

All Things Work Together For Good

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Do you know what a believer might keep in mind to give him peace?

"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." These words are found, as many of you know, in Romans 8:28. In these days we intend to be thinking about Thanksgiving; and here we have a statement that will serve as a basis upon which we can stand when we are thinking thankfully toward God.

This statement is not always understood but most of that misunderstanding comes from misapplying it. We are prone to extend the "all things" and the "good" to all men; but that is not true. What does it say? "To them that love God." You may say, "You mean just to them?" I say, "Yes, just to them." Anybody can join them, but they are the only ones to whom this promise is made.

"We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." All things? These words must be taken just as they sound; just as you would think. Primarily we should keep in mind that this means not only the good things, the openly helpful things. For some reason it would be rather easy to think that such would come from God. Thus we could think all things work together for good; when unconsciously we are thinking all good things work together for good: but that is not the way it reads. This Scripture not only means the good and openly helpful things but also the ugly, the evil, the harmful things work together for good to them that love God.

We believe God is over all. Thus, He is over all that happens. Nothing can happen except by the power and the strength of God, and with His permission. Even when a crime is committed, in which someone has done harm to someone else, the wrongdoer could only do it by using the strength that God gave him. He only did what God allowed him to do. This is difficult to grasp but it is very important. At this point, when we are thinking about what we are to be thankful for, it is blessed to think that all things work together for good. We might have some problem even with the good and the helpful things, but to think that the ugly, the evil and the harmful will work together for good is even harder to grasp. We can be helped to grasp this idea if we will remember that God is infinite. God is almighty; and He is gracious.

There are many things about this Scripture that go beyond my understanding; many things leave me wondering. When I think about the almighty power of God, the infinite grace of God, why do some evil men prosper? I don't know; my human thinking bogs down, and I lose out at that point. But I didn't make up that verse of Scripture. This is from God, and He would have us remember it. Actually if we will begin by remembering that God is infinite, almighty, and gracious, we can be strengthened and helped about believing this remarkable statement that all things work together for good to them that love God. We are also helped by seeing results, because God works out His will and His way to bring many gracious benefits. But you and I are to remember that it is true even when we cannot see the results; and it is true even if we cannot see how it works out.

The statement we are considering notes that all things work "together", and this gives us a clue as to how we may think: that we should keep all things "together" in our minds. Some things are pleasant: some things are unpleasant; but the outcome is in the will of God. Since they work together we would do well to think of them together. For instance, a person has a toothache. That is unpleasant. He goes to the dentist, and I can tell you from personal experience, that is awful. But the relief is wonderful. That all

belongs together. You may not think of it all during every moment that you are in it; you will have to face it one way good and another way bad; but all the way through it works out that relief is wonderful. A student in school may find that struggling with assignments may be a pain but when he is finished, and the diploma is received, the diploma is wonderful. Doing all of the little things that need to be done around the office can be irksome, but at the same time there may be a raise in pay from time to time. That is a delight. They both go together. All things work together for good. When is anything good? It will not be the way it looks or the way it works. Not whether or not I like the feel of it, but if I like the results of it. "All things work together for good": and when it promotes results that are desirable, then it is good.

"We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28) and this is what points to the difference. I am sorry if anyone feels that this is unfair. It isn't; but if anyone feels that this is exclusive; it is. When God calls, some come. This gracious promise that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord is not for everybody. I love to remember, and to say before I take a breath: anybody can have it; and then I say slowly and soberly: not everybody will. But mark it down: as surely as you live, those who do accept it, have a promise.

At this point I feel that I should say something about this matter of "loving" God. What does that mean? Does it mean being emotionally aroused about God? Does that mean you are to love God the way you love a child? Or the way you love a friend? What does it mean to love God? The Bible tells us in so many words: "If you love me keep my commandments" (1 John 5:3). Not that we just obey or in the sense that we outwardly conform, but that we inwardly keep and cherish the commandments of God. The Gospel is for everybody. Anybody can hear the call – whosoever will may come – but the providence of God does not work well for everybody. It is especially geared to work blessing for those who trust God.

I do not want my words to get in the way of the simple statement of Scripture. We know that all things work together for good to them that love God. They are the ones for whom all things work together for good. You say, "What about the others?" I can't tell you. This is not my commission. I have no way of telling you what God is doing with other people. I do know that God is gracious, and I do know that God cares about other people and wants to win them; but we do not have the promise that He is working out things for good in every way for all men. This is only for those who keep His word, those that love God. "If you love me, keep my commandments."

To Them Who Are The Called

Do you realize that obeying the call of the Lord makes a difference in people?

In considering the matter of Thanksgiving we may note Paul's admonition "in everything give thanks." We could remember Paul's statement that we know that all things work together for good to them that love God. From these references we gain the impression that for a believer to give thanks is quite definitely a different matter than for an unbeliever. We talk about Thanksgiving and we say that everyone should give thanks: "in everything give thanks." But it would be helpful to remember that these Bible passages are directed to believers, and that believers can give thanks in everything for reasons we will now notice.

It is quite possible that a case could be made to show that all men everywhere, because they are creatures of God, have reason to be thankful; though I doubt very much that they would accept our conclusions. But this is not the thrust of Paul's admonition. Paul is not urging all men everywhere,

regardless of their attitude to God, to be thankful. That would not make sense. If people do not believe in God and trust in Him, why should they thank God? Romans 8:28 is the basis for what Paul urges upon believers: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

So we have in mind that if we are believers in God through Christ we can claim this marvelous statement that all things work together for good for such as are obedient. But there is more to be said. In fact, what follows is a sort of restatement of the whole matter when Paul goes on to say to "them who are the called according to his purpose." These few words point to two profound truths. The "called" and "according to His purpose." The words "the called" are exactly the same words that are translated "the elect." To those who are the elect according to His purpose. And at this point I need to point out that this does not mean the select: it does not mean that God arbitrarily chose some person to whom He would show His mercy, but that God in His grace and mercy calls all men everywhere: "Whosoever will may come and whosoever cometh, He will in no wise cast out." That call goes out to all men. "Come to the Savior, make no delay. Here in our midst, He is standing today." But the sad fact is that not everybody will come.

God knows beforehand who will come and because He knows this beforehand, He has a way in the Scriptures of referring to it. We refer to these people as the "called ones." This is not so much reference only to the fact that God calls, as that they responded. The call of God goes out to everyone, and if it was a matter of speaking of God calling, you would mean everybody on earth because everybody – all men everywhere – have been called in the sense that God called them, but they are not "the called" in the sense that they did not respond. I oftentimes say with reference to this word "called" and the word elect," that they are like the word "recruit." The recruiting officer comes into a community to recruit young men for the Navy. He will take them between the ages of 18 and 22, or whatever the age limits are, then there will be certain other qualifications. We will say that after two weeks of campaigning in the community, he recruits seventeen men. Now he would have taken seventy or more; he called the young men in that community, but all of them who were called did not come forward. The seventeen who came were "the recruits", "the called." And this is the significance of the word "elect." To them who are "the called" – "the elect" – according to His purpose.

But here is another profound idea: viz., the purpose of God. You do not have to just imagine what this is. We are told in the very next verse. "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

So what, then, is the purpose of God? To conform these people to the image of His Son. They are "the called" according to His purpose to conform them. He called them that they might be made into the likeness of His Son, so that His Son could be the first-born among many brethren.

The word here is "conformed." Actually there is a two-fold process going on in the believer. You will remember the Scripture: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Thus one aspect of the process going on in the believer is "transformation": from the inside he is being made into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ just about the way the soil in your garden is made into a rose. The rose comes out of the soil which actually produces the rose, but that is because of the seed that was put in there. The organizing principle in the seed brings together the various items of food and material to be found in the plant, so actually the soil is being transformed into a rose or a lily or violets. While it is true these plants grow out of the soil, actually they are being transformed from within because of the plant life that is there. The seed was sown and then from the inside out the soil is transformed into the likeness of the plant. But the word that is used here is

"conformed."

This brings something to our minds that I actually am often inclined to overlook. You and I are being shaped into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ by outside pressure. Conformed is by outside pressure; transformed is by inside spirit. There is an aspect in living in which the pressures are from the outside. We remember the passage in which Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ." When a person is crucified with Christ it does not mean that he is crucified as Christ was crucified. We should remember Christ Jesus did not crucify Himself. He did not drive a single nail into His hand; He did not plunge that spear into His side. Others did it. He was submissive. When Paul says "I am crucified with Christ" he means others are going to do it to him. We need to soberly remember that in the will of God this will be the lot of every believer, and by the way in which it is done, you and I will be conformed to the image of His Son.

Believers will be called through hard experiences. When we think of conforming anything – such as a block of stone into a certain shape – we know it takes hammering to knock off the rough edges. The Apostle Paul says that it is the will of God that believers should be conformed to the image of His Son. Peter was warned about this. "Thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God" (John 21:18-19). Just as Peter would glorify God because somebody would crucify him, believers are to understand that they, too, will be crucified, and this is the purpose of God. We are just now laying the basis to understand why we can thank God for everything. We can thank Him for the rough spots, the hard knocks. We can thank God for the things that tear us apart and pull us inside out. Why? Because these outside pressures conform us to the image of His Son. And when we remember that we can say with the Apostle Paul, "We glory in tribulation."

According To His Purpose

Can you understand how it could be the will of God that a believer should be led into real trouble?

"Giving thanks always for all things." This is a familiar phrase but do you realize that it poses a real problem? Frankly and simply, are we to give thanks in the day of trouble? It is this aspect that sharpens the idea that Paul is speaking to believers in his admonition about giving thanks. Believers can have real trouble. They may be distressed by it. Peter says in his first epistle: "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations" (1 Peter 1:6).

This is not expressed in our usual vocabulary but the meaning is clear. Peter is saying that now for a time because of circumstances the believer may be downhearted. These were believers who had had trouble; and trouble can make one downhearted and heavy spirited. This helps us to remember that giving thanks always for all things may not always be hilarious. The believer does not thank God because he hurts; but because the hurting is in God's will, working out His purpose. There is much we need to review about our ideas. If a person is totally committed and always obedient, will he ever have trouble? Yes, that is quite possible. As a matter of fact, it could even be the reason why he has trouble. In Matthew 4:1 we read: "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." I can remember when I was a young Bible student, I would look at that verse and wonder about that. Here is the beloved Son of God: "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" (Luke 4:22). Yet this same Jesus of Nazareth was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. This was in God's plan, and we need to remember humbly: "the servant is not greater than his Master."

We are considering just now how the believer can give thanks to God for everything. We are

recognizing that everything will include some hard things, some distressing things. If we are to always give thanks there will be times when it will not be easy. We read those familiar words of the Lord Jesus:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:1-2).

We could substitute the word "pruned," as that is what it would mean. Every branch in the vine that is fruitful is pruned, that it may bring forth better fruit. Pruning is done by taking small and soft branches and twisting or breaking them off with one's fingers. Larger branches may be cut off with a knife or sawed. In any case it amounts to an amputation process. Something is taken away. The gardener prunes the branch that it may be more fruitful, and so pruning can be understood. We are almost ready to say that is a good idea. But when the cutting is done with good branches it is not so easy to accept. When branches that could bear fruit are cut in order that the plant as a whole may bear better fruit it will help to remember how the Lord said to Peter: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter."

Believers may all share in this. Whether they understand it or not, it is true that our Heavenly Father, the faithful Husbandman, is watching over the plants growing in His vineyard. He is the One Who will seek to enable this creature, this being, His believer, to bear more fruit. This is done by pruning away branches, dead ones and good ones, so that what is left may prosper. We are talking about life: about having daily experiences with God; and in this connection we are saying there can be sorrow; there can be grief. But all of these things are under control; and this is why the believer can be thankful, because the purpose of God is being worked out.

In Hebrews 2:10 there is a phrase which tell us how God's plan was to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through suffering. Suffering actually contributed to making Jesus of Nazareth the perfect Person He was. If the Captain of our salvation suffered we can be quite sure, suffering will be in order for us. This was Paul's experience:

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:7-9).

So if I should feel under certain circumstances a real weakness I am right in line to have the strength that comes from Almighty God, made complete.

"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities" (II Corinthians 12:9-10).

This includes physical trouble and suffering. This is as plain as it can be. The purpose of God in everything that happens to us is to shape us, to conform us to the image of His Son.

Jesus of Nazareth suffered when He came into this world and lived the perfect life under God. He went through trouble. And so it follows that believers trusting in Him can expect such experiences in the

will of God.

"For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully" (I Peter 2:19).

Are you depending on the Lord? Are you trusting in Him? Then never question suffering. Don't push away the hurt. Yield to the situation and trust Almighty God. He will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able to bear. He will watch over you and He will bring you through to Himself.

"After ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, (that is, mature) stablish, strengthen, settle you" (I Peter 5:10).

So we learn that the believer can always give thanks to God in all things for, since suffering is for growth into His likeness, we can glory in tribulation. This may not be satisfying to us in a human way, but Peter has said: "Though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness (you are depressed) through manifold temptations . . . yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (I Peter 1:6 and 8).

"Where Are The Nine?"

Do you realize it makes a difference to the Lord if a believer gives thanks? It is easy to feel that what I do is not very important to God; that I do not really count in the great universe, where God is almighty and all powerful, and where there are millions upon millions of creatures. It is easy to feel that I do not really count; but this is not true. I need to remember that He died for me. I know He died for all men but this whole truth does not become really operative and effectual until I realize He died for me. And this makes me significant. Does it matter to Him what I do? It is true that He died for all men, and He died for us as believers, but He died for me as one single soul. He carries me in His heart; He watches over me. He prays for me; and He looks for my response to His Will.

"And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off and they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go show yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God. And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole" (Luke 17:11-19).

"Where are the nine?" I suspect we all realize it is common in the ordinary home for parents to teach their children to say "please" and "thank you." Why do they do this? Because this is profoundly important in that child's whole outlook on life. It is for the child's sake that we require these things.

This story of the grateful Samaritan points to a great truth. The Lord expects my personal response to

His grace and His mercy. He gives His grace to me but He notices what I do with it. We must remember that ingratitude – to be unthankful – is sin. There is no embellishment about it. It is a blemish and it is a fault. How easily we accept all of the benefits that come to us as a matter of course, and we forget to say "thank you." Take, for instance, the matter of our daily strength. Isn't it true that many of us are inclined to accept the day just as it is, and we take our strength as we have it. Sometimes we wish we had more; sometimes we complain because we feel tired or weak, but how often it never occurs to us to be grateful that we have enough strength to move. What could we do on our own? Consider the functioning of our bodies: our eyes: they see; our ears: they hear; our hands: they touch; our mouth: it talks. If any one of these were to be handicapped wouldn't we be under a terrific disadvantage?

For your own soul's sake consider the idea of being paralyzed, of not being able to move a muscle. There are people like that. Or consider the idea of being blind. There are people who are blind. You may say, "Isn't that too bad?" Yes, it is. Every day that I have the strength to do the day's work I should thank God. I should be grateful for health and strength for each day. I am smitten with the thought that I have not been grateful enough for the health and the strength with which I have been blessed. Let me go on. We wake up in the morning in our home. Where would we be without that home to live in? Consider the services rendered by those who take care of the home day after day. Is it possible that I could forget and not be grateful for my family, for my home? Let's think about it. Let's not be among the nine who took everything that was given to them and who went away and forgot all about it.

Consider our friends. How could we get along without any friends? How meaningful is the fellowship we have with friends: the communion we share with friends. By way of contrast, consider living alone, with no one to share our affairs. That would be an intolerable situation. Consider the community in which we live and how much we have because of what other people give to us. It is easy for us, living in this country, to forget that being free is a great blessing. And how easy it is for us to take for granted the many conveniences that are conducive to pleasant living.

We have the privilege of sharing in the life of people around us because of the very culture in which we live. Not every country is like this. If we take this for granted we miss so much. I know these are days in which it is easy to criticize the government under which we live. I wonder if you have ever considered living among primitive people. Some years ago I attended a ball game in Brooklyn and was seated in the bleachers among strangers. One person left his seat after putting his baseball schedule on the seat. The stadium was crowded and people were searching for seats. Someone saw that this seat was vacant and he wanted to sit down in it but all around people who didn't even know the man who had left it momentarily, rose up in objection. I thought at the time, "What a wonderful thing to live in a country where the rights of each individual are recognized."

The outlook today is amazing. This is the day of opportunity. It is easy to think of all our blessings as if they were routine. I want to urge upon our hearts that we need to thank God for what we have in the way of temporal blessings. We have blessings that are to be seen right in this world and they are ours by the Providence of God. We should thank Him.

Upon Every Remembrance Of You

Do you realize how much we are blessed because of other believers?

"I thank God upon every remembrance of you." The Apostle Paul began his letter to the Philippians with these simple words. We so readily accept without regard the circumstances under which we live. Sometimes it almost frightens a person to realize how easily we take everything for granted. There is an

old saying: "You never miss the water until the well runs dry." How true that is! Every day we receive benefits we scarcely ever remember; it is only when we do not have them, and we feel the pinch, that we suddenly think about the fact that we need the blessing of God. But we needed the blessing of God all of the time when our situation wasn't pinching. We receive so much so often from hosts of other believers; and when we give thanks always for all things we should include other people.

While it is true that in one sense I am related to everyone so that whatever happens to anyone actually affects me, that is rather vague. There is a sense in which I can see certain benefits coming from some, and then I have to remind myself there are a great many benefits I can't even see, and many things that are good for me that I don't ever recognize. I am inclined to be taken in by the bright days, and eliminate all the others; but that is not the way with life. Life comes with the light and the dark; life comes with the good and the bad. There is that which is for us and that which is against us, and we need to learn how to give thanks for everything. Just now we need to learn how to give thanks for other people.

When I think of my own life, which is getting longer by the day, and I look back over the distance, I am stirred to think of how much I have to be grateful for. The thought comes to me that if it were not for other people I would not have anything. Of course, if it were not for other people I wouldn't be here but the point is I do belong to them and they belong to me, and I should be conscious of it and thankful for them. Paul was. Paul could say to those Philippian believers "I thank God upon every remembrance of you."

When I think about the different people I should be thankful for, of course I start with my parents. My mother died when I was three and a half years of age and I do not know much about her. I have heard more about her since I am grown than I ever knew. But in just that moment of time when she saw me for the last time, she left in my heart the words, "Come, and be with me where I am." When I was in high school those words were as if they had been emblazoned on the wall in a motto. I could see them before me day and night, and for a long time they were the only bright spot in the gloom of my daily existence. Then I think of my father who gave me an example of hard work, faithfulness, integrity. He insisted on certain things being done in certain ways. I find myself even today when working around in my yard saying, "This is where my father would tell me what to do." I think about my stepmother – faithful woman that she was – how she carried on with the children of someone else, with all of the integrity of her earnest, sincere being. These people were used of God in my own life.

I think of schoolteachers I had; how they labored to drill into me accuracy, honesty, integrity. Oftentimes we take them for granted but schoolmasters can bring us to Christ. They do not necessarily always talk about what the Lord Jesus did for us, but what they talk about shows that we need Him. My memory recalls different people: I think about my Sunday School teachers. For a long time in my life I forgot them, perhaps because they did not teach me the Gospel so that I could recognize it. They did not tell me that Christ Jesus died for me and for that reason I would be saved, but they told me a great many things and more than that, they demonstrated many things. They faithfully taught the Word the best they knew how, and they actually contributed to me in many ways.

Those who have heard my story will know that I cannot help but think about that country postmaster living eleven miles from town, on his farm. That man patiently and faithfully told me the true Gospel story which is what I preach to this day. I learned it from that old farmer.

I think about the days when I was in the Army and I think about the Gideon from Toronto who traveled more than a hundred miles on Sunday to a military encampment to tell us about the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ. When I think about that man I realize that I had the privilege of knowing one of God's great men. I think about a certain woman who said, "Every time you name the name of Jesus you will be

stronger." It was that comment that "triggered" a series of events that wound up with my being where I am today because when she expressed it that way I felt in my heart and soul it was true. I thank God for her. I think about the faithful preachers who proclaimed the Gospel, some of whom I heard and they really affected me. Many sincere, professing church members affected me in various ways and I am thankful for them.

All of this was true for me in a special way, and it is especially true for me now in this ministry that we have over the air, The Bible For You. I praise the Lord for each person as they pray for this work, tell others about the ministry and support this work with their gifts. Each aspect is given in praise as unto the Lord. I would like to say with the Apostle Paul, "I thank God upon every remembrance of you." I remember also in I Corinthians 1:4: "I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ." Let us each one, because we are concerned, take time out to thank God for other people.