

A Different Perspective

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 8:28-32

In a conversation recently someone said to me 'the exception proves the rule', and that got me thinking... That saying makes absolutely no sense at all. If it's a rule there aren't exceptions, and if there are exceptions there really can't be a rule. So I looked up the saying and here's what I found out.

The origin of the phrase is actually from 16th-century English law. It was originally written '*Exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis*', which of course we all know means 'Exception confirms the rule in cases without exceptions.' In clear English it means that posting an exception to a rule is a reminder that at other times the rule exists.

There are all kinds of sayings or quotes that have come down to us that either don't make sense or aren't exactly faithful to the way they were originally written.

'It's raining cats and dogs' comes to mind. Has that ever actually happened? Not really, so we can't take it at face value. Where did that one come from? The most likely origin, according to one source, is that in London in the 17th century, heavy rain used to fill the streets and carry along dead animals—mostly cats and dogs—and so the saying came out of that.

There's 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush', 'Make no bones about it', and 'There's more than one way to skin a cat.' (I think that people who make up sayings don't like cats all that much.)

How about this one: 'That's the best thing since sliced bread.' Really? Better than airplanes or computers or iPods or even Pop-Tarts? Better than heart transplants or antibiotics or the cure for polio? Would we really give up all those things if it meant we had to run a knife through a loaf of bread for ourselves? For Pete's sake.

There's another one—who's Pete?

It's also common sometimes to hear misquoted Bible verses, or sayings that people think are Bible verses but really aren't.

'God works in mysterious ways' is one of the most common. People cite it as a Bible verse, but it's actually from an 18th century English poet named William Cowper.

A more damaging one is this: 'God helps those who help themselves.' Really? What about the rest of us? Does God ignore the needs of those who find themselves powerless sometimes? What does that mean for the millions of people in 12-step programs? The first step is the admission that we're powerless in the face of our addictions.

You can tell these make me a little cranky.

Our text this morning includes a passage that has been misread and misquoted for centuries.

28And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. 31What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

As we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans, it's helpful to be reminded of what he was trying to accomplish:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

The substance of Paul's case is that we were made to have a close relationship with God—that we were made for that kind of closeness—we were meant to live that way, but it all got complicated by our sin. For our purposes today and in this series, sin is anything—anything at all—that gets in the way of the relationship we were meant to have with God.

But God doesn't leave us hanging. If you trace the history of the human relationship to God you see that God has always provided a way—no matter what we do to mess it up—God has always provided a way for us to come back to him—that's the point of the Old Testament Law and the prophets and the promise of a Messiah.

God always provides a way back to him, no matter what we've said or done or even believed before this moment.

So what about our passage today? How has it been misunderstood?

I have to say that when we started this series on Paul's letter to the Romans, I was looking forward to this precise passage, but I'm not now—it's really one of Paul's 'greatest hits' in Scripture—most people who have read this letter will know Romans 8:28 and quote it often.

And maybe that's where the problem is.

So many people know this passage that it feels pretty daunting to say anything new about it. How do we make this text come alive one more time as we work our way through this important letter?

But the real reason this text is hard is that it's been twisted and abused over the years—it's been made to mean something that God or Paul never intended, and so that's why it's so important that we look at it again.

How has this passage been abused? Let me ask that a different way: How many of us have had this verse recited to us when we've suffered a tragedy or some other kind of loss? How many of us have had someone share this text with us as a way of trying to get us to stop feeling something genuine like grief or anger or sadness.

You know how this happens. Someone suffers a loss and a friend comes up and says: 'All things work together for good for those who love the Lord.'

I have to tell you that that drives me crazy.

First, it makes it sound as though we should be glad or happy or free of sadness no matter what happens. If it's all going to work out for good then why be a killjoy? Why spoil the party by actually having authentic feelings about something? 'All things work together for good,' don't they?

The second problem with that quote is that it makes it sound as though our ability to squelch our feelings is directly related somehow to how much we love God. Do you see that in there? 'All things work together for good for those who love the Lord.' The logic there means that if things don't seem to be working out for good in your life, then you must not love the Lord—or love the Lord enough.

That just makes me nauseous.

Most importantly, though, the way this passage too often gets quoted is a corruption of the way it was actually written. Please, tell me you can hear the difference between these two:

'All things work together for good for those who love the Lord.'

And...

'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.'

One of these is a lie—a simpering, shorthand, cheeseball way of reducing Scripture to a lame version of 'All's well that ends well.'

One of these is a lie, but the other is a revolutionary expression of hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ himself.

Hearing the difference between these two is the difference between seeing the Christian faith as a wimpy, unrealistic escape —the real definition of the ‘opium of the people’.

Hearing the difference between these two is the difference between seeing Jesus Christ as a nice guy we can model our lives around, and seeing him as the one true transformational source of hope for every person and place in the world.

One of these is a waste of time. The other is a call to a deeper level of discipleship than we ever thought was possible.

‘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.’

Romans 8:28 isn’t a call to some Pollyanna refusal to acknowledge problems or evil in the world. It’s an expression of faith that no matter what happens, God is working to find some redemptive purpose in it—in other words, we are not alone. One writer described it as the belief that ‘our confidence is sure precisely because our future is not in our hands and does not depend on our own faithfulness or ability’ to be perfect. As with every argument in this entire letter, the point is found in coming to God in faith, struggles and all, brokenness and all.

But Paul doesn’t leave it there. In the next section he asks a rhetorical question and then answers it with a reminder of what God has done to bring us back to him—he answers the question by telling us the lengths God has gone—and will go to—to place us back into his family.

What do we say about this?

What do we say to a God who doesn’t promise us a pain-free life, but promises to work for good within everything that happens.

What do we say to a God who doesn't just say things.

What do we say to a God who goes so far to demonstrate his love for us that he doesn't even spare his own son?

We say three things:

We say we want to know this God. That's why we offer opportunities for people at all ages to grow and learn and become mature in their faith.

We say we want to worship this God. That's why we don't stop at just knowing about God—we come together to offer our praises and prayers—to sing and listen and challenge ourselves to draw near to God himself.

We say we want to serve in this God's name. If our faith stays inward then it hasn't grown into maturity yet. Knowing about God and worshipping faithfully are the starting place for serving each other and strangers and the whole world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Notice that none of this is about putting our faith in a list of doctrines and then forgetting all about them. This is a different perspective on what it means to be a Christian.

This is about building a relationship with God and with each other and with the rest of the world. Remember that through the entire letter to the Romans Paul has been saying that all of this comes to us when we come to God in faith.

John Ortberg describes it this way:

'Faith is not simply holding beliefs. Many people, when they consider faith, think 'I believe that God exists,' or 'Scripture is accurate,' or 'love is the greatest virtue.' But at its core, faith is not simply the belief in a statement; it puts trust in a person. We think we want certainty, but we don't. What we really want is trust. Trust is better than certainty because it honors the freedom of persons and makes possible the kind of growth and intimacy that certainty alone could never

produce.'

That trust is the key. Believing that God wants the best for us and that he'll work to bring it about no matter what else happens to us—believing that is the beginning of trust, and the beginning of an amazing, life-changing, world-altering relationship.

And the best part is that there are no exceptions to God's rule—we're all included. The good news for us this morning is this: God helps those—he offers himself to those—who come to him in faith.