

# "God's Providence"

Romans 8:28

Baxter Exum (#984)  
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## Introduction:

Perhaps some of you here this morning have heard the story of Chippie the Parakeet. Apparently, Chippie was sitting in his cage minding his own business when his owner decided to clean out the cage using the vacuum cleaner. The phone rang and the owner went to answer it, and as you can imagine that is when things began to go horribly wrong. As she was not paying attention, the vacuum cleaner accidentally sucked up the bird! Realizing what had happened, the woman opened up the vacuum cleaner, ripped open the bag, and (fearing the worst) discovered the bird stunned and covered with dust, but alive. The woman decided the bird needed to be revived, so she rushed him to the sink put Chippie under the faucet. He is now cold and wet from the sudden bath, so instead of using a towel, she goes for the electric hair dryer. So Chippie goes from being sucked up, to being nearly drowned, to being blown over. Several weeks later, a friend asked her how Chippie was doing, and the owner replied, "Well, Chippie does not sing much anymore, he just sits there and stares!"

Certainly that little bird had been through a traumatic experience, and yet for some of us I wonder if it sounds a little bit familiar. Sometimes it seems that life just keeps on coming at us—one traumatic event after another. And sometimes we almost get overwhelmed with all of the challenges that we face on an almost daily basis.

We can look at the news—even just over the past week. Nationally, we have seen hurricanes—one right after the other, and certainly we are mindful of the terrible consequences of those dangerous storms. But even right here in Madison, we have seen yet another murder—this one apparently going back to an argument over a jukebox in a downtown bar. Less than a week ago, we saw a pregnant woman bite off the finger of the father's new girlfriend. Right here in Dane County, we have had armed robberies and beatings and fatal car accidents. In our own families, we have had our own challenges as well. Almost every week, it seems that several families call in asking for prayers due to some very difficult circumstances, and certainly this week was no exception. All of us face some challenging situations from time to time. We might agree with Job, who observed in **Job 14:1-2**, "***Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil. Like a flower he comes forth and withers. He also flees like a shadow and does not remain.***"

If you were with us last week, you might remember that we looked together at two verses from **Romans 8**, in response to two sermon requests from members of this

congregation. Two members had asked for lessons on the power of prayer and on a very serious concern, **"My prayer life is not what I desire—my heart speaks but I cannot express my thoughts."** In response to those concerns, we looked together at two verses in **Romans 8**. The passage comes after a longer series of verses on some of the suffering that we do as Christians. In **Romans 8:18**, Paul had just said, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."** And then last week we look at **verses 26-27**, where Paul said, **"In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."**

We discovered, first of all, that we are weak, that we do not know how to pray as we should. And yet we also discovered that God has taken our weakness into account, that help has been provided, that He has given us the Holy Spirit to intercede for us with groanings too deep for words.

This morning, I would like for us to move on to the very next verse, a verse that was listed by two of our members as being one of their favorite passages in the entire Bible. In our pew Bibles, the verse is found on **page 1769**. I am referring to **Romans 8:28**. It is a verse that discusses what we sometimes now refer to as the **"providence of God."** The word providence goes back to a Latin word—pro, meaning before, and videre, meaning to see. And so the word literally means, **"to see before."** And the idea is that God can see ahead. God can see what is coming, and God can make plans based on the future and what is best for us in the long run.

And so as we continue to think about our groaning, as we think about Chippie the parakeet, as we continue to think about the difficulties we face (sometimes almost on a daily basis), I would like for us to keep on looking at **Romans 8**, and if you will, please look with me at **Romans 8:28**, the inspired words of the apostle Paul, a favorite verse of several of our members here at Four Lakes. Paul said, **"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."**

What an amazing verse! I think we can understand why this verse is a favorite of at least two members of this congregation. As we look at this verse in depth this morning, I would like for us to consider several basic ideas that will hopefully encourage us as we live the Christian life.

## **I. One of the first things we notice in Romans 8:28 is what Paul says right away. Paul starts out by saying, "AND WE KNOW." »PPT»**

We **"know"** that God causes all things to work together for good. The word **"know"** refers to learning something as the result of instruction. We know our math facts, because someone in the past took the time to teach us. We know that 2+2=4, because someone taught us. And in a similar way, we know that God causes all

things to work together for good, because God has taught us this truth in His inspired word. As Christians who study the Scriptures, therefore, we know something that other people do not know. We know that God is at work behind the scenes. This is not something that we just know from experience. This is not just wishful thinking, but it is something that we know because we have been taught it in the word of God.

Certainly we understand that knowing something has a way of changing our perspective on things. We may find ourselves on a giant boat that is racing down a river, crashing into the water, and we might be scared, unless we know that we are simply on a water ride at Noah's Ark Waterpark. Having that knowledge has a way of changing our perspective on things.

Perhaps we get a check in the mail for \$10,000. Normally we would get pretty excited about that, unless we know that that particular check was sent to us by our mortgage company. And so having the knowledge that if we cash that check we will be charged huge amounts of interest—having that knowledge will change the way we look at that check. Chances are (having that knowledge) we will put it in the shredder.

Knowledge, therefore, changes our perspective. This morning, then, we are looking at knowledge that will change the way we look at what happens to us in this life. So first of all, we know something, and our knowledge changes the way we live.

## **II. As we look very carefully at verse 28, Paul makes it very clear what we know, "WE KNOW THAT GOD CAUSES ALL THINGS TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD." »PPT»**

As we look at this statement, perhaps we need to notice, first of all, what we do not know. First of all, this verse does not teach that God causes all things to happen. You might remember from several years ago, one famous televangelist said that Hurricane Katrina was God's vengeance on the great sin that was being committed by those in New Orleans, that God was punishing the immorality on Bourbon Street. But no, we do not know this from the Scriptures! **Romans 8:28** does not teach this. The Bible does not say that God causes all things. The Bible does not say that God is the cause of all suffering and destruction. Of course, our insurance policies may rule out certain "**acts of God,**" but just because some huge insurance company says that God did something does not make it so!

Sometimes at a funeral, especially for a young person, I will hear someone try to comfort the family by saying, "**Well, God must have needed that little girl in heaven more than we needed her here, so God took her home.**" No! As far as we can tell from this verse, God does not just go around picking people off for no good reason. This verse does not teach that God causes all things to happen. Sometimes people just die for no good reason.

There are many bad things that take place simply as the natural result of some kind of sin. Somebody gets high on drugs and crashes his car—God did not cause that to

happen. Sometimes bad things happen not necessarily because of sin, but simply as the natural result of making a bad choice. Earlier this week, I read about a 47-year old man who died in a motorcycle crash—going 239 MPH on the salt flats in Bonneville, Utah. I am not saying that this man sinned by trying to break a record, but there are natural consequences of certain behaviors.

There are many random things that happen—sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes not even linked to our behavior at all. A number of years ago, we were studying with some people who lived in a nearby community, we were trying to convince them to be baptized, and one Sunday morning they came in and said, **“On our way to worship this morning, we were driving the speed limit on the highway, and there was a dove that hovered right over our windshield, so today is the day that God wants us to be baptized.”** No! Sometimes doves just happen! I often wonder what they would have done if they had accidentally run over the dove on the way to church that morning! So whether it is good or bad, God does not necessarily cause all things. That is not what this verse is teaching.

We should also point out here that not all things are necessarily good. There are many things that happen in this life that are not good. The Bible never implies that war, and disease, and divorce, and famine, and disaster are good. Paul never says here that bad things are actually good. He is not banning us from mourning over something. He is not telling us to ignore the pain. He is not telling us to just re-label what is bad as being good. He is not telling us to ignore the obvious. I remember hearing about someone going into an autobody shop, and the man behind the counter said, **“Friend, you have not had an accident, your car has just been rearranged!”** That is not what God is saying here. God is not telling us to just redefine what is bad as being good.

We should also point out that this verse is not teaching that we will always understand the good that God is working out for us at the time. There are many times, right in the middle of it, when we might be pretty mad at God. We can look at some of the Psalms written by King David, and there were times when David seems pretty upset at God. David was pouring it all out. David could not see the work of God in the middle of every difficult situation.

This verse also is not saying that God’s people will always be protected from every evil thing. The Christian life is not like Star Trek, where the ship is surrounded by an invisible shield. Again, back in **verse 17**, Paul talked about suffering. In the following verses, he goes on to talk about pain, and suffering, and slavery, and groaning. Toward the end of this chapter, Paul talks about tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. And so Paul is not promising that Christians will avoid any kind of evil or pain. Christians will have trouble.

And finally, this verse is not just saying that all things will simply work out on their own in the long run. We are not talking about wishful thinking. We are not talking about random chance. We are not talking about the old saying that time heals all wounds. That is not the subject of **Romans 8:28**. So, what is this verse saying?

It is saying that, **"...God causes all things to work together for good."** In other words, God's plan for our life is much bigger than any individual problem. Obviously, when we are right there in the middle of it, we are not always blessed with a long-term perspective. We are not always able to see the end, and so we are tempted to judge the problem based on the beginning instead of the end.

When Paul says that all things **"work together,"** he uses the word that we get our English word **"synergy"** from. Synergy is the idea of cooperation. According to the dictionary, synergy is, **"...the interaction of two or more forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects."** And so it is the idea that things are better together than they are separate. The individual events that happen to us may not be pleasant on their own, individual events may not even be caused by God, but God is able to take those separate individual events, and is able to blend them together and to use them for our ultimate good.

I don't know how many people here this morning would enjoy eating raw eggs. I know don't. I don't know how many people here would enjoy sitting down and eating a half-cup of vegetable shortening. I know I wouldn't. I don't know how many people would enjoy eating a half teaspoon of baking soda, or a teaspoon of salt, or a cup of flour. But I know that when those individual ingredients are mixed together, they can be combined to make some of the best biscuits you have ever tasted! The providence of God is a lot like that. God does not cause all things to happen, but He can take those things that do happen, and He can combine those ingredients like a Master Baker, and He can cause, **"...all things to work together for good..."** in the end.

In a similar way, I doubt that very many of us would enjoy getting beaten up and left for dead by our brothers. We would not enjoy being sold into slavery. We would not appreciate being thrown in jail and falsely accused, and yet that is exactly what happened to Joseph in the Old Testament. Through it all, Joseph did not give up his faith in God, and over time God worked it out for good. You might remember that as the brothers were meeting Joseph for the first time in many years, Joseph said (in **Genesis 45**), **"I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt."** In fact, later in his life, looking back on it after many years, Joseph met with his brothers once again and said (in **Genesis 50:20**), **"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."** His brothers had evil intentions, it was a bad series of events, it was not pleasant at the time, but God meant it for good.

We see this in the Bible, over and over again. We see it in the life of Queen Esther in the Old Testament, in the words of Esther's uncle Mordecai, **"And who knows whether you have attained royalty for such a time as this."** In the New

Testament, as the early church was being persecuted, it seemed like a bad thing. People were running for their lives. People were being harassed and persecuted for their faith in God. In the opening verses of **Acts 8**, a young man named Saul, **"...began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."** But please listen very carefully to the next verse (**Acts 8:4**). The word of God says, **"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."** And from that point on, the church continued to grow by leaps and bounds as it spread from one end of the Roman Empire to the other.

Several years later, this young man Saul (who was doing the persecuting), he obeyed the gospel, and as he himself went out preaching, he was thrown in prison, and you might remember that before the night was over, he ended up baptizing the jailer and the jailer's entire family. Several years later, Paul was thrown in jail again, and in **Philippians 1:12**, he writes to the church in Philippi (where he had been thrown into jail once before) and he says, **"Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel."**

And by the end of the letter he basically says, **"Oh, and by the way, all of my Christian friends here told me to tell you 'Hello,' especially my guards!"** (a very rough paraphrase of **Philippians 4:22**). Once again, God had taken a bad situation and had caused it to work together for good. That is the message of **Romans 8:28**—God can take something bad and use it for a good purpose.

**III. Before we leave this passage, though, we need to notice a limitation, because we notice that Romans 8:28 does not apply to everyone, but it applies only, "...TO THOSE WHO LOVE GOD AND ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE." »PPT»**

In other words, the verse only applies to children of God who are faithful—to those who are striving to please God. We know from **John 14:15** that those who love God will obey His commandments. We are talking about people, therefore, who obey the Lord. People in the world are not covered by this verse. People who have left the Lord are not covered by this verse. There are only two types of people in this world—people who love God and people who do not. **Romans 8:28** was written to those who do. It was written to the early Christians who were thrown to the lions in the coliseum in Rome. It was written to middle and high school students here in Madison who endure classes in the public schools where teachers ridicule the Christian faith. It was written to Christians of all ages in all circumstances—from the beginning of the church all the way to the end of the age when Christ returns to take us to heaven.

For those who love God and for those who are called according to His purpose, the Bible teaches that whatever we endure, God will somehow work it and weave it together to bring about that which is truly good. What an amazing promise! How does this knowledge change the way we live? It means that our lives have meaning. It means that God is not out to get us. And it means that even when something bad happens—even if we are persecuted, even if we have a day like that parakeet I

mentioned earlier, we can trust that God is always looking for a way to work things out for good. If we love Him and if we let Him, even the problems we face can be a beautiful part of that process.

### **Conclusion & Invitation:**

Without a doubt, the best example of patient endurance is found in the life of Jesus Christ. Even though He was absolutely perfect in every way, Jesus suffered a humiliating death. He took on the sins of the world and died as a common criminal. But through that suffering, God was working things together for good, and three days later Jesus came back from the dead. As the Bible says in **Hebrews 5:9-10**, ***"Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."*** Truly, ***"...we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."***

I am so thankful for the suggestions and the comments that led to this morning's lesson. The Bible teaches that if we want God to work things out for good, we must become obedient to the gospel. That is, we die to sin, we allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and we then come up out of the water ready to live the Christian life. If you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)