

The Ultimate Promise (Part 3): Romans 8:28

Introduction: Please open your Bible to Romans 8:28.

One of the saddest events in church history is something that is called **the Great Ejection**. After years of turmoil and even civil war in England, **the tide turned against the Puritan movement**, both politically and among the people.

And on **August 24, 1662** (a Sunday) the English Parliament enforced the **Act of Uniformity** which required all ministers of the gospel to conform to the State/Established Church of England (the Anglican church). It required all ministers to submit to the doctrine and worship of the Anglican Church promising never to attempt to change these things. It further required all ministers to receive Anglican ordination.

These were requirements that Puritan, non-conformist ministers could not submit to. And so the tragic result of the Act of Uniformity was that about 1000 ministers were forced out of their churches. Between 1660 and 1662, altogether about **2000 ministers** of the gospel were forced out of their churches one of whom was **Thomas Watson**.

In our first message on **Romans 8:28** you may remember that we referenced a book that Thomas Watson wrote on **Romans 8:28** originally titled, *A Divine Cordial* (later retitled, *All Things For Good*). What makes this book especially meaningful and weighty is **when he published it**. He published it in **1663**, one year after the Great Ejection.

Thomas Watson said that **he faced two great difficulties** in pastoral ministry. The first was **to make the unbeliever sad**, in view of his need of God's grace. The second was **to make the believer glad** in response to God's grace.

How can believers be glad in 1663? How can believers be glad in 2024? I submit to you, **Romans 8:28**. Dear people, this verse is divinely designed to make you glad in God no matter when you live or what difficult you are facing.

I. The Gospel Introduced (1:1-17).

II. The Gospel Explained (1:18-4:25).

III. The Gospel Experienced (5:1-8:39).

A. The Benefits of Justification (5:1-11).

B. The Foundation of Justification (5:12-21).

C. The Holiness of Justification (6:1-7:25).

D. The Security of Justification (8:1-39).

1. Deliverance from condemnation (8:1-4).

2. Empowerment over the flesh (8:5-13).

3. Privileges of adoption (8:14-17).

4. Hope of glory (8:18-30).

a. The Christian perspective on suffering (v. 18).

b. The Christian hope in suffering (vv. 19-30).

- 1) The creation's groaning for glory (vv. 19-22).
- 2) The Christian's unseen hope of glory (vv. 23-25).
- 3) The Spirit's help en route to glory (vv. 26-27).
- 4) The Christian's promise of glory (vv. 28-30).
 - a) God's sovereign purpose (v. 28).
 - b) God's sovereign salvation (vv. 29-30).

Proposition: As we have said before, the promise of **Romans 8:28** easily divides into **four parts** the first two of which we have already looked at beginning with...

I. The Certainty of God's Promise.

We see this part of the promise in the opening three words: "And we know."

The **second part** of the promise is...

II. The Comprehensiveness of God's Promise.

We see this part of the promise in the words: "all things."

Last time we began to look at the **third part** of the promise...

III. The Content of God's Promise.

"God causes all things to work together for good"

According to this part of the promise, we learn that God is continuously at work in the world.

God is not a passive spectator in His creation. No, He is always working in the world and the scope of His work includes "all things." What is more, God is always working on behalf of His people for our good.

As we said last time, **Romans 8:28** underscores the sovereignty of God in a profound way.

When Paul says that "God causes all things to work together" that is another way of saying that God is absolutely sovereign over all things. If God is not sovereign over all things then **Romans 8:28** cannot possibly be true. Another way to describe the promise of **Romans 8:28** is in terms of **divine providence**.

The word "providence" ought to be a regular part of your vocabulary and thinking. There is not a day that goes by in my life that I don't think about and/or speak about the providence of God.

The providence of God is **not an abstract, detached doctrine**. It is life for the Christian!

As we learned last time, there are **three aspects of providence** the first two of which we looked at last beginning with...

1. Preservation.

God not only created the universe, He **maintains** the universe. Right now, God is actively at work preserving the world He has made. God provides the air we need to breathe. God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall. It is God who provides water, and food, and everything else we need to live and flourish.

The **second aspect** of providence is...

2. Government.

God not only preserves His creation, He **governs** it. God has the undisputed right to rule over His entire creation. God controls everything. There is nothing that God doesn't control, including

sin, calamities, and the devil. God's providential control over His creation is **meticulous**. It extends even to **the smallest details**. God so rules over the world that there is not one maverick molecule. If there was one maverick molecule **Romans 8:28** could not be true.

That brings us to the **third aspect** of providence which is...

3. Concurrence.

The idea of **God's preservation and government** are very profound truths both of which contain things we don't understand. But when we come to the idea of **concurrence**, this is where **we especially run into a deep sense of mystery**. There are things here that no one fully understands except God.

That leads us to **an important point**: As Christians, we don't merely believe things about God that we fully understand. I confess to you that I don't fully understand anything about God. I don't fully understand how Jesus is both God and man (the hypostatic union). In the one person of Jesus there are two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. I believe that but I don't fully understand that. And so as Christians, we believe many, many things that we don't fully understand one of which is the doctrine of providence especially the reality of concurrence.

According to the **dictionary**, the term "concurrence" means: "the simultaneous occurrence of events or circumstances; a situation in which two or more things happen at the same time."

When this term is applied to the doctrine of providence, the idea is **the simultaneous occurrence of two things: God's sovereign rule over all things and man's freedom**. Both of these things are **true**. And both of them **occur at the same time**.

This is a crucial point because based upon all that the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty, someone **could draw the wrong conclusion** that man is merely **God's puppet**.

But the Bible is **equally clear** in teaching that man is **not a puppet/robot**, that man is **responsible**, and that we have **the ability to make free, moral choices**.

So while God governs all things including human decisions, man still makes free, moral choices for which we will be held accountable to God.

So, is God sovereign over all things or does man have responsibility? Yes. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

Now, we recognize that **there are certain limits to man's freedom**. As a creature of dust, and a fallen creature at that, man's freedom is **not ultimate**. Only God has ultimate freedom. But nonetheless, under God, man has the ability to make free, moral choices.

ILLUSTRATION: For example, if I take a **drink of water**, it is because I choose to. God is not making me drink against my will. And yet God is in control of me taking a drink of water. How these two things work, I don't know.

Proverbs 16:9

Does this verse teach human responsibility? Yes (we plan our ways).

Does this verse also teach divine sovereignty? Yes (God determines our steps).

Both are true. They are **concurrent**. These two things happen at the same time.

Now, we know *that these things are so* because the Bible tells us. **But how these things are so**, we do not know because the Bible doesn't tell us. This is what theologians often refer to as a **paradox**. A paradox is **something that appears to be a contradiction but isn't**. It appears to be a contradiction because our ability to understand these things is so limited. This is also what is called **the mystery of providence**. With our very limited intellectual capacity, **it is a mystery to us how both of these things can be true**. But they are.

We cannot understand how God's sovereign purposes work in concert with human choices. Men are free to make choices, and yet human choices are the outworking of God's sovereignty. You make free, moral decisions while God accomplishes exactly what He wills.

D.A. Carson, "The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean it is illogical; I mean that we do not know enough about it to be able to unpack it."

Louis Berkhof, "This divine activity [i.e. providence] accompanies the action of man at every point, but without robbing man in any way of his freedom. The action remains the free act of man, an act for which he is held responsible."

Wayne Grudem, "God causes all things that happen, but...he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make *willing, responsible choices*, choices that have *real and eternal results*, and for which we are held *accountable*. Exactly how God combines his *providential control* with our *willing and significant choices*, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or the other (simply because we cannot explain how both can be true), we should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all of Scripture."

Sadly, what Grudem warns against is what many Christians invariably do, **they reject one of these two truths**, and the one that is most often rejected is God's sovereignty. Very rare is the Christian who accepts both human responsibility and divine sovereignty.

Charles Spurgeon, "That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other...These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring."

Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 3:1), "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

God controls all things including sin. But God is not the author of sin. Neither does God cause people to sin. Nor does God force people to do things against their will. And yet all things that come to pass are according to God's will. What a mystery!

With that in mind, look again at **Romans 8:28**...
“God causes all things to work together for good.”
God is meticulously sovereign over all things.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if God was not sovereign?

I'll say it again, if God is not sovereign, **Romans 8:28** cannot be true. So, praise be to God that He is sovereign. But God is **more than sovereign**. He is also **infinitely wise** and **entirely good**.

What would it be like if God was sovereign, but He wasn't wise and good?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if God exercised His absolute sovereignty without wisdom?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if God exercised His absolute sovereignty without goodness?

If God was sovereign and could do whatever He pleases, but He was **not wise or good**, then **Romans 8:28** could not be true. In order for **Romans 8:28** God must govern His creation with meticulous, unrivaled sovereignty. But He must also exercise His sovereignty in a way that is wise and good. That is precisely what God does.

Listen very carefully, everything that God does is wise and good. We don't understand most things that God is doing. But even though we don't understand what God is doing, we know all that God does is wise and good. God always has a good and wise reason for doing what He does. God never acts arbitrarily or recklessly. He always acts in perfect accord with His infinite wisdom and goodness.

Charles Spurgeon, “God is too wise to be mistaken. God is too good to be unkind. And, when you can't trace His hand, you can always trust His heart.”

As you stand in the mystery of providence, you can always trust the good and wise heart of God.

Always remember, this great big God is your Father who loves you (8:14-17). God controls everything in such a way that He is always working for your good. God doesn't do this once or twice or even many times. He does this all the time (cf. Ps. 23:6).

Now, **two clarifications** are in order:

1. **Romans 8:28** does NOT say that **all things are good**. Dear people, this is an example of **the Bible's realism**. All things are not good. Sin is not good. Suffering is not good. Death is not good. Drug addiction is not good. The death of a child is not good. Losing a spouse is not good. Cancer is not good. ALS is not good.

There are countless things in the world that are not good. And over the course of your Christian life you will experience numerous things that are not good.

2. A second clarification is that **Romans 8:28** does NOT say that **all things work together for your comfort**. Sometimes what is good for us is not comfortable. Sometimes **medicine** is good for you but it tastes terrible. Sometimes **surgery** is good for you but it's painful.

Now, the **context** of **Romans 8:28** is **suffering**. Beginning in **v. 18** and extending all the way to the end of the chapter Paul emphasizes the suffering of the Christian in this world. And so far we have learned **two vital lessons about suffering...**

1. Present suffering cannot be compared to eternal glory (v. 18).

In this life we suffer. But suffering will not last forever. And when compared to eternal glory everything that you suffer in this world is almost nothing. It is light and momentary. By the grace of God we can endure any and all suffering in view of future glory.

2. Present suffering works for our good (v. 28).

In this life we suffer. But God uses our suffering to accomplish good for us. There is no such thing as meaningless suffering for the Christian.

Elisabeth Elliot is someone who suffered a lot (her husband was martyred in the jungles of Ecuador). And yet she said that our suffering is never for nothing.

Elisabeth Elliot, "Is there a reason to believe that suffering is not for nothing? If there is it's not obvious. It doesn't exactly meet the eye."

She's not questioning that our suffering is never for nothing. Rather she is being honest that it doesn't exactly meet the eye when you experience bitter providence. But it meets the eye when you read **Romans 8:28**. Dear people, **Romans 8:28** is the lens through which you are to read every moment of your life. And according to **Romans 8:28**, your suffering is never for nothing. God always uses it for your good.

John Piper, "When things don't go the way they should, God always makes them turn for our good."

Now, let me try to illustrate this promise using **two illustrations**.

My first illustration is one that is often used about a **tapestry**. Have you ever looked at the underside of a tapestry? It's a **tangled mess**. There are **knots and loose ends** that make no sense. This is what our lives often look like to us. They seem to be one big out of control mess. But when you look at **the frontside of the tapestry**, all the colors, all the threads, and all the images are **masterfully woven together**. When you look at the underside of your life, what God is doing doesn't make sense. But when you look at the frontside, what God is doing is masterful.

Corrie ten Boom (*The Master Weaver's Plan*)...

My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.

I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily.

Oft' times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.

Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.

God is masterfully weaving together the details of your life for good.

My **second illustration** comes from the life of **Joseph** in the book of Genesis (chapters 37-50). Joseph was the **son of Jacob**, one of the patriarchs of Israel. Jacob had **twelve sons**. So Joseph had **eleven brothers**.

Jacob did something that no parent should ever do, he showed **favoritism** to Joseph. Jacob gave Joseph a **beautiful coat**. But he didn't give his other sons coats. Joseph's brothers knew that he was their father's favorite son and they **hated him** for it (Gen. 37).

Then Joseph had a **dream** about his brothers (Gen. 37). He dreamed that **they would bow down to him**. When Joseph told them about his dream they hated him even more. And in their jealous hatred, they **plotted to kill him**. But instead they **decided to sell him as a slave** to a caravan of Ishmaelites who took Joseph down to Egypt. The brothers then took Joseph's coat, dipped it in animal blood, and told their father that Joseph had been devoured by an animal. How wicked!

None of that was good. But the Lord was with Joseph in Egypt and he found favor in the sight of **Potiphar**, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard (Gen. 39). In fact, Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his entire house. But this led to more trouble for Joseph. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, he refused. And after many failed attempts to seduce him, Potiphar's wife **falsely accused** Joseph of trying to rape her which led his **wrongful imprisonment**.

Have you suffered like Joseph? Have your brothers sold you as a slave? Have you been wrongfully imprisoned? This was the life of Joseph. He suffered greatly.

But in prison God gave Joseph the ability to **interpret Pharaoh's dream** (Gen. 40-41). According to the dream, Egypt was going to experience **seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine**. When Joseph interpreted his dream, Pharaoh made Joseph the prince of Egypt. And in that position Joseph **established a plan of storing grain in Egypt for seven years** to prepare for the seven years of famine.

When the famine came, **Jacob** saw that there was grain in Egypt (Gen. 42). So he sent his sons to buy grain in Egypt. And when they came to Egypt they unknowingly appeared before their brother Joseph. They didn't recognize Joseph. But Joseph recognized them. And guess what they did? They bowed down before him just as God said they would in Joseph's dream (Gen. 42:6).

Now, here is the million-dollar question: Who sent Joseph to Egypt?

His brothers did! They sold him as a slave. But there is **another answer** that is given in **Genesis 45:4-9**.

Who sent Joseph to Egypt? Was it his brothers or was it God? It was both. But Joseph emphasizes that it was God (Gen. 45:5, 7, 8). But how could it be both? I don't know. This is the **concurrence** aspect of providence.

Genesis 50:15-18, 19-21

What must God control for Genesis 50:20 to be true? Everything. God controlled **Jacob**. God controlled **Joseph and his brothers**. God controlled **the brothers' decision to sell Joseph into slavery**. God controlled **their sin and evil intentions**. God controlled **Potiphar's wife and Joseph's imprisonment**. God controlled **Pharaoh**. God controlled **the weather and crop production** including the famine. God controlled **the nations of Egypt and Israel**. God controlled **Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt to buy grain**. God controlled the whole situation and He did so for good.

It was not good that Jacob showed favoritism to Joseph.
It was not good that Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and hated him.
It was not good that Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt.
It was not good that Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife.
It was not good that Joseph was wrongly and unjustly imprisoned.

None of that was good. All of that was like **the underside a tapestry** that looks like an out-of-control mess. But when you look at **the frontside of the tapestry of Joseph's life**, you see how God used all of those bad things to accomplish good in his life, in the life of his family, in the life of Egypt, and in the life of the Israelite nation. What an amazing God!

R.C. Sproul, "Think now of Joseph. What was the result of that many colored coat? Suppose Jacob had been more sensitive to his sons and decided not to give that coat to Joseph. And so the brothers' jealousy is not stirred up. And because their jealousy was not stirred up they didn't decide to do away with Joseph. And if they didn't decide to do away with Joseph they never would have met this caravan group, the Ishmaelites. No caravan to Egypt, Joseph is never sent

down to the slave block there. He never comes to the slave block, he's never bought by Potiphar. He's not bought by Potiphar, he never gets in trouble with Potiphar's unscrupulous wife who blames and accuses Joseph of attempted rape. And if that had never happened, Joseph isn't thrown into the prison. If he doesn't get thrown in the prison, he never meets the butcher, the baker, and the candle stick maker. And if he never meets the butcher, and the baker, and the candle stick maker, he never interprets anyone's dreams. And Pharaoh never hears of him. He never becomes Prime Minister, and never is put into a place to make provisions for his family, and invite them all to relocate in Egypt."

All of that happened, under God, because of Joseph's coat.

The story continues...

R.C. Sproul, "But through the fickle finger of fate, they did move down to Egypt. And wouldn't you know it, by chance Pharaoh comes along, who didn't know Joseph, and he takes these guests that are inhabited in the land of Goshen and he enslaves them as the biggest slave labor force in history. But, as fate would have it, a baby is born to a woman, and escaped the decree of killing the males of Hebrews. She sets him adrift in a little ark made out of reeds and pitch. It just happens that this baby cries at the wrong time while the daughter of Pharaoh is down there by the river side washing her clothes. She says, 'Aw, isn't he cute.' Picks him up. Takes him back and adopts him. And it just so happens that the boy is raised in the court of Pharaoh with all of the arts and with all of the knowledge of the Egyptians, and becomes the prince who's going to be the next Pharaoh probably. Until that fateful day, when by accident he comes along and he sees one of his countrymen being abused by an Egyptian guard. Moses steps in, punches the guard, he falls down. Wouldn't you know he hits his head. That stone happened to be there instead of the soft earth, and killed him. He shovels up the grave, but somebody saw him so he has to run out to the Midianite wilderness where he languishes for decades until he's an old man and he starts hearing voices coming out of bushes that are burning and not being consumed. But that was his lucky day because that's the day he met God, and God sent him back to Pharaoh and told him, 'Let My people go.' And from that came the exodus. And from the exodus, the Law, the Law and the covenant. And from them the prophets, the kings, the exile, the return from exile, the birth of a baby, the death of that baby on a cross. You ever think of that? No coat, no prison, no Potiphar, no Prime Minister of Egypt, no exodus, no Law, no prophets, no Jesus, no salvation all because of one, lousy coat. But that's God. And that's how God works. They say it's the devil that's in the details. No, no, no, no, no, no. It's God who's in the details, sovereign over every one of them working to bring His work to pass."

Who would have thought that from Joseph's coat would come the cross of Christ and our salvation?

Beloved, God truly does cause all things to work together for our good!