

All Things Work Together For Good

Today I want to take a look at one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. The reason I want to do this is because I think this verse has been widely misinterpreted. Our culture has taught many people to think that “it's all about me”, and that's had a negative impact on our ability to understand the Bible.

The verse that I want to discuss is this one:

Romans 8:28: “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.”

When some people read this verse they interpret it like this: “All of the trials in my life are just the road I have to take to make my life better. I'm going through a rough spot now, but on the other side of this trial my life is going to be great!” If that's how you interpret that verse then it might as well read like this: “And we know that all things work together for my personal benefit, so that my time in this world might be made better.”

But is that really true? Is that what the verse means? I think the answer is a resounding *no*. The true meaning of this verse is quite different. All things do work together for good, but sometimes we must suffer greatly for the benefit of someone else. The good that God is going to accomplish isn't always *our* good.

We can see this truth illustrated in the lives of both Joseph and Job. On the surface they both seem to be great examples of people who went through a difficult trial, but overcame it and ended up with a much better life. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37:28) and then falsely accused of a crime and put in prison (Genesis 39:20). That horrible ordeal started a chain of events that ultimately made him second in command over Egypt (Genesis 41:38-43). Joseph went from being in prison

to being royalty.

Job's case is a little different, but his story ends in a similar way. He also went through terrible trials: he lost his wealth (Job 1:14-17), his children (Job 1:18-19), and his health (Job 2:7). However, after the trial was over he got everything back and became even greater than he was before (Job 42:10). The trials of both Job and Joseph led to their personal enrichment and wealth.

But does that happen every time? Do all trials end in fame, fortune, and personal enrichment? Let's take a look at a few other famous Biblical characters and see what we can find.

In the Old Testament there was a prophet by the name of Ezekiel. He was a righteous man who served the Lord all his life. When the Lord gave him a message he delivered it; when the Lord gave him a command he obeyed.

There came a time when Ezekiel was faced with a great trial: God told him that He was going to kill Ezekiel's wife, whom he loved very much. Not only was God going to kill her, but He commanded Ezekiel *not to mourn over her death*:

Ezekiel 24:15-18: “Also the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke: yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down. Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead, bind the tire of thine head upon thee, and put on thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not thy lips, and eat not the bread of men. So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded.”

The reason the Lord did this was to warn the people of Israel that terrible judgment was coming. Ezekiel's actions were a graphic sign of what was about to happen to them. When God's judgment came upon them it would be so awful that they would be unable to mourn their dead. This trial was very difficult and

painful for Ezekiel, but that was the entire point:

Ezekiel 24:21-24: “Speak unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the excellency of your strength, the desire of your eyes, and that which your soul pitieth; and your sons and your daughters whom ye have left shall fall by the sword. And ye shall do as I have done: ye shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men. And your tires shall be upon your heads, and your shoes upon your feet: ye shall not mourn nor weep; but ye shall pine away for your iniquities, and mourn one toward another. Thus Ezekiel is unto you a sign: according to all that he hath done shall ye do: and when this cometh, ye shall know that I am the Lord God.”

After this trial was over, did Ezekiel get his wife back? No. Did God give him another wife? No. Did Ezekiel's life improve once his wife was gone? No. The reason God did this wasn't to improve Ezekiel's life, but to warn the entire nation that if they didn't repent God would send a terrible judgment upon them. God did this for the benefit of *the nation*, not for the benefit of Ezekiel.

Another example of someone who suffered greatly is the apostle Paul. During the course of his ministry he experienced countless trials and hardships:

2 Corinthians 11:24-27: “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in

perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

That's some pretty severe torment! Did these sufferings enrich Paul's life? Was his life improved by the beatings and imprisonments that he received? Did they lead him to a life of wealth? Not exactly. The apostle tells us that all these things happened for a very different reason – to further the spreading of the gospel:

Philippians 1:12-14: “But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places; And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

According to Paul himself, the many trials that he faced weren't for *his* benefit, but were used by God to further the spread of the gospel. Likewise Ezekiel's trials weren't for his benefit but were used to warn the nation of Israel to repent.

Which brings us back to Joseph. According to Joseph himself, the reason all those terrible things happened to him was *not* so that he could one day be royalty and live a fabulous life. Instead they happened so that God could save the lives of many people:

Genesis 50:19-20: “And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to

save much people alive.”

Why did God afflict Joseph? It was to save the lives of his family – the very same people who hated him, persecuted him, and sold him into slavery. God put Joseph through a terrible ordeal in order to save Joseph's *enemies*. It wasn't about Joseph at all!

We can find something similar in the story of Job. It's easy to overlook the fact that Job wasn't the only person in the story who suffered. A lot of people lost their lives:

Job 1:14-19: “And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

When God tested Job's faith He allowed Satan to kill Job's servants and children. The reason all of those people died was *to benefit someone else*. In fact, their deaths benefit all those who have read the book of Job and been edified by it.

That's the point which is so easily missed. It's *absolutely* true that all things work together for good for those who love God. However, sometimes the good is for *someone else* and not ourselves! Ezekiel suffered to warn the Israelites of coming judgment. Paul suffered so that the gospel might be spread. Joseph suffered to save many people from famine. Job's children died so that Job's faith could be tested (and so we could be edified by what Job went through).

Now, I'm not saying that our trials *never* result in personal blessings. There are indeed times when the trials in our life are followed by periods of blessing – and there are examples of that throughout the Bible! It's also true that when we suffer for the sake of Christ we will receive Heavenly rewards (Matthew 5:12, Luke 6:23).

My point is we must not think that everything which happens to us is somehow about us. When God sends us a trial, He might send us a great blessing afterward that makes everything better – or He might not. We must not overlook the many godly people who suffered greatly but received no reward for it in this life:

Hebrews 11:36-38: “And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

There are many saints who suffered terrible things in this

life and never saw their circumstances get any better. There were prophets who boldly proclaimed the word of the Lord and were thrown into prison for it. There were apostles who preached the gospel and were executed for their faith. I'm sure that these people received Heavenly rewards (because Jesus always keeps His promises), but is that truly what's on our mind when we meditate on Romans 8:28?

We need to remember that it isn't always about us. Sometimes God works through us to bless those who are around us. Sometimes God puts us through terrible trials so that others can be enriched. Sometimes we must suffer so that others can be saved. God doesn't always repay the trials of this life with the riches of this world. It's unwise to believe that everything that happens to us is for our temporal, earthly benefit. As we've seen, sometimes God has a very different plan in mind.