

GOD'S PURPOSES

Text: Romans 8:28

Belgic Confession Art 13

Readings: James 1; Romans 8:18-39

Theme: God's purpose is to work out all things for the spiritual good & salvation of believers.

Purpose: To comfort and reassure us with the knowledge that God works all things for our spiritual good and salvation.

Most of us have been in a situation where we have wanted to bring comfort to someone; we have been with a person who was deep in grief and we wanted to say something that would help him or her, but somehow, we could not find the words.

There have also been times when we ourselves have been in a troubled situation, or grieving, and others have tried to comfort us; but their words seemed hollow, or trite or even insensitive.

You know the standard phrases people use:

"Well, things could be worse you know."

"You need to count your blessings."

"There are people who are even worse off than you are!"

"You need to look for the silver lining in every cloud." Maybe we have used these empty clichés ourselves!

Of course, when speaking to non-Christians it is often hard to find words of comfort.

But when we are speaking to other Christians we do have comfort we can bring, consolation we can give, words we can say.

Romans chapter 8 is one of the most powerful chapters in the Bible and the second half of this chapter contains some of the most reassuring words written by the apostle Paul.

Romans 8 verse 28 stands out as one of the great texts of the Bible, a verse that is well known, often quoted and much loved by believers. These words have brought help and strength to many Christians. One writer says that down through the ages this verse has been "a staff for trembling hands and a stay for troubled hearts."

It assures us that God will work out everything that happens to us, whether good or bad, for our spiritual good and salvation.

It assures us that God is at work. God is the subject of this sentence. He is sovereign; he is all-powerful, almighty and sovereign; he uses all things for our good.

Before the creation of the world he foreknew us as his elect people. He predestined us in Christ and then called us by his Holy Spirit. Those he called he also justified, and those he justified he will also glorify. From beginning to end God is at work to save his elect people and to bring us to our eternal home in heaven.

We will see that he is at work 1) in us, 2) in all things, 3) for our good.

1. God is at work IN US, that is, in Christians, in those who believe in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul describes us with two phrases.

a. The first is, "**those who love him**".

We love him because he *first loved us*. He took the initiative, he reached out to us, he made the first move.

"Tis he that saveth me and freely pardon gives;

I love because he loveth me;
I live because he lives.”
We love him because he loved us.

God, of course, *commands* us to love him. This, said Jesus, is the first and the greatest command: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37f). To love God is the essence of true religion and is the distinguishing mark of a Christian.

b. The second description of us as Christians is that we “**have been called.**”

In theology we describe this as an “effectual call”.

You might be walking your dog without a lead and it sees a cat and takes off after it! You call to your dog to come back; “Scruffy, come here!” But your dog ignores you and keeps running. Your calling is ineffective.

Not so with God’s call to his elect people; his call to us is effective, it is powerful, it works. He calls us to himself through the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit. When God calls his people we listen and respond and believe!

He calls us to himself not because we are so lovable or good, nor does he call us because he really needs us in his kingdom and can’t do without us – not at all!

He calls us because he loves us, because he is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Ps 103:8).

God is at work in us “who love him and have been called according to his purpose.”

2. God is at work IN ALL THINGS

“All things” means *all* things, that is, everything that happens to us in our lives – “rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand” (HC Q27).

God rules and governs all things “so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment” (BC Art 13). This is the doctrine of God’s providence.

We don’t have any trouble with this truth when things are *going well*, when we are in good health, when work is going smoothly, when we are making ends meet.

We have more questions about this when things go *against us*, when we get ill, when we lose our job, when we are struggling financially.

This verse in Romans is written in a context of suffering. Most of the second half of this chapter is about “our present sufferings” (v 18).

Christians through all of history, and throughout the world today, have been and are going through hardship, trouble, persecution, famine, nakedness and sword. Some face death all day long; they are considered as sheep to be slaughtered (v 23,25,35f).

Under the words “all things” Paul includes our daily struggle with sin, the death of loved ones, trials in our marriage and with our children, chronic pain, recurring illness. “All things” includes everything in our life that is distressing, perplexing, hard to bear.

God is at work in and through these events and circumstances. Yet we must remember that God is not the author of sin nor can he be charged with the sins people commit. Sin and evil come from Satan, from the world, and from within ourselves – from our own sinful nature, not from God.

None of us understand how all this works out, especially when we are right in the *middle* of sickness and suffering and trial. But we often don’t understand it even *after* the time of trial or death or difficulty.

There are many things that we *know* about God and his work in this world and in our lives, but there are also many things we do *not know*. We live in this tension, in this gap, between what we know and what we don't. We live by faith in God, "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb 11:1). We live in patient hope for "what we do not yet have" (v25)

We know and believe that God is at work in us who love him and have been called, and that God is at work in everything that goes on.

3. God is at work FOR OUR GOOD

This doesn't mean that suffering and death and illness are good things but rather than God uses these things for our good. The *result* is good. The good referred to is our *spiritual* good, our salvation.

One of our hymns expresses this well:

"O Father, you are sovereign, the Lord of human pain,
Transmuting earthly sorrows to gold of heavenly gain.
All evil over-ruling, as none but Conqueror could,
Your love pursues its purpose – our soul's eternal good."

In this letter of Romans Paul wrote, "we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope, and hope does not disappoint us..." (Rom 5:3f)

Later Paul wrote from prison in Rome to the church in Philippi; "Now I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (Phil 1:12); his imprisonment was for good.

James wrote, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

In verse 29 Paul describes God's purpose in our lives as being "conformed to the likeness of his Son." That means that God wants us to be like his Son, the Lord Jesus.

God is using all that we go through to shape us, mould us and fashion us to be more like Jesus. God wants to see in us more of the character of Jesus – his love, compassion, patience and kindness. He wants to see in us more of Christ's wisdom and depth of insight and understanding.

Of course, we will never be fully like Jesus because we are human and he is God and man; but this is the aim, the goal, the objective – to be like Christ. This is what God is doing in your life and mine, in your pain, in the poor health of your children, in your struggles at work, in your financial difficulties, in the death of someone you love, in your loneliness – he is conforming you and me "to the likeness of his Son."

This good is our complete and final salvation; it is all that God has planned for us and promised to us; it is the full inheritance laid up for us in heaven.

Romans 8:28 is one of the great texts of the Bible and has brought comfort and strength to many believers who have applied these words to their own situation of suffering.

But how can we bring this comfort *to others* who are suffering? As we noted at the beginning, it is not easy to find the right words to say.

That is often a good thing. Sometimes we are too quick with our words, too glib, too ready with a reason for another person's pain.

There is a time for *silence*, for just sitting with someone, for just being near them.

Job's friends were the most help to him when they sat with him in silence for seven days. When they opened their mouths to talk to him they only added to his suffering with their false accusations and unhelpful explanations!

Yet there is a time for *words*; not the trite clichés of the world, the meaningless phrases people use to fill an awkward silence; rather we speak the words of faith, the Word of God, words that have brought consolation to God's people in the past.

Paul, writing to the believers in Corinth, assured them that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ... comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Cor 1:3-5).

This is the “unspeakable consolation” that Guido de Bres drew out of the Scriptures and wrote about in this confession. He not only wrote these words but he lived them out, and he died as a martyr finding confidence and joy in the providence of his God.

He could say with Paul, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Amen