

ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR WHOSE GOOD?

Today's Text: Romans 8: 18 - 30

Extracts:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us... For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance... And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose [Rom. 8: 18, 24-25, 28]

On one very cold winter morning, a fishing fleet put out their craft from a small harbour on the east coast of Newfoundland, a large Canadian island off the east coast of the North American mainland.¹ As the night closed in, not a single vessel of the entire fleet could be sighted. Their family members –wives, mothers, children and sweethearts- got worked up, pacing up and down the windswept and cold beach. As if their problems were not already too heavy, one of their cottages caught fire. Without the men around to put out the blaze, the cottage was completely razed to the ground. But early the following morning, the entire fleet returned safely to harbour, to the joy and relief of their family members. However, the wife of the man whose cottage had been destroyed by fire cried uncontrollably in her husband's embrace, saying, "Oh, Honey, we are ruined! Our home and everything in it was destroyed by fire!" But to her surprise, her husband replied, "Thank God for that fire! It was the light of our burning cottage that safely guided the whole fleet to port!"

Thank God indeed that the women and children got their loved ones back safely. Thank God for the fire from the burning cottage that provided the bright light that guided the stranded fleet back to port. But how about the woman who lost everything in that fire? Was the fire also for her good? What is her definition of good in such a situation? In this week's Bible verses, we are assured that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called to His purpose. Before you rush to put it in your bank account of infallible Bible promises, it is important that you know how it applies to you. All things work together for whose good? That is what we shall attempt to find out from this week's study.

¹ "All Things Work Together For Your Good," True stories compiled from the writings of David Brandt Berg [© The Family International, 1997]; http://deeptruths.com/treasures/all_things_work_together.html

1. Background: Read the fine prints!

In Nigeria, all the telephone providers operate a prepaid system (pay-as-you-go). Recently, I got completely absorbed in a quiz my phone provider had sent to subscribers by text, promising a handsome reward for being the first to correctly answer all the questions. I was determined to win the prize and kept going on and on. Then, I stopped to respond to an e-mail message on my BlackBerry only to be alerted that I could not send my reply because I had not subscribed for that facility. That could not be true! But, on checking my prepaid balance, I discovered that I had used up all my credit! What happened to my huge balance earlier that day? It had been eaten up by that quiz and that was the promoter's aim, unknown to subscribers. The lesson I have learnt from that story is never again to get carried away by any gimmicks by my telephone provider without first verifying them. I am sending the same message to my readers: ***pay attention to the fine print, not the bold "advertisement" of God's promises in the Bible.*** The Bible passage that we shall deal with today carries such fine prints.

Most prosperity-preaching churches assure their members that all things will work together for good for them without emphasizing the fine prints attached to that blessing. When the promised blessings do not come as they have been assured, some believers get disappointed and begin to doubt how much faith they should put on the word of God. Of course, the problem is not with God but with their pastors and their congregations who have chosen to ignore or downplay the conditions attached to that blessing. For the avoidance of doubt, here is how Paul put it [**Rom. 8: 28**]:

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

To enable us to understand and appreciate every aspect of that verse, let us pay attention to the following:

a) *God's definition of good*

A popular saying is that what is good for the goose is good for the gander (the adult male goose). Are we sure that is true? After all, according to an African proverb, every vulture is bald-headed but not everyone of them is an elder. Of course, some of them are baby-vultures! Therefore, ***the first matter to settle is what is good for us. Is it what we want or need? Is it what God says we need? How do we know that when things turn out in a particular way, they are good for us?***

The *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard* [**Matt. 20: 1-16**] gives us a good lead on the matter. There, Jesus tells the story of an employer who hired labourers at different hours of the day to work in his vineyard with a promise to pay each of them what he had agreed with him. At the end of

the day, both those who came in the morning and those who came an hour to closing time each received the same wage, a penny per day. As the first group grumbled over their “unfair” wage, the employer said that he had paid them what he had agreed with them and added, “***Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?***”

The workers (that is, labourers like all of us in the Lord’s vineyard) looked at their reward in quantitative terms (material blessings) while their employer (that is, the Lord) looked at it in qualitative terms (that is, spiritual blessings). For example, joy, peace of mind, etc, cannot be counted or split. There is nothing like half of joy or 80% of peace. It is immaterial for how long you have been a labourer in the Lord’s vineyard; the reward is the same as for the thief that received Christ a few minutes to his death [Lk 23: 39-43]. Salvation is salvation. A day and a thousand years are one and the same before God [2 Pet. 3: 8] whose time scale is eternity. Therefore, ***it is God who defines what is good for us and He does so at His discretion.*** For example, when Peter asked Jesus what was the reward for those of them that had forsaken everything to follow Him, He replied that everyone that had given up earthly treasures (such as family and material possessions) for His sake would receive “a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” [Matt. 19: 27-29]. ***Only God knows what is good for us, and it is to give us an expected end [Jer. 29: 11], namely peace of mind here and salvation hereafter.***

b) *The conditions for getting it*

Two conditions are necessary for all things to work together for good for us as defined above, namely, that we ***love God*** and be ***called to His purpose***. In the words of Jesus Himself, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” [Jn 14: 23]. He added, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” [Jn 15: 12]. Therefore, ***total obedience to God’s will*** is a key requirement, for you cannot call Jesus Lord if you will not do what He says [Lk 6: 46].

The second condition is related to the first. You must be called to God’s purpose. In the words of Jesus, you did not choose Him; He chose you and appointed you to go and bear abundant and enduring fruit, such that whatever you ask the Father in His name, He may give you [Jn 15: 16]. Therefore, ***your life ambition may not necessarily be God’s calling or purpose for your life.***²

² “Your ambition is not necessarily God’s purpose!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 6 No. 19, 7 Aug. 2005; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_6/PDFs/19_YourAmbitionisnotGodspurpose.pdf

From the foregoing, it is clear that *as long as it is God that determines what is good for us, what we then receive may not always or even be pleasurable or pleasant! On the surface, it can look like failure or disappointment but it is in line with His plan for our lives.* For example, Stephen was martyred but before he died, he saw Christ in heaven standing at the right hand of the Father [Acts 7: 54-56]. His death dispersed the early disciples to distant lands and led to the rapid spread of Christianity beyond the shores of the Sea of Galilee [Acts 8: 1-4]. So, his death at an early age and in painful circumstances was good. Where then do you currently stand?

2. Try to identify yourself!

Do you love God? Are you called to His purpose? If one were to do a survey of worshippers in churches that we are all familiar with by asking them those two questions, our analysis might suggest the following profile of believers:

a) *Some are still in rebellion*

These are so-called *believers who will give all they have to God but themselves.* They may be very regular church-goers who pay their tithes religiously, go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land at every opportunity, give of their wealth freely to the church and its clergy, and swallow the Holy Communion at every opportunity. *To them, coming to church is a social function that is good for their ego or self-worth.* On Sunday, they are pious. For the rest of the week, they are devils at work or in business. They may belong to cults or traditional societies that pay homage to their ancestral deities. In the end, such people have no peace of mind because they do not fear God nor are they prepared to obey Him.

Remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to ask what he needed to do to gain eternal life. The man claimed to have obeyed the Ten Commandments from his youth. But, when Jesus asked him to sell all he had and give to the poor, he became sad and walked away [Lk 18: 18-25]. *God does not seek yours but you,* to borrow Paul's admonition of the Corinthian Church [2 Cor. 12: 14]. The word of God says, "There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked" [Is. 57: 21]. Therefore, *you are still in rebellion unless and until you give Christ first place in your heart.*

b) *Some are mere spectators*

Some believers still want everything to be done for them and yet they will not raise a finger to serve others or the church. They hide their talents, lest some chores be given to them. Yet, they are the first to complain when higher positions and rewards are given to the hardworking members. They hardly read the Bible, not to talk of teaching it to others. They are *always*

taking but never giving. Such people are mere spectators in the house of God.

In the words of Jesus, the harvest is ripe but the labourers are few. We are to pray that God should bring more labourers into His vineyard [**Matt. 9: 35-38**]. There are vacancies for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; healers, helpers and administrators in the body of Christ [**Eph. 4: 11; 1 Cor. 12: 28**]. So, get off that padded pew and make yourself available to be called for God's purpose. Then, God will confirm that good in your life.

c) *Some are mercenaries*

Some people are indeed doing much more than they should but they are actually in business working for themselves or their families. They are mere mercenaries or ***entrepreneurs who happen to be running churches instead of actual enterprises.*** God has called them but they do not fear God in their hearts. They use one gimmick after another to get church members to give the church more money than they would willingly give. But mercenaries in God's house are not accountable or transparent in how they use church funds.

Talking about such people, Jesus has warned, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons ... and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness'" [**Matt. 7: 21-23**].

A sorcerer called Simon had astonished the people of Samaria so much so that they saw him as a great power of God. When Philip came, Simon gave his life to Christ but did not give up his trade in his heart. When Peter came to lay hands on the new converts to receive the Holy Spirit, Simon offered him money because he thought that it was a money-making business [**Acts 8: 9-25**]. Clearly, all things cannot work together for good for mercenaries because they do not love God even though they may have been called to His purpose. If you find yourself in that situation, repent and return to Jesus. ***Salvation is a gift of God; it cannot be bought or sold.***

d) *Some are true warriors*

There is a hard core of members who ***are in the church for salvation***, not political control or self-aggrandisement. ***They keep their eyes on the ball of righteousness by faith in Christ Jesus, not on the dribbling skills of the rebels, spectators and mercenaries in their midst.*** They will be

persecuted and maligned but they are not discouraged because they know whom they have believed and they are persuaded that He is able to keep that which they have committed to His care against that day [**2 Tim. 1: 12**].

These are the true warriors whose faith and commitment have kept the light of Christ alive these past two thousand years. Of that group, Jesus has said, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” [**Matt. 5: 11-12**].

In sum, God calls those He loves. Those He calls He chooses. Those He chooses He glorifies [**Jn 3: 16; Rom. 8: 29-30**]. In response, you are to love Him and make yourself available for His service. *You will carry your cross. That cross represents pains and sufferings and endurance for Christ’s sake. God uses them to snap you out of complacency and strengthen your wings to fly at a higher spiritual altitude. But without the cross, there is no crown. God will give you a crown to glorify Himself and vindicate you before your enemies. That way, all things do indeed work together for good for you and others who love God and are called to His purpose. That is the message of Romans 8: 28.*

3. Conclusion: Good is measured at the end of your life on earth!

As Jesus headed in the direction of Jerusalem for His Passion, He told His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me... For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” [**Matt. 16: 24-26**]. Therefore, *good is measured at the end of your sojourn on earth.*

Your chosen destination determines your route and mode of transport. Those who choose to remain as rebels, spectators and mercenaries have preferred hell as their destination. The road there is a broad and busy expressway and it leads to destruction. But *the warriors desire to go to heaven. So, they have taken the narrow gate and the difficult way of fear of God and total obedience to His will that leads to life* [**Matt. 7: 13-14**]. This narrow way is bound to be harder but follow it for your good. Keep at it. Don’t let go. Get to the finishing line, your gateway to eternity. That way, all things will work together for your good!

Alleluia!