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What Does “All Things Work Together for Good” Really Mean?

By Rick Thomas

Sometimes you can become so focused on the pain that the removal of the pain is the only thing that matters, even if death seems to be a viable option. It was during this season that I received counsel, some good and some bad. Regardless of the quality of their care, all of them wanted to help me because they cared for my soul.

They were acting out of love even though I was not receptive to them. One of the more challenging pieces of advice that they brought to me during my time of suffering was what Paul told the Romans:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Boom! They dropped the bumper sticker verse in my time of agony. “Hey, brother Rick, all things work together for good.” Honestly, it is a good verse, though it’s a hard one. I intuitively knew that I was going to have to change if I was going to enjoy the full benefit of the verse.

It’s kind of like John 3:16. You’re not going to benefit from it if you resist God’s salvation. I remember before God regenerated me how that verse was so frustratingly difficult. The Lord

was not going to budge from His Word, and I was afraid to embrace the apparent truth of His teaching.

Mercifully, God gave me the grace to interact with John 3:16, and I have been benefiting from it ever since. Then, shortly after salvation, Romans 8:28 came into my life, and it was another battle in my soul.

When You Don’t Want What God Wants

I knew that Paul’s word to the Romans was not going to accommodate me, and it was not going to change to suit my preferences. I had to decide if I was going to change, which was the issue. I wanted my will, and God was saying, “No, your will is not the main thing here.”

To accommodate Romans 8:28 into your life means you’re going to have to give up some of your rights. Remember, John 3:16? You gave up all of your rights when you accepted Christ. Though I knew God was calling me to a different kind of life through this text in Romans, I did not want to do what was necessary to live in the goodness of what Paul was teaching.

It’s kind of like when the alarm goes off in the morning. I know what I need to do, but the doing of it is a different matter. During my season in the “crucible of suffering,” a friend came to me and said, “Hey brother, the Bible says that all things work together for good.”

I knew he was right. I also knew that he loved me and wanted to help me move forward in my sanctification. The sad thing for me was that the rightness of his counsel and

the text were not the issue. The issue was that I did not want the good that he was sharing with me.

Because of where I was at the time, I responded to him, “Hey friend, has it ever occurred to you that I might not want things to work together for good?”

How Can Good Come out of Evil?

The bottom line was that I wanted my life back. It did not matter if my old life was for my good or not; I wanted it back. I wanted out of my hurt. I did not want to live in or experience what I was going through at that time. Sometimes pain can become so deep and profound that it does not matter if what God has is good, better, or best. At the moment, you want things put back the way they have always been.

This struggle makes Romans 8:28 one of those frustrating texts that every soul must engage. It is also imperative that this verse is interpreted correctly for the sufferer to understand it, own it, and be changed by it. The misfortune of this text is that it has not only been frustrating and misinterpreted, but many folks have misapplied it. Sometimes individuals use it as a simplistic counseling approach. It is anything but that.

During the season of your most profound hurt, you need to not only know what this verse means, but you need to know how to navigate through the challenge that it confronts you with during your struggle, which brings us to the heart of the matter.

The real issue in this verse is around what the word “good” means. There is no doubt that all things work together for good for the Christian. We know that things are going to turn out good because God is good. Can the life of the Christian turn out any other way? I believe not. The better question to ask is, “What does ‘good’ mean?”

What did Paul think when he said, “all things work together for good?” How would Paul want us to interpret and think about the word “good?” How can good come out of evil?

Most certainly, the good that Paul was talking about does not necessarily mean I will live a healthy, wealthy, and peaceful life. We all know better than this. Christians embrace a “Thorns &

Thistles Theology” (Genesis 3:18).

But man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward (Job 5:7).

It also does not mean that when trouble inevitably comes, that God is about to turn this tragedy or disappointment into prosperity or a preferred outcome for me. This worldview is a man-centered interpretation of the text. Let me illustrate.

The Wrong Good

Mable was in an automobile accident; she totaled her car. Through the ordeal, she received an incredible insurance claim that allowed her to buy a car that was far better than her previous aging vehicle.

No doubt, God was working these things into her life, and she received a brand new vehicle. However, it can be misleading to bring Romans 8:28 to bear on this situation.

For some, it might imply that God is our Divine Dreamweaver and that He is working hard to bring us many “good” amenities in life, like a brand new car. This illustration is not the “good” that Paul had in mind.

It also does not take into account the other person in the wreck, who was at fault. It does not take into account the insurance company, or rising premiums, and other collateral issues that others would not perceive as good according to this interpretation of the text.

The point of the text has nothing to do with whether your life and circumstances unfold to your liking. Giving you the life you’ve always wanted or your preferred best experience now is not at the top of God’s “to do” list.

Here is a quick list of our brothers who did not get what our world would call their “best life now,” but it was without a doubt the good that God was working into their lives for His glory:

- Joseph’s life landed him in a pit and prison to bring about good.
- Judah offered to give his life up for Benjamin’s life to bring about good.
- Moses spent forty years of his life in the desert to bring about good.
- Naomi was willing to give up her daughters-

in-law to bring about good.

- Esther was willing to lay her life down to bring about good.
- Job lost everything, but from his horrible experience came good.
- John was boiled in oil, but he, too, was used to bring good.
- John Bunyan spent over a decade in jail to bring about good.

My idea of good and God's idea of it might not be the same. I must know this, and you must know too. Sometimes God's plans and ours can conflict. It is crucial when you think about the good of Romans 8:28 that you interpret it through a gospel filter.

The Right Good

During my season of despair, I think I knew that my good and His good were two different things. That is why I said, "Hey, friend, has it ever occurred to you that I might not want things to work together for good?"

Though I did not precisely know what good God was trying to work out in my life, I did not care. I just wanted my life back. But this dilemma does raise a question. What is the good that God is trying to work out in our lives?

Here's the short answer: the good that God is working in us is to make us more like His Son—Jesus Christ. He wants us to be Christlike. Isn't that the essence of the Christian journey? Isn't that the reason He saved us to make us like Christ?

If my circumstances are not transforming me into the person of Jesus Christ, I'm missing the point of what God is doing in my life. The purpose of the Bible is transformation. It is not about your best experience now or how to learn and maintain all of the productive habits, or any other man-centered approach to life.

The point of the Bible is not my success or happiness as defined by our culture. The point is a transformation into the image of His Son. If I gain personal property, acclaim, or significant monetary worth in this life, praise God.

But I better make sure that I do more than praise God. I must run these earthly advantages

through the filter of Romans 8:28 and pray to God that terrestrial prosperity becomes a means of grace to conform me to the image of His Son.

In one sense, this worldview is releasing, from the perspective that a person could succumb to the temptation to think that hardship has come to them because God is angry with them. Your difficulty and God's anger toward you are not compatible.

This kind of thinking flies in the face of God's goodness. The wrath of God may abide upon the non-Christian, but not on the Christian (John 3:36). God is for you, which the rest of this text implies (Romans 8:31). To think otherwise negates the power that you should find in this verse. If you are a Christian, God is not angry with you, but seeking to make you look like Jesus.

Friends, God is working good into our life, whether the circumstances that come to you are to your liking or not. It's not about the events, but the grace that He is asking you to appropriate to your life so you can experience the good that is on the other side of the crucible of suffering.

Do you believe this?

We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Call to Action

- When undesirable things come into your life, how do you respond to them?
- Do you believe that God is working good into your life through your desirable as well as undesirable circumstances?
- How are the desirable circumstances conforming you into the image of His Son?
- How are the undesirable circumstances conforming you into the image of His Son?
- Will you share these truths today with someone who needs a word of encouragement?

Don't back down from this hard verse when sharing it with others. But please make sure you understand it and that you can carefully walk them through a God-centered perspective of it when applying it to their trouble.

FUNNIES

Teacher: "Johnny, I wish you wouldn't whistle while you study."

Johnny: "That's all right. I wasn't studying. I was only whistling."

Mark Twain was once showing some friends through his library. The visitors commented on the great number of books that were piled here and there on the floor, in chairs, and in every available place.

"You see," Twain explained, "it's next to impossible to borrow shelves."

After being on the phone for a long time with a customer, who had been having difficulty with a computer program, a support technician turned in his report: "The problem resides between the keyboard and the chair."

One day, instead of serving the usual hot meal, the school cafeteria handed out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

After lunch, a satisfied first grader marching out the door complimented the cafeteria manager: "Finally, you gave us home-cooked meal!"

A sure sign of middle age is the size of the obstacle that gets in your way when you tie your shoes.

Four students walked in halfway through the American history test at the local community college. "Sorry," they said, "we had a flat tire."

An understanding man, the professor said that if they could all answer just one question correctly he would give them each an "A" for the exam. The students agreed. So, the professor handed each one a piece of paper, placed them in four separate corners and said, "Write down which tire was flat."

An American couple went to Europe. In a small town in Italy, they stopped for breakfast. Paying for the meal, the husband discovered he'd been charged three dollars for an egg. He asked, "Is there a scarcity of eggs around here?"

"No, a scarcity of Americans."

The corn crop might not have amounted to much this year, but Abie says that was nothing compared to one year when he was a little codger. They made corn on the cob one day, and Abie's father ate fourteen acres of corn!