

Articles and Sermons :: The Overruling Providence Of God by J. Oswald Sanders**The Overruling Providence Of God by J. Oswald Sanders - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2012/6/17 22:10**

Reading: Romans 8:26-30

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

This sentence, interpreted in its context, can bring unlimited comfort and cheer to the Christian in time of testing. With Paul it was a matter of profound conviction: "And we know that all things work together for good." No room for question here. He had unwavering confidence in the overruling providence of his God. He believed that "God makes everything turn out for the best" (Scholefield). For him this conviction rendered complaining unthinkable since every event of life was either planned or permitted by God. It made possible of achievement his counsel of perfection, "In everything give thanks" (1 Thes. 5:18). It turned sighing into singing. It was a practical embracing of this truth which enabled him and his companion to sing at midnight even when plans seemed to miscarry and they were immured in a dungeon, with bleeding backs. To him it matters little whether physical conditions were propitious so long as he knew he loved God and was called according to His purpose. Everything, whether seemingly adverse or advantageous, would certainly turn out for the best. The important question is, do we share Paul's joyous assurance?

Paul couches his statement in such categorical terms that it is impossible to remain neutral in the face of its astounding claim. If it were somewhat qualified or expressed in less dogmatic fashion it would be easier to accept. When faced with devastating sorrows or reverses it sounds rather glib and divorced from the grim reality of experience to say that it is all working together for good. But is it really so? Must its assertion be viewed with secret skepticism or can it be embraced with joyous realism? Interpreted in its context, with full value given to each word, there is no verse in the whole of Scripture which will give such poise and serenity in the midst of tragedy, trial or disappointment.

The key to the interpretation of the central statement, "All things work together for good," is that it must be neither isolated from its context nor divorced from its two conditional clauses— "to them that love God" and "to them that are called according to His purpose." These two clauses determine and limit its application. The simple fact is that all things do not without qualification work together for good for everybody. Nor does this verse claim that they do. Two things are presupposed. First there must be correct relationship to God. The beneficiary under the promise is a member of God's family, enjoying and manifesting the family affection. Such a person is persuaded that He who did not spare His own Son would never permit or ordain anything which was not for his ultimate good. Love trusts even when it cannot discern. Then there is partnership. He is one of "the called" according to God's eternal purpose and his plans have given way to God's plan. To him it is inconceivable that God's perfect design could be thwarted by anything really adverse to him. God is intermingling all things for his good. With his God, "accidents are not accidental and adversity is not adverse." The conclusion is that God's purpose unfolds to those whom He has called and who love Him in return. The promise has nothing for the man in rebellion against God and out of sympathy with His purposes. It is to the cold heart that this verse becomes a stumbling block. It glows with comfort when the heart is warm with love to God. But to be entitled to the comfort of this verse we must come within the category laid down by Paul.

The question inevitably arises, Can tragedy be good? Is ill-health good? Is bereavement good? Is frustration good? Why does God permit these to strike us? In Paul's day there were four characteristic reactions to adversity. The attitude of the Epicurean was, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." The Cynic defied fate to do its worst. The Stoic set his teeth and steeled himself to accept the Divine will. Epictetus wrote: "Have courage to look up to God and say, 'Deal with me as Thou wilt from now on. I am as one with Thee; I am Thine; I flinch from nothing so long as Thou dost think that it is good. Lead me where Thou wilt; put on me what raiment Thou wilt. Wouldst Thou have me hold office or eschew it, stay or flee, be rich or poor? For this I will defend Thee before all men.'"

But in the text Paul epitomized the Christian attitude: not defiance or indifference or even resigned acceptance. The Christian joyously embraces adversity or sorrow, knowing that all things whether propitious or adverse are working together for his highest good.

Four truths full of comfort and encouragement emerge from this verse.

God's Plan Is Beneficent

"All things work together for good."

The crux of the problem involved in the practical application of this verse lies in our interpretation of the two words "for good." The "good" promised by God in His longsighted love may not always seem good and acceptable to us. Indeed His providences sometimes appear disastrous when viewed from a materialistic temporal viewpoint. The good promised by God is spiritual rather than temporal, and some time may elapse before we discern its true beneficence.

It took years before the strange providences in the life of Job had their vindication. His afflictions had their rise in the malicious mind of Satan, but Job did not attribute them to blind chance or even to Satanic agency. He expressed his philosophy in the noble words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). When taunted by his wife he maintained his confidence in God. "What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). His stand of faith was abundantly vindicated by subsequent events. He emerged from his trials enriched and not impoverished. Through Job's cooperation, God took the evil acts of Satan and made them work out for good without in any way condoning the evil.

"We tend to interpret good in terms of animal comfort," writes Vernon Grounds. "If we are exempt from disease, if our bodies are never stabbed by pain, if we always have money in our pockets or reserve in the bank, if we live in modern homes and enjoy the latest luxuries, if we can dress well and take long vacations at the seashore...that we consider good. Unfortunately we find ourselves victimized by a materialistic civilization, and despite our Christian faith we subtly equate comfort and goodness. In the same way we tend to equate success with goodness... Or yet again we tend to equate pleasure with goodness...And yet such equations are a million miles removed from Paul's basic teaching. And because all of these are false equations, we have trouble with Romans 8:28. Our failure to grasp Paul's conception of the good, changes what ought to be a soft pillow for our hearts into a hard problem for our heads."

Whatever my God ordains is right;
He taketh thought for me.
The cup that my Physician gives
No poisoned draught can be,
But medicine due,
For God is true.
And on that changeless truth I build
And all my heart with hope is filled.

Few tragedies have highlighted this truth more than the fire at Serampore, India, on March 12, 1812. Within a few moments the sacrificial translation work of years of William Carey and his colleagues went up in smoke. The loss in paper for Bibles was immense. The newly cast Tamil type and Chinese metal type were a total loss. Portions of manuscripts, grammars and dictionaries laboriously compiled perished. William Carey wrote, "Nothing was saved but the presses. This is a heavy blow, as it will stop our printing the Scriptures for a long time. Twelve months' hard labor will not reinstate us; not to mention the loss of property, manuscripts, etc., which we shall scarcely ever surmount."

The loss of manuscripts referred to included portions of nearly all his Indian Scripture versions, all his Kanarese New Testament, two large Old Testament books in Sanskrit, many pages of his Bengali dictionary, all of his Telugu Grammar and much of his Punjabi, and every vestige of his well-advanced Dictionary of Sanskrit, the magnum opus of his linguistic life.

But there follows his affirmation of faith in words akin to those of our text. "God will no doubt bring good out of this evil and make it promote our interests." Before the ashes were cold, Carey's colleague, Marshman, wrote that the calamity was "another leaf in the ways of Providence, calling for the exercise of faith in Him whose Word, firm as the pillars of heaven, has decreed that all things shall work together for good to them that love God. Be strong therefore in the Lord. He will never forsake the work of His own hands."

In the midst of this desolating reverse, God's servants' grasp of this truth kept their hearts at peace. "It stilled me in to tranquil submission, enabling me to look up and welcome God's will," said Marshman. Carey told how he had been hushed by the verse, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psa. 46:10). Ward, the third of the famous trio, was found while the fires were still smoldering, not just submissive, but jubilant.

But how could this possibly be working together for good? It did not take long for the strategy of God to appear. "The catastrophe unstopped the ears of British Christendom. In the blaze of the fire they saw the grandeur of the enterprise; the facts were flashed out. And thus the destruction proved a beacon, and multiplied the Mission's zealous friends." So loud a fame it brought them as to reverse the nature of their risks. "The fire has given your undertaking a celebrity which nothing else could," wrote Fuller in a faithful warning. "The public is now giving us their praises. Eight hundred guineas have been offered for Dr. Carey's likeness! If we inhale this incense, will not God withhold His blessing, and then where are we?"

Then what is the nature of the good which Paul had in view? The answer is found in the context: "For whom He did for know He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Paul's conception was that anything which made him more like Christ was good, altogether irrespective of its reaction on his comfort or health or success or pleasure. Christlikeness does not always thrive in the midst of material comforts. Many of the most Christlike Christians have been plagued with ill health. Success in business has in many lives been the death knell of holiness. Seeking after pleasure often defeats its own ends.

God's Plan Is Active

"All things work together for good."

The heart that loves God discerns Him busily at work in even the most heartbreaking and unwelcome happenings of life. All things are turning out for the best because God is at work in them, transmuting bane into blessing and tragedy into triumph. His operation is not always clearly discernible. Indeed it not infrequently seems that He is doing nothing. Carlyle, meditating on the enigmas of life, in the anguish of his heart said, "The worst of God is that He does nothing." But God is often most active when all seems most still. The working of God in nature is unseen but none the less effective. Under His invisible control the stars maintain their predestined courses, the restless ocean keeps within its appointed limits. We should never, in impatience at the seeming inactivity of God, take things into our own hands and try to be our own Providence.

The daily happenings, whether tragic or joyous, are the raw material from which God is weaving the design of life. "The dance of plastic circumstance, machinery just meant to give the soul its bent." Introduce God into the events of life and order emerges from chaos. "He is too kind to do anything cruel, too wise ever to make a mistake." No conceivable circumstances could better prosper God's plan or further our highest good.

God's Plan Is Inclusive

"All things work together for good."

"All things" means exactly what it says. Everything in every sphere is under the beneficent control of God. It is the comprehensiveness of this statement which is so breathtaking. Bereavement, illness, disappointment, blighted hopes, nervous disorders, children who are giving concern, lack of fruit in service despite earnest endeavor to fulfill conditions of fruit bearing—surely these are not working together for good. Paul quietly asserts that such is the case. We may be willing to admit that life as a whole is subject to the overruling providence of God, but hesitate to believe that every detail of life is the object of His loving concern. Yet our Lord asserted this to be the case. Even the sparrow did not fall to the ground without His Father's knowledge. The circumstances of the Christian's life are ordained of God. There is no such thing as chance. Love refuses to believe that God is not interested in every detail of life. Everything is permitted and designed by Him for wise purposes. He will not cease His supervision for a moment.

Every adverse experience when rightly received can carry its quota of good. Bodily pain and weakness cause us to feel our frailty. Perplexity reveals our lack of wisdom. Financial reverses point up how limited are our resources. Mistakes and failure humble our pride. All these things can be included in the term "good."

God's Plan Is Harmonious

"All things work together for good."

They work into a preconceived pattern. The events of life are not unrelated. The physician's prescription is compounded of a number of drugs. Taken in isolation, some of them would be poisonous and would do only harm. But blended to

gether under the direction of a skilled and experienced physician they achieve only good. Barclay renders the verse: "We know that God intermingles all things for good for them that love Him." The experiences of life when taken in isolation may seem anything but good but blended together the result is only good.

In adverse circumstances unbelief queries, "How can this be working for good?" The answer is, "Wait until the Great Physician has finished writing the prescription." Who cannot look back on life to see that things considered disastrous proved in the ultimate to be blessings in disguise? The artist blends colors which to the unskilled eye seem far removed from his objective. But wait until he has finished his mixing.

Life has been likened to an elaborate tapestry being woven on the loom. For the beauty of the pattern it is imperative that the colors must not be all of the same hue. Some must be bright and beautiful, others dark and somber. It is as they are all worked together that they contribute to the beauty of the pattern.

Not until each loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the pattern
And explain the reason why;
The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
For the pattern He has planned.

In time of severe trial there is always the temptation, while assenting to the truth in general, to feel that our present circumstances are an exception. If that were so, the text is null and void, and the truth of the overruling providence of God in the affairs of men has no meaning. As tragedy upon tragedy overwhelmed Joseph—banishment from home, sale as a slave, unjust imprisonment—it was difficult for him to see these untoward events working together for his good. Yet in retrospect he said to his brothers, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good" (Gen. 50:20).

In the events of life, "God has an end in view which is worthy of Him, and will command our fullest approbation when we cease to know in part." Even if called upon to face the wrath of man or devil we can confidently rest in the assurance that it will ultimately praise God, and that which cannot do so will be restrained.

Whate'er my God ordains is right;
My Light, my Life is He,
Who cannot will me ought but good;
I trust Him utterly:
For well I know
In joy or woe
We soon shall see, as sunlight clear,
How faithful was our Guardian here.

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