

The pattern of providence

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] The 8th chapter of the epistle to the Romans, to these verses we have read together, and I would like us to focus our attention very specially on verse 28.

For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Many years ago, a young fellow of 18 was having his evening Bible reading in candlelight.

He was reading in this chapter, and when he came to verse 28, he paused, and for a moment or two, he was absolutely thrilled.

Being a new convert, he said, I wonder do the people down there in the church know that the Bible says this? And so he went to the prayer meeting some days later, and during a lull in the prayers, he stood up and read this verse.

[1 : 10] Now I don't know whether he expected everyone to shout hallelujah or something, but nobody moved. There wasn't a murmur throughout the whole of the congregation.

It's absolutely amazing how we get used to these tremendous statements in the word of God, and they lose their sublimity.

We fail to be thrilled when we come to read them, maybe for the hundredth or the hundred and oneth time. That young boy became a pioneer missionary in the heart of Africa.

He died in 1949. His name was Robert Moffat. Now let us look at this section of the epistle to the Romans.

The apostle has been taking us through the great sections that deal with justification by faith. He has gone on through the great sections that have caused so many problems in connection with sanctification.

[2 : 21] And now he comes to this section which is dealing with the final act in the great drama of our redemption, our glorification. Glorification is the subject of this part of the epistle to the Romans.

Glorification is promised in verses 12 to 17. We have the expectation of it in verses 18 to 27.

And we have the certainty of it in verses 28 to 30. And so the apostle is dealing with glorification.

And while he dwells on that, the final end of our salvation, he is conscious that nevertheless, in the present time, we are subjected to suffering.

He who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. The Christian is not exempt from persecution, from suffering, from hardship.

[3 : 28] And so the apostle is well aware here in this section that while we await the final glory, there is a measure of suffering we must pass through.

Now let the Christian know if he is walking with God in faith and prayer.

Any suffering that comes his way is not punishment but chastisement. Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he desireth.

And so the Christian is subject to these kind of things, the ups and downs, the problems, the tensions of life. And the apostle here makes a very quick account.

He has a little bit of spiritual arithmetic here. He makes two columns. In one he writes down some of the sufferings that the Christian has to face in this life.

[4 : 44] And in the other column, the glories that await the Christian on the other side. And he comes clearly with this calculation. I reckon, he says, that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us.

However, I think the apostle comes to the climax, to the heights, to the highest point in this whole portion of scripture in reference to glory when he comes to verse 28.

And he sees there, and he reveals to us from the scripture that all the Christian has to pass through before he reaches glory.

The ups and the downs, the sufferings, as well as those days that are beautiful and sunny. Everything that happens in his life is but preparation.

Under the providence of God, preparation for the glory that awaits the Christian at the end of the road. And so he says, 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.

[6 : 08] I want to say three things about this verse. I usually keep to three things. I can remember them better myself that way.

And the first of them is, we have here a sweet certainty. This is something we know according to the apostle. We know, he says.

This is the very first statement he makes. And then he informs us that this knowledge is restricted to a select company.

It's not everybody who knows this. It's those who love God, those who are called according to his purpose. And there's a sure confidence for those who have this knowledge, those who belong to this company, that all things are working together for their good.

Now let's look at the sweet certainty first of all. We know, says the apostle. Now there are things the Christian knows.

[7 : 14] There are things the Christian doesn't know. And when we don't know, let us say firmly, we don't know. But when there are things we know, let's affirm that these things we know.

When I was a very young Christian, someone said this to me. They said, Always doubt your doubts, but believe your beliefs. Let's relegate the things we don't know to the things we don't know.

But the things we do know, let's affirm them with all the assurance we have. And this is one of these great certainties. We know.

Among the things we don't know, there's one in this very portion of scripture. The apostle says, We know not how to pray as we ought.

But we are reminded that even in some of the things we don't know, we have the help of God. When we don't know how to pray as we ought, let's remember there is one at the throne of God who is making intercession for us.

[8 : 26] And remember there is one with us and in us who is helping us in our infirmities and making intercession for us with sighs that are too deep for words.

But tonight, we are looking at the things we know. The man in the world, the unconverted man, sometimes thinks we Christians are rather presumptuous.

He says, How do you know these things? And of course, our answer is, we know these things because of the trustworthiness of the one who guarantees these things for us by his word and by his character.

We are not speculating when we talk about the things we know. The assurance is given to us because of our personal knowledge with the eternal God who has entered into covenant with us and has given us many precious covenant promises.

And so, we know by the cognition of faith what we are going to say now. These are things we know. The unregenerate man has to say very often where the Christian says we know he has to say I don't know.

[9 : 51] His philosophy is one of agnosticism. We don't know. I think it's all summed up in that little incident in the life of Robert Burns when he turned over with his plowshare that little mouse house in the field.

The field mouse. And he started to talk to that little mouse and among many things he said this but thou art blessed compared to me. The future only touches thee.

The present only touches thee. But oh, I'll come back what cast my eye prospects drear and forward though I cannot see I guess and fear.

Now that is the philosophy of the unregenerate. The Christian knows certain things about the past. He knows certain things about the future.

He knows certain things about the present. What do we know about the past? Well here's one of the great things we know about the past. We know that we have passed from death onto life because we love the brethren.

[11 : 03] Now there's something worth knowing. The picture there by the way is of a ferry boat conveying people from one side to the other side. And what is being said is the Christian knows that he has been ferried across from the death side to the life side.

We know that we have passed from death to life. Now that's something worth knowing. What do we know about the future? Well says the Apostle John we know that when we shall see him we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

There's what we know about the future. And what do we know about the present? We know says the Apostle that presently at this present time all things are working together for our good.

Now these are some of the certainties that we know from Holy Scripture and we are looking at this one tonight. We know that all things work together for good.

Now as I've said it's not for everyone to say this. It's not everyone who knows this. And so there's a restriction on this verse to the people who know this.

[12 : 28] And two characteristics come from the verse. The people who know this are those first of all who love God. Now do you love God?

Do you love God with an affection that is genuine? With a love that is sincere? Do you love God? Not because perhaps you have had a glimpse into the records of the great purposes of God in the book of life.

None of us have had that. Not because we have heard our names recited from the Lamb's book of life the role of the chosen. No. We love Him because He first loved us.

We love Him in response to His love to us. And if you love God like this with all sincerity then you are part of this company.

Those who love God. It's the duty of every man woman and child in this world to love God. when we think of the way God has loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[13 : 51] And if you don't love God sincerely and genuinely it's because something else is taking the place of that love in your heart and in your life.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good happy blessed is the man who trusts in Him. But there's another characteristic of those people who have this knowledge.

They are the cold ones according to God's purpose. Purpose wise His cold ones.

I heard the call come follow that was all. Earth's joys grew dim my soul went after Him. I rose and followed that was all.

Will you not follow? Have you not followed when you heard His call? Have you followed God? Have you heard His call? are you one of His choice ones, one of His chosen ones, one of those who are purpose wise, His cold ones?

[15 : 05] You know, the doctrine of the choice of God in its sacred mystery refuses to be explained away so as to mean in effect nothing more or nothing less than the choice of man.

It is presented to us everywhere in the scripture and not least in the epistles and not least in this epistle as a truth that is not meant to clear everything away by way of the problems that surround this but mainly to inform us that if we love God then we have not to congratulate ourselves for this but the God of all love and the God of all mercy and the God of all grace that our eyes that were so guiltily shut have been effectively opened by the power of God.

Any part of the chain of redemption that would suggest belongs to us would cause the chain to be fragile indeed.

The whole chain is forged by God himself. If we love God now it's all of his doing it's all his work in our hearts it's his mercy we ought to have loved him always it's of his mercy that we love him now.

You see the force of verse 29 for whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate it's not merely that he had foreknowledge of what we would do but it was his foredecision of what he would do in our lives.

[16 : 58] He predestinated us and having done that in the past eternity in this world this time space world he called us to himself and having called us he justified us and having justified us he goes on sanctifying us and having done all that finally he glorified us.

I wonder did you notice the tense there even our glorification is spoken of as something in the past a fact already accomplished have you noticed that James Denny as a matter of fact says the tense in this last event is amazing it is the most daring anticipation of faith that even the new testament contains our glorification as well as our justification is presented to us here as something already accomplished the pilgrim is already in the immortal country now that's wonderful isn't it that we are as good as there already although we are still in this veil of tears now how do I know what evidence have I got that I have this assurance of all things working together for good the first one is do I love God sincerely genuinely the second thing is this is there any evidence in my life now that I am being conformed to the image of God's son is there a change a process going on of sanctification in my life am I walking in the way of holiness is God leading me out of the way of darkness and sin into a life of holiness you see the process of conformity should be going on now and these are some of the indications that we belong to this elet company this elet company who have this very blessed this very sweet assurance that all things are working together for good and that is the final part

I would like to deal with in this in this wonderful verse the sure consequence of belonging to this company who have the assurance this is what's happening to us all things are working together for our good all things working together for our good the tense there is a present continuous tense not that all things work together for good but all things are working together for our good and we have here the fact of constant working things work life is made up of many forces and although at times they seem quite stationary nevertheless they are always at work all things work says the apostle and then he gives us something of the comprehensiveness of this working all things work all things

I've met some people and they are prepared to say that the great events of their lives are ordered by God but not the small details of life but you know I believe that the true Christian soul refuses to accept anything as outside the direct or the permissive will of the heavenly father all things is all things and it means all things and I believe that all things the great and the small are working together for our good that means our bleak days as well as our bright days it means our disappointments and bereavements as well as our so called red letter days our mountain top experiences our valley experiences our blue heavenly days our red letter days our bleak grey days every experience we pass through is working together for us not long ago a friend of mine in this city passed to his reward some of you may know him he was an art dealer as a matter of fact he had perhaps the best salon of fine art in the city of

Glasgow his gallery was surrounded by the most beautiful paintings of past and contemporary artists and I remember standing there one day in the gallery with him he was a very very fine Christian gentleman and he said this to me he said willie have you noticed that the predominant color in all of these pictures is grey grey he says you know it's the greys that bring out the greens and the blues and the reds and most of our days probably are grey days don't forget that the greys are the days is the color that highlights all the other wonderful colors and so all things work and then it says here there's a harmony in the working all things work together they're all working together they are interlocked together all of these things you say is it possible for the cold north winds to harmonize with the southern breezes can sunshine and tears be harmonized yes they can and instance after instance could be quoted to show that they do all things work together together

[23 : 44] I remember once in Glasgow we were having a very bad time weather wise and that's not unusual in the city of Glasgow but this was a real bad time we were going through terrible winds and rain and everything and one of our homespun poets put a little ditty in the evening times and I thought it was so good that I jotted it down I've never forgotten it it said this wind and water and gloire that means worse for those of you who only know the Gaelic in fact it went on to say for head we know it sure it all be choked with stew you see everything was harmonizing everything was so necessary everything was working together everything working together we have a

God who causes everything to work together he's the God who tells the number of the stars and gives each one his name he is the God who measures our tears in his bottle and notice too that all things work together for good look at the beneficence of this working for good the staircase may whine but each step is one higher than the preceding one and we are on the way upward all the time all things working together for our good it's just like the doctor's prescription many of you have had it I've had it myself it said on it the mixture as before and I've gone to the chemist and I haven't seen him but I know what he does he takes a little bit of this and a little bit of that and this little bit of this might do me a lot of harm but when it's mixed with a little bit of that and a little bit of something else then all together it does me good and you'll notice that the bottle says shake it all together shake it well before you take it all things working together for good and I'm old enough now to look down through the years and to see many instances that for me were bitter but now as I look back

I can see the hand of God was there it was God who was ordering these things the steps of a good man ordered by the Lord I can see also there were times when the stops were ordered by the Lord it's not always the steps sometimes he stops us sometimes he does things that we cannot understand but after a while as the years pass and as we look back in retrospect we see the hand of God in all these things all things working together for our good are we living in this wonderful sunshine or are we not you know many times I find that Christians are not living in this lovely sunny situation believing that all things work together for good remember Jacob in the Old Testament

I read about Jacob in Genesis 42 and 36 he said all things are against me all things are against me poor Jacob I tell you what was happening to Jacob he was suffering from a partial view of the facts he didn't know all the facts at that time poor Jacob thought that Joseph was dead he thought Simeon was dead he thought he was going to lose Benjamin but Benjamin was kept in safety Simeon wasn't dead Joseph wasn't dead and by and by Jacob was going to see how wrong he was to say all things are against me he was suffering also from defective memory I wonder had he forgotten the harm that had led him up to his old age I wonder had he forgotten that time in his experience when solitary and alone and far from home he lay down on a pillow of stones and how that night the Lord came to him and revealed to him the ladder that stretched from heaven to earth and the angels of

God ascending and descending on the ladder he had forgotten about that he had forgotten that in the bitter experience with Laban when Laban tried to deceive him so often that God had brought him out with a great blessing on his head he had forgotten that in his confrontation with Esau it wasn't as hard as he had thought it was going to be he had forgotten that experience at Jabbok when he wrestled with the angel of the Lord until the morning broke and when his name was changed from Jacob to Israel yes it's so easy to forget and to dwell in the shadows and to think all things are against me two Christians met on one occasion and one said to the other you know I find it difficult to trust God when everything is dark and his friend replied listen my friend if you can't trust your friend when he's out of sight he's not worth owning as a friend and if you can't trust

[29 : 57] God when you can't see him then you have no trust in God at all the psalmist David says in psalm 91 not under his wings thou shalt see but under his wings thou shalt trust under his wings thou shalt trust and so let's come out from the shadows let's get into the sunshine let's believe what the scripture says that all things are working together now for our good and the glory shall yet be revealed and after it's all over we'll be able to say about our heavenly father my father planned it all it was all his plan it was all in the great plan that he had for my life we'll be able to say with our own Rutherford I'll bless the hand that guided I'll bless the heart that planned when crowned with glory dwelleth in

Emmanuel's land all things work together for good you know it's sometimes very difficult to believe this I remember reading about the bishop of Durham Dr.

Hanley Mole would to God there were more bishops like Hanley Mole in the Church of England today well Dr.

Hanley Mole was called to a great pit disaster during his ministry in Durham many lives had been lost underground he had heard of great distress at the pit head many tears a lot of sadness a lot of distress and he wondered what he would say to these people when he got there and what the bishop did was this he took with him one of these canvas samplers that had some beautiful words embroidered into the canvas in glorious shining letters but you know when he got there he didn't show the letters he turned round the reverse of the canvas and all the people could see were the tangled threads blacks and yellows and greens and reds and blues a tangled mess you might say and then very slowly he turned over the sampler and there were these words in glorious living letters

God is love despite it all he was able to say to these people God is love and this is it at the end of the day we'll have to confess that it was love that guided us on through all the perplexities and through all the trials and through all the difficulties and brought us at last to glory some of you may have seen another sampler that says this not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly will God unfold the canvas and reveal the reason why the dark threads were as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he had planned we know we Christians know all things work together for our good we we love

[33 : 34] God we who are the called according to his purpose and my friend if you don't have this assurance that this certainty doesn't belong to you tonight oh I urge upon you consider the great love that the father hath bestowed upon us consider the love that God has demonstrated by sending his son to be the savior of the world and the cross consider what your response ought to be to the love of God that you too may know that all things in your life are working together for good let us pray our gracious God we give thee thanks for thy precious word tonight we thank thee for reminding us of this wonderful truth we have been considering we thank thee for the great salvation that is ours justified by faith alone in the death of our Lord and Redeemer

Jesus Christ we thank thee for the work of sanctification that is going on presently in our lives we thank thee too for the glory that awaits those who love thee sincerely and who are thee purpose wise thy called ones we thank thee our heavenly father for the truth sometimes difficult to see but oh enable us by faith to grasp it that all our problems and difficulties our ups and downs our good days and our bad days are all contributing to the glory that shall yet be revealed in us and should there be among us those who have not got this assurance as yet wilt thou graciously deal with them oh wilt thou call them also to thyself open their eyes to see the love of God to behold the manner of thy love and to turn and seek the

Lord while he may be found hear us we beseech and be cleansers and receivers and anoint us and renew us and all we ask is in the saviour's name and for his sake amen