

What It Is Not!

Romans 8:28

Introduction

We arrive today, at perhaps the most familiar verse in the entire New Testament. *Romans 8:28* is a verse we tend to carry around in our hip pocket and pull out whenever we need a sense of meaning, or purpose, or even an answer from God.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

What an incredible verse. It is a verse that can color the perspective of our entire lives.

Unfortunately many believers use it to color outside the lines of what God intended to communicate.

We hear story after story of bad things with good endings and we say, "That's what Romans 8:28 is all about!"

We hear of some difficulty in the life of a believer and we quickly quote, "... all things work together for good ...!"

I can remember being in a funeral parlor, standing next to a grieving widow and listening as people walked by. One well-intentioned woman patted the widow on her shoulder and said, "Remember Romans 8:28."

We use that verse in hospital rooms, funeral homes, and emergency rooms. We use it because we misunderstand it.

I have been slowly making my way through a 1,200 page biography of George Whitefield, a man used by God to bring about the Great Awakening, both in America and in England, during the mid-

1700's. One event, recorded in another man's journal, sounded like a great Romans 8:28 story.

Whitefield learned of a widow with a large family, whose landlord had recently taken all her furniture away because she could not make rent. Whitefield immediately went and gave her five guineas. (That sounds like little furry animals to me!) Five guineas made rent and got her furniture back. The friend who was traveling with him hinted that the sum was more than he could reasonably afford; to which he replied, "When God brings a case of need before us, it is that we may relieve it."

The two travelers proceeded on their journey, and before long, a robber confronted them, demanding their money, which they gave. After he left, Whitefield turned the tables on his friend, and reminded him how much better it was for the poor widow to have his money than the thief, who had taken all his friend's. They had not long resumed their travel before the robber returned, and demanded Whitefield's coat. This request was granted, only after Whitefield asked for the robber's tattered old coat in exchange, since it was very cold. The robber agreed, and after trading coats, the robber rode away. After some time, they saw the robber galloping towards them as fast as he could, and now, fearing that their lives were threatened, they also spurred on their horses, and fortunately arrived at some cottages before the robber reached them. The thief was stopped and, no doubt, intensely mortified; for when Whitefield took off the man's tattered coat, he found in one of the pockets, his five guineas, and nearly one hundred more!ⁱ

Now that is my kind of story! That is Romans 8:28 at work, right?! Without a doubt, yes.

However, what if Whitefield had not asked for the coat, and instead of a happy ending, he lost his money, his coat, and his horse too?! Would we still quote Romans 8:28? Isn't God great?!

Or, what if the robber had killed Whitefield's friend, or both of them? Would you dare quote Romans 8:28 then?

What about the times Whitefield preached while people hurled stones through the church windows? What about the times when Whitefield was slandered; when he faced insurmountable debts for his orphan house? Does Romans 8:28 fit in there?

What about the young Asian believer, active in her church, serving Christ while she attended graduate school, planning for the mission field, who was working part time in a jewelry store to pay her school and living bills when two young thugs came into the store, stole some jewelry, and then, shot and killed her? Does Romans 8:28 work for that?

What about terminal illness? What about divorce? What verse do you use for bankruptcy?

What do you tell a woman who is persistently propositioned by her boss, who happens to be a leader in the church? What do you say to an elderly couple who have been defrauded out of their life's savings? Can you use this verse for the victim of sexual abuse or rape? What do you say to them? "Remember, Romans 8:28!"

If God is working all things together for good, where is the good in that?!

Was God at work in Isaac's life as he carried wood up a hillside?

Was God at work during David's years of running for his life *after* being anointed king?

Was God at work through the unfaithfulness of Hosea's wife?

Was God at work in the prison sentence of Joseph?

What good was it when John the Baptist was suddenly beheaded?

Would any of them have understood Romans 8:28 the way most Christians understand it today?

Listen to this,

A correct interpretation of any verse of scripture means it is correct for any condition, with any Christian, in any culture, and under any circumstance.

If it does not work when the sun is out *and* when the clouds come up, then we have missed its true meaning.

Which leads me to say, *Romans 8:28* may be one of the most quoted yet most misused verses in all the New Testament.

The danger is this – if we misunderstand what God is saying and we misuse and misapply it – it can distort our perspective and lead us down paths that please, not our heavenly Father, but the enemy of our soul. That enemy prowls about seeking a believer to devour, literally to discredit; to destroy, not just by means of external activity, but by means of internal attitude.

Romans 8:28 – What It Does *NOT* Mean!

So, before we proceed with what *Romans 8:28* means, I want to tell you what it does *not* mean.

Romans 8:28 is not a precise explanation for suffering

1. First, Romans 8:28 is not a precise explanation for suffering.

Paul does not provide a quick answer for the grieving. This verse is not a band-aid for you to try to stick on some suffering believer. In fact, this verse does not pretend to solve the riddles of life.

Furthermore, this verse does not even attempt to answer the questions that begin with the word, "Why?"

Does it bother you to read verses like these:

- Solomon wrote, "***It is the glory of God to conceal a matter . . .***" (Proverbs 25:2a);
- Isaiah wrote, "***Truly, You are a God who hides Himself . . .***" (Isaiah 45:15a);
- Moses said, "***The secret things belong to the Lord our God . . .***" (Deuteronomy 29:29a);
- Ecclesiastes declares, "***Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.***" (Ecclesiastes 11:5);
- God spoke through His prophet Isaiah on another occasion and announced, "***For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord.***"

‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

In other words, we want answers but lack the capacity to grasp God’s infinite mind or the way He intervenes and manages and moves and controls the events of our lives.

No wonder Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 11, verse 33b,

. . . How unsearchable are His [God’s] judgments and unfathomable His ways.

In I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 16a, he wrote,

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? . . .

In other words, the mark of growing up in our faith is getting to the point where we less and less demand from God an explanation!

We all need to practice saying things like, “I don’t know why!”

Say that with me, “I don’t know why!”

“I don’t have an explanation . . . this is beyond me!”

These are not my favorite expressions, just ask my family. Besides, I am in a profession and calling that is supposed to have the answers, isn’t that right?

Imagine calling me up with your particular challenge and I respond with, “I haven’t got a clue . . . I can’t imagine what God’s doing in your life . . . I am totally stumped!”

You would probably look for another church.

The older I get, the more often I say, “I do not know why, but I do know Who.”

When Job demanded an explanation, God responded, you may remember, not with an answer, but with His attributes.

The trouble is, we most often would rather have an explanation!

Romans 8:28 is not a prohibition against sorrow

2. Romans 8:28 is not an explanation for suffering and it is, secondly, not a prohibition against sorrow.

Have you ever heard a Christian say to another believer, “Now don’t cry . . . remember, Romans 8:28!”

The motto of many in the church is, “Deep Christians don’t cry!”

Well, if that is the case, then Jesus Christ failed miserably outside Lazarus’ tomb where He wept openly. And the crowd said in John, chapter 11, verse 36b,

. . . See how He loved him!

This verse in Romans is no biblical prohibition to grieving.

However, have you ever shared some challenge and the person handed back to you, like a prescription from the doctor, “Romans 8:28,” and said, “take one of these in the morning with a glass of water and you’ll feel better.”?

How many believers are afraid to show how they feel, especially if they feel sorrow or frustration or loss or confusion or doubt? Church can become a masquerade, and a misapplied Romans 8:28 can be the leading cause of it.

Romans 8:28 is not a precise explanation for suffering, and it is not a prohibition against sorrow.

Romans 8:28 is not a pretext for avoiding the challenges of life

3. Thirdly, Romans 8:28 is not a pretext for avoiding the challenges of life.

A believer is misguided who tells another, “Settle down . . . don’t get so excited about your passion for God and zeal for the Lord; He’s gonna do whatever He wants to do anyway, so why bother getting so fired up about accomplishing something for God?! He’s gonna work everything out!”

Ladies and gentlemen, this verse is not an excuse from home to get out of the great commission. This verse is not a hall pass from the discipline of study. Paul does not give the believer justification for apathy and complacency.

The Thessalonians had that problem. They were saying, “Jesus is coming back, so why get all worked up . . . why build a building . . . why plant a field . . . why develop an enterprise . . . why try to reach the world with the gospel . . . in fact, why work at all?!”

So they were quitting their jobs and sitting on their hands, waiting for the rapture.

Paul responds to their error by simply saying, in II Thessalonians, chapter 3, verse 10b,

. . . If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.

Romans 8:28 will never justify complacency in your walk with Christ. We are to run the race, bear the cross, fight the good fight – glorifying God with whatever He has allowed our hands to handle. We face the challenges of life head-on, and at the same time, on our knees.

Romans 8:28 is not a permanent ticket to comfortable living

4. Fourthly, Romans 8:28 is not a permanent ticket to comfortable living.

Paul has already reminded the believer in Romans 8:25 that we wait and actively hope with anticipation.

Somebody might say, “Well, I’ve been asking God for His will for my life and I just don’t understand why He isn’t coming through.”

While we may not know what the will of God is for our future, He has given us more than we are prepared to tackle, right now.

Let me give you a few of them:

- obey your parents (Ephesians 6:1);
- if you are single, develop a romantic relationship with a believer only (I Corinthians 6:15);
- if you are married, husbands, actively love and lead your wives, and wives, actively love and respect your husbands (Ephesians 5:22-25);
- raise your children with an understanding of biblical and spiritual truth (Ephesians 6:4);
- provide for the physical needs of your family (I Timothy 5:8);
- work hard in your occupation (I Thessalonians 4:11-12);
- give to the Lord, His church, and His cause (II Corinthians 8-9);
- pray consistently and regularly (I Thessalonians 5:17);
- develop an attitude of gratitude and joy (I Thessalonians 5:16);
- serve the church body where God has led you (I Corinthians 12);
- exercise your spiritual gifts (I Peter 4:10);
- consistently worship with gathered believers (Hebrews 10:25);

- develop and act out biblical convictions (Colossians 3:2);
- study the word of God (II Timothy 2:15);
- memorize the word of God (Psalm 119:11);
- meditate on the word of God (Psalm 1:2).ⁱⁱ

Start with that!

The problem is not what we do not know of God’s will and cannot do, the problem is what we do know of God’s will and will not do.

Romans 8:28 is not an excuse to let it all slide.

There is another problem with the misuse of this verse. Let me include it in this fourth point.

There are many who believe God has obligated Himself to providing pain free, trouble free living, by mentally inserting the little word “now” into this verse. Look at Romans 8:28 again and let me read their version to you,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good now! . . .

Or perhaps, “in the very near future . . . I’ll get my answer . . . life will smooth out . . . everything will be fine.”

You cannot support that view with the reality of scripture.

Listen to the apostle Paul as he speaks to his fellow passengers on a ship that is about to be broken up and shipwrecked. Let me read Acts, chapter 27, verses 14 through 26ff.

But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo;

and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along.

Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship’s boat under control.

After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along.

The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo;

and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.

When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said . . .

. . . "I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

"For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me,

"saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.'

"Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.

"But we must run aground on a certain island."

Isn't that great? An angel came and delivered the good news.

But we must [first] run aground . . .

Wait a minute! If God can go through the trouble to send an angel, why not have the angel pick Paul up and deposit him on land?

I love the irony of Paul's speech – and the reality of Paul's Christianity. He says, in verse 25,

. . . I believe God . . .

Then he says, in verse 26,

But we must run aground . . .

Those two verses do not go together, do they?!

"God's in control," Paul would say, "and I have to go for a swim! We're gonna skin our knees and get beaten nearly to death by the wind and waves and get water in our noses and in our lungs and probably be scared out of our minds."

He said in verse 22,

. . . keep up your courage, for there will be . . . loss . . . of the ship.

Do you know what Paul was suggesting? God had ordained that he would survive, but God had also ordained that Paul's ship would sink!

Paul would say with William Cowper, the hymn writer,

God moves in mysterious ways

His wonders to perform;

He plants His footsteps on the sea,

And rides upon the storm.

He does not say, "God gets rid of the storm," but, "He rides upon the storm."

I have stood on the rocky hillside of the island called Malta, just above the cove where Paul supposedly swam to shore when he was shipwrecked yet another time!

God rides upon the storm.

Who would sign up for that kind of Christianity?

Surely God would give His friends –

great weather,

good health,

prosperity,

favorable reports from the doctor,

great news from the broker, and

smooth sailing on the ocean –

surely the boats of believers do not sink!

Deep down, that is what we really expect from God. And it shows in our response to God when the boat begins taking on water. If you don't mind me saying so, *we really expect God to treat us better than that.*

I remember a number of years ago, traveling to South France on a short term missions trip to one of the Servicemen's Centers that is part of Missions to Military. I was traveling with my wife, Marsha, my missionary parents, who oversee the Military ministry, and others from our church.

On our way home, after a week of hard work, my wife and I came up to the ticket counter in Paris, where we were connecting to the States, and after some delay, they asked us to sit down in the seats near the counter. There was evidently, some sort of mix-up. It turned out that they had separated Marsha and I on the flight home by accident, and, after talking it over in French with one another, they informed us that we were being moved up to first class – all the way home.

Let me tell you, there is a world of difference between first class and coach. I mean a world of difference! Now I know why they pull that curtain – they do not want you to know how bad it is in the back in the cattle cars!

It was another world up there! We had not even taken off before we were immediately offered something to drink – champagne even. I don't think they understood why we wanted sweet tea. A full meal was served with linen and silverware, as well as a dessert menu with rich coffee that stayed with me for three days. They offered complimentary this and complimentary that. The leather chairs reclined!

We felt bad . . . but I got over it! Marsha, on the other hand, was almost embarrassed. She said to me, "Honey, we need to at least offer our seats to your parents."

I thought, "Oh no!"

Well, I got up, went back to coach, came back, sat down, and said, "They didn't want to switch."

Of course, they were asleep when I asked them!

All the way from Paris to Raleigh, first class! Man, I could get used to this! Surely this is God's design for His children! Surely He wants His close friends to experience first class travel through life!

If you asked Paul, "How do you know God's pleased with you and in sovereign control?" he would

respond, "I'm having to swim for my life! But God promised I'll at least make it to shore."

Conclusion

Romans 8:28:

- does *not* offer precise explanations for suffering;
- does *not* prohibit the believer from sorrow;
- does *not* give the believer a pretext to avoid the disciplines and challenges of life;
- does *not* provide some kind of guaranteed first class tickets throughout life.

That is not what Romans 8:28 is!

Well then, what is it? I will answer that in our next discussion.

However, for now, in one sentence, I will tell you,

Romans 8:28 is a glimpse into the attribute of God's sovereignty; a revelation that God is sovereign and we are secure!

When we catch a glimpse of God's sovereignty, we discover our security! It is not in the events of life – good or bad; we discover security in the everlasting purpose of God.

To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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ⁱ Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield, Volume 2* (Cornerstone Books, 1980).

ⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, *The Mystery of God's Will* (Word Publishing, 1999), p. 30.