating; it is a call that extends to the entire human race everywhere.

But if there were only this general call of God to all men to come to God for salvation, no one would have ever been saved from their sin. The general call of God to salvation, if alone, will always be rejected by sinners. Something more needs to be done than simply make a plan of salvation known. Sinners will reject Christ unless and until something more than an external invitation of the gospel is performed. This rejection of the grace of God in His external call may be seen in Jerusalem's rejection of Christ.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you would not!*" (Matt. 23:37)

Isaiah recorded God's statement respecting Israel. "*But to Israel He said, 'All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people'*" (Isa. 65:2). God had called to them through the prophets, but they would not hear. Proverbs 1:24 records the rejection of God calling to people to respond to Him. "*Because I have called, and you refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded.*"

John Gill, and 18th century London pastor, once described this:

"I have called, and ye have refused ; I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people"; and to these it must be useless, as to any salutary effects; many that are called and invited to attend the gospel ministry refuse to come; such were they that were bidden and called to the marriage feast; but they made light of it, and some went to their farms, and others to their merchandise; such were the Scribes and Pharisees, who would neither go into the kingdom of heaven themselves, nor suffer (encourage) others that were entering to go in, but shut it up against them; that is, would neither attend the ministry of Christ and his apostles themselves, nor suffer (permit) others, but discouraged them from it, by their reproaches, threats, and persecutions, as our Lord complains (Matt. 13:3-7). Others that attend the ministry of the word, do it in a careless and negligent manner, not minding what they hear. . . Many that hear have an aversion to what they hear; the gospel is a hard saying to them, foolishness to some, and a stumbling block to others; some mock and scoff at it. . .

The grace of God in the general call of the gospel alone is insufficient to bring people to salvation. People need more than just hearing the gospel. The Holy Spirit must apply the gospel to an individual's mind and heart before salvation can take place. And so, the general call of God, if alone, will be rejected

¹ Sometimes it is referred to as a "universal call" or an "external call."

by sinners. *The general offer of the gospel is insufficient to bring salvation apart from an inward work of grace by God leading and enabling a sinner to receive and respond to the gospel.* Again to quote **John Gill**, “It (the general call) is always insufficient and ineffectual of itself unto real conversion, without the powerful and efficacious grace of God.” What is needed is more than a general call. *What is needful is an effectual, or inward call of God to bring a sinner to receive Christ in the gospel.* This is an act of special grace whereby God applies salvation to His people. This is the calling that Paul is referring in Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, *for those who are called* according to His purpose.

The effectual call of God to salvation is the call of the gospel that goes out to *specific* individuals. This is the call of God that is heard by them “who have ears to hear.” The Holy Spirit issues this effectual call to the elect through the general call of the gospel. This is the call described in the verse immediately following our text, Romans 8:30, which reads, “*Moreover whom he predestinated, these He also called.*”

Before we ever called on Him to save us, He called on us to save us. This calling is *the inward call of the Holy Spirit* whereby He enables us to hear, understand, and respond to the Gospel. It is frequently referred to as an *effectual calling* because it *always* results in bringing the one called to faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a definition:

Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered us in the Gospel.

We may also read of this inward call or effectual call in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14,

“But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief of the truth, *to which He called you by our gospel*, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thess. 2:13f)

Notice that Paul felt “bound” to thank God for their salvation. Why? Because they had been converted to Christ through His grace alone. God had chosen them “from the beginning” -- they had been elected. When the time arrived for them to begin to receive salvation to which they were destined, He “sanctified” them, that is set them apart from sin and the world. God had determined to save them through the work of the Holy Spirit in them so that they would believe the truth of the gospel. This work of bringing His chosen ones to Christ is described here as God’s action. Paul wrote that God had “called” the Thessalonian Christians through the means of the gospel that he had preached to them. And so, this call of God is effectual, that is, it always accomplishes the purpose for which it was issued--the salvation of God’s chosen ones. Paul described his own experience of this effectual call of God:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and *called me by his grace*, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood. (Gal. 1:15).

We can identify more specifically to what we are called by this inward work of grace in our lives. *First*, when God effectually called us to salvation *He called us out of great and gross darkness, into marvelous and surprising light.*

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him *who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Second, the internal call is a call of men out of bondage to sin. This bondage that was our condition before becoming saved was far worse than Israel while in Egyptian bondage. Moreover, the liberty from sin that God gives us is far greater than the liberty Israel enjoyed upon coming out of slavery in Egypt. We read in Galatians 5:1, “Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty” (Gal. 5:1-3). **John Gill** wrote:

They were slaves to their sinful lusts and pleasures, and were brought into bondage by them, and held under the power of them, as in a prison; but in effectual calling, the shackles of sin are broken off, and the prison-doors opened, and they are bid to go forth and show themselves; they become free from the tyranny of sin, and sin has no more dominion over them: in their state before calling, they are under the power and influence of Satan, the strong man armed, who keeps possession of them, by whom they are kept in bondage, and led captive by him at his will; but when effectually called, they are taken out of his hands, and are turned from the power of Satan unto God, and are delivered from the power of darkness, and are translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, where they are Christ's free-men. . . . They are called and allowed to make use of a liberty of access to God, through Christ, by one Spirit, and to enjoy all the privileges of the gospel, and the immunities of a gospel church-state, being fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.

Third, the effectual call of God unto salvation involves God callings persons from fellowship with the men of the world, to fellowship with Christ. “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). Again, **John Gill**:

As Abraham was called out of his country, from his kindred, and his father's house; so saints are called to forsake their own people, and their father's house; to relinquish the society of their former companions, and to have no fellowship with ungodly men: not that they are to have no civil correspondence, commerce, and society with the men of the world ; for then, as the apostle says, they must needs go out of it ; but not to join with them in superstitious worship, in acts of idolatry, in a false religion, and in the observance of the commandments of men ; nor in any sinful, profane, and immoral practices ; and as much as may be, should shun and avoid all unnecessary company, and conversation with them; for evil communications corrupt good manners; and it is a grief to the people of God, to be obliged to dwell among them, and with them, as it was to Lot, to Isaac and Rebecca, to David, Isaiah, and others: the people of God, in effectual vocation, are called to better company, to communion with God, 'Father, Son, and Spirit; to fellowship with one another; to converse with saints, the excellent in the earth, in whom is all their delight.”

Fourth, when God calls people to salvation He calls them unto a state of peace with Himself. “God hath called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). Again, **Gill** wrote further of God’s effectual call:

...to internal peace, to peace of mind and conscience ; which men, in a state of nature, are strangers to ; for there is no peace to the wicked: but God calls his people to it, and blesses them with it; with a peace which passes all understanding ; with peace in the midst of the tribulations of the world; with a peace which the world can neither give nor take away; and which arises from the blood and righteousness of Christ, and is part of that kingdom of God which is within them.”

Fifth, people who are effectually called to salvation are called out of a state of unholiness and sinfulness, into a state of holiness and righteousness. We read of this in several places.

1 Thess. 4:7, “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but *unto holiness*.”

2 Peter 1:3, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the

knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, ⁴by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.”

Sixth, the effectual call of God, the internal call, is *a call of persons into the grace of Christ*. It is an inward call of God to receive all of the promises and benefits of Christ for sinners. By this call the individual is given understanding and faith whereby he receives Christ, embraces Christ, professes Christ, and stand fasts in Christ. God is the One “*Who has called you unto his kingdom and glory*” (1 Thess. 2:12).

We could multiply the number of verses that speak to the effectual call of God.

John 6:37. “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

John 6:44f. “No one can come to me *unless the Father who sent me draws him*. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ *Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.*”

John 10:3. “To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out.”

John 10:16 -- “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also *I must bring*, and *they shall hear my voice*: and *they shall become one flock*, one shepherd.”

John 10:27 -- “*My sheep hear my voice*, and I know them, and they follow me.”

Acts 16:14 -- “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira, one that worshipped God, heard us: *whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul.*”

Acts 18:27. “And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped *those who through grace had believed...*”

1 Corinthians 1:9. “God is faithful, *by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

Hebrews 3:1. “Therefore, holy brothers, *you who share in a heavenly calling*, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.”

And so, the promise of Romans 8:28 is only secure to those who love God, the ones who had been called by God effectually unto Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. They and they alone are the objects of God’s special attentive care to assure that nothing shall happen to them but that He will bring some benefit for them. The reason is that He loves them and He has purposed to save them unto Himself.

In this way the people of God are secured in God’s blessing. When Joshua led the children of Israel into the Promised Land, shortly after having conquered Jericho, in obedience to God’s command, Joshua divided the people of God. He placed one half of them upon and by Mount Gerizim and the other half of the people on Mount Ebal. Joshua then had the Levites recite both the blessings as well as the curses of the law to the people. If the people obeyed God’s laws, then God promised them blessing. But if they transgressed His laws, then God promised them cursing. But in contrast to that covenantal

ceremony in which the terms of the covenant were rehearsed before the people, the promises of God in the new covenant for those in Christ are only blessings. Because Jesus Christ kept the law of God fully on behalf of His people, only blessing comes forth from God upon His people. Thus the prophecy of Isaiah 54 is realized to us and through us.

⁴“Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
Neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame;
For you will forget the shame of your youth,
And will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore.

⁵For your Maker is your husband,
The LORD of hosts is His name;
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel;
He is called the God of the whole earth.

⁶For the LORD has called you
Like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit,
Like a youthful wife when you were refused,”
Says your God.

⁷“For a mere moment I have forsaken you,
But with great mercies I will gather you.

⁸With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment;
But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,”
Says the LORD, your Redeemer.

⁹“For this is like the waters of Noah to Me;
For as I have sworn
That the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth,
So have I sworn
That I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you.

¹⁰For the mountains shall depart
And the hills be removed,
But My kindness shall not depart from you,
Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,”
Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

¹¹“O you afflicted one,
Tossed with tempest, and not comforted,
Behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems,
And lay your foundations with sapphires.

¹²I will make your pinnacles of rubies,
Your gates of crystal,
And all your walls of precious stones.

¹³All your children shall be taught by the LORD,
And great shall be the peace of your children.

¹⁴In righteousness you shall be established;
You shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;
And from terror, for it shall not come near you.

¹⁵Indeed they shall surely assemble, but not because of Me.
Whoever assembles against you shall fall for your sake.

¹⁶“Behold, I have created the blacksmith
Who blows the coals in the fire,

Who brings forth an instrument for his work;
And I have created the spoiler to destroy.
¹⁷No weapon formed against you shall prosper,
And every tongue which rises against you in judgment
You shall condemn.
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,
And their righteousness is from Me,”
Says the LORD.

Benediction:

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24f)