

Our Magnificent Invincibility

Romans 8:28

May 6, 2018

Introduction:

One of the questions geeks like me ask one another is the question, “If you could be any superhero, which one would you be?” It’s certainly a question pondered by every 12-year-old boy and by some boys who are well-beyond the age of 12. In my ponderings on this important question over the years, I can confidently say I’ve given the same answer since I was at least 12, and that of the myriad options I could imagine myself to be, my superhero of choice would be Superman.

Superman is for me the easy option because he’s essentially invincible. You know what they say: he’s faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, he can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Superman can basically fly, possesses super strength, has x-ray vision, can travel at the speed of light, and can’t be hurt - what’s there not to like? He really only has one weakness, and that’s to kryptonite, which is a rare element leftover from the destruction of his home planet, meaning it’s not something you can readily pick-up at your local Wal-Mart. So Superman’s the obvious choice for superhero I’d want to be because he’s basically invincible.

There’s something appealing about the thought of nothing being able to harm you, isn’t there? I think we’ve all imagined at one point what it would be like to be invincible, where nothing could hurt you or stop you in any way. Well, the thing is, as Christians we’ve been promised a level of invincibility, although it’s not quite like that of Superman where bullets bounce off us. We have an invincibility of a different sort, an invincibility to anything that might undermine what God has called us to in Christ. In our passage this morning, we’re promised that as Christians, all things work together for our good, which is to say in effect that we’re invincible to anything that might work for ill against us. There’s no spiritual form of kryptonite that might unexpectedly be our Achilles’ heel; God sees to it that no matter what we face in this life, he will use it to our benefit. Nothing can harm us.

Let’s consider what this magnificent promise is by opening your Bible with me to Romans 8, which can be found on pg. 944 of the pew Bibles. We’re looking at one single verse this morning, but it’s a verse I would imagine many of you already know because of the glorious promise that’s made to us in it. Our passage today is Romans 8:28 which I will read to you from the ESV. **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Because of the beloved nature of this passage and the wonderful promise contained in it, our time this morning will be focused on this one verse alone. In order to do that, I want to consider it first in terms of what the promise is and second to whom it is given. So we’ll begin this morning by unpacking this promise given to us in Romans 8:28. So our first point today concerns...

1. The unlimited scope of the promise

The heart of this verse is what it says right in the middle, that “...**all things work together for good...**” So the first question I want to concern ourselves with is “What does Paul mean by ‘**all things**’?” And I think it needs to be said first that “**all things**” doesn’t mean merely good things, such as things like an unexpected pay raise, or the birth of a newborn baby, or a clean bill of health from your doctor. It means *everything*, both good things as well as those things we would consider to be bad.

Remember, the context of this verse reminds us that life isn’t always puppy dogs and rainbows. Back in v. 17, Paul said we will be glorified with Christ if we also suffer with Christ. Suffering is a bad thing. Then in v. 20-23 we’re told that creation is in bondage to decay, that we groan inwardly as we long for our redemption. That’s not a good thing either. Then a few verses after this passage, Paul mentions in v. 35 that we may face “tribulation and distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword.” None of those fall under the category of “good things.” Of course, we also have Jesus warning us throughout the Gospels that if we follow him, we also will be persecuted and hated by the world just as he was. Again, not so good. So when Paul says, “**all things work together for good,**” he’s including both the good and the bad, the joys of life and the hardships. This is an inclusive statement encompassing all that life might throw at us, from the most gut-wrenching suffering to the most blissful joys.

And what does God do with all of these things, all of life’s highs and lows, moments of happiness and sadness? He says God works all things “**together for good...**” God takes everything that happens to us - the people in our lives, the situations we face, our experiences at school and our jobs, our health and our financial situation - he takes all of these things and works them together for good. But that leads to another question: what does Paul mean by the word “**good**”? The term “good” has to be defined, lest we make it say something it doesn’t mean to say. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again: “Good” does not mean perfect, at least as how we might define it. “Good” is not always what we’d prefer. “Good” is not pain free. “Good” is defined by what God intend to accomplish, which for the believer is to conform us into the image of Christ. So in all things, God works to bring about this good in us, even though we may not find “**all things**” which we undergo to accomplish this good to be good in themselves.

Let’s take the example of Joseph at the end of the book of Genesis. In a fit of jealous rage, his brothers toss him into a pit and sell him into slavery in Egypt. While he at first prospers in Potiphar’s house, Joseph is falsely accused of rape by Potiphar’s wife and sent to prison. He hopes to get out through Pharaoh’s butler, but unfortunately the butler forgets about him and so Joseph ends up spending two more years in prison. After seventeen years of where it seemed nothing that Joseph experienced was working together for any good whatsoever, Joseph is finally made chief over all the food stocks of Egypt, after successfully interpreting Pharaoh’s dream. Then when his family back in Canaan is facing severe famine, they unknowingly come to Joseph for food, only to discover that the brother they mistreated and abused is now second in command of the most power nation on earth.

Then Joseph says this to his brothers, *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”* That’s the OT version of Romans 8:28... All things were working together for the good of Joseph and his family, including the evil done to Joseph by his brothers, the lies of Potiphar’s wife, and the years of languishing in prison. Those weren’t good things in that they didn’t bring any joy and peace to Joseph in the midst of suffering through them. They were evil circumstances brought about by people with evil motivations. Nevertheless, God still used them to accomplish good - for both Joseph personally and for his entire family.

I fear if we misinterpret the word **“good”** here to mean **“perfect”** then we’ll be prone to read this promise like this, “God will work out everything so that I never suffer, never feel any pain, never experience heartache, will never be uncomfortable, and never will I have anything happen to me that is unpleasant or disagreeable.” That’s certainly how those in the prosperity gospel would have you read it. **“Good”** for them is defined by the good life of American prosperity: health, wealth, success, swimming pools, movie stars. A life of easy and comfort, with no pain or suffering or need of any kind. But that’s not the good Joseph got. Nor Paul. Nor Peter. Nor Job. Nor David. Nor Jesus.

Paul recognized that what is truly good for us is not material riches or physical health but our growth in Christlike character. Look back a few pages to Romans 5. He talks about the **“good”** which God was bringing about in the lives of the Roman believers through suffering, saying this in v. 3 of Romans 5, *“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”* All things - including bad things like suffering - work for good ends, to produce in us endurance, character, and hope.

And all of those things are just ways that describe how we are being conformed into greater Christ-likeness. The good that God is using all things for is to make us more like Christ. It’s a guarantee that the tree of our life will bear good fruits. God promises us that the salvation he began in us will be brought to completion because he will work all things in our lives to bring his good purposes for us, to conform us into the image of Christ so that we will experience our final glorification in heaven.

Now admittedly, this is a promise we have to take on faith because it doesn’t always look like all things are working together for good, does it? I can look back on my life so far and there are some things I can discern where God’s hand was shaping me and molding me into the image of Christ. But there are other times where I still don’t get it. In my humble opinion, it seems I would have been better off not going through a particular difficulty. Can you say the same about your life? The truth is we don’t always get to see all the ways God’s plan works itself out in our life. This passage is not a promise that we will come to clearly understand how God takes all the messed up and terrible things that happen to us and use them for good. It says God will use them for good, but it doesn’t promise we will always comprehend it.

I've known people who have suffered the grief of a miscarriage, the loss of a loved one to cancer, a difficult and unjust divorce, unfair treatment at work, abuse that left deep, long-lasting scars, and a host of other things that don't seem to make any sense or serve any good purpose. So if that's you, this is a passage you have to take on faith because right now your faith isn't sight. You can't see it. You can't make sense of it. The puzzle pieces don't fit together, no matter how much you rotate them. I get it. I have those same puzzling events in my life as well. But I need to believe this is true. I need to rest in the fact that I'm not able to view the big picture from my limited vantage point and quite frankly may never fully understand it this side of heaven. That's why this promise is so important, so comforting - it gives us hope that when we can't see how all things are working together for our good, that somehow, in God's providence, they are anyway, regardless of whether I can discern it or not.

My friends, this passage calls us not so much to understand but to believe, to look in faith to a Heavenly Father who sees to us that whatever we face, no matter how good or bad, is not going to undermine his ultimate purpose for us, which is to conform us to the image of Christ as he brings us to glory. It's to strengthen us to patiently endure whatever trial we may be experiencing because whatever it is won't destroy it. We are invincible in that God's purposes to save his children will never be thwarted by any person or situation or disease or disaster we might face. No matter what you are facing currently or have faced or will face in the future, nothing will bring you to ruin. God's purposes stand sure. He will complete the good work he began in you.

So Christian, you are invincible in Christ, and there is no kryptonite that exists as the one exception that can take you down. But it not because you possess this power in yourself; it's because your Heavenly Father is guarding you. You aren't working all things out for the good, you don't possess that power, but God, the sovereign Lord over all the universe is. And as the apostle Paul will say in v. 31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Answer: no one. So I want to encourage you again and again to rest in this promise. God will accomplish his good work of saving you by bringing you to your heavenly home, and he's doing that right now in whatever it is you are facing, whether you can discern it or not. Nothing can stop it. No circumstance can thwart it. No individual can interfere with it. God is at work right now to see to it that every person, every event, every moment of your life works towards achieving his goal of conforming you to the image of Christ and bringing you safely to your heavenly home.

But having said that, we need to make sure we understand that this wonderful promise is limited to just those who are Christians. So our second point today concerns...

2. The limited recipients of the promise

What Paul says here is not a promise to everyone. This is not something that is true for each and every person. It's limited only to a certain group of people. Look back in your Bibles at how this promise is framed. He says, again in v. 28 of Romans 8, "**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**"

He describes those to whom this promise applies in two different ways. First, he says that **“for those who love God”** all things work together for good. If you don't love God, then this promise doesn't apply to you. In fact, quite the opposite is true: things are not working towards your good. Consider for a moment what Paul said about those who didn't love God but instead loved their sin back in chapter 2 of Romans. In Romans 2:5 he wrote this, *“Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”* In other words, for a person who doesn't love God, the things and people and circumstances of his life are actually building up wrath, increasing God's just anger against him.

That's a frightening place to be if you're an unbeliever. There's no comfort to be found if you don't love God because things aren't going to work out for you. While from your perspective you might think any material blessings you enjoy in this life are signs of God's favor, but that's not so. The fact that you love the gifts of God more than God, the fact that you're ungrateful and selfish and greedy with all the good things God has blessed you with is not to your benefit but your detriment. Instead of all things working for your good, they only serve to store up wrath for yourself.

But when it comes to us as Christians, does this mean that things only work for my good when I love God such that it is dependent upon me to maintain a heart of love for him? What about those times when we don't love God as we ought? If we're honest, our love for God can fluctuate, can't it? It can run hot and cold. We can be passionate about him one day and yet the next get so caught up in the day's affairs that we barely even think about him. So is this saying that things only work for my good when I'm actively loving God but that when I am in a down time, when I've given into fear or stress or doubt that I shouldn't expect God to work all things for my good?

We might fear that if this was the only qualifier Paul gave to this promise but look at the second description he gives at the end of the verse. He says God works all things together for good, **“for those who are called according to his purpose.”** The fact that we love God flows out of the fact that we've been called by God to begin with. In other words, our subjective feelings of love for God is based on the objective calling of God who chose us before the foundations of the world to believe in him.

See, we need both of these descriptions. They don't describe two separate groups: it is a description of one kind of person, a Christian, who simultaneously has been called by God according to his purpose such that he or she also loves God as a result. John Piper helps to explain why both of these descriptions are important, saying this,

“If he had only said that all things work together for good for those who love God, it would have sounded like the promise rests on pretty flimsy ground. My love for God is a flimsy ground for this promise. It is an experience in my heart. And my heart is notoriously fickle and variable and weak. To make such a massive promise rest on such a fragile human experience alone would be to make a mountain rest on a marshmallow.”

So Paul says, this promise does not just rest on your marshmallow heart, it rests on God's calling and purpose. 'All things work together for good . . . for those who are called according to his purpose.' Here we have God's work, not my experience. God's call, not my consciousness. This is solid. This is divine. This is powerful and deep and strong.

But what if Paul had only said, 'All things work together for good for those who are called'? Then we would want to ask, 'How do I know if I am called?' We would want some sign that God has in fact done this great and powerful and wonderful thing: he has called me.

So Paul gives both. He tells us the objective, solid, divine work of God that makes the promise unshakeable: he called us according to his purpose. And he tells us what happened in us when God called us so that we can know it has happened: we love God and all that he is for us in Jesus Christ. So we have two things that must be true of us if this promise is to be ours. Our love is subjective, and God's call is objective. Our love is our act, and God's call is his act. Our love is an effect, and God's love is the cause.

In other words, the call of God according to his purpose is part of the massive, deep, unshakeable foundation Paul is laying in Romans 8 that keeps this promise from falling and makes it believable. You are not the key here. God is the key here. His work will keep this promise true for you, or it won't be true for you. Because your love is too fragile and uncertain. But God's call is not fragile and not uncertain. And it not only brought your love into being but will keep it in being so that the promise of Romans 8:28 will be true for you forever." (All Things for Good: Part 3 - sermon from www.desiringgod.org)

Grace Fellowship, the God who has called you to faith in Christ will also transform your heart through that calling so that you will love him. Not always perfectly, but steadily. Think of the apostle Peter for a moment. He loved God, but he also has his moments of doubt and weakness. He feared the winds and the waves when he stepped out of the boat and walked on water. He denied Christ three times on the eve of Christ's crucifixion. But the whole of his life was dedicated to loving Jesus. His call insured the love he had, though wavering at times, was never snuffed out.

So it is with us. We may be weak at times, but God's calling upholds us. Those who are called by God are those who also love God, and it is those people and those people alone to whom this promise is given: that all things will work together for good. God will see to it that what he began in his initial calling to us through the proclamation of the gospel will reach its ultimate fulfilment as he works all things, good and bad, for our eternal good, which is our final and complete salvation in Christ.

Conclusion

This is one of many passages that teach what theologians call the doctrine of eternal security. What it means is that once God calls you to himself and adopts you as a child of

God through faith in Christ, then nothing will ever interrupt or hinder that calling from becoming a reality. Think about it: if all things are working for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, then how could anything in all creation prevent God's good purposes for you from being achieved? **"All things"** covers all things: not just the good things but the bad things as well. It's comprehensive in scope. The fact that God has called you in the past, and that calling is made evident by a love for him right now, demonstrates that nothing will stop his future plans for you from coming to fruition. God is at work in everything to see to it that his purposes to save you will come to pass because nothing can thwart his plan.

So what this means Christian man or woman is that you have nothing to fear. Take the worse thing you are going through currently or have gone through or fear that you will one day experience and realize that even in that God is at work even in that for your good and his glory. You may not be able to puzzle it out right now how it is of benefit to you, but the promise of God here in this passage stands sure: he is at work in it to keep his promise to save you, from first to last. We may have to take that in faith at times when the tears of our eyes blur our vision, but what a promise to place our faith in! All things work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. Let's pray.