

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, July 27, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Romans 8:28

*"All Things Work Together for Good?"*

**FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISE**

Today in our second reading from Romans, we heard one of the most important promises of God. Did you catch it? *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* (Rom. 8:28).

You have heard me say many times before, we don't live by feelings, we live by faith; and specifically faith in the promises of God. There are many promises in God Word, over 2000 to be exact, but it is this one in Romans that is especially important. In fact, faith in this promise will help you go to sleep at night when nothing else will.

I remember when I was a boy growing up, we had a garden and we would grow cucumbers and tomatoes – nothing like fresh produce right from the soil. And with the fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, we would always make a salad. And to complete that salad, I would always add some poison and then eat them. I really did. But it didn't hurt me because what was poison really wasn't poison. Actually, it was a white substance known as sodium chloride. Some people call it salt. It is made up of two ingredients, sodium and chloride, each of which is a deadly poison. But compounded together, they make table salt, and in the right amount, good for your health, and certainly causes those fresh cucumbers and tomatoes to taste even better.

You see, there are certain things in this world of ours that in and of themselves are not good. In and of themselves they are bad, even terrible. But by the chemistry of the cross, God takes those things that in themselves are bad, and He mixes them with the hands of His love, and compounds them in the crucible of His omnipotence, and they become to us that which is good, that which flavors life and actually nourishes us. I want you to think about that as we look at **Romans 8:28**. And I want you to notice several things about this great promise.

**THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S PROMISE**

First, I want you to notice the certainty of the promise. Notice how sure it is. The apostle Paul says, *"for we know that all things work together for good."* This is not conjecture. This is not a hope so or a perhaps so, this is a "know so" statement. The apostle Paul is saying we know that this is true. You see, the promises of God are yea and amen in Jesus Christ.

Dr. F. B. Meyer, Christian theologian and author, once wrote, *"On an occasion, if any promise of God should fail, the heavens would clothe themselves with sackcloth. The sun, the moon, the stars would reel from their courses. The universe would rock. And a hollow wind would moan through a ruined creation the awful message that God can lie. But thank God, while many may lie, God cannot lie. He abides faithful. And we know that when he said **Romans 8:28**, when he put it in the Bible, it cannot fail. We know that all things work together for good."*

But what is the greatest challenge to believing this promise? Our circumstances.

One woman said to another woman, "I got married." She said, "Oh, that's wonderful." She said,

"But my husband is not good looking." Oh, she said, that's too bad. She said, "He's very rich though." "Oh," the other woman said, "that's good." She said, "But he's very stingy." "Oh, that's bad." She said, "He did build us a big house." "Oh," the other woman said, "that's good." Said, but it burned down. Oh, she said, "That's bad." The woman said, "But he was in it." At that point, the other woman didn't know what to say.

You see human nature is to always look at our circumstances in life, first, don't we? Sometimes we say this is good, then it's bad, then it's good, then it's bad. Well we need to just wait until God is finished! You see when we get our eyes on circumstances, we get our eyes off the Lord. And when we get our eyes off the Lord, we forget His promises. Don't keep your eyes on your circumstances. If you keep your eyes on your circumstances, you'll get confused. Get your eyes on the Lord! The God who made and controls the universe. The One who set the stars and planets in their courses, the One who made the incredible human body – don't you think He is in control of your life? That's why Jesus said, "*Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you wear, if your Father in heaven takes care of the birds and the lilies won't He take care of you? For we know.*" There's the certainty of it.

### **THE COMPLETENESS OF GOD'S PROMISE**

But I want you to notice something else. Second, I want you to notice the completeness of the promise. Notice what Paul also said. He says, for we know that "*all things*" work together for good. Not some things, not a few things, not most things but *all* things. Now, we know that the sweet things of life work together for good. Thank God for the kiss of a baby. Thank God for the love of a spouse. Thank God for friendship. Thank God for health. Thank God for the church. Thank God for joy. Thank God for music. Thank God for all of these good gifts. The Bible says in **James 1:17**, "*Every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from above from the Father of lights in whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*"

And God takes these sweet things, and God uses them for good, even when we're not good. The Bible says in **Rom. 2:4** that "*the goodness of God leads us to repentance*". The sweet things work together for good. Ah, but what about the sorrowful things? Do they work together for good, also? Let me give you some examples from Scripture.

**Jeremiah 24:5-6.** Listen for a moment to see how God dealt with his ancient people, Judah. "*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; Like these good figs, so will I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans...*" Now watch this next phrase. "*I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land.*"

What would happen if the United States was taken over by some foreign country and we were taken from our homes and exiled to another land? We would say, God has forsaken us. Well, that's what happened to Judah. The Babylonians came, took them out of their land, and God had them put into a foreign country as captives. But what did God say He would do for them? Had God forsaken them? No. God said, "*I will set my eyes upon them for good.*"

Now listen to **Psalm 119:71** David said, "*It is good for me that I have been afflicted.*"

Have you ever said that? It takes a lot of faith to say that. Anybody afflicted? Anybody sick? Anybody sorrowful? Anybody hurting? Would you say it is good? It takes a lot of faith to say that. But that's what David said. You see, God had to get David's attention. And what God taught David when he was afflicted was more than God could teach him when he was well. Sometimes the bed of affliction and

a sickbed will do more than a sermon.

Or how about Joseph? Do you remember what happened to Joseph? Joseph was a godly man, one of the finest you'll find in Holy Scripture. But look how he was mistreated. He was betrayed by his brothers. He was put into a pit and left for dead, and then taken out of that pit and sold into slavery. He was accused of rape and then, he was cast into prison. All due to the betrayal of his brothers.

But do you remember what Joseph said in **Genesis 50:20**? As he looked at his brothers he said, ***"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people."*** In other words, even though you meant it for evil, God meant it for good.

***"For good,"*** there it is again. Now, suppose that had happened to you. Suppose you'd been left in a pit by your brothers, suppose you'd been sold as a slave, suppose you'd been lied about, put in prison, suppose you had been falsely accused of rape and all these things? That happened to Joseph. Joseph said to his brothers, you meant it for harm. But God meant it for good. Joseph understood the principle of **Romans 8:28**.

Do you see what God is trying to tell us? You may be like Joseph, suffering at the hand of your family. You may be like David, afflicted in body. You may be like Judah, carried into captivity. But if you are a Christian, if you love God, even all the sorrowful things, God will work them together for good.

I want to tell you what else God uses. He uses even the Satanic things. You say, what? What the devil does works together for good? Yes, it does. You see, the devil, himself, though he doesn't desire to, and though he doesn't want to, the devil himself gives glory to God.

Let me give you an example. The apostle Paul had a vision from God. It was so big, so great, so glorious that he speaks about in **2 Corinthians 12**. As a result of his visions, Paul was in danger of being carried away into perhaps pride or egotism, or going beyond certain bounds that God had set for him. And so he says in **2 Corinthians 12: 7**, ***"There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated."*** Now, here God wanted to humble Paul. And God allowed the devil to become his messenger, his errand boy. That doesn't mean that the devil meant it for good. That didn't mean what the devil did was good. That doesn't mean a thorn in the flesh is good. But here is God who takes everything that happens, and he works it together for good. And here was the apostle Paul who was broken, humble, hurt. He prayed for it to be removed but it wasn't. But God gave him added grace. He told Paul, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."*** And it was that grace that made Paul greater than he ever could have been.

But it's not only Satanic things God will cause to work for good.

Sinful things work together for good to those who love God. Now I didn't say sin was good anymore than I said Satan was good. But God is over all. He is sovereign and has the final say. And even where there is sin, the Bible says, ***"where sin abounds, grace does all the more."*** If a man sins, he will suffer, he will be hurt. If a man sins, it's terrible, it's horrible, it's heinous. But when Simon Peter cursed and swore and denied the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus said, Simon, I have prayed for you that your faith fail not. And then he said, Simon, when you're turned around, strengthen your brethren. It's bad, Simon, that you did this. It's terrible. But I know that you're going to come out on the other side. And even the sin that you committed is going to be used as a platform to help and strengthen others. And when you've repented, strengthen your brethren. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't it amazing how God works all things together for good? Peter suffered, and he wept bitterly, but God used those things to bring Him closer to Himself.

But not only does God use the sinful things to work together for good, He also uses the simple things. Anything you can mention. The truth is God knows the number of the hairs on our heads, and not a blade of grass moves without His permission. In fact, God takes the most minute, inconsequential detail, and He moves it and works it all according to His sovereign purpose. I think of Pharaoh, the mighty king, ruler of Egypt. He'd decreed that all the little boy babies would be put to death. Little Moses was hid in the bulrushes. There's a verse of Scripture that says, “*And the baby wept*”. Pharaoh's daughter heard that baby crying. Her maternal instincts went out. She found that little baby. She raised him. He became the mighty Moses that led the children of Israel out of Egypt, and brought about the demise of that great kingdom. And what caused it? One of the events was a baby's cry. Mighty Pharaoh and his decree on the one hand, and a little baby and his cry, “waaa,” on the other. That small thing God used. The simple things, the Satanic things, the sinful things, the sorrowful things, the sweet things. God uses all things. All things work together for good.

### **THE CAUSE OF GOD’S PROMISE**

Now, I want you to see something else. I want you to see not only the completeness of the promise, but I want you to see the cause of the promise. Why does it happen this way? Romans 8:28 says, “*we know that all things work together for good.*” That may be how it’s translated, but I think another way it should be translated, “We know *that God works* all things together for good.” Things in themselves don't work together for good or bad. Things don't happen just by accident. We live in a cause and effect universe. And where God does not rule, He overrules.

God is the One who brings order out of confusion and harmony out of discord. Listen, if this verse seems too much for you to take in, don't forget that there is a God in the heavens who's doing all of this. We know that God works all things together for good. Whether you can understand it or not, isn't the issue. The issue is that God is working out His plans through us and in us. And that leads us to....

### **THE CONDITION OF GOD’S PROMISE**

There is a condition to this promise. It's not just automatic. The Bible says, And we know that God works all things together for good *to those who love him.* Those who love him and *are called according to His purpose.*

That's the condition of it. Do you want to be called according to God's purpose, do you want all things to work together for good in your life? Then there is one simple condition – Love God. Remember what Jesus said is the greatest commandment? “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength and all your soul.*” That's the key. And the beauty of this promise is that anybody can do it. Doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, or what you do. Doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, skilled or unskilled, young or old. All you have to do is love God and that means following His Son, Jesus.

However, if you're here and you don't love God, **Romans 8:28** doesn't apply to you. The despisers of God can't claim this. The haters of God may not claim it. The atheist can't claim the promise of God. In fact, for those who don't love God, this verse applies to you but only in reverse! All things work together for bad to those who don't love God. Now, think about that for a moment. The bad things work together for good if you do love God. The good things work together for bad if you don't love God.

What do I mean? Let me give you an example. The preaching of the gospel. Is preaching the gospel good or bad? I am sure we would say it's a good thing. But when we are preaching the gospel, we are preaching God's Word. And in **Eph. 6:17**, God's Word is called a sword, in fact it is called a double edged sword in **Heb. 4:12**. You see when the Word of God is proclaimed, it cuts. And if it does not cut to heal, it will wound. If it does not bless you, it will convict and judge you. You're never the same after hearing the Word of God. The same wind that blows one ship into the harbor is the same wind that blows another ship upon the rock. You see, the gospel is either good or bad depending on the response.

If someone hears the gospel and turns to the Lord and is saved, then it's working together for their good. But if someone you hears the gospel and doesn't love God, then the preaching of the gospel will hurt them. In fact, if they don't repent, it will be used against them. Jesus told His disciples that when they go to a house to witness, knock on the door, if they receive you, go into that house and share, and let your peace be upon that-house. But Jesus also said, **“If they will not receive you, shake the dust off your feet.”** Shake it off, for that dust will be used against them in the judgment.

People won't be able to say, “O God, I didn't have a chance.” No, there's the dust off the shoes of my servant that I sent to your house. And that which would have worked together for good to bless will work together for bad to blast. The Word of God is a two-edged sword. That's the condition of it.

### **THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE PROMISE**

One last thing I want you to see and that is the consequence of the promise. How do all things work together for good? Well, that you will be wealthy? No. That you will be healthy? Not necessarily. That you will be happy. Perhaps, but not necessarily. What are the consequences? Well let's look again at the rest of **Romans 8:28**: **“We know that all things work together for good to them who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”** Just underline that phrase.

Well, what is God's? It's found in the next verse – **Rom. 8:29**: **“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.”** Did you catch that? That's what it all works together for. That's the consequence of it. That we might be like Jesus.

So many people have the wrong idea. They think, well, everything is just working together for good, praise the Lord. Not quite. It's like when someone is driving down the road and they have a blow out and they say, “Oh well, praise God, all things work together for the good, there is a sale on tires somewhere.” That isn't what this verse means. Now God may in His mercy direct you to a sale, and that's fine and I think frequently He does, but frankly, that's an awfully cheap application of this verse. God's plan for you is not that you have new tires on your car. God's plan for you is that you be like Jesus. That you will be conformed to the image of His Son. Whether in joy or sadness, health or pain, sunshine or rain, good times or bad, the sweet things, sorrowful things, sinful things, Satanic things, simple things, all things work together to those who love God. They are used by God to make us like Jesus Christ. That's what it's all about and that is why **Romans 8:28** is one of the great promises of God's Word. Let us pray...