

Reflections on Romans 8:28

Romans 8:28 reminds us that God uses all things that happen in our lives, to accomplish good for us who love him. Now, it seems easy to believe that God would use *good* things in our lives, to accomplish good. But it is completely amazing - though just as true - that he uses the *bad* things that happen, to also accomplish good.

Admittedly, there are times that we cannot see the good. But God does not restrict the time of his accomplishments to this immediate moment. He has our entire lifetime to work in us. The good *will* come, but some of it may take longer to arrive. Some might not become fully visible until eternity arrives - when we see Jesus face-to-face.

Like a tree that does not enjoy being pruned while its branches are being cut, in the end it produces a more abundant harvest than if it had never been pruned. But the fruit doesn't occur immediately; the tree has to wait and give the fruit time to ripen. (Compare this to John 15.)

One question that sometimes comes to people's minds is: "Can God use my sin, to accomplish good? If so, does that mean my sin is good?" In answer to the second question, sin is *never* good. Nowhere in Scripture can a statement be found that tells us that sin is good. Nowhere.

In answer to the first question, the promise of Romans 8:28 *does* apply, but it does so indirectly. Because of the sin, God will bring events and circumstances into our lives. These working *together*, not the sin by itself, are the cause of the good.

One of the ways God accomplishes good is through discipline - something that all genuine Christians will experience. In one way or another, he will teach us to do what is right (Titus 2:11-12). He may allow us to reap the painful consequences of the sins we commit. Or he may bring hardships or trials to some other area of life - one that, in our opinion, is unrelated to our sin. (We tend to break life into separate "compartments" and forget that all of life is interrelated.)

But we need to remember that discipline comes in many forms. In addition to the "negative reinforcement" (punishment) that we so often associate with the word "discipline," there are also "positive" ways to train a person, to reinforce what is good, and to lead us (or re-direct us) into the path of life.

Sometimes God may even return good for our evil. Sometimes, when we sin, we know we deserve punishment... but for some reason, it just doesn't come! If we are genuine disciples of Jesus, his kindness will shame us (when we contrast it to our sinfulness) and will lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

When we sin, our response to that sin (as well as to what God does) will demonstrate what our true nature is. If we belong to Jesus, we will find the sin to not be as enjoyable as we might have expected - a temporary fleeting enjoyment, at best, followed by a painful awareness of the hurt and the break in fellowship that we have caused. This is because God has given us a new nature, with new desires and interests that go contrary to our old way of life. We may (and will) struggle with the ways of our old nature, because we still live in a body that has been conditioned by our old habits and inclinations. But when we sin, our normal tendency will be to repent and turn back to God.

On the other hand, if we do not belong to Jesus, our normal tendency may range anywhere from constantly feeling guilty - yet unable to change - to closing our eyes to our sin and treating it as inconsequential. We may be able to make some superficial changes - though unable to deal with the real issue of sin. Or we may even defend our sin as good and necessary! Our response will be partly determined by the extent to which we have seared our consciences and hardened our hearts. The longer we continue to spurn God's discipline and kindness, the more our response will harden our hearts, perhaps to the point that we are no longer capable of turning in repentance - and not even capable of realizing what has happened to us.

Merely experiencing God's kindness does not prove we are saved. After all, God's kindness is displayed not only to Christians, but to non-Christians, as well (Matthew 5:43-48). On the other hand, when we experience his discipline (including the "negative" aspect we tend to dislike), it is a good indication that we *do* belong to him. If God never disciplines us, we can claim to be "Christians" all we want, but according to God (Hebrews 12:5-11), we are *not* his children. [Note that discipline is not limited to times that we sin. God can use some aspects of discipline to bring about growth and maturity even when it is *not* associated with willful sin or with punishment.]

There are times that circumstances seem to go against the promise of Romans 8:28. We live in a world full of injustice: people often experience the opposite of what they seem to deserve. (Compare to Psalm 73.) But the Day of Justice will come. And *all* God's promises will prove true. For those who have refused to humble themselves in the presence of the Creator, nothing good is promised. But on that day, all creation will see and will know that *all* things without exception work together for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to his promise. And it will be to the glory of the God who saved them.

Is it O.K. for Us to Willfully Sin, If We Know That God Uses All Things to Accomplish Good in Our Lives?

Below are two quotes from a book entitled, "All Things for Good," by Thomas Watson, Banner of Truth Trust. Because the book was written in 1663, the language is sometimes difficult to read. In a couple places, I've added "updated" words [in brackets], to compensate for the archaic terminology.

QUOTE #1

From: Chapter 2 [The worst things work for good to the godly]

- *Part 2 [The evil of temptation is overruled for good to the godly]*
 - *An "objection" responded to (at the end of the section):*

OBJECTION:

But if being foiled [defeated] works for good, this may make Christians careless whether they are overcome by temptations or no.

ANSWER:

There is a great deal of difference between falling into temptation, and running into a temptation. The falling into a temptation shall work for good, not the running into it. He that falls into a river is capable of help and pity, but he that desperately turns into it is guilty of his own death. It is madness running into a lion's den. He that runs himself into a temptation is like Saul, who fell upon his own sword.

Quote #2

From: **Chapter 2** [*The worst things work for good to the godly*]

- **Part 4** [*The evil of sin works for good to the godly*]
 - **A warning** (at the end of the section):

But let none ABUSE this doctrine. I do not say that sin works for good to an impenitent person. No, it works for his damnation, but it works for good to them that love God; and for you that are godly, I know you will NOT draw a wrong conclusion from this, either to make light of sin, or to make bold with sin. If you should do, God will make it cost you dear. Remember David. He ventured presumptuously on sin, and what did he get? He lost his peace, he felt the terrors of the Almighty in his soul, though he had all helps to cheerfulness. He was a king; he had skill in music; yet nothing could administer comfort to him; he complains of his "broken bones" (Psalm 51:8). And though he did at last come out of that dark cloud, yet some divines [theologians] are of opinion that he never recovered his full joy to his dying day. If any of God's people should be tampering with sin, because God can turn it to good, though the Lord does not damn them, He may send them to hell in this life. He may put them into such bitter agonies and soul-convulsions, as may fill them full of horror, and make them draw nigh to despair. Let this be a flaming sword to keep them from coming near the forbidden tree.

Again, I say, THINK NOT LIGHTLY OF SIN