

In analyzing this passage, the first thing to note is its structure. Verse 28 is a transitional proclamation building upon the preceding context, and verses 29-30 serve to clarify and expand that proclamation. This observation is important, especially since these verses are most often treated in isolation from the larger context. Paul's proclamation (8:28) is a favorite memory verse for Christians, and as such is routinely applied by itself to any and every difficult, unforeseen or unfathomable circumstance. In similar fashion, the three verses together are commonly employed by Reformed Christians as a proof-text for divine sovereignty in salvation, and the related doctrines of foreknowledge, election, and predestination. This is not to say that these uses are entirely erroneous, but only that such abstraction of 8:28-30 from Paul's broader argument will inevitably result in the thrust and significance of his statements being distorted or missed.

- 1) Verse 8:28 represents a transition, but the exact nature of that transition is disputed. One reason is that Paul's introductory conjunction can be variously translated: most often it indicates an unbroken continuation of thought (*and, but, then, now*, etc.); at other times it marks the resumption of an interrupted discourse or narrative. Virtually all agree, however, that this conjunction consistently indicates some manner of *contrast*. That is, it acts to draw a contrast of some sort between the two ideas or statements that it conjoins. This contrast can be either positive or negative.

Most English versions here render it *and*, but that should not lead the reader to conclude that Paul was moving on to an entirely new discussion. Verse 28 and the previous passage are connected in a way that emphasizes contrast. That connection is most likely tied to Paul's repeated use of the verb "we know," for in this way he drew a marked contrast between believers' weakness in knowledge in 8:26 and their confident conviction in 8:28. No Christian can fully discern the circumstances and sufferings of this life, but all believers know their God, and they trust His good purpose.

- 2) The second matter of disputation is the subject of the verb rendered *work together* (NASB). A few important Greek manuscripts include the subject noun *God*, but this reading is not widely attested. The other obvious choice is the noun "all things." The difficulty here is that the form of this noun allows it to function grammatically as either the subject or the object. Thus the two reasonable possibilities for the reading of this clause are: "*God works together all things*" and "*All things work together.*" But because this verb never occurs elsewhere with an object, it is best to adopt the second reading and regard the noun "all things" as the subject.

Presupposing this to be the correct reading, two further questions arise. The first is what Paul meant by *all things*. Noting the preceding context, some commentators seek to limit his meaning to matters of difficulty and personal suffering (ref. again 8:16-18). In other words, it is hardship in all of its various forms that "works together" in the believer's life.

However, there is no reason to impose such a limitation. First of all, Paul's grammar suggests that he was speaking in generic, comprehensive terms. And even if it is granted that Paul particularly had believers' suffering in mind, in context this suffering is itself *all-embracing*. For the suffering Paul was referring to is specifically associated with the "already but not yet" state of every Christian's salvation. It is grounded in his present, abiding weakness and the "eschatological angst" it provokes in him. And this weakness with its attendant anxious longing overarch *every* aspect of the believer's life – his joy and sorrow; his health and disease; his lack and abundance; his failures and obedience.

The second question concerns Paul's statement that all things *work together*. How can the various realities and circumstances of life actively work in connection with one another? In some versions the difficulty is resolved by inserting God as the subject. Thus the NASB: "*God causes all things to work together...*" As noted, this insertion is supported by a few manuscripts, and it does get to the heart of Paul's meaning. For clearly he did not mean to suggest that various things in and of themselves are capable of working together. It is God who *causes* "all things" to so work.

- 3) And because God secures the harmonious inter-working of all things, they work together "*for good*." It is important here to consider that Paul was not implying the goodness of all things as they exist and operate in time and space. He was not saying that everything is good in itself. His point was that, in God's hand, everything – whether it is good or evil, profitable or unprofitable – works in conjunction with everything else toward an *outcome* that is good. God's purpose and goal are good, and He interacts with all things toward the accomplishment of that goal.

It must also be observed that Paul did not specify exactly *how* God effects His purposed outcome. The answer given by many is that God directly causes everything that exists and occurs at every point in time. The world is essentially a robotic entity operating according to divine programming. Such a view has a certain appeal, but it makes God's self-revelation in the Scripture incoherent. The Bible never suggests that the created order is governed in a fatalistic manner. Quite the opposite, it everywhere insists upon the reality of objective evil, the freedom of human beings (including their refusal of the divine will), the operation of natural causalities, etc.

At the same time, the Scripture reveals a God who is sovereignly in control of His creation. The world does operate in accordance with natural laws, and yet God is the author of those laws and oversees their administration (ref. Psalm 104; also Genesis 7:11ff; Exodus 14:1ff; etc.). With respect to men, every person lives entirely as a free agent, and yet God acts in the context of human freedom to accomplish His purposes. The process of *inspiration* is one of countless examples of this dynamic.

And so Paul's statement does not deny human freedom or natural laws and causalities. Neither does it imply that God is the cause or source of evil. It simply affirms that all of the things that comprise life in this world are being ordered by God – *in a manner that is inscrutable and largely imperceptible to men* – toward the accomplishment of His good purpose.

Another important matter is the sphere in which Paul envisioned this good. All too often Christians understand his words as indicating that even the bad things in life accomplish some form of good *in this life*. For instance, when a person is sick or hurt this statement is often used to imply that God is using the affliction to produce greater faith, humility, or trust in Him. While affliction does have such an effect, this is not Paul's point.

In context Paul was concerned with the redemptive, eschatological reality that is the believer's glorification, and the good outcome he referred to fits within this perspective. This becomes readily apparent when 8:28 is considered together with verses 29-30. *The great good that God is working toward is the saints' obtainment of their promised inheritance in the comprehensive renewal to come at Christ's return.* This is the ultimate good toward which all things are working; all of the "intermediate good" associated with the believer's present life in this world is taken up in it.

*"The promise to us is that there is nothing in this world that is not intended by God to assist us on our earthly pilgrimage and to bring us safely and certainly to the glorious destination of that pilgrimage."* (Moo)

- 4) But this harmonious working of the circumstances and issues of life is not true with respect to all people: *"God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God..."* Paul's promise is not to humanity at large, but to those only who love God. This assertion, too, has been subject to all sorts of misunderstanding, perhaps the most common being the inclination to read Paul's words "backwards." That is, the natural tendency is to understand Paul as saying that those who give themselves to love God will find Him ordering the issues of their lives for their good. If one wants to realize this good outcome, then he must begin to sincerely love God.

But this was not at all Paul's meaning, as one simple observation shows. That observation is that Paul regarded this love as a defining principle. The individuals he was referring to do not merely express love for God; they are defined by the fact that they are lovers of God. Paul intended to convey that love for God is more *who they are* than *what they do*. This being so, it is impossible to conclude that Paul was indirectly exhorting his readers to apply themselves to loving God. Men become lovers of God, not through personal volition or effort, but through renewal. New life in Christ brings the end of sin's dominion – the enslavement of "self-love" – and initiates a new form of "slavery" that is devoted love for God.

Paul's language precludes human volition and effort. "Lovers of God" are produced solely by divine initiative and power; the Father forms this love in His children. Thus every Christian is *constituted* a lover of God, and the maturity or weakness of his love is irrelevant to Paul's promise to him.

- 5) All things work together for good with respect to those who are lovers of God, and all such lovers are themselves the product of God's grace and power. He effects His good outcome on behalf of *all* those whom He has renewed and is transforming. This truth is affirmed by Paul's second qualifying phrase: "...to those who are called according to His purpose."

This phrase is set in apposition to the preceding one, which means that they are grammatically interchangeable, and therefore refer to the same individuals. In other words, *those who are lovers of God are those who have been called according to His purpose*. Several things are to be noted in this regard. The first ought to be obvious, which is that these phrases refer specifically and only to Christians. Though Paul does not commonly speak of believers as "lovers of God," his teaching does limit this description to them (1 Corinthians 2:9, 8:2-3; also 2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Secondly, the initial phrase identifies believers from the vantage point of their relation to God, while the second identifies them from the vantage point of His relation to them. For their part, Christians are lovers of God; for His part, God has called them according to His purpose. And finally, the latter phrase acts to define the former by providing the basis for it. Those who love God are those who are "the called ones." But God's call is the ground of their love; they love Him because He first loved them. It is not their love that provokes God's calling or His working things for good on their behalf; rather, the former is the fruit of the latter.

These observations provide insight into how this "calling" is to be understood. Many view it in terms of the so-called *universal call* by which God calls all men to come to faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 22:14; Mark 16:14-16; Acts 1:1-8, 14:8-18, 17:24-31; also Isaiah 55:1-7; etc.). But in that Paul has bound this particular "call" to those who are lovers of God, it is clear that he was referring to God's *effectual call* by which men are brought by the Spirit into saving union with Christ. Verses 29-30 also confirm that this was Paul's meaning.

The Father's call underlies every believer's share in Christ, and His call to His children comes on the basis of His eternal, loving purpose for them. That purpose extends beyond their present salvation to the realization of the good outcome that is their final glorification; it extends from eternity past to eternity future, and comprehends everything in between. This is why Paul could affirm that, for them, "all things work together for good." And this is why the saints rejoice in a hope that cannot disappoint.

In verse 8:27 Paul observed that the Spirit intercedes for the saints “according to God.” His intercession represents the Father’s concern and care for His children. In the following verse Paul expanded his contention, insisting that the Spirit’s role as intercessor is but one facet of the Father’s care: *He causes all things to work for good with respect to His called-ones who love Him.*

Paul’s declaration has huge implications, for it reveals that everything in a believer’s life has eternal relevance.

- All things are profoundly significant, not because God is the direct cause of them, but because they are all being administered by Him unto a good outcome, namely His purposed glorification of His children.
- That Paul extends this work of God to *all things* is especially important. For he just previously affirmed that all Christians are characterized by abiding weakness. This weakness is associated with the “not yet” state of their salvation, and includes *spiritual* as well as physical/temporal weakness. This is evident from Paul’s associating it with prayer (8:26). And because the believer’s weakness is associated with his spiritual incompleteness, it extends as well to the various manifestations of his sin.

Thus sin is a part of the “all things” that God is overseeing toward His good outcome. And as an aspect of the weakness that characterizes believers’ “already but not yet” condition, remaining sin also acts to strengthen Christian hope. For, according to Paul, the saints’ present weakness is the promise of future glory. Even the sinfulness that provokes such longing must be viewed in light of the “glory to be revealed to us.”

- The believer’s present weakness – *in every facet of it* – is subject to the Spirit’s intercession and the Father’s good purpose. Just as Christ’s atonement comprehends all that pertains to believers’ corruption, so also does the work of the Spirit, which work is the fruitful expression of the Father’s will. Because of the intention and effectual power of the triune God, all things work together for good for those who are beloved children.

Verse 8:28 ends with Paul’s affirmation that God’s calling of believers is “according to purpose.” God’s effectual call is foundational to the outworking of His purpose for His children, and this purpose finds its goal in their glorification as joint heirs with Christ. This is the reason Paul could insist that all things in the saints’ present experience are working together for their good. Having called them, God is overseeing everything in their lives toward the accomplishment of His determined end. This truth is a key theme in Paul’s gospel, and is reiterated in some form throughout his epistles. In the Ephesian letter, in particular, Paul made the sweeping proclamation that God is working all things in time and space according to the counsel of His will, which is His eternal determination to sum up the entire created order in His Son (Ephesians 1:3-10).